



*After the
Sunset*

Lenise Lee

AFTER THE SUNSET

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Author's Note:

Although the characters in this piece of fiction participate in unprotected sexual encounters, the author in no way or form endorses or advocates this behavior in real-life situations.

After the Sunset

By

Lenise Lee

≈ Excerpt ≈

...Though she wanted nothing more than for him to take her by the wrists and pull her in close so that his body covered every inch of her bare skin, Nichole's feet were planted to the ground. She dared not make a sound nor move one inch from the spot she anchored to. Was she ready to take on Eric Raven? A man whose persona was so much more bold, confident, and irresistible than any man whom she had ever encountered. Up until now, she had successfully played her role and set her will for him never to see the way she quivered inside whenever he was near and how he caused her hormones to spike to the breaking point. One word, one unchecked glance could make him alert to the fact that she craved him down to her very core. Nichole wanted to feel Eric's immense strength throbbing within her walls, to moan his name aloud as he pushed his full weight and brawn deep inside and up to her womb. Never in her life had Nichole ever considered succumbing to a night of unadulterated passion with a man whom she barely knew. Was she really ready to take the leap and allow herself this one night of inhibition?...

...Nichole's lips parted, as if to speak. Eric lowered his arms and leaned down a little closer, eager to listen. But no words came out. She remained silent, her eyes still searching him, trying to make the right decision...

Dear Reader,

Quite often we forget that the most rewarding aspects in our lives, the ones that have the capability of filling us with passion and desire beyond our wildest dreams, are usually right in front of us the entire time. Sometimes, all it takes is for a few seemingly random acts of the universe to set what was always meant to be in to perfect harmony.

Thank you for joining me on this new adventure. Enjoy.

LL

≈ Chapter 1 ≈

Nichole Edwards studied the faux sheet of white paper on the screen of the portable computing device in front of her.

Her eyebrows were turned down low and her fingers were arched over the keyboard as she absorbed the words on the page.

*He reached for her and she drew back. He grabbed her arms
and pulled her to his aching body and then began an assault on her
beautiful bowed lips until they were plump and full...*

When her eyes began to burn from the heavy concentration, she removed the frameless glasses from her face and sat them down on the large desk she was seated at. She squeezed the bridge of her nose between the thumb and index finger of her right hand, while her mind went over the lines of material she had just typed.

“No, no, that’s all wrong,” Nichole scolded herself aloud within the walls of the vacant room.

Her index finger held the backspace button and all of the words on the last two pages disappeared one by one before her eyes.

Working the second shift in the records department of the Timber Falls Police Department was starting to take its toll on her mental capacities. Her greatest motivation for taking on this odd shift was that the money paid well and could go toward a large down payment on a house instead of continuing to rent a small apartment at an astronomical price. With the town being so close to neighboring New York, the real

estate in Timber Falls, NJ was nearly as outrageous as the sprawling metropolis next door.

The long stretches of quiet solitude were also another perk. Most people that needed records and other case files from her department usually requested and retrieved the items during normal daytime business hours. Nichole's duties started at the back end of the day, a couple hours before dusk – usually around five in the evening during this time of year – and she rarely encountered anyone else for hours at a time. Her office was at the rear of the first floor of the police station and was mostly windowless, except for a slim long rectangular shaped window toward the back of the room. Not many of the police officers who were on duty during her shift made their way to where she was stationed. Most of them were either riding on patrol or attending the reception area, while detectives and other specialty personnel were usually working through the night in their own offices or assigned areas throughout the three story complex. For a budding author, this solace and isolation provided the perfect environment for Nichole's creative energy to flow.

Nonetheless, even after almost seven months of working from 3PM to 11PM, Nichole was still not quite use to sleeping most of the day and then trying to stay awake and alert for remainder of the night. When she was still living at home with her father and one of her two sisters, the household rarely rose later than seven in the morning or even earlier. On this particular evening, the effects of the late hour, close to 10:30, were causing her body drawing in on itself. Despite wanting desperately to finish this key chapter in her first full-length novel, she was fighting hard to keep her eyes steady and to resist the temptation to lay her heavy head down for a quick nap.

Her shift was almost over but she couldn't hold out much longer. After plucking out another coherent sentence or two, Nichole yawned and finally gave up the good fight as she allowed her head to slip forward and then felt the coolness of the hard oak meet the warmth of her forehead.

Her eyes were closed for barely five minutes before Nichole heard the unmistakable sound of her own soft snore escape her nostrils. After another handful filtered through, *much louder this time*, another sound – a hostile voice – cut through the silent air.

“Asleep again?”

The deep alto voice sliced right through her catnap and Nichole's eyes snapped open. Without having to glance up, she already knew who the unexpected visitor was.

“No wonder this town is so overrun with faulty police work. Everyone is sleeping on the job nowadays.”

Pul-leaze. Is this joker kidding me? One ten-minute nap and now I am the cause of every major crime within twenty miles, Nichole thought as she wrestled with the urge to ignore her unfriendly visitor.

The fact that she was still on duty for another fifteen minutes was the only reason Nichole felt even slightly obliged to at least acknowledge his presence in the room. Nichole blinked her eyes open and, through blurry vision, spied the round desk clock to her immediate left. After another moment of absently staring at the numbers displayed on the timepiece, she summoned enough energy to lift her head from the awkward comfort of the hard surface, though not bothering to replace her glasses. She was simply too tired to care about what she looked like right now, especially to a man who obviously

already loathed the sight of her. While trying to blink away the thin film that was building around the cornea of her eyes, Nichole turned toward the direction of where the owner of the ever-annoyed voice now stood staring daggers at her from across the desk.

Her words came out sluggishly as she cupped her face between her two cocoa colored hands and allowed her eyes to squint somewhat as she tried to refocus her vision.

“Can I help you with something, Mr. Raven?”

“Please don’t let me interrupt you.”

The comment was meant to sound snappy; however, to her tired ears, it sounded like little more than what it actually was, a plea for attention from a man who needed to get over himself.

Eric Raven.

Looking at the blurred image before her, Nichole wondered how half the female population in this building and about a dozen others across the uptown business district could possibly be in love with this man. Sure, he was above average height with a clean cut and handsome face. He looked more like a Roman god than a Senior Assistant Public Defender. Nichole would be a liar if she thought that even she could resist the air of carnal sensuality that followed him constantly. Even at this moment, her body was beginning to feel more alert, more vibrantly awake in his presence. Nonetheless, and this was a major factor that seemed to negate any others, Eric Raven had a pompous alpha male attitude to match his ethereally magnetic persona. Unlike every other woman in a two county radius, Nichole simply did not have time to stroke his ego every time he stomped through the door and made a demand. It was way too late in the evening for

mind games and she was reluctant to give him the satisfaction of intimidation and control that he seemed to constantly crave.

Seconds ticked away and he remained silent. After another few moments slid by, Nichole decided to take it upon herself to cut the tension that was rapidly building between the two of them.

“Mr. Raven, did you actually need something? Or may I finish my nap – only if it’s okay with *you*, of course.”

She didn’t need to actually see his face clearly – she would have had to make the effort to lift her glasses to do that – to know that he had replaced his sophisticated features with a confounded sneer. It never seemed to require too much effort on her part to get Eric Raven riled up. The idea that she had such an influence over his moods actually appealed to Nichole’s senses, somewhere in a part of her psyche that she was not quite ready to explore.

“Do we have to do this dance every time I come to this office?”

The corners of Nichole’s mouth turned up to form a satisfied smirk. There was no doubt that her ability to escalate his temper always bought with it a sense of satisfaction. She sat up a little straighter and let her grin increase threefold before answering his asinine question.

“If you mean, do you and I have to go through this silly battle of wills whenever you stomp down to the Office of the Records and Registry, then yes, *we do*. I cannot and will not act as though you are God’s gift to all humanity like all the other silly little girls that roam around this place.”

Nichole saw Eric's body lean back from the bite of her words. She silently wondered how it was possible for a man who sported such a tough exterior to be this easily offended by mere words?

Well, good. Someone needed to set Mr. Eric Raven straight, and I'm damn well glad it was me who did it.

Another full grin, double in size and intensity, slipped over her lips.

"What are you smiling about?" He spoke with a hint of contempt behind his question.

"Oh, nothing," she lied and lifted her brown eyes to meet his blue ones, "Anyhow, what did you need?"

"What I *need* is some information, of course. Why else would I be here at this hour?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because you can't get enough of seeing my lovely face?"

A feeling of mischief made its way into her thoughts and Nichole batted her eyelashes in mock flirtation.

Her statement seemed to be true enough. Eric was down here no less than twice per week asking for copies of this or that. A big time public official like him could have easily sent his assistant or someone else to retrieve what he needed, or even called to have the items faxed or emailed to his office at the county courthouse, half a block away. He almost never made requests during normal business hours when there were plenty of other people to help him. So the question remained, why did he always show up in dire

need of something during Nichole's shift? If she didn't know better, Nichole might assume Eric was purposefully trying to be alone with her.

Yeah, right, she mused in her head.

Only in his dreams would she ever give him the time of day. If there was one thing that Nichole M. Edwards could not – *would not* – be bothered with, it was a man who believed the sun had to rise and set at his command.

She heard a deep inhalation of breath and then saw Eric lift a hand the color of a warmed peach to adjust his red tie. He cleared his throat and continued on as though she has made no comment.

"I need you to please get me a copy of the Rondell Holmes case."

Please.

That one word echoed in Nichole's mind. Not once, in all of the two years that she had known of him and the six months of having to deal with him in person, since switching to the second shift, did this gorgeous man ever – *ever* – ask for anything politely. With Eric Raven, all requests were actually demands and to be treated as such. Her previous assignment had been as a clerk in the records department of the courthouse, where she had first encountered the hot new attorney in town. Nichole had observed his fierce nature whenever they had passed one another in the courthouse halls. She had witness firsthand how men cowered under his commands and how women flocked to his side just to stand a little closer to his sculpted physique.

This unexpected break in his usual mood suddenly warranted more attention. Nichole lifted her left hand and casually reached for her glasses.

"Wait."

His plea stopped her from pulling the lenses up over the bridge of her nose.

She looked up at him and although she could not see a clear image of his facial features, she was almost sure that the corners of that sensual mouth of his were arched slightly upward.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Nothing, I – nothing.”

He shook his head, as if shaking the thought away.

She pushed the thin lenses up and immediately his features became crystal clear.

A flawlessly symmetrical face met her gaze. An angular nose that appeared to have been chiseled out of marble, beautiful rose colored lips, just begging to be kissed, and light blue eyes were all Nichole needed to get her pulse pounding. Any hints of sleep that remained were washed away by the bold handsomeness of the man standing before her on the other side of the flat rectangular desk, a desk with just enough surface area to allow two prone bodies to do some major horizontal moves. Well over six feet in height, with wide shoulders and a broad chest that gradually sloped down to a slim but sturdy 36” waistline, Eric should have been the prototype of what a man should be built like. Dark brown hair, tapered on the sides and at the base of his neck, slightly longer and with deep waves on the top, gave his style just enough edge and flexibility for either the boardroom or out to a casual nightclub. The dark charcoal colored wool coat perfectly complimented the navy blue suit he wore beneath.

After fully beholding the image of the man before her, Nichole felt the telltale tingle of goose pimples trying to creep the surface of her skin and had to tear her gaze

away. Only through sheer will had she been able to keep her tongue from making a lazy stroll across her lips.

Suddenly needing a distraction, Nichole stood to adjust her standard beige button up cotton top and matching straight knee length skirt of the same color. After stretching her arms full length and rolling her neck, she looked over to see a smoldering gaze trying to memorize her every movement. Nichole had to look away to keep Eric's stare from overpowering and intimidating her.

Quickly dropping back to her seat, Nichole saw that her work terminal had timed out. Eric may only be in "assistant" status now but he was extremely efficient at this job and would probably be taking on the highly coveted position that Gregory Ramsey, the current Senior Defense Attorney in their county, would be abandoning upon his retirement, later this year. Nichole was a smart woman who appreciated all of the benefits of having a municipal assignment and the last complication that she needed was for the high ranking attorney standing before her to pull rank and report that she was being less than professional during business hours. Her final reasoning was that it would probably be to her advantage to regain some sense of professionalism and very soon.

"One copy coming right up, sir."

She punched in her username and password and waited for the program to take her to the next screen.

"Do you always have to be so formal with me?"

His voice was strained, as though he were holding something back. Nichole pretended not to notice his change in tone from hostile to slightly sensual.

"I don't think that I understand what you mean."

She answered him absently while continuing to stare at the blue screen with the Police Department Official Seal in the center of the monitor.

Whether from the lack of sleep or the lateness of the evening or a combination of both, her senses were starting to reach their maximum. The smell of his spicy cologne drifted up her nostrils. It was an exotic mix of warmed oak and fresh pine.

“What I mean is, in all the times I have been in here, day or night, not once have you been polite me. No smile. Not even a ‘hello’. Straight to business.”

The polished timber of his voice sent a strong signal to her nether regions. The possibility of her doing something outside of her character, like reaching over to inhale a tantalizing sample of his essence, was increasing with every second that he continued to stare down at her. Nichole no longer trusted herself to meet his masculine gaze.

Okay, this is going way too far, she mentally scolded herself. Come on, you stupid machine.

Her name and password had been grayed out, but were yet to be accepted into the registry. Nichole silently pleaded with the piece of machinery to kick-start so she could hustle up the documents he needed. The sooner she completed her task, the sooner Mr. Eric ‘aka *Walking Sex Machine*’ Raven would vacate the premises. Her hope was that, once he was gone from her sight, her suddenly raging hormones could calm to normal levels.

“Same goes for you,” she muttered while still focusing on the login screen.

“*What?*” he thundered out, almost offended, “I am nothing but polite to you. I only return back what *you* give out.”

“Damn it! Come on. This is ridiculous”

“What’s wrong?”

Nichole sensed that the concern in his voice was almost genuine. Again, she wondered at what had prompted his sudden about-face in temperament. Was there any truth to the possibility the Eric might be interested in her?

Moving around the reception desk, Eric moved closer toward where Nichole was seated in a low back rolling desk chair. He leaned over her shoulder and she automatically crossed her legs to keep the ache down.

“This stupid computer won’t let me get to the records application, and – ”

Her words caught in her mouth as Nichole turned her head up to find that Eric’s face was only inches away from the side of her own. She had sensed his movements but had not realized he had stopped to close. The smell of fresh pinecones drifted from his smooth full jaw line and the heat from his skin caressed her cheek, sending her nostrils into a flare. Never had any man she had ever encountered before oozed this much sex appeal.

“Um, it won’t let me log on. It’s just stuck or something.”

Eric reached his large arms around her shoulders and placed his hands flat against the desk on either side of her keyboard. Nichole felt her nipples pebble at the intimate closeness of their two bodies and immediately hated herself allowing it to happen. When he leaned forward a bit more to inspect the monitor, Nichole was unable to resist Eric’s magnetic draw and pushed back against him. The heavy material of his coat rubbed against the base of her neck and caused Nichole to suck in her bottom lip at the feel of the rough material. All she had to do now was reach up and rub her fingers through his silky

locks and her body would probably combust from the sensation. Her eyes were sliding close as she imagined how the hairs would feel between her fingertips.

“I think I know what your problem is.”

“Hm?”

Her eyes remained close and she was not completely sure what problem he was referring to – her work terminal or her rising heat level.

“I know why you can’t get into the system.”

“Oh.”

Was it really possible she was disappointed that he was referring to the computer dilemma and not the latter? Nichole mulled over that thought but reached no certain conclusion.

Eric’s head dipped and he eyed her suspiciously, but continued on.

“You have the caps lock on.”

Nichole looked down and the caps light was lit up like a Christmas tree. She deselected the button, hit control-alt-delete, re-entered her information, and the records manifest came on in less than ten seconds.

“Oh, man, I must be done for the day. That should have been the first thing I looked at.”

She took her glasses off again and squeezed her eyes closed.

A nice long bath and an even longer rest would be an absolute necessity since it was now certifiable that her brain was fried.

“What time do you get off?” His voice was lighter, even less aggressive and more sensual than before.

“Huh?”

Nichole looked up at Eric with a confused expression.

“You look exhausted – *beautiful* – but very exhausted.”

Nichole’s lips parted slightly, a hint of confusion crossed her expression. Eric was walking around to the other side of the desk when he said the words and his back was to her. She was grateful he had completely missed her reaction to his statement. After quickly pulling her lips back together, she made sure to keep her eyes glued to the application on the screen while she pulled up the information he requested.

Beautiful. Had she heard him correctly? Nichole wondered if she should ask him to repeat his last sentence.

The instant she raised her head up from the monitor, Eric must have read her face. His blue eyes flashed an undecipherable emotion and then he cut her off before any words came forth.

“The file? May I please have a copy now?”

“Sure, sure. Give me two minutes.”

Nichole typed in the last and first name of the defendant – *Rondell Holmes*. Mr. Holmes was currently on trial for robbery and assault on an affluent resident of Timber Falls, Monica Bristle King, an heir of one of the founding families of the this lovely community. This time, it wasn’t so much the crime as it was the major players that were garnering so much press for this case. Even reporters from Manhattan had stopped in to pick up some facts to post snippet articles in the big city papers. Since Rondell was from one of the poorer sections on the outskirts of town, his family could not afford their own attorney, so one was appointed on his behalf, namely Mr. Eric Raven.

At the very least, Mr. Holmes had the very best public defense attorney on his side. Being a county worker in his district, Nichole knew Eric's reputation well. He worked every case he was assigned to as though it were high priority and represented all of his clients to the fullest, regardless of their socioeconomic status. That had to be the one characteristic, other than his jaw-dropping good looks, that Nichole admired about Raven. Eric was a tough guy yet he was also a truly brilliant defense attorney. Not only was Eric honest and hard working, he didn't let his looks make a name for him. He allowed his integrity to set the tone for his career.

Reaching over to the printer, Nichole removed the pages that had spewed out of the printer at the push of one button on her keypad and then stapled the small stack together.

"Done. Have a good evening, Mr. Raven."

Without bothering to look up in his direction again, she placed the booklet into his outstretched palm.

Once the papers were in his hand, Eric turned to move toward the doorway and then he stopped. He stood frozen in place, facing the door, with Nichole holding her breath, anticipating his next move. Finally, after an extended pause, Eric turned on his heels, walked back over to Nichole's workstation and gripped the edges with thick fingers. He leaned forward and lowered his body so that he was at eye level with her.

"Before I leave, I want you to know I meant what I said."

His voice had lowered one octave and the effect, with only six inches separating their faces, sent a small shudder down Nichole's spine.

"Which part?"

Her own voice came out a little lower than she had intended and she cursed herself for falling under the hypnotic sway of his words. Only the Lord knew how many other women around town Raven had succeeded in seducing after hours. She dared not breath for fear of exposing her weakness to the owner of the crystal blue pools. The feeling surging throughout Nichole's body was both delicious and maddening all at once.

When he responded, Eric's voice had dropped to a near whisper.

"About you being beautiful."

Her mouth was suddenly dry causing Nichole to swallow hard.

The sound of someone – *a female* – clearing her throat floated across the room. The overpowering odor of an impossibly strong perfumed scent drifted inside along with the woman. Even though a half dozen weeks or so had passed since the woman moved to the overnight shift, Nichole still gagged at the smell each time it hit her nostrils.

Peeking around Eric's wide shoulder, Nichole watched the sultry redhead enter the records room. As the temptress floated toward them, she sashayed her hips from side to side. Her eyes never left Eric's face. Sheri Ramsey was a woman on a mission to capture and claim.

Eric shifted his body so that he had turned away from Nichole and was now in a standing position again. Sheri stopped so that her large breasts, near bursting from beneath the one size too small top that was unbuttoned to just below the outline of her bra, were grazing the arm of Eric's coat. She placed her slim, cream-colored hand onto the curve of his shoulder and began to slowly, meticulously massage the area.

Her red-coated lips curved up at the corners into a seductive smile and the gray of her eyes sparkled with naughty mischief. Sheri's words rolled seductively off of her tongue.

"Eric, what a wonderful surprise. It's been so long – *too long* – since we've had a chance to *talk*."

Nichole could only guess at the hidden meaning of the statement. Judging by the way Sheri seemed to hold Eric captive, whatever her guess, she would probably be correct.

To Nichole's surprise, and a hint of relief, Eric took a step backward to widen the space between their bodies thus forcing Sheri's arm to drop from his shoulder

When he spoke, there was formality in his voice.

"Ms. Ramsey, it has been a while since we last ran into one another. You must have recently changed your work hours."

Sheri's eyes narrowed, a flash of surprise – *perhaps anger* – ran across her face.

"Yeah, I did," her words were much colder now and she crossed her arms over her exposed bosom, "I'm more of a night owl. Then, again, I'm sure you've already figured that out by now."

It was Nichole's turn to make some noise. She grabbed the edges of the keyboard and made sure she rubbed the bottom against the wood to create enough friction to make a slight screeching sound that caught the attention of the other two. There was definitely a crowd and the grand entrance of *the queen* signaled that Nichole's shift was over. Nichole's bed was awaiting her arrival and she did not want her last thought, before sleep

overcame her, to be a vision of a make out session or even a lover's quarrel between *that* pair.

"Mr. Raven, Sheri can assist you with anything else you may need," Nichole called out to Eric as she started to gather her belongs and clean off her area.

She placed her electronic notebook back into its black carrier case and then tossed her Chinese food carton and soda bottle into the small wastebasket next to the desk.

"Can't you stay a moment longer? I only need to discuss one more item with *you?*"

Nichole allowed her dark eyes to slide in Eric's direction only long enough to see a pleading look on his face before she turned away. Tossing the strap of her tote bag up and over one shoulder and her dark pea coat over the opposite arm, she took quick steps toward the door leading to the hallway before offering a reply without bothering to look back again.

"Sorry, I've had a long day and need to get home. Enjoy the rest of your night, Mr. Raven...You too, Sheri."

"Okay. Maybe we can finish up another time?"

Thankfully, Nichole wouldn't have to answer because she had successfully made her way halfway up the hall before Eric's muffled question reached her ears. She had put a good distance between them and hoped to keep it that way. Now, all she needed to do was pray he had all the information he needed for this case and would not be making anymore unannounced visits with her in the near future.

This time was enough to get her juices flowing, and if there was a next time, she may find herself willingly spread-eagle across the desk with criminal defense lawyer Eric

Raven pinning her down. This was a desire that Nichole secretly yearned for and loathed all in the same thought.

How could a man be so damn sexy this late at night?

She shook the thought from her mind and pushed through the front entryway of the building and made her way up the street and toward her tiny apartment a few blocks away.

≈ Chapter 2 ≈

Eric Raven walked over to the large window in his office.

His sharp blue eyes peered out and onto the busy Tuesday morning crowd below. A normal business day was being carried out on the street below, with throngs of people moving along the mid-morning sidewalk and a countless number of cars flying down the roads of this bustling mini-metropolis.

It was business as usual in his office as well. His legal assistant, an older woman named June, had left him a copy of her notes from the Rondell Holmes case file on his desk. An early morning visit with Rondell had revealed little more than what Raven had already read in the local paper. Rondell was adamant that he was on his way home from work when the police picked him up for no reason. He said he had never meant Monica King and had no idea what she looked like or where her place of residence was. With the opening hearing of Rondell's trial only a few weeks away, close to Christmas, Eric would need a miracle to add any plausible evidence to his case's defense. Right now, all he had was Mr. Holmes's word that he had nothing to do with the robbery or the assault and for a jury that would never be enough.

Eric knew that he needed to look over his assistant's information as well as his own notes but he could not seem to keep his thoughts on track. His behavior as of late was so foreign to him; never had a woman caused him this much distraction. It had been three days since their last encounter and every time Eric tried to focus on the case at hand, *she* would cloud his vision and fill his mind.

Nichole Edwards.

Petite glasses, hair pulled back in a simple pony tail, long skirt – *whatever* – she wore and did everything with confidence and pride, the same as him and Eric loved that about Nichole. Her goal in life was not to impress others and it was this essential characteristic that Eric loved most about her. From the first time she had crossed his path in the corridor outside of a courtroom he was about to enter, Nichole had captivated him straight away.

Eric was never able to find out the name of the mystery woman with the mocha colored skin and the silkiest looking legs he had ever seen. It wasn't until about six months ago when he had to come in person to the police station to pick up a certified file from the records department that Eric was finally able to put a name to the lovely face.

Their first conversation was less than amiable. Eric had not been quite sure how to react to a woman who didn't instantly want to give herself to him. His frustration at not being able to express himself to her had turned to anger, yet Nichole meant his forced words with grace and poise. His Nichole never raised her voice higher than was necessary to complete their business exchanges. She never gave Eric so much as a hint that he was able to get under her skin, to evoke any type of emotion – positive or negative – from her.

When he found out she had switched to the second shift, he immediately switched his habits also. Whatever records information he needed from the Timber Falls Police, he collected himself and in person. Eric had deemed it to be the perfect opportunity to try to get some alone time with Nichole. He wanted to know so much more about her but she never even blinked at him twice. He did have a heart – despite many opinions to the contrary – and his goal was to somehow share it with Nichole. In Eric's mind, he would

somehow get her to feel more comfortable with him. He wanted her to share some of her life and, hopefully, some of her personal time with him. Thus far, his plan had been a complete failure.

From the first time Eric set eyes on Nichole over a year ago, he knew he had to have her, but his approach was all wrong. Growing up as one of a hand full of white kids in a housing project had made him tough, even aggressive at times, and sometimes it was hard to shake the edge off. Age and maturity had moved him – *slowly* – away from his brawler stage, and now he did most of his fighting in the courtroom. His height and large physical build caused most people, men included, to instinctively cower away from him or become eager to follow his commands. All of Eric's life, since his early teen years, females have always wanted to be near him and to offer themselves to him. Eric never had a problem getting who or what he wanted one way or another. *But his Nichole was different.* She wouldn't be bullied into dating him and, thus far, she wasn't coming willing either. Never once had she ever seemed intimidated by him or remotely attracted to him. Until a few days ago, Eric was beginning to think of giving up on the slightest hope that he could change the status of their relationship, or what his stubbornness had told him was a budding relationship.

Whenever he walked into the small office where she was stationed, Eric was always filled with a sense of comfort at seeing her sitting there so cute with that little black device perched in front of her nose. He wanted to know what she was reading, what her hobbies were, what she was interested in, what she did for fun, and all the things that made her laugh. Eric wanted to be Nichole's confidant, her lover, and so much more if she would only allow him a moment of her time. But each and every time her dark

eyes, like rich coffee, covered by those petite lenses, would meet his, he saw nothing but contempt for him reflected back and had to do his very best to hide his own adoration for her.

Eric loved how her lenses framed her caramel colored face. Her light dusting of honey shaded eye shadow and the most tantalizing colors of lip-gloss he had ever seen, only enhanced her stunning features, and not overwhelmed them. Eric wanted so much to pull Nichole's sleek dark hair from its holder and grip a handful in his fist, and to run his tongue along her slim and delicate neck. He craved an opportunity to confirm that she tasted as sweet and enticing as she appeared.

The other night was the first time he had the blessing to behold those lovely dark chocolate eyes, minus the lenses, and Eric's heart missed a beat, several actually, when they landed on him. Since that time up until today, he had spent almost every waking and sleeping moment fantasizing about Nichole lying next to him in his bed while he stared lazily into those hypnotic pools.

The thought alone was more than enough to make his manhood stiff.

When he heard the light tapping on his office door, Eric adjusted his pants legs. He was glad to have worn his usual dark dress pants. It was much easier to hide his obvious excitement than if he had been wearing a pair of light colored slacks.

"Come in," he yelled loud enough for the visitor to hear.

"Do you ever take a day off, guy?" The gruff voice of the lead county Defense Attorney Gregory Ramsey filled the room.

The offhanded comment was meant to signal nonexistence camaraderie between the two men. Eric had always made sure to keep his superior at arms length at all times.

There was something he didn't like about this man. Rumors abounded about Ramsey's double standard when prioritizing what he considered white collar versus blue-collar defendants, and Eric didn't want this man's grime to taint him in any way. Still, Ramsey was his boss, at least for the next few months, and deserved the respect that came with that position, whether he had earned it or not.

The younger man casually strolled from his place at the window and reached out and shook the older man's hand.

"Yes, sir, but only to shower and change. Other than that, you know my life is here."

"Good, good. That's what I like to hear," Gregory responded as he firmly cupped the young man's elbow.

"Have a seat."

Eric extended his hand to the large leather armchair near his library of legal books and other important tomes.

"Please, call me Greg."

Ramsey unbuttoned his black suit jacket and placed himself in the seat offered to him. The senior attorney appeared to be in a jovial mood, but Eric eyed him carefully. If there was one thing his street smarts had taught him, it was never trust anyone at face value alone. Even the kindest smile could be masking the most devious heart. The opposite was true also. People who often looked scary enough to make you want cross to the other side of the street, oftentimes could be some of the most loving and giving people one could ever meet. Personal experience had taught him this lesson and was one of the main reasons Eric had retired from the corporate sector and taken up defense

law. There was a significant decrease in pay, but the sense of accomplishment he felt as a defense attorney far outweighed the monetary compensation. He wanted to fight for the ones who were given the bad hand in life, who did not have anyone else on their side.

