

TAKEN

BY *You*

BOOK THREE

THE RYAN FAMILY SERIES

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DOROTHY ELIZABETH LOVE

SCENE EXCERPT

Get a taste of what's to come in this book...

The slow attention to detail he was giving her nipples sent trickles of excitement through her. She bent her knees to support herself, pressing against his hardness, escalating her arousal. His groans of pleasure were her reward.

The constant pressure was sending lightning bolts of excitement through him. The storm was at hand. He shifted his weight and slid his hand under the thin cloth of the thong and into wetness. The first downpour.

“MMMMmmm...” Her soft cries of joy got more demanding as his fingers increased the pressure against her clit. His hand softly wafted, and she began to whirl wildly.



Hi there, Reader. It's time to cuddle and enjoy! And if you want more, this novel is part of a 3-book series. For details, check out my “**Message to Readers**” at the end of the book.

The Ryan Family Series

- The first novel, WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT
- The second novel, AND THEN CAME YOU
- The third novel, TAKEN BY YOU



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CHAPTER

One



It had to be nervousness.

How else could she explain the anxiety she felt as she waited to meet the man who tiptoed around her dreams, yet didn't know she existed?

Not only was Reese McCoy a stranger to her, but he was also a famed football player, model, and successful businessman. So much rolled into one man. That was probably why her heart was racing.

At Atlanta International Airport, Leila stood in the shadows of the waiting area of baggage claims. She scanned the crowd for the face she had seen many times in online media and TV. She hadn't discovered any of the details about his personal life until last night when she had talked about him while viewing his pictures in the photo album of her friend, Chi. The album was followed by an exciting look through a male pinup calendar. The barely clothed pinups of Reese McCoy told a completely differ-

ent, definitely more enticing story that she reexamined again and again.

The less publicly known pictures in the album revealed expressions of happiness that seemed to lessen more and more as time passed by and Leila found that somewhat baffling.

When Reese McCoy finally entered the baggage claims area, he flashed that sexy smile—one Leila had come to like—at the airline worker helping travelers arriving from Scottsdale, AZ. His denim jeans and matching shirt nicely emphasized what she knew was an incredibly fit body underneath.

Lord, she thought, tingling, he's too fine in person.

Reese suddenly turned that alluring smile toward her. It masked the troubles she had heard he was having. Yet, still, it caused her breath to catch; she exhaled slowly. Too bad she had never met him in person before now.

Leila was about to wave to get his attention, but he turned and looked about, searching for someone. Leila knew he was looking for his friend but wished it could have been her. She also knew that would never be the case. It seemed Reese McCoy had very little time for things outside of business, especially something as bothersome as a serious relationship.

Suddenly, his gaze returned to hers. This time their eyes locked for several moments. A slow, meaningful smile danced across his face. Leila couldn't stop her mouth from reacting to his contagious smile. When he winked, she realized she had been staring. Did he think that she was just another pretty face on the long list of many that smile, and that sculptured body could entice? Embarrassed, she glanced away to refocus on her reason for being there.

Amazingly, in the short time she looked away, he closed the distance between them.

Standing a few feet away he said, "Hello, pretty lady."

Probably a practiced line, she thought. He had no idea who she was or why she was there.

“I’m here to pick you up,” Leila somehow found the confidence to say without breaking her stare.

He chuckled. “I haven’t been to Atlanta in a while, but come-on lines have certainly gotten bolder. I guess my next question should be: Your place or mine?”

“My place.” Leila enjoyed his surprised look. She’d caught him off guard. Maybe he wasn’t as practiced as she thought.

“Ohhh... yes,” he growled softly, slowly, as his eyes roamed over her body. “I do miss Atlanta.”

I think I’m flirting! That boosted her ego as she extended a hand for a shake. “I’m Leila Chamberlain. A friend of both Parker and Chi. Parker will call you about the change in plans, but he asked that I pick you up. He’s stuck out of town on business and won’t be back until very late. And Chi can’t get away from the hospital. So, I’m to babysit you until he returns.” Leila was well aware that Reese had come to town to serve as Parker’s best man.

“Babysit?” Reese chuckled, looking away. “I got his text that someone was to pick me up. I expected a driver holding a sign. Not a babysitter.”

Leila wasn’t sure, but it looked as if there was a hint of something akin to regret behind that sienna stare. He recovered quickly. “I should start over,” he said, holding her hand to shake. “Nice to meet you, Leila. It’s a pleasure.”

Leila laughed then. “Parker thought you would be upset because all your plans for tonight changed at the last minute. He said something about you being a stickler for preplanning. I can’t wait to tell him you used the word *pleasure*.”

“Mention it’s because of his choice of babysitters.” Reese adjusted his carry-on luggage over his shoulder. “I’ll follow your lead.”

His sinfully charming grin had returned and that caught her off guard. “I guess we should get your luggage.”

“That’s one option.”

That certainly has a double meaning! She, however, stuck to the agenda. “We have a stop to make. I’m to remind you to get fitted for your tux today. We can go there next if you like.”

“Although Chi and Parker’s wedding is one of the reasons I’m in town,” Reese said, “I have a few business errands to run. I’ll get the tux later. I guess I need a rental car now.”

“No, you don’t.” She dodged a traveler hurrying toward them. “Parker’s Jeep and a key to his home are at my place. I’ll take you there.”

“You *were* serious about going to your place?” Reese smiled down at her.

“I never kid around about inviting a man to my home.” She casually tossed that comment out. “It’s also my place of business.”

“Oh.” The smirk on Reese’s face showed he was possibly thinking of ‘considerably less than appropriate’ business options. Or maybe he just found her seriousness to be funny. “Thanks for coming to pick me up,” he said, as they reached the baggage carousel.

“No problem,” Leila said as other passengers huddled around in search of... or scampering to catch suitcases in motion. She stepped aside to get out of one man’s way and brushed against the side of Reese. That unexpected touch sent heated awareness through her. She took in his wide, firm chest and strong, muscular arm, as his spicy cologne enchanted her.

“What is Mr. Chamberlain going to say about you entertaining me while my friend’s away?” His breath sent warmth over her ear.

“My father gave up on advising me years before he died,” Leila said. She knew he was attempting to find out more about her personal life. Although single and available, she wasn’t quite sure if she wanted to admit that yet.

It tickled her pride knowing she’d done very little to capture his interest, yet clearly, she had. Well, if not counting the blatant

stares, the flippant invitation to her home, and the unnecessary closeness they were now sharing.

Her reaction to him was purely physical, the worst kind, and she needed to contain it. His skin coloring reminded her of warm pecan pie, her favorite. She unconsciously licked her lips as she recalled the pictures showing more of that skin. He looked just as rugged and daring as he had in the younger photos, but now the fine lines of wisdom that cradled those eyes suggested an experience she wanted to know more about. She liked his faint beard that surrounded lips that promised heaven in a mouthful. Instantaneously, her mind drifted to a scene where she was experiencing that mouth, those fine hairs against sensitive parts of her body.

And soon, very soon, they would be alone together.

“I would pay big money to know your thoughts,” Reese said, watching her. He looked as though he already knew her thoughts.

“I didn’t think I would recognize you from the pictures Chi showed me.” Leila was proud of how well she came up with a valid, although veiled, excuse for blatantly, probably heatedly, staring at him. “You haven’t changed much in the past few years.”

His smile disappeared as if memories from the past plagued his thoughts. “Pictures can lie. I’m nothing like that guy anymore.”

He was frowning and she blamed herself. “I just meant...” Leila was about to say, ‘You look the same physically,’ but it was too late because he had turned to retrieve his bag from the spinning carousel.

She was sure his statement had nothing to do with physical changes, but more with the circumstances that surrounded his life. She didn’t know all the details, but Parker had labeled them as “difficult times.” Since Parker had also labeled his first fiancée’s death, his sister being shot, and the car accident that almost killed the love of his life, Chi, as “difficult times,” Leila figured Reese’s life must have been just as troubling.

Reese collected the last of his luggage and followed Leila outside into the warm June afternoon. They went to Leila's car in short-term parking. She easily maneuvered the car out of the airport only to encounter caterpillar slow highway traffic.

"Is this typical for this time of day?" Reese asked a few minutes later, looking at the dashboard clock.

"Not normally. There must be an accident ahead."

"How far away is your place?"

"Without traffic it's about twenty-five minutes."

"This can go on for a while." Reese reached into his overnight bag to retrieve his cell phone and dialed. "Bill? It's Reese McCoy," he announced when the person answered. "I'm in town but stuck in traffic. First, the plane was delayed. Now this. Can we delay our meeting until this evening?" Reese listened. "No, no. That's okay. I'll get there as soon as I can. I really need you to see my plan and consider supporting it... Yeah... Bill, it's a solid plan. Don't shoot it down until you have a chance to review it." The longer Reese talked, the flatter his tone got. He hung up and stared at the phone for a few seconds, visibly shaking off a difficult mood.

"I can take you directly to your meeting," Leila offered. "Pick you up and take you to get the Jeep afterwards."

"I'm not sure how long I'll be or where we might head afterwards." Reese watched the traffic come to a halt. "The sooner I get to Parker's, the sooner I can shower, change and get to the meeting." His look suggested appreciation. "But thanks for offering."

Leila liked the sincerity she saw. "I have a better idea. You can change at my place, it's closer and we need to stop there anyway to get the Jeep." She looked at her car's dashboard infotainment map for the time delay on the current route. Then reached into the backseat to get her cellphone thinking to use its navigation system for alternative routes. "I'll get off the highway as soon as I can. Maybe get around this."

“Take your time.” Reese said, looking down the V neck of her blouse that showed a peek at the tops of her breasts as she leaned to retrieve her phone.

“Are you sure? That call sounded important.” She looked up, still leaning back with phone in hand.

“It was, but this...” His eyes roamed provocatively up her chest to her eyes. “...delay is taking my mind off it.”

His somber look from moments ago had disappeared, replaced with a warm, much more pleasing smile. The inches between them would only take seconds to remove.

She wasn't sure which one of them moved first, but somehow his mouth seemed much closer to hers. Her heart jiggled a little and she found herself breathing heavier. Then something in his eyes called to her.

Sampling him was a fantasy that had crossed her mind several times while looking at pictures of his fantastic body. Now she was sure she was the one to move closer this time.

The honking from the car behind startled her.

“Oh!” She jumped and let out a nervous little laugh. Looking quickly about, she then moved back under the wheel. It took her a few seconds to realize the car was already in gear and all she needed to do was remove her foot from the brake pedal. She felt like a clumsy teenager instead of the professional, sometimes sassy, business owner that she was.

That was a stupid gesture I just made, she said to herself, then turned to Reese. “Traffic is moving.”

“Uh huh,” he grunted, his smile widening.

Luckily, since she couldn't think of anything else to say, jazz music from the car radio filled the air. It bothered her that she'd neither resisted nor gone through with the kiss. A kiss she'd been wanting to experience since the moment she'd dreamt of him. This kind of indecision was another example of why she would always be the lonely maid of honor and never the bride. She could

dream about having this man but couldn't pull off impressing him as an experienced flirt.

Remembering the map app, she busied herself with getting a more convenient route.

"How long have you lived here?" Reese asked.

"I moved back about four years ago. It's changed a lot since I was a kid." She studied the smartphone map display, then looked up at the road ahead. "I think I can get around this by getting off at the next exit."

"I'll leave my comforts in your competent hands."

Leila looked at him. *His comforts*. Was he picking at her for failing to resist him and failing to kiss him? Certainly, kissing was a bit much for someone she had just met. She played it safe and pretended to take a greater interest in getting around the heavy traffic. The ride through the business districts was the perfect distraction.

They arrived at her home, or partial home, as Leila called it, about thirty-five minutes later. They had talked very little en route because Reese spent most of the time on his cell phone discussing shipping matters. The gist of what Leila picked up on was that his cinching an important business deal was imperative to the expansion of his company. Based on Reese's solemn tone, she figured things weren't going well.

Reese noticed the daycare sign. "You have a kid we need to pick up from daycare?" he asked as she navigated into the parking lot.

"I live on the floor above it. My private entrance is around the side." Leila said. She parked and they got out of the car.

"Interesting place to call home." He said as the trunk opened so that he could retrieve his luggage. "How come?"

"I own the building. The daycare center is my business."

"Very clever." He glanced around at the upscale business location.

The daycare was the size of a two-story warehouse with a large playground and an expanse of land behind it. Several cars were in the parking lot. A few parents were picking up their children. On the playground, several kids played on slides, swings, and monkey bars, while others played a game of putt-putt golf on artificial turf. Several kids cheered when another whacked the small ball between the legs of a gigantic parrot.

Upstairs, Leila's loft door opened into an extremely spacious, open area. She had a flair for the dramatic and had reconfigured the large warehouse space into sections with cream Roman columns separating the foyer and hallway from the living room. The floors were bleached hardwood with matching paneled walls. Large plants were aplenty. A deep purple, leather sofa sat against the back wall, on the other side of the glass top table, matching chairs faced the sofa.

The unusually high windows on the back wall spanned up to vaulted ceilings and allowed a view of blue skies and green tops of leafy trees. A view she considered her peak at heaven. No one could have imagined that a busy playground, a major road, and several businesses were just beyond those walls. It was just like she wanted it to be.

Reese's cell phone rang again. "Hey, Suzette," he said casually.

The female name got Leila's attention. But she shouldn't be eavesdropping. Or at least, not look as if she were eavesdropping. Leila went to her desk at the far side of the room and opened the top drawer, pretending to be busy as she tuned into Reese's conversation.

"I'll rearrange my schedule," he was saying. "I don't want to change the plans for this weekend. Okay. Bye." He walked toward Leila.

Leila sensed Reese was studying her downcast head. She put down the mail she held and reached back inside the top drawer to

get a stuffed envelope, which she handed to him. “These are for you. Jeep keys, Parker’s house key, and address to the tuxedo shop.”

“Parker is finally getting married.” Reese shook his head. “I still can’t believe it.”

She angled her head, slightly confused. “For a best man, shouldn’t you sound a bit more supportive?”

He looked at her, his expression tame. “Parker deserves to finally find happiness.” Then he added, “And Chi is amazing. She is the yin to his yang.”

“Well said.” She passed him and headed down the hall. “You wanted to shower and change. Let me show you to the bathroom.”

Reese stepped inside a bathroom that only an interior designer could have imagined. It was supersized with the look of two rooms forming one. The high ceiling was painted with clouds and the borders with leafy red and purple roses. It had a Jacuzzi tub, a freestanding glassed-in shower stall, and more Roman columns. The other side of the room featured a vanity area with a leather loveseat with a bookcase.

“Very nice. I like your taste.” Reese set down his luggage.

“Thanks. I live too close to my job. So, home had to be an escape for me.” Leila opened the bathroom’s closet door and handed him a towel and washcloth. She pointed and said, “Everything else you might need should be under the sink.”

She turned and noticed him unbuttoning his shirt, pulling the shirttails from out of his pants. She froze. Not out of panic but out of pleasure. She’d dreamt about seeing that body up close and personal. Putting his hands on his hips the shirt parted, turning the pinup calendar view into reality.

His muscles were more chiseled than Leila had dreamt. Fine, silky black hairs called to be touched. She flexed her hand in response.

“Anything else I should know?” Reese asked, breaking her trance.

Again, she was staring. His chest was more enticing than the one she'd conjured up in her dream last night. She dragged her eyes up to his. His cocky grin didn't help matters. It was one thing to secretly drool and pant like a cat in heat. Being caught, however, was rather embarrassing.

"I need to go downstairs to check on the daycare." Leila found herself struggling to find something other than him to gawk at. Failing, she walked toward the safety of the door.

Unfortunately for her, he stopped her by catching her by the arm as she passed.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"There is something else," Reese said, pulling her closer to his inviting body.

She sidestepped. "I've delayed you long enough from your meeting," Leila said to his hand since she wasn't brave enough to look him in the face. He might see just how in need of his touch she was.

The house telephone rang. Again, she jumped and inwardly cursed because of it. She needed to gain control of herself. "Let me get that."

Due to her business and the enormous size of the upper level, she had landline phones installed in most rooms so that she wasn't jogging down long hallways in search of her cell phone. She looked at the telephone that hung on the bathroom wall by the loveseat behind him. Though parts of the too-large bathroom looked and felt like a den, it was still too intimate a setting for her with Reese in it. She decided to take the call elsewhere.

At her desk, Leila found herself breathing heavily when she answered. "Chi! Hi! Your timing couldn't be better... We just got here. Reese was about to jump in the shower."

"Stop him!" Chi said. "I need to talk to him."

“Oh, okay, hold on.” Leila hurried to the bathroom door and called out. “Reese, it’s for you!” When he picked up the bathroom telephone, she went to hang up the handheld on the desk.

As she walked away, Reese stepped out of the bathroom, the cordless telephone resting on his bare shoulder. He had taken off his shirt and shoes, and his pants unbuttoned and barely zipped. “I think that’s a fantastic idea. I’m sure of it,” he said to Chi. “I assume you’ve already talked to Leila?”

Leila came to stand in the hallway, watching him watch her. His stare was disconcerting. So sexy, so disarming, so distracting. Thankfully, the man would be leaving her home forever once he showered and changed. Moments earlier when he touched her, she’d had the impression he was going to do something quite thrilling. That would have been a mistake for her, considering the Suzette call, but she felt disappointed that it hadn’t happened for some reason.

Luckily, he was leaving, and her life would soon return to normal. She could sit back and think about her crazy reactions to him later. Whatever he had just said to Chi, Leila hadn’t heard; she was too busy enjoying his near nakedness.

In less than an hour he will be gone, she reminded herself. She exhaled slowly to calm her racing heart.

“Leila,” Reese said, “Chi was wondering if you could help with something tonight.”

“Sure,” she said. “Of course.”

“More wedding guests are flying to town,” he said.

“Does she need me to pick them up from the airport?” she asked.

“It seems Parker has run out of rooms. So, Chi was wondering if you wouldn’t mind entertaining me tonight...,” Reese paused to smile, “by letting me use your bedroom.”

Although his statement was obvious, Leila asked, slightly flustered, “What?”

TAKEN BY YOU

He removed the distance between them and said again, very slowly, very provocatively, “I want to stay the night with you.”

CHAPTER

Two



Leila stared dumbfounded for several seconds. “You want to sleep with me...,” she sputtered, then quickly shook her head as if to eradicate her blunder. “I meant, spend the night here with me?” *Who did he think he was flashing an arrogant grin?*

Reese said calmly, “Which of those questions do you want me to answer?”

She was smart enough to avoid that. “Let me speak to Chi.” She took the telephone from his extended hand.

“I’ll be in the shower,” Reese said. “If you need me, come get me.” He left her standing in the hallway, stunned, with her mouth wide open.

“Okay.” Leila agreed and thought about it. “I mean...” It was too late. He had already closed the bathroom door. To the telephone, she said, “Chi, what’s going on?”

“I’m getting married in a week,” Chi joked. “I thought you knew.”

“Don’t play with me,” Leila complained. “You know what I mean. Reese can’t stay here with me. He’s a stranger.”

“Not based on the conversation I just heard between you two.” Chi laughed. “Besides, Reese is like family, Parker’s so-called big brother. My problem is that Parker’s mother is flying in tonight. She wasn’t supposed to get here until the end of the week. His old coach arrived last night, and we put him in the guestroom instead of letting him drive to the hotel. He’s still at the house. Mama is at my place babysitting. We’ve run out of bedrooms, and you have two extras. Put Reese up for tonight to give me time to figure out what to do with Coach.”

“I have fifty-two impressionable kids downstairs, all with parents who respect me. What kind of image do you think they will have of me if I start dragging strange men home?” Leila was pacing the floor, shaking her head.

“First, it’s none of their business. And second, having a guest visit your home is not the same as teaching promiscuity...” Changing the subject, she said, “Anyway, I picked out another flower to use in the arrangement that’s going to be at the altar.”

“Another flower?” Leila complained. “We’ve completed all the design. You can’t change the flowers on me this late in the game. Rita and I have taken care of that.”

“Think about gladiolas.” Chi went on, “I saw this arrangement on a display counter at Macy’s. The height of those flowers will be perfect at the altar.”

“Forget flowers. And shopping at Macy’s. Rita and I have already selected the arrangements for the altar. Now back to Reese. I can’t have him staying here tonight.”

“I thought we settled that,” Chi said. “Reese doesn’t mind. You have room. Parker and I don’t. So, it’s settled.” Chi’s pager went off. “I gotta go. I just got paged to the Emergency Room.

Once you see the Macy's arrangement, you'll agree with me. I will text you the picture. Oh, and take care of Reese for us."

"Reese can take care of himself," Leila said tartly. "Or possibly have Suzette do it."

"Suzette?" Chi said, confused. "Reese's ex is the last person we want around him."

The room went still. Leila had forgotten his ex-wife's name. She'd been referred to as 'his ex' the few times she had come up in conversation. She had known Parker and Reese were old friends who played professional football. She had known Reese rarely traveled to Atlanta; the reason she hadn't met him in the year since she'd become friends with Chi and Parker. She had known his life started to spin out of control with the divorce but hadn't known the details. Somehow, all the pieces hadn't come together in Leila's mind until now.

"Now I recall Parker having said he was to pick up his son from his ex-wife's place," Leila finally said, numbly.

Chi exhaled a playful sigh. "Girl, you scared me for a second. I thought you meant something else by that comment. Reese is dying to see Keith. Anyway, I've got to go! Bye."

The line went dead.

Leila stood there holding the telephone to her ear. Her emotions had run from complete attraction to Reese to complete annoyance. What baffled Leila was that she had brought these diverse emotions on herself. This attraction to him would be her doom.

Dazed by her thoughts, she walked into the bathroom to hang up the telephone.

In her frustration, she had momentarily forgotten Reese was in there. As the steam evaporated so did her thoughts, because she suddenly remembered him. Probably because he materialized into view. He was completely naked and absolutely beautiful as he stood inside the glass shower stall. Warm water rinsed down his muscular, pecan-toned body as strong arms flexed. Suds glistened

from the silky hairs of his arms down to the ones of his legs. When he turned, looking back over his shoulder at her, she got another view of that fabulous chest that led to...

“You need me?” he asked casually as if they were both standing completely dressed in a crowded room.

Leila’s eyes shot up. That damn knee-weakening smile of his was back.

“Um, just hanging up...,” she muttered before hurrying out of the bathroom. The soles of her white sandals beat against her feet as the heels clacked loudly on the hardwood floors. When she got to her bedroom on the other side of the building, she was almost running.

She closed the door behind her, thinking it would somehow block out what had just happened. It didn’t, of course, so she leaned against the door and exhaled slowly.

At times like this, cigarettes and alcohol could come in handy. Unfortunately, she didn’t drink during business hours or when she planned to spend time with the kids. And she stopped smoking the year her father was diagnosed with lung cancer, which eventually took his life.

Leila resorted to meditation.

Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths, exhaling very slowly. Calmer now, she looked down and realized she was still holding the cordless phone.

In lightning motion, images of Reese’s tantalizing nakedness returned to assault her with an erotic jolt. Her nipples hardened as she began to warm.

She exhaled slowly to calm herself. It didn’t help. Leila took several slow steps toward the bed, easing down to sit at its foot.

“So, Leila,” she said, looking at her image in the dresser’s mirror in front of her. “You have an incredible-looking man under your roof that you are dying to have sex with but shouldn’t. What are you going to do about it?” Her pitiful reflection made no

reply. Her nipples pressed stubbornly against her blouse; her chest heaved laboriously. She ran her fingers slowly through her short hairstyle then down her neck to her chest. Her reflected image looked more like a hooker enticing a paying customer than of a modest woman attempting to calm herself. She shook her head in disgust. “Apparently nothing.”

Leila rubbed a hand down the front of her white Capri pants. Then she rested her elbows on her knees and stared down at the intricate details of the Persian rug under her feet. She heard distinct sounds of movement in the front of her home: Footsteps. The alarm chirps when the front door opens. More footsteps. She sat quietly, hoping, waiting, for answers.

She was still sitting in that same spot fifteen minutes later. The only clear decision she had made was that the rug needed to be cleaned. Standing, Leila felt somewhat better because she was alone in her home.

She hadn’t confronted Reese or confirmed anything with him. He had gone to his meeting without having any way of ensuring that he could get back inside. If he called before returning, she would give him the locations and telephone numbers of a few hotels, and then carry his luggage to him.

Comfortable with the new plan, Leila stood and walked out of the room. She planned on heading downstairs to check on the daycare center. All the after-school students would be there by now, so it would be a full house over the next two hours. She liked to tour the center and check on the kids. It was the one thing she had complete control over as well as success with.

Telephone still in her hand, Leila walked out of her bedroom, past the large room on the right that she used for designs and crafts, past the two guest bedrooms and guest bathroom, then the kitchen. She wanted to make sure Reese had locked the front door behind him. Nearing the front room, she was feeling a lot better about her plan to rid Reese from her home.

“So, there you are.” The deep voice came from the sofa.

She visibly jumped and let out a soft cry. “Lord, Reese, I thought you had left for your meeting!”

He stood up, placing the notepad and pen he had been using on the sofa table in front of him. “Not without saying goodbye.” He came around the table.

Leila never moved. She watched as he walked with a strut befitting his self-assured, muscular body. The navy slacks and matching shirt fit nicely. The gray blazer was tailored. When he stopped in front of her, she had to look up to meet his gaze.

“Thanks for your hospitality,” Reese said.

“No problem.” Leila stepped back, but the wall prevented her further retreat. “Are you familiar enough with the city to find your way to the meeting?” It was a dumb question she knew but needed something to say to feel the quiet. She inhaled and exhaled slowly. Something about the scent of his cologne was quite soothing.

“Yes.” Reese glanced at his watch. “It’s about four-thirty. I’m running late. The guy I’m meeting is looking for a reason to walk away from this deal. He might use this, but what the hell. I’ve made a friend in you. If nothing else I’ve accomplished that today. I’ll probably be tied up until around seven-thirty. If you don’t already have plans, maybe we can have a late dinner together.”

He considers me a friend. Possibly lost an important business deal just to say bye to her. He wanted to take her to dinner. Leila felt pleased. *A date. A date with a man the calendar labeled Nubian Prince.*

She hoped she didn’t look as mesmerized as she felt. “Dinner sounds good,” she finally said aloud.

“I’ve been craving soul food, and I believe there’s a restaurant downtown on Peachtree Street. Would that be okay with you?”

He likes what I like. “Sure. I know the one you’re talking about. Shall I meet you there at eight?”

“Let me pick you up here around that time. Just in case things change.”

He's considerate of my time, she marveled. "Here is fine," she said softly.

"Good." He quickly glanced at his watch again and went to the table to get the notepad and Jeep keys. "I've gotta run. I've already taken everything else I need to the Jeep." He took her by the elbow and walked toward the front door. "I left my cell number on your desk. Didn't know where to toss my towel, so I hung it in the shower." He stopped at the door. "You came into the bathroom earlier. Do you need something from me?"

Lord, do I ever. Leila was proud of herself for not melting into a pile of heated mush. "I somehow forgot you were in there. I wanted to hang up the phone." She lifted the telephone she was still clutching it.

"Makes sense." Reese surprised her by leaning to kiss her forehead. He was obviously one of those affectionate men. She loved that. Leila leaned into it, into him. "Thanks again. See you tonight." He stepped outside.

His kiss is so warm. "See you." Leila leaned on the front of the door watching him leave. She was going to miss not having him stay the night with her after all. He had said he'd taken his things to the Jeep. Probably when she heard the alarm's chirping sound, indicating the front door had been opened. That was an efficient use of his time. Preplanning was one of his strong points Parker had said.

Luckily, he was leaving because her resistance was weakening.

"By the way," he said midway down the stairs. "I'm not sure which room you want me in tonight." He paused; his smile seductive. "So, I put my luggage in the first bedroom. See you later."

Sleep here! When did I agree to that? It took a second or two to translate those thoughts into words. "I... didn't... You can't..."

"What?" he said from the bottom of the steps. "Can we talk about it later? I really do need to go."

"We'll definitely talk about it at dinner."



AT SIX O’CLOCK THAT EVENING, LEILA AND JOYCE, ONE OF THE TEACHERS, watched the last child leave. David Kendal’s father was always the last parent to arrive. As the Kendals headed down the long private driveway flanked with blossoming trees, Leila turned to Joyce. “Good night. Great job today.”

“And a long day,” Joyce said wearily. Her petite body looked tired. “I’m going home and crashing. Don’t work too late tonight.”

“I have dinner plans. I’m headed upstairs to shower and change.”

“Dinner plans?” Joyce said, as if not sure she’d heard Leila correctly. So, you’re going to a fundraiser or something?”

“I’m going on a dinner date.” Leila wasn’t happy with Joyce’s shocked look. It only reinforced the idea that she is still uninvolved. She headed to the back hall that led to her private entrance upstairs. “Good night.”

“Uh huh,” Joyce mumbled. “G’night.”

Leila was sure Joyce was smirking at her. Was it obvious to everyone that her love life was lint size?

A dinner date!

Ever since Leila had moved back to Atlanta to take care of her father during his dying days, dating had become secondary. Helping her father and managing a new business had been all-consuming. After his death, her business helped to overcome her feelings of loss. His death left her with the need to prove something. Do things differently. Focus on stability.

Upstairs, Leila dimmed the lights and lit several candles in her bathroom while a pot of tea brewed. She felt herself tensing up and blamed it on her busy afternoon. She would sink into a lavender-scented bubble bath. That always did the trick.

As Leila entered her bathroom, for some strange reason David Kendal came to mind. She could relate to him in a lot of ways.

The first time she had met David's mother had been during an argument between his parents in the daycare's parking lot. Mrs. Kendal had enrolled David in piano lessons and wanted to take her son shopping for a grand piano. Mr. Kendal didn't appreciate her picking up David without informing him since it was his week with the child. The argument got out of control and little David jumped in the middle, attempting to appease his parents. So had Leila.

Parental approval was one of the driving forces in her life. She had been their angel from God since she was the only child, her mother could have. Her mother's first three pregnancies had resulted in miscarriages, so Leila wasn't supposed to have happened. She was to be the perfect angel that the world would know as Elizabeth Chamberlain's shining star. Leila had sparkled once upon a time as a professional model, but when her career fizzled out, Leila was ecstatic; her father had understood; her mother had been crushed because that had been her dream for her daughter. And Elizabeth Chamberlain never had forgiven Leila for falling short.

Based on what she'd seen of the parental battles between David's parents and the kid's constant attempts to intervene and appease, he too would probably fall short of pleasing at least one of them.

Reaching around in the bubbly water, Leila found the washcloth and absently rubbed it across her stomach. Some people never realized how precious having children could be or how important raising them in a nurturing environment should be.

Forcing more pleasant thoughts, Leila's mind drifted to Reese McCoy. From the little she knew about him; she could relate to his upbringing as well. An only child raised by one loving caregiver. Maybe that was one reason she felt drawn to him.

The calendar pictures Chi had given her were surely another reason. When Leila asked to describe what Reese looked like to identify him at the airport, Chi immediately went to get the male

calendar entitled The Nubian Prince. He had been in several photos, but none as sizzling as the one for August. Lying on red satin sheets, he was nude except for the bit of satin that was draped over his penis. That photo was the one she had studied before going to get him from the airport.

Although the photo revealed a lot of his body, it hadn't quite prepared her for seeing him firsthand in the shower. A definite muscular vision from head to toe. Though she didn't see all of him, what she did see up close was much more alluring than the pictures.

A familiar tingle began to warm her. It started in her chest and trickled down between her legs. Why is it that every thought of Reese results in a heated arousal? It didn't help that the last time she'd had sex was...?

She couldn't remember.

"Too long," Leila mumbled and got out of the tub.

If she didn't get control of her thoughts, she would have to get back in and run a cold shower.

Leila lotioned her milk chocolate skin, lightly applied makeup, and fashioned her short hair into a style that complemented her face nicely. She automatically pulled out a midnight cotton, blue dress that hugged her tall, slender figure from neck to calves. After donning silver earrings and bangles, she stepped into a pair of navy slinky sandals. She was ready.

Smiling, she glanced at the clock. It was five minutes 'til eight. Dinner would be later than planned. For some reason, she wanted to be annoyed at Reese. Possibly to dampen her fascination with him.

Besides, the man did live several states away and, according to Chi, was on the rebound from a terrible divorce.

But none of those things seems to repel her allure to Reese.

He will be here soon, she smiled. She went to the front room to wait.

And wait.

He didn't come or call.

Two hours, twelve minutes, and several glasses of wine later, Leila cursed angrily. "Never again!" She stood and went to her desk to call Reese on his cell phone. Halfway through dialing, she slammed down the telephone. "The hell with him! Why am I doing the calling?" She started mocking his so-called kind words as she marched back to her bedroom to change into pajamas. *I met a new friend in you... I want to take you to dinner.* Then that damn forehead kiss just before he left! "Men!" she shouted, shaking her head. "Mother, you didn't lie. They aren't much good for serious relationships."

She pulled on her powder blue cotton pajama shorts and matching top with a knee-length housecoat. Then it hit her. She stormed to the bedroom nightstand and took the racy calendar from the top drawer. She marched to the bathroom and tossed it into the trash can.

"That's what got me into this predicament in the first place. If I weren't lusting after the man, I would have seen this charade for what it is!"

Realizing she was talking to an empty room annoyed her even more. Changing her mind, she pulled the calendar out of the trash and hid it under the vanity.

She would call Chi and tell her just what she thought of this "like family" and "like a brother to Parker" guy. Now that she thought of it, he must have known he wouldn't be coming back tonight. Why else would he have suggested she stay at the house in the first place? That nonsense about 'not minding being late to say bye' was probably crap as well. But she was the one who'd agreed to go out with him, even though she'd known her sexual fascination was blindly leading her. That was why she was angry.

Leila picked up the telephone and started dialing Chi's number and then stopped. Why dampen Chi's spirit right before the

wedding just because she'd allowed Reese to tiptoe into her fantasies? Leila had suspected from the moment she met him that his intentions were those of a playboy. He hadn't known who she was at the airport and had practically suggested sex. Reese had probably found some Atlanta woman less prudent or more promiscuous than she was.

She hung up, deciding to have one last cup of tea instead of bothering Chi. She had pouted enough about this, and it was time to move on.

Around midnight, Leila went to bed. Leaving the curtains parted to look out at the starry night, she turned off the lamp on the nightstand and got into bed, pulling up the covers over her. Just as sleep began to take over, she heard the faint sound of ringing.

The doorbell.

She practically leaped out of bed and snatched her housecoat off the foot of it. Stopping at the guest bedroom, she grabbed Reese's large suitcase and suit bag, then slid the overnight bag over her shoulder. She struggled to drag all of it down the hall. Nearing the front room, she heard faint sounds of shoes descending steps.

Reese was leaving.

"Oh, no, you don't!" She dropped his belongings and ran to the front door. She fought to open the three locks, then yanked the door open. "Reese!" she called out, seeing him halfway down the stairs.

He came back up. "You are still up. I take it you got the messages I left you."

CHAPTER

Three



Leila tried to make sense of that statement. “Messages? What messages?”

“May I come in?” Reese stepped inside the foyer when she nodded. “I asked that you wait up for me so that I could apologize for missing our date.”

That flustered her. “I never got any messages.”

“I forgot to get your number here. Since I couldn’t reach Chi to get your number, I called the daycare center and left messages for you there. I wasn’t sure if the business line rang to your home as well.”

“It doesn’t.” That was the only sensible thing Leila could think to say. She would listen to every one of the messages later. Twice if need be. Up until a few seconds ago, her Reese-get-lost speech had consisted of a few choice words, possible profanity, and a lot of finger-pointing. Knowing that she could be wrong had left her feeling a little confused and deflated.

Reese reached past her and closed the front door. “The meetings didn’t go as well as planned. Bill is an even harder sell than I thought. The deal began to crumble, and I had to do some juggling. All evening, unfortunately. He still isn’t sold.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Leila said, genuinely interested. Reese looked as if the disappointment of the meeting was still weighing on his shoulders.

“Yeah. But Parker finally called me not too long ago with your number. He offered his sofa to bunk down on if you were asleep. I figured I would stop by and see.”

“You look exhausted,” Leila said, wondering why she didn’t have the desire to yell at him. But she still needed to let him know just how much she didn’t appreciate this.

“I am.” He exhaled. “I’m working on about five hours of sleep.” He turned, placing his hand on the small of her back so that they could walk together down the hall. “Did you get dinner?”

“I had a little something.”

When Reese spotted his suitcases piled in the center of the hallway, he looked at her, then went to stand in front of them. “What’s this?” He looked back, confused.

This was her opening. However, telling him that she’d overreacted and wanted to fling his luggage at him, just didn’t seem right. Maybe she should tell a little white lie, like wanting to have his things available when he walked in because he might have made other plans. Leila conjured up an assortment of excuses to say.

Leila exhaled and stood straighter, prouder. The truth is better. “When I didn’t hear from you, I thought you had stood me up. When the doorbell rang, I planned to give them to you.”

He did the unexpected. He burst out laughing. “Tough lady. Remind me never to stand you up!”

This was the first time she had ever heard him laugh. And it completely transformed him, dissolving the tired lines that had

creased his face moments ago. Laughing added so much appeal to him. She took full credit for that laugh, regardless of the reason.

Leila realized that because she had voiced her concerns, she felt better. “Or mislead me,” Leila added, smiling.

“You got it,” he said. “No misleading or standing you up.” He took a step toward her, hands on hips, his smile still intact. Since he didn’t have on his blazer, the bottom-down shirt pulled nicely across his enticing chest and arms. Blue was definitely a good color for him. It was a striking contrast against the warm coloring of his pecan brown skin. “Should I take my luggage to the car now?”

“You’ve had a tough night. Why chance a long drive when you’re already tired?”

He nodded. “Tired but restless.”

“If you want to talk about it, I can make coffee or tea,” she said, slipping her hands into her housecoat pockets. “Decaf, of course.”

His eyes slowly drifted to her pockets at her thighs, the area around them, then leisurely back up. “Coffee will be good if you have cream and sugar.”

“I do.” Leila returned his smile.

“I’ll return my suitcases to the guest room while you make it.”



REESE THOUGHT THE KITCHEN WAS ANOTHER DESIGN MIRACLE.

Plum-colored walls contrasted with bleached wood for a sleek, dramatic effect. On the left wall were the refrigerator and stove. The wooden doors of the refrigerator were the same bleached wood as the cabinets. The right wall held more cabinets and a wine rack. The back wall housed the sinks and all the cooking gadgets one could want. A cozy dinette was in the middle of the room.

He had walked into the kitchen just as Leila was bending to retrieve something from under the sink. He had no idea what she

was getting and didn't care because the view of her butt covered by those frilly shorts was a stunning sight.

She straightened and the housecoat shut out his view. But the story it had initiated started to unfold into yet another titillating scenario. As she poured water into the percolator, she placed her other hand on her hip. The housecoat moved away as she swayed her weight to one side and Reese was delighted with another pulse-inducing view. Her shorts hugged like a glove. The bands around her thighs were made of a thick white elastic lace, so he got a view of an enticing butt hugged nicely by sexy lace. One of those shapely, milk chocolate legs was also on display, and it seemed to go on forever. Visions of those legs wrapped around his waist danced in his head. He blinked a few times trying to wipe out the image, or else the resulting hard-on would make for an uncomfortable night.

Reese knew he was not supposed to allow his mind to travel down the sensual path it was going. When Reese told his buddy Parker that he wasn't sure if Leila got his messages about being late, Parker had cautioned him about talking to Leila tonight and advised him to consider camping at his place to allow her time to calm down if she hadn't gotten the messages. Parker had described a serious and driven woman who could be particularly critical of conceited, thoughtless men.

Reese, however, saw her as more bark than bite. He suspected she would listen to reason because he had called her. Her softer side was also obvious by their encounter at the airport, and the way she had brushed against him during the traffic jam, not to mention the way she had gawked at his body in the shower. Why not chance coming over? It was worth it to come back in hopes of getting more of that ego trip.

Reese wasn't looking for an emotional attachment, but after the bad treatment from his ex-wife Suzette, Leila's positive attention answered a deep need in him. Suzette had never been an

overly affectionate woman and in the final years of their marriage, she would have preferred tightly hugging a container of bubonic plague instead of touching him. The look of desire he saw in Leila's eyes was a far cry from the frigidity of his ex-wife and much, much needed. Even if it was only for a night.

Leila turned to the side counter and spotted him. "Oh, hi. I didn't hear you come in."

"Need help?"

"I'm done. I only made enough for two cups." When she whirled around holding the two cups of coffee, the housecoat floated away from her body. He felt the need to look away, or else embarrass himself with both physical and verbal reactions. The way she let her housecoat hang open gave Reese the impression she thought her pajamas were appropriate for mixed company. He went to sit down at the table.

"I have coffee cake if you want something sweet to go with this." Leila leaned to place the cup in front of him. "Coffee tastes so much better to me that way."

The cake wasn't the taste of sweetness he was thinking about since her nipples were at eye level. "Sure."

She returned with treats and sat across from him. "What was this meeting about? The man you met with was Bill, right?"

It took Reese a few seconds to jump from the erotic direction of his budding fantasy to the topic of business. "Yes, Bill. Good memory. I have a week to win him over. Bill Lowell is an important link in a deal I'm making. We truck a lot of goods to/from Arizona. However, the company needs more access to distributors. Bill's shipping company is in several cities and can give us access to major trucking arteries. I have a major contract in the works to bring in a lot more business. I'm trying to sell Bill on a partnership."

"Sounds like he can benefit a lot as well. He's not interested in that?"

“He’s interested in the distribution chain. He thinks my company is too small.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“If I can’t convince Bill of the benefits, I’ll approach my second choice.”

“Sounds like you have a plan.” Leila took a sip of coffee.

“Yeah.” Reese leaned back in his chair, feeling much better now that he had verbalized his concern. He set his cup down, realizing he was indeed in need of rest. “So, what time do I need to be up and out of here?”

“Want breakfast?” she offered.

That toothpaste-ad smile of his was back. “I like the sound of that.”

Still balancing the cup between both hands, she took a sip, contemplating the question. “What about seven? I must be downstairs by eight for my staff meeting.”

“Seven is good. I’ll need to get some work done. I’ll get up earlier to make sure I can leave when you do. Parker told me you made arrangements with some hotels to put up the wedding party.”

“Just one hotel close to the church.”

“That’s closer to Parker’s house? I need something more central to town. Maybe closer to here.”

Leila set her cup on the table. Her finger ran around the top of it. “I have two extra bedrooms. And an office.”

“Stay here all week?” he asked, slightly surprised by the offer.

Leila nodded.

Reese leaned forward, wondering about her hesitant behavior. Maybe she didn’t want to make the offer but felt obligated to help out Chi and Parker. He hadn’t considered staying past one night with Leila. Nor did he think he could handle several nights of her walking around in skimpy lingerie. And, with her foot propped up on the seat like it was, the view of her leg was already distracting. She was in the comfort of her home, doing what she typically did

in her comfortable surroundings. Those daily habits would give him a weeklong erection. Turning her down was the safest thing to do.

“Staying with you would make it easier for me to get around,” he finally said. “But I don’t want to be a bother. I’ll be working around the clock.”

“Sounds like my schedule.” Leila looked up. “You won’t be a bother. We probably won’t see much of each other anyway with schedules like ours.”

Maybe she was right. He could better handle himself if he got smaller dosages of her, especially dressed like that. “Then I guess you’ve talked me into it.”

She smiled. “I guess I twisted your arm hard enough.”

“Easy sell, actually,” he grinned. “I’m glad you offered.”

“Not a problem.”

Reese watched one mesmerizing hand rub up and down her thigh. Is she trying to tempt me? he wondered. Then he noticed how casually, probably unconsciously, she was doing it. But it still interfered with his ability to reason. And resist. He did need to add distance between them before he forgot about good behavior and reached to touch her thigh. Then touched other, softer parts as well.

It had been much too long since he’d had the pleasure of just talking companionably with a woman. The few encounters he’d had recently had all stemmed from some hopeful woman wanting to act on fantasies that damn calendar caused. That was a turn-off to him.

But this, with Leila, felt good. And it concerned him a little.

“Thanks for the coffee. I better head to bed.” He took another sip and got up. Neither one had touched the coffee cake. “By the way, Chi and Parker are having a get-together at Parker’s restaurant tomorrow. I was asked to invite you.” He walked to the sink to deposit his cup and saucer.

“That sounds like fun.” Leila packed up the sweets and carried them with her cup to the sink. Standing next to him she added, “Dinner at his restaurant, Parker’s Place, will probably be the plan for the rest of the week.”

“Can we ride together tomorrow night?” He looked at his watch. It read 12:43 AM. “Or should I say tonight?” Reese turned to face her and said with a grin, “Of course, I promise to be here on time the next time.”

Leila found herself laughing at that and he joined in. “That would be a good idea,” she said.

“I figured since my bags were practically at the door, I wouldn’t get another chance to blow my welcome.”

“You don’t.” Leila was smiling as she slid the container with the sweets back into the cabinet. She turned to Reese and leaned back against the counter. “But I’ve forgiven you for tonight.”

“Good.”

He just stood there watching her watch him. He wanted to say something else but couldn’t think of how best to put it into words. He wanted to thank her for being understanding tonight, for offering to talk because he needed to hear himself say he would nail this business deal... for opening her home to him. And for being so damn distracting and sexy looking that his meeting failures just didn’t seem all that important now.

He took a step closer to her and she put her hands back against the counter. The action pulled her housecoat open, and a bit of heaven peeked out. The fit of that damn underthing—too sexy to be called casual wear or sleepwear—left little to the imagination. He took another step.

“What time is dinner?” she said, and he thought she sounded a bit breathless.

Talking wasn’t what he wanted and if he stood there any longer sex was something she wouldn’t be able to talk him out of. He

was confusing himself with that thought. He needed to get a grip on his out-of-control, raging thoughts. “Seven-ish.”

“Well, I guess I’ll head to bed.” Leila attempted to slide to one side but his hand on her arm halted her.

“Thanks for the talk, Leila.”

“Sure,” she whispered, then managed to add more evenly, “Talking always helps me. I tend to think about things too much, and then toss and turn because of it. Hopefully, you’ll sleep much better tonight.”

“Sleep?” He pondered the thought, his gaze sweeping over her mouth. “Yeah. That’s an option.”

Reese leaned forward to kiss her forehead. As he did, his hand found her waist. Both his mouth and hand marveled at their warm findings—warmer and softer than he had imagined. “Good night,” he whispered before gently kissing her forehead again.

She tasted of what he’d been needing: genuineness. The fact that she wasn’t trying to purposely entice him only attracted him more. A non-calculating woman. What a pleasure.

“Good night,” Leila said, unable to stop herself from leaning into his mouth. Then she took a small step away.

He looked down and his eyes locked on her chest. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he caressed down her arms. “I’m going to bed now. And it has nothing to do with me being sleepy.”

Leila looked up. Her eyes held a surprise. “I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. Sensual desire swam wildly in his stare. “But if I were you, I’d wear clothing the next time we’re in this kitchen.”

Leila’s nicely arched brows frowned up. Her penetrating yet surprised stare looked as though she were attempting to determine if he was joking with her. “I thought I did ‘this’ time.”

He shook his head slowly, enjoying the perfection of her face. Up close, under the bright lighting, her skin looked near flawless.

Other than her frown, she was a spectacular sight. “I’m a man with a lot of restraint, but another encounter with an outfit like that might weaken me.” He stepped back so that his eyes could heatedly scroll down her body.

Leila looked down. Her nipples were tightening. Probably from his hot gaze. “I’ll wear something less revealing,” she whispered, refusing to look back up. She studied the fuchsia-colored nail polish on her toes. Slowly, she pulled the housecoat closed, but it was too late because the image he’d seen was already imprinted on his thoughts.

Reese’s stare was still lingering at her chest. Her nipples seemed to punch against the thin, powder-blue material. Even with the housecoat pulled together, he could make out their perfect shape through the material and that made his body tense up.

“This...,” he said before placing his knuckles against her tummy. He drew a sensual line up to the area just below her breasts. As his appealing touch eased up her body, he noticed her breathing changed. The heavy rise and fall of her chest were bringing the fullness of her breasts very close to his touch. It was tempting to keep his hand there, but he brought it up to lift her gaze to his. “...is too appealing. If I’m going to stay here, go a little easier on me.”

“I’ll remember that.” Leila’s stance suggested strength of mind, but she was crumbling into thousands of explosive sensual bits. And she knew he could feel it.

“Do,” Reese said huskily, then slowly turned and walked away. It was a lucky thing for Leila that he did. His resistance was disintegrating. Another second and he would have willingly, demandingly, touched her. All over her. And her only option would have been to enjoy it. He certainly would have.

CHAPTER

Four



Getting to have a meal with the man was becoming a real problem.

Leila sat at the table in her staff meeting attempting to focus on the agenda, but thoughts of Reese, who had missed breakfast, kept entering her mind.

“The after-school program...,” Leila had to look down again at her notes to refresh her memory, “...results look good. Keep it up. We’ll discuss this in detail at the next meeting. Thanks, everyone.”

The meeting had lasted about sixty minutes and during the meeting, Leila kept watching the conference room door. She had hoped her secretary, Eunice, would peek in since she had left Reese both breakfast and a note asking him to call her when he got up.

It was amazing that she had a man living under her roof yet found it so difficult to see him. Why did he keep offering to meet her when he didn’t have the time or energy?

Then she thought about it. Although she had suggested breakfast, he'd had so little sleep the previous night that he needed the rest. Since they had planned on seven, Leila had gotten up a little earlier, dressed in jogging pants and an oversized T-shirt because of his previous warning, then made breakfast.

She had knocked on Reese's bedroom door but there was no answer. She peeked inside and saw him sleeping peacefully. She eased the door closed and went to get dressed for work. He was still sleeping when she left for the office, so she left a fruit basket, sausage and eggs, a pot of coffee, and a note on the counter.

After the meeting, Leila headed to her office in the daycare.

"Happy morning to you!" Eunice said, excitedly. Her pretty, dark chocolate face held an odd smile. Leila picked up on it.

"Good morning, again," Leila said, then wondered if Reese had called her this morning. "Any calls?"

Eunice raised a brow. Because she was short and stout, it looked as if she were attempting to stand as she rocked forward to get the message pad. "Several from late last night but I thought you would have gotten them by now."

"Last night?" Leila finally remembered. *Good, Lord, I forgot his messages!* She had every intention of reviewing them after Reese said he had called. But following that heated arousal in her kitchen, she had barely made it to her bedroom without melting. Leila had figured she would listen to them this morning but had waited too long for Reese to wake up and ended up rushing to her meeting.

"I didn't get those. I'll listen to them now," Leila said.

"Too late I've deleted them." Eunice smiled, looking at her pad. "The first came around seven-forty. Mr. McCoy said that he was running late and things with his client weren't going well, that he would see you by eight-thirty. He then called back at that time to say to have dinner without him and that he would stop by later."

"Oh, yeah," Leila said, "I got those."

“I thought so since the last message said to wait up for him,” Eunice said, smiling widely.

Leila could tell by Eunice’s grin that she concluded a lot more had happened when Reese got to her place. One would have to pull out her teeth to get confidential business information from Eunice, but since these messages were anything but businesslike, the grapevine would have wind of them by lunch. All juicy gossip and none of it accurate.

“No other phone messages?” Leila asked.

“Nope!” Eunice was flashing that big grin. “That was the last one.”

“Well, Mr. McCoy got stuck at that business meeting. We never connected last night.” Leila turned her head to her office. She needed to keep Reese under wraps. Nothing fed the gossip mill more than a rumor involving sex.

“I see,” Eunice said to Leila’s retreating back. “But when Reese... I mean, Mr. McCoy stopped by this morning to see you...”

Leila whirled around wide-eyed but was wise enough not to say anything incriminating. “Yes?”

“He didn’t want me to interrupt your meeting because he had another appointment,” Eunice said with a telling look. Leila didn’t like how Eunice was bubbling from all this.

“Good.” Leila took a step toward her office.

“However,” Eunice added, and Leila thought about the joy of hiring a new assistant. Someone senile, who would forget this entire thing, might be a good choice. “On the note he left...” Eunice dug around for it and blatantly read it. “He mentioned he enjoyed breakfast and looks forward to seeing you again tonight.”

Leila snatched the message out of Eunice’s hand.

“You know how you like for me to read all your business correspondence. I thought this might be one.” Eunice attempted a look of innocence. She failed.

“Thank you,” Leila said tightly. She scanned the letter for anything damaging. Luckily, it was just as Eunice had read. It annoyed her that Eunice overemphasized the word ‘again,’ but it damn near caused heart palpitations when Eunice continued.