Eric turned his mind back to the business at hand. The fact that the lead defense attorney in the county was in his office meant there was a serious agenda to be discussed. Gregory Ramsey was not the type of man who deemed himself a hands-on kind of superior and he almost never made personal visits to the attorneys under his charge. Either you knew how to do your job or you didn't. Only a hot ticket item on his list of priorities, usually the higher profile dockets, would prompt him to take the time to come this far away from the main office. Despite the smile that Greg had plastered all over his face, Eric was sure the man had nothing but discomfiting news to share.

"I like what you have done with the place," he said in Eric's direction but without actually looking at him.

Ramsey crossed his legs and continued to speak without actually waiting long enough to get a response.

"The last time I was here was when your replacement was being given his walking papers. You remember him, don't you?"

His cool gray-eyed gaze was casually sweeping over the room, never focusing on any one area in particular. Eric's keen senses and years of courtroom experience had already revealed to him that the elder man was strategizing his next move. .

Bingo. Now we're getting somewhere.

"Actually, I don't," Eric offered when he felt it was time for him to respond.

He made the short distance across the room and claimed his own seat behind his desk.

“When I came, the office was already vacant. Rick Matthews and I never had a chance to meet in person. Although – I have heard *things*.”

Eric purposefully left the statement open-ended. He knew there was a reason for this surprise visit from his superior and he needed to know what it was so he could setup his own game plan. Eric never worked in the dark. Either he had all of the cards in front of him or he didn’t play at all, except, of course, when it came to this cat and mouse game with his sweet Nichole.

A smile touched his mind when her name crossed his thoughts, but he kept his outward face stern and serious as he awaited a response from the older gentleman.

“I see.”

Greg puckered his lips and contemplated for a moment before he continued.

“Well, let’s just say that Rick didn’t exactly *follow the rules*.”

Ramsey stopped again and placed his hands together under his jaw with the tips supporting his chin and he leaned forward.

“I know that you currently have the Holmes case on your docket.”

Eric nodded, but remained silent. He would not be willingly walking in to any traps. He was not completely sure what Gregory Ramsey meant when he referred to the man Eric had succeeded as Senior Assistant Public Defender as *not playing by the rules* but he knew he was about find out.

“Eric, this is a *very* sensitive case. You understand who the victim is, what she and her family represent to this community?”

Another nod on Raven's part.

"The Bristles and the Kings are prominent members of this city. The Bristle family was here when it was nothing more than a backwater hamlet. Monica Bristle King is the mayor's niece and a cousin of one of the state senators. Her husband is one of the top business magnates in this region. Her family wants justice *and they are going to get it*. The perpetrator is going to have to pay. No matter what, he's going to get a very long sentence. The Office of the Public Defender only needs to do our part, which is to give a *reasonable* defense nothing *extra*. That will also entail allowing the prosecutor to make his case. *You get me?* And if you nod your head one more time, I'm going to come over there and knock it back for you."

The last statement was supposed to make Eric sit up straight and take notes; instead, he casually placed his own hands under his chin and locked stares with the gray-eyed man with salt and pepper hair. This man was his boss, *yes*, his master – *hell no*. Eric had made acquaintance with and out-maneuvered dozens of bullies like Gregory Ramsey in his South Philly neighborhood, at the local law school he had to work full-time to afford, and in the major circuits of New York City when he was still practicing corporate law. None of them came even close to being as hard-handed as Eric Raven when *his* temper escalated.

"I'll tell you exactly how this conversation is going to end. If you leave right now and let me do my job the *right* way, that is, the *legal* way, I won't have to report you to the state Bar Association. Mr. Ramsey, please allow me to clarify that I am *not* a professional athlete. I am an attorney; therefore, I do not play games, especially when it comes to person's life or their freedom. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some more

research to do and a few appearances to make in court today. I think you can show yourself out. Please have a safe drive back to your office in Jersey City.”

Eric stood and walked back to his station at the window and placed both of his hands securely in his pant’s pockets. With his back turned to Ramsey, he flexed his fists and silently steadied his rising level of anger and annoyance at Ramsey’s attempted threat. A firm click confirmed that the visit was over but the real work was only beginning. There was something off concerning the circumstances of this case and he needed more information to begin to fit the whole picture together. The fact that his superior found it necessary to make an unannounced visit to wave a hand of intimidation signaled to Eric’s instincts that whatever available facts and evidence on hand would require a closer look.

A warm feeling spread over his chest, and was able to counter the icy blast that Ramsey had brought into the room with him.

Another trip back to the police record’s department would come sooner than previously planned. This time, he would not allow Nichole to run out on him. It was time to end the stalemate he had allowed to stand between them. No more games. Nichole needed to understand that Eric wanted her and there would be no stopping his pursuit.

≈ Chapter 3 ≈

The next week was brutal for Eric.

After his not so friendly meeting with Gregory Ramsey, Raven had been assigned several new cases that needed to be reviewed, initial interviews had to be scheduled, and back to back court appearances attended. Even for a seasoned Public Defender his caseload was heavy.

Once his final hearings for the week had concluded at around one thirty in the afternoon the following Thursday, Eric went back to his office to review the notes regarding Rondell Holmes once more. He had only met with the young man once since being assigned as his attorney; even so, he had a feeling that the man had been placed in a bad situation by no fault of his own. Reading through the file, Eric quickly summarized the defendant's life. Rondell was twenty-one and his juvenile record wasn't clean, but he had been charged with no new crimes since the age of sixteen, when he and his family moved here to Timber Falls. His mother thought the best move for her two young and impressionable sons was to get as far away from all of the temptations of the inner city as her limited budget would allow. Her choice had proven to be successful up until a little over a month ago.

He had read and re-read the police report and notes and the facts did not add up. Mr. Holmes lived nearly five miles in the opposite direction of Marina Village and did not own a vehicle. Even if he were a track star, that would have been a long escape on foot from the crime scene and back to a block away from his job on the other side of town where he was arrested. He worked a steady job as a mechanic at a local auto shop,

had virtually no outstanding debt, and no children. He still lived with his mother and younger brother, who was a senior in high school and was enrolled in college prep courses at the local community college. There was no element in Rondell's lifestyle to indicate any reason why he would need to break into a home, much less assault the homeowner. There was no history of a violent crime in his records. Toxicology reports taken with the mandatory time frame following his arrest stated there were no foreign substances in his system. On top of this, there were no prints left at the scene that matched the set take from him. In essence, he had no need to rob anyone, because he would have been destroying the life he appeared to be trying to build up for himself and his family. Rondell Holmes simply did not have the motive or the means to commit this crime. Mr. Holmes had firmly announced his innocence more than once during that first meeting and Eric Raven believed him.

Rubbing his hands over his face, Raven glanced at his watch and decided it was time for some fresh air. His plan had been to work for a few more hours before calling it a day, but the long week was wearing on him and he decided it was time to cut out for a break before he went over all of the material again with refreshed eyes. Eric reminded himself that he had a job to do and there were people who depended on him to perform his duties to the best of his ability. This would include needing to have a sharp and focused mind.

Nichole sipped her mocha latte and then scanned the headlines of *The Journal*, Timber Falls' local newspaper. Without fail, the Bristle-King assault case had once again made the headlines for a fifth week in a row:

...Monica Bristle King, daughter of business mogul Daniel Bristle, remains in a medically induced coma. The socialite was attacked and savagely beaten at her Marina Village home on October 20th. The Marina is an area of Timber Falls known to house some of the most affluent members of the area and sometimes used as a secluded hideaway to various celebrities. Around 8 PM that night, the Bristle-King residence was ransacked while the heiress's husband, Ronald King, was away on company business. Ronald King, Senior Vice President of Bristle Telecom, has made no comment regarding his wife's health or the status of the pending case against Rondell Holmes, the only suspect in the crime. Police and the District Attorney's Office continue their investigation and expect to move forward to trial within the coming weeks...

The moment she finished reading the article, Nichole shook her head. There was something off about the case, but she was no investigator or attorney. Still, even from the viewpoint of the average Jane, the way the case was open and shut for the County Prosecutor was almost too perfect.

She pushed her glasses up and allowed her eyes to roam around the modest café. She came here mostly because it was family owned and operated and, because of that fact, the proprietors were always friendly and were not skimpy on the ingredients, which

made for a wonderful feeling of coziness while enjoying mouth-watering and decadent coffee flavored drinks and treats.

At this time of the afternoon, close to sunset and when the shopping district connecting to the busy uptown area was finally starting to slow down, not too many others visited the café. Nichole was able to get comfortable and relax her mind before her shift started. She was still dressed in her street clothes, consisting of a light blue three-quarter length cotton knit top, faded blue jeans and dark stiletto heeled shoe-styled boots. After she finished this last cup of coffee, Nichole would make her way back to her small apartment, a fifteen-minute walk up the street from here, and change clothes before heading off to a long evening that stretched until close to midnight.

As her eyes continued to leisurely survey the last remaining customers, her sight landed on a familiar figure at the checkout counter. There was no mistaking *that* body. Even fully dressed, Eric Raven was the absolute archetype for a women's wet dream. How was it possible for a man to have perfectly brush and groomed hair and no shadow line at this hour of the day? This time around, he was minus the wool coat. Today had been unusually warm for early November, thus Nichole's own sleeveless attire. His suit jacket was in his hand and Nichole had a full view of his firm backside. The starched cotton of his white dress shirt hugged his massive shoulders and allowed her to fully admire their wide arc shape and the perfect sturdiness of his waistline. There was no doubt in her mind that he had to have played some type of sports when he was younger. The man was built like a brick house. Nichole allowed herself a quick vision of what it would be like to wrap her thick thighs around his dark peach colored skin and hold on for dear life. She squirmed in her chair and then the unthinkable happened. He turned

around. She wondered had he felt the heat radiating from her thoughts projecting onto him or had his perfect vision caught her movements from the corner of his eye.

The corners of his mouth lifted and formed a charming smile. Nichole realized she was still watching him, probably with a lustful gleam in her eyes, and immediately adjusted her posture. Dropping her gaze to look over for her tote bag, she started to pack up her few belongings and clean up her area. Eric was still paying for his items, and Nichole calculated that if she moved fast enough she should have enough time to make it halfway to the door before he was free to try to engage her in any kind of conversation.

Nichole's problem was that her attraction to him had made itself abundantly clear during their last exchange. Her senses still hummed at the memory of Eric Raven's zesty scent. The last kind of trouble she needed was to be caught in some kind of scandal inside or outside of the workplace. Her main focus was her career and securing a better home. A man would complicate everything – they seemed to have a talent for doing that.

“Don't leave on my account.”

Darn. Not fast enough.

Having been caught in the act of trying to flee, she had no choice but to play along. He was still somewhat of a superior to her own lowly position, and there was no use in making trouble with him when it wasn't necessary. Nichole would not allow herself to go any further than being polite. After all, Eric's new *friendlier* smile seemed to be an indication that he was trying to start off on better terms with her. It would not hurt her to be civil for as long as he was able to hold up his end.

“Mr. Raven, nice to see you. How are you?”

She smiled and hoped it looked sincere.

“I’m well.”

Eric stood over her, looking as manly as ever and with a determination in his eyes that made Nichole’s heart rate accelerate.

“I’m actually better now that I have run into you. May I sit?”

Although the man set her tiny nub on fire, he had always carried an attitude that could cool her heels just as fast. Usually his overbearing personality made her want to send him packing as fast as possible. His last visit, however, had set off one of her internally sensors. It had been nearly one year since Nichole had broken up with her last boyfriend and probably equally as long since her last intimate encounter. The effects of lacking the *special touch* that only a man could provide were starting to show. Nichole was doing her very best to hide the flush of heat coming over her body while she beheld Eric’s dazzling blue eyes, made to look all the more intense by his deep brown hair.

“I was just about to leave, but...sure. Please, have a seat.”

“I don’t want to keep you,” is what he said but then Eric sat in the chair opposite Nichole without further delay.

Eric turned to place his coat on the back of the chair. Then he undid his cuffs and rolled up the sleeves on his button up shirt. He was getting comfortable and Nichole needed to prepare her defenses. She had heard all of the rumors about his various liaisons around the station and at his office, and she refused to be counted amongst the number of the discarded.

“No, it’s no problem,” Nichole glanced down at her slim gold wrist watch, “I still have some time.”

She had about an hour until her shift started. Her better instincts told her to lie and say she needed to get home and prepare for work, but a faint yearning in her heart almost wanted this encounter to play out and see where it was going.

“So, how is your day going, Nichole?”

He said her name in a way that made her inhibitions wane just a bit. The urge to lean across the table and taste those perfect lips was rising. Eric looked directly at her and the blue in his eyes was vibrant and kind, there was no hint of the beast of a man she had previously known him as. Nichole pushed down the surge of hormones and tried to continue the conversation in a casual manner, making sure to keep her voice steady and light.

“I’m doing okay, although not really looking forward to another long night over at the station. But, a gal has to make a living.”

There was a touch of nervousness peeking through at the end of her sentence and Nichole had to don a smile in order to mask it.

“That she does. It’s funny you should mention that. I was actually going to come by and see you later.”

Nichole clamped her legs together and held them tight. She quickly licked moisture across her lips and shifted her eyes away from his enchanting irises.

“You were coming to see *me*?” The words rolled hesitantly off her tongue.

“Well, you know,” Eric shifted in his chair and adjusted his tie, this one a violet color, “I needed you to pull some more information for me on the Bristle-Holmes case. You’re the best and the fastest, so I prefer to work with you.”

“Thank you,” Nichole tried to hide the sudden upwelling of pride in her chest.

Her office environment was anything but big on kudos, so she accepted the gratitude wherever she could get it.

“It’s true. You keep things confidential and I appreciate it. Anyone else would be telling their superior about every piece of information they hand over to me, especially regarding this particular case. Not you,” he paused to consider his words, “You’re *special*.”

The last word hung in her ears like a sweet humming. Her delight manifested into a full set of whites clearing her plum colored lips.

“I’m only doing my job,” she said shyly, her tone slightly lower than intended.

“That’s just it, everything that you do, you do it with pride and dignity. I love that about you.”

His blues became stormy as Nichole perked up at his last words. In a flash, it was Eric’s turn to become beet red.

“What I meant to say is that you take pride in your work. It’s a very admirable quality.”

He sipped his coffee and Nichole looked out of the window and focused on the side street, quickly being overcome by long shadows. She was determined not misconstrue any affections he had for her. While she mulled over her off balance feelings toward Eric Raven, Nichole also noted the black sedan parked across the street from the café. The luxury car had pulled up a few minutes after she had arrived and had remained there with the engine idling ever since. Not once had she seen anyone exit or enter the vehicle.

“What were you reading?”

“Hm?”

“In *The Journal*.”

He nodded his head toward the folded newspaper in front of her on the tabletop.

“Oh, it was another article about the case you’re working.”

Eric watched Nichole bite her lip and lower her brow. Then, just a quickly, lifted her features again.

“What’s the matter? For a moment, you look disturbed.”

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Until today, she had not shared what she knew about the case. Perhaps that was also one of the reasons for her restless sleeping habits as of late. Despite her constant exhaustion, Nichole was able to sleep for little more than a few hours before she was wide awake again. Her brain would not shut off, it always drifted back to the night they had arrested Rondell Holmes and brought him to the station. Part of her was sure there was something not quite right even back then. However, the blue shield was not something any one wanted to cross, if it could be avoided.

“It’s nothing. A quick thought ran through my mind.”

“Do you want to share?”

“Really, it’s nothing major.”

“That’s not what your face is saying. Please? I can be keep a secret too.”

A hint of playful boyish charm accompanied his words.

This was twice he had abandoned his hard exterior in her presence. A stunning smile graced his face and Eric’s hand twitched. His hand and her own were only inches apart, and she thought maybe he had wanted to reach out and touch her.

There was a newfound magnetism about this handsome man that made Nichole want to trust him. She needed to share this story with someone but it was too soon to tell whether Eric was that person. Revealing what happened the night of the arrest to anyone else could possibly bring on more unnecessary trouble than Nichole was willing and able to deal with. She had lived a relatively quiet and average life until now and hoped to keep it that way for a while longer. A friendly smile was not enough to make her loosen her lips – *either pair*.

After a moment of silence, Eric finally seemed to get the hint and awkwardly moved on to the next topic.

“About what happened the other night,” he started.

“You don’t have to explain,” she quickly cut him off, “It was one of those funny times of the day when people say crazy things. Don’t sweat it, Mr. Raven.”

“Eric.”

“Eric?”

“Yes, please call me by given name. Using the title *Mister* makes me sound so old. I’m only thirty-one, you know.”

Nichole felt her cheeks warm. His age had nothing to do with any of her naughty thoughts. But, it was nice to know he was only a couple of years older than she was.

“Okay, *Eric*. I would tell you to call me Nichole but you already do that.”

He smiled again, a full one that lifted his cheeks and allowed a slight glint to shift his eyes from light blue to a sea blue.

“*Nichole*.”

“Yes?”

The warmth in her cheeks spread down to her breasts and she self-consciously reached to adjust her thin glasses once more.

“There was no mistake. I meant what I said. I think you are strikingly beautiful.”

He reached for her hand and fully engulfed her smaller one, preventing her from snatching it away without making it look like he was hurting her to any casual onlookers. She held her breath, and the skin on the back of her hand seemed to mold against his firm pressure.

“I have wanted to tell you that for some time now. I saw how you always reacted to me. I thought you despised me and would shoot me down, so I decided to keep this to myself. Not anymore, Nichole. I saw it in your eyes. You want me too.”

“Mr. Raven – Eric – I don’t think this right.”

“Why not?”

His eyes searched her face for an answer.

Nichole had the feeling that if she said anything but the truth, he would know. She barely knew the man personally but could almost read his thoughts and his intended actions before she knew what her own would be.

“Well, we work together, not quite, but close enough that anything on a more personal level would be – *complicated*. Besides, I’m not really big on casual affairs.”

She laid it out as simple as possible and hoped he would get the picture and leave her be.

“Neither am I.”

She squinted her eyes. Now it was her turn to judge the honesty of his statement.

“What about Sheri and all the others?”

“*Sheri?* No way. She’s my boss’s daughter and more importantly that *girl* is not anywhere near my type,” he made sure to hold Nichole’s gaze before he continued, “You are.”

When Eric saw that he had successfully manifested a crimson blush onto her cheeks, he sighed with a slight relief and eased down the intensity of his gaze a notch. He had made his declaration and it was time to hear her reaction.

“You’re kidding me, right? She’s everyone’s type. Including more than one person down at the DA’s office and the homicide division.”

“Exactly.”

Nichole took the bait and released a giggle. She understood his meaning perfectly well. Sheri had – purposefully or not – built up a long-standing reputation for being a hardcore sex kitten. Nichole found that she was actually quite relieved that Eric, unlike most of the other men she worked with, did not prefer the hot red head.

“Nichole, you hit the nail on the head when you said what you did. Obviously, I could have received the information I needed at a more convenient time of day or by other means, but I needed a way to see you.”

That small revelation was too much to contemplate all in one sitting. Here she was thinking that the man despised her and was purposefully trying to pick fights with her when all the while he was fighting his feelings for her.

Nichole could sit still no longer; she yanked her hand out of his and, in the process, knocked over the remnants of her cup and onto the leg of her jeans.

She jumped up at the sensation of the liquid soaking through the material.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Was it still hot?”

Eric was right at her side with a stack of napkins trying to dab at the dark stain.

“Thank you, I’m okay. I just need to get home and get changed. I was going to be leaving soon anyway.”

Nichole timidly moved his hands away from the stained area, which happened to be covering most of her upper thigh, near her heated center. Eric looked at her and then down at where his hands were placed and pulled them away from her as quickly as possible.

“Are you sure you didn’t get burned?”

She watched his eyes check over her for the slightest hints of pain. His concern touched her heart.

“I’m sure. I should get going.”

“Let me walk you home.”

“I only live up the street. Not far at all. I do this all the time.”

“That was before. I insist on making sure you get there safely from now on.”

Eric helped Nichole to her feet and then held her black pea coat out for her to push her arms through and then pushed it up over her shoulders. He rubbed both of her shoulders tenderly before picking up her small bag and grabbing the newspaper off of table. After placing his own jacket on, he left a tip on the table under his cup. He turned and took Nichole’s hand and intertwined their fingers. All of this happened so fast; Nichole only had time to follow his lead.

“What about your coffee? Don’t you want to finish it first?”

“No, I’d much rather spend a little more time with you.”

Nichole dropped her head and lowered her eyes.

Eric moved them toward the door, making sure to keep her close to his side. He nodded to the man who was co-owner of the shop and then held the door open enough for her to slip through first while still holding her hand securely between his long fingers.

For the first time since meeting him, Nichole was glad she was starting to have a friend in the delectable Mr. Eric Raven.

≈ Chapter 4 ≈

Seeing Nichole sitting in the café window had solved Eric's earlier dilemma of how to find a way of getting her to spend even a minimal amount of quality time with him.

He had actually been on his way to buy coffee at a neighboring shop but once Eric's eye's landed on Nichole, the impulse to enter and seek her out was too overwhelming. He was glad to have meant her in the coffee shop and away from the work atmosphere. Here, under the dimming sunlight, they could both be themselves. No desks and no office politics to keep them leashed.

As the pair walked through the brisk autumn evening, Eric made sure not to let go of Nichole's small hand. He had waited a long time to be this close to her without some form of hostility holding them apart, and he wanted to treasure every moment until it was actually time to release his prize.

"How long have you been a lawyer?"

Her confident voice cut through his roaming thoughts. She stared up at him with those warm eyes and a hunger started to build up within him. If Nichole only knew the seductive things he wanted to whisper in her delicate ears right now, she would probably slap him. The image of her slender body sprawled across his oversized mattress while he crawled slowly up the bed toward her sent an instant jolt throughout his system and he squeezed her hand tighter.

"Ouch!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, did I hurt you?"

This was the first time in years that Eric could recall a woman having such an effect on him. He was becoming extremely nervous after having progressed this far with Nichole, and it was starting to show.

Without thinking, he raised her smaller hand to his lips and tenderly kissed the area he thought he had bruised. Nichole was at a loss as to whether she should pull away or enjoy the tingle the affection stirred.

“I’m fine. I should be asking are *you* okay? It seems like your thoughts came to life for a moment.”

She stared at him blankly, still unsure of whether to react to his small kiss or force the moment on to another subject.

“About five years now.”

Eric went back to her earlier question when he concluded she was not going to take his bait. From the dim light of the streetlamps it was hard to make out her expression, and Eric hoped that he had not crossed the line with his display of affection.

“And you’re already a lead defense attorney? I knew you were good, but not that good.”

He smiled down at her.

“Thanks for the compliment. I love what I do and I hope it shows. When I have a passion for something, I go all out to make it work.”

He squeezed her hand again, making sure to be gentler this time. Eric warned himself that he would have to be careful to remember his own strength when touching his sweet Nichole in the future.

Again, there was a moment of awkward silence between them. His mind scrambled for a new approach. They were less than a half a block away from where she said her apartment was and Eric was nowhere near ready for their time together to be over.

“How long have you been in law enforcement,” he asked, quickly switching the subject back to a topic more comfortable to her.

A chuckle escaped Nichole’s delicate throat and it was the sweetest sound that had ever graced his ears. He wanted to keep her talking and laughing, to hold her attention for as long as possible.

“Saying that I am in law enforcement is a big stretch. I’m actually only considered a county clerk. I never really had to attend the Academy, only pass a proficiency exam.”

“Even so, probably a hundred or more people tested for the position, and you came out the winner. That in itself speaks volumes about you and how special you must be.”

He released his grip on her fingers to move his arm around her shoulders and pull her closer against his own body. The wind was picking up and he used that as an excuse to follow through on the tender embrace. To his delight, she actually pushed up slightly closer and her head was nearly lying on his chest as they walked on. He moved his head so that it rested lightly atop her soft hair and inhaled her fruity body spray, like candied apples, and it was a wonderful delight to his senses.

Nichole released a small sigh and Eric thought she was enjoying the moment equally as much as he. After a few more feet, Nichole’s body suddenly stiffened.

“Eric, stop,” Nichole said as she used her slim hands to lightly push away from his chest.

He would not allow her to have second thoughts when they were this close to connecting. Before too much distance opened up between them Eric turned and leaned down to capture Nichole’s lips, gently laying a small kiss on her mouth.

The sound of her gasp wasn’t enough to make him stop there; instead, it only fueled his confidence and intensified his passion for her. Her sweet lips tasted even sweeter than he imagined, like ripe raspberries, and he deepened the kiss. They were plump and the feel of her tongue sliding across his was like a small piece of heaven. Nichole lifted her arms to clasp the sides of his face, her fingers then lifted further up and playfully combed through his hair down to his scalp sending waves of tingles throughout Eric’s upper body. He wanted to give this woman every part of his body and to love her until she was utterly exhausted.

Eric heard the shuffle of feet and a man clear his throat. He and Nichole had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk when the kiss had begun. From the corner of his eye, while making sure not to release Nichole’s overly moistened mouth, Eric saw the man side step around the entangled pair before continuing to his own destination. He honestly didn’t give a damn if they were holding up rush hour traffic. He was right where he wanted to be, with the woman of his dreams clinging to him.

He felt his hardness straining against his slacks, nearly at the point of bursting. Nichole set his soul ablaze. He was so overwhelmed with passion, Eric was near stunned when Nichole abruptly ended their moment of heated play and pulled in a long breath of air.

She peered up at him and Eric's heart rate doubled. He removed her lenses, carefully dropping them into his suit jacket pocket, and placed his oversized hand on to her flushed brown cheek. He held the pose while he basked in the warmth of her eyes. With her glasses on Nichole possessed hypnotic eyes, able to hold him captive with no hope for release. Without them, he was a man drowning as he stared deep within those chocolate irises.

"You are so lovely," he whispered so that only she would hear the confession.

Nichole swallowed and her eyes quickly moved from left to right as she contemplated her next action. He wanted her to say yes but had already prepared himself for her inevitable response. Eric was well aware that Nichole – *his* Nichole – was not a woman to be won over easily. This was only the beginning of his chase and he would make it a good one, because the prize was all too important to be lost.

"Eric," her voice barely audible, "we're here."

She tilted her head to indicate a brownstone a quarter block from where they now stood.

How they had traveled the full five blocks so fast, he had no idea. If he could, Eric would have frozen time just to keep her within arms reach for as long as possible.

"May I walk you in?"

"I'm not sure that would be wise."

Nichole stepped back and placed at least one foot of space between them. Eric had to dig in his heels to keep from closing the distance again and pulling her back into the strength of his embrace.

“I promise to be good,” he smiled and held up his right hand, “I swear, I only want to make sure you get inside and into your apartment safely before I leave you.”

“When did you become my protector?”

Nichole’s lips were turned upward to form a sly grin and the question was meant as a snide comment but Eric took this moment seriously.

“Since now.”

He made sure to keep eye contact with her when he said the words. Eric wanted the intensity of his blue gaze to etch itself into her memory. He wanted her to understand his sincerity and his determination to be in her life from now on. Nichole’s eyes widened and then the corners of her sensual lips lifted even further.

“You know that’s not really necessary. In less than an hour, I’ll be making my way back in the opposite direction – *alone*. I do this all of the time.”

Until she had spoken those words just now, Eric had honestly never given this situation much thought. It had never occurred to him that the woman he had built up a heightening adoration for was making this dangerous trek alone five nights a week. This town had a relatively modest crime rate, especially when compared to the major metropolis nearby, but there was no way he was not going to see to her safety from now on.

“You’re absolutely right,” he lifted a dark eyebrow, “I’ll wait. I insist.”

To prove his point, Eric took Nichole by the hand to finish up the remaining distance to her building. Once there, he released her hand and bounded up the front steps two at a time. Eric opened the common door and was prepared to wait all night, if needed, for her to lead him inside and up to her apartment where he would wait patiently

to escort her back uptown. Eric was determined to make Nichole understand that he wanted her and would not take no for an answer. There would be another time and place for him to demonstrate his longing attraction to her mind and her body. Until that time came, he would also make good on his promise to her to maintain his gentlemanly status. From this point onward, and until he was sure that Nichole was ready to move forward with their shared affections, Eric would do his best to stick to his *hands off* policy.

“It’s getting kind of cold out here. Are you going to stand there staring at me all night?” His tone was playful and when Nichole replied she kept of the same jovial mood.

“Well, seeing as how I’m confident I won’t be able to convince you otherwise, I guess I should take the offer.”

“Good girl,” he winked.

She jogged the short distance up the stairs and paused. Not really meaning to, simply acting purely off of instinct, Nichole raised an arched brow and placed a finger under his chin.

“Besides, it might be nice to have some company before I spend the rest of the night alone.”

Nichole saw Eric take a heavy gulp before she brushed passed him, making sure to trail her fingers along his midsection as she moved.

Standing there, watching the swing in her hips and the grace of her steps as she slid past him and into the foyer of the brick building, Eric had to bite his bottom lip and tighten his palms to keep himself from behaving against everything he had just promised.

The part that turned him on the most was that Nichole was not even aware of how much sensuality surrounded her at all times.

Damn, I want this woman, Eric thought as he finally moved to follow her through the doorway and further into the complex.