“He seemed quite concerned about leaving your home’s door unlocked.” Eunice looked ecstatic as if she had personally discovered information on a top-secret FBI coup. “But I told him not to worry since I have the extra key to the bottom lock. When I walked him back up to your loft to lock the door, he mentioned this wouldn’t have happened if you had awakened him before you left.” Eunice flashed another nausea-inducing smile. “But I’m not sure what that was all about.”

Like that will matter when you tell the story to everyone. Since Leila had already lied about seeing Reese last night, correcting it with the truth that nothing happened wouldn’t have made any difference. So, Eunice’s cat-who-ate-the-canary grin stayed intact as Leila walked away.

Amazed at how calmly she walked to her office, she closed the door, smothering an overwhelming need to scream. Her entire staff and a few parents would know Eunice’s version of the truth by the end of the day. Giving the topic any more attention or threatening Eunice would do no good.

There went her image of the upstanding, professional business owner. This was the downside of having a home attached to a business that catered to impressionable minds and promised the best possible setting. The daycare’s relationship with the churches was a perfect example. The facility prided itself on Christian principles. Leila wasn’t a Bible-toting fanatic, but she did believe in providing not only a great learning environment but also a spiritually enriched haven where parents could leave their children. Her greatest allies were the churches in the community. A large group of the kids in the daycare had been enrolled through her relationship with the Reverend Stanley’s AME Church.

Leila had considered moving her residence on many occasions. In the beginning the additional cost of having a home mortgage and renovating a building wasn't cost effective. It was cheaper to live onsite and slowly convert the upper level into something she loved. Then once business began to boom, it had made more sense to stay close by, until now.

In a week, Reese would leave, and things would right themselves. Leila had no idea how she was going to deal with the black eye the gossip would give to her respectable image. She had brought this one on herself.

Sitting at her desk, Leila opened a file. She would throw herself into working on the presentation to the city of Atlanta. It was a program that had the potential to double the size of the daycare in two years, converting the top floor into a tutoring center. Her strongest ally was Shirley Stanley, the wife of Reverend Stanley. Because of the support from Mrs. Shirley, Leila had been able to grow the business faster and by doing so, finally improve the daycare's value to her mother's satisfaction. Her mother hadn't thought her business would succeed. That reminded Leila to prepare for the meeting next week with Mrs. Shirley because the results of that meeting would undoubtedly get back to her mother, the critic. With that thought, she reached for the program outline.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER LEILA WAS STILL WORKING ON THE PROGRAM. Her office telephone rang, and she decided to take a break.

She pushed the half-eaten sandwich aside and grabbed the telephone. "Hello?"

"Hey. It's me, Reese. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

Leila smiled as she leaned back in the chair. "I was looking for a reason to put down this project I'm working on. How's your day going?"

“Better than expected. I’m just leaving my meeting with Lowell.” Reese was driving out of the parking lot, cell phone cradled to his ear. “Leila, I wanted to see you before I left this morning. Things didn’t end quite like they should have between us last night. I would be lying if I said I didn’t find you attractive, but maybe I stepped across the line by touching you like I did.”

“Uhm...” The erotic dreams his touch had ignited flashed in her mind. “Nothing to worry about.”

“So why didn’t you wake me for breakfast? I assumed you didn’t want to see me.”

“That’s not why,” Leila said. “I thought you set the alarm clock.”

“So, my touching you didn’t bother you?” He sounded hopeful. *Aroused*’ would have been a better word to use, Leila thought. “No, you didn’t do anything to upset me.”

“Well, it bothered me,” he said. “Not only did you look good, but you also felt good. A little too good.”

“Reese,” she said breathlessly. She wanted to return the compliment, but she needed to stop this.

“I like the way you just said my name,” he said. “I take it you’re thinking what I’m thinking?”

Only if it involved him touching a lot more of her body’s private places that craved special attention. And doing it while in her bed. “What time are you getting back tonight?” she finally said.

“Around six-thirty. It’ll give me just enough time to shower and change before we leave for Parker’s Place. But if you have other things in mind, I can get there earlier.”

“That’s...” It was a perfect opportunity to act on what she’d been dreaming about. But why start this when she knew he would be gone in a week? “Six-thirty is a good time. I’ll be working until then.”

“Are you sure that’s the answer you want to give me?” he asked.

“I typically use all three locks on the front door, but since you’ll need a way in, I won’t this week. I’ll get you the spare key to the bottom lock. This way you can come and go as you please.”

Reese started laughing. “Now that’s an answer I wasn’t expecting. Are you avoiding my question?”

Sure I am. I’m not going to take you up on an open invitation even if that’s all I’ve been thinking about. Those were Leila’s thoughts, but she never voiced them. “I thought I did answer you. You wanted to know what I was thinking about.”

“No,” he said. “I wanted to know what your dreams were about last night. Mine included me removing lace from your body.”

In the moment that he paused, Leila thought about what it would have felt like if he had, him tasting her breasts with that incredible mouth all while his hand caressed between her legs. “Reese, don’t take this the wrong way. I do think you’re a good-looking man and I’m glad to be able to help by offering you a place to stay...”

“But?” he asked.

“But you’re here for about a week to attend a wedding. One that I’m helping to plan. I would prefer concentrating on that.”

There was a long pause. During that time Leila wondered if he had hung up, but then she heard him exhale.

“I’ve seen the way that you look at me when I’m dressed and when I’m not. And when I am dressed, I get the impression you wish I weren’t. But if you want me to think you’re only concentrating on a wedding, then I’ll go with that for now.”

“That’s a good idea,” Leila heard herself saying. She wanted to tell him being undressed with him very close to her was something that dominated her thoughts.

“Leila, I’m glad you said what you did.”

Leila wondered if she had spoken her thoughts aloud since they were certainly shouting through her brain, or if she’d missed

something. She concentrated on the pieces of their conversation she was positive she had voiced, then responded neutrally. "Sure."

"So, I'll see you this evening?" he said. She agreed and he hung up the phone.

Leila held the office phone in mid-air, staring at it to understand why his voice felt warm to her ear as if he had come through the phone. The warmth was beginning to flow through her veins like honey. Slightly baffled and much provoked, she slowly hung up the phone.

How did he know that I'm this attracted to him? I need to hide it better.



WHEN REESE ARRIVED AT LEILA'S LOFT, SHE OPENED THE DOOR TO his warm sexy smile. He stepped inside looking quite triumphant, indicating his business meetings had gone well.

Leila wore a red sleeveless top with a high collar and a fat bow tied at the waist. The matching pants flared into wide legs. She had on her traditional silver earrings and bracelets.

"You look great," he said.

"Thanks. I have something for you." Leila led the way down the hall, her sandals clicking softly. She entered through the columns that led to the front room and went to the desk at the far end. "Here you go." She gave him the house key. "I need to catch up on some work downstairs. I'll meet you back here in time to leave." She knew it was an excuse to not be in the loft alone with him while he changed. The last time had almost ended with her doing something quite titillating in the bathroom. She wanted to avoid any conversation about her interest in him until she could come up with a better excuse to add distance between them. The paper-thin wedding planning excuse wasn't going to hold him off for long.

When she reentered her loft from the private, inside stairwell that connected to the daycare, he was coming down the hall. His

pressed black pants complemented his build wonderfully as did the gray collarless shirt that matched the blazer he wore.

“Hey, pretty lady,” Reese said, stopping at the door’s entrance. “Let’s go.”

Surprisingly, they conversed amiably on the drive over to Parker’s Place. He was still excited about the business deal and some of that excitement bubbled onto her. Leila forgot about the trepidation she had felt earlier. Talking about business somehow waylaid the pressure of the date. Throughout the ride to the restaurant, Reese never mentioned the attraction she was denying, and Leila assumed he probably had figured out she was avoiding it any way she could. And, of course, he would have been correct.

When they approached the building with the gold-colored neon lights reading Parker’s Place, Leila parked her Lexus in the restaurant’s side parking lot, and she and Reese walked up the lit path to the entrance.

Reese opened one of the restaurant’s double doors and Leila walked inside. They walked through the bar area, heading to the restaurant side to find Parker and Chi.

“Reese!” Parker said joyfully when he spotted his friend heading his way. “Man, it’s good to see you.” They shared an embrace before Parker turned to Leila. “Thanks for taking care of my buddy.”

“Not a problem,” Leila said as Parker kissed her cheek.

Reese scooped up Chi in his arms. “You get prettier each time I see you.” He touched her stomach, “Is there a reason in here for this glow?”

“I always glow,” Chi said.

“It’s because of me,” Parker said cheerfully. “I just have that effect on my woman.”

“I was going to say it’s the skincare program I’ve started.” Chi smiled as she went to put her arm around Parker. “Since he was with me when I bought it, so I guess he’s somewhat responsible.”

“Absolutely,” Parker agreed.

As they all took seats at the table, a tall, shapely black woman with a bit too much makeup walked up. Her black leather mini-skirt and matching top fit snugly.

“I thought I recognized you,” the woman said to Reese. “Long time no see.”

“Hello, Donna,” Reese said as the others bid her a hello. Although Donna was looking at Leila, he didn’t introduce them. “I haven’t been in town in over a year.”

“I must tell Suzette I saw you,” Donna said, looking back and forth between Reese and Leila.

“She knows I’m in town. I’ll see her when she brings Keith from Alabama this weekend for Parker and Chi’s wedding.”

“Yeah, her folks just spoil their grandson.” Donna never acknowledged or offered congratulations on his friends’ wedding. She was too busy staring Leila up and down.

“It’ll be Dad’s time to dote this weekend. Thanks for stopping by. Take care of yourself, Donna.” Reese turned his attention back to the table. He’d kept the conversation with Donna short to discourage her.

“Devious Donna,” Parker said, shaking his head as she walked away.

“I see her here all the time, but she rarely speaks,” Chi commented.

“She’s looking to meet the football players that come by,” Parker continued. “Since I’m taken, there’s little interest or reason to speak.”

Leila didn’t like the vibes Donna was giving off but kept her thoughts to herself. It didn’t matter anyway. Everyone at the table probably had the same opinion of Donna so why waste energy by complaining about the pessimistic woman.

“Donna is also a good friend of Suzette,” Reese added. “That’s probably why she avoids you, Chi. She sided with Suzette,

so my friends were axed.” Donna had been a part of the reason his divorce ended as badly as it had. She had encouraged Suzette to leave him bankrupt if possible. Reese turned to Parker, effectively ridding himself of the negative thoughts before they started. He said cheerfully as he looked about, “I like what you’ve done to this restaurant.”

“Yeah,” Parker said merrily. “I’ll never admit I picked out the decorative colors, but I did do a good job, didn’t I?”

Laughter erupted at the table.

“It has changed a lot since you were last here,” Parker said proudly. “I’ll show you around later. We expanded the stage area to accommodate dinner shows. I get to feed a lot of people because of the musical talent I feature here.”

“My favorite group, Mellow Moods, will be performing at the wedding,” Chi added.

“Reese, you need to come to town more often,” Parker said. “Things change too quickly. What are you going to tell your godson when he asks where you are?”

“What godson?” Reese looked at Chi. “I thought you said you weren’t pregnant?”

“She will be,” Parker said confidently. “And you’ll be the godfather. So back to my point: You’ve gotta visit more.”

“If this deal goes as planned, I’ll have another reason to come to Atlanta.” Reese looked over at Leila.

“Is it going that good?” Parker asked.

“Business is going,” Reese said. “Bill is the kind of businessman who wouldn’t be involved at this point if he didn’t see any value. Atlanta is back on the map for me. I’m liking it.”

“Since when?” Parker asked, surprised. “You do nothing but complain about the city when you come.”

“Since returning this last time.” Reese looked over at Leila again.

A spotlight couldn't have been more revealing than the bright smile she wore when Reese looked at her. Then, when she realized Parker and Chi were also looking at her as well, she reached for the wine list, taking extraordinary interest in its contents.

"Parker, order me my favorite," Chi said, standing. "I need to go to the restroom. Leila, want to join me?"

The look on Chi's face meant 'no' wasn't an option. "Okay."

"What would you like, Leila?" Reese touched her arm as she stood.

"Chicken salad and white wine."

In the bathroom, Leila went to the mirror and checked her makeup. She patted her hair, which was brushed away from her face, showing wonderful, high cheekbones. She rubbed her ruby lips together, then looked at Chi's frown in the mirror.

"I thought you needed to use the bathroom."

"No, you didn't," Chi said. "Spill it! What's with you and Reese?"

"Nothing is going on between us." Leila was back to adjusting her perfectly applied makeup.

Chi's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "We're best friends and you've never lied to me. I can't believe you just did. Something is going on. Whose bed did he sleep in last night?"

"Chi, nothing is going on. Reese slept in the guest room, and I was in my bed."

"No hanky-panky in any other part of the house?"

"No, Chi."

"Did you kiss him?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

Leila guiltily looked down. "It's been too long since I've had a man in my life."

“I knew it! I just knew it!” Chi walked over and turned Leila to face her. “I suspected something after overhearing your conversation. What is going on?”

“I don’t know,” Leila admitted, shaking her head. “I’m just so damn turned on by Reese, and he’s barely touched me.”

“Does Reese know this?”

“Considering I stood in the bathroom and watched as he showered, I guess you can say...yes.”

“Weelllllll now. That explains a part of it.” Chi was smiling. “I understand your attraction is lust. But I think Reese is quite taken with you.”

“It’s mutual lust,” Leila said. “Hence the reason I’m not going to let this go any further. He’s only here for a few more days, which isn’t enough time for anything meaningful to develop. He doesn’t even want to live here, and I have no desire to ever visit the Arizona desert.” Leila attempted to rationalize her actions. “He’s good-looking. I’m lonely. That’s all you’re seeing.”

“I hear you.” Chi nodded, as if agreeing. Her look suggested she didn’t. “Reese had a bad divorce, and that calendar layout has brought him tons of unwanted attention. I get the impression Reese doesn’t like being a sex object.”

“What did he expect those partly nude pictures viewed by millions of women would bring him?”

“Money,” Chi explained, “but not being thought of as a sex toy. For a while there, Parker thought the man would never have a positive thing to say about women. He’s come to terms with the calendar mistake. But he’s still a man.”

“One that I’m also lusting after,” Leila said. “That’s another reason I need to keep this attraction of mine under control.”

“He’s probably still wearied of women that come on too strong,” Chi said. “But you’re staying under the same roof, and nothing has happened. And now you’re drooling over each other.”

“We’re not drooling,” Leila defended.

“Sorry. I meant lusting.”

Leila playfully rolled her eyes and folded her arms. “Reese sort of suggested that’s what’s happening between us. For all I know he might be testing me.” She looked down and tapped the toe of her red shoe against the designer tile floor. Then she looked up to say, “I don’t want to make another mistake, Chi. You know how I get my emotions all tied up into stuff. Even if I am lusting, I wouldn’t be able to separate my emotions from anything physical.”

“Maybe you’re worrying about the wrong thing,” Chi said. “You two can’t keep your eyes off each other. And if I’m right about Reese, you two won’t be able to keep your hands off each other either. Who knows where this could lead? Go see.”

“Your past with lusting relationships has been just as bad as mine. Yours was more devastating. I can’t believe you’re suggesting I do it.”

“Remember, I got pregnant from a womanizer who dumped me. That’s the devastating part. Parker was no saint when I met him, and I wasn’t looking for anything when he came along. But Leila,” Chi smiled reassuringly, “if I’d known love could be as great as it has been with us, I would’ve given everything I own to get it.”

“Reese is so...,” Leila pulled away, looking forlorn, “is so...”

“Is what?” When Leila didn’t respond fast enough, Chi added, “Just tell me what you like about him.”

“He’s handsome. He’s attentive. He’s considerate. He’s frank about wanting me, but not overbearing or pushy. He makes me feel sexy just by talking to me. He’s barely touched me. But Lord, you wouldn’t be able to tell that by my dreams.”

“So, what’s the real problem then?” Chi asked.

“I just don’t know how to handle this. Taper it so I’m okay when he leaves. At least you and Parker live in the same state.”

“Think about it some more.” Chi reached out and hugged her. “I’m not going to pressure you by playing matchmaker. I just

wanted to find out what was going on. Sounds like you want it to be nothing,” Chi walked towards the door to leave, “at least, nothing yet.”



AS THEY APPROACHED THE TABLE, REESE WAS THE FIRST TO SEE THEM coming so he stood up. When they got there, he reached over to pull Leila’s chair out and a little closer to him. “Welcome back,” he said to Leila.

“And I’m sure you’re glad we’re back,” Chi replied, not giving Leila a chance to. Reese smiled at her and winked.

Parker leaned over in his chair to whisper to Chi so as not to be overheard. “Did I win the bet? Leila can’t keep her hands off him, right?”

“Ask me that tomorrow night.” Chi kissed him softly. “But I’ll grant you your wish tonight.”

“So, we get to practice making a baby?” Parker asked, grinning. Chi smiled at his arrogant look. “Sure do.”

Parker whispered again. “According to Reese, she is interested in him. So, I guess I’m going to win this bet after all.”

“Only if Leila gives in first, honey.”

Both Parker and Chi looked at Leila. She was running her fingers up and down the stem of her wineglass as she leaned over to talk to Reese. The way she was stroking that glass had captured Reese’s attention completely. Whatever she had just said made him smile. Reese put his hand on Leila’s leg as he leaned forward to say something in her ear. She burst out laughing and leaned into his shoulder.

“You’re going to owe me big time,” Parker said, grinning at Chi.

CHAPTER

Five



“I had fun tonight,” Leila said as they entered her loft. “It was good seeing Parker again.” Reese closed and locked the door behind them. “I’ve missed my so-called little brother.”

Leila looked back. “You want coffee or wine?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Let’s talk.”

They went to the dark purple sofa in the front room. Reese removed his jacket and tossed it over the arm of the sofa, then sat.

“Want music?” Leila asked.

“No.” He patted the sofa next to him.

“Just a second. I think I’ll have a glass of wine. Be right back.”

Leila stepped past him and sashayed to the bar cabinet on the wall opposite the office. Reese watched the enticing movement of her hips as she left and returned to sit.

“When I look at you, I don’t see a daycare teacher or business owner,” Reese said as she sat next to him. “How did you get into this business?”

“I’ll answer that after you tell me what you see.”

Reese looked around the room. “You decorate like an interior designer.” Then he looked at her. “You walk like a runway model. Look like one too. You serve food and drink on fine china or crystal, yet you put on casual clothes and play with kids all day.”

Leila was laughing when he finished. She took a sip of wine. “Not all day. Up until my father died, I worked with a modeling company that put on major fashion events all over the world. I loved the work but not the atmosphere. Too many plastic people, drugs, and parties. I came home to take care of my father when the cancer got bad. He left me this building and I had enough money to change careers. I didn’t want to go back to that type of lifestyle.”

“Why daycare?”

“My first job was at a daycare facility. I loved it so much I wanted to go into social work, but my mother wanted a model.”

“So, you did what your mother wanted?” Reese asked evenly, wondering how much influence her mother had.

Leila took another sip of wine. It looked to Reese as if she were trying to wash away a bad memory. “During my modeling days, she was able to meet, greet, and get lots of pictures with famous people. That made her happy. Now I can do whatever I want to.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Especially if you like being around kids all the time.”

“Are you complaining about kids?” Leila held her breath.

“Oh, no.” Reese’s face held joy. “I wanted to raise a basketball team of my own. Suzette didn’t.” Reese shrugged. “At least Parker will have a bunch. He’ll make me the godfather, so I might get to help raise that team’s worth of kids after all.”

“How long have you known Parker?”

“Almost eighteen years. We played football together in college. We were both recruited to a pro team. We ended up playing against each other several times. We were both extremely competitive but managed to remain friends even when my team won more games against his.” Reese smiled and rested his arm along the back of the sofa as he adjusted his position.

Leila pushed away the small statuettes decorating the table. “Put your feet up and make yourself comfortable. It’s scratch-resistant glass, so stop frowning at me.”

He stretched his legs out and crossed them at the ankles. Leila leaned back against the sofa.

“I think the world of Chi,” Reese said. “She reached out and saved Parker from drowning in a vat of misery. Because of her, I have my old friend back. And my only family other than my son.”

“The rest of your family has passed away?”

He leaned his head back, studying the ceiling. “That’s what I tell people who aren’t close to me.” Reese looked back up at her. Moving the hand hooked over the sofa, he touched her shoulder. “Because I don’t know any of them. My father was a player, and my mother died giving birth to me. I was told I have a half-dozen siblings somewhere. My aunt and grandmother raised me. Both have since passed away. A year after my mother’s death, my grandmother moved us South. She had no intention of keeping in touch with the mothers of my half-brothers and sisters. That’s why keeping a close relationship with my son is so important. He’s all I’ve got left.”

“He lives with his mother?”

“They live here in Atlanta some of the time. Suzette also has a home in Alabama where her folks live. That’s where Keith is now. I’ll get to see him this weekend. Suzette agreed to bring him over for the wedding. I call him my Reese’s piece.”

Leila laughed at the play on words. “Is his being a sweet kid the reason you nicknamed him after candy?”

“He’s an eight-year-old rough-and-tumble boy. The perfect boy child in every way. But he loves me. Thinks the world of Dad.” He smiled with fatherly pride.

“Based on what I know about his dad,” Leila said, “I can understand that.”

Reese looked meaningfully at her as he tightened his hold on her shoulder. “That’s good to hear. Do you think you have enough information to support that claim?” He smiled that award-winning smile.

“I do,” Leila said confidently, softly. “Chi and I have been best friends from the day she brought her son to enroll at my daycare. I trust her opinion. I’ve heard both her and Parker talk about you enough. And the short time I’ve been with you has confirmed what I’ve heard.”

“Are you trying to make me like you?” Reese grinned, enjoying her sincere stare. “If so, it’s working.”

She took a few moments to respond. “I got the impression you already liked me.”

His expression turned serious, then unreadable, then flattering. “I guess I should work harder to keep that under wraps because it seems you would rather I not.”

Leila cautiously looked down at her crossed legs as her hand smoothed over the red material. “That’s not it. I like having someone’s attention... your attention. But...” Leila shook her head as she struggled to find the right words, words to compliment without sounding enticing. Was there such a thing as neutral words to describe lust?

“What don’t you like about me?” he asked since she wasn’t going to finish her explanation.

That was a question a less confident man wouldn’t ask. Reese was secure enough with himself that no matter what her answer,

he would probably shrug his shoulders and continue as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Leila looked up and smiled warmly. This one was easy to answer. “Distance. You live on the other side of the USA.”

“You got out of that nicely. It’s not me, it’s where I’m living.” Reese laughed, putting his feet down. He leaned forward and picked up her glass, thinking to change the topic. “Can I have a sip?”

“I don’t think saying no to you is an option,” she said since he had the glass tipped up.

Reese looked back over his shoulder, the burner on his stare turned back up a notch. “Are we still talking about the sip of wine?”

Leila blinked a few times then nodded yes. This was one of his pushy little habits she found both annoying and endearing. He was confident. “I’ve seen your calendar layout.”

Reese grimaced, then took another sip of wine, an attempt to wash away the ugly thought. The heat from before began to seep away, the burner now off. “So, you think I’m a playboy or player of some type?”

“I was thinking more of my reaction to it,” Leila said. “I’m in lust and don’t want to be.”

That honest response softened him. Reese turned to face her and then reached over to wrap his hands around her waist. When he tugged slightly, she easily slid across the slick leather toward him.

Why did he feel as though he was the one being pulled? Maybe because the lust she was denying herself was something he wanted her to act on. And that was a contradiction to his edict. He wanted it to be more than just lust and he couldn’t fathom why just yet.

His face was inches away from hers when he reached up to caress her cheek. Reese watched her expression change from surprise to curiosity to something warmer. Deeply hidden but still detectable was a hint of the lust she talked about. Leila smiled and

nibbled at her bottom lip. Slowly, the pink tip of her tongue licked its center.

Reese watched in silence, completely mesmerized, completely taken. A temperature quite close to sizzling began to take hold. He wanted to experience her mouth firsthand. See just what that heat consisted of.

“Leila.” It came out huskier than he wanted. “Me too. But I honestly don’t know what I’m looking for with you. I just know I want more. Does that make any sense?”

“More of what?” she asked quietly. Sensing he was searching for the right words, she said, “More talks? More friendship? More touching?” Because he looked a little introspective, she added for clarity, “Something physical? Or something spiritual?”

“Maybe some of all of the above,” he finally offered.

“What happens when you go back to Arizona?” She reached to caress his face; a lone finger ran under his lip. She enjoyed the sensations of fine beard hairs on smooth skin.

This was a glimpse into her resistance. Reese massaged that finger with his mouth. “I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“I have,” Leila said, enjoying the way his warm hands moved up and down her waist.

“And?” he asked.

“And it doesn’t look like much of anything when you return home.”

Reese placed his forehead against hers, his hands at her waist. Silence ticked as he considered how sweet she might taste. He found her different approach to be attractive. She wasn’t peeling off her clothes and demanding pleasure. But he suspected that if she did, he would be completely absorbed, blissfully sated. “I guess I can understand how you came up with that.” He moved his mouth to her temple and kissed her. Softly, slowly, his lips moved over her closed eye. He kissed again, then up to her brow and back

to her temple. Holding his mouth there he felt her pulse beat to a song his soul was humming. “What do you suggest we do?”

Leila leaned closer, placing her head on his shoulder. She kissed the underside of his neck. “I don’t know.” She leaned back to look up at him. “I just don’t know,” she whispered.

“We’ll think of something.” Reese nodded, taking one of her hands in his. He stood and pulled her up to face him. Running the back of his other hand down her face he said softly, “It’s late. Let’s go to bed.”

Her expression seemed puzzled, not sure if that meant together or not. “Okay.”

Reese led the way, pulling her along. She turned off the light in the front room, and then they went down the hallway. Reese’s bedroom was the first door on the left. He stopped at the entrance to the dark bedroom and then turned to Leila. The dim glow of the hallway light illuminated just about every expression that crossed Leila’s face. Reese saw mostly doubt dipped in a dose of excitement and anticipation.

He smiled. Making love to her could be a cure for her loneliness and a restoration of his faith. She would be his haven bottled up in a slim, chocolate, fine body. He needed to taste a little of that now. He pushed her back against the wall.

His hands ignited a path from hips to butt, where he squeezed softly as he pressed closer. His mouth came close to hers and Leila tried to kiss him, but he lifted away. She looked a little surprised. When she opened her mouth to ask him why he moved away, he hungrily filled her mouth with his tongue. Tasting hers, kissing hers, licking hers, exploring hers.