≈ Chapter 5 ≈

Nichole caught the obvious hint. Eric was not about to leave her side any time soon, even if she dared protest his intentions.

Him being here, moving closer and closer toward the privacy of her home was a mistake, plain and simple. Inviting him up to her apartment had started them down an irreversible course of events she feared to tread. Everything about Eric – his mannerisms, his confidence, his overt physical appeal and, most especially, his hot tongue tickling her own – were dangerous to the nth degree. Eric Raven was the makings of an infatuation Nichole preferred to steer clear of at all costs, if possible. The problem was, he was adamant about making sure she arrived home and then back to the office safely under his guard. This would leave too much time alone in his company. Within an office setting, she would be able to control her urges to intertwine herself in his arms. Here, behind closed private doors, Nichole feared she would not be able to demonstrate such willpower.

It had taken some time to build up, but now Nichole was starting to see what it was about this man that had all the ladies in the police force and court offices so stirred up. He was a man driven, and he could drive you – probably *very* hard – if given the chance. Eric was assertive and handsome; he was one of the sexiest alpha males Nichole had ever encountered. These qualities were beginning to work their way into Nichole's innermost thoughts.

Despite the fact that he was a born leader, he also had this understated gentleness about him. Nichole was sure this was an attribute many other women had tried to coax

out of him, yet had failed. Women had a way of wanting to try to tame the toughest tigers. She wondered how long it would be until she was counted among the dozens who would be trying to rope in this reluctant stallion. Then, a new thought crossed her mind. This sudden sentiment toward her, this hidden piece of his personality, it was almost as though Eric wanted only her to partake of this side of him.

Holding to his earlier promise, Eric never touched her again even as they moved up the tightened space of the staircase leading to her second floor apartment, but he was on her heels the entire time. Eric was so close; Nichole felt the hot wind from his breath down the back of her neck. How he had managed to keep from falling over her or from tripping her steps up during the short walk, she could not guess and honestly did not care. He was like a human barricade behind her, and Nichole loved every moment. Some of her male neighbors, whom she was on a speaking basis with, offered her slight nods as they passed the couple on the stairs and in the hallway, yet none were brave enough to offer the flirty *hello*'s that she was use to. Nichole could only imagine the intimidating glare that Eric was giving to keep the usually overly friendly males at bay.

"Don't you have any female neighbors?" he asked in a gruff voice from behind her.

"Why? Are you looking for a date?" She tossed the comment back over her shoulder.

"It looks like I might have a lot of competition for your affection. I counted no less than five guys who looked as though they would be trying to wrestle you to the floor if I weren't here. I can only imagine what has been happening before I showed up."

Nichole smirked as she stopped in front of her apartment door.

“Jealous?”

His lips slipped over the sensitive spot on the tip of her upper ear.

“Maybe,” he whispered.

She had to add extra focus while rummaging through her bag to locate her house key. The simple task was further complicated by Eric digging his solid fingers into her hips while she tried to do so. His breath was heavy on her neck and she was sure she had felt his mouth lightly touch the side of her throat. She was near lightheadedness as her eyes closed from the sensation.

“If you don’t stop, I won’t be able to make it through the door.”

“Then, I guess I will have to claim you right out here for all of your admirers to see that you’re already taken.”

A moan slipped from her lips.

Being *claimed* and *taken* had never been high on Nichole’s to-do list. For this delicious man, she just may have to take exception. However, the act of giving her already nosey neighbors a free peep show would have to wait for another day. Drawing on all of her strength, Nichole separated their bodies by stepping nearly into the frame of the doorway and inserted the key into the lock.

Nichole froze mid-action. Something was wrong.

She clutched the knob and found that the door slid backward without her having to turn the aging lock. With a long creak from rusting hinges, the door continued to open effortlessly.

She looked back at Eric. He positioned himself next to her and then used one of his thick arms to gently move her away from the door. His sharp eyes had not missed the

ease at which the door opened and the fact that she did not have to use the key to enter. The door had been jimmied, and a heavy body had splintered the wood to help pry the inside chain latch loose. There were telltale scratches along the paint of the door's frame.

One question flashed across Eric's mind.

Was the person waiting on the other side?

He held up his palm in the halt position. Nichole weakly nodded in agreement as she clutched her belongings.

When he was satisfied that she understood, Eric moved forward through the doorway. The lights in the apartment were all out, and that was something that Nichole would never do. As a single woman living on her own with no roommate, she always made sure to keep at least one lamp lit so she would be able to easily survey her surroundings upon entering.

The inside was completely dark, only the light filtering in from the common hallway slightly illuminated the space. Somehow she more afraid to stand alone in the hall than to enter the darkened apartment. Nichole took two steps forward and walked right into Eric's massive back.

He turned and although most of his expression was hidden by shadows, Nichole could make out his annoyance that she had not waited as he had requested.

His attention went forward again as Eric moved a few inches then stopped. There was a slight thump and followed by a low rattle. He had collided with one of the end tables next to Nichole's sofa. A little more rattling and then a loud *click* signaled the apartment's living room being fully illuminated by the lamp on the table.

Nichole's eyes quickly scanned the area. It was only after several adrenaline filled moments that she realized her vision was not at one hundred percent. Eric still had her lenses in his pocket. How had she made it this long without them on her face? She could see reasonable well without the pair but was now more comfortable with them on. She would have to remember to retrieve the eyewear from him before they parted ways.

When her mind returned to the situation at hand, Nichole saw that Eric had already started a canvas of the modest four-room apartment. He walked the short hall leading to the kitchen to the left, the bathroom on the right, and finally ending at the master bedroom at the rear. He flipped on the hall light as he traveled. His body stood to its full height, probably no less than seven inches taller than Nichole's five foot six stature. His wide shoulders were squared and he stepped stealthily as he walked forward with his feet equally apart, as if he were trying to prepare his body to react instantly to whatever he would find in the darkened space ahead.

"Are there any other doors?" he called from the end of the hall.

"No."

Nichole went a few steps forward, shifting her tote to the other shoulder, causing the floorboards to creak beneath her weight.

"Stay where you are!" Eric yelled and then quickly readjusted his tone. "Please don't come back here yet. I still need to check the bedroom."

Not knowing what else to do besides stay put, Nichole fidgeted from one foot to the other. After what seemed like hours, Eric emerged. Nichole saw that the light in her bedroom, as well as those in the kitchen and bathroom, was reflecting into the hallway.

"Find anything?" She actually hoped his response would be a negative.

“I did. Your bedroom window is open.”

Eric stopped in front of her and rubbed the length of her arms. He was trying to calm a shiver that was yet to begin.

“Whoever was here, they couldn’t have left that long ago. They must have heard us talking outside of the door and went down the fire escape in the back, outside of your bedroom window.”

There it was. Nichole’s arms twisted under his grasp as skin began to prickle and the sensation spread on the entire length of her body. The lightheadedness she was now feeling had nothing to do with passion or lust, only fear. What if Eric had decided not to walk up with her? What if the person did not hear her at the door and she walked in on him trying to rob her home? What then?

“Nichole, *Nichole*,” his voice coaxed her back to this reality. “I know what you’re thinking. The *what if’s* don’t matter, right now. I’m here and I won’t let anyone hurt you, okay?”

She nodded weakly, feeling the strength in her body starting to dissipate under its own weight.

“Come sit on the couch for a minute. Collect your nerves. I’m not leaving you anytime soon.”

She allowed him to escort her to the middle of the plush beige couch and then felt him place a heavy arm around her. The sense of security he emitted was indescribable. It was like having her own personal bodyguard, ready and waiting to attack anything or anyone that came too near to her.

Nichole's voice was nearly mute. Her lips moved, but it was hard for actual sounds to escape.

"Should we call the police?"

"We should, but something about this set-up doesn't make any sense. Just by taking a quick look around, do you see anything missing? Is there anything out of place?"

Suddenly remembering an important fact, Nichole moved forward from the comfort of his arm,

"May I have my glasses, please?"

"Oh, right. I guess you do need those. Maybe I'll get to stare shamelessly into those heavenly doe eyes again after we get this all sorted out."

Nichole knew Eric was trying to distract her attention from the seriousness of the situation, but fun and games were far removed from her mind at the moment.

He slipped a hand within his pocket and removed the lenses. Instead of placing them in her outstretched hand, Eric opened the thin arms of the glasses and gently placed each one behind Nichole's ears. He even pushed them up and adjusted them for her until they sat perfectly atop her oval face. Nichole was speechless. No man had ever taken the time to do that caring act before, not even her father.

"Ah, I knew it," he exhaled and smiled.

"What?"

Nichole looked up and searched his face.

"You're still gorgeous," Eric spoke in a hushed tone and then placed a chaste kiss on her pouting lips.

Her lips trembled at the touch. The pair locked eyes and were lost to one another. The sound of another door creaking, further up the common hall, finally jarred them back to the present moment.

Nichole sat up and squinted her eyes to readjust to the lenses. She looked around the space and surveyed each corner. Everything was in its place, not even a dust bunny appeared to have been moved.

“It doesn’t look like anything is missing.”

Her furniture was exactly as it should be. The flat screen television was still fastened to the wall. An antique cherry wood grandfather clock, given to Nichole by her late aunt and too large for the area that doubled as her living/dining room area, sat in the corner near the four person dining table.

“Exactly. The bedroom and the other rooms look the same. Even to me, having never been here before, nothing looks to be out of place. What else could the person have come here for if not to steal something? Do you keep a lot of jewelry around? Gold, platinum, anything like that? Do you keep cash hidden here?”

“I don’t really own much jewelry, really only my wristwatch, a few pairs of earrings, and my gold cross around my neck. As for cash, I only keep a few dollars in my bag because I usually only use my debit card, even for small purchases.”

“This doesn’t make sense.”

Eric leaned forward where he sat and placed his elbows across his knees.

“Wait.”

His sight suddenly spied the object sitting out in the open for anyone to find.

“Maybe the person didn’t come to take something out. What if he came to leave something here instead?”

“Like what?”

After she posed the question, Nichole’s eyes followed Eric’s gaze to the spot he was now focused on. She caught sight of a single white envelope on the glass top of the long table that sat before the couch.

The envelope had Nichole’s first name written on the front, with a thick underline beneath the name.

Both pairs of hands reached for the item simultaneously. Eric’s large palms were faster and he snatched up the envelope to his face. His eyes silently re-read the name. Carefully, he moved the envelope back to hold it over the table. He tilted it first to one side and then to the other. Nichole guessed he was trying to determine if any powder or other substance would spill out or maybe he may feel the weight of the contents shift in his grasp. When nothing happened, Eric lifted the unsealed opening.

Nichole scooted forward and chewed at her bottom lip. Her hands were slick with sweat and she was glad Eric had the heart to handle the package. Left up to her, the envelope might have remained unmoved and unopened, and whatever message it was meant to convey definitely would have remained undelivered.

Once the flap was lifted, both Eric and Nichole saw only one item within the folds. A small piece of ruled notebook paper, neatly folded over.

“Do you have any tweezers?”

“Sure.”

Nichole was in the bathroom medicine cabinet and back by his side in a flash. She handed the thin double-edged piece of metal over to Eric and waited again.

Eric took in a deep, calming breath. He used the tips of the tweezers to pull the paper from the envelope and then shook it lightly over the tabletop. Satisfied that nothing spilled on the counter below, he used his own hands to unfold the creases.

Nichole's hands covered her mouth. A silent scream pierced her mind.

Two words, written in the same block lettering used to write the name on the envelope, were concise and to the point.

Keep Quiet.

≈ Chapter 6 ≈

“Are you sure you don’t know what that note means?”

“Positive.”

She nibbled on her lower lip again.

That had to be a sure sign of her nervousness, but due to what cause? The break-in? Or keeping a secret from him? Eric would have to find out which scenario was true if he was going to keep her safe.

He was convinced that Nichole was hiding something important. There was a vital piece of information being withheld from him, but Nichole was adamant that she was completely clueless as to what the message referred to and why it was left for her.

Eric’s lady was also quite insistent that she would most definitely be making it on time for her evening shift, despite his pleas to the contrary. He had left his own canary yellow speed machine with the bold black stripe straight down the middle at the parking garage of his office building. Given the circumstances, he felt it would be safer to take a ride rather than walk the half-mile back to the police station. So, while Nichole dressed for work, Eric used his cellular to call a taxi.

Nichole was sullen for most of the short ride toward uptown and Eric watched her fidget several times on the seat beside him in the cab. Once he paid the fair, they walked side by side into the stone building taking up most of the block where Mainline Avenue and Broadway intersected. Nichole kept her distance from him as they passed a few uniformed officers, who composed most of the skeleton crew and were scattered throughout the first floor rooms and reception area. Eric took the hint that Nichole did not

want anyone to be suspicious of why he was accompanying her. They exchanged passing glances with the others, making sure to keep the greetings simple. No one spoke any questions verbally; however, by the next morning, the station would probably be abuzz with gossip of the two entering the office together after hours.

Eric moved like an armed guard behind her as Nichole made her way into the small space that was the Records & Registry room. As she walked over to her desk to sling her coat over the chair and her computer bag onto the table, Eric scanned the room for anything unusual about the scene. Sure, they were in the police station, which should be the safest place for her; nonetheless, the unusual manner of the break-in was nagging at his subconscious. Similar to the Rondell Holmes case, he was missing a piece of the puzzle that was right in plain view. He was sure it was only a matter of time before the pieces came together and the picture would focus clear as day in his mind.

These were thoughts to ponder later. Right now, Eric's primary focus was tending to Nichole.

“You really are dedicated to your job, aren't you?”

He spoke in her direction while his eyes continued to look over the expanse of the space.

Samantha, the woman whom Nichole was reliving for the night, had left only moments ago, but not before making sure to offer them both a questioning glance, and now they were alone again. At this time of day and into the evening, no one else generally came back to this office at the extreme rear of the first floor of the police administration building. The idea of Nichole being here all alone tonight did not sit well

in Eric's stomach, especially after what had recently transpired. After Eric left, Nichole would be the only person in this general vicinity for possibly hours at a time.

"Well, someone has to be. We can't all be famously ruthless attorneys."

His lips arced up into a smile.

"Nichole."

"Yes?"

She lifted her face up and fluttered her thick lashes, as though she were pretending to flirt with him again. Eric was confident she was not pretending this time around.

"You have a lot of spirit in you. You're not afraid to say what's on your mind. I love that about you."

He rounded the desk and stepped up to her body, as close as possible without walking through her. Her breasts rubbed at his suit jacket. Eric felt the brush across his chest and had to bring her in even more. It was late, his heart rate was at its peak, and he wanted nothing more than to splay this vivacious woman across the desk and sprinkle sensuous kisses over every inch of her being.

Eric's hands clasped the back of her neck as he leaned in. It was his turn to hold her captive. She was soft and pliable in his arms. The moment he had touched her, Nichole instantly relaxed against him and her will was to comply without further hesitation.

Eric felt the pulse at the sides of her neck quicken and watched Nichole's pupils enlarge. She wanted him almost as much as he wanted her, but both knew now was not the time. Later, the two would talk more. There was so much to figure out, so many

questions to ask and answer. For now, it would all have to wait. They were parting ways for the time being and it felt as though an eternity would pass until they were reunited again.

“Promise me something,” Eric spoke against her moist lips.

He could taste the flavor of her gloss.

“Okay,” Nichole exhaled against his mouth and he inhaled her soft breath.

“Don’t leave here until I come to pick you up. I don’t know what’s going on, but I do know that someone is watching you.”

“I won’t.”

He pushed against her lips once more. Nichole’s lips partly and the soft tickle of her tongue sent his manhood into overdrive. He released her mouth and then allowed his tongue to stroll across her lips, trying to savor her berry flavor.

If Eric was going to leave, he had to do it soon, while he maintained a small sliver of willpower.

“I mean it, Nichole. Until I arrive at eleven, *do not* leave this room.”

“What if I need to use the ladies’ room?”

He chuckled and placed his brow against hers.

“I guess that might be okay. The janitor is floating around this wing, plus the few others that we saw on the way in are bound to walk down this way eventually. Yell, holler, scream, whatever you need to do to get someone in here, if you feel threatened.”

Nichole’s brow crinkled.

“Eric, what are you saying? Why would I feel threatened here?”

“No reason.”

Eric cupped her right hand within the grasp of his larger one and pulled it to his face. He rubbed the delicate palm slowly along his jaw line and kissed her fingertips before allowing them to fall back to her side.

“I hate to leave you, but I have some work to finish up at home, a few more cases to go over. There are some notes and documents that I need to look at again. I promise to be here promptly at eleven. *Wait for me.*”

At exactly 10:59 PM there was a light creak and a weary Nichole looked up from her computer screen.

There seemed to be a slight influx in petty crimes over the last week and requests for all kinds of documents had flooded the email account for the record's department seemingly overnight. Nichole had been busy answering emails, voicemails, faxes, and any other kind of communication you can think of over the last few hours. She guessed this was to be expected the closer the year moved toward the winter holidays. The stress from lack of income, unresolved family issues, and tedious work assignments tended to overflow during the cooler months when there was less daylight and more time spent indoors.

It wasn't the sudden surge in the work volume that annoyed her as much as knowing that most of this load should have been completed by the day shift. The evening and overnight shifts were mainly for emergency requests that came in and to enter backlogged items.

Nichole's mind briefly flashed back to when she was on duty six weeks ago and then to the note left in her apartment earlier tonight.

Just as she was hitting send on the last request of the evening, a smiling face peeked around the open door.

Deep blue eyes watched her from across the room. She felt a sense of security that had been eluding her all night. Despite the fact that Nichole was inside one of the safest places for anyone to be, it wasn't until a strikingly handsome man named Eric Raven entered the room that she felt at peace. Shaking her head, Nichole realized how ironic this situation was. It was not more than a couple of weeks ago that Eric Raven would have been the last person on earth that Nichole would have been happy to see this late in the evening.

The notion must have also been playing in Eric's thoughts as well. He had a devilish grin across his lips and a twinkle of mischief in his eyes that was hard to conceal, even for a man who made his living being a professional at misdirection and bluffing.

"You didn't leave," he said, sounding almost relieved.

"I promised that I wouldn't, didn't I? Besides, my shift wasn't over until exactly right now."

Nichole was trying to sound stern as she stared pointedly at her wristwatch, but her words were filled with too much glee to be taken too seriously.

Eric strolled over to the reception desk and folded his arms as he leaned forward. As usual, a mixture of oak, spice, and pine created a seductive aura around him.

"That you did, but I never expected you to listen to me."

"Why is that?"

“Because you are a strong-willed woman. One who obviously is not use to giving any man anything that easily.”

The corner of Nichole’s mouth, freshly covered with a new coating of raspberry gloss, turned upward.

“Well, well, Mr. Raven, after one cup of coffee and a few kisses, you think you know me so well.”

A rich full laugh escaped his throat and his eyes danced in front of Nichole.

“Was it only a few kisses? Wow, every one of them felt so familiar to me, as though we have been practicing that move on one another for years now.”

Nichole’s heart fluttered. This time he had struck a chord. As much as she wanted to fight the feeling, Eric was absolutely correct. The sense of passion, with a hint of wonder, that they had shared during their sensual kisses did feel strikingly familiar, like the feeling of completeness that one has after reuniting with a former lover, whom you have missed and longed for every aching night.

Could she be falling for this man? *Impossible*. He was everything she had sworn to avoid in any new relationships. Never again would a man dictate her heart, her thoughts, and her time. She was an independent woman who could and would manage just fine in the absence of male companionship, especially any man who mused in tempting women with his searing good looks during his spare time.

Nichole’s mind replayed Eric’s confession that women like Sheri were not his type. In actuality, as she briefly went over the times she had encountered Eric in person, not once had she witnessed him being flirtatious with any woman. He had always been strictly professional. Another point also in his favor was that, despite the initial hard

exterior he had always displayed, Nichole was starting to get a taste of the softer side of this man. Typically, he only inspired *others* to fear and awe in his domineering presence.

Once again finding herself in the predicament of needing to be released from his hypnotic pull, Nichole broke eye contact and started to gather her belongings, taking great care to make sure that her movements did not appear hurried or agitated. Whatever game Eric was trying to play was not going to work on her, not now, *not ever*.

With her mood suddenly sour, Nichole stared the tempter straight into his eyes. Before she had only played at trying to sound serious and put-off, now that she was slightly irritated at her stealthily evolving feelings for this man, Nichole wanted every word she said to him from here on out to come out with a nasty bite. That should be enough to keep him at bay until they separated again.

“Thanks so much for coming by to make sure I was okay. I think I can manage from here.”

She quickly scooped up her computer bag from the desk and her coat from behind the desk chair.

Like hell you can, is what Eric wanted to toss back at her. Instead, he remained silent and watched Nichole for a moment longer.

Someone had broken into her apartment just to leave a cryptic note and this woman thought she would be all right walking home alone at nearly midnight. Either she was more foolish than he had assumed or so dead-set on keeping her independence that she had completely abandoned all reason. Eric suspected it was the latter and had to rethink his approach.

Perceiving the sudden iciness of her tone, Eric backed himself away from the desk and continued to watch his beauty carefully. He wasn't sure what had dampened her mood in all of the five minutes they had been together, but he sensed he was now treading on thin ice and needed to make sure every move from here on out was delicate and executed perfectly. He had vowed that he would break down this wall of wills that stood between them coming together and Eric was always a man of his word, even if it was only spoken in his own thoughts. If it was necessary for him to concede to her mood every now and then, a task that he was certifiably unfamiliar with, he would give it his best try if only to see where this budding attraction between Nichole and himself might take them both.

After allowing some space to gather between them, he spoke his next words carefully, making sure to make his statement sound more like a suggestion than a demand.

"Really, it's no problem at all. I told you, from here on out, I'd like to make it my duty to watch out for your safety, Nichole."

"Eric, I don't need someone to watch over me. I am an adult woman who is very capable of taking care of her own self. Now, if you will please excuse me, I need to go home and get some rest, it has been a very long day *and* night."

Nichole motioned to walk past him, toward the exit, and Eric had to quickly step in her path to barricade her fast paced escape. Though the man that stood before her was easily close to a foot or possibly more over her head, Nichole countered his glare with unflinching eyes. She might not be originally from the city, but a few years of working uptown had helped her gain more street smarts and willfulness than any self-defense class

ever could. Eric Michael Raven would never succeed at intimidating Nichole Jasmine Edwards, not in this lifetime or in the next. Folding her jacket over her arms, she stood toe to toe with the giant and waited for him to make the next move and she would surely shut him down if necessary. But instead of seeing fierce lakes of ice blue staring down daggers at her, she only saw peace. His cherry lips were turned up slightly at the corners. Either he was enjoying tormenting her or he was trying to do his best to wait out her sudden hostility toward him. Thinking back, Nichole silently scolded herself for her small fit of rage. The man had done nothing wrong all night. He had only asked if he could see to her safety, more than once, and followed through on his pledge to be a perfect gentleman while in her company. After reaching this conclusion, Nichole allowed her stare to soften and relaxed her hunched shoulders.

Eric immediately cued in on her hard features turning gentle once more. She had let down her guard slightly and he wanted to make the most of this opportunity to reset the tone of their encounter.

“Nichole, I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m not even sure what I said to send you on defensive mode. Whatever it is, I truly apologize. I only want to make sure you’re okay. Those are my only intentions, *I promise you.*”

Taken slightly aback by the honesty in Eric’s voice, Nichole’s breath caught in her chest. Although she may have secretly hoped he might honestly be looking out for her best intentions, she never really expected him to want to help her out without expecting some sort of favor in return. Her mind was constantly preparing itself for the moment when his real personality would resurface and this *façade* Eric was trying to hold up would fade away.

“Yeah, well, thank you,” she managed to push out in a hushed tone. “I should still get going, it’s really late.”

As she moved around him and tried to make her way toward the door once more, Eric caught her upper arm. Remembering his own strength this time around, he was very careful to keep his grip gentle and not too tight.

“Wait. Where are you going to stay tonight?”

“I’m going back to my apartment. I don’t have any relatives that live nearby and it’s way too late to call someone to come and get me.”

“But you can’t stay there alone. Not after what happened this afternoon. Whoever left that note could come back anytime over the next few hours.”

“That’s true,” Nichole dropped her gaze to the floor and her stomach turned as the seriousness of the situation returned to her mind.

“I hate to even say this out loud but if that person comes back, they might do more than just leave a note the next time around.”

“But I don’t have anywhere else to go. I can’t afford any of the hotels near here and there is no way that I’m staying at one of those shady roadside dives over by Route 130.”

“You can stay with me.”

The invitation hung in the air as they both thought over the consequences that may come from them spending one night together, especially under this type of circumstance. Fear and stress from having one’s home invaded combined with the other person’s heightened machismo while playing as the protector could quite possibly boil

over to a sizzling night of passion that both may regret as soon as the sunlight hit the horizon the next morning.

“No, I can’t do that. Thank you for the offer, I appreciate it,” Nichole finally responded as she took two steps backward and closer to the doorway.

One of them had to think this through logically.

Eric moved forward, closing in the gap between them once more. Instead of enfolding her within his long arms as his mind and his spirit were instructing him to, he kept his arms at his side. He was determined to show Nichole that he could be a true gentleman and that, as much as he would love to have her naked in his bed, it was taking care of her well-being that was most important to him at this moment, not sating his sexual desire for her.

“Nichole, I give you my word that I won’t try to make this into a sexual encounter or try to take advantage of you in any other way. Truly, I only want to offer a place for you to get some sleep and where you can feel safe, at least for tonight.”

As if in sync with Eric’s previous unfulfilled thought, Nichole wrapped her arms around herself and looked off to the side. The idea of being alone in her apartment building with a busted lock that any five year old could get open was not her idea of how to find a peaceful night’s sleep. Still, she didn’t know much about Eric Raven other than his strong work ethic and rumors of his sexual exploits. That wasn’t much info to go one when deciding whether to spend the night at a man’s house. It was the gentle gleam in his eyes and the way he patiently waited for her reply that pushed Nichole to reconsider accepting his offer of a place to stay tonight. There was kindness and concern there. All of those expressions looked so genuine coming from him. There was only a fraction of

an inch separately them now and Eric was making no effort to put any suave moves on her, only awaiting her decision. This restraint on his part made Nichole believe she might just be able to trust this man after all. Maybe she really did want to know more about Eric Raven, the *real* Eric Raven, not the myth, after all.

Nichole dropped some of the fire in her gaze and cleared her throat.

“Okay, but only because I really don’t have anywhere else to go. I guess I would feel safer with you than with those creeps from building lurking around all night.”

His eyes sparkled.

“Great, if you want, we can go by there now and you can get an overnight bag together. My car is right out front, so we don’t need to walk and we could be back at my place by midnight or sooner.”

Nichole thought he sounded a little too happy saying those last few words. She needed to remind him that this was a platonic sleeping arrangement *only*, just in case he had suddenly forgotten.

“Easy tiger. I feel I should let you know ahead of time, I always keep a can of mace in my bag, and I don’t plan on letting my bag out of my sight for the next few hours.”

Right after seeing the heavy *gulp* that slid down his throat and the bob of his Adam’s apple, she smiled up at him and turned away with a confident stride.

Without having to check the clock, Nichole was well aware that Sheri was late as usual. Her concern for who would cover the desk until the queen decided to show up was nonexistent. Nichole had more important worries to consider. The most important of

them being, *how would she and Eric manage to keep their hands off of one another for the remainder of the night?*

≈ Chapter 7 ≈

Nichole heard the click of the bolt sliding into place behind her.

Normally, hearing these kinds of sounds after stepping foot into the apartment of a man whom she barely knew would be cause for alarm. However, in this case, it truly wasn't. Thus far, Eric had been true to his word to keep his hands off. He had not touched her once in the last hour or so, and it was a few minutes after midnight. He had waited patiently in the living room while she gathered a few pieces of clothing and some toiletry items. He made sure to keep his eyes dead ahead on the ride over here in his bright yellow sports car, and he stood on the opposite side of the spacious elevator during their ride up to his apartment on the twenty-fifth floor of the his uptown Timber Falls luxury loft building.

Now, standing in the open entryway of the oversized apartment, Nichole actually felt a slight sense of relief that the night was finally coming to an end and she couldn't think of a safer place to lay her head for the rest of the night than in the Eric's home.

"You can sit your bag anywhere or I can just show you where I keep the guest bed. It's completely up to you," Eric said as he made his way past her to grab a remote from a shelf built into a wall to the right of the door.

He hit a button in the center and, in the blink of an eye, the full lights came up and the entire space was illuminated in dazzling white light.

Nichole had seen luxury apartments before, but this was the absolute pinnacle of high-end living. The walls of the entire area were painted an off-white color. Directly in front of her was a crystal-like chandelier that hung just past the entryway and it was large

enough to light up every crevice of space for the eye to see. To her right, some twenty feet away, there was a spiral staircase that led up to a half floor, nearly half the length of the main floor. This was the only portion of the loft that was still slightly under shadow, probably because it was a few feet higher than the chandelier, nearly eighteen feet overhead. The open space before her, at least the size of three standard apartments in Nichole's building, was divided by the change in the décor. In the center was a beautifully polished mahogany dining table, strangely enough with no chairs on either side of it, indicated the dining room. Next to that area was an ultra modern looking kitchen with a burgundy and white marble center island complete with the trendiest cook wear suspended seamlessly above it on the silver overhead rack. Nichole noted that the isle also had four tall chairs, similar to the height of a bar stool, around its four sides.