Caught off guard, Leila let out a little cry of joy and longing as she fiercely wrapped her arms around him.

His hands began to explore her body under the soft, red blouse. As he found her breasts, his mind conjured up a fantasy of what she would look like without that blouse.

The kiss intensified as his head bent to the right, hers to the left. When Leila let out a soft moan, he squeezed her nipple between his fingers. Before she knew it, the bow tie that held the blouse closed was somehow undone and his hands went behind her to unclasp her bra. He caressed her bare back, then her waist, all the while sampling her mouth. She tasted of wine and sweetness.

Reese slowed his assault on her mouth as he remembered her look of doubt. He planted small kisses against her lips before saying, "I think it's safe to say I want you."

Leila rubbed her hand down the front of his pants to cup his penis. He moaned in satisfaction. "I can tell that you do," she said, gently squeezing. She was enjoying how heated his look became as she continued her touches.

He looked down at that marvelous hand of hers. "I like that."

He was hesitating. Debating whether he should ask to make love to her or muster up the strength to walk away.

Leila caressed his chest and his shoulders. She wrapped her arms around him and leaned up to kiss him gently. She stepped back to adjust her blouse. "You have a hell of a goodnight kiss."

He grinned. "I do want more." Taking her shoulders, he pulled her closer and said a little more seriously. "We both do. I think we're both a little vulnerable right now. I don't want to wake up with you regretting we made love because of it." That was a feeling he knew too well and disliked immensely. Reese began righting her blouse and quickly tied a lopsided bow to secure it. Effectively hiding the sexy vision that was tearing at his resolve. He was flirting with a fire that was already beginning to sear him. The tight rein he claimed to have on his resistance was already loosening, melting from the heat she emanated. At least she had the decency to acknowledge her lust and her concern over it. It would do well for him to rethink his lust. But damn, he wanted her.

He stepped back.

She sobered. "Are you sending me to bed now?" she asked.

TAKEN BY YOU

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Go to bed with me, but let’s just hold each other close tonight. When we wake up, tell me if you still want this. Then I’m making love to you.”

CHAPTER

Six



Waking up wrapped in Reese's arms was an exhilarating experience. He felt too good: so warm, so comforting, and strangely enough, protecting. She'd slept peacefully and was sure it was because he was there. Getting up to rush to the office wouldn't be a driving force today.

She had been awake for about thirty minutes, his body spooned to hers. She was resting her head on the pillow next to his. She turned gingerly to wrap her arm around his waist, her fingers rubbing around the waistband of his pajama pants. The floor-length, white satin gown she wore was up to her knees, allowing her to slide her leg between both of his. She lay there listening to his easy breathing as she watched the tops of trees slow-dance with the morning breeze.

This was better than sex. This was more potent, a comforting promise.

The pressure of not knowing what tomorrow would find just didn't seem important anymore.

Initially, Leila had fallen in lust with Reese without knowing him. He had the body, the smile, and the face that made every heterosexual woman's dream worth not waking up from. She had touched that calendar layout of him many times, wishing he were beside her. Never had she put a personality with the body. Now that she had been given a chance to discover more about him, she painted in the finishing touches to her mind's picture of him in warm, soothing colors. He was much different, more desirable than she had originally thought.

Reese was truly decent. Worthy of a friendship, maybe more.

Although they had cuddled and talked after climbing in bed, he'd only kissed and held her, never once suggesting that they rethink his request to just cuddle. They held and touched each other until they had fallen asleep. During the night, they'd moved apart.

Leila has awakened thinking about his words, "...Go to bed with me, but let's just hold each other..."

Now she considered her strange feeling of safety. Immediately she concluded it was due to the kind way in which he'd removed her concern about waking up the morning after with regrets. She had never been the kind of woman who could casually sleep around and not be concerned with what everyone, including the lover from the night before, would think about her.

She had gotten that from her mother. Elizabeth Chamberlain preached that other people's impressions of a person were more important than one's impression of self.

"The world will judge you and criticize your weaknesses," her mother had often said. "Any self-respecting woman should present an image of righteousness."

Elizabeth would have a coronary if she knew her only daughter was in bed wrapped around a man she would probably never see again after a few days. Luckily, her mother lived in Chicago

and rarely called. This was Leila's time to willingly, privately, indulge herself.

Reese leaned back a little and she tightened her hold on him. His hand clasped the one hand she held against his firm stomach. He moved his head toward her, and she rested hers against his chest. Leila couldn't see his eyes but could tell from the side of his mouth that he was smiling.

"Hey," Reese said softly, reaching his hand around her waist.

"Good morning." She kissed his chest.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, caressing down to her thigh.

"Very well." Her hand smoothed over his waist.

Glancing at the clock, he said, "It's almost seven. We overslept. Ready to get up?"

Leila leaned up on an elbow and looked down at him. "Stay in bed with me a little longer?" she asked softly. The meaning behind that was clear and the wickedly lustful gaze it caused was thrilling, a little frightening.

"I like your idea," Reese growled. "Let me go get rid of my morning breath. I'll be right back." As he threw back the covers and sat up, his cell phone rang. "If that's Bill canceling my morning meeting with his group, I'll stay as long as you want me to." Looking at the caller ID, he frowned, then looked back at Leila. "I need to take this."

She wasn't quite sure about his change in mood. He seemed to withdraw. "Okay."

Reese said hello and listened. He occasionally murmured an acknowledgment as the other person talked. "Our agreement for this weekend shouldn't change because of that." He stood and began pacing. "Put Keith on a plane. He's flown alone to Arizona enough times."

Reese was looking more agitated by the second and Leila wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He went to the high window

and stared out at a sunny, calm day. None of that changed his brooding mood.

“Listen, Suzette,” Reese snapped, then tried to calm himself. “I’ll just come there. Just because your plans have changed doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be able to...” Suzette interrupted him and he placed his hand on his hip, his arm flexing. “The hell with that,” he continued angrily. “I have a meeting in a few hours that I can’t miss. After that, I’ll head straight there.” Reese ended the call still looking out the window. He ran frustrated fingers over his hair as he exhaled and shook his head.

Leila was leaning back against the headboard, her knees pulled to her chest, the white gown draping to the covers. “Everything okay?” she asked when he just stood there staring at her.

“Leila, I’m sorry but I can’t stay. I need to go to Alabama to get my son. Suzette planned a last-minute trip to California. If I don’t go get him, she’ll take Keith with her, and I won’t get to see him at all. Knowing my ex-wife, it’s going to be a major ordeal. I need to pack so that I can leave my meeting and head to Alabama. I’ll be back for the wedding.”



LEILA HAD BEEN AT HER DAYCARE OFFICE FOR SEVERAL HOURS, BUSY-ing herself with the routine of managing Midas Touch Daycare. It would soon be the Midas Touch Daycare and Learning Center after she expanded, specializing in tutoring kids with special needs. Statistically, African Americans weren’t faring as well in the public educational system. Therefore, she wanted to do what she could to reach out and touch those in her immediate area.

She busied herself with work so as not to think about how abruptly Reese McCoy had come and gone from her life. He had spent the time they were supposed to be making love by instead packing. He had showered, dressed for his meeting, kissed her on the forehead, and told her bye. Leila figured Suzette would do

what she could to entice Reese to be with her, probably up until a minute before the wedding.

It seemed that Suzette McCoy had made last-minute changes to go to California was counterproductive. It had already been two months since Reese had seen his son.

The ringing of the telephone broke Leila's trance. Chi's cheerful voice chirped in her ear. "Hey there! I didn't expect you to answer."

"Why are you surprised that I'm in my office?" Leila said. "I'm a working owner."

"I guess I thought that because you and Reese left the restaurant late... I just assumed you two would have slept in..." Chi let the meaning dangle, eagerly hoping Leila would give details.

"I have too much work to do," Leila defended.

Chi picked up on the salty tone. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is just peachy. With so much going so well in my life, why wouldn't it be?"

"Leila," Chi said softly, "what's wrong?"

Leila looked up to make sure her office door was closed. She flopped back in the chair. Her spirits deflated when she concentrated on the reason Reese left. "What's wrong is that I didn't want to have sex with Reese because I have these crazy notions that intimacy like that would and should have your heart attached to it. Maybe that shouldn't matter. I wanted more. And I'm upset about it!"

Chi was trying to sort through the jumbled statements. "So, you still haven't had sex with him, and it now bothers you?"

Leila attempted to calm herself and added, "Well, why else would I be upset that Reese left my bed this morning to go see his ex-wife?"

Chi went completely silent for several seconds. "Are you sure? Reese wouldn't do that."

“Reese got up this morning, packed, and is on his way to see her. It seems Suzette has some important things to do, therefore will not be bringing Keith to Atlanta. If Reese doesn’t go to Alabama, he won’t get to see him until who-knows-when.”

“Damn it, that woman just makes me want to spit!” Chi was getting angry too. “She promised both Reese and Parker that Keith would be here for the wedding. It’s women like her who turn a completely good man sour against the rest of us.”

“She could have brought the boy down earlier,” Leila suggested, feeling a kindred spirit. “She could have put him on a plane. Airlines make special arrangements for children flying alone.”

“I wonder what else is going on to make Reese have to go there?” Chi was thinking out loud, unknowingly adding a level of concern Leila hadn’t previously had.

“You tell me,” Leila suggested.

For the first time, Leila was thinking of reasons Reese would want to be with Suzette. Leila’s mother and father had lived in different states for the last twelve years of their marriage. Although separation papers were filed, they never completed the divorce and never got back together. Leila’s father hadn’t planned to ever marry again, and her mother ultimately couldn’t stand the embarrassment of a divorce. For many years, they traveled to spend horny nights in each other’s bed. It was easier for her mother to justify having sex with her estranged husband than to disgrace herself by sleeping with someone else who didn’t offer longevity. One man leaving Elizabeth Chamberlain was bad enough. She didn’t want to subject herself publicly to another failed relationship. Leila secretly thought her mother attempted to mend the relationship, and her father always seemed to placate her as best he could.

Thankfully, she hadn’t made love with Reese. She could only imagine how much lower she would feel if she had. “Do you think that Reese still has feelings for his ex-wife?” Leila asked hesitantly.

“I would hope not.”

“Chi, do you know why Reese and Suzette broke up?”

“Reese never talked to me about it, but Parker says that Suzette hitched herself to Reese when he turned pro football. She went after him hard to get married, especially when he started to get a little fame. Keith was a convenient mistake and Reese married her after she got pregnant. Neither Reese nor Parker wanted a long-term career as a professional football player. Reese’s heart wasn’t in it and Parker had a bad knee. Both were in it for money to finance their businesses. They had both talked about going into the restaurant business, possibly together, but Suzette hated the restaurant business more than she did Reese quitting football. She claimed she didn’t go to college to end up waiting on tables, even if it was her own restaurant. When Reese was approached about a shipping deal, Suzette wasn’t ecstatic about it, but her father helped Reese with the business startup, so she supported it.”

“Do you know who filed for divorce?” Leila asked.

“Reese did. He also filed for full custody of his son. But his constant traveling, weeks on end to keep his business afloat made it easier for Suzette to win. I’m not sure if she wanted custody or wanted to spite Reese by taking his son away.”

“That’s just great,” Leila said, annoyed. This sounded too much like the story of her mother and father and that added to her frustration. Leila’s mother had used her as a weapon to hurt her father many times. Especially when her mother wanted to spend time with her father. Last-minute meetings were arranged to rendezvous.

Reese was the giving type, just as her father had been. In Leila’s experience, men like that seemed to be used if they found themselves connected to the wrong type of woman.

“Suzette sounds like my mother,” Leila said bitterly.

“I don’t know either one well enough, but it sounds to me like you’re worried about him seeing his ex-wife. Don’t worry about that. Reese can’t stand being in the same room with her.”

“Neither could my father, but that never stopped him from continually sleeping with my mother.”

“Leila,” Chi said. “Pick up your purse and come meet me for lunch. I can tell you’re concerned about what’s going on. Let’s talk more face-to-face.”

Leila didn’t want to hang up just yet. There was one other thing that was nagging at her. “I know I shouldn’t be having feelings for a man I’ll probably never see again, but last night I got the impression that could change. Now I’m thinking I was wrong.” Leila exhaled. “His son is only a few hours’ drive away. Reese isn’t coming back until Friday night. If Reese truly disliked his ex-wife, why would he want to be there for two days?”

Chi said with great concern, “I don’t know, Leila.”

Yes, she was glad they hadn’t made love. Otherwise, slime would be the only comparable thing she would be able to relate to.

CHAPTER

Seven



Thursday night started on a good note for Leila.

She went to Parker's home for a celebration barbecue.

It was a small gathering of people, but the laughter coming from the backyard gave the impression of a huge party.

"Come on in!" Parker's mother said, opening the front door. "I thought I left the door unlocked."

"Hi, Harriett," Leila said, walking into Harriett's open arms. Because Harriett was shorter, Leila bent so that her arms could go around her neck for a tight hug.

"Leila, it's been too long since I've seen you. I thought you would have come and visited with me by now." Harriett was a warm-spirited woman who could honestly say she never met a stranger. Harriett lived in Florida and only visited on rare occasions but knew all of Parker's neighbors and all his friends. "I heard you were stuck babysitting Reese." Harriett looked outside. "Is he not with you?"

“He’s had to make an emergency trip to Alabama. He’ll be back tomorrow night for the rehearsal.”

“Well, come join us out back.” Harriett led the way.

Several people were sitting in the great room merrily chatting. A card game was also going on. Leila greeted and waved at the people she knew as she followed Harriett to the glassed-in patio, where another half dozen people were lounging. Several tables were set up and covered with tablecloths. Parker and a friend of his, Marcus, were standing at the grill outside on the lawn.

“Chi,” Harriett called, opening the door, “look who I found.”

“Leila!” Chi was seated at a table with two others. “I’m glad you made it.” When Leila got to the table, Chi added. “You remember Parker’s sister Patricia and her husband Mac?” Leila thought Patricia was as pretty as Mac was handsome. If she had an older sister, she’d want one like Patricia who always seemed to glow.

“I sure do,” Leila said, brightening. “When did you two get in from Florida? I thought you weren’t planning to come to town until tomorrow.”

“I thought so too,” Mac said, stretching out his long legs as he wrapped his arm around Patricia’s chair. “But I have a demanding mother-in-law.”

“I heard that,” Harriett whined playfully, heading to the patio bench on the other side of the room. She sat down next to an older, very fit-looking gentleman.

“Entertain Coach and stop eavesdropping,” Mac joked. He looked back at Leila. “She claimed the party tonight wouldn’t be the same without us. The only problem I had was that there wasn’t a party originally scheduled for tonight.”

Leila laughed at that. It was good to laugh after feeling slightly betrayed by Reese’s departure. This was good medicine for her mood. “Don’t blame me. I was only responsible for planning the dinner party following the rehearsal tomorrow night.”

Chi added, “We ended up having so many people visiting all week that Parker wanted to do something fun tonight.”

“I’m not complaining,” Patricia said. “It’s been too long since I’ve seen you all. This way I’ll get more time with you before the honeymoon.”

Leila joined them at the table. This was a great idea that satisfied everyone. She had moped all yesterday, even after Chi had taken her to lunch and later to Macy’s, her favorite department store, trying to lighten her mood.

“Hey, Leila,” Parker called from the grill. He was wearing an apron with ‘If you don’t like my cooking, eat at home’ written in red on the front of it. “Dinner will be served shortly.”

Leila waved to him.

“That grill has more gadgets than the kitchen stove,” Chi said.

“My brother professed to be an expert cooker years ago,” Patricia said. “No matter how charred the meat is, he claims it’s perfect.”

“Being an expert at barbecuing myself,” Mac added, “I take issue with that.”

“Sweetheart, we don’t have a grill,” Patricia reminded her husband. “We have two stoves that you don’t use, but no grill.”

“Patricia,” Mac had a confused expression, “what point are you trying to make exactly?” He grinned.

They all laughed at him.

“I married you for better or worse,” Patricia said, laughing. She patted Mac’s arm. “But I think not having a grill falls into the better category.”

Parker and Marcus were coming inside carrying trays of cooked steaks and chicken. They placed the trays on the buffet table set up at the back of the room. They all got a whiff of nicely seasoned meat.

Parker came to the table and leaned to kiss Leila on the cheek. “Now, that’s a proper welcome.”

“You smell like dinner.” Leila smiled up at him.

“Doesn’t it make your mouth water?” Parker grinned. “But you’ve got to control yourself for another few minutes. I’m not quite done cooking.” Then he turned to Chi. “I’m ready with the hot dogs for the kids.”

The kids consisted of Mac’s teenage daughter, Brenna, from his first wife; Courtney, the overly talkative four-year-old daughter of Mac and Patricia; and Chi’s seven-year-old son, Anthony.

Chi stood up. “Let me go get them. I’m sure I’ll have to drag Anthony away from a computer game.”

“See how nicely my future wife is preparing for the twins we’re having?”

“Twins?” Patricia said excitedly.

“Congratulations!” Mac said.

“What did you say?” Harriett jumped up and came to stand next to Parker. “I’m going to be a grandmother?” she asked excitedly.

Leila just shook her head, laughing. She knew the truth.

“I’m not pregnant with twins,” Chi said.

“But Parker just said...” Harriett pointed an accusatory finger at him.

“Mom, you’re already a grandmother. And, yes, we’re going to have twins,” Parker said confidently, as though that added clarity. “Chi is losing a bet we made and the pay-up is her having twins.”

Patricia started laughing. “Parker, you know you can’t request twins like putting in an order at McDonald’s.”

“Why not, if she loses the bet?” He was defending his point regardless of how ridiculous it sounded.

Harriett joined forces with her son. “Medical breakthroughs happen every day. And Chi being a doctor gives us full access. I would like to have twin grandkids. Can we make it a boy and a girl?” She looked from Parker, who was considering the idea as

if it had merit, to Chi who was laughing uncontrollably. Harriett turned to Leila. "Don't you think that's a good idea?"

"More kids for my daycare," Leila said. "I love the idea."

"Mom, I'll see what I can do about that." Parker turned to Chi and talked in code. "If she falls by our wedding, then we're having twins. A boy and a girl."

"Who's falling down?" Harriett wanted to know, looking about.

"No one," Chi hurriedly said before Parker could spill the beans regarding their bet about whether it would be Leila or Reese who fell in love first.

"Just what is the nature of this bet?" Mac asked calmly.

"Well, it started when..." Parker tried to say but Chi elbowed him in the ribs. "Ooooouuuccch!" he complained, drastically rubbing his side. "I'm going to need that rib for walking down the aisle."

"Never mind the bet," Chi said to Mac, then gave Parker an if-you-dare-tell look. "Parker, you better come help me with the kids." Chi took his hand and led him away from the group.

Harriett looked at Leila. "Do you know what this bet is about?"

"Not really," Leila said. "All I know is that Parker has been wanting a son so that he and Anthony can have a playmate. He's been on this baby thing for a few weeks now, but the betting part is news to me."

Harriett frowned. "Well, you're Chi's best friend. You're failing in your responsibility."

Leila laughed. "I'm sure you have a perfectly great explanation for that vague statement."

"Be nose! Go ask her for me. Chi is as stubborn as my son and she's probably trying to win this bet. I suggest she start participating by helping him. Because when my son gets something in his head, he won't quit 'til he gets his way." Harriett finished that declaration by putting her hands on her hips for emphasis.

“Since it involves getting pregnant,” Mac said, smiling, “I do believe Chi is already participating.”

Harriett looked confused for a second, thought about it, and blushed. “I do believe you just might be right,” she said in a bit of a rush, then turned around. “Now just where did Coach get off to?”

They laughed as Harriett hurried away.

Dinner was as tasty as Parker had predicted and the laughs and camaraderie among friends and family couldn’t have been better. Leila was feeling completely at ease hours later as she sat talking with Chi and Patricia in the den.

Patricia and Mac had been married for several years and he was still completely devoted to her. Leila watched in appreciation as he waited on her, tended to her requests, and hugged her often. Chi was ecstatic about finding new love and she couldn’t have found a better man than Parker. The two couples gave Leila hope for relationship longevity. She had never been close to having what either woman was experiencing but she realized now that she did want something wholesome in her life.

“Leila?” Patricia was saying. “Did you hear that?”

Leila hadn’t, she’d been daydreaming. “I’m sorry, my mind was wandering.”

“Based on that smile,” Chi said, “I take it as a good wander?”

“I’m not telling.” Leila winked, then looked askance at Patricia. “What did I miss?”

“Parker just,” Patricia started but looked up and saw him walking in the room, “called for you.”

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” he said from the doorway. “I guess my buddies are right. Good women are hard to find.”

Patricia laughed. “Parker, you’ve been acting silly tonight. It must be because you’re getting married in two days.”

“Right now, I’m a man on a mission,” he answered matter-of-factly, then grinned.

“The wedding has had him hyped all week,” Chi said, reaching out for his hand. “I think I like it.”

Parker leaned down and kissed Chi. “Thank you, honey.” Then he turned to Leila to say very sincerely, “You have a phone call. You can take it in my office.”

“Well, well,” Patricia said as Leila stood up. “I’m eager to know who requires her presence privately.”

Parker wrapped his arm around Leila and escorted her out. “My buddy Reese,” he said, smirking victoriously at Chi. He held up two fingers indicating twins. Chi affected a puzzled look. Parker winked and left the room, taking Leila to secure his chance of winning.

As Leila sat behind the desk and picked up the telephone, Parker closed the office door.

“Hi, Reese.”

“You sound so good right now,” Reese said. “How are you?”

“I’ve been with the Ryans all evening. How can I be anything but in a good mood?”

“I figured as much when I couldn’t get you on your cell phone.”

“I’m glad you figured out how to find me,” she cooed. “How’s Keith?”

“Growing.” Reese’s mood got lighter. “I swear, every time I see him, he looks taller. He’s a good kid. You’ll get to meet him tomorrow.” Reese’s tone lost a little of its assurance. “I mean, if you’re not too busy.”

This was the first time Leila had ever heard Reese second-guessing himself and wondered if it was caused by seeing Suzette.

“Of course. I’m not too busy,” Leila said. “I would love to meet him. And if you have meetings to go to, you can check him into the daycare. We can keep him busy for you.”

“Thanks for offering, but Mama Harriett has already taken first dibs. She and Coach are taking all the kids out touring tomor-

row.” There was a long pause. She heard Reese exhale. It sounded as if he needed a break from a long day’s battle. “Leila, I want to see you when I get back. I’ve rearranged my schedule to free up tomorrow morning. Do you think we can spend some time together?”

Leila remembered Reese’s original plan was to fly home on Sunday, and now Saturday would probably be spent with his son until the wedding that evening. Tomorrow would offer her a few precious hours. Their final hours to spend alone. This was all the time she was now left with. Remnants.

And she wondered about his trip, his tone. Something in his voice made it sound as if seeing her was very critical. He’d even rearranged his schedule just to make it happen. She was glad. Tomorrow morning would be the last chance she would have to build a pleasurable memory.

“I would like that,” she said, hoping she sounded as sincere as she felt. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again.”

He did it again. A long exhale.

Leila didn’t like the sound of his pitiful exhale. His voice was filled with frustration when he finally said, “I didn’t have to make this trip. Keith could have skipped this so-called major event. Suzette didn’t want him to miss. My in-laws had a party.”

“I’m sure Suzette had her reasons.” Leila tried to sound neutral.

“I would rather have spent time with you,” Reese said.

Leila found herself feeling even more silly for doubting his interest in her. Regardless of everything else, he had wanted to be with her. She hated how the ugliness of her past seemed to cloud her every reaction to him. Two days ago, she’d feared intimacy. Now she feared she’d missed a chance at it.

“What time will you be here?” She hoped she didn’t sound desperate.

“As soon as I can. No later than nine.”

“Reese?” Leila needed to say something that expressed how she honestly felt about the abrupt ending of their last encounter. “I missed you yesterday.”

“Leila.” The way he called her name held so much meaning. It sounded like longing. “I’m missing you now.”

CHAPTER

Eight



A stray sunbeam fell on the clock. It was a few minutes to nine. A few minutes more and Reese's arrival would end her fretting.

Leila had already showered and dressed in a black sundress with red flowers. She stood looking at her reflection in the master bathroom's mirror as she buckled the thick belt that matched the dress. She took her time pressing down her short hair to frame her face. Then applied a touch of makeup because she wanted to look especially pleasing for Reese. She sprayed on a hint of jasmine-scented perfume, patted the sides of her hair again, and smiled at her image.

Humming an upbeat tune, she stepped back and assessed the finished look. *Damn good*, she thought.

"Leila..."

It was said so softly she thought she'd imagined it. Turning, she jumped. "Reese!" A hand went to her fast-pounding heart. "You're back!"

"I didn't mean to startle you." He was grinning with that sexy mouth, looking absolutely pleased to see her.

The initial racing of her pulse from fright quickly turned into pulse-racing excitement. She'd forgotten that she'd left the two top locks unfastened so he could come in just in case she didn't hear the doorbell.

She was smiling now. "How long have you been here?"

"A few minutes. I called out when I first came in and knocked on your bedroom door, but you were too busy humming and playing in the mirror. I like the way you play."

Leila struck a pose and turned around with the grace of a ballerina. "Minus the gray hair you just gave me, how do I look?"

Reese laughed. "You're lovely. With or without gray, but I don't see any."

Leila just stood there watching him watch her. All the scenarios she had come up with last night for rushing into his awaiting arms just didn't seem to fit with him leaning against the doorframe, arms folded comfortably at his chest.

His usually close-cut beard had grown out a little. It added a hint of ruggedness, especially with the denim jeans and boots he wore.

Oh, what the hell! I'm going to stop denying myself. *I need to touch him.* Leila walked purposefully toward him. As she got closer, he pushed away from the wall. She didn't stop until she was in his arms with hers wrapped tightly around his neck. She tiptoed and pressed a kiss just below his ear before whispering in it, "I'm glad you're here." Then she kissed his cheek, his chin. She looked up and instantly related to the stirring attraction she saw.

"I wish I'd never left."

Hearing that felt as good as the titillating strokes he ran down her back and across her butt. Leila opened her mouth over his, exhaling her desire into him. Then she kissed him passionately, deeply. The more they kissed, the more she wanted to. And Reese gave her what she wanted.