It was just as Nichole was surveying the third half of the space, on the other side of the dining area and closer to the stairs, that she realized the arraignments weren't complete. On this side of the room there were two floor-to-ceiling glass sliding doors that opened out to what she assumed was a balcony with a fabulous view of the city. There was also huge red brick fireplace about another twenty feet away from that. Most of the living and dining area were completely void of furniture, rugs, or anything else that would be considered homely.

“What happened?”

Eric looked over at her and tilted his head to the side.

“What do you mean? What happened *where*?”

“Right over there,” Nichole said as she pointed out the empty spaces, “Where is the rest of your furniture and everything else?”

Eric placed the white remote back up on the shelf he had taken it from and laughed to himself.

“I was kind of hoping you wouldn’t notice that. I haven’t finished moving in.”

“How long have you lived here?”

He moved forward as he took off his suit jacket and loosened his tie.

“About two years now.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I had this dream of this awesome apartment. You know, with all the feng shui to match my soaring career. I just couldn’t get up the motivation to finish adding to the *ambiance*,”

He laughed and then became serious.

“Actually, there was another reason.”

Nichole had remained standing near the door and had to practically yell her question to him as he now stood a good distance away and closer to the fireplace.

“What’s that, if I may ask?”

Eric walked back in her direction, tossing his suit jacket over the banister of the pearl white staircase as he moved, and then stopped next to the bottom stair-step. He answered Nichole without looking directly at her.

“Because I don’t have anyone to share all of this ridiculously oversized room with. When I realized how silly I felt being all alone in here, I didn’t see a point in trying to put anymore energy in the project.”

Detecting a slight hint of sadness in his reply, Nichole decided that she was through with asking any more personal questions for the time being. Her mind pushed

her to want to go over to him and place her body against his, to embrace him in a hug and feel the muscles in his chest against her face, to share his moment of reflection and somehow offer a sense of comfort to him as he had tried to do for her at her apartment. In reality, her feet remained firmly planted where she had been standing since entering the loft. She still didn't know enough about him, or his intentions toward her, to make such a risky move.

She had always assumed Eric Raven was a playboy. Seeing this huge apartment had only heightened her suspicions, but to find out that he didn't finish buying furniture or decorating because there was no woman in his life to help him finish filling the space said a lot more about him, about his *true* character. But it was still not enough to make her want to act further upon her burgeoning feelings toward him. The fact that this man had the power to make her senses sway and caused her thoughts to roam toward expanding beyond a simple working relationship with him bugged Nichole's mind just a tad, especially since less than two weeks ago she could barely stand the sight of Eric.

"Hey, where did you say you wanted to me to put my stuff?"

Nichole broke the awkward moment. She was developing a curiosity that she was sure would lead only to trouble and heartache and that was a path she was still hoping to avoid before it was too late. Even so, with each new passing glance and smoldering kiss, no matter how hard she fought against the draw, it was becoming crystal clear that the more time she spent with Eric the higher the probability of her following that road to no return.

"Apologies, I am being so rude. You must be tired. Let me get that for you."

He only needed a few long strides to return to her side. Eric grabbed the canvas satchel from her arms and made sure not to touch her handbag. He was sure his Nichole would make good on her promise to use the secret weapon she had hidden in there if necessary. She was quite cute when she was trying to be tough but definitely not to be fooled with. The thought of that unique combination made him smile to himself and he wanted her for his own all the more. She was a woman after his own heart and habits. One more reason to want to love her with everything he had to offer. The problem was how to show that intent without coming on way too strong like he had a bad habit of doing in his professional life. His personal life was quiet and simple when compared to the arrogant man he had to be during business hours. It was this part of himself that Eric hoped to show Nichole. He had a strong hunch that they were more alike in that sense than she would dare admit at this stage in their relationship.

“Now that you mention it, I think I am a little tired,” Nichole replied and immediately followed that statement up with a heavy yawn.

She quickly covered her lips and bowed her head shyly.

“I guess maybe more than a little.”

“Ha, it’s definitely to be expected,” Eric laughed and moved back over to the staircase.

“I want to thank you again. You really didn’t have to do this, so I want to make sure you know how much I appreciate you helping me.”

He spoke as he moved to an easy jaunt up the winding stairs.

“No worries, really. I already told you, I have more than enough space to accommodate you. You can follow me now or are you going to stand in that one spot until morning comes?”

Nichole quickly scrambled over the staircase and followed behind.

“What’s up here?”

He reached the top step and then stepped to the side to flick on the light switch on the wall.

“This is my bedroom slash home office slash entertainment headquarters,” Eric mused as he took in the crowded space about the size of a deluxe hotel master bedroom.

Nichole noticed another floor to ceiling window, sans the patio door, directly in front of them. The lights from the lampposts and streetlights below twinkled through the glass. There was also a king sized mattress in the center of the room with starch white linens, still quite rumpled from the last body laying there, and a thick midnight blue comforter tossed to one side of the bed. Right next to that was a mahogany nightstand and matching antique style lamp. In the furthest corner were a desktop computer on top of a black workstation and a notebook style portable computer on the rolling chair nearby. The other wall, near the top of the stairs, housed a large LCD flat screen television. Probably every one of the newest game systems on the market was strewn in front of the TV, plugged in, and waiting to be played for hours on end at a moments notice. A smile touched Nichole’s lips as she realized that this portion of the residence was definitely the bachelor pad area.

“Nice, very nice,” she chuckled.

“Ha-ha, Nichole. I know it’s a mess up here, but it’s the only part of this whole place that really feels like home. It’s not the Regency but it’s a pretty good place to lay your head until tomorrow morning.”

When Eric sat her satchel down to the floor, Nichole raised her arm as she called out to him.

“Please – *be careful*. I forgot to tell you that I shoved my laptop in there with my other stuff.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll put it on the bed until you get ready to move it. Mind if I ask if this is the same computer that you seem to carry with you everywhere like it’s a sack of money?”

“Yes, one and the same.”

“Any particular reason why? If I’m being too nosey, feel free to ignore me at any time,” Eric joked as he walked over to sit her bag on the center of the bed.

“I like to write. I’m hoping to finish plucking out my first novel soon.”

Eric looked up at her. He had a pleased look on his face.

“Well, well, aren’t you always full of surprises. Maybe you will tell me about your story. I’d love to listen.”

It was at that moment that Nichole noticed a photograph on the bedside table. Even from this distance, she could still tell that it was probably really old, due to the fading color quality of the photo. There was a Caucasian woman and an African American woman in the center rear and in the forefront three boys side by side, two white and one black. Everyone in the photo was wearing classic 90’s neon colored clothing and they were all smiling jubilantly back at the camera. Nichole wondered about the history

and story behind that picture and allowed her curiosity concerning Eric to once again get the best of her.

“Who is that in the photo?”

When there was no answer, Nichole looked over to see a mixture of happiness and pain over his features and his body stood motionless. Eric was silent; his thoughts were lost in a memory he was yet to share. The reaction was not at all what Nichole was expecting and she wished she could take back the inquiry. Finally, Eric’s chest moved. He turned and sat on the edge of the bed and inhaled a slow breath before speaking.

“That’s me with my mom, Betty, my cousin Pierce, and a childhood friend of ours, Marcus, and his mother, Nancy.”

Nichole heard the sadness in his voice as he went through the names.

“Eric, what’s wrong? I’m sorry I asked.”

The sound of Nichole’s small voice brought Eric back into the present.

“No, no, I’m fine. You don’t have to stand up the whole night. Come sit down.”

He held out his hand to Nichole, and she placed hers into his palm as she walked to take a seat next to him.

“I’ve never told anyone outside of my family about this,” Eric said as he put Nichole’s hand to his lips and pressed them against her warm flesh.

Afterward, he intertwined their fingers and placed the adjoined hands on his lap.

“When I was twelve years old, my father walked out on my mother.”

“Eric, I’m so sorry.”

Nichole angled her body to lean in closer to him.

“That’s not even the worse part. The woman he abandoned my mother for was her own sister, Lizzie, Pierce’s mother. And if that wasn’t bad enough, Aunt Lizzie didn’t bother to take her seven-year-old son with them. She and my father cut and run and left us three to pick up the pieces.”

“Oh, Eric.”

Nichole moved her free hand to his reddened cheek.

He stared straight ahead and back into the past. The corner of Eric’s eyes glistened, but he would release no more tears. He had shed all of his tears over this tragedy years ago.

“My dad, Gerald, was a salesman. He moved us all over the country. Mom wasn’t fond of being dragged across America and back but she was a good wife to him and never once complained. Pierce’s dad had problems of his own and he was never around much so Aunt Lizzie was never far behind us. No matter where we went, she usually ended up showing up somewhere close by. She was Mom’s younger sister and my mom felt obligated to look after her.

“I came home from school one day, by this time we were living somewhere in Delaware, to find my mom in tears and my cousin sitting in a corner looking disheveled. Lizzie hadn’t even bothered to give him a bath and to change his clothes before she left. Aunt Lizzie was living next door to us when this all happened so when she didn’t come back home that night, Pierce wandered over the next morning. Mom just put together the pieces since Dad never returned home either.

“Who knows when their affair started? It could have been weeks, months, years...they never left a clue. No note, no good-bye, nothing. Just gone and never to

return. Dad cleared out their joint accounts the day before he left. I guess he needed some seed money to start a new life with his new lover. He never wanted Mom to work so she didn't have any income other than his. We were just the leftovers of two broken families, without a dime to rub together. She cried in her room for two days before she was finally able to tell me what had happened. Right then, I promised I would never be so cruel to any woman I ever loved. I would never pledge my heart to someone unless it was truly going to be a lifetime commitment.

“We had to leave both houses behind with most of the furniture still inside, since it would have cost too much to have it shipped to wherever we were going. My mom had to sign up for public housing because she couldn't afford anything else at the time and we left town with whatever we could all stuff into her small car. She took Pierce and I to Philadelphia and we all stayed there until after I graduated from law school. My mom went to work in the stockroom at a retail shop in Center City because it was the only job she had any experience in. The money coming in wasn't as much as what Dad brought home but it was enough. Mom always made it enough. We had a relatively good life from that point on, and I can't think of a thing to complain about. After the initial shock of it all, we ended up having a strong family and happy memories for a long time. Hm, it still feels strange that I don't remember having any of that when my dad was around.”

Eric stopped to reflect for a moment longer and then turned his face to Nichole.

“That's my story. I'm not super human and I'm not the monster *you* think I am. I'm just a man who wants to love and to be loved. I want the family that my dad wasn't man enough to give my mom and I.”

Not knowing what else to say as Eric gathered his thoughts in silence, Nichole asked the obvious question.

“Did you ever see your dad again?”

A look of amusement settled on his face.

“Yeah – *once* – maybe five years later. He was alone at a bus terminal. Pierce and I were going to visit some relatives here in Timber Falls when we saw him from a distance. He didn’t have on a suit, which was odd, because my dad was someone who always wanted to feel important so he always wore dress pants and a collared shirt, even on the weekends. His head was low and he didn’t have any bags with him. In truth, he didn’t look like he was going anywhere, only sitting there and waiting. I use to wonder what happened to him and why he left us the way he did. After seeing him that day, I stopped wondering. He was *never* going anywhere and I’m glad he finally freed my mom so she could find her own way.”

“I haven’t know you very long, Eric, but I can tell that you’re a good man. You’re not the bully I always thought you were. I can see that now.”

Nichole brushed her fingers through the edges of Eric’s dark hair as she spoke softened words to him.

“Your mom didn’t let your dad’s selfishness ruin her life and you didn’t allow his actions to taint yours either. She sounds like a wonderful woman and I hope to meet her someday.”

Eric’s smile was sad. There was renewed grief in his eyes.

“Nichole, I wish you could have. She would have *loved* you. She passed away three years ago and I miss her so much. I kept some of her furniture from our house in

Philly, the table downstairs and the desk and lap over here,” Eric said while motioning to the nightstand.

“Her being gone, and having only Pierce as my closest living relative, made me rethink where my adult life was progressing to. Fame and success only go but so far. Family, friends, and *love* are the things that really matter. Mom made sure Pierce and I always remembered that.”

Nichole stroked his back.

“Did your cousin ever see his mother again?”

“No, none of us have heard from Aunt Lizzie in over fifteen years. The last time Pierce saw her was the night she left him alone in the house. She was always a co-dependent personality. If she couldn’t return to my mother and if my father had abandoned her along the way, who knows what type of person she may have eventually latched onto.”

Nichole’s hand fell away from his back and she sat up straighter on the edge of the bed. Since Eric had been so free to share such a personal experience, Nichole felt it only right to give him a glimpse into her childhood as well.

“I guess we have more in common than I thought.”

“How’s that?”

Eric waited patiently for her answer.

The pair had finally reached a pinnacle in their relationship. Though the memories were painful to relive, he was sure that Nichole was the one he wanted to share his innermost reflections with, and he wanted her to feel the same. There was nothing

that she could say that would turn away his growing affection for her. This night, this moment, would only draw them closer together.

Nichole released his fingers and then touched her hair as she mulled over how to begin. She held her voice steady and low as she spoke.

“My mother passed away, too.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, baby.”

Eric moved Nichole’s hand from her hair and kissed the spot gently. He interlaced their fingers once more.

Nichole’s heart fluttered and she squeezed his hand tighter against her palm.

“Thank you.”

They held one another’s eyes in a loving glance and then she continued on.

“I was around your age, about ten, I think. My older sister, Natalie, was sixteen and Nivea, our baby sister, was almost five. I don’t remember much about what happened. Whatever it was that took her happened really fast. It was as though she was there one moment and gone the next. No one ever talked it much after that. My dad had to get another job to replace her income, and we almost never saw him, except once a day for a late dinner. Natalie married and moved out when she turned eighteen. She was never close with any of us and it was almost like she couldn’t get away from us fast enough. For the most part, I had to take care of Nivea and myself since my dad was away so much and Natalie couldn’t be bothered to help out. It’s pretty much been like that since I can remember.

“The funny thing is, and I know this sounds terrible, but I don’t remember much of anything about my mother. I know her name was Natalie, too, and that she loved to

smile. She had the sweetest smile that would chase away anything that was grieving you. Nivea has that same smile. She doesn't remember our mom at all, but she reminds me of the parts that I can recall about my mom. Maybe that's why we were always so close to one another. She's the reason why I even moved here. This job with the county pays enough so that I can help with her college tuition and I can put her on my medical benefits as well."

Nichole paused. There was not much more to her story. Her younger sister was *her* closest living relative and Nichole had protected her fiercely – almost like a mother would do – since they had been children.

A yawn slipped through her lips and Nichole's lids suddenly became heavy.

"I think you should get some sleep now," Eric whispered into her ear and then nuzzled it.

The statement hit a nerve. If she was going to sleep here, where was Eric staying? There were no other beds in sight that she could see in plain view.

"But where will you sleep?"

Eric kissed the inside of Nichole's palm and then moved back to the other side of the bed.

"I'm going to grab the extra blankets from the closet and hit the floor."

"Wait, I can't let you do that. This is your home. I can take the floor. Besides, I thought you said you were going to show me to the guest bed."

"Honey, that was a joke," Eric said throwing back his head in laughter, "I usually tell that to any of my out of town friends who need to crash here for the night. The floor *is* the guest bed."

Nichole's brow lifted up and her lips formed the letter "O" as she finally caught on to the inside joke and then covered her mouth to hold back her own fit of laughter.

"You have a beautiful smile, Nichole," Eric's words came out soft and tender, "you don't *ever* have to hide that from me."

Nichole dropped her palms to her side, and then went to cover her lips once more as she felt the distinct warmth of a blush filling her cheeks. She hesitated a few inches from her face and then allowed her hands to fall against her side once more.

A whispered "*thank you*" was all she could manage without wanting to rush forward and recapture his lips for another passionate kiss reminiscent of earlier in the evening.

The air became heavy with the sexual frustration that was gathering. The pair was locked in a gaze with both of their hearts thundering away. The sudden change in mood caused her nipples to stiffen through her light purple cotton top and the erotic sight immediately captivated Eric. Without even noticing his own actions, he had unbuttoned most of his shirt down to his navel. Nichole stood mesmerized by the hard muscles that lined his abdomen and the distinct beginnings of the "U" shapes that would lead to well-defined pectorals hidden by material of his shirt. Her hand moved forward. Her body instinctively wanted to feel his skin molded against her own. Eric saw the movement and pulled the delicate hand closer, placing it firmly over the left side of his chest and then moving it down, slightly closer to his heart.

Beneath her fingertips, Nichole felt the strong pulsing of Eric's heart. She went to open her lips to speak and felt the beating rhythm speed up triple time under her touch. Eric placed a thick index finger to her lips. The warm moisture from her mouth melted

into his fingertips and then her lips folded slightly over the tip causing him to inhale a deep breath.

Once his breathing had settled back to normal, Eric moved the tip of his finger under her chin.

“Nichole, you don’t have to say anything or do anything tonight that you won’t be proud of when the morning arrives.”

He hated to end the beginnings of what he had no doubt would be the most explosive night of sensual passion in his life, but Eric wanted Nichole to be absolutely sure and completely ready for all that he had to offer. If and when they reached that line and dared to cross it, there were be no going back for either of them. Right now, there were too many unknowns hanging between them for that to be possible. Eric wanted Nichole to have the same desperate desire for him that he possessed for her. It was for that defining moment that he would patiently await.

“Good night, sweet Nichole.”

He placed a chaste kiss on her lips and then placed her hand back against her waist.

“We can talk more in a few hours. Breakfast is going to be my treat.”

Eric moved closer to where Nichole stood, still not quite ready to tear himself away from her presence. Her hands went to his hips and pressed firmly. He cupped her soft brown cheeks between his large hands.

“My sweet, sweet Nichole.”

Eric’s whispered breath teased her heightened senses as he kissed first he forehead and then her cheek and finally her lips once more.

Nichole's eyelids fluttered closed as she sought to go deeper into the kiss. Eric's thick tongue teased hers through open lips. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the tender exchange ended. Eric forced himself further away, and turned to grab his sheets and blankets from the bedroom closet at the head of the stairs.

"If you need anything else just yell down the steps. The bathroom is over there," he pointed to a door to the extreme right side of the room that Nichole had not noticed before, "and your are welcome to anything in the fridge if you get hungry during the night."

Without looking back, he bounded back down the stairs and toward the open-spaced living room.

All it took was being within three feet of that woman to set his libido ablaze. His last thoughts while making up the makeshift bed on the floor were of a nice, long, cold shower – *or possibly two*. Eric would probably need that cold douse very soon or else he would be flying back up those stairs to finish what he had almost started. Since the main bathroom was upstairs, he would have to settle for a cold soaking from some paper towels in the kitchen. Eric was in for a long *hard* night ahead.

≈ Chapter 8 ≈

Eric hit the end button on his touch screen phone.

He looked over to where Nichole sat beside him on the park bench. Despite the fact that he was not much of a cook, Eric wanted to make good on his word to provide breakfast and offered to buy her a sandwich at the food cart across from his office. To his relief, she happily accepted his invitation with no argument. Eric was sure that if he had offered to take her over to La Fiore, an upscale dining establishment on this side of town, Nichole would have probably flat out refused or, if he had somehow managed to coax her into going with him, she would have insisted on paying for her half of the meal. Eric was starting to understand that expensive gifts and trinkets would not sway this lovely woman. Nichole was more at ease with him in casual settings. Simple gestures seemed to evoke more emotion from her than overly flamboyant actions. In the past, many women had come seeking out Eric Raven for the sole purpose of claiming a piece of his reputation and a chunk from his bank account. He was most certain that Nichole was not one of those types, not in the least.

Eric studied the line of her well-toned face for a few more seconds before speaking. He watched her munch away at her breakfast burrito wrapped in aluminum foil and marveled at how such a seemingly insignificant act could possibly be a demonstration of such grace and innocence. He watched Nichole's deep brown eyes light up at the sound of the early AM call of a sparrow high up in a tree and then glint in the vibrant yellows and oranges of the encroaching dawn. The metropolis was only beginning to wake up, all was still quiet except for nature and all its glory and Eric could

not have imagined a better way or a better person to spend this magical moment with than his Nichole.

“Everything is all set,” he finally spoke and awaited her coffee brown eyes to turn back to his direction.

When the moment finally came, he wanted to rewind and replay the scene again so he could feel the same swelling of his heart once more.

“What’s that?” Nichole asked while taking another bite of her food.

“The locksmith should be at your place anytime now. He’s also going to bring a guy over with him to make sure the frame hasn’t been damaged and is reinforced just in case someone tries to come back again.”

A hint of nervousness flashed across Nichole’s smooth brow. She lowered the food from her mouth and started to rewrap the item, her appetite was suddenly absent.

“It’s only a precaution. Really, it’s standard in these kind of situations.”

Eric slowly positioned himself closer to where Nichole now sat up straight – *stiff as a board* – clutching at her sandwich.

“Eric, this is all so crazy. I mean, why would anyone want to break in for the sole sake of leaving a note for me to find?”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you. I was trying to wait for the right time to bring up the subject again.”

“What do you mean?”

“You still have no clue as to what that notes means? I mean ‘*Keep Quiet*’ usually indicates that you or someone else has something to tell or confess.”

Nichole drew back to make eye contact with Eric.

“So, what are you saying, Eric? Are you accusing me of something?”

Her tone was defensive again. Eric reached for her hands and took them in his own. Nichole jerked as if to pull away but then decided against it and Eric felt relief wash over his mind. The last thing he wanted to do was destroy all of the progress that they had already made.

“Not at all, Nichole. I only meant that there *might* be something that you know, maybe that you don’t even realize that you know which could possibly be placing you in a little danger. That’s all.”

Eric massaged the back of her hands with thumb as he said the words and then felt her relax in his embrace.

“I see what you’re saying,” Nichole responded as she pondered his words, her eyes shifting over to the approaching sunrise. “I – I’m not sure if this means anything but –”

Nichole halted mid-sentence. This was the moment of truth. Could she trust this man who had been nothing but kind to her over the last few hours or was he only trying to get next to her to find out what she knew to help his case? Maybe he already knew what she was about to tell but needed an official statement and this was the only way to get her to confess the details aloud. She wasn’t the only person on duty that night, someone else may have already gone to his office and Eric needed someone else to corroborate that story. There were too many *what if’s* and *maybe’s*, and it was all making her head swim.

“Nichole, what is it? What do you know? You can trust me, *I promise*. Tell me what’s going on. Why does someone want to scare you?”

As much as Eric wanted to keep this meal on a personal level, his instincts were kicking in to high gear and he needed to have his suspicions answered. He had a strong feeling that there was more to the story about why Nichole had been given a warning and Eric was determined to find out exactly what she knew so he could figure out a way of protecting this woman that he had become so fond of.

“Eric.”

“Yes.”

“The night of the arrest, I was there.”

“Whose arrest?”

She looked back at him and saw his eyes open wide as he focused in on her with great intensity. Nichole saw the blue of his irises and, for a moment, the color sparkled like tinted diamonds, sending a long, warm sensation down her center.

Eric saw her shudder and placed an arm around her. He was wearing his heavy wool coat again and she her dark leather jacket. The air was warm this morning and there was no reason for either of them to be cold or even mildly chilly so Eric was positively sure her nervousness had nothing to do with the weather.

“Rondell Holmes.”

Nichole heard her own heart pounding in her chest as she said the name to her companion.

Time stopped between them. It was almost as if her words were hitting his ears in slow motion. After a moment, he finally digested the name and the possible significance of whatever information Nichole was about to relay to him regarding this highly publicized case.

“Nichole, go on. What happened that night when you were on duty? Did you see him come in?”

“Not exactly, but I did see – ”

Before she could continue, Nichole’s eyes shifted and spotted a familiar figure approaching. It was a tall older gentleman with graying hair.

He was making his way across the grass and toward where the couple sat in the park at the center of the town’s crowded business district, now solitary due to the early hour of the morning. Nichole instantly recognized the man’s face and knew his name well but didn’t know him personally. She was confident that Eric was on more familiar terms with the onlooker, whose long and confident strides were bringing him ever closer to where they were seated. But Eric was so engrossed in what she was about to tell him, he never even looked up until the older man was only a yard away from them. Strangely enough, Nichole noted that he didn’t interrupt their conversation right away. He stood there silently, *listening, waiting, and watching* Nichole with a fierceness in his eyes that caused the shudder that ran through her body a moment ago to suddenly return in full force, only this time it was icy cold.

“Nichole, sweetheart, are you okay? You’re shivering again. I can assure you there is nothing that you would have to hide from me. Tell me what happened that night. I promise that I will do my best to protect you, *no matter what*.”

“Well, I guess you do leave the office every once and awhile.”

The booming voice finally caught his attention and Eric’s head snapped up to see Senior Public Defender Gregory Ramsey leering down at them. The two men held one another’s menacing gaze for a moment longer with neither saying a word. Finally, Eric

turned his back against the park bench so that he was able to watch Ramsey face-to-face, eye-to-eye.

“Mr. Ramsey, good morning.”

“Eric, how are you?”

Eric continued to watch the older man closely, there was mischief hiding behind those metallic colored eyes. Neither man had forgotten about how their previous conversation had ended. Eric felt his face heat up at the reminiscent thought and then his features instinctively turned to stone. He remained seated but extended a hand upward in greeting. For the time being, there was no reason to be rude to his superior. He also made sure to keep Nichole close to his side. Before he had turned around to see Ramsey looming over them, he saw that there was now an unusual glare in her eyes, almost like how a deer would appear when trapped in oncoming headlights. She returned to sitting in a rigid position, completely transfixed on Ramsey. Eric wondered if he imagined a slight shake of the elder’s head as he eyed Nichole and then subtly – *seamlessly* – returned his attention back to Eric and resumed their handshake before breaking it off.

“Um, Eric, uh – *Mr. Raven* – I need to go. I should go see about my apartment.”

Nichole stood and nearly fell backward, as if startled, before regaining her balance. She had not realized that Mr. Ramsey was standing so close to them. His height was almost equal to that of Eric but was much more menacing and overbearing.

“My dear, what is your name again?”

Judging from the way he had been studying her and the almost imperceptible headshake he had just given her, Nichole was positive that he had not forgotten her.

However, she felt obligated to relay the information to him anyway; after all, he was still an important county official.

“Nichole. Nichole Edwards, sir. I work as a clerk at the police department.”

“Ah, yes, Ms. Edwards. Please do not feel as though you need to leave on account of my presence. Mr. Raven and I will only need a few moments to finish up our business on an upcoming case.”

He smiled, but it was cold and wooden. It lacked all the depth and sincerity that now filled any of the one’s that Eric had began to freely bestow upon her. Where a smile from Eric made Nichole feel warm and weightless, the grimace posing as a smile from Mr. Ramsey made her feel frightened and under observation. She needed to be free of his fearsome presence sooner rather than later. Any thoughts of telling Eric her story quickly abandoned Nichole’s mind.

“No, it’s fine. I was about to leave anyway,” Nichole replied to Ramsey and then turned back to Eric before continuing, “Mr. Raven, thank you again. How much do I owe you for the locksmith?”

“Locksmith?” Ramsey questioned and eyed Nichole again.

“I – uh, there was a –”

Eric stood and stepped partially in front of Nichole before she could complete her answer.

“Ms. Edwards is having some trouble with her door getting jammed. I recommended someone to take a look at her locks and made sure everything is *secure* at her residence, and that nothing has been *tampered* with. She and I are very close friends now.”

Ramsey raised a graying brow.

“Is that so?”

Nichole looked away and it was Eric who immediately answered with a powerful affirmation.

“It is.”

He spoke with the well practiced ease only a seasoned attorney could manage while he moved to position his body so that Ramsey could no longer make any eye contact with Nichole. Eric didn't like the energy that he sensed between the two and he didn't want Ramsey making Nichole any more nervous and afraid than she already was. He wanted Ramsey to know that any questions for Nichole were to be directed his way from now on. Before turning back to Nichole, Eric locked hard eyes with Ramsey, ensuring that the other man understood the warning he was being given. When he was satisfied that the message was received, Eric looked to Nichole.

He reached for her hands and held them in his large palm. Eric gave Nichole a warm smile and spoke more tenderly as he addressed her earlier question.

“It's no problem at all. Don't worry about the cost. I want you to call me later and let me know you're okay and that all of the repairs on the door are completed to your satisfaction.”

He read off his number for her to program into her cell phone and then kissed her forehead. All the while, Ramsey waited and shifted from one foot to the other until the couple finished their exchange.

“Don't forget to call me later and definitely before you leave for work. We'll meet up again as soon as I'm finished with my work at the office.”

“I will.”

Nichole eyes drifted to the direction where Ramsey stood a short distance behind Eric. Before her eyes made any contact with the other gentleman, Eric touched her cool cheek and brought her attention back over to him.

“You should go now. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay,” Nichole replied in a near whisper and with a small smile that barely lifted the corners of her mouth upward.

She hesitated a moment longer, not moving so much as an inch. Her mind was racing and she was desperately trying to read Eric’s face.

Does he know the whole story? Are he and Ramsey in on this together? I almost told him everything I knew.