He leaned back against the doorframe, pulling her closer to him without ever removing his mouth from hers. With his legs parted she fitted nicely between them. Once there, Leila ground against his hardness. She marveled at the deep groan he made.

Leila felt herself being moved back against the bathroom counter. The buckle of her belt was loosened and buttons up the front came undone. Reese pushed the dress off her shoulders, but the loosely fastened belt prevented the dress from hitting the floor. He kissed her shoulder, then nibbled and sucked gently on her neck before kissing her ear as his hands pulled up the folds of the dress.

“Did you really miss me?” he whispered with a hint of vulnerability and a splash of wanting.

Leila wondered why that sounded as if he had doubts. She leaned back to look at him. “Yes.” She was about to show him just how much but wondered if they were alone. “Where’s Keith?”

“He’s with Harriett,” he whispered, then went back to nibbling her sensitive parts along her collarbone and neck. His tongue played between nibbles. Then lowered to lick the softness between her breasts.

“Then you’re all mine this morning,” she said, enjoying the steamy path he made down her chest.

Reese smiled as he looked into her eyes. “Just what are you going to do with me?” He was rubbing his forming erection against the junction of her legs.

“Hold that thought.” Leila went to the medicine cabinet and got a box of condoms. She caught a glimpse of her disheveled look in the mirror and giggled. She had more lipstick on her face

than her lips, the perfectly styled short hair wasn't anymore, and the dress was hanging half off.

"And to think I spent all that time trying to look pretty for you."

"You look better than that." He reached for a washcloth and carefully wiped away the lipstick from her cheeks. He ran his fingers over her hair, massaging his way to the back of her neck. Next, he unbuckled the belt, and the dress fell to the floor, revealing a lacy black bra and matching thong panties.

Reese groaned huskily. "Now you look perfect."

Taking his hand, she walked backward, pulling him with her. Leila helped him remove his shirt and by the time they got to the bed, Reese was stepping out of his jeans and boots. He stood nude in front of her as she sat on the side of the bed admiring his body. Her hand rubbed up his thighs and over his penis. Its reflex was immediate. Rock hard, swaying as she stroked.

Reese sucked in air and exhaled rugged desire. He stopped her before her caress brought a premature end to their interlude. Leila's bed was already made, so he laid her back onto smooth covers and climbed atop her. His stiffness pressed against the lace of her thong.

Reese's hand went to the side of her head as he rubbed his lips across hers, slowly dipping his tongue in for a sensuous sample.

She felt like the calm just before the storm. A sensuously hungry storm was moving inside her, heading his way. When the storm broke, it would be tremendous.

He looked into her eyes and caught a glimpse of its force. He wanted to be swept away, blown away, caught within it.

Reese kissed his way down the side of her neck, licked along her collarbone, then kissed his way to the black lace of her bra. His teeth teased at her breast's roundness as he pulled the straps off her shoulders and unfastened the bra.

The slow attention to detail he was giving her nipples sent trickles of excitement through her. She bent her knees to support

herself, pressing against his hardness, escalating her arousal. His groans of pleasure were her reward.

The constant pressure was sending lightning bolts of excitement through him. The storm was at hand. He shifted his weight and slid his hand under the thin cloth of the thong and into wetness. The first downpour.

“MMMMmmmmm...” She was grinding against his hand. Her soft cries of joy got more demanding as his fingers increased the pressure against her clit. His hand softly wafted, and she began to whirl wildly.

His sumptuous massaging between her legs combined with his eager feasting at her dark chocolate nipples sent her over the edge into a greater whirlwind. She burst into erotic rapture, trembling with her orgasm.

“Reeesse...,” She murmured, and he captured the rest of her pleasurable moan with a kiss. She lay trembling in his arms as he braced himself atop her.

“You sounded good,” he whispered moments later against her mouth as she trembled in his arms. “Felt good, too.”

Leila opened her eyes as she reached her arms around his neck. It had been much too long since she’d experienced ecstasy. Reese shared it exquisitely. She basked in the feel of it. “It felt damn good.”

He smiled against her mouth. “We’re not done.” He turned her on her stomach, placing tingling kisses down her back, across her butt, and to her thighs. He pulled off her thong. Kneeling behind her, he pulled Leila to rest on her knees with her back to his chest. He licked and nibbled at her shoulder.

Leila tipped her head to the side to kiss him fully as his hands rubbed across her front and down between her legs causing more lustful sensations. She could feel his thick erection pressing the back of her thigh. Bending to reach under her, she caressed his balls, fingered his erection, and stroked the flame within him.

“Oh, yes...” Reese called out as her stroking increased. He pulled away from her incredible fingers and donned a condom. He penetrated her as she rested on her hands and knees. She was wet, warm, snug. The view from behind excited his slow gyrating movements to a faster pace. Leila’s moans echoed the increase in sensations.

The storm was moving along shore, its erupting intensity engulfing all in its path.

Reese’s strong current of desire suddenly burst into an ecstatic release and he called out with abandon, “Ummmm.”

And all went calm. Their labored breathing remained constant as the torrential moment passed.

Both still resting on their knees, he reached to pull her back up to his chest, cuddling her close. Leila wrapped her arms around the arms that held her, placing her head back onto his shoulder.

They lay down and he turned and pulled her to him. Her arms went snugly around him as her breath warmed his neck. Reese kissed her temple. She leaned back and he kissed her awaiting mouth. He had an immediate and strangely comforting reaction. He realized Leila could be the one to blow away the old memories so that something fresh and new could grow within him.

He looked at her closed eyes. She looked completely satisfied, at peace. “I can’t possibly leave Atlanta and stay away.” When he said that, Leila’s eyes fluttered. After she smiled, he added, “When this deal goes through with Bill Lowell, I’ll be here a lot more.”

“I was just thinking that the Arizona desert might not be that bad a place to visit.”

He laughed at that. “I thought you didn’t like the heat.”

“But I like the heat you make.” He kissed her again and she moved closer to him. “Stay with me right here until you have to leave for your meeting.”

“I will,” he drawled, pulling her into his arms. “I’m going to really enjoy my stay in Atlanta.”

Then he did just as she’d requested.

CHAPTER

Nine



As Reese walked out of Leila's home, he thought nothing could ruin a perfectly wonderful day, including the rain clouds that blocked out the Atlanta sun. He saw them as clouds of joy marking the lovemaking he and Leila had shared. They had spent a lazy hour in bed, talking, laughing, caressing, holding each other. And making love again more passionately, more slowly than before.

He felt nothing would go wrong, nothing could ruin the morning.

Then he met with Bill Lowell.

In the conference room at Lowell's firm, Reese leaned back from the table. Though his face showed nothing, a tidal wave of emotions flooded him: Anger. Deception. Cornered and wounded. He looked up at Bill's wavy salt and pepper hair, tanned skin. Somewhere in his heritage there must have been some Italian, although Bill claimed differently.

“Bill,” Reese managed calmly, “that’s not a counteroffer. That’s a threat.”

“It’s the facts, Reese.” Bill slowly linked well-manicured fingers together. “I’ve reconsidered. I can do everything you’re offering without your company.”

“I just landed a sizable contract with a supply chain,” Reese said. “I’m bringing more to the table. Giving you a chance to leverage existing business.”

“I could put a salesperson in that area and eventually gain that same type of business.”

“Not in a reasonable time frame, not without a remote office,” Reese countered. “Besides, I’ve got drivers ready to go. And most importantly, I’ve got the market visibility and growth opportunity in the southwest.”

“At first, I thought this venture with you would benefit me.” Bill closed the folder with finality. “My team looked very closely at everything. And it seems to us you need Lowell Enterprises to pull your small business into the big game.”

Reese leaned forward. “You’ve already agreed that this holds promise for us both.” He felt like he was begging now. He had known it was a long shot approaching Lowell Enterprise, but still, he had hoped for a merger.

Although McCoy Shipping was relatively small, it generated enough revenue to keep the company in the black. But the company wasn’t growing. Each year Reese was working much harder and generating only marginal growth. He just couldn’t squeeze anything else out of his company.

That’s why he’d approached Lowell Enterprises with the idea of using his company to expand southwest, perhaps to the West Coast. In this meeting, Reese had introduced a recently won contract to sweeten the deal. It hadn’t worked.

“Like I was saying, Reese, with the talent and connections you have, I would like to offer you a position with my company. You

could head up my division to expand my visibility on the West Coast.”

“The only problem with that is,” Reese couldn’t hide the biting tone, “I’d have to close the doors to the business I built from scratch. Your counteroffer wouldn’t leave me with a business or my employees with jobs. I would become just another employee for you.”

Bill drummed his fingers on the closed folder, then pushed it a few inches away from him. A definite refusal. “The difference between my business and yours is that I’ve grown substantially each year over the past five years.”

Reese bit back the desire to tell Bill to shove his job offer up his ass. He instead lied. “I might give your offer some thought.”

“Do that.” Bill stood and extended a hand.

Reese knew if he walked out of that office, he would be contacting the second, less successful company on his list to pitch his plan for a joint venture. How could he give up without a fight to save everything he had spent the last ten years building?

Reese shook Bill’s hand, then placed his documents in his briefcase. “If you ever manage to expand out west, have your salesman call me.”

Bill’s eyes rounded with surprise. Eagerly, he said, “McCoy Shipping has a lot of influence. We’d love your help with business dealings.”

Reese finally smiled. “I was thinking more along the lines of lunch.”

Unceremoniously, he walked out of the office. Outside Reese noticed that the sun was finally out, but it didn’t serve any purpose for him. He felt cold and damp inside. This was supposed to have been his chance to finally accomplish what he had always wanted.

He had given up so much, worked so hard, and sacrificed just about everything to keep his business going. He was responsible for winning business contracts and managing strategic operations,

and when he didn't have enough drivers available, he got behind the wheel of a semi to deliver shipments.

Everything he did revolved around work. And he'd just lost a chance to change all that into a situation that offered some semblance of a decent home life. A stable life. Something with someone to care about.

Leila came to mind. This would mean he wouldn't be spending the time he had hoped in Atlanta. His next best chance at an East Coast deal was hundreds of miles and an extra plane ride out of the way. Much, much more hustling than he wanted, particularly when attempting to have a relationship with Leila.

But he would have to save his company. "Damn," Reese said, shaking his head. "More of the same for a while longer."



THE WEDDING REHEARSAL WAS JUST ABOUT COMPLETE WHEN REESE finally showed up around six that evening.

The wedding party was lined up in the front of the church. Decorative floral arrangements were at the altar and more arrangements with peach ribbons hung from the pews.

Reese walked purposefully down the center aisle. A petite woman, he assumed the wedding coordinator, stopped her speech, and turned to look at him over her shoulder.

"Hello, I'm Rita. You must be the best man?"

Reese heard the stern undertone in Rita's voice and noticed the grin on Parker's face. "None other," Reese said as he walked past her and took his place next to Parker. He winked at Leila. Her warm smile melted some of the frost from his meeting at Lowell Enterprises. He cringed at the thought of taking that smile away when he gave her the bad news about the thwarted business deal.

"For the benefit of the best man," Rita said, gaining all their attention, "we'll walk through this one more time."

Parker turned to Reese and grinned. "It's typically the best man's job to make sure the groom gets to the wedding. Will we have to do the role reversal thing tomorrow?"

"That's what you get for not letting me be your best man," Marcus, who was standing behind them, joked. "Plus, I'm better looking."

"We weren't sure if you could handle carrying both the rings and that ego of yours down the aisle," Reese retaliated playfully, as everyone filed down the center aisle.

At the back of the church, the women lined up on one side and the men on the other.

"From the top," Rita urged, turning on the music. Mac and Patricia walked towards each other and met in the center. Mac took her hand, and they walked down the aisle. Chi's friend Sarah and Marcus followed them.

Reese met Leila at the back of the center aisle. He opened his hand to her as the other groomsmen had done. "Hey, pretty lady."

"Hey." Leila smiled warmly. "Did you get everything taken care of today?"

He wouldn't tell her just yet. Hiding his dread behind a smile he said, "Yes. Unless you feel I didn't satisfy all your needs this morning."

Leila brightened, then blushed, not sure if the couple in front of them realized Reese was talking about their lovemaking. She whispered, "You more than satisfied me."

Will she still want to see me if I don't work in the city? Long distance was a hell of a way to start a relationship. He struggled with the one with his son.

Reese took a step closer and reached up to run a finger under her bottom lip. "Did I tell you how much I like kissing you?" He bent, hungry to show her, maybe convince her of his desire for her.

"Excuuusse me!" Rita sang out loudly from the front of the church. "Are you two coming? We're getting married down here!"

“I’ll show you later,” Reese said, turning to march Leila down the aisle.

“And I want you to,” Leila countered, her tone full of appeal.

The rest of the wedding party completed their parts, and the rehearsal was over.

Parker walked over to Chi and Leila. “Chi, I won this bet. Leila can’t seem to keep her hands off Reese.”

“I beg to differ,” Chi corrected. “It looked to me like Reese was about to kiss my best friend.”

“Not from where I was standing,” Parker professed. “A bet’s a bet and you lose. You owe me twins.”

“You two were betting on me?” Leila burst out laughing as Reese walked up. She wrapped her arm around him, and he willingly pulled her close. Her laughter was something he enjoyed.

“I didn’t,” Parker said, a tad too proudly. “I bet on my best friend. Hence the reason I won. Because it seems to me, you’re taken by him. He won you over. I won.”

Reese, who had been watching Parker, then looked into Leila’s joy-filled eyes. “I do hope that is the case.” He stayed away from adding: “And will continue to be the case,” hoping to figure out a way to make a difficult dating situation work.



THE DINNER AT PARKER’S PLACE WAS A ROWDY BASH. THE RESTAURANT was decorated with peach and white balloons lining the walkway leading to the restaurant’s front entrance. The rehearsal dinner included the wedding party, family, and anyone dining at the restaurant. Complimentary champagne was served to everyone. Live music, laughter, and chatter were plentiful.

When the dinner was over, the women and men parted. The women went to Leila’s home and the men to Parker’s house. The old-fashioned bachelor party idea of having a stripper jump out of a cake, drinking heavily, and partying until everyone passed out,

just didn't appeal to Parker. Instead, he and his buddies gathered at his home to socialize. Some brought gifts, a few complained about the lack of naked women, but all reminisced about old times and football. Parker put in a DVD of a game his team had won against Reese's and the crowd got loud and competitive.

That's when Reese took his son to the guest bedroom. He hadn't seen him most of the day and was glad to be reunited with him at the rehearsal dinner. Keith had seemed to be enjoying himself whenever he spotted him.

"Had a good time today?" Reese asked as Keith was placing his overnight bag on the bed.

"Okay, I guess," Keith said noncommittally to the suitcase, his back to Reese.

Reese moved to sit on the bed. "Mama Harriett said you enjoyed the outing. Looked like you had fun with the other kids at dinner. I guess you made some new friends."

"I guess."

"Then tell me something." Reese touched Keith's shoulder to get his attention. Keith looked like a miniature version of him, minus the muscle definition and beard. But Reese was sure his son would be just as tall, just as physical as he was someday. Reese saw himself as a child looking up. "Why the long face, Reese's Piece?"

Keith, the Reese's Piece, was studying his father's concerned face.

Reese couldn't tell if his son was having trouble figuring out the problem or was uncomfortable with expressing his thoughts. Keith was never a shy boy, so Reese recognized immediately the reason for his son's hesitancy when Keith finally said, "Mama said you wouldn't have time for me on this trip. That you would pass me off to other people to watch me."

Reese bit back the urge to curse. Keith was looking as though he had revealed a grave secret and wanted to retract every word.

Reese took another approach. “The Ryans are like family to us. They wanted to spend time with you as well. And I wanted you to get to know them better. We’ll have the rest of the time to buddy up.” He touched his son’s shoulder.

“Yeah, okay, Daddy.” Keith stepped back opening his suitcase.

Suzette had no right to tell their child that. Now Reese wondered if she had said something else to him. His son’s preoccupation with unpacking bothered him. Why would he fret so? Then Reese remembered sensing apprehension when they walked Leila to her car. Keith had tried to pull him away as he kissed her goodnight.

Reese tested his son. “Leila wants to spend time with us this weekend.”

Keith’s head popped up; his brows scrunched in a frown.

So, Keith is concerned about my friendship with Leila.

“I thought you said it would be just us,” Keith complained.

“And Leila will join us tomorrow.” When Keith turned away annoyed, Reese asked, “Is there a problem with that?”

“I guess not,” Keith huffed.

Reese would have to deal with this, but he just didn’t have the energy to figure out the best way to broach the topic tonight.

“I think you will like Leila once you get to know her,” he said. But Keith didn’t respond. Standing, Reese went to give his son a protective hug. “Don’t stay up too late playing that video game. Goodnight.”

Keith barely returned the hug. “G’night, Daddy.”

Reese would have to deal with this. His son refusing to hug him back had never happened before. Suzette probably had said something else that caused Keith a bunch of unnecessary concern. He would have to ease into that discussion lightly. Keith was very protective of his mother.

As Reese reentered the family room, he saw Parker and Mac heading into the kitchen. He followed them, thinking a strong

drink was in order. He'd finally gotten time with his son and found out Keith wasn't happy. That it involved Leila bothered him.

"Reese," Mac said, "what is this I hear about you doing business with Lowell?"

"Do you know Bill Lowell?" Reese was surprised but glad to have something else to think about just then.

"Before I expanded into other markets, he was somewhat of a competitor. He's a shrewd businessman."

"I pitched him a deal to use me to expand in the southwest. Doing so would also allow me to expand this way. A joint venture of sorts."

"Or at least it used to be," Parker added.

"Yeah." Reese reached for a beer in the refrigerator. "He prefers hiring me to work for him." That thought agitated his already sinking mood.

Mac frowned. "And you sell off your business instead?"

"Yeah." Reese couldn't keep the annoyance out of his voice. "He doesn't want the overhead of my business. Bill believes it would be more beneficial if he expands slowly." Reese looked from Mac back to Parker. "I won't work for him. I have a backup plan. It will require me to do a lot of hustling, but I'm used to that."

"My company has a shipping division." Mac leaned back against the counter. "If I can be of any assistance, let me know."

Reese quickly looked at Mac, hopeful. Using Mac would give him a needed advantage. Why hadn't he thought about approaching Mac for help sooner? Mac didn't have a need to use Reese's company but was an expert in the field, had contacts and could minimize some of the complications Reese was running into.

Finally, Reese felt he was getting some relief from a day that had been spinning out of control.

"Don't look so surprised, Reese," Mac said. "We're family."

"No, we're not," Reese said playfully, finally able to joke. "You're just married to the sister of a good friend of mine."

“Don’t let Mom hear that nonsense,” Parker quipped as he finished refilling the ice bucket. “She’ll take it personally that you’re not acting like her oldest son.”

Reese nodded as he quickly calculated the benefits of consulting with Mac. He was about to ask Mac a business question when his cell phone rang.

Unhooking it from the waist of his pants, his smile disappeared as he looked at the caller ID.

The sinking started again. Another problem.

It seemed he would deal with Keith’s issue tonight after all. “Hello, Suzette.”

“Reese!” Suzette said joyfully. “I’m so glad I caught up with you. I have good news.”

His ex-wife must have landed in California and wanted to check up on Keith. She always called frequently when he had his son. With Suzette being away on an important trip, he’d hoped to spend the weekend without major interruption.

“Oh, really,” Reese said. “So, your flight to California was uneventful?”

“Actually, it’s better than that,” Suzette said. “We ran into last-minute drama that changed everything. I’m at the airport and I don’t have my car. Can you pick me up?”

“You’re in Atlanta?” Reese snapped as his eyebrows slammed together. He almost dropped the beer can he held.

Parker, who was just about to take a sip out of his glass, stopped it in midair and frowned. “Don’t tell me Suzette is now back in town!” When Reese nodded, Parker shook his head.

“I’m coming to the wedding since I can’t go to California,” Suzette said, obviously not over-hearing Parker’s comment. “I need to talk to you tonight. Why don’t you and Keith come pick me up and all of us can have breakfast at my place in the morning?”

“I’m with the fellas, Suzette. And Keith is already in bed. Call Donna or call for an Uber to get home.”

“You can still come over. I was hoping that...,” Suzette started but Reese cut her off.

“Like I said, I’m with the fellas. I’ll call you in the morning.” Reese hung up and looked miserably at Parker. “Suzette decided your wedding is important after all.”

“Bullshit,” Parker countered. “If Suzette changed her mind about coming here, it has nothing to do with my wedding. But she will not ruin Chi’s day,” he vowed.

Reese popped the lid from the can of beer, then thought he needed a stronger drink. This entire day had been filled with drama, all starting after he told Leila that being with her in Atlanta wasn’t going to be a problem.

Luckily the wedding would be a saving grace to keep them busy and pleasantly occupied.

CHAPTER

Ten



By all accounts, the wedding was a comedy. To some, however, it was just short of a disaster. And it all started with Parker.

The church was decorated beautifully. The groomsmen escorted guests to their seats. Love ballads filled the air as everyone waited in rapt anticipation.

The bridesmaids were garbed in peach-colored, spaghetti-strapped, floor-length dresses, and the groomsmen in black tuxedos. The ring bearer was Chi's son, Anthony. The flower girl was Mac's oldest daughter, Brenna. After a musical prelude, the bride entered.

Chi's dress caused everyone to pause in breathtaking delight. It was a strapless antique white satin design that hugged her waist and blossomed in layers to the floor. Her hair was pulled back, and the pearl headdress flowed in sheer material over her face and down her back to the floor. Parker took one look at her and let out

a nervous yet loving breath. This was the moment for which he had waited much too long. If left to him, he would have married Chi long ago. She completed him in so many ways. The wedding was the finale, the beginning, all in one.

It was perfect. She was perfect. But God help him, he couldn't wait another minute. About the time Chi got halfway down the aisle, over-eagerness exhausted Parker's patience. He decided he couldn't take any more of the delay. Chi just was taking too long. So, he went to get her.

"Where is Parker going?" Leila nervously whispered to Sarah and Patricia.

"He better not walk out on my friend," Sarah said, becoming concerned.

Chi stopped and looked up at Coach. "I think he's coming to get me. This wasn't what we planned but play along."

Parker stopped a few feet away and extended his hand to her.

"Oh, how sweet!" An extremely large woman dressed in gold and wearing lipstick the color of gold cried out from the pews. "He's collecting his bride!"

"What are you doing, Parker?" Chi hurriedly whispered, attempting to talk without moving her lips.

"Not giving you a chance to get away." Parker had the decency to keep his voice whisper soft. "Thanks, Coach."

Chi wasn't quite sure what to do at first. But since Parker was adamantly holding his hand out, she figured he was serious about changing Rita's meticulously rehearsed wedding march. Instead of warning Parker that Rita was in the far aisle flapping her arms in vexation, Chi placed her hand in his. Then Parker walked backward, bringing her to the front of the church.

The vocalist also caught the ad-lib fever and changed the words to the song from 'take my life and make me whole' to 'take my hand and I'll be yours.' Several women in the pews burst into tears, the large lady in gold sobbing the loudest.

Parker and Chi stood facing each other. He was still holding her hand. “Did I tell you how happy you make me?” Parker asked tenderly.

Whatever concerns Chi had melted away. “Yes.”

The good reverend, an expert at wedding ad-libbing, chimed in as if all was going as planned. “When there’s love involved, everything else in the world is brighter...” He shared a few more words of wisdom.

So did Parker. “Chi, a hundred years from now I want to renew our vows in this church.”

“Ssshhhh.” Chi needed to get him to hush. Parker was talking almost as loud as the reverend.

“You don’t agree?” Parker wanted to know.

“Honey, we’ll be too old to walk. But I’m willing to roll down in matching wheelchairs.”

Parker laughed at that, and Chi shushed him again.

The reverend was saying, “Anyone who has a reason why this couple shouldn’t be joined...”

“Mommie?” Anthony, the ring bearer, was tugging at Chi’s exquisite gown. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Since nothing was going as planned, Chi was sure her son had concluded this was probably another rehearsal, guests included this time. Chi spotted Rita, the wedding planner, shaking her head and fanning herself as if about to pass out. Chi grinned. “Sure, baby.” She turned back to Leila who was not able to hide her laughter behind the exotic bouquet she held. Patricia fared a little better with containing herself. However, Sarah was dabbing at tears as her body shook with merriment.

“Leila can’t leave!” Harriett said to Chi. “Coach, please go help Anthony.” Harriett Ryan’s hushed command sounded like a shout. She had underestimated how well sound carried in this church and apologized to people sitting in the rows behind for her indiscretions.

Coach jumped up, perplexed. Leila pulled the exotic bouquet to her face to cover another bout of giggles at the Coach's bewildered look. He scooped up Anthony, the child's legs dangling like a rag doll, as he ran down the center aisle in search of a toilet. Leila leaned on Patricia for support, laughing while trying not to make a sound caused her legs to go weak. It was obvious by how Coach was spinning in circles that he had no clue which way to go.

"Repeat after me....," the good reverend was shouting above the giggles in the audience.

"I love you," Parker whispered, leaning close to Chi's up-turned lovely face. "Our wedding bed will be a good place for you to make good on the bet. I want more kids. One to be like Anthony."

"Excuse me, Parker!" The reverend, now slightly agitated, was roughly tapping on Parker's shoulder. Up until this point the reverend hadn't cared about the disruptions but they were to the serious part now and he wanted Parker's full cooperation. "Pay attention! You're missing your lines."

The churchhouse roared in joy!

Parker repeated his lines. So, did Chi. The rings were blessed, and a prayer was said. Then Parker willingly, eagerly, kissed his bride.

By now everyone's tears of laughter had become tears of appreciation for the special moment.

"My Chi," Parker said as if mesmerized. Even though his part was over, he lovingly added a speech. "From this moment I promise nothing will ever separate us. No one will come between us. Nothing will go unresolved with us. Your love completes me. You healed me and made me whole again. And I'll love you the rest of my life because of it."

For the first time, Chi shed tears, ones of love that could only come from the heart.

Leila watched Reese pat Parker on the back. Then Reese looked longingly at her. His lazy smile widened.

Patricia, dabbing at tears, saw Suzette abruptly stand and storm out of the church. She smiled, only interested in her brother's happy wedding.

"Ohhhh, what Parker said was soooo beautiful!" the fat lady sang.

"Amen," said the reverend.

And the wedding was over.



THE RECEPTION WAS A HUGE BASH. AS THE MUSIC OF MELLOW MOODS played, the wedding guests chatted merrily.

"Happy?" Parker said as he danced slowly with Chi.