“Nichole, I’ll be fine. Trust me.”

She nodded and then turned and started back toward the direction of her apartment building. Eric watched her walk for a few moments more, allowing his mind another couple seconds of peace as he watched his lady disappear beyond a small grove of trees. Before turning back, he reset his attitude and prepared to face his opponent once again.

“What can I do for you this morning, Mr. Ramsey?”

Eric spoke with a cool, smug air of confidence, like the natural orator he was. He made sure to keep his face straight, almost blank, as he awaited Ramsey’s response.

“The question is what has *she* been doing for you this morning...or maybe last night?”

Ramsey snickered and nodded his head in the direction that Nichole had just walked toward a moment ago.

Eric's eyes narrowed and his face turned sharp. His cool façade slipped.

"Hey, you watch your mouth," Eric said with a distinct growl behind his words.

He lowered his brow and stepped toward Ramsey.

Ramsey moved back an inch or two, caught by surprise at the intensity in his subordinate's reply. Ramsey, however, was quick to regain his composure. He was a man who commanded situations, not submitted to them. Eric was under his watch, not vice versa.

"No, you watch how you speak to your supervisor. The man who gives the *'yeah'* or *'nay'* about whether or not you will still have a job by the end of today."

"Is that supposed to be a threat, Mr. Ramsey? If it is, let me tell you up front that I don't *ever* take them lightly," Eric growled again, and steadied his gate while his fists automatically clenched tight.

Suddenly, an image of Nichole flashed in his mind, and Eric remembered that his days of brawling in the streets were long over. For a quick instant, Eric could have cared less about a having a job. This man not only insulted him but, more importantly, someone whom he cared for deeply. Although he could easily take Ramsey in a fair fight, Eric reminded himself that this man would also have some pull regarding Nichole's future employment status as well.

Eric straightened his stance and then continued, "What do you want, anyway? How did you find me here this early?"

He adjusted his coat and straightened his sleeves while rolling his neck slightly in an effort to regain his coolness. His best lesson learned from this line of business was to never allow your opponent to see you sweat or know they had successfully rattled your nerves. It was during those moments when they would realize they had found an edge – *or a weak spot* – to hold over you. Nichole was definitely becoming his weak spot and Eric knew that Ramsey had easily picked up on that fact.

“As to how I found you, your secretary –”

“Legal Assistant,” Eric corrected.

June had at least earned the right to be called by the title on her degree.

“Yeah, *assistant*, or whatever it is they’re calling themselves these days,” Ramsey rolled his eyes in annoyance, “she told me you stop over here in the mornings before you come into the office. However, she did not tell me that you would also have company with you. *Very pretty company*, I might say. Just a tad on the plain side, but, eh, I don’t usually go for that particular flavor anyway.”

He shrugged his shoulders and allowed a sly smile to creep over his thin lips.

“Except, of course, for maybe a roll in the hay every now and then when the wife or the other candy I keep won’t put out the good stuff. By that time, when I need to get a really hard one out, it really doesn’t matter what they look like in the dark. *Isn’t that right, Raven?*”

Ramsey winked.

Eric clenched his fists at the implied obscenity, and had to shove them in his coat pockets before they found a target to release their gathering fury on. Ramsey was definitely trying to bait him now. *But why?* The question now floating in his mind was

all the more reason for Eric to hold his temper for as long as possible. He needed to turn this conversation before it went any further to the wayside.

“If you didn’t come to talk about business, we don’t have anything further to discuss, Mr. Ramsey.”

“Right, right, back to business. *What do I want?*”

He paused and clapped his hands together under his chin, in an overly dramatic fashion, while his eyes looked skyward, as if reflecting on a deep thought.

Then the stealthy grays found their way back onto Eric’s face and became as lethal as daggers.

“What I want is for you to stay focused and stop fucking around with the hired help, *smart guy*. That is, if you want to keep your post with the county office. You know what,” his hands went inside of his dress pants pockets, “I admit that you did catch me a little off guard yesterday. I was half way back to Jersey City before I realized you had actually thrown me out of your office, albeit extremely politely. For today, let’s say we not forget who is in charge *right here* and in that office building over there.”

Greg motioned his head back toward the county offices behind them and across the intersection, now becoming abuzz with rush hour traffic.

“I asked you to leave before you compromised your moral ethics in front of me. If that would have happened, I would have had no choice but to report my observation to the State Board of Legal Ethics.”

“*There is no ethical violation here,*” Ramsey’s tone turned harsh, “When it comes to this case, you do your job the standard way, nothing more. You already have a full case load, no one will fault you for not going the extra mile on this one.”

At this point, although Ramsey had not mentioned the case he was referring to by name, it was obvious to Eric which one was the subject of this heated discussion.

“What are you trying to suggest I do, ignore all of the evidence that says Mr. Holmes had nothing to do with that home invasion or the ensuing attack?”

Ramsey eyes narrowed. Eric countered the glare.

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Mr. Raven. Mr. Holmes was seen running from the scene of the crime.”

“That’s bullshit – *seen by who?* That tip came from an anonymous phone call. The caller has yet to come forward and own up to that statement. From what the official police report says, Rondell was half way across town, on his way home from work, which his employer has sworn to and his time card confirms, when the PD picked him up.”

“Raven, there are plenty of other cases that deserve your valuable time and devoted attention, but not this is not one of them. *Leave it alone.* This is my last warning.”

“Why should I? Rondell deserves the best defense that I or any other half decent lawyer can present.”

“Rondell Holmes doesn’t deserve shit!”

Eric heard the sound of a bird’s wings clapping together overhead as it retreated from the fierceness of Ramsey’s reply, now echoing throughout the thick foliage surrounding the two adversaries.

“Rondell Holmes is a thug who broke into the home of one our community’s most affluent residents and beat her to a pulp so he could take money and jewelry from her home. He wanted to use it so he could finance whatever bad habit his kind is into. For

that, he is going to do the maximum sentence. *End of story.* The sooner you realize that the better for your career.”

With his final threat made, Ramsey turned on his heels and stomped back to his all black luxury sedan illegally parked at the curb about twenty feet away.

Eric remained behind, silent and stunned.

With Ramsey now far out of striking distance, he finally pulled his hands from his pockets. His phone was gripped tightly in the palm of his left hand. The time read 8:00 AM and he wondered how long it was going to take Nichole to call him. He needed her to say she was all right so he could exhale the breath he had been holding since she had left his sight.

He had a strong suspicion that, from now on, she wouldn't be safe anywhere but by his side.

≈ Chapter 9 ≈

At 2:00 PM the following Monday, Nichole sat up in her bed, a pile of pillows behind her, and staring at her laptop screen.

She was trying to figure out a way to allow the characters in her novel, Trent and Daphnie, to stumble upon a hidden clue that had been available during their entire investigation. Her fingers were poised on the keys but before she could hit a stroke, Nichole heard the floorboards creaked.

Despite the fact that she lived in an ancient building where the boards, the walls, the sinks, and almost every other stationary object in her apartment creaked multiple times throughout the day, she couldn't help but jump at the noise.

Nichole's strained eyes went straight to the sound.

She knew there was nothing to be worried about. On Friday, the locksmith and his associate, two very nice older Italian men who smiled constantly and made small conversation with Nichole while they worked, had completed the repairs to her door. It was practically like new and, with the new metal reinforced hinge and the double bolt now added, was almost impenetrable. Each one had assured her that the work was their best ever. Even with this verbal guarantee of the quality of the work, Nichole now made sure to check the locks multiple times during the day when she was at home and before she exited.

As Eric had requested, she called later that morning to thank him and assure him that all was well. Nichole had been flattered by the concern and worry in his voice over the phone. But that was on Friday and she had not heard a word or received a call from

Eric Raven since that time. Eric had seemed too sincere about wanting her to be safe, but could it have all been a front? If was he so concerned about making sure of her well being, why had he not called to check up on her again? *Why should she even care that he hadn't?*

Nichole had taken the biggest leap of her life by moving away from her family's home and her younger sibling. After her mother died, when Nichole was only a child, her father had to work all hours of the night and day to support his family on his single income. Having to care for a preschool aged girl while her eldest sister went through her own growing pains, had forced Nichole to grow up and grow independent as soon as possible. There was nothing she couldn't handle on her own, and her father had made sure that all his girls were educated so they wouldn't need a man to support them. Why should now be any different? As it was, the door was fixed, and nothing had actually happened anyway.

So what was all the worry for? Someone left a note. Wow. How silly am I to nearly have a nervous breakdown over that?

Yet, if there was the slightest possibility that the warning really was meant to keep her from confessing what she knew, anything she was planning on telling Eric had already conveniently slipped out of her mind. And if he asked again, that would be the story she was sticking to.

It's none on my concern anyway. So, problem solved, she thought with a gleam of satisfaction.

Nichole lifted her glasses to rub her eyes with both sets of fingertips and then glanced at her watch. Her shift would be starting in about forty minutes and she needed

to get ready if she didn't want to be late, which she never was. Friday afternoon had been the first time since taking her post as a clerk that Nichole had decided her raw nerves needed a few days to recover and she called in sick to her supervisor's dismay. She didn't feel it necessary to relay any information about the break-in. Just as Eric had mentioned, the entire situation was odd and Nichole did not want to disclose any more information than was needed to get out of coming to work.

After taking a shower, dressing in her uniform, and combing her straightened hair down to her shoulders, Nichole was finally ready to face the world again. She was never one to check under the bed for the boogeyman or jump at dark shadows, so why start now?

Her low heels hit the hard slab of the top concrete step and she straightened her lenses. The sun hovered bright in the sky, though it was be dipping far below the horizon in less than two hours. The sky was a brilliant blue, the lighter shade that comes with fall skyline, similar to the color of Eric's eyes. As soon as the comparison came to the forefront of her mind, Nichole shook the thought away. Eric Raven was trouble, and she wanted none of it. Nichole was never so glad as right now to be out in the fresh air and her biggest goal today was to stay as far away from that man as possible.

Her legs started moving and she was walking up the side street next to her apartment building and in the direction of the police department building uptown. Her neighborhood wasn't the most spectacular yet it had nowhere near the amount of crime as there was on the back end of town, the section where Rondell Holmes was from. Though she had never been to that side of Timber Falls, Nichole was no one's judge and

suspected that there were hardworking and honest people who lived and raised families there too.

It only takes a few bad apples to spoil the tree, or whatever way that saying goes.

Nichole shook her head as she pondered the old expression.

Right now, Nichole was more concerned about her own safety than about what happens across town. Her usually trek would have taken her up a few residential streets and straight across the shopping district and finally uptown. While working on her novel, Nichole had wasted more time than she had originally planned and was now pressed for time, so a short cut was necessary to get where she needed to be on time. Though she had walked this particular side street dozens of times, down this short thruway to the next main street, something was different about it today. It could have been her imagination, but the walkway was so quiet. *Too quiet.*

Nothing felt right. The vibe in the air was causing her skin to tingle and the shadows from the buildings on either side of the lane were too long. *Did something just move over there next to that dumpster?* A stretch of old cobblestone about fifty feet long, usually taking only five minutes, at most, to complete now seemed to stretch on for eternity. Nichole quickened her pace up the shadowed way. The end of the side street appeared so far away, so unreachable. Most of the sunlight remained hidden behind the towering building to her left. With her mind kicking in to high gear and her senses on alert, a grip of paranoia began to sweep over her and Nichole's mind wandered back to the note. If the person's goal had been to grab her attention and to place a dose of fear in her life, they had definitely succeeded in doing so.

While her mind was still buzzing with the eerie feeling that she was being watched from the sidelines, somewhere within those sharp shadows stretching from her left to her right, a picture of Eric overtook her thoughts. She wished she had called him before leaving today, if only to hear his soothing voice.

It was at that very instant of distraction that an elongated shadow, darker than those created by the sun hovering behind the building, emerged just outside of Nichole's line of vision, near the edge of the large dumpster she had just passed.

As she neared the end of the street, only two steps before her foot landed on the busy sidewalk up ahead, a large gloved hand swept around her mouth and an arm slipped around her waist. Both movements came with enough force to discharge the air from her lungs and silence any sounds of alarm all at once. She was lifted at least four inches from the ground and pulled back further into the darkened space of the thruway.

When her feet landed again, she felt a solid body close behind. The heavy aroma of what smelled like a powerful aftershave or a pungent perfume wafted up her nose. The second half of the odor was strangely familiar to her memory. Tears stung at her eyes and her heart thudded against her the wall of her chest as she watched countless people walk pass the spot she was being held captive in the shadows. All of them so busy on cell phones, touch devices, or so deep in conversation with a companion that none turned a head even slightly in her direction. She had no chance of catching the attention of anyone. Her pleas, her flaying arms, even if she could manage to free either her arms or her mouth, would most likely go unnoticed, as the sounds of honking horns and the shouts of angry motorists filled the air.

Hot lips pressed to her left ear and Nichole thought she would faint dead away but the strength of the man, the body frame was most definitely too large to be a woman, held her upright.

“In case you did not get the other message, I came to give you a reminder. Make sure you forget whatever it is you think you know.”

As if on cue, she nodded her head rapidly, hoping to convince the man that she would be compliant with his wishes. Anything to get him to leave her alone and let her go free and unharmed.

The owner of the deep menacing voice was definitely a male. He was purposefully straining his throat to keep his tone mumbled, low, and raspy as if trying to disguise his voice. If need be, Nichole would probably never be able to identify the real vocals of this person at a later time. The man behind her could probably have a conversation with her ten minutes from now, with his regular voice, and she would never know that it was the same person.

“Make sure you don’t tell the lawyer *anything*,” he paused and squeezed her middle section tighter. “Remember, we know where you are at all times...*Nichole*.”

He had paused before he said her name, and with that Nichole knew this horrible man wanted to make it clear this was no random encounter. He knew her name, he knew where she lived, he knew her routine, and probably where she worked. He would come back if necessary. Next time, it wouldn’t be a note, or some bruised ribs. He wouldn’t hesitate do something far worse to get his message across loud and clear.

A single tear dropped from her eye and rolled down the dark leather glove.

Eric sat at his desk and gripped the black desk phone in his hand. Any more pressure and the thick plastic would crack under the weight of his palm.

Where are you, Nichole?

The sound of her voicemail picking up again made his palate go sour.

He had arrived at his office a little after eight this morning, and had been attempting to contact Nichole's phone call ever since. After his hostile conversation with Ramsey, Eric needed some time to cool off and get his thoughts together. Since that early Friday morning meeting, his already full agenda had another three defendants added to it overnight. It was as though Ramsey were trying to punish his insubordinate behavior by burying him beneath a ton of assignments. Or perhaps he was attempting to distract Eric's attention from the Holmes case. Once brief conversation with Nichole Friday morning was all Eric was able to manage over the rush of the last few days.

His long weekend of reviewing other cases and even having to appear in unscheduled court meetings had successfully rerouted all of Eric's anger away from Mr. Gregory Ramsey and toward his opponents in court. However, it had also delayed him getting a chance to do what had actually been his main goal and that was finding out what was going on with Nichole. She was a stubborn woman, and Eric in no way expected another call from her any time in the near future. Nichole was still fighting the attraction between them and, until she finally admitted to her feelings, it would be up to Eric to keep their connection growing strong. He was hoping, however, that Nichole would have at least some pity on him and give him a ring on her way to or from her office down at the station. The digital time above the keypad on the phone read 3:15 PM and there was still no reply to his calls from his lovely lady.

Having just called over to the station and finding out that she had not been there since leaving with him Thursday night sent Eric into a panic. Not a man to lose his cool, Eric hit the release button and placed the receiver back on the cradle. He needed to think out his next move. If Nichole were not at work and was not at home either, could something have happened to her? He was still unfamiliar with her routines and habits. Most of his knowledge of her was through their all too brief interactions during work hours. She had to be *somewhere*; he just needed to figure out where and soon.

A heavy knock on his door jarred Eric from his thoughts.

“Come in.”

He sat up and waited for the new arrival to appear through the doorway.

At first sight, he jumped from his seat and bounded toward the door.

June had entered and was cradling a disheveled Nichole with one arm. Nichole’s uniform top was wrinkled and her skirt was twisted. Her usually neat and groomed hairstyle had disappeared and was replaced by long strands of straight dark hair hanging in moist strands around her shoulders. Her face was heavy with perspiration *or were those tear stains?*

“*What happened?!*” Eric thundered out the question, never really expecting an answer.

“I don’t know Mr. Raven. There was a light tapping on the office door. I opened it and there she was leaning against the frame.”

At that moment, Nichole’s eyes flurried and she locked on to Eric.

“Eric?”

She held out her arms to him and he immediately came to her side.

Retrieving Nichole's slim body from June's support, Eric scooped Nichole up in his arms and carried her over to the small arm chair in the corner and placed her down as gently as he could.

Her eyes were now closed, but the unmistakable sign of tearstains dragged the length of smooth dark caramel colored cheeks. She whimpered slightly, refusing to open her lashes.

"Nichole, what is it? *What happened to you?*" His voice was near pleading.

By this time, June had stepped closer and was leaning in next to the spot where Nichole had folded herself in a semi-fetal position.

"Sir, you do know her? She was leaning against the door crying her eyes out and hasn't said a word since I opened the door. I looked up and down the hallway, but everyone who walked by or peaked their heads out of their offices looked just as confused as I was, so I just told her to come in. I hope that was okay. "

June watched Eric for a reaction or a response, but when none came because he was completely focused on the girl crying on his couch, she continued.

"Should I call the police?"

"*NO!*"

June jumped back. Claspings her hands close to her chest, she took a few more steps backward. She had never seen Mr. Raven so upset, so *hostile*. She had no idea who the woman was or what was the nature of her relationship to Eric Raven and, based on the fierceness of his reaction; she honestly didn't want any more details.

“June, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you,” Eric turned to his assistant with softer eyes and a softer tone. “Actually, can you please make one call for me and then I won’t ask you to get involved any further?”

Still stunned from Mr. Raven’s initial reaction, June simply nodded her reply.

“Please call Pierce Walker. He’s at the Detective Division at Timber Falls PD. Tell him exactly what happened,” he spoke to Doris and then went back to applying his large palm against Nichole’s heated forehead. “I’m going to be leaving for the day. If anyone asks about this young lady, you don’t know who she is or where she went, which is true. Anyone who needs to find me will know where I’m going, everyone who doesn’t know, please take a message from whoever it is. Also, cancel all of my appointments and request a reschedule for any hearings or trials on my calendar for the rest of today and tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mr. Raven. Understood.”

June nodded her head once more and asked no further questions. She had been working at this type of job for many years and knew better than to get too involved in the personal lives of the attorneys she had assisted. After the sunset and behind closed doors, the lives behind public figures were often more scandalous than those of the average Joe. June believed Mr. Raven to be a man of high morals, and one of the most honorable lawyers she had every worked for. Whatever he was up to, she was sure it had to be for the right reason or maybe the right *person*. She took one last glance at the pretty black girl lying there so frightened and then turned and exited the room without another word.

Once June was out of the room, Eric placed a small kiss on Nichole's lips. She stirred a little and then her body relaxed slightly at the feel of his nose touching the tip of hers.

“Don't worry, baby, I'll take care of you.”

≈ Chapter 10 ≈

By seven thirty, later that night, Nichole remained asleep in his bedroom.

Eric wanted to wake her to see if she wanted any dinner; however, whatever had happened today was serious enough to frighten her to a deathlike sleep. Eric was careful to touch lightly as he removed her outer clothes upon first laying her down. With the greatest of care, he had slipped on one of his t-shirts and a pair of running shorts over her body. Afterward, he had abandoned his own suit and tie for a sleeveless A-Shirt and some old jeans. All of his millions of questions would have to wait until she was ready to open her eyes.

He watched her from where he was leaning against the wall at the top of the staircase, at the entryway of the half floor of his loft. The white cotton sheets that hugged her form outlined her petite but curvy body. She appeared so small, so fragile lying on the oversized bed. He wanted nothing more than to beg Nichole to forgive him for allowing this to happen, especially after he had promised to protect her from now on and to keep her safe.

Eric walked over and sat lightly at the edge of the bed. While he continued to study Nichole's features, he organized his thoughts. Nichole was here because her life was in danger. *But, why was her life in danger, what did she know?* As he turned over the circumstances in his mind, again and again there were too many *why's* and *how's*, and not enough *names* and *places*. Whatever the answers, one fact was certain, Eric was the only one whom Nichole trusted. Why else would she come to his office instead of calling the police? She had mentioned that she had no family nearby and Eric wasn't

sure about any friends, but why wouldn't she contact the very police force she worked for?

Unless someone there was involved in her attack. That could be the reason why she seemed so hesitant to share what she knew about the Rondell Holmes case.

The thoughts raced through his mind but no final answers were reached. All of this would be nothing more than a guess until Nichole started to open up and added more trust to him. Eric was determined to never take the trust she had bestowed upon him lightly and to never fail to protect her again.

The moment her eyelashes fluttered, Eric instantly moved up closer to her side.

Nichole's thin arms had been lying over the sheet and Eric scooped the nearest one onto his lap and grasped her hand in his and waited for her to speak.

Slowly, Nichole's lids lifted and sent Eric's heart racing. Those hypnotic, almond shaped eyes stirred his emotions and he followed through with his urge to kiss her hand.

Nichole's irises widened and then settled as she started to recognize his facial features. Her lips moved a silent question that he easily discerned and answered with a protective tone.

"It's okay. You're in my home."

She tried to sit up and then weakly flopped back against the thick pillows.

"Easy. You've been asleep for a while now. Give yourself a moment to get balanced."

In agreement with his words, Nichole tightened her eyelids and then opened them again.

"My glasses?"

“Oh, yeah, here they are.”

Reaching over to the nightstand, Eric pulled the lenses from the top drawer and placed them in her free hand. With the pad of his thumb, he massaged the back of the hand he was holding.

Thank you, she mouthed wordlessly, unsure of how to respond to his affection.

When no adequate response came to mind, Nichole sat up as quickly as possible and placed the lenses over her face.

Her brow folded slightly as she tried to think back to earlier that afternoon and to recreate the moment in her mind.

“I don’t understand, one minute I was walking and then the next someone sneaks up behind me, *and –*”

Her thoughts went black. She was there, in the alleyway, all over again. The nightmare had come to life once more and the scene replayed in her mind. The feeling of a cold glove across her face. The feeling of it tightly squeezing back against her lips and cheeks. A harsh breath in her ear, sending a frigid chill down her already unsteady core. Her entire body shuddered as the moment of fear returned to her. A large hand grabbed at her wrist and wrenched it away from Nichole’s body. The force was so hard that even if she had attempted to pull away she feared her slim bones might have easily snapped. She looked up, her vision slightly blurry as tiny tears filled the outer corners. Her heart stopped as she prepared to finally meet the face of her attacker, but saw only Eric’s ice blue eyes.

“Who was it? *Who did this to you?*”

Eric tightened his grip on her already limp hand.

Frozen in a state of fear, Nichole was helpless and unable to pull away from his brute strength. Instead, the emotional pool building up inside her finally burst and trickles of salty tears spilled down her cheeks. Inhaling a deep breath of air, she released a low and heavy sob.

Immediately, the tight restraint on her palm was released. In its place, strong but gentle arms pulled her forward. The feel of soft cotton rubbed against her cheek, instantly drying the river of tears she had just released. Nichole felt the hand in her hair gently and methodically stroking her scalp. Despite her hesitation to succumb to the soothing feeling, as her body was nearly in a state of shock, slowly the tension in her shoulders and spine eased. She allowed herself to melt into the hard chest that was intent on pulling her in closer and closer.

“Nichole, sweet Nichole, I am so sorry,” Eric purred softly in her ear as he used his free hand to move strands of cottony soft hair behind her ear. “Forgive me. Please forgive me. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m so sorry I let this happen to you, baby.”

Nichole’s limp arms finally regained movement. First one, then the other moved slowly behind Eric’s massive back. She placed her hands lightly against his lower back and held them there for what seemed like an eternity, unable to decide if she should make any other move. The scent of his cologne filled her nose as the cotton of his A-shirt caressed her cheek. The soft words he repeated to her over and over again – *forgive me, forgive me* – played like a lover’s melody in her mind. Her eyes opened and a perfectly rose-peach colored neck with a firm Adam’s apple met her gaze. Her eyes moved upward and Nichole noticed the telltale sign of short, dark stubble starting to make its way across his hard jaw line.

Warm lips pressed against Nichole's forehead and her slim hands responded by pressing further against Eric's lower back.

"Nichole, I was so worried about you. So – *scared*," Eric hesitated at the last word.

It wasn't an emotion that he was accustomed to, or used loosely, but today was different. He had literally felt his heart stop when he saw this woman in such complete disarray. He feared the perpetrator had done the worst to her but his thoughts lightened a bit when he saw that her stockings or her skirt were not torn.

Eric steadied his breathing while he continued to massage Nichole's scalp. He *needed* to keep his mind clear of the fear that enveloped him at that moment. He *needed* to know what happened so he could make it all right, could fix whatever the bastard had done to hurt this sweet woman. He *needed* Nichole to be all right and back to her vibrant self once more. Eric needed the whole story and Nichole was the only one who could provide it.

He froze when he saw the tears well up in her eyes. As an unfamiliar sting surged at the corner of his eyes, Eric had to fight back his own tears to keep them from spilling out. *Her pain had become his pain.*

Eric's skin started to tingle as the sensation of tiny fingers slowly massaged his back through the fabric of his shirt. He wanted to rip the fabric to shreds so he could feel the fingers play on his bare flesh, to feel the sensation intensify. But, he also felt the hesitation. She was still scared. Her mind wasn't clear and any sudden movement may cause Nichole to freeze up completely or break down again. He would need to coax her more, to allow her to accept the safety of his embrace.

Lowering his mouth to her ear once more, he confessed his heart, “Sweet Nichole, don’t be afraid. I won’t let anyone hurt you anymore, I promise.”

Laying one kiss against her earlobe, Eric waited for a response. His eyes squeezed close as Nichole’s hands eagerly tugged at the bottom of his shirt and then dipped underneath. Her palms splayed against his mid-back and held on tight. The tiniest of sensual ripples teased his neck while her tongue arced its way up his neck to his jaw and then culminated with two moist lips closing over his own.

Opening his mouth to accept the kiss, Eric pleaded in his mind for more. The taste of Nichole was sweeter than honey. Feeling her cling to him for support, the feel of her smooth brown cheeks between his hands and the longing of her big brown eyes locked onto him, was more intoxicating than any wine he had ever sampled.

Sweeping his arms under her legs, he pulled her up onto his lap. Nichole straddled him but remained motionless, still not quite sure if she were making the right decision. Everything felt like she was in a dream world. For all she knew, she could still be laying in an alleyway, not here and wanting this beautiful man more than anything else in the world. One thing was absolutely concrete, even when all else had seemed like an illusion over the last week, Eric Raven was a real man. Not just any man, the *perfect* man. He was what any woman craved in the privacy of her thoughts. He was massive. Inch after inch of pure, sleek, hard, sculpted muscle. His sleeveless attire allowed Nichole to take in his masculine arms. They were flexed and displayed enormous, well-defined biceps. Nichole could feel every ounce of the steel strength of his body under his solid embrace. Massaging his bare shoulders, she wanted to pull his strength into her own body, to feel it pure over her soul and wash away all of the fear and loneliness she

had ever felt before meeting him and being held in his arms like this. Even through the sturdy material of his Eric's dark denim jeans, Nichole delighted in the hardness of his cock pressing against her slick mound hidden beneath the shorts she was wearing.

For the first time, Nichole noticed that she was no longer wearing her own clothing. She now donned an oversized white T-shirt. Due to its size, the garment was probably one of Eric's. She also noticed that his hands had slipped under her shirt just as hers had done to him only moments ago. His large palms had wrapped themselves around each of her rounded lower cheeks and his fingertips were embedded in the soft flesh there. Nichole's thin silk panties were slick down the middle at the exact spot where his manhood throbbed against her nub.

Touching his face with a shaky hand, Nichole laid her head back against his shoulder and then wrapped her lean arms around his neck. The feeling of being overcome by emotion suddenly rushed upon her again.

"Eric, I – " she whimpered, unable to finish the thought any further.

Pulling Nichole's body further against his own, Eric cradled her in his arms as she wrapped her thighs around his waist.

"*Shh*, Nichole, it's okay. I'm here, baby."

Burying her face on his shoulder, Nichole poured out her story in short, fast bursts.

"Eric, I was so *afraid*...The man, *I don't know who he was*...He came out of *nowhere*...I never saw his face...*H– he grabbed me from behind* when I was passed through a side street...I wanted to scream or to try to fight him off, but he was too *strong*, I just – *I just couldn't*."

“I promise you, Nichole, we *will* find out who it is. He’s going to pay for scaring you this badly. I know this is hard, but I need to know. Did he say anything? What did he sound like? I need you to tell me, baby, please.”

Nichole collected her breath before she spoke again.

“His voice didn’t sound right, almost like he was trying to disguise it. It was kind of hokey like how they do in the movies, but good enough so I might not recognize it again.”

Nichole leaned back so she could watch Eric’s face.