"Extremely," she smiled brightly.

"By the looks of things, all is going extremely well," Parker said confidently.

"Honey, our wedding was a comedy show." Chi laughed.

"I got what I wanted," Parker cooed, pulling her closer and kissing her softly. "That's all that matters."

"I must admit I had a good time," Chi said.

"I think everyone did," Parker added. "Our wedding has other benefits I hadn't thought about until now. Mom and Coach are inseparable. And look at how Leila is making eyes at my best man."

"Love is in the air," Chi admitted. "And Reese is just as attracted to Leila. Maybe when we get back from the honeymoon, we can decide who won the bet."

"I would say we've done good at matchmaking for this wedding. I have a few more friends who are single and clueless. I may have to marry you again to get them together so I can right that wrong." Parker looked at his happy mother dancing with his father-like friend, Coach Theodore Henderson. Smiling down at

Chi, Parker added, "Now if I can just get you pregnant, all will be right with the world. Let's make a baby tonight."

"You want a child of your own, don't you?" Chi asked.

"I'm adopting Anthony, so I already have one. I want more."

His confession touched Chi deeply. Her next statement was full of emotion. "I was going to save this present for later, but..." Chi caressed his cheek, "I am pregnant. I've known for a while."

He froze. "But I thought you said that you weren't?"

"Think about it. I never denied being pregnant, just that I wasn't having twins. And I always said you wanted me to be pregnant. Everyone assumed that I wasn't already. Everyone except Reese."

"Chi..." He swept her up in his arms. "You're perfect. You complete me."



"THAT WAS THE MOST SHAMEFUL DISPLAY OF A WEDDING I'VE EVER experienced," Suzette complained to Donna as they sat at a table in the reception hall, watching people on the dance floor.

"Unusual, but I enjoyed it." Donna took a sip of champagne. "Never had that much fun at a wedding. Chi made a beautiful bride. Smiled and laughed through the whole thing. Her bridal party all looked like models. Too bad the groomsmen are all taken."

"Just whose side are you on?" Suzette snapped.

"You can see just as well as I can." Donna looked toward the dance floor. "When the wedding party isn't dancing together, they're snuggling. I told you when I called you in Alabama that Reese was really into Leila. More so since seeing them at Parker's restaurant."

"I don't know about all that." Suzette ran professionally manicured fingers through long, nicely woven hair. The fake hair extensions flowed softly across the low cut of her exposed back. "I didn't

get that impression when Reese came to Alabama. But what I do know for sure is that he didn't meet her until he came down for the wedding. She's just the flavor of the moment."

Donna watched as Reese smoothly turned Leila around the floor before pulling her into his arms. He was whispering into her ear. It looked like he was singing the words to the slow groove *Mellow Moods* was playing.

"So, what are you going to do about her?" Donna turned to Suzette. "She's the reason you canceled your trip to California and came here."

"Based on what I've found out about Leila, she has a few weaknesses. I'm going to make her wish she never laid eyes on Reese." Suzette watched as Leila burst into laughter and Reese joined in. "She is annoying me," Suzette said tartly. "She won't have my leftovers until I'm good and done with him. I certainly don't plan on letting Reese come here and flaunt her around my town."

When Suzette stood up, Donna asked, "Where are you going?"

"To find Keith," Suzette said. "I'm sure Reese is embarrassing him by acting like that on the dance floor."

"Keith's fine. He's at the table with the other kids. Probably grinning at some girl."

Suzette looked around and spotted him sitting at a table watching the dance floor. "No, he isn't. I'm not subjecting my son to this kind of treatment. Reese knows Keith isn't adjusting well to the divorce. If Reese wants our son to be happy, he'll rethink what he's doing. Besides, when I talked to him this morning, he said he'd be in town longer than originally planned, working on another business deal. That will give us time to figure out what's best for Keith. Disrespecting me and embarrassing his son surely isn't it." Suzette walked away.

About the time Suzette got to Keith's table, a fast-tempo song began to play. As she sat down next to Keith, Reese escorted Leila back to the wedding party's table.

“Come dance with me, Keith.” Suzette stood, taking Keith’s hand.

The dance floor was situated in the center of the room with the area just behind it set up for the band. Suzette strolled to the middle of the floor and then helped Keith spin her around to the beat of the music. Her long hair fanned around her. The white strapless dress fitted her curvy figure like a glove.

Keith laughed as his mother danced with him.

“You want to have a family dance, Keith?”

“How do you do that, Mama?”

“Me, you and Daddy dancing together.” When Keith nodded eagerly, Suzette turned to the table with the wedding party. Just as she had hoped, she had the attention of most of the people there. “Reese!” Suzette called and gestured for him to come over. When he didn’t move quickly enough, she told Keith to call him.

“Daddy, come dance!”

As Suzette hoped, Reese got up and came to the center of the dance floor.

Keith immediately turned to his father and started doing the latest dance fad seen in all the music videos featuring young adults. He outdid his father and then turned to his mother. She complimented him by clapping and laughing while Keith performed.

Suzette took one of Keith’s hands and told him to grab his daddy’s. Soon after, Suzette took Reese’s other hand, and they danced together in a circle.

Suzette saw Leila watching so she purposely moved closer to Reese. She linked her arm around Reese’s waist and hip to hip they danced in front of Keith.

“You trying to out-dance me!” Keith grinned. “Watch this!” He did another physically challenging dance that looked as if he twisted his legs into a pretzel and then spun around counterclockwise to untwist himself.

Reese laughed and Suzette placed her head on his shoulder as she joined him in laughing.

Looking around, Suzette didn't see Leila sitting at the table and smiled victoriously to herself.

CHAPTER

Eleven



“Hey, Leila.”
“Reese?” she said into the phone. She looked at the clock on her nightstand. “I hadn’t expected to hear from you tonight.”

“I dropped Keith at his mother’s. He was tired after the wedding and everything else I crammed into the evening. I’ll pick him up in the morning.”

“So, you’re back at Parker’s house?”

“No,” Reese said softly. “I’m downstairs. You want company?”

There was a long pause. “Why didn’t you knock on the door?”

“I will if you like.” Reese was already out of the vehicle and walking up the stairs. “I still have your key. Can I use it?”

The front door opened as he was about to insert the key. “No need,” Leila said into the phone and to his face.

Smiling, Reese pressed the END button on his cell phone as his eyes roamed slowly over the black mini-gown with matching

housecoat she wore. His stare seemed to remove every stitch of her thin clothing, leaving her bare to the elements, to his scrutiny.

He looked back up at her expressionless face. The heat that the outfit caused was smothered by her aloofness. He sobered. “You’re already dressed for bed,” was the best he could come up with.

“I didn’t realize I would be entertaining this late.” Leila was still standing in the doorway. It was obvious she was debating if she wanted to ask him in. Reese resolved her doubt by stepping inside the dimly lit foyer. The only light that was on was the one midway down the hall.

Leila closed and locked the door. “I thought you would be with...” She stopped herself from saying Suzette’s name. It was hard keeping her jealousy at bay. She attempted a casual tone but failed. “I thought you would be busy with other plans tonight.” She folded her arms across her chest, a sign of a communication block. Nor had she moved from the door or gestured that they sit down.

Reese had changed out of the wedding tuxedo and was wearing jeans and a polo shirt. “What’s wrong, Leila? I didn’t see much of you near the end of the reception. Now you’re acting distant.”

“It’s just late, Reese,” Leila lied, stepping around him. “If you want to use my guest bedroom, you’re welcome to it.”

“Guest room?” He caught her arm and pulled her toward him. “Something is wrong. Talk to me.”

Leila stared at the front of his shirt, her hands resting against his stomach as he held her waist. She attempted to look unaffected by Suzette’s behavior earlier but fell short.

“I guess I figured out the best description for you today. You come across like a family man to me. Like you would probably be most happy in a father’s role.” She sadly looked into his eyes.

“I’m at that point in my life. I’m sure I give off those vibes.” He shrugged, then thought about it. “Is my being with my son this evening the reason you’re acting like this?”

Leila shook her head. “I guess after seeing you with Suzette and Keith, I’m feeling like I’m interfering. I don’t want to. You three looked good together.”

“Oh, now I understand.” Reese exhaled concern and squeezed her waist. “Suzette and I try to act civilly toward each other for Keith’s sake. She was clinging to me today. I’m sure it’s because of him. But that marriage is over.”

Leila thought of her parents’ situation that had never ended. “It didn’t look that way.” The comment slipped out before she could stop it.

“It’s definitely over,” Reese said simply.

Leila stared at the floor. “I should have said something. I’m sorry about my behavior.”

Leila realized she was projecting her own family’s dysfunctional behavior onto Reese and that wasn’t fair. Her parents continually reunited, then separated. It didn’t benefit anyone to grow up in a loveless household. That was part of the reason Leila was still single. She never had a moment when she could completely trust her heart to someone. It was probably because she raised a shield around it, not sure if she could handle offering it completely. But she wanted to try.

“I’m where I want to be,” he whispered, moving his hands up and down her sides.

Leila linked her arms around him and squeezed. He felt warm, welcoming, like relief. “I’m glad you thought to come by. I wanted to be with you tonight.”

“I guess I should have warned you that Suzette had changed her mind about attending the wedding.”

“That would have helped.”

“I was thinking of Keith. He needed to see something other than his mother and me argue. It made his day.”

“I’m glad of that,” Leila said. “What about you?”

“Suzette can be draining. But I noticed Keith had concerns about my not being around him. So, accommodating her to make his day was a small price to pay. Keith had a great time. Therefore, I did.” Reese was at a point where he would do whatever was needed for the sake of his son’s happiness.

“Good,” Leila said honestly. His explanation was enough to wash away a lot of her insecurity. She knew the impact parents’ love had on children. “Come on back.” She took his hand, leading the way down the hall.

I’ve been acting so silly over this. Why can’t I just enjoy what I am getting from him? she asked herself.

Based on what she had heard about Reese and Suzette’s rocky marriage and divorce, she should have known better than to think there was more between them. It was just that Suzette had been at Reese’s side most of the time at the reception. After her one dance with him, Suzette had been there at his side from that point on... clinging to him, entertaining him.

If it had been her parents, they would have ended up in bed, making love and making promises of love that would never be kept. But now Reese was with her. How could she waste the little time they had together with such nonsense?

Leila stopped abruptly and turned to face him. She went up on her toes and kissed him deeply. The more she kissed him, the more she wanted to. All the yearning that had been building since the last time he made love exploded all at once.

Pulling his shirt out of his pants, she said between kisses, “I want you, Reese.” She rubbed her hand across the front of his jeans and backed up against the wall, pulling him toward her.

“Do you?” Reese asked huskily, his hands cupping either side of her neck. The front of his body touched her from breast to thigh. When she moved against him, he crushed his mouth to hers before saying, “How much?”

Mouths tasted, hands explored, bodies ground together. Leila's housecoat came off her shoulders and fell to the floor.

She pressed her mouth to his and her hand went in search of the hardness forming inside his pants. "Just as much as you want me," Leila said, referring to his erection. She unzipped his jeans for access.

Reese slowed his pleasure-giving and took a step back. Taking her hands, he linked his fingers between hers as he placed her hands against the wall on either side of her head. With his knee positioned between her legs, she was pinned there.

Her eyes were glazed with craving. "Reese." Her voice was laced with desire too. She tried to move closer to him but couldn't.

"Is sex what you expect from me?"

Leila was about to say "yes," but the tension that creased his eyes indicated her answer would weigh heavily. What else could he possibly want her to say? They both had admitted they were in lust. Sex would be the obvious answer to that.

"Let me touch you," Leila said softly, then wished she had said something different.

Disappointed, Reese looked down and shook his head.

When he spoke, Leila realized he wasn't answering her request to touch him but shaking off an unpleasant thought.

"Leila, I don't need another pretty face in my bed."

She wasn't quite sure what to say to that. She was about to flippantly joke, 'What about a pretty face against the wall?' but thought better of that. It wouldn't have helped the situation. But why else would he come to her in the middle of the night?

When Reese released her hands, she did the only thing she could think of. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. He staggered back a step or two, but they never parted because he wrapped his arms tightly around her, his face at her neck. Reese kissed her there.

He straightened to look at her face, saying nothing.

Leila watched many touching expressions cross his face: Desire. Intense need. Desperation. Longing.

Weddings always made her reexamine her relationships. What love she had in her life, or didn't have, or wanted to have. Maybe the wedding had made Reese question those same things about himself.

He pressed a kiss on her forehead. "I'm extending my stay in town. I have this business deal I want to follow up on. But..." he watched his thumb rub across her bottom lip, "I also want to spend more time with my son..." he looked into her eyes, "...and with you."

Something tremendous ran down her insides and tapped on her heart. Surely, he felt her shudder. She kissed his thumb. Leila figured she had two options just then: Make love or make a promise of love.

"Reese, I want to say something and I'm not sure if it's going to sound right. Tell me if it doesn't." She momentarily looked down to gather her thoughts. "When you're with me I feel...I feel... like...I matter to you. When you touch me, it heightens my impression. Your touches express so much." Leila pressed her cheek into the palm of his hand as she looked up at him. "I like it and want to enjoy it for as long as I can."

"I think I understand."

Something captivating was in his eyes and it held her hostage. It reminded her of longing and contentment melding together. He kissed her chin, then bent to kiss his way down to the skin over her heart. Holding his mouth there, he reached for her shoulders and pulled her closer to his warm lips. He rubbed his face from side to side, occasionally kissing the insides of her breasts through the material. Then he straightened and softly pressed the area covering her heart with his hand before cupping the warm skin of her breast.

Those kisses seemed to go through her skin and tightly hug all of her.

Reese looked into her eyes as if trying to interpret her thoughts. Then one of his fingers touched her lips and traced around them. She kissed it softly. He lightly rubbed the back of his fingers down her face, neck, then over her shoulder where he pushed off the strap of the nightgown to expose her breasts. As he watched her expressions change to a deep craving, he gently stroked one breast, then gently pinched her nipple. Leila shuddered. He pressed her back against the wall before moving his mouth down to her nipple, one and then the other, he drank in some of her joy. He marveled at how turned-on Leila got as he sucked her breasts. He reached under her mini gown. She wasn't wearing panties, so he easily felt her wetness.

Straightening, he said against her mouth as his hand did marvelous things between her legs, "So you read a lot into how I show affection. What does this say to you?" His strokes quicken.

Leila sucked in air. "Like you want to say something aloud that you haven't quite shared," she whispered.

"I do." Reese pressed his body to hers and ground against her, kissing her deeply.

"Then tell me," she managed.

"I want to know more about you, experience more of you. Figure out why I'm always thinking of you. That's why I'm staying in town longer."

Leila let out a pleading, surprised-filled sigh. *I needed to hear you say that*, she thought. "Not for business or your son?"

"I could handle most of the business transactions from home. Suzette is going to let me take Keith sooner to Arizona for the summer break."

"So, I'm the main reason." Please don't let this be a false promise of love, she prayed.

Leila pulled him closer into her arms as she laid her head on his shoulder.

“I want to spend some time figuring out what’s going on between us,” he whispered in her ear before kissing her there. “I want more of you, Leila.”

“The way you touch me suggests that.” She desperately wanted him and needed him physically. Maybe eventually there would be a promise of love, but for now, making love was an acceptable option for her. In time, they would figure out what was best for them. “I need to feel you.”

When he nodded, she pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. She kissed his shoulder, then worked down to kiss, lick, and taste his small nipples. Enjoying how they hardened in her mouth; she sucked harder as she massaged between his legs. Reese groaned and trembled a little. Leila wanted more. “I want more,” she said softly, rubbing her hand over his stiff penis.

“I’m yours,” he agreed willingly.

She got a condom.

When she returned, he pressed her against the wall and reached down as his knee parted her legs. His hand summoned her pleasure to peak for him. When his fingers concentrated on the small bud between silky hairs, she damn near screamed.

Leila braced herself against the wall as she lifted her leg around his. He moved and helped her to raise the other to link both legs around him, as she easily rested against the wall and him. Reese bent down to insert himself into her. When he filled her with his stiffness, she let out a pleasurable moan that he captured with a kiss. As his hands gripped her butt, he thrust all of him into her again, and again, then around and around, then back again. With each thrust, Leila told him how it made her feel. So, with each thrust, he became more aroused. The intensity got more demanding as they sought and found the wonderment just ahead.

When Leila began to tremble and shake beneath him, he immediately exploded into ecstasy. Moments later, breathing hard, he whispered in her ear, “Did I explain my feelings clearly?”

Laughing, Leila kissed him. “Very nicely.”

“Let’s go to bed. I have more to say to you.”

CHAPTER

Twelve



R Reese woke up before Leila.

They had slept in the guestroom because it was the closest for continuing the passion that started in the hallway.

Leila was sleeping peacefully on her stomach. He turned on his side to face her. Bracing up on his elbow with his head in his hand, he gently ran his fingers down her back.

He had awakened thinking about their conversation from the previous night. Some of it nagged him this morning. Maybe he had admitted too much, too soon. Maybe by telling her he was staying in town because of her wasn't the best idea. She wanted him sexually, that was very apparent. But she said it wasn't all just physical. He hoped like hell that was the case because he wanted to believe it was true.

There were a lot of reasons he probably should never have gotten involved with Leila. The obvious reason was they lived so far apart, and both had businesses they couldn't move away from.

Those weren't big obstacles to Reese, though. He could work around them if this was meant to be.

Reese discovered Parker had been right about a lot of things. Her background suggested she would place value on family and long-term relationships. For instance, her parents had never divorced. She dated infrequently and wasn't emotionally involved. She was a loyal friend and trustworthy. Her interest in him seemed genuine. All those things were important to him.

Reese's biggest fears were opening his heart to misuse and placing his son's well-being in the hands of the wrong person. Previous relationships had gone badly. Suzette's had been difficult and what followed with the several women looking for a fling with the Nubian Prince had been worse. That damn calendar had brought more pain than it was worth. The problems ranged from women blatantly fondling him in public to privately offering money for sex and everything in between.

His hand smoothed over Leila's butt and down one thigh.

If he had been the gigolo type, he probably could have made a small fortune and retired early. But no self-respecting man would ever lower himself to that level. What amused Reese was that some Black women had the nerve to call Black men dogs and players. Sisters needed to be real with themselves and each other. Games were played on both sides of the dating fence. A man with looks and money was fair game to all or so it seemed.

Reese was never interested in—as one of his friends used to call it—counting pussy-niches. Being raised by self-respecting women who truly loved him had resulted in Reese not wanting sex-only relationships. Although Suzette had filled so many of the roles he wanted from a woman, he later discovered she had married the idea of him, and not him. She wanted the riches, the fame, the glory. She gave him a son and called it love. He had believed her. However, it turned out that there were too many empty moments with her kind of love. Everyone and everything had been more

important than he was until he decided to leave her. Reese just needed to feel appreciated in his marriage. It rarely happened.

Maybe that was why Leila was so appealing. It seemed in her nature to cater to others' feelings. From the moment they'd met, she'd made him feel appreciated. And for her to be as attracted to him as she was, she'd tried like hell to keep him from knowing it. And she didn't need his glory. She had her own money, her own identity.

Leila gave as much passion as she took. It seemed she also got as much pleasure from him as he got from her.

He leaned and kissed her shoulder, smelled her warm skin.

Reese looked at the clock. He needed to get dressed and go pick up his son. A smile played across his face. *His son*. He liked using that term. He liked the idea of having a part of him to be there in the future, a loved one to have around as he grew old. He had been barely thirty when his aunt passed away leaving him alone in the world. He was the only family member at the funeral; there wasn't even a distant cousin.

It won't be like that for Keith.

Keith was the major point of concern. Somehow Reese needed to figure out how to blend both Keith and Leila into his life. He suspected that might be more difficult than he'd originally thought. At Suzette's home last night, Keith hadn't wanted him to leave and had asked that he stay the night with them. Suzette had casually offered to share her bed with Reese if he stayed the night. Reese had declined, of course, but Keith didn't like the idea of his leaving even though Reese promised to pick him up this morning.

Today would offer the first chance at testing his theory about Keith's concerns with Leila. He had to figure this out if he was to ever have another family again.

For all the football success Reese had had, nothing compared to family. No name etched on any size trophy could compare to shaping a new generation.

Family life meant everything to him, and he had none. He wanted more children. And he would be a very different kind of father from the one he'd had. One who would provide financially and emotionally, who would be there to listen, one who would ensure college was available, a child he could play football with, camp out with, and talk over problems with. Somehow, Reese wanted to provide all those things and found the decisions he had made lately were to ensure it.

Reese suddenly remembered that his overnight bag was still in the Jeep. He had stayed at Parker's the night before because of the bachelor party. Easing out of bed, he found his jeans and left Leila resting.

As he left the room he looked back at her. *Leila, you're my first genuine relationship in a very long time.* "Thank you," he whispered. "I needed this."



WHILE REESE SHOWERED AND DRESSED IN A FRESH PAIR OF JEANS AND a button-down shirt, Leila got out of bed and freshened up. Wearing the black mini housecoat, she was in the kitchen making coffee, when she heard him come out of the bathroom. She walked to the kitchen's entrance. "Want coffee?"

"In a to-go cup if you have it."

As she stood at the coffeemaker, Reese came up from behind. She leaned back against him as he hugged her. "I'll go pick up Keith. Then we'll come back and pick you up for breakfast. Maybe over breakfast, I can sweet-talk you into going to Six Flags with us."

Leila turned around. Her smile turned serious. "I would love to go, but I think you two should do the father-son thing at the fun park. I've watched him around you. He needs that."

He frowned. "Are you sensing something out of the ordinary?"

She did but only said, “You don’t get to see enough of each other. I don’t want him to feel as though he’s competing for your time. If Keith and I had known each other for a while, I would certainly go. I noticed how he clings to you. Let him do that today without my butting in.”

When they reached the front door, Leila stepped into his arms. She kissed him softly. “Now that I’m going to have you here in town a little longer, I don’t mind Keith having most of your time.”

“Thanks.” Reese kissed her again, then headed to leave the door. “Keith and I will see you in a bit.”

Leila watched as Reese went down the stairs. She needed to put some thought into how best to deal with Keith and change his view of her as the enemy.



THE THREE OF THEM WERE HAVING BREAKFAST AT THE IHOP BECAUSE Keith loved the pancakes. The conversation had been full of Keith’s recounting the last two days he had spent with his father.

As he poured syrup on his pancakes, Keith asked. “Daddy, maybe we can go camping since you’re gonna be here this weekend. Remember that time we went camping in the Arizona desert? Now that was fun! Wolves were howling. Man, that was scary but fun.” Keith grinned, licking syrup off his fingers. “That’s when Mama started to act chicken.”

Reese remembered that trip and how Suzette had attempted bravery for their son’s sake but jumped at every little thing. He smiled at the memory. “I’ll check into what they have around town,” Reese said. “I’m not sure about next weekend. That will be pushing it.”

“Ah, Daddy, you’re not going to have time?”

“I might not,” Reese said. “If not, we’ll figure out something.”

“The kids at the daycare go camping all the time during the summer,” Leila said, looking at Keith. “You might be able to join some of the field trips.”

“Cool!” Keith’s eyes brightened. “Is that the place we stopped by today? Midas Touch?”

“Yes,” Leila smiled.

“Hey, Daddy, if we do go camping next weekend, we’ve gotta bring Mama!”

Reese attempted to sound casual. “If we go, Keith, it’ll be you and me. Or I might invite Leila.” Reese turned, smiling at Leila. “You’re not afraid of the outdoors, are you?”

“I love camping.” Leila was smiling too until she saw the unhappy look on Keith’s face.

“Why does she have to come instead of Mama?” Keith whined.

“Leila is a close friend of mine. If we go, I would like for her to join us.”

“But why? You haven’t even asked Mama! She might want to go.”

“Keith, we haven’t even decided if we are going.” Reese was attempting to explain things calmly. “Mama and I don’t do things together like we used to. We’ve talked about this before, son.”

Keith chewed on his pancake as if it were tasteless rubber. Then he sat back and stared at his plate. “You said that time in the desert that camping would be a family outing.” Keith looked resentfully at Leila. “Just the family.”

Reese wanted to shake some sense into him. This attitude wasn’t what he’d taught his son. Suzette, he thought. Reining in the anger from the thought, Reese said more civilly, “A lot of different people make up a family. Just because Mama and I aren’t in the same family unit any longer doesn’t mean we can’t have fun without her.”

Keith glared at Leila. “If Leila wasn’t here, you probably would invite Mama.”

“Enough, Keith,” he said consolingly, “Don’t be difficult about this.”

Leila leaned back against the cushioned seat, quietly watching. There was tension whenever she got too close to Reese or Keith perceived her as replacing Suzette.

Keith finished his meal in silence and sat sipping on his Sprite.

On the drive back to her home, Leila talked companionably with Reese. Keith was still sulking, staring out the window when they pulled into her driveway. Reese decided the best thing to do would be to give him time to cool off. This would pass if he didn’t give it much attention now, but he would have to address it.

He turned from behind the wheel and pressed a kiss to Leila’s forehead. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Absolutely.” Leila turned to the backseat and smiled at Keith. “Have fun today. I’ve been to Six Flags before. You’re going to have a great time.” She opened the passenger door, then turned back to Keith and noticed him taking an interest in the huge toy bird. “You should come by with your dad one day soon and see all the play rides and things we have at the daycare. You’ll have fun here as well.”

“Okay,” Keith said tonelessly.

Leila waved bye to them and blew a kiss.

As Reese backed out, he looked at his son. The kid didn’t have any reason to feel threatened. What was going on in his head?



“REESE AND I WOULD LOVE TO MEET YOU AND MAC FOR DINNER.” Leila was lounging on the sofa, her feet tucked close to her butt as she talked to Patricia on the phone. “He and Keith should be returning from Six Flags in a few hours.”

“So, Keith is staying with you?” Patricia asked curiously. “I would think Suzette wouldn’t stand for that.”

“Since Suzette is in town, Keith goes home each night.”

“Leila, it isn’t my place to say this, but if you and Reese are as serious about each other as I think you are, be careful of Suzette.”

“Why?” Leila swung her feet to the floor, alarmed. “How well do you know her?”

“I’ve known her for years. Suzette was threatened by my friendship with Reese because she thought I wanted him. I don’t think she ever believed Reese is like a brother to me. She did some very vindictive things.”

“Vindictive? Like what?”

“It started as petty, annoying things. Believe it or not, it goes back as far as high school for me when Reese and Parker used to come home for college breaks and long weekends. Sometimes, Suzette would come. Back then Suzette spread rumors that I slept with the high school football team. When all the players started to hit on me and showed up at my house at all times of night, I figured something was up. Reese didn’t like wild girls, so she made me out to be one. Suzette denied it, of course, but the rumor didn’t start until she began hanging out at the spots I had gone with friends. There were other episodes like that, but the worst was when she falsely accused me of taking money from her. Whenever I was around her, she hid her purse and complained to Reese about how uncomfortable I made her. Of course, he wanted to make her happy, so he spent less and less time around me. Eventually, they got married and I rarely saw him. I summed it all up as Suzette having felt threatened by me. Any woman interested in Reese is a threat to her.”

“Why would she see me as a threat?” Leila rubbed a frustrated hand through her hair. She didn’t like hearing any of this. “They’re divorced.”

“Because Suzette is still in love with him. She’s been trying to patch up their relationship ever since Reese divorced her.”

“What about Reese?” Leila asked cautiously. She wasn’t sure if she was prepared to hear the response. “Has he ever had thoughts about going back to Suzette?”

“If you answer a personal question, then I’ll tell you about Reese.”

“Sure,” Leila agreed. “Ask away.”

“Are you falling in love with him?”

Leila hadn’t expected Patricia’s bluntness. “That’s not fair. I don’t even know if I would admit that kind of thing to myself, considering how short a time I’ve known Reese.”

“God made the world in less than you’ve known Reese.” Patricia laughed lightly. “Besides, Leila, why should love have timeframes?”

“It’s more than just timeframes. Love is compatibility. It’s a desire and need. It’s communication. It’s completing the other person. And all that takes time.”

“Well, even though you’ve decided to chicken out and not answer, let me tell you what I know about Reese.” Patricia inhaled, then smiled. “When I heard he was going to be in Atlanta next week, I knew it was because of you. Reese is a great guy and a wonderful father. All he’s ever wanted is a family, someone to love and someone who would love him. I think that’s his biggest flaw. He willingly wears his heart right out front, so you don’t have a problem finding it. He’s not a complex man. Loving him isn’t complicated. What you see is what you’ll get.” Patricia exhaled, allowing Leila time to absorb that. “And what I see is that Reese is completely absorbed with you. No one else. He even laughs more when he’s around you. And so do you.”

Leila found her eyes getting moist and didn’t want that. “I’m very fond of Reese,” Leila finally admitted.

This was the discussion Leila had wanted to have with Chi but couldn't because of the honeymoon. She hadn't considered talking to Patricia since Chi was her link to Reese. She felt relieved to have someone to talk through this.

"I think he's very fond of you, Leila. So does Parker."

Leila didn't want to dig too deep into that emotional well. She and Reese hadn't made any commitments to each other. If she dug too deeply, she would have to admit how much it was going to hurt when he did leave. Leila changed the topic to Keith's attitude. "You mentioned Suzette could be vindictive. Do you think she would use Keith to hurt Reese?"

"Suzette knows the only reason Reese is still in her life is because of Keith," Patricia said softly. "I can't imagine her doing something that would push Reese farther away."

They chatted a little longer, then finalized their dinner plans before Leila hung up.

Reese would be coming home soon, and she couldn't wait to see him. Coming home soon. Leila shook her head. Get a grip, Leila. He's not coming home. He's only borrowed a key to a house that is five states away from his home.



THEY LOOKED LIKE TWO HAPPY COUPLES SITTING ON THE PATIO OF the upscale restaurant located in the Buckhead area. The night's navy sky was their umbrella. Patricia's arm was wrapped around Mac's waist as she sat leaning into him. Leila's legs were crossed as she nuzzled close to Reese. His chair was butted close to hers, so his arm was lazily resting across her shoulders. They had finished dinner and sat laughing and talking over dessert and coffee.

"You two look pretty cozy together," Patricia said, watching how Leila snuggled closer to Reese. "Just wait until Momma figures out something is going on between the two of you."

“Reese and I are friends,” Leila said. “Harriett already knows that.”

“Just friends, huh?” Patricia teased.

Reese tightened his hold on Leila. “Special friends,” Reese said.

“Yeah, right.” Patricia was bent on forcing them to admit what she suspected. “Mac and I were special friends, too. You keep this up and Momma will be asking for a wedding date and begging you for grandkids.”

“I’m not her son, she can’t demand grandkids from me.” Reese’s comment was full of bluster. It was a damn good feeling being a part of the Ryan’s clan.

Patricia jumped all over his denial with the truth. “You know you like hearing us label you as family. I’m getting tired of having to remind you.”

“At least Keith has already figured it out,” Reese said. “He calls her Grandma Harriett.”

“You don’t get off the hook that easily.” Patricia wanted to get back to the topic of Leila and Reese. She looked at her husband. “Mac, I think they’re avoiding the topic of their relationship.”

“You think?” Mac’s deep voice held humor.

“Reese has a business to maintain out west,” Leila said, defending their avoidance. “I’m in the process of expanding a day-care. So, trying to squeeze in a relationship, a wedding, and a few grandkids would be a major undertaking.” Leila leaned into Reese. “So, we’re friends.”

Reese’s smile disappeared when she quickly simplified what they had into just a friendship. He frowned when she used their careers and the distance to imply it didn’t leave time for anything else. He wanted to improve on what Leila said. Squeezing her gently, he said, “Special friends.”

Leila looked up into eyes that held yearning, a need. “Yes. Very special friends.”

“I thought so,” Patricia said triumphantly.

Leila turned her determined look to Mac. "I'm surprised you and Reese haven't explored an East Coast venture together."

Mac said, "We've discussed what he has planned. My company's direction doesn't support what Reese wants to do."

"What about your contacts?" Leila asked Mac. "You must know of someone who could be of benefit."

Reese enjoyed hearing Leila support him. "She's doing a good job of pleading my case." He kissed her temple.

Leila looked up at caressing eyes. "I know how important this expansion is to you. I would be nowhere if not for my family's connections."

He didn't think he had those connections. "I guess I need to lean on my family a little more."

"Might as well," Patricia agreed. "And you need to come visit us more as well."

Mac decided to take the first step. "Reese, Leila is right. If your schedule allows, why don't you come to Florida on Tuesday? I'm having a meeting with several shippers in the region. Come as an adviser. Do some networking. Then let's see what more we can do. It seems your East Coast expansion is most important to everyone at the table." Mac was looking at Leila when he finished. She brightened.

"I can squeeze that in," Reese said.

"We're going to start around eight in the morning," Mac said. "If it's better for you, fly down on Monday. You're welcome to stay with us."

"I have a meeting on Monday afternoon. I can come that evening. It'll give us some time to talk, Mac." Reese's smile was genuine. "Thanks for the invitation."

"That's what family is for," Mac said, grinning.

Dessert was finished and they said their final farewells since Patricia and Mac Carter were returning home to Florida. Patricia used this dinner to discover what she wanted and fulfill a prom-

ise she'd made to Parker to check in on them. She had recalled how excited Leila had been about Reese's call during the backyard party at Parker's. How thrilled Reese had been seeing her at the wedding rehearsal. How inseparable they had been at the dinner party. And how great a couple they made at the wedding and reception.

Witnessing their behavior over dinner tonight, she knew both Leila and Reese wanted more, but weren't ready, or able to admit it yet. That saddened Patricia, as she kissed them both farewell.



REESE TOOK LEILA BY THE HAND AS MAC'S CAR PULLED OUT OF THE restaurant's parking lot. "It's a nice night. Let's walk a little."

A cool spring breeze made for perfect outdoor activities. There was a soft buzz of excitement as people walked down sidewalks, cozied at outdoor cafes and drove about.

Enjoying the sights and sounds, Reese headed to a small park that featured a huge fountain in its center. Water sprayed on a large white cement statue of a man with a fish tail.

Reese stopped at the low wall encircling the fountain. With his back to it, he raised himself up to sit on the wall then pulled Leila to stand between his legs.

Reese wanted to say something about the comment made at dinner. They hadn't talked in-depth about what was happening between them and now he felt the need to correct that. Leila was helping to make his life anew, adding something more special, fresher to it. The old routine left little to be desired. It left too much unaccounted for. "Patricia was pretty persistent, wasn't she?"

"Patricia loves you like family. All the Ryans and the Carters do."

Reese wasn't referring to that part of the conversation. He'd meant Patricia's perceptive eye about their friendship, but instead said, "They are family and are insulted when I refer to them as

anything else.” He thought about the discussion involving Mac. “I appreciate what you said to Mac.”

Leila looked demure then, and he wondered why.

“I hope I didn’t come across as snooping,” she added.

“You help to push along something I’ve been dragging my feet on. I should have acted on Mac’s potential support long ago. I’m going to make the best of it.”

“I’m glad,” she said softly. “If it does work out, everyone in your family will be glad as well.” Reese nodded and Leila added, “I only met Chi about a year ago, but feel as though I’ve known both her and the Ryans for much longer. They’re nice people.”

“You’re right.” Reese ran a finger down her cheek, and it ended under her chin. He raised her serene gaze to his. This was why he was so drawn to her. She touched positive aspects of his life and desired only to enhance them.

“I assumed you and Chi were old friends and she’d been hiding you out. Since you’ve known her for such a short time, I guess that’s why I didn’t meet you before now. It’s been about a year since I’ve been back.”

Leila smiled. “I’ve known about you though.”

Reese’s hands went to her shoulders, pulling her closer. With the height of the wall, his sitting position put her eye level with him. “Would you like the chance to find out a lot more about me?” To him, Leila looked as though she was debating if she wanted to answer that. One of them had to be the first to expose the truth that neither had really talked about. Reese decided to be the one to start. “You know Patricia is right. There is something going on with us. And I want it to be something very real, very special and meaningful between us. I like how you make me feel, Leila.”

She was enthralled. Leila rubbed her hands up his jean-clad thighs. “How’s that?”

He liked the way she smiled, how her eyes sparkled, how her touch increased when she asked that. “Like there’s a place I can

entrust my heart for safekeeping,” he said, taking both of her hands in his. “Right here.” He was referring to her cupped hands, which he clasped between his. He pulled them to his mouth to kiss.

Leila couldn’t contain her emotions. She leaned forward and kissed him softly, sweetly. Then she kissed him again. “Is it possible I could be this lucky?” she whispered to his mouth.

Reese laughed. “Why lucky?”

“I’ve wanted to be intimate with you from the moment you stepped off the plane. Maybe even before that. But I didn’t think it was possible or practical.”

“I remember your look when I first met you,” he said. “What I liked about it was how hard you wanted to come across as casual although I saw something more intense behind your smile. I knew then that you weren’t going to toy with me. That if we started something, it would be real.” Reese’s smile faded into seriousness. “I would say I’m the lucky one.”

Leila shook her head as her emotions took over. “I don’t know how Suzette let you slip away. I wouldn’t have.”

Reese pulled her into his arms. “Then don’t.”

“I really want to get this right with you.” Leila squeezed him lovingly, then stepped back. “Tell me, what went wrong between you and Suzette?”

Reese looked up into the indigo sky. Stars winked like flirting angels. “As long as my dream was her dream, we were in love. Football is a hard business. Only one player in a bunch might go down in the record books; most go broke after their career is over. I was just part of the bunch, even though I was good at it. I had no intention of making a long-term career out of it. It was the quickest legal way for this poor Black man to make big money. When Suzette discovered she couldn’t change my dream into her dream, she decided we weren’t in love anymore. In an argument one day she called me a ‘nauseating nuisance,’” Reese smiled joylessly. “How could I continue to love someone who thought so little of

me?” Reese held Leila’s cheek in his hand. “I don’t look back on it as a bad thing. Now I have a new chance with you. If you want it. Let’s not let distance or our jobs be an issue. Let’s make this work.”

Leila leaned closer to him, placing her mouth to his ear, her hands at his waist. “I’ve changed my mind,” she whispered, as a tear rolled down her cheek and onto his. “It wasn’t luck that brought you to me. Maybe you are a blessing.”

Reese wrapped his arms around her, enjoying the feel of her even as he reminded himself that things never went smoothly in his life. It seemed to him that he was always fighting an uphill battle, be it work or otherwise.

Will something ruin this with Leila? It’s going too well, too fast. Reese held her close as he wondered why it seemed the bright stars now seemed suddenly dimmer.

CHAPTER

Thirteen



The daycare office was full of Monday morning chatter. “The wedding was heavenly.” Eunice was seated at her desk updating Joyce. “And Chi was so beautiful! It made my whole weekend.”

Leila walked into the room. “It was wonderful, wasn’t it.”

“Well, good morning...I mean, afternoon Leila!” Eunice said cheerfully, stopping her recitation of the weekend events.

Leila spoke to both. “It is good.”

“Leila and Reese were so cute together.” Eunice gave Joyce a conspiratorial wink. “You should have seen them dance together at the reception.”

“Reese is a good dancer,” Leila agreed, smiling.

“I knew I should have gone,” Joyce complained, shaking her head. “Sounds like I missed a great time. I just had too much going on all weekend.”

“I’m sure Chi will bring wedding pictures when she picks up her son. So, you’ll get to see some of it.” Leila headed to her office. “Eunice, hold all my calls this morning. I need to put the final touches on the presentation to the city.”

“You have an appointment in thirty minutes with Mrs. Shirley.”

“I don’t have a Monday appointment with her. It’s scheduled for Thursday.”

“She called this morning demanding to get on your schedule. I think it has to do with the church’s support.”

“Not a problem. She probably has a conflict for Thursday.” Leila closed her office door and went to her desk to boot up her computer. As Microsoft Windows did its startup, she reflected on why she was late getting into the office and smiled.

When they had walked into her home the previous night, Reese had asked seductively, “Which room in your house haven’t you made love in?”

“You would know since you’re the only man to make love to me here.”

He grinned arrogantly. “Then we have a few options, now, don’t we?”

The way he had smiled gave Leila the impression they would have a night of wicked passion in every room, possibly ending in the kitchen, with pots and pans being knocked to the floor as they did something acrobatic on the counter.

Surprisingly, it had been much different, more erotic. Reese had gone to the hall bathroom and ran a hot bubble bath. He had removed his shirt and shoes but kept on his jeans. Next, he helped Leila undress while planting tantalizing kisses all over her body. By the time she got into the tub, she was spilling with desire. Reese disappeared to the kitchen and returned with a chair and a small container of honey.

Resting on his knees, he lathered his hands with soap and slowly rubbed them all over her body, rinsing away the soap as he went along. Rubbing honey on his fingers, he traced her lips with it and treated her to a deliciously passionate kiss. Then he sat in the chair and reached underwater for her foot. He smoothed honey on the bottom of it and licked and sucked it off.

That was a new and different experience that sent a sensational jolt of electricity down her legs and straight between them.

Leila let out a tremendous moan.

His honeyed hands were followed by warm kisses down her leg to her knee. He tugged at her leg with one hand as the other repositioned her in the tub. In a carefully maneuvered, water-splashing flash she was now turned facing him, lying across the width of the tub with her legs draped on either side of the chair he sat in. Reese moved closer to lick off the honey he poured on her breasts. Slowly, determinedly, his hands worked down her legs, fingering and rubbing devotedly between them.

Water swirled, hips gyrated, and honey was licked. When the tremors started, Reese didn't stop until she called out in ecstasy. Then the sudsy waves slowly calmed.

Reese never said a word through any of that. When he finally spoke, it was a soft whisper. "Are you ready for bed?"

"Yes," was all she could manage to say.

He rinsed her down again and held a towel up as she stepped out of the tub.

Reese took off his jeans and they went to bed in the nude. He held her throughout the night. The morning was spent in bed talking and tasting honey off each other's bodies as they made love.

As she watched him leave this morning, Leila knew loving him would only make things better between them.

Her computer screen went dark, and a colorful bouncing ball leaped around the screensaver. That motion pulled her from her

reverie. The screen only flashed the bouncing ball if the PC had not been used within ten minutes.

Goodness, Leila thought, pressing the computer keys. At this rate, I'll get nothing done. Then an idea came to her. She went to one of the Internet's online bookstores and shopped for a book on fantasy lovemaking techniques.

After the ocean's worth of fun she'd had in the bathtub, she wanted to repay Reese in some erotic way.

Leila was deep into reading an excerpt from a naughty how-to sex book when the reverend's wife, Mrs. Shirley Stanley, strolled into her office. Although in her fifties, she looked like a woman ten years younger and acted twenty years wiser. Her conservative business suit fit perfectly. Not a strand of her auburn-tinted hair was out of place.

Flustered, Leila couldn't remember the keystrokes to immediately turn on the bouncing ball to hide the book with a cover of nude people. Instead, she quickly turned off the computer and the screen went black.

"Hello, Mrs. Shirley." It was a pet name she used growing up which became the norm. Mrs. Shirley had been an integral part of her rearing. There had been many nights Leila spent at Mrs. Shirley's house when her mother needed a babysitter. Leila stood and walked over to take her hand, hoping she didn't look as guilty as she felt. "How have you and the Reverend been?"

"We're fine. I hope I wasn't interrupting something truly interesting." Mrs. Shirley took a seat. "You looked completely engrossed in what you were doing."

Leila looked into the stern, emotionless face of the older woman. It was a face shaped by strict righteousness. "I'm sure it's a topic in which you and the Reverend would have very little interest."

"Try me?" said Mrs. Shirley. "You might be surprised."

Leila couldn't contain her bright smile. Out of respect for the stately, elder woman, she refused to allow her mind to dance down the wicked path it was going. The urge to say, 'Tell me all you know about oral sex,' flashed in her mind and she willed the thought away.

"I'm just so surprised to see you today," Leila said instead. "I only had...sweets... for breakfast and was thinking about grabbing a bite to eat. Would you like to go to lunch?"

"That sounds lovely, but I'm on a tight schedule. I have a board of directors meeting this afternoon and need to leave here in thirty minutes."

Mrs. Shirley Stanley was married to one of the most powerful ministers in the city. Her connections were the reason Leila had been able to achieve a level of success so quickly with the churches.

Mrs. Shirley's influence and contacts within the city were also going to help promote Leila's new plan for the tutoring program. It wasn't a case of the church coming together with the government, though, neither side would have willingly admitted that even if it had been. While Mrs. Shirley was rooted in religious organizations, she was just as committed to community, city, and state organizations. There had been several incidents in which the church rallied for or against a government leader with Mrs. Shirley leading the pack. Her influence was needed for Leila to succeed with her growth plans for the daycare facility. Keeping Shirley Stanley on her side was her best option for the business as well as to help satisfy her mother. Her mother trusted Mrs. Shirley more than she did her daughter.

Leila opened her day planner. "Is this meeting replacing the one we had originally scheduled for Thursday to review the presentation?"

"No," Shirley Stanley said flatly. "I have other business to discuss."

Leila automatically reached for a pen. Shirley Stanley was quick to give directions, instructions, and recommendations to be followed to the letter.

“I had breakfast with Councilman Davis this morning. Education has never been on his ticket, and it seems it still isn’t. I might be able to help him to see the importance of laying a strong educational foundation for the children of our community.”

“Should I meet with him before the presentation meeting?” Leila asked. “Maybe I can help convince him by showing the poor grade level statistics I’ve collected and the positive impact of tutoring.”

“The councilman is looking to be reelected. Those students won’t be of any interest to him until they can vote.”

“Then I’ll leave him in your trustworthy hands.” Leila laid down her pen. “Eunice mentioned something about your wanting to discuss church business.”

Shirley Stanley sat up taller, her fingers tightening around the purse in her lap. The quick change in her demeanor concerned Leila. The councilman was certainly a looming issue, but whatever else she wanted to discuss seemed just as bad. Leila prepared herself for complicated news.

Mrs. Shirley Stanley started with a sermon. “What we decide to do as individuals always has a rippling effect on the lives of others. We should do what must be done for the good of others.”

“Of course,” Leila said with conviction. “All I’ve ever wanted to do is help children. I’m dedicating my life’s work to it. You know I take what I do very seriously.”

“I’ve always believed that to be true,” Mrs. Shirley said. “Even when your mother initially asked that I help you with the idea of opening a daycare. She had her doubts, but I saw the determination you had.”

“And I owe you a lot because of it,” Leila confessed.

“I’m glad to hear it because I’ve gotten some disturbing news.” Mrs. Shirley took a moment to look up as if asking for heavenly strength. She said sadly, “There have been concerns brought to my attention about the number of men you have visiting this facility after dark. The latest concern came yesterday when one of the church members saw a half-naked man running around the parking lot as she drove by. She circled back thinking the worst, but realized the man was the football star, Reese McCoy.”

Leila’s mouth had dropped open in shock at the comment about the ‘number of men,’ but she couldn’t keep quiet when she heard Reese’s name.

It took a massive effort not to shout, but it still came out loudly. “What are you talking about? Reese wasn’t running naked through the facility. Who said that?”

“Never mind who.” Mrs. Shirley’s face held disapproval of Leila’s tone and the topic. “I understand his chest was bare. He didn’t have any shoes. His pants weren’t hanging off like those rap singers wear theirs. I call that practically naked. This is a Christian-based facility and the church’s and my husband’s reputation are at stake.”

“Mrs. Shirley.” Leila couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Reese is a respectable man, not a flasher. He wouldn’t harm the children. I was here yesterday. I believe he was retrieving his overnight bag out of his Jeep.”

“Overnight bag?” The words spewed out like spit. “So, the rumor about men sleeping overnight at the facility is true?”

Leila shook her head to dismiss the nonsense she was hearing. Struggling to keep her voice even she managed to say, “There have not been a number of men. Reese has been a guest in my home for the past week. He’s a very good friend of mine.”

“I understand you met Reese McCoy quite recently. So how could he be a very good friend?”

Leila slowly rubbed her finger across the pressure building up in her forehead. She would try a different approach. “I do recall telling you about the wedding of close friends of mine, Chi and Parker Ryan. Reese is considered family by the Ryans and by offering him my spare bedroom, I was extending assistance to friends who had invited him to town for the wedding.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Shirley. “I’m quite relieved to hear that. Even in these times, a woman’s reputation should be treated as a delicate thing.”

Leila had a flashback. That sounded like something her mother would say. For a split second, a chill ran through her.

Please don’t let this get back to my mother in the fashion it has gotten to Shirley Stanley.

For some reason—and Leila couldn’t put her finger on it—she felt this conversation was far from over. Maybe it was because the older woman was still flexing her fingers and looked as if she were contemplating an even graver topic.

“Family is the foundation of everything.”

Oh no, not another sermon! Leila needed to assure Mrs. Shirley that Reese McCoy’s presence in her home wasn’t a major issue. She interrupted the renewed lecture. “Reese McCoy is leaving town for a few days on business. He plans to return home sometime next week. I believe the concerns of the church members...”

“You mean the Christian mothers whose children attend this daycare?”

“The parents who have children here,” Leila modified, “need not worry about my personal life. It will not interfere with the mission of this facility.”

“Excellent, I’m glad we cleared that up.”

“So am I,” Leila said, slightly confused and overwhelmed.

“I have one last thing to ask of you,” Mrs. Shirley said calmly.

Leila jumped at the chance to right whatever wrong was affecting her image. “Whatever I can do, just ask.”

“A young boy’s future is at stake. He’s an emotionally disturbed child whose parents are having difficulties right now. I believe you might be able to assist.”

Finally, back to a topic based on reality. Leila reached for her pen and noticed her hand shaking. That entire conversation had rattled her. She wasn’t adjusting well to the quick change in topic. She felt she still needed to say more in Reese McCoy’s defense. However, talking about another topic would give her time to think of something more reassuring to say.

Leila positioned the pen to write. “What is it you need for me to do?”

“You of all people should know how a troubled marriage affects the child. Allow Suzette and Reese McCoy to put their marriage back together. Don’t let Keith continue to suffer because you can’t find a single man to have a decent relationship with.”

Whatever remaining patience had kept Leila from screaming disappeared. She slammed down her pen and leaned forward.

“I don’t know who’s been feeding you this garbage about me and Reese, but I don’t appreciate how you’ve come to me! This is none of the church’s affairs. This is none of your affairs...”

“It’s your having an indecent affair that’s the problem!” Mrs. Shirley said strongly. She stood to leave. “If the news is getting back to me and having me rethink my position on helping this facility...” She turned and headed toward the slightly opened door. “I wonder how your mother will handle this embarrassing news, knowing her only daughter is turning into something as sinful as a woman selling on the street corner.”

Mrs. Shirley Stanley stormed out, leaving Leila shaken and dazed.

CHAPTER

Fourteen



“I think you have an aggressive plan,” Mac said to Reese, who sat across from him in the entertainment room of his home, “but it’s possible.”

“It’s possible,” Reese agreed, flipping through his folder. “A lot of things will have to fall into place. I’m not comfortable with this other company. I think they’re tampering with the books to improve the bottom line.”

“Of the two prospects you can approach tomorrow, the best is the guy looking to expand his Tampa-based business. The other investor will require you to change your strategy and elongate your timeline.”

“I’m more interested in merging with an existing company.” Reese closed the folder placing it on the coffee table, then leaned back on the huge gray couch. “The sooner I get my business plans stabilized, the sooner I can have a regular life. If there’s such a

thing. It seems all I do is work and sleep. I rarely have time for my son. Or myself.”

Mac reached for the music player’s remote under the papers and aimed the remote to turn on 60s soul music. The wall behind him had audio and video equipment from floor to ceiling. Ray Charles’s raspy melody filled the air. “And now you’re trying to squeeze Leila into it.”

“I think I’m succeeding with that.” Reese smiled, enjoying the sound of the piano melody. It was the perfect background for transitioning into a new conversation.

“Congratulations. Another reason to consider your trip to Atlanta a success.”

“The only reason, so far,” Reese corrected.

“Leila is good people,” Mac said. “Patricia thinks very highly of her and is rooting for you two.”

“That’s a pleasant change. Patricia wasn’t supportive of my marrying Suzette. I’ll never tell her that she was right.”

“You and Suzette seemed close.”

“If Suzette had her way, we’d still be married, and I’d played football until I retired. She had mood swings. Sometimes she would treat me like I was the best person on the planet, the next I was Satan himself. When I asked for a divorce, she set out to destroy me. Almost did. She had a better lawyer, and I didn’t have a prenuptial agreement. If not for the divorce, my business would be right where I want it. I had an office on the East Coast when I first opened. The divorce caused me to consolidate. I chose to keep the Arizona office to add distance between Suzette and me. Unfortunately, it added too much distance for Keith.”