His jaw was set, the lines in his face were rigid, yet there was a small twinkle in the corner of each eye, almost like a tiny tear he was holding in place by sheer will alone, unwilling or unable to allow it to fall. He had the look of a man who had been greatly dishonored, who had been wronged, whose heart was slightly broken, who was ready to go to war at all costs. Nichole wondered if all this emotion was for her sake. *But how could that be?* They barely knew one another on a personal level, had only worked together directly for a little over six months, and yet she knew. Nichole knew with every breath she was taking, he would punish whoever was trying his best to harass her in to a quiet submission. Eric Raven was ready to take on the world for her, and Nichole had to be strong enough to be his woman and to back him up when needed. It was time to trust this man who seemed so determined to protect her. She wanted no – *needed* – to tell him the whole story now.

“The man told me to forget what I know. Eric, I know now that I can’t do that. Whoever is threatening me will keep coming back. He won’t stop harassing *me* until I

stop *him*. It's like a sick game now. I had the feeling he was getting some kind of perverse pleasure out holding me like that."

She dared not remember the slight bulge she felt pressing against her from behind.

Nichole moved her legs from across his lap and stood up. From the corner of her eyes, she saw his stormy blue gaze following her every move.

"What else? What is it?"

"I want to tell you everything that I know."

Eric came up to his full height and stood behind Nichole as she stared down at the darkened sidewalk below. He placed his hands on her round, full hips, and squeezed lightly.

"This is a beautiful view, Eric."

She smiled and it was the first one she could remember in what felt like an eternity.

"Yes, it is, but right now I'm more concerned about watching over you."

He paused as an alternate scene, under far better circumstances, played out in his thoughts.

"Perhaps, one day soon, we will be able to watch the sunrise from this window *together*."

Eric looked down at Nichole and she stared up at him.

Nichole responded to his tender words by moving back so she was pressed firmly against Eric's chest. His arms encircled her and Nichole could feel the hard muscle in them tense with anticipation. He bent forward to hold her tighter and Eric's face brushed hers. Nichole could feel his thick waves of hair brushing against her brow.

“Tell me, baby. If I’m going to help you, *to protect you*, I need to know everything. I need for you to trust me.”

His head came to rest on her right shoulder while her arm arched up and back around his neck. Nichole allowed herself another moment of weakness, of intimacy, while her fingers played through Eric’s silky chocolate brown tresses.

“Okay, I will,” her voice was nearing a sensual whisper, “I just hope you understand what all this is about, because I can’t seem to make the pieces fit together the right way.”

Though his mind was trying to stay focused on the case at hand, his growing attraction to this voluptuous woman was returning and steadily taking hold. Eric’s hands slid upward from Nichole’s waste. He followed the slim outline and then the palms of his hands went against her flat belly. From there, eager digits moved slowly toward more sensual territory. His thumb and index finger had finally located her hardened nipples through the cotton of the shirt. They worked semicircles around the small pebbles until a soft moan slipped from Nichole’s lips. Eric’s manhood instantly became engorged. His full palms encircled her C-cup sized breasts and massaged tenderly yet urgently. Nichole felt the telltale trickle of moisture gathering between her thighs as Eric’s hands became more feverish. She turned in his arms, now losing herself to primal passion. Her intent led her to reach up and grasp his lips in a heated lock, while Eric’s hands were now firmly placed on her globed ass.

The sensual scene paused mid-action at the sound of a doorbell ringing downstairs.

As Eric and Nichole stood breathless, holding one another in a desperate embrace, the same thought crossed both their minds in unison. Whoever was at the door had the worst timing imaginable.

≈ Chapter 11 ≈

Detective First Class Pierce Walker was a near replica of Eric Raven.

Nichole determined this to be a fact the moment she saw him and his six-foot plus frame, saunter through the door of Eric's loft. He appeared to be slightly younger than Eric and Nichole, maybe in his mid-20's. Tall and broad, but not freakishly muscular, he had a frame similar to a professional American football Running Back, just like Eric. Pierce's facial features and bone structure, the full rose colored lips and perfectly aligned nose, as well as the high cheek bones and commanding eyes were all the same as Eric's.

She also immediately noticed the differences.

The first being, although they looked like twin brothers, Pierce didn't have the ability to make Nichole's breath catch in her throat or make her heart go into an immediate flutter whenever he looked in her direction. There were other ways to tell the two men apart as well. For one, Pierce had short blond hair, not the beautiful mix of deep oak brown and dark bronze that colored Eric's perfect waves. Nichole had come to secretly adore his perfectly trimmed mane for the spectacular way it glossed under the light. Another notable difference was Pierce's eyes were green not the stunning blue that belonged to her Eric.

Her Eric.

Nichole could hardly believe that she had just placed that tag in front of his name, as though she had purchased him from the store. Still, she admitted that it felt so right to believe that he belonged with her.

After they both descended the stairs, hurriedly trying to adjust their clothing the entire way, Eric undid the heavy bolt and pressed a small black button next to the wall shelf adjacent to the door. Once the door had been opened, and without having attempted any type of greeting, Pierce made a B-line straight to Eric's refrigerator and started hunting through its contents. As if this were a normal occurrence, Eric shook his head in amusement and started to close the door until a small voice filtered inside.

The near hushed voice, almost childlike, spoke up just as the door was nearly closed.

"Excuse me? *Hello?*"

As soon as the familiar voice hit her ears, Nichole ran over and snatched the doorknob from Eric's grasp. Seeing the cute face on the other side of the threshold, Nichole nearly jumped into the arms of her younger sister, Nivea. The girl, five years younger than Nichole, and about fifteen pounds heavier and fuller in the hips, happily accepted the embrace.

"Oh my goodness, Nivea, what are you doing here?"

Still holding on to the other young woman's thick arms, Nichole stepped back to look at her sister as if she hadn't seen her in years. It had been a few months since Nichole's last visit home and a friendly face, especially right now, was exactly what she needed to help lift her spirits.

"Sis, it's good to see you, too," Nivea smiled warmly as she returned her older sister's glee, "I came as soon as dad told me what happened."

"What did he tell you? How did he know?"

Nichole asked the questions back to back without allowing Nivea to answer. At the same time, she turned a wrinkled brow in Eric's direction.

"Dad said a man named Eric Raven called and said that you weren't feeling well and were staying with him because you said you didn't have any other family in town. And you know how Dad is," Nivea chuckled as she went on, "he was having none of that living together out of wedlock mess and he couldn't get out of working tonight so he sent me right over to investigate when I finished my afternoon class."

Nichole turned a relieved smile back toward her sister and hugged her once more.

"I'm so glad you're here, Niv," Nichole pulled back again and studied the other female, "and you look like you've lost some weight."

Nivea blushed and bowed her head.

"Just a little. Anyways, how are you? Are you feeling any better?"

"Um, yeah, a little. Nivea, I want you to meet Eric Raven. He's the man who called Dad."

Eric stepped forward and extended his hand to Nichole's baby sister.

"Nice to meet you – *Nivea*?"

"Yes, same here. Thank you for watching over my sister. I know she didn't give you an easy time. Nickie is usually the one doing the babysitting."

Nivea laughed and Eric arched an eyebrow in Nichole's direction.

"Is that so? And you are absolutely correct, *Nickie* gave me a terrible time about trying to help her out."

"Yeah, that sounds like our Nickie."

Another jovial laugh escaped Nivea's lips and her round cheeks flushed red.

“Nice. Now that everyone is reacquainted can we get down to business?”

A fourth voice sounded from the kitchen and drew everyone else’s attention in that direction.

With the sense of relief that came with the arrival of her favorite sister, Nichole had completely forgotten about Pierce. Immediately her mind went on the defensive when she realized he had neglected to inform either she or Eric that there was someone else waiting to enter. He was actually going to let Eric shut the door right in her sister’s face and not say a word to stop him. Yet another reason to *never*, not even by accident, confuse him with Eric.

“Eric, who is *that*?” Nichole asked while dangerously eyeing the other man.

Her chin pointed in Pierce’s direction, and her hand had automatically gone to her hip.

Without awaiting any formal introduction, the hulking blond dropped his open container of orange juice onto the counter next to the stove and strolled out of the kitchen, stopping not more than five inches from where Nichole stood. If he thought his size was going to intimidate her, he was going to be sorely mistaken. Someone sneaking up on her in an alleyway was one thing, trying to take her face-to-face was an entirely different story. Nichole wouldn’t allow him to see any fear in her eyes so she held her position.

“Detective Pierce Walker, sweetheart.”

“*Sweetheart?*”

Nichole crossed her arms over her chest.

“Mr. Walker I don’t think you know me well enough to speak to me like that.”

“You want me to get to know you first. Hm, I don’t usually take that much time, it’s usually straight to the good parts for me, but if that’s what you’re into, maybe we can work something out.”

Pierce winked his sparkling green eye down at her.

Nivea’s mouth gaped open and Nichole’s eyebrows shot up high. When Nichole finally regained her composure, she stepped an inch closer toward Pierce only to have Eric extend his arm in front of her.

“Easy. I’ll take care of it.”

He looked over to her with tender eyes and she relaxed her shoulders and moved over to stand with her sister.

Once he was certain that Nichole was at ease, quick as lightning, Eric reached around and grabbed his counterpart by the open collar of his light beige button up shirt.

“What the hell is the matter with you?”

“Sorry, bro,” the other man replied, throwing his hands up in the air as an indication of his surrender, “What’s the problem? Is she *yours*?”

“She has a name, Nichole Edwards. And yes, she is very special to me, so you watch yourself around her.”

Eric pointed a stiff index finger to heighten the meaning of his words.

Pierce’s previous arrogance was easily deflated by Eric’s rebuke.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. It won’t happen again. Promise.”

“Damn right it won’t,” Eric said and released the other man’s shirt. “Apologize.”

Pierce straightened his shirt and tucked the top back into his dark slacks before looking in Nichole and Nivea’s direction, yet not directly at either of them.

“Look, Nickie – *Nichole*,” he corrected himself when he saw her features turn hard again, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get too – *friendly* – with you.”

“Yeah, sure, it’s cool,” Nichole spit out the words without thinking.

She was certain that his apologize was nowhere near sincere, which didn’t bother her a bit. However, she continued to remain quite annoyed about him having left her sister out on the doorstep, so to speak.

“And her sister, Nivea, too,” Eric commanded from nearby.

“What? *For what?*”

Pierce looked over at Eric, completely perplexed.

“Because you were rude to her also. You knew she was standing out there and you were going to let me leave her there while you raided my refrigerator for orange juice.”

He looked over at the younger lady and the pair held one another’s gaze for a silent moment. It was almost as though Pierce were seeing her for the first time, since he couldn’t recall her riding the elevator up with him. His eyes moved slowly up and then down her full frame. She was heavier than the other one and a little shorter but, in his opinion, much prettier. Her face was sweet and kind, like a cherub, with light brown almond shaped eyes. She had her dark hair in loose ringlets around her shoulders. She had a tender innocence he had never before seen in a woman. If she were a few pounds lighter, he might have even asked her out on a date or *something more fun*. The thought made him smirk, and Nivea quickly cut the connection and looked away. Pierce came out of the moment as well.

“What do you mean? She’s gotta’ mouth. I never said ‘*Hurry up and shut the door before she gets in*’.”

“Pierce, if I have to step back in your direction, I guarantee you will regret it now *and later*.”

The muscles under Eric’s shirt flexed and the other man noticed.

“Yeah, whatever, that super hero tough guy shit only goes but so far. But, seeing as how I’m a gentleman and all, I will say I’m sorry I left you standing out there,” he looked back over toward Nichole’s sister and then blinked, “*Nivea*.”

She was still as stunning as he remembered.

“Hey, it’s no problem at all,” Nivea smiled but made sure not to look directly at Pierce. “He’s right, anyhow, I should have spoken up sooner.”

After a silent moment, Eric finally broke up the tension hanging between the small group.

“Ladies, if you haven’t already guessed, this is Pierce. He’s a detective down at the Timber Falls Police Department. I asked him to help me out on your case, Nichole.”

The moment Eric realized what he had said; it was too late to take it back.

“Case?” Nivea’s face became washed with worry. “Nichole, *what case*? Daddy said you were sick, not that you were in trouble.”

She waited with wide eyes for her elder sister to explain what was going on.

“Nivea, it’s okay,” she reached for her sister’s hand and gently squeezed, “It’s nothing for you to worry about. Eric is taking care of everything. I’ll tell you everything a little later.”

The girl still appeared ill at ease, but she remained silent, and watchful. Her visit had taken on a whole new mission. If her sister needed help, she would do whatever was necessary to give her that help and support.

“Nichole is right, Nivea. I guarantee you that I am seeing to your sister’s safety, which is why I asked for the help of this knuckle-head,” he looked over at Pierce and grinned.

“Hey, we’re not kids anymore, you can’t call me that.”

“I can call you whatever I want, little brother.”

“Oh, so this is your *brother*,” Nichole spoke as though she did not want to say the words.

Eric said he worked at the station, yet his face didn’t look like one she had ever seen there. Then again, the PD she worked for was numbered at a little over two hundred so it was quite possible they had never crossed paths before today. She also did not recall Eric having mentioned a brother during their conversation the other night and, even more so, she didn’t want to believe someone this arrogant and rude could be related to her Eric. Then it dawned on her. Nichole realized it wasn’t all that long ago that she was thinking the same thoughts and had held the same opinion about Eric. With that in mind, there had to be more to Pierce Walker than meets the eye. This was information Nichole decided she needed to keep in mind, because she was definitely not fond of the way he had been surveying her sister.

“Technically, he’s my cousin. In actuality, we’re probably closer than most blood brothers.”

“Damn straight. Brothers for life,” Pierce shot back without blinking an eye.

Nichole's mind went back to the photo upstairs and the story Eric had told her regarding the circumstances of how Pierce had become a member of Eric and his mother's immediate family. How had the reality of being abandoned by both his mother *and* his father affected Pierce, who had been no more than seven years old at the time? Before Nichole had an opportunity to reevaluate the spark behind this haughty man's personality, Eric spoke again and his voice eliminated the thought.

"Right. Back to business. I wanted Pierce to do some follow-ups for me. He's one of the best investigators on the force," Eric hesitated, "and he can be *trusted*. Right now, that's a key to sorting this entire mess out."

"Speaking of investigating. I still need that statement so I can see what angle to start from."

Pierce eyed Eric but he was really referring to Nichole. He was waiting to see how his big brother wanted to handle this. The two men had spoken briefly on the phone when Nichole was still asleep. Eric had made Pierce well aware of Ramsey trying to bring down the heavy hand on him and of Nichole's reluctance to give him her full story.

"Nichole, baby," Eric moved over to her side and placed a long arm around her shoulder and pulled her in tight to his body, "Are you ready to tell us what happened?"

All eyes fell to her and Nichole felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. The sooner she gave them the facts, the sooner they could help her find and escape whoever was trying to keep her silent.

"Yes. I think I'm ready now."

"Do you want to sit down? Would that be easier on you?" Eric still hugged her in his protective embrace.

Nichole nodded.

“I think that may help.”

“Okay. The kitchen is better. There’s enough seats for all of us in there.”

With those words, the four of them moved over to the brightly lit kitchen area. Each person took one of the four long-legged pub style seats around the marbled center isle of the room. Nichole and Nivea were on either side of the isle, with Eric and Pierce at each end. Once seated, the others waited patiently for Nichole to begin.

“Okay,” Nichole started and then inhaled and released a calming breath, “this is what I know. Again, I have no idea if this has anything to do with why someone is trying to scare me or whether this has anything to do with your case, Eric. But, here goes. About six weeks ago, I was on my regular shift from 3 PM to 11 PM. At around 8:30, I was on my way to the dining hall for my dinner break. As I passed by the first floor overnight holding cells and then moved past Interrogation Room D, about a yard away from the hall leading to the cafeteria, I heard someone crying, it sounded like a woman, so I stopped. Don’t ask me why I did; I guess it’s just a habit of mine. I wanted to see if there was something I could do to help whoever it was. I backtracked and was about to enter the room when I heard two more voices, they were both male. While the woman was crying, I heard the men whispering to each other. I could tell they wanted to shout but didn’t want to draw any attention. I peaked my head in just enough to see Ronald King sitting at the center table. At the time, I didn’t recognize him at all, not until I saw the papers the following night. He was beet red and his clothes were all bloody down the front. He was pointing his finger at someone else out of my line of sight. I never saw the woman; I only heard her voice coming from the other side of the room. The woman’s

voice kept saying, *'I'm sorry, so sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know'*. Then the other man, the one that I couldn't see, would tell her to shut up and stop crying and then he said, *'This is all your fault, you should have stopped them,'* but his voice was being aimed as though he were talking to Ronald King. Then Mr. King said, *'My fault? Are you serious? She's the one who,'* then he stopped when he saw me hovering by the door. I didn't hear anything else after that because I start to move as fast as I could down to the cafeteria. I was hoping down to my very marrow that he didn't know who I was and wouldn't be able to remember my face.

"I tried to forget about what I had heard. I ate my dinner as usual and tried to keep under the radar, and prayed no one came looking for me about the incident. About an hour later, I walked the same way I always do, and tried to move pass Room D as quickly as possible. The closer I came to the door, I realized the lights were out and no one was in there anymore. I did, however, hear all of this noise coming from the holding cell area. There was screaming and shouting. When I walked past, I saw a man on the floor and about three officers trying to hold him down. I looked up and Mr. Ramsey was there yelling directions to the officers, telling them not to let him get loose. Without even breaking from giving his instructions to the men, he looked up and watched me walk by. That's all I know, I swear. I didn't even realize that the guy they were holding down was Rondell until I saw his picture in the paper right under the photo of Mr. and Mrs. King the next day."

Nichole folded her hands and waited for feedback. Now that she had said everything out loud, she was even more confused as to why anyone thought she would be able to make or break that case. She didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary. She

saw a man being questioned after reporting his wife being attacked. She saw the suspect for the attack being brought into the station for booking. That was everything she knew, except those pieces just didn't seem to fit together right. There was something odd about how those two incidents paired up from her point of view that night.

Eric reflected on her statement for a moment, as did Pierce.

Eric was the first to ask a query.

"What happened after you went back to your station in the records room? Anything unusual?"

"No, nothing."

Pierce took his turn to pose a question while he took mental notes of everything being said.

"Did Ramsey or any of the other officers come down and ask you any questions or say anything to you at all?"

"No, no one else came down while I was there. I left a little early when Sheri came at around quarter to eleven."

Nivea remained silent as she sat with her hands on her lap, completely helpless to lend anything useful to the conversation since, up until a few hours ago, she had no idea that her older sister was in any kind of trouble.

Nichole knitted her brow.

"What is it? Do you remember something else?" Eric asked.

"Hm, I remember thinking that it was odd."

"What was odd?"

“I was expecting Bob to be next on shift but I didn’t stop to ask questions, I only wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.”

Eric rubbed his hands through his wavy hair and then slid them down his face. The answer was right there, mixed in with those details somewhere, he just needed to sort through it. He needed to take every last detail apart and then put it back together. To do that, he would need just a little more background information on a couple of new players that hadn’t been considered before.

“Pierce, what do you think?”

His young cousin had an uncanny ability to read between the lines. Pierce had made detective faster than any other officer on the force, accomplishing what no other had ever done in less than three years after graduating from the academy. He might have picked up on at least one item that Eric had missed along the way. This fact brought up another question, why hadn’t Pierce been assigned to investigate this case? He was the best detective in Timber Falls. If solving this home invasion and finding the perp were of the utmost important, why didn’t the police commissioner have the best man on the case? Then, it occurred to Eric that maybe the higher-up’s didn’t really want this case to be solved, maybe because they had already handpicked the offender.

“I think this whole Rondell Holmes case is screwy. It didn’t read right from the moment I saw it in the paper.”

“Agreed. By the way, why weren’t you assigned to this case from the beginning? If this mess is so important, why didn’t they put you on it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, bro. As far as I know, there have been no detectives assigned. The uniforms apprehended Mr. Holmes a little after 9 PM on the

same night as the break in. Case closed. That's all we all know, which is exactly what is already printed in *The Journal*."

"Yeah, it seems like the paper has more details about the full story than the official police record. How come it was never mentioned that Ronald King was at the station that night?"

Eric sat up, his blue eyes shining bright as his neurons started firing in rapid succession.

"Another thing, the arresting officers' reports said Rondell Holmes was caught fleeing the scene, and when he resisted arrest they had to use force and that's how he had all those bruises on his face and arms. Rondell has always denied that allegation. He said they pulled up to him while he was walking home and asked him to come to the station for some questions, and he went along with no problems. Rondell said they started their attack on him after the officers said he was being charged with assault and burglary. He denied everything and asked for his lawyer and that's when they jumped him. Nichole, from what you say, it sounds like Holmes was telling the truth. I don't recall him mentioning that Ramsey was in the room, but it's not uncommon for someone from the DA and the Public Defender's office to be witness to an initial interrogation. For Gregory Ramsey to be there in person says volumes. He doesn't show up unless the case has enough clout. Hm, I don't like how this all is starting to sound."

Nichole sat motionless. Tonight and all the previous days' events were clearly wearing on her. Her face was a shade lighter and her usually vibrant eyes were hollow. Eric knew it was time for her to get some more rest. For the first time in weeks, Eric also felt the need for a few hours of peaceful shuteye. He was trying to force himself to absorb

a lot of information in a few short hours. He needed to have a clear mind and his senses intact to figure out this dilemma so everyone involved could move on with their lives. Hopefully, he and Nichole would be doing so together from here on out; however, with his Nichole, it was too soon to tell what her long-term intentions were going to be and if they would even include Eric.

His eyes went from Nichole to the other end of the table.

“I think that’s enough for tonight. Pierce, I need you to do a background check on two people for me.”

“Okay, shoot. Who is it?”

“Gregory Ramsey and Ronald King.”

“I had the feeling you were going to say that,” Pierce replied with a sly smile. “It’s as good as done. I’ll have something for you first thing in the AM. I’m getting ready to head back to the station now.”

“Good. We’ll talk some more then.”

“I guess I should get going as well.”

Nivea had been so quiet that Pierce and Eric had completely forgotten that she was present.

“Nivea, you are more than welcome to stay,” Eric offered a small smile to the girl when he spoke.

“Yeah, Niv. Please stay. I haven’t seen you in awhile and that bed is huge. We can both fit.”

Nivea’s cheeks heated up to firecracker red and she stood abruptly.

“Um, that’s okay. I need to get home and get some rest. I have an exam in my first class tomorrow.”

“Nivea,” Nichole looked at her sternly, “you know that’s not how I meant it.”

Nichole was well aware of her sister’s self-consciousness regarding her constantly fluctuating weight. Though Nivea never gave in to snide comments about her heftiness, Nichole could always tell it hurt her deep whenever anyone touched on that subject. Nivea was scheduled to complete her BA from Eastern States University next fall with a major in Health and Physical Science. Nichole’s guess was that Nivea wanted to understand why she had a problem controlling her weight, despite all the different diets and exercise routines she had tried over the years.

“Of course I know that, Nickie. Don’t be silly. I just need to get home.”

Nivea smiled but Nichole was the only one who could tell that it was forced.

“Well, if you insist on traveling this late, Pierce will make sure you get home.”

Eric spoke and then turned his head forward to catch the other man’s attention. He gave Pierce a quick warning glance.

“*I will?* Oh, yeah, sure, why not,” Pierce rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “It’s not like I don’t have anything else to do tonight but be a personal escort. Then again,” he smiled and a glint caught those emerald green eyes, “I like how those last words sound.”

“No, no,” Nivea countered, losing a bit of her shyness as she easily picking up on the suggestive nature of his words, “That’s quite all right. I can take a taxi back and Daddy can pay for it when I get home.”

“Nivea, Pierce is a constant jokester. He wasn’t serious about that last part. Were you, Pierce?”

Eric folded his arms over his chest where he remained seated at the kitchen isle and awaited Pierce's reply.

Pierce once again let his eyes roam over Nivea's face and what parts of her body he could make out from his place in the chair. He made no attempts to hide his actions.

"Yeah, I was only kidding around."

When his richly colored eyes finally reconnected with Nivea's light ones, he offered her a brilliant display of pearly whites. He let the words roll out slow and steady.

"I'll be a perfect gentleman. *But only for you.*"

Having witnessed his flirtatious display, Nichole made it a point to make Nivea promise to call her the moment she stepped through the door at their father's home. She didn't trust Pierce Walker to be alone with her sister; however, she did trust Nivea Edwards to do the right thing and swing on him if he didn't know how to keep his paws to himself on the ride home.

Nichole hugged her younger sister tight at the front door; while Eric and Pierce exchanged a hand slap and manly half hug (more like hard pats on the back). Nichole and Pierce simply gave one another an evenly matched head nod as Nivea and Eric shook hands once more.

Once the *good-byes* were concluded, Pierce reached for Nivea's arm and folded it over the crook of his own. He bent over slightly so he could make his statement as personal as possible, since he was well aware that Nichole was watching him with a cat-like stare.

"Looks like it's just you and me for the next couple of hours, sweetheart."

Though taken aback at first by Pierce's quick actions and the tickle of his breath on the tip of her ear, Nivea didn't want him to see that he had shaken her nerves just a tad over the last hour and even more so now that he had positioned himself so closely to next to her.

Staring up into his deep green eyes, Nivea felt a primal stirring she had never before experienced in the presence of a man – *any man*. She would have to make sure to keep her wits about her when dealing with Mr. Pierce Walker. He was a very dangerous man, in more ways than one.

“Mr. Walker, I think I should make sure you are aware that my dad made sure to buy all of his girls either a stun gun or a can of mace on their 18th birthday. He made us promise never to take them out of our purses. I won't tell you which one I have in my purse right now but I will tell you that I never leave home without it.”

She followed up her statement with a sweet smile and batted her light ginger colored eyes.

Pierce swallowed hard, and then he smiled. It was a smooth and easy grin that could melt butter.

“*Ouch*. You're a lot tougher than you look. My kind of girl. How about we get moving and leave these old farts to their bedtime stories?”

Nivea laughed and the two made their exit from the loft arm-in-arm, giggling the entire time.

With the door closed after them, Eric turned the bolt while Nichole waited patiently behind him. Then the couple faced one another and each wondered if they should pick-up exactly where they had left off earlier that evening.

≈ Chapter 12 ≈

Nichole and Eric stood there silently staring at one another, both unsure of what the next move should be.

Eric couldn't recall his heart beating this fast in the presence of a female since he was in junior high school waiting on his date for the Spring Fling to descend the stairs under her father's watchful eye. He remembered that her first name was Bianca. She had skin the color of roasted almonds and dark curly hair that framed her face at just the right angle. Her father wasn't too happy that she had been dating a white boy behind his back but had seen through his own prejudices enough to allow the two to continue dating off and on over the next few years. Even back then, Eric was drawn to women with a little more color in their cheeks and a little more roundness in the hips. On occasion, he had dated ladies of his own race and several others throughout college and law school, yet his preference had always been and would continue to be black women. It was the way they held their heads high and moved with a confident stride and with graceful steps. Their faces poised in a knowing look that they had the ability to turn a man's head with the slightest uplifting of their dark eyes. It was the fullness of their bodies and richness of their spirits. It was also the motherly care and fearless protection they held in their hearts for all of their family and friends. Eric recalled how Ms. Nancy, his mother's best friend in their old neighborhood in PA, had taken his mom under her wing when the family first moved into the new environment. His mom had always said she had never met another woman who was kinder than her gal Nancy. All these things were what appealed to Eric Raven the most and it was Nichole Edwards who displayed these qualities to the purest

extent. After having witnessed the fire welling up in her eyes when she realized how rude Pierce had been to her sister, Eric was certain that Nichole would probably rival him in the lengths she would go to protect and care for those she loved and who loved her. He held high hopes he would one day be counted amongst that blessed number.

Looking up at his statuesque form, Nichole watched the twinkling in Eric's eyes and puzzled over what he could be deliberating in that fascinating mind of his. The color in his eyes had darkened another full shade of blue to a deep royal blue, and it was clear that he had become captivated by something. She watched as the corners of his lips turned up slightly, the hints of a budding smile were present and Nichole wondered all the more what that *something* could be.

Her gaze followed along his angular cheeks and nose. He was almost too handsome to behold. Eric's hardened biceps folded over the extended expanse of his chest, all the while his eyes and his mouth remained fixed in a longing stare as he countered Nichole's watchful eye. Before her, Nichole beheld a strange mix of arrogant confidence with a hint of submission behind those blue irises, hidden just below the surface where only she had the ability to see that deep inside him. Nichole finally understood the truth. Eric wanted her to witness this side of him. He wanted her to see him as the strong, capable man she had come to admire but he also wanted to reveal something more, something *softer*, a piece of him she had never noticed before. There was another Eric Raven waiting for her, a more passionate and giving man lurked there behind his public face and, *with pleading eyes*, he wanted Nichole to draw it out of him.

Before she knew it, her gaze had strayed just a bit lower. She noticed how the white sleeveless shirt that he donned conformed to and showed the perfect contour of

every muscle in his cast iron chest and well developed arms. The outline of his pectoral muscles and the image of his hardened nipples captured her attention. She wondered what that sight would look like minus the cotton barrier that now covered them. How would his stiff pebbles feel against her cheek, her lips, and her tongue? What would it be like to slide her hands over that massive chest and then slowly move down his defined abs and seek out the hot regions just below his waistline?

That last vision jolted Nichole back to the here and now. The feel of her wet tongue making its way over her lips had finally caught her attention and awakened her from whatever spell the image of joining with Eric's body had placed her under. Though she wanted nothing more than for him to take her by the wrists and pull her in close so that his body covered every inch of her bare skin, Nichole's feet were planted to the ground. She dared not make a sound nor move one inch from the spot she anchored to. *Was she ready to take on Eric Raven?* A man whose persona was so much more bold, confident, and irresistible than any man whom she had ever encountered. Up until now, she had successfully played her role and set her will for him never to see the way she quivered inside whenever he was near and how he caused her hormones to spike to the breaking point. One word, one unchecked glance could make him alert to the fact that she craved him down to her very core. Nichole wanted to feel Eric's immense strength throbbing within her walls, to moan his name aloud as he pushed his full weight and brawn deep inside and up to her womb. Never in her life had Nichole ever considered succumbing to a night of unadulterated passion with a man whom she barely knew. *Was she really ready to take the leap and allow herself this one night of inhibition?* More importantly, was her heart ready to accept the moment of emptiness and loss when the

sunrays beamed through the window and the fantasy was over and when Eric would, undoubtedly, escort her to the door?

The honesty and openness of his beautiful sapphire eyes said there was no chance of that happening. Eric was waiting for *her* to decide where this defining moment would lead them. Everything about the way his body was positioned and how his glare called to her said that he wanted this night to move forward, that he wanted her now and tomorrow and even long after that. The hungry eagerness that lit of his pupils sent a rushing warm sensation across the line of Nichole's body. Her arms prickled with gooseflesh. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, she absolutely tingled with anticipation of what could happen between them tonight and for many nights to come. The question remained – *could she make that move?* Was she brave enough?

Her father had raised his daughters never to open their legs to any man who came calling, but this was not the case. Here, now, with Eric, this was more than simple physical attraction. This was like *destiny*. Two objects that were meant to forge an eternal bond.

Nichole's lips parted, as if to speak. Eric lowered his arms and leaned down a little closer, eager to listen. But no words came out. She remained silent, her eyes still searching him, trying to make the right decision.

Eric closed the space between them and reached out his hand to delicately apply the backside against Nichole's warm face. He slid his long digits carefully down the warm milk chocolate brown of her skin. His hand stopped beneath her chin, and he allowed one finger to remain there as he lifted her face up closer to his.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and husky, but still soothing, like the mesmerizing melody of a smooth jazz singer.

“Nichole, I can see the hesitation in your eyes. I want you to know that you don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to. You must think I’m terrible for even having these thoughts about you during a time like this.”

“What thoughts?” Nichole’s voice was eager.

Eric let loose a low, deep laugh and Nichole sucked in her lower lip as her breath caught in her chest. She was truly overwhelmed by his touch and the teasing sound of his voice in her ears.

Eric placed his other hand on the opposite side of her face and cradled her in his grasp. His mouth was a mere centimeter from hers and there was a feeling like an electrical current flowing from one pair of lips to the other.

“Nichole, sweet Nichole,” his vocals remained a melodic whisper, “I haven’t stop thinking about you since the first day we met. You were the most amazing woman I had encountered in my adult life.”

This came as a great revelation to Nichole since she also remembered the night they had first met six months previous when Nichole first switched to the second shift. She had heard rumors of the new County Defense Attorney storming through the Courthouse like a tyrant leaving a wake of broken hearts and egos. She had even witnessed such a display once while she was still a clerk in the court records department. But to have this domineering man actually come storming into her office and making demands at eight o’clock at night was a completely unnerving experience. Nichole recalled having to set down some ground rules for the hot new attorney in town. She had

made it plain and clear to Mr. Eric Raven that Nichole Edwards was no one's punching bag and if he intended to continue to deal with her on any level, he would have to immediately adjust his attitude. From that day on, whenever he was in her direct company, Eric kept his bark worse than his bite.

"Your laughing because you remember, don't you?"

Eric's breath tickled her as he spoke into Nichole's ear.

"I do," she smiled and giggled at the memory.

"You almost sent me packing with one hard look. I had to use every ounce of my will power to keep a straight face and from cracking under the pressure from that icy stare of yours."

"Well, you did just come in and start barking orders *at* me, and without even asking my name first."

Nichole wrinkled her brow up at him, and Eric kissed the lines away. Her heart thudded and then missed one beat.

"Yes, I admit that I did. I also admit that I memorized your name the moment you said it to me. I knew that I had finally met my equal. A woman who could put me in my place without so much as raising her voice. A woman who embodied everything that I cherish. Intelligence. Grace. Charisma. *Beauty, inside and out.*"

He whispered the last sentence, wanting Nichole to feel the sincerity in each word.

"Eric," Nichole spoke in a hushed tone, as she moved each of her slim hands against either side of his wide shoulders and lowered her eyes, "I feel the same."

He lifted her chin once again, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“You think I’m beautiful?”

Nichole chuckled.

“You know what I mean. I think you are an amazing, hard working, and honest man. I’m practically a stranger to you and here you are probably putting yourself into some insane amount of danger to help me.”

“Nichole, I’m not doing this for a stranger. I’m doing this for *you*. I have never allowed any other woman that I work with into my home. I have never allowed any potential witness to get this close to my – *my heart*.”

Nichole gasped at the confession. Could he be serious? Was Eric really saying that she had found a special place in his heart?

“Eric, what are you saying?”

Her hands moved down from his shoulders to his upper arms. Her fingers were barely able to wrap themselves around the extreme girth of the hard muscles there. Her fingertips pressed into his flesh as her lower nub began to throb. Her excitement was heightening with each passing second. Every new confession increased her desire for Eric to *claim* her, to take her as his own possession.

Eric pressed his moistened brow against Nichole’s and breathed in her scent. His body temperature soared as every blood vessel in his body was flooded with endorphins. He felt his cock rise to new heights beneath his jeans, stretching the denim material to its limits. Having Nichole this close, with no restrictions and no boundaries, was driving him mad with desire. Eric slowly moved his lips over hers and placing soft kisses as he moved over their wet surface. He felt her heat radiating onto his own body and he hoped that her passion for him was on fire, nearing the point of combustion. He had already

reached that pinnacle and he wanted her to share the igniting spark when it finally thundered down.

“Nichole,” Eric spoke breathlessly with his lips grazing slowly over Nichole’s mouth, “I desire you more than any woman I have ever met. I can’t explain the connection I feel to you. How much I want to hold you in my arms, to feel you against me. I’ve had to mask this urge to be near you, *inside you*, from the first moment I saw your beautiful silhouette passing me in the hallway, and even more since we first shared a kiss the other night. I want you so much right now that I ache inside. I need you to be with me tonight. I need to feel us joined together. Just give me tonight, that’s all I ask. Tomorrow, you can go back to hating me. I just want to be with you – *really be with you* – and to know that you’re with me, even if it’s only for one night. I won’t disappoint you. I promise. *Please, baby.*”

Before Nichole could respond, Eric leaned in further and parted her lips as his tongue swept through her inviting mouth. She received him well, with her eyes closed, while her own tongue tickled his. Her mouth finally closed to suck on his wet lips as their noses pressed together, each holding a breath, afraid to exhale and to lose the electricity of the moment. Eric reached down and enveloped her round ass cheeks into his large palms and squeezed tight, causing Nichole to jump from the contact. He seized on the moment and when Nichole lifted her body slightly, Eric pulled her up the rest of the way. He held her up in the air tight against himself so that they were eye level with one another. Her bare feet dangled a few inches off of the floor.

Eric broke their kiss so he could gaze into Nichole’s dark eyes and make his final plea for her to have mercy on him.

His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

“Please.”

Nichole melted at the need flooding through his eyes; the intense blue of his irises drew her further into their magnetic pull. Her will power broke and the spark ignited.

“Yes,” she breathed out low and then recaptured his mouth.

Kissing him feverishly, she wrapped her lean legs around his slim, firm waist and held on for dear life. The very next sensation was like she was flying as Eric moved them back toward the stairs; all while he covered her face, neck, and collarbone with wet, heated kisses. Nichole moved her head back further to allow him full access to wherever he wanted to paint his lips against her skin.

By the time they had reached Eric’s bed, Nichole was breathless and her head was swimming. She was floating away to a world that she was eager to explore. Eric sat her down on the edge of the bed and went to his knees before her as he nestled his body between her legs, and pulled the shorts from under her hips and down her legs, allowing them to come to rest on the carpeted floor below. Continuing to rain kisses upon every visible inch of her was simply no longer enough. He wanted, *needed*, and desired much more. Raising her arms high in the air, Eric made quick work of removing his oversized T-shirt from her upper body. A white lace bra met his gaze and an animalistic growl emerged from his chest as he spotted her dark nipples beckoning to him through the sheer fabric. His mouth immediately went to one of her rounded breasts and latched on, trying to suckle her through the material, while his right hand molded the other one within its needy grasp. His free hand encircled both of her buttocks and slid Nichole further toward the edge of the bed. Nichole’s head went back and she inhaled a lung full of air as the

intoxicating mix of pleasure and pain overtook her when Eric nipped at her swollen buds, first on her right breast then her left.

Eric allowed Nichole to lie back against the bed as he continued to tease both swollen mounds. Just as her head landed on the dark blue bed spread, Eric's mouth released her nipples and his head began a lazy path southward. Without even thinking about what she was doing, Nichole's own hands replaced Eric's mouth and she began to squeeze and mold her own nipples in the absence of his touch. She felt her dark chocolate buds through the silky material and was turned on by the feel of her own hardness.

As Eric made a trail of kisses down Nichole's breasts, then her stomach, he stopped at her bellybutton and tickled it with his long, wet tongue. The sensation of steamy moisture in such a sensitive area made Nichole's lower body buck upward and Eric knew she was ready for the second course.

Using his index fingers to hook under the thin straps of her white bikini-style panties, Eric began to slowly pull at the material as he slid them lower down her hips, over her thighs, and finally under her tiny feet. His fevered lips had moved the entire length of Nichole's lower body and right leg until the small panties had been fully removed from her body. At her heel, Eric lifted one elegant foot and brought the soft ankle to his lips. Moving his tongue slowly over the area, he continued to lift her leg and then moved it to one side. He gave the same treatment to Nichole's left ankle and leg, but instead of stopping there, his tongue began to snake its way up her calf and then to her thigh.

He stopped at her trimmed triangle patch and paused. Eric felt his mouth water in anticipation as the moment he had fantasized about for so long had finally arrived. Nichole – *his* Nichole – was here with him, and right now he was the one she desired. This was his opportunity to claim her, to make her want only him now and forever. One night would never be enough.

Eric looked up from where he knelt before her. The vision of Nichole massaging her own breasts was the most erotic scene that he had ever laid his eyes on. His cock instantly hardened even more, to the point that it hurt with each pulse of his thick blood vessels. While she plucked her nipples and then rubbed each one with the palm of her hand, Nichole's eyes remained closed behind her lenses. (Eric silently scolded himself for forgetting to remove her glasses first so they wouldn't get broken.)

"Nichole," his voice was assertive.

He waited for her to raise her smoldering eyes to him. When she finally regained enough coherence to make eye contact, he spoke again.

"Has anyone ever loved you like this?" Eric nodded his head toward her heated lower mound.

The passion raging within her kept Nichole from speaking above a sultry, hushed tone. Her voice was near muted.

"No, no one."

"Will you let *me* love you this way?" He breathed out a deep baritone and saw her writhe as the vibration tickled her nub.

She nodded.

“No, Nichole. I want to hear you *say it*. I want to know this is what you want, for me to be the first. I want to know that you want me to take you to the peak of ecstasy.”

“I do.”

Nichole’s body wiggled seductively again. The sound of his voice and the carnality of what he was asking, of what he wanted to do to her, sent a wave of lust throughout her body.

“I want to hear the words. Say it, my sweet Nichole. Tell me I’m the one you want.”

Eric held his breath. What if she rejected him? How would he ever be able to cleanse her from his system when being with her felt so right, so perfect?

“Yes, Eric, I want you. I want you to eat my – *my pussy*. I want you to be *the first and the last* lover to do it.”

A wave of relief swept over Eric’s mind. Nichole was his now. He would never let anyone or anything stand between them or tear them apart. It was time to take his queen to the heights of true bliss.

In one swift motion, Eric pushed Nichole’s legs higher and spread them wider so that he would have full access to his prize. He brought his head down closer and inhaled her feminine scent. She was giving off the most intoxicating pheromones and he wanted to memorize every reaction to his touch. Using his large hands, Eric spread Nichole’s labia wide. He was careful not to apply too much pressure since this was her first time having oral sex. The next time they were in this position, Eric was confident that she would want them to be opened to their limits. Once Nichole’s lips were spread to his satisfaction, Eric placed the tip of his long, wide tongue against her pulsing bud and

stroked the hotspot several times. He felt her body jump at the new sensation and, with each arch of her body, he deepened the strokes and quickened the pace. Over and over again, he licked hungrily at her engorged clit and Nichole rolled her body in fits of rapture. When Nichole finally became accustomed to this sensation and her jerking decreased, Eric changed formats. He closed his lips, now wet with her flowing juices, around her clit and sucked at the tender spot. He felt the tiny button pulsing between his lips and then nipped at it very lightly with his teeth.

He no longer needed to hold Nichole's knees apart with his shoulders, because she had positioned one of her hands on each knee and was now pulling her them farther apart so that Eric could move his face further against her heated flesh. A deep moan escaped Nichole's throat as she pulled at her knees even more, widening her gate further than Eric had. When she had pulled her legs back as far as her flexibility would allow, Eric released her clit. Dragging his tongue, soaked with Nichole's personal flavor, further downward, Eric stopped at the entryway into her deep canal.

"I hope you're ready for this, baby," he murmured against her dripping lips.

Then he plunged his tongue deep into her pussy.

His tongue was so wide and hard, Nichole's eyes widened as she felt her opening spreading with each tongue thrust *in and out*. Again and again, Eric licked and drove his wet tongue further and further up and into Nichole's drenched hole. Her knees dropped back and held open on their own as her entire body arched up away from the bed. Eric placed a heavy palm against her exposed belly, while Nichole buried her hands into his silky hair and palmed fists full as he continued his hungry assault on her pussy.

"O...o...Eric! That feels ssooo good! I – I think I'm going to cum!"

As Eric continued to vigorously tongue fuck her, Nichole's stomach knotted up and began to spasm. She had only experienced one orgasm in her life, with a high school boyfriend, and it was nowhere near as powerful as the one threatening to explode through her core at this very moment.

“All mine.”

Eric made his primal declaration while he slurped at her hole.

Nichole felt one final, deep thrust into her opening and then there was a sensation between floating away and an intense deep tissue massage as her hole clenched tight around Eric's tongue. She was overcome by the power of her release as it soaked all over Eric's mouth as. Nichole gripped his hair hard. The surge racked through her body several more times, with equally powerful intensity each time around. Finally, the pulsating subsided and a new sensation replaced the first one.

At some point, she must have released his hair, but Nichole honestly couldn't recall when that had happened. The very next feeling was of Eric's strong hands moving her further back onto the mattress and then his lean, ripped body climbing up over her. Her hands immediately went to his hardened abdomen and then stroked the outline of each muscle there.

“I want you to cum, too.”

She looked up at him with soft, doe eyes and Eric wanted to cry because of the sudden welling of happiness he felt at her sentiment.

“I will, baby. I needed to take care of you first.”

He stroked the side of her face and then kissed her lips. For the first time in her life, Nichole tasted her own juices and the flavor was exhilarating. With quick fingers,

she undid the button and zipper of Eric's pants. Using the heel of her feet, Nichole forced the jean material along with his briefs over his hips. Once this task was completed, she wrapped her legs around Eric's waist once more and then tightened them, forcing him to snuggle down further against her stomach. Nichole felt his oversized and engorged cock against her still pulsing clit. She licked at her fingertips and used her forefinger and thumb to roll his nipples.

"Cum for me, Eric, please. *Cum inside me.* I want you to. I want this. I do."

Her soft moans were like music to his ears. Now that Nichole had been taken to her own personal paradise, she wanted the same for him. No wonder he was falling in love with this woman. Nichole was perfect. This whole experience was almost like a dream, a dream Eric hoped would not end with the sunrise.

"Anything to make you happy, Nichole."

Eric used one hand to grab his swollen cock head and rubbed Nichole's wet bud. When he was satisfied that he had covered the tip of his manhood with her juices, he dragged it toward her warm entrance. As he moved the rounded mushroom, Eric took his time, allowing himself to feel her silky flow against his skin. He paused at her opening and allowed only the very tip to slide into her hot center. Eric's eyes rolled back as the feel of her heat overtook his senses.

Without opening his eyes, he spoke in a commanding tone.

"Hold on to me, Nickie."

With no choice other than wanting to obey his words, Nichole locked her arms around Eric's neck. Though his eyes remained closed, hers were wide open and watching as his face transformed into a primal longing. While she focused on his features

tightening, the feel of his slick bulbous head at her opening stirred up ancient yearnings of her own.

“Nichole, tonight, tomorrow, forever, you will always be mine.”

When she didn’t respond, Eric’s eyes snapped open and he caught her in a hungry stare.

“Forever.”

Too captivated to speak, Nichole nodded once.

“I need you to hear you promise, Nichole. *Stay with me forever*,” he whispered down to her. “Say it.”

“Why me?”

Nichole had not realized she had spoken the words until they had already left her mind and then filtered through her lips. But she needed to know why this gorgeous man had chosen her, a plain Jane, over all of the dozens of model types he had encountered over the years.

“Because you’re perfect. You’re my sweet Nichole and you’re perfect for me. I need you in my life. You’re the one I’ve been waiting for.”

He captured her mouth once more and sucked at her bottom lips until it plumped.

“Promise me, Nichole. Stay with me.”

“I promise,” her voice was low and silky as she confessed her commitment to him, “You and I, together. Forever. *Now fuck me.*”

Eric didn’t hesitate any longer.

The promise had been made and this was the final key to claiming Nichole as his queen for life. He pushed into her dripping hot channel with one long thrust. His

extended eight and half inches filled Nichole up to the tip of her womb. His wide girth, nearly four inches, stretched her opening to its very limits. The tingling sensation of his cock spreading her wide open was dizzying and Nichole nearly fell limp in his arms. The feel of his full weight inside her was nearly overwhelming. Eric began to heave and thrust upward, and with each new stroke Nichole's body came to life and started to hum with a new energy she had never before experienced. The more his thick throbbing cock and pulsing veins pushed at her walls, the higher Nichole ascended.

“O, Nichole. You're ssooo *tight*. O...*I love it!*”

As her channel became accustomed to his large size, Nichole moved her hips upward and began to meet him thrust for thrust.

“O...that's right, baby. *Give it to me!*”

Eric spoke the mantra over and over again in grunts against Nichole's hair, now damp with perspiration.

The harder Eric pounded into her and the deeper he pushed, the more Nichole bucked her hips and received him further and further into her center.

“O...o....*Nickie*. Baby, I can't...hold it...anymore. *Oooo...shhiitt!*”

Once again, the feeling of floating away washed over her. Somewhere from in the distance, Nichole heard Eric cry out a release as his last thrust upward sent him balls deep inside of her and a burst of warmth exploded against the entrance to her womb. The feel of being saturated with his juices caused Nichole's clit to burst once more. Racked with exhaustion, her body collapsed against the bed below.

As Nichole felt herself drifting off to a soothing sleep, Eric relaxed his body down against hers, and placed one last tender kiss on her lips. Her last thought, before she went

into a dream she would not be able to recall later, was that she had forgotten to take off her glasses. Nichole smiled to herself as remembered there was no time to do anything but give in to Eric completely, the way she had always wanted to.

≈ Chapter 13 ≈

When his eyes opened, Eric scanned the darkened room.

The sound of his mobile phone vibrating against the nightstand had awakened him from one of the most peaceful slumbers he had had in months. The tickling sensation across his chin and upper chest alerted him that he was not alone in the bed. To his relief, everything that had just transpired had not been merely a sensual dream on his part. Nichole was there with him, sharing his bed, held under his tight embrace. Soft snores escaped her nose while her head rested on his naked chest. Eric wondered if it was only imagination when his name escaped her parted lips.

Though he was reluctant to move one inch away from his ladylove, the incessant buzzing of the phone had to be dealt with. Eric didn't want Nichole to have be disturbed from her sleep.

While keeping his left hand secured around Nichole's bare shoulder, Eric turned his body partially to one side and used his free hand to grab the phone. He squeezed the button along the side of the slim mobile device and looked at the illuminated screen, which read:

Call from PW. Slide to Answer.

Eric used his thumb to rub across the screen and then raised the phone to his ear.

"What's up?"

"Hey, bro. Were you asleep?" Pierce's strong voice questioned him suspiciously through the phone's receiver.

“Yeah, kind of,” Eric answered as he turned his face further to one side, trying to do his best to keep his voice low.

He felt Nichole shift and then lay still against him.

“That’s new. You’re usually the one who’s up before the sun. Hm, I wondered if this has anything to do with your new lady friend.”

Pierce giggled at his own innuendo but Eric remained silent.

He glanced up at the oversized window to his right and could just make out hints of light purple and dark pink, a sure sign that the sun would be making its way over the horizon in about an hour or so.

Pierce was right, Eric never slept in this late, not even on the weekend. He was always busy trying to work his caseload, which seemed to take up the majority of his time and attention. Until only recently, he had only scheduled enough free time to make a twice-weekly stop at the local gym and to play his video games. These were the only proven methods to coax his mind into any state of rest. Now that Nichole would be in his life on a more regular basis, Eric was willing to make as much time as needed to keep their budding relationship moving forward on to bigger and better ventures. For no other woman had he ever considered making such a change to his lifestyle.

“Pierce, unless you had something important to tell me *and fast*, I’m going to hang up.”

Eric studied the outline of Nichole’s face in the dim light. Though he loved his younger blood brother with all of his heart, the man was an expert at trying Eric’s patience.

“Well, I guess I have my answer about what you were up to last night,” Pierce said as he giggled into the phone again.

“Pierce!” Eric yelled in a muted tone.

“Okay, okay, I was only kidding around. Anyway, I think you need to come down to the station. I know you are, uh – *busy* – but,” he cleared his throat, “you really need to see what I found when I ran those background checks you asked me to.”

Eric pulled the phone away from his ear and hit the side button once more. The screen immediately lit up again, after having timed out during the call, and he saw that it was close to 7 AM.

“Alright, give me thirty minutes. I need to get dressed. I’ll be over there as soon as I can.”

“Cool. See you then.”

The phone disconnected and Eric placed it back onto the table.

He wrapped Nichole in a tight embrace and rubbed his cheek against her feather soft dark hair. If he could have stopped time, Eric would have lived in this moment forever. Yet, he knew that the key to getting Nichole out of this whole mess was waiting for him a few blocks away at the Timber Falls Police Department. He had to leave, but it would not be easy to let her go, not now, not ever.

After a few more minutes of feeling her soft breath warm the center of his exposed chest, Eric began to slowly slide toward the edge of the bed. As he unfolded his arms from Nichole’s nude body, he gently placed her sleeping form against the sheets and pillows. Even after finally making it to a standing position, Eric stood there, completely naked, watching Nichole embrace the large pillow as if she believed it to be

Eric's body. It took every piece of strength in his willpower not to climb back into the bed and selfishly gather her up against him again and shut out the problems of the world. He wanted to *love* her again – *and soon*. Unable to resist one last sentiment, Eric leaned down and brushed his lips lightly across her brow while he stroked her hair against the pillow.

“Sleep well, my sweet Nichole.”

Eric hovered one moment longer, and then raised himself up and headed toward the bathroom to shower and dress.

After showering and pulling one of his black pressed suits and matching dress shoes from his walk-in closet, Eric dressed in the darkened upstairs of his loft and then made his way a few blocks over to where his brother awaited his arrival.

He walked through the entryway of the Detectives Division and spotted Pierce at his desk in the rear of the rectangular shaped space. About a dozen flat top desks lined either side of the room, creating a center aisle. Each desk housed a flat screen monitor with CPU and keyboard, standard multifunction phone, a gold-plated nametag for the detective who was assigned to the desk, and whatever other personal or business items that officer used the space for.

Pierce's desk was littered with papers strewn everywhere and no semblance of order to his multicolor paperwork collage. Other than the computer, phone, and case files, there was only one other item on Pierce's desk. It was a photo taken more than

fifteen years ago of Pierce, his aunt and legal guardian, who was Eric's mom, and their childhood friend Marcus and his mother at a neighborhood picnic. It was identical to the one that Eric kept at his bedside, and the one possession of true value that either man had ever owned.

As soon as the younger man spotted Eric, Pierce leaned back into his pleather rolling desk chair, placed his feet up on his desk and put his hands behind his head. A sly, knowing smile snaked its way across Pierce's handsomely tanned face. His green eyes thinned out and there was a hint of mischief behind them.

Pierce spoke when Eric was close enough to hear him loud and clear.

"Well, well, look who decided to crawl out of bed"

Eric merely grunted.

"You had something to show me or what?"

He purposefully avoided giving in to Pierce's intended meaning behind the comment.

"If that girl was able to keep you down and out this long, she must have a really, *really* good –" Pierce paused and quickly rethought his words as he saw the fire gathering in his big brother's cold blue eyes, "*personality.*"

He grinned again, but kept silent and awaited Eric's response.

Eric, who had been slightly hunched, still trying to shake off the weakness Nichole had placed in his knees from their passionate encounter last night, stood upright to his full six foot three inch height and speared Pierce with his eyes.

“This is the last time I’m going to say this. *She* has a name. *Nichole*. And you’d better start using it and treating her with lots of respect. I promise you, I will kick your ass, *if need be*, for you to behave when addressing her or speaking about her. *Got it?*”

“Yes, sir. Whatever you say.”

Pierce grinned.

A small piece of him was happy that Eric had finally found something, or rather *someone*, other than work and career, to bring this much life and energy out of him. He wondered if he would ever meet such a person.

A quick vision of Nivea crossed Pierce’s mind. Her full cheeks and bright eyes lit up his thoughts.

After some serious persuasion on his part, probably the hardest he had ever had to work to convince a lady to hang out with him, Pierce was able to get Nivea to divert and delay their trip back to her home. For the time being, he would keep the details of their detour to Manhattan away from Eric, and especially from her older and overprotective sister, Nichole.

He pushed the memory away and brought himself back into the present.

There would be plenty of time in the near future to travel down that road. Whether Nivea was ready for him or not, he was coming to find her again.

“Good. So what did you find out? Does it help put any answers on the table?”

“First things first. I guess since you probably cut straight over here, you haven’t had time to check the news or any of your phone alerts. Am I right?”

Pierce sat up. He interlaced his fingers and laid them on the desk.

“No, I haven’t,” Eric replied as he reached into the breast pocket of his suit and pulled out his phone.

He tapped the face and saw that the miniature newspaper icon at the bottom left of the screen had the number three placed over the image, indicating there were three news updates waiting for him to review. He had programmed the phone to scan the local and national papers and television shows for any articles or other media pertaining to any of his current cases. Eric touched the icon with his wide thumb and scrolled through the messages. The last one almost made his heart stop.

“That’s right. The Bristle-King case is officially a homicide. Mrs. King’s brain started to hemorrhage again early this morning, close to about 1 AM. The doctor’s couldn’t stop the bleeding and she ended up have a severe seizure. First she went brain dead and then her heart stopped. Her husband had her medical records updated to a DNR – *Do Not Resuscitate*.”

“Shit.”

Eric murmured to himself as he read the news article of today’s edition of *The Journal*. Every sentence Pierce had said was confirmed by the details printed on the screen.

“You know what this means.”

“Yeah, I do. Whoever has been trying to get at Nichole is probably shitting himself right now. If they think she is the key to really solving this case, they’re going to get desperate and redouble their efforts.”

“Exactly.”

The urgency of the situation caused Eric's temples to pulse. His palms were moist as he placed the phone back into his jacket pocket. He retraced his movements from before he had left the loft until now and confirmed that he had bolted the door. The apartment was wired with a state of the art alarm system with an electronic sensor built inside the heavy material of the door, which automatically armed when the deadbolt was turned, so he knew no one would be getting inside without using the key. Nichole would have to unbolt the door and then buzz in everyone except him. Both actions had to be completed to keep the silent alarm from sounding. Eric decided to wait until after he had finished talking with Pierce before he called her and gave her the update. When he had left, she was still asleep. He hoped she would be awake by then. Nichole's life might be getting even more complicated over the next few hours or days so Eric wanted her to get as much rest as possible while she still was able to do so.

"We need to bring this all together – *now*. Tell me what you found. Give me the abbreviated version. I need quick facts, and less humor, please."

"No problem. This is work, so I'm strictly business from this point on."

Eric nodded and waited for Pierce to continue.

"As you probably already guessed, your guy Ramsey is squeaky clean. No criminal record as an adult or as a juvenile. Attended upscale private schools, graduated undergrad and law school summa cum-laude. Wife recently deceased. One child, a daughter named Sheri Marie Ramsey."

"No surprises there."

"No, not exactly true. I said *he* was clean, I never said anything about his family. Apparently, Ramsey's father, Gregory T. Ramsey Senior, was a high-ranking judge on

the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals. Police records and old newspaper articles show him to be a tyrant with a bad temper, one he seemed to bring home on more than one occasion. Ramsey's mother, Theresa, had him arrested several times for domestic spousal abuse, though all of the charges were later dropped after she would always recant her story."

"So Ramsey witnessed domestic violence as a child."

"Yes, but he has never been implicated in a case of his own, either as the victim or the aggressor."

"Okay. Where is this leading to?"

"I'm getting there, Big Bro. If her birth records hadn't confirmed it, you would never have guessed that Sheri Ramsey was really Gregory's daughter. Their lives went in two completely different directions. She dropped out of high school but I assume she must have earned a GED at some point because you can't work for the municipality without having at least one of those. Never went to college. A juvenile record a mile long. You name it, she's done it. Possession of an illegal substance, possession with the intent to distribute, soliciting an undercover officer for sexual favors. As an adult, aggravated assault, aggravated battery, prostitution. It just goes on that way until about three years ago. Her criminal record stopped and she showed up at the Timber Falls PD."

Before making his next comment, Pierce paused to scratch the top of his head and then smooth his close cropped blond hair.

"Seems like the bad seed skipped at least one generation before it was planted again."

"What do you mean Sheri *showed up* at the police department?"

“As in, there’s no record of her actually being hired. No application, no interview notes, *nothing*. It’s like she came in to start a random shift and her name was added to the payroll. Maybe her daddy talked to someone who owed him a favor and that’s how she got that spot. That’s the only explanation I can think of for how someone with a sheet as long as hers is working at the police station with secured files.”

Eric’s mind went back to something Nichole had mentioned last night. She said she thought it was odd that Sheri had been there the night of Rondell Holmes' arrest. He wondered what she meant by *odd*. Eric went over Nichole’s sentence again and again, contemplating her meaning.

“Next is Ronald Phillip King, who came up almost as clean as Ramsey. He had one prior adult conviction last year, solicitation of an undercover officer for sexual favors. It was the first and last on an otherwise spotless record for the telecommunication king. He did ninety days community service.”

Pierce fumbled through the files and papers randomly strewn across his desk and pulled out a black and white glossy photo. He handed the picture to Eric.

“Take a look at this.”

The photo had been snapped from a high angle and showed a man in a sitting position. There appeared to be another arm coming from the direction directly next to him and draped over the man’s right arm. After a moment of studying the image of a man’s upper torso and head intensely, Eric recognized the face in the picture.

“This is a photo of Ronald King. So what? I already know what he looks like.”

He tried to hand the photo back over to Pierce, who waved it away.

“Yes, it’s Mr. King, but what else to do you see in the photo. What do you see *on* the photo?”

Eric scanned the picture again. Then he spotted what Pierce was referring to. At the top center of the picture were the words *TF Traffic Camera 4*. It was a red light picture and the camera had captured a blurred image of Ronald King through a windshield as his car went through a red traffic control light at an intersection.

“Take a look at the time stamp at the bottom.”

“Nineteen hundred and forty five hours, ten twelve. 7:45 in the evening on October 12th.”

Eric looked up at Pierce.

“Is this right?”

“All of those camera’s are set to synchronize with GMT. There were no anomalies reported in the city’s computer network on that night. It’s absolutely correct. Wait, there’s more to the story behind that snapshot. Do you know what intersection that camera covers?”

“No, which one?”

“Spruce and Merrimack.”

“That’s – what – a half mile or less away from his house?”

Pierce nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, give or take a few feet.”

“This means that Ronald King was in town on the night his house was reportedly invaded and his wife beaten to within an inch of her life. He was not only here in Timber Falls, but right around the corner from the location of the crime.”

Eric sat on the edge of Pierce's desk as his trained mind automatically started to pull the facts together.

"His official statement said he was away on business that whole week and that his flight didn't land at Newark International until 7:45 PM and he didn't get in the door of his residence until 9 PM when he found Mrs. King unconscious on the floor and the house ransacked."

"It's true, that's what he said when his statement was recorded. I read the entire report copied into the file you gave me."

"We have documented proof that Ronald King lied about where he was and when and here's the proof. Were you able to get a copy of Monica King's initial medical examination from the emergency room like I asked?"

"I did."

Pierce was confident that he already knew what Eric's next question would be, because it was the same question he had asked himself as he was finally able to place the puzzle pieces together. He had the answer waiting and ready.

"What time did the physician on duty estimate she had sustained her injuries?"

"According to the Dr. Bryce Daniels, head surgeon on duty and Mrs. King's attending physician from the time she entered the trauma unit up until when she was admitted to critical care, she was the victim of repeated blunt trauma to the cerebrum between the hours of eight and nine o'clock that same evening."

"Son of a bitch."

"You think we have enough to arrest him?"

“Maybe. But this is only one piece of circumstantial evidence. He could easily say he forgot the exact time he left the airport and arrived home because he was in shock over what happened to his wife and having to find her that way. We would probably need to check the flight logs for that date and time to confirm which arrival Mr. King was actually on.”

“True. You’re the lawyer so that makes sense. What now?”

“About how tall do you think Ronald King is? About how much does he weigh?”

“I’m guessing maybe five foot eleven, one hundred sixty pounds.” Pierce shrugged his shoulders as he answered. “Why?”

“Because that’s tall enough to lift Nichole and drag her into an alleyway. It’s also heavy enough to kick in that old door to her apartment. But, there’s something still bothering me.”

Eric scratched his forehead and then combed his fingers through his thick dark brown waves.

“What’s on your mind?”

“May I see that copy of Mrs. King’s medical examination?”

“Sure, right over here.”

Unbeknownst to any casual onlooker, the mess of papers must have had some type of order, because Pierce’s hand landed directly on the exact pages Eric needed. On the second page of the stapled report was a piece of lined hospital paper, complete with a human diagram with dark spots shaded over several areas to indicate the location of the injured areas on Monica Bristle King’s battered body. There were scribbled notes along

the sides to indicate her condition upon entering the emergency ward, while others listed the diagnosis of her condition and possible prognosis.

Eric read over the report before he spoke. He was not considered an expert in his field for no reason. He had familiarized himself years ago, earlier in his career, with the scribble scratch writing that was otherwise known as a physician's penmanship. Such a talent came in handy during times such as these.

"This says that she had '*contusions to the head, neck, and chest area, probably from a heavy metallic object, such as a heavy paperweight or the like*'. It also says she was struck at an angle perpendicular to her head, not at an acute angle."

"Okay, so what does that mean? In English this time, please."

"That means, whoever beat Mrs. King in the head was roughly her height and not much taller or shorter than that. That eliminates Ronald King as the primary attacker. He's too tall. Someone else had to be in the house with them."

Eric picked up the black and white photo that he placed on the desk a moment ago. He studied the image again, taking a second and longer look at the slender disembodied arm next to Ronald King. The identity of the passenger in the car with him was now of the utmost importance. All of the pieces to this mystery had fallen in place.

Time was running out, he and Pierce needed to move on this fast as. But Eric was adamant that his first priority was to check on Nichole. He needed to know that she was safe and secure in his home, possibly soon to become *their* home, if she would be willing to take that chance on him. He dropped the photo down on the desk again, and then reached for his phone.

"What are you doing?"

“I need to call Nichole and make sure everything is okay at my loft. I left her a note not to leave or do anything until she heard from me. I need to let her know what’s going on.”

“What do you want me to do? We need to decide our next move and fast. King isn’t considered a suspect in this case, only a witness. He’s not under any travel restrictions. When he hears that his wife is dead, he might panic and leave town. And it won’t even look suspicious, only how a grieving husband who needs time to heal outside of the public eye would react. He may never come back and Holmes goes to jail, probably for the rest of his natural life.”

“Agreed. Get some of your guys together. After I check on Nichole, I’m going to call a judge that I am on pretty good terms with. I think I can convince him to issue a warrant for King’s arrest.”

Eric eyed the photo once more before he dialed Nichole’s mobile number.

“Actually, I think we may need two warrants.”

The phone rang several times, but there was no answer on the receiving end.

≈ Chapter 14 ≈

Streaks of sunlight rising over the uptown city buildings filtered in through the loft's bedroom window and coaxed Nichole into finally opening her eyes.

Nichole awakened from her deep slumber to find herself alone in the king sized mattress, clutching an overstuffed pillow she had thought was her Eric's body. She should have known by the plush feel of the form that it was not the hard torso of her new lover, the only lover she now desired.

There was a moment when her heart raced and her thoughts turned to panic as the implications of what the two had shared together a few hours ago flooded over her mind. Had she really had her first one night stand? The fact that Eric had abandoned her in the pre-dawn hours felt heavy in Nichole's heart. She went back over anything he might have said or done before sheer exhaustion from their lovemaking caused sleep to overtake her. Had he mentioned needing to leave early the next morning? Even worse, had he told her to make sure she was gone before he returned home?

All these possibilities and dozens of other doubts and feelings of insecurity buzzed in Nichole's head. When she realized that she was completely naked under the heavy white cotton sheet, her feelings of regret doubled in intensity. How would she ever be able to face her father knowing what she had done in the throws of passion? Surely she was an adult woman, but her father's critical eye and high expectations for his girls could easily make her feel like a small child craving his approval. Eric being of Caucasian descent did not bother Nichole; however, her father would not feel the same.

That was a bridge she would have to cross if and when it was necessary. Right now, the sudden urge to remove herself from this bed and get dressed was her main focus.

As Nichole reached over to the bed stand to search out her lenses – Eric must have slipped him off while she slept – her hand made contact with a smooth surface with a slim rectangular bottom half. Looking over and then using her other arm to click on the table lamp for more light, she saw what the mysterious object was and also spied something even more important. Next to her thin lenses and a stainless steel spoon with a blue handle was a small container of yogurt with a note folded beneath where the cup sat on the table.

Eric. Nichole spoke his name in her mind and her lips formed a satisfied smile.

After placing her glasses over her eyes, Nichole carefully unfolded the note, still unsure of what awaited her on the page. As she read the words, all of her previous fears and doubts slipped away. Eric's tender words soothed her aching and anxious heart.

Sweet Nichole. It was hard for me to leave your side this morning. I could have watched you sleep forever, never wanting to move an inch away from you. I hope by now you know how much I care for you. I hid so many of my feelings from you for too long, but not anymore. I am all yours now and I hope you will accept me as I am because I have already chosen you. I have to meet Pierce soon. Please stay in my apartment until I call you. I want you to be safe until I return. I miss you already. Eric.

Until this moment, Nichole had never considered herself as being overly sentimental. Love had only been an idea and not a possibility that would ever be part of her future. No one man had ever drawn out her raw emotions, touched her heart, or swept over her soul the way Eric Raven had. Perhaps love, *true love*, was indeed a treasure she could hope for.

After reading his words professing himself to her, Nichole wondered how she had ever kept her own attraction to him at bay for so long. Somewhere, deep inside herself, Nichole had always known that the connection between she and Eric was there, waiting for one of them to act on what each already knew with certainty was a spark destined to one day fully ignite. It was as strong as a heartbeat and as natural as a breath.

After reading over the letter once more, Nichole pushed back among the soft pillows and replayed her night with Eric over in her mind, from sensual beginning to explosive end.

It took some doing but she was finally able to convince herself to leave the bed and head for the shower. Once, while she was under the warm spray, she thought she heard a familiar ringing coming from the bedroom. By the time she had grabbed a towel, the noise had ceased.

Returning to the soothing trickling of the water pouring over her body, Nichole massaged her skin and enjoyed the feel of her own silkiness. She was relatively unfamiliar with the act of self-pleasure but was easily becoming accustomed to the tantalizing experience. Her only wish was for Eric to be there to share in the exploration of rounded breasts and slim waistline, down to her moist center. Although the shower

left her physical body clean, her carnal self sought out another release at Eric's doing. Nichole was left wondering when her lover – *her love* – would return.

After drying off and having no choice but to put on her work clothes from yesterday, Nichole searched out her cell phone. Her ring tone was actually the opening melody of a song by an alternative rock group whose music she quite enjoyed. It was easily distinguishable from a regular phone ringing, and it was the sound she had heard while in the shower.

Flipping the phone open, she saw the icons indicating that she had one missed call, one voicemail, and also one new text message. Nichole wasn't surprised that the call had been from Eric, in fact, she was quite pleased to see his name on her screen and a little disappointed that she had missed him. Not wanting to wait a moment longer, Nichole anxiously hit the number one on the key pad and placed the phone to her ear and awaited the sound of Eric's voice. His message was short and to the point, not what she had been expecting or anticipating at all. Eric said he was calling to check on her and to call him right away whenever she heard the message.

Shrugging her shoulders at his brevity, Nichole hit the end button and then went into her phone's text message folder. This time around she truly was surprised. Not only had Eric left a voicemail, he had also sent her a text as well, equally as brief.

The message read:

where r u?

It was time-stamped from five minutes ago and, without thinking, Nichole hit the reply button and typed back a reply.

im still at ur place. u said not to leave. where r u?

There was a delay and then her message indicator chimed.

stay there. im coming now. left my key.

Nichole hesitated. Text messages were usually so impersonal and she wondered why Eric hadn't just waited for her to return his call. Her intuition prompted her to want to dial Eric's number yet she quickly dismissed the thought. He would be arriving in a few minutes, so there was really no need to call back. She plopped the phone back onto the bed and headed back to the bathroom to seek out a comb and brush to use for styling her wet hair while she awaited Eric's return.

After twenty minutes, the doorbell sounded and Nichole descended the steps and walked the distance to the door. As she moved the bolt backward to undo the lock and turn the knob, two thoughts passed through her mind that she had not previously considered. Eric had went to see Pierce, so he must have driven his car – *how was it that he had left his key?* An easy answer was that he kept them on separate key rings, it wasn't a common practice but it was possible. As her hand moved away from the bolt and down to turn the knob, the second revelation finally prompted her into alert mode, but it was already too late to stop the motion. The type of bolt on this door could only be locked in one of two ways – by hand from the *inside* or, once *outside*, a key was required to seal the exit. If Eric had left his keys, how had he locked the door from the outside?

The instant the logic came to her, the loft door was forced back and a searing pain shot through her abdomen. Nichole doubled over as she was struck in the midsection. Moving backward, trying to escape the pain and regain the breath that had been knocked out of her, she looked up to see a slender form with long dark red hair and pale skin rushing toward her. Nichole's first reaction was to turn and run back toward the stairs, only then would she be able to call for help on her cell phone, since she wasn't sure where and if Eric had a landline down here. However, the force of the blow made her body slow to react and even slower to move on demand. A few half steps backward were all she could manage before she felt a strong hand grip her upper arms.

The female yelled to her companion who held Nichole upright.

"Grab her. *Hold her, Ron!*"

"Do you see her phone? *Do you see it?!*" The male countered.

"No, it must not be down here."

"Okay, okay, good. What do we do now?...Sheri...*Sheri*...I said *what do we do now?*"

The man continued to hold Nichole under a vice grip despite the fact that she was too weak to struggle against him. She thought she had heard him call the woman *Sheri* but that couldn't be right, could it? Why would she be doing this?

"I heard you, you big *jerk-off*."

Sheri's voice trailed off somewhat, as though she were moving further away and behind where Nichole was being held.

Nichole heard the heavy breaths of the man holding her. He was in a heavy state of panic as his breathing turned to near wheezing. Nichole also smelled a familiar and pungent scent cross her nose. Even in her weakened state, she recognized the distinct odor of her attacker and now recognized the heavy perfume of his female companion. It had to have been Ronald King who attacked her in the thru street. It was understandable that she would not know Ronald's scent since she had never met the man in person, yet Nichole was clueless as to why she didn't pick-up on the garish aroma of Sheri Ramsey as the second scent she recalled clinging to the man's skin during that terrible nightmare.

"Just let me think for a minute, *okay?*"

"*Think?* We don't have time for all that. That lawyer could come back any minute. We need to do something with her. She knows too much."

Sheri's form suddenly reappeared to Nichole's left and purred seductively into her ear.

"It's really a shame that it has to be this way, pretty Nichole. I kind of liked you. You're so *cute*."

"Stop fucking around, we need to take of this mess fast. Her man knows. Raven is smart. If she told him what she saw or whatever she overhead that night we were in the room with your father, he'll figure it out. Somehow, he'll figure out. I can't go to jail – *I just can't!* That place is shit. This is all your fault so *tell me what to do!*"

Sheri's voice abandoned all forms of seduction. She spit her words at Ronald King like the viper she truly was underneath her beautiful mask.

“You weak piece of shit! Monica was always the one who had all the balls – never you.”

“Well Monica isn’t here right now, *is she*, sweetheart? *You* bashed her brains in, or have you forgotten who started all this? *You killed her!* Your daddy can’t save you from this one. ”

“You shut your fucking mouth! I loved her! I loved her!”

The sounds of heavy slaps filled the air as Sheri’s mental state continued to deteriorate.

“Stop hitting me, you whore!”

While the two tossed angry and violent words at one another, Ronald had to loosen his grip on Nichole to fight off Sheri’s barrage of assaults, both verbal and physical. Nichole listened to each berate the other regarding the broken sexual triangle between Sheri, Ronald, and Monica. Now witnessing Sheri’s lucid thoughts and uncontrollable fits of rage, and thinking back to her overt sexual persona, Nichole figured this could be another episode similar to the melt down that happened at the Bristle-King residence and culminated to Monica’s brutal attack. Having experienced one of Sheri’s fierce blows for herself, Nichole was convinced that the petite woman was more than capable of the deadly strikes that had placed Mrs. King under a medically induced coma. Perhaps one or both of the Kings had wanted to end *their* affair with Sheri. It could have been that Sheri refused to leave the home without giving a good fight first, resulting in a battered wife in the hospital and a cuckolded husband doing whatever he thought he needed to do to save his own skin.

Slumped to the floor and trying to regain the air back into her lungs, Nichole watched the pair as Ronald continued to duck and attempt to hold back Sheri's vicious pawing. From the corner of her eye, Nichole hurriedly searched the kitchen to her right for anything she could use against them should their attack turn back on her. A kitchen knife holder caught her attention. Nichole did not want to take anyone's life and wished that she had the time to retrieve her father's stun gun, but she had no idea where her purse was and knew she would have to defend her own life with whatever was available. This would be the third time, one or both of the invaders had violated her personal safety, and Nichole had had enough. There was no telling when Eric would return, or if he would return in time. The best case scenario was Ronald and Sheri fleeing the premises before he arrived and Nichole refused to live another day waiting for them to return to harass her any further. One way or another, this torment ended here.

Nichole sent up a silent prayer and then struggled over toward the kitchen. Her movement must have caught Sheri and Ronald's attention. Their bickering stopped and the sound of two pairs of feet thudding across the carpeted floor sounded in Nichole's ears. Her movements felt as if she were progressing in slow motion, while the pair seemed to be moving with lightning quick speed.

As her hands finally made it to the marble countertop, Nichole felt the looming presence of Ronald only inches behind where she now stood. At that very moment, before his hand made contact with her hair and her hand made contact with one of the knives in the set, there was a sound like an explosion of thunder. Everyone in the room – Nichole, Ronald, and Sheri – froze mid-motion and looked toward the source of the sound.

The nearly superhuman strength and speed of Eric Raven had pummeled the heavy loft door.

In seconds, he moved to his left and across the stretch of space between him and the kitchen. Using his heavy left elbow, Eric jabbed into Ronald's side and the force of the blow dug deep into the flesh there. There was the sound of bones cracking as one of Ronald's ribs snapped and as his nose shattered when Eric used the heel of his right hand to give a powerful uppercut to his opponent's face. Blood began to leak from Ronald's fractured face, and he hit the tiled floor hard, folding himself into the fetal position as he went into shock from the attack.

When Nichole looked over, she saw that Pierce had easily subdued Sheri by the arms. Though she struggled roughly against him grip, her twists and turns under his mighty strength were useless. Eventually, other uniformed officers placed handcuffs around her thin wrists.

The very next sensation Nichole remembered feeling was a soothingly cool hand on her flushed face.

As her gaze moved around, she saw two heart-stopping blue sapphire eyes.

Eric brushed the loosened hair from her face and wiped away tears she had not realized had streamed down her cheeks.

"Eric – *thank you.*" Nichole finally managed to croak out the words.

Her body remained frozen against the counter and she was terrified to move, unsure of what would happen next. Everything was now a blur through her tear soaked eyes. Adrenaline continued to rush through her veins.

Afraid that any more stress would be Nichole's mental undoing, Eric used hushed tones when addressing her.

"Nichole, sweetheart. Baby, come to me, *please*."

Nichole's body arched forward as she attempted to meet him halfway, but she made little progression. When Eric saw that she was unable to complete the task, his large body stepped closer and over a prone Ronald King. He bent and then looped one arm under her trembling legs and the other around her back. With the greatest of care, Eric swept Nichole into his arms and cradled her close to his body. Her arms instinctively went around his strong neck as she held on to him for support, for comfort, *for love*.

Eric placed his chin against her hair while Nichole's face hugged his chest.

"Nichole – *Nickie*. I'm here now. It's all over. Believe me when I say I won't ever let anyone hurt you. I promise. I'll always take care of you, my love."

"I believe you, Eric," she whispered. "Hold me tighter, please don't let go."

"Never, my sweet Nichole. Never."

She chanced a look into his face, and then Nichole Edwards buried herself deeper into his chest. As she spoke and confessed her true feelings for Eric Raven, she hoped

that he could sense her spirit calling out to his. They would be forever connected from this moment on.

“I want to stay with you forever. I need you. *I think I love you.*”

Eric’s heart swelled and the tiniest of tears trailed down one side of his face. He had finally found his kindred mate, the woman he would live for and love for the remainder of his years on this earth.

“I love you, too, Nichole. *Always.*”

≈ Epilogue ≈

...*Three Weeks Later*...

“Okay, where did you say you wanted this to go this time?”

Eric grunted as he spoke.

The beige chaise sofa was much heavier than it appeared. Even with his mighty strength, Eric was finding it difficult to continue lugging it from one end of the living room to the next while Nichole decided on the perfect angle for the piece of furniture.

“Hm, another inch to the left, please.”

Nichole watched him from her station next to a stack of bags and boxes from a nearby home decorating store.

After he pushed the item over the required distance, Eric looked over to Nichole for approval. There was a faint, pleading smile on his lips.

“Maybe back over to the right?”

“Oh, come on, Nichole,” Eric sighed.

Never had he imagined having a woman living with him would be this *interesting* and exciting. Then, Eric realized he wouldn’t have it any other way or with any other woman. As Nichole continued to add her personal touch, *their* loft was finally starting to feel like a home, after having been so stark empty for too long.

After seeing the exasperated look on her lover's face and watching him slump in a defeated posture beside the couch, Nichole burst into laughter.

"Quit crying, you big baby!"

Eric laid his head back against the chaise and closed his eyes. A wide grin spread over his mouth.

"Okay, on one condition."

"What would that be, Mr. Raven?" Nichole replied with a coy smile of her own.

"I need some good lovin' first."

"Some good *what*?"

Nichole laughed hard again.

"Come over here," Eric teased as he reached up and pulled Nichole down onto his lap.

Once seated, she snuggled up under his chin and he kissed her nose.

"Eric, I can't believe this ordeal is all finally over. It feels so wonderful to be free of all that drama."

Eric looked down at his sweet Nichole, so perfect in his arms.

"I know how you feel. I finally feel like we can get started with our lives, *together*."

"Yeah, *together*."

The pair basked in the comfort and silence of one another's embrace, and then Eric spoke again.

"I received a letter from Rondell's mom yesterday."

Nichole's curiosity perked. She raised her chin to listen for the rest of his story.

"All of the paperwork finally went through and they released him from holding last week. She thanked me for helping her son clear his name."

"Honey, I'm so glad to hear that."

She kissed his cheek and smiled up at him.

The moment that she lowered her head again, Nichole's thoughts turned dark as she thought about the other players in this fiasco.

To her glee, Ronald King had confessed to his role in the cover-up of what really happened to Monica King. In his statement, given from his hospital room, Ronald said that Monica had wanted to end their lascivious affair with Sheri. She had discovered that the pair oftentimes had encounters without her knowledge and had even added other partners to the mix during their outside trysts. Ronald confessed to watching helplessly while Sheri, who was beside herself with grief and anger, used a paperweight from a nearby desk to repeatedly strike Monica until the other woman fell unconscious to the floor. Ron also admitted to using an unreleased Bristle Telecom computer software program to hack into Eric's phone and send those texts to Nichole from his private laptop.

Upon her arrest, Sheri Ramsey remained adamant that she and her father had nothing to do with any crimes committed. Because the wicked woman was foolish enough to try a second attack on Nichole in person, and also because of Ronald King naming her in his confession, both Sheri and her male lover would be indicted on murder in the second degree for Monica King's death, as well as burglary, aggravated assault, and an expanded list of secondary misdemeanor crimes for her part in the harassment and attack on Nichole.

The only person who seemed to escape the heavy hand of the law was Gregory Ramsey. Sheri had refused to say a word against her father's involvement and, for a reason unknown to any outsider, so had Ronald. Perhaps an anonymous threat of what would happen to either person during their stay in prison was what had sealed the duo's lips against the high-ranking official. For now, no one would ever know.

Nichole and Eric were confident that Gregory had to be the mastermind behind trying to conceal the actual events of the night. Sheri and Ron must have contacted him after they realized the severity of Monica's injuries. He had to have been the one who called in the anonymous tip of seeing a young black male, around 18-25 years old, fleeing from the scene. Gregory might have also convinced Sheri to call another clerk, Bob, who was the one who was actually scheduled for the 3rd shift that night, and talk him into allowing her to swap days with him. In this way, Sheri had a better chance of solidifying an alibi of being at home getting ready for work, though no one had ever thought to connect her sudden change in work schedule to the details of this case or to the affluent Mr. and Mrs. King.

Sheri and Ronald were nowhere near intelligent enough to cover their tracks so well. Someone had to be guiding them through the process and laying out the pieces on the chessboard.

The comfort at knowing that at least two of her tormentors would be locked away, probably for the next ten to fifteen years, was short-lived since the third and silent partner remained a free man. Although Ramsey had slipped quietly into the sunset, after settling on a retirement date earlier than expected and naming Eric as his successor, Nichole remained slightly disturbed that he would not be punished for his part in this debacle.

A shake of her head turned Nichole's mind back to more cheerful thoughts. With Eric by her side and their commitment to one another firmly established, Nichole was thankful for her happiness and comfort in her new home and with her new love.

"If we don't get up now, we won't ever get the rest of this downstairs finished."

Nichole leaned up and placed a lingering kiss on Eric's lips.

He was reluctant to release her but wanted to satisfy Nichole's wishes to have their home decorated before the upcoming New Year.

As Eric helped Nichole up to her feet and the pair walked over to the bags and boxes filled with various home décor items, he looked over at her and was filled with an indescribable joy to have gone through this lengthy state of affairs, if only to have his lady love in his life on a permanent basis as an end result.

He gave her a half smile while he watched her sorted through rugs and place mats.

"How's your novel going?"

“Surprisingly, it’s almost done. I just want to make sure all of the characters get closure.”

“Good, I can’t wait to read it. Did you give any more thought to taking those English classes at the Community College? You don’t have to worry about the cost.”

Nichole walked back to Eric and hugged him around the waist. He had told her on several occasions that if she wanted to return to school and finish her degree, he would dutifully support her emotionally and financially until she finished.

“I have and I do want to go back to school. But, I think I’m going to wait until Nivea finishes next fall before I start. I still need to support her and make sure she sees it to the end. I think my mom would that for her.”

“She would probably want that for both of you.”

Eric squeezed her closer.

“I know. One hurdle at a time. Now that our lives are all cleared up, we can all move at our own pace. Plus, I want to see if I can get my work published first.”

Eric pinched Nichole’s rear.

“Lady, whatever you’re selling, I’m buying.”

Nichole playfully swatted him away.

“You are so naughty,” she winked and then ran in the other direction.

Eric caught up to her in the kitchen and then picked her and sat Nichole on the countertop. After he nestled between her legs, his blue eyes searched her brown ones.

“I love you, Nichole. More than I ever thought I could.”

Nichole massaged the side of his Eric’s tan face and pressed her brow to his.

“I love you, too, Eric.”

After he pulled her back down so that they could walk back to the living room and finish up their work, Nichole caught Eric by the hand and stopped him mid-step.

“One more thing.”

“What’s that, honey?”

“Tell your brother-cousin to stay away from my sister.”

Eric laughed and then through his hands up.

“I swear I had nothing to do with anything.”

Nichole arched an eyebrow up at him.

“Yeah, sure. If Nivea calls me one more time to say Pierce had another bouquet of flowers sent to my dad’s house, I’m going to go up the Detectives Division and have a serious talk with him *after* I dig into you for letting this happen. What happened the night he drove her home anyway? She never called me to say she had arrived home and every time I ask about that night, she gets quiet and says she has to go do something. All this started when *you* forced them together.”

Eric chuckled.

“I have no idea and, honestly, I don’t want to know. The only thing that I’m concerned about at this moment is getting that good lovin’ you promised me for all of my hard labor.”

With that said, the chase was on again, through the living room and up the spiral stairs.

Eric and Nichole looked forward to making many new happy memories within the walls of their home and over the expanse of their blissful years together.

THE END