“From what I can tell, Keith adores you.”

“Yes, but,” Reese shook his head thinking about his son’s recent behavior, “he’s doing this clinging thing now. Like if he takes his eyes off me, I’ll vanish and never come back. That’s not like Keith. He knows I’ll always be there.”

“He hasn’t seen you in a while,” Mac offered. “Maybe your spending extra time in Atlanta will help with that.”

“I hope so.” Reese wished it was that simple. As he placed his folder inside his briefcase, he reached inside one of the pockets for the small silver oval locket. He would sometimes touch it whenever he needed a pleasant thought. Memories he didn’t want to think about had surfaced as they’d talked about Suzette.

Noise coming from the kitchen got Mac’s attention. “Patricia must be home.”

“Mac?” Patricia said, coming into the room. “Reese! Good to see you!”

“It’s good to be seen,” Reese said as Patricia headed to the sofa to sit next to Mac.

Mac leaned over and kissed his wife, then wrapped his arm around her.

“So, how’s Leila?” Patricia asked eagerly.

“She’s great.” Reese grinned. “But I think you want to ask how we’re doing together.”

“You know me too well,” Patricia agreed. “I feel good about you two. Don’t you?”

“Leila and I talked about the possibilities.”

Patricia looked at Mac. “He makes it sound like a business deal. Why can’t you men just spill your feelings.”

“Sweetheart, it’s a macho thing,” Mac said as if it made all the sense in the world.

“Is that your locket?” Patricia said, enthralled. “I haven’t seen it in years.”

Reese laid it in her palm. Patricia opened it and showed the picture to Mac.

“That’s his mother,” Patricia said.

“She’s beautiful,” Mac said to Reese as Patricia returned the locket.

“It’s a priceless keepsake,” Reese said, staring meaningfully at the silver locket. “A link to my past.” *Something to mark my future.* Then he noticed the time and stood up. “Let me go make some good-night calls before it gets too late.” He headed toward the hall.

“Tell Leila we said hello,” Mac called out as Reese left.

“Mind your own business,” Reese said to him.

“You never left the room when you called Keith before. Who else are you calling?” Patricia was laughing when she said that.

“You mind your own business, too!”

Thirty minutes later, Reese returned to the entertainment room to find Mac and Patricia watching a movie.

Patricia saw Reese’s frown. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Reese said, grabbing his briefcase. “It’s just that I’m still getting Leila’s voicemail. She’s bad about checking messages, but I thought she would have called me back by now. But she got to the office late and is probably playing catch up.”



REESE HAD RETIRED TO THE GUEST BEDROOM ABOUT AN HOUR LATER. He lay in bed writing on a notepad the points he wanted to cover with both potential contacts tomorrow. He truly wanted to focus on merging with an established business instead of building another business from scratch. The issue wasn’t whether he could do it, but whether he wanted to throw so much time and energy into starting another venture.

He wanted to refocus his time and energy on having a family, having a life outside of work.

Leila.

Reese knew he was probably coming on too strong. Maybe he should slow this thing down and give her time to decide if she truly wanted something meaningful with him. He was approaching her like a business deal, trying to wrap it up, so that he could move to the next stage of their relationship. Maybe he should suggest a

long dating period, not rush her. He felt drawn to her, comfortable with her, connected to her in some way. He completely enjoyed being with her and when he wasn't, he found himself missing her.

He was not the sucker type who believed in love at first sight, but there had been something energizing about that first moment. And it still existed between them. Their talks, their interactions, had been like old spirits reuniting after a long time away. She was so familiar to him. That was what had motivated his wanting to be in town a little longer.

Everyone else said they were right together. It did feel right. But could it be right between them for a very long time? Because he certainly couldn't do another divorce.

He wished Leila would call him back. He was missing her.

As Reese jotted down another topic of concern on the notepad, his cell phone rang.

Smiling, he reached for it. Automatically assumed it was Leila. "Suzette. What's up?"

Suzette was saying, "I know this sexy tone very well. You must be in bed."

"I was working. Preparing for a meeting tomorrow."

"Reese, you're always working. Baby, I've been telling you for years you need to relax more."

"What makes you call? Is Keith okay?"

"He was a little rowdy tonight," Suzette said. "When I asked him what was wrong, he told me you were out of town on business and wouldn't be spending time with him tomorrow."

"When I talked to Keith about it, he seemed okay with us rescheduling to Wednesday."

"Reese, sweetie, I've warned you before. Keith isn't being open with you. He's having a big problem with you making promises and not keeping them."

"That's not what happened," Reese defended. "He and I are still doing everything we planned on doing, just a day later."

“What’s so important that you can’t see Keith tomorrow?” Suzette asked sweetly.

“I’m in Florida on business,” Reese said.

“Just business, huh? I find that funny since this meeting wasn’t in the plans before now.”

“I’ve told you everything you need to know.” Reese wasn’t going to have the age-old discussion with her. “Put Keith on and I’ll talk to him. He obviously must be really upset if it made you call.”

“He’s already asleep. I didn’t want to call and have him overhear our conversation just in case you had other reasons for putting him off.”

“There are no other reasons.” Reese found himself getting annoyed. “I told Keith what was going on. I’m surprised he took it the wrong way.”

“I’m concerned,” Suzette said. “You just haven’t been too excited about making time for him lately.”

“That has never been the case. That will never be the case. I don’t know why you would think that. I’ve been practically begging you to let me see more of him.”

“I have an idea,” Suzette said excitedly, not even acknowledging Reese’s last statement. “Keith was going on and on about wanting to go camping. I’m thinking of taking him this weekend. Why don’t you come with us? I know Keith would love to have you there. To him, camping means family time. You know how important that is to him.”

Now Reese understood the reason for the call. Keith must have mentioned the camping disagreement and Suzette wanted to solve it. That wasn’t what Reese wanted to do. Spending time with Suzette like that would only confuse Keith more.

“I’ve already made other plans for Keith and me this weekend. Suzette, it’s late and I must get up early in the morning.”

There was a knock on his bedroom door. “Reese?” Patricia called out.

“Give me a minute, I’m on the phone,” Reese said to Patricia.

“Out of town on business, huh!” Suzette bit out. “You stood your son up for some wild fling with that woman?” Suzette went from calm to furious in two seconds flat.

It caught Reese off guard. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. And I don’t have time to explain my personal life to you. Good night, Suzette.” He started to press the END button.

“I will not allow you to bring that woman in front of my son and...”

Reese pretended not to hear her ranting. He ended the phone. It was rude, but Suzette had drawn her conclusions and nothing he could say would change her mind. He didn’t have the energy to waste trying to explain differently.

Reese got up and went to see what Patricia wanted.



LEILA’S PHONE HAD BEEN RINGING ALL EVENING. ONLY FIVE MINUTES had passed since the last time it rang. She had avoided checking the caller ID a few times but knew this was probably her mother calling again. It would be the fifth call this evening.

Leila wanted to avoid the conversation with Elizabeth because she still hadn’t figured out how she was going to explain things to her mother’s satisfaction.

The telephone rang again. She went to the nightstand in her bedroom and picked it up. Exhaling, she answered.

“Leila, I’ve been trying to reach you since this afternoon. Your secretary said you got my message. I’m surprised I haven’t heard from you by now.”

Leila was sure the ungodly story Mrs. Shirley had given Elizabeth had been reported as a bigger image stain than it needed to be. It would serve as yet another reminder that Leila had not turned out to be the angel her mother wanted.

"I've been busy, Mother." Mother was proper. *Mama* was for uneducated Southerners, therefore, never to be used in the Chamberlain household. "I got your messages."

"Not all my messages, because the last one requested that you call me before eleven o'clock tonight."

Leila noticed the time was seven minutes past eleven.

Any other time Leila would attempt to pacify, to please. But now she was tired and just wanted to rest and think this thing through.

She went straight to the point. "Mother, I got a visit from Mrs. Shirley today. I'm sure you must have heard the rumor by now. Hopefully, you've also heard that it's unfounded."

"No," Elizabeth said firmly, "I heard that you still have this McCoy person living with you. Are you shacking up with this man?"

"Reese McCoy is a friend. A very good friend. He was the best man at Chi's wedding."

"And he couldn't stay in a hotel with the rest of the wedding party and traveling guests?"

Leila needed a cup of tea. A glass of wine would be better. "I have good news. Reese and I are dating."

"So, he's gone from a friend in a wedding to someone you're now dating?" Elizabeth retorted.

"He's a very good friend. There's nothing to be concerned about. I like him. He cares for me. We aren't doing anything that any other couple wouldn't do."

"That's my concern," Elizabeth said tartly. "You've only known the man for a short time and you're moving him in. Flaunting him around your place of business."

Leila was getting upset and needed to calm herself. "I'm sorry, Mother, that you feel this way. I don't think our behavior is inappropriate at all."

“Isn’t he some *Playgirl* calendar model? You don’t think that’s inappropriate for a Christian-based facility?”

“You have lots of information on the matter,” Leila said, annoyed. “What do you suggest I do?”

“I suggest you have Reese stay in a hotel like decent people do. The man is married, for God’s sake! No self-respecting woman would be playing around in public with a married man.”

Leila felt the sharp ping in the center of her forehead. She would need an aspirin by the end of the call. “He’s not married,” Leila corrected, sadly shaking her head. “He’s divorced. And he’s very decent. Very considerate. It was unfortunate that someone saw him in front of my home. I’m still surprised that it was possible since it’s difficult to see the parking area from the main road. Regardless, whoever it was saw him after business hours. I’m sorry if you’ve been embarrassed by all this. But you haven’t been told the complete truth. Mrs. Shirley left my office upset before I could correct her.”

“Obviously, some of the facts were left out,” Elizabeth unwillingly agreed.

“I’m grateful for Mrs. Shirley’s help.” Leila needed to win her mother’s trust again. Elizabeth was always asking to be made happy, and Leila found she couldn’t stop herself this time. She had a dysfunctional relationship with her mother, but she had long ago resigned herself to that fact and did what was needed to keep her mother happy or less disappointed with her. “Mrs. Shirley’s done so much to help me grow my business. I didn’t mean to upset her. Or you.”

“Shirley thinks you’ve done a great job.” Leila noticed her mother hadn’t said that she also thought highly of her work. Even now she still had hope that her mother would change her opinion. “But, Angel?” Elizabeth said, sweetly.

Leila felt her stomach turn. An ultimatum or a nicely veiled threat always followed that pet name. It would be the price Leila

would have to pay to correct the wrong she had done. It would be the solution that would remove Elizabeth's scarred vision of her.

Whatever it was, Leila knew she would probably do it.

"Yes, Mother?" she halfheartedly said.

"This relationship had better be heading toward a marriage. I would hate to think you've sunk to this level of dating and not plan to get anything out of it. Otherwise, end this with him immediately."

"I understand how you feel, Mother."

"Then you understand neither Shirley nor I will accept your continuing with this foolishness."

Not once had Elizabeth asked her how she felt about Reese or even how she was doing. The entire conversation had been predicated on what Elizabeth wanted. This was why Leila rarely called her mother. This was why her father couldn't handle being around her mother for long periods of time. Why would anyone want to be put through this?

Why am I allowing it to continue? Leila thought.

This wouldn't be the first time her mother or the Stanleys had interfered with a relationship she had. This was just the first time she desperately, vehemently, wanted to disagree.

Leila couldn't promise marriage, but she needed to say something to pacify Elizabeth for the time being. Something that would make this ugly stain on her image less noticeable. Fame and prestige were nice bandages for Elizabeth's pride.

Leila felt awful, even cheap, for thinking of it. It almost made her gag. But she needed to make amends, sell Reese's worth, and preserve what little was left of her image, so she said, "Did you hear that Reese was a professional football player?"

"Really!" Elizabeth chirped. "How could Shirley forget to mention something as important as that?"

TAKEN BY YOU

Then she buried her face in her hands and shook her head miserably. Now she was acting like the tramp Mrs. Shirley had accused her of being.

CHAPTER

Fifteen



R Reese was in a great mood when he got off the plane at Atlanta International Airport. Business had gone extremely well, and in about fifty minutes, Leila would be in his arms.

He had last seen her yesterday morning. He hadn't had a chance to talk to her today but had left a message suggesting they go out to dinner to celebrate.

He was half-hoping Leila would be the sentimental type who would anoint the start of today's reunion by surprising him at the airport to reenact their initial meeting. Only this time, he would kiss her as he had wanted to do the first time he'd seen her. He looked about at the many travelers milling around the corridor. She wasn't there. *Oh, what the hell*, he thought. *It was a corny idea anyway.*

As he headed to the main terminal, he dialed her office number. No answer. Leila knew what time to expect him, so no doubt she would be there when he arrived.

On the drive to her place, Reese considered how excited he was about finishing their discussion on how they planned to continue their relationship. When they last talked about it, they had been holding each other in bed, sensuously caressing. They should reenact that for sure. With his crazy work life, she understood the limitations and accepted the idea of weekend visits. Reese had suggested he come to Atlanta more often, which would give him a chance to see Keith as well. On those occasions when business trips took him in other directions, Leila had offered to meet him wherever he might be located.

They were willing to compromise, to understand, to extend themselves for each other. Things were going well.

Reese glanced in the rearview mirror as he changed lanes to exit the highway. Only a few more minutes and then he would be with her.

It seemed they could talk about anything. Their discussions ranged from social events to private dreams. He discovered her dream was to teach the world, one child at a time. Reese shared his desire to move the world, one shipment at a time. And when they weren't with the world at large, they decided to fill the gap with joy and concern for each other. They laughed easily together. She listened willingly, offered advice, and enjoyed debating.

At one of his life's low points caused by the emotional games of the women he'd met after the divorce, Reese had thought remaining with Suzette would have been easier. Thankfully, he never gave up hope that he would one day meet that special woman. He had found Leila just when he needed her most. This was proof that keeping the hope alive had paid off.

Reese pulled up to her home. He grabbed his suitcase and headed up the stairs. Since her car wasn't in the driveway, he searched for her house key on his key ring. He wanted to shower and dress for their dinner date.

The closer he got to the top, the more he smiled. Coming to see her was a routine he could easily get used to.

He turned the key. The door didn't open.

Frowning, he realized the other locks were engaged. He headed back to the Jeep, tossed his belongings in the backseat, and reached for his cell phone.

"Leila, it's Reese," he said to her voicemail. "I'm home. Since I can't get into your place, I'll run a few errands and meet you back here. Call me when you get this."

As Reese drove around to the front, he spotted someone locking the daycare's door. When he noticed the woman waving to get his attention, he stopped.

"May I help you?" the woman asked.

"I was looking for Leila Chamberlain," Reese said as she neared his Jeep.

"The daycare is closed, but she lives in the back."

"I just left there. Do you have any idea when to expect her?"

Reese noticed the brightly colored nameplate dangling from the key chain was inscribed with the name JOYCE.

"Leila was here all day." Joyce cranked her neck, trying to see the back parking area. "She left the daycare about an hour ago. Want to leave a message or something?"

"I'm Reese McCoy. Just trying to connect with her. If you think she's coming back soon, I'll wait."

"So, you're Reese McCoy," Joyce said curiously. "I'm surprised you're allowed on the property considering all the ruckus you've caused."



REESE STOPPED BY THE SHOPPING MALL TO PICK UP A FEW THINGS since he was running out of fresh clothes and essentials. He grabbed his shopping bags, briefcase, and suitcase out of the back-

seat of the Jeep, then purposefully walked into the lobby of the Embassy Suites hotel.

For the past few hours, he had been thinking about what Joyce had told him, and he still wasn't sure which annoyed him more: The church's request to ban him from the daycare's property or Leila not immediately coming to him about it.

How in the hell could he be labeled an improper influence? And just who in the hell were these self-righteous church members to dictate who could visit someone's home? Joyce had said Leila had defended him, but in the end, obviously lost.

Why couldn't she just come to him? Considering the challenges that long-distance relationships cause, things like this would add unneeded pressure and problems. He didn't have an issue with living in a hotel. Hotel living made things easier for him when he traveled. Everything he needed was just a telephone call away. What he took issue with was being the last person to know about *this* problem.

The hotel room was designed as a suite with a separate living room, office, and small kitchen. He placed his shopping bags in the living room closet. "Damn, Leila," he said disappointedly. "Why couldn't you just come to me?"

Reese headed to the shower. He would order room service and spend the rest of the evening working on his business plans. As he stepped out of the shower, the hotel telephone rang. He had asked the hotel receptionist to send someone to get his clothes to be dry-cleaned. That was probably a call from them.

"Hello?" Reese said, adjusting the towel around his waist.

"Reese? It's Leila. I'm downstairs in the lobby. Can I come up?"

Five minutes later he was opening the room door to let her in. He hadn't bothered to get dressed, so he stood back, wearing the towel and a frown.

Leila unceremoniously went to the sofa in the living room area and put down her purse. Reese closed the door but didn't move from in front of it. His hands were placed unflinchingly at his hips.

"Joyce left me a message that she recommended this hotel," Leila said as she turned to face him. She had wrapped her arms around herself, looking as if she were warding off a chill. "I'm sorry you heard about the confusion with the church this way."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Reese decided he was angrier than he had originally thought.

"It seems a few more people are on the church's bandwagon. I got stuck in a meeting about this and couldn't get back home in time."

"You locked me out," Reese said tartly. "Forget the door. I feel like you shut me out of your life. Yesterday we talked about doing whatever we could to have a relationship. Then someone complains about my visit, and you put on all the locks!"

"I forgot about not putting on the locks," Leila said softly, desperately. "It was a habit. I wasn't thinking." She was shaking her head from side to side.

"You've known about this church edict since yesterday," Reese said curtly. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I figured I would try to handle it, not bother you about getting involved with my issue." Leila dejectedly looked at her folded hands.

"We *are* involved, Leila," Reese snapped, and she looked up with pleading eyes. Her expression made him rethink his tone. She had been yelled at enough today. He added, more sympathetically, "How can we do this if the small things trip us up?"

Leila took several tentative steps towards him. She stopped a few feet away. "I don't want this to be a problem, but I'm not quite sure how to solve it."

"I'm staying here now." He shrugged, looking around the hotel room. "I guess it's solved for the moment."

Leila closed the distance as he stood watching her. She hesitantly reached out, stopped just short of touching his chest, then urgently threw her arms around his neck.

Reese didn't move initially. His hands were still at his waist until she tightened her hold on him.

"I'm sorry," Leila said, kissing his neck. "I didn't mean for all this to happen. I'm so sorry, Reese."

He gave in and wrapped his arms around her. "Who the hell are these people to think they can dictate what we do?"

Leila looked sadly up at him. It was as if the words hurt to come out. "My family."

Reese's head snapped back as if he'd been punched in the face. "Who?"

"My uncle is the reverend and..."

"Your uncle?" Reese interrupted, speaking a bit too loudly. He thought he must have misheard her. "Your uncle is the family who doesn't want us together?"

"His wife and my mother also seem to think we are rushing things."

It took him a second to digest that. Attempting to swallow this distasteful truth was giving him indigestion. "You briefly mentioned your family, as if they didn't matter much." Reese bit back the urge to shout.

Just as quickly the absurdity hit him, and he started to laugh. This was just too ridiculous. He shook his head, then moved toward the sofa to sit.

"Maybe it's because I don't have a religiously headstrong family," he quipped. "Hell, I don't even have a family. But I thought we were consenting adults. Which makes their opinion somewhat moot."

"I feel the same way as you do," Leila said, coming to sit next to him.

“Then explain why your staff has an all-points bulletin out about me.”

“It’s not like that. Joyce overheard me arguing with Mrs. Shirley, my uncle’s wife. It’s no secret she has an influence on my policymaking. I guess they assumed I would follow Mrs. Shirley’s request.”

Reese sat with his elbows resting on his knees. He looked to the side at her. “So, what’s your position on all of this?”

Leila shook her head. “It’s complicated. If I choose not to abide by the church’s wishes, I know they will start having parents remove their kids. The church also has a daycare, and I’m sure they would talk the parents into switching. And I’ve been relying on some of Mrs. Shirley’s contacts to help with the expansion project I told you about. Relying too much on her. They’re wielding a lot of power over me right now.”

“Are you telling me that what we do in *our* relationship will continue to be dictated by these people?” Reese asked flatly.

Leila seemed to deflate a little. She leaned back and folded her arms around her as if the temperature in the room had dropped considerably. Reese watched as she then rubbed her fingers across her forehead. She looked as if she were contemplating a decision. Slowly, she moved over and placed her arm around his back. “What I do know, Reese,” she kissed his shoulder, “is that I want you in my life.”

She looked confused, lost as to what to do next. “We talked about everything, it seemed,” he said. “Why haven’t I heard this about your family?”

“I didn’t want to start out talking about how complicated they are.” Leila looked away. “They’re so hard to please.”

“And you feel that you need to?” he asked levelly.

“You’ve said yourself how important family is.”

But Reese had also defined family as being supportive and nurturing, like the Ryans. Leila's family, however, seemed far from that.

She turned toward him, her arm still around him. "Are you angry with me?"

Reese could hear the uneasiness in her voice. "Come closer." He tugged at her arm, and she easily slid off the sofa and knee-walked to kneel in front of him. When she finally looked up, his eyes held meaning, comfort. "No. I'm not mad at you. Disappointed. But not angry. I'm just surprised by all this."

Leila looked as if her world were starting to slowly spin again. Her smile strengthened a little, her shoulders lifted. Then she nodded as if she'd concluded something to herself. She moved closer between his parted legs and leaned as if to kiss him. Inches away, she slowed, studying his face, reading his expression, trying to decipher his thoughts.

Leila watched his mouth as her lips moved to his. Then she looked back up to make sure his look was still approving. It was, so she kissed him gently.

When his hand touched her cheek, she kissed him again. "You're okay?" she asked.

"Yes." Reese reached out to hold her. "Are you?"

"Getting there. Let's talk about something more pleasant," she said. "In the message you left me, you wanted to celebrate. Let's."

It was time for a promise of love to try to win him over. It was something her mother had taught her well. This time her kiss held desperate meaning as she caressed up his legs, loosening the towel.

Reese stopped her hands. The swinging from one emotion to another was too fast. He wasn't sure if he wanted to bury it all away with a roll in the sack. "I don't want sex as a means of dropping this."

"I just..." Her stare fell to her chest. "I just need to feel something other than disappointment right now."

“Baby...” Reese rubbed his hand over his hair. This reunion wasn’t going at all like it should be. He didn’t want ‘just sex’ if that was what she thought would fix this. He wanted something stronger between them. Something meaningful to work toward. They hadn’t solved the family issue yet. He reached and pulled her to sit next to him. If they could get past this family thing, they would be on the right track. “Let’s figure out how to deal with your family.”

“I don’t know how, Reese.” Her eyes held misery. “They won’t understand.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen



“I told you Leila wouldn’t be a problem,” Suzette was saying into her cell phone as she sat in the upscale restaurant in downtown Atlanta. “When I found out she was related to the Stanleys, I figured things would go in my favor. But I never expected the word to get back to them that Leila was interfering with my reconciliation with Reese. The Lord does work in mysterious ways.”

Suzette was admiring how nicely her freshly done sculptured nails looked. The pretty pink color did everything for her skin. “I feel really bad that Sister Stanley took such drastic actions. Rumor has it that she threatened to close Leila’s business if she embarrassed their family with her foolishness.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Donna said. “I’ve never met her, but I know she’s very influential. I wanted to go to that fundraiser she held last year for the King Foundation, but the tickets to the event were five hundred dollars. Too rich for my blood.”

Suzette wanted to freshen up her makeup. She looked around in search of Reese; he wasn't there yet. But she was tired of this conversation, so lied, "Listen, Donna, I see Reese walking into the restaurant. As soon as people start seeing us as a couple, everyone will figure out we're getting back together."

"Suzette, are you sure it's over between Reese and Leila?" Donna asked. "This will look bad if he's going out with the both of you. You know how people talk."

"Leila is history! I've got to go." Suzette pressed the END button on her cell phone and slid it into her purse. She glanced toward the restaurant's entrance, hoping Reese and Keith were *actually* there. Nope, they still hadn't shown up. She had enough time to reapply lipstick and powder her nose.

Heading to the restroom, Suzette noticed two good-looking men watching her and immediately enhanced the twist in her strut. She knew the hot pink dress flattered all her nice curves. She smiled seductively as she passed by them. They leered excitedly. That's the reaction she liked to get. Without looking back, she continued on her way to the restroom.



REESE SPOTTED SUZETTE AS SOON AS HE WALKED INTO THE RESTAURANT. She looked as stunning as ever.

She waved and Keith said, "I see Mama!"

"Suzette, you're looking great," Reese said walking up to the booth. "I won't stay. I'm sure your date will be here any minute."

"Don't worry about that," Suzette said. "My friend is running late so stay for a few minutes. I want to hear about Keith's day with you."

Keith had already slid into the booth and Reese slid next to him.

Keith started with the highlights; a ritual that accompanied each time Reese brought him home. Typically, Suzette would start

by asking questions, but this time Keith eagerly piped in. “We played basketball this morning. Daddy won though. But I spent this afternoon at the Midas Touch. Man, that was fun!”

“Another afternoon at Midas Touch?” Suzette raised an arched brow in question. She looked at Reese. “Another day there?”

“With school being out and my working. It was a good choice,” Reese tried to keep his voice void of emotion. Suzette’s interrogations into details about Keith’s visits with him were sometimes bothersome. He figured this would be one of those times. “I checked him into the daycare for a few hours. They have an excellent summer program going on.”

“If you don’t have time for him, bring him home,” Suzette snapped.

“I have enough time,” Reese retorted. “When I need to run to a short meeting, it’s easier to go there since it’s close to my hotel. Besides, he needs to spend more time with kids his age.”

Suzette ignored that. “Keith, order dinner. You know how you get when you go too long without a meal.”

Reese frowned, turning concerned eyes to Keith. “Is there a problem?”

“Mama says I act weird when I haven’t eaten.”

“Since when? I’ve never seen that.” Reese was looking at Keith more closely. His son seemed as healthy as ever.

“Just jittery sometimes,” Suzette said, reviewing the menu.

“You should keep me informed about things like this. Maybe you should schedule an appointment with the doctor.”

“I started noticing it last week. Don’t worry. I’ll get it checked out if it continues.”

“I do worry. And if you don’t take him, I will.” Reese looked at his son again, his concern growing. “Keith, are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

Keith shrugged, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“Think you’re still up to a long hike on Saturday?” Reese probed. “Just as much of a walk as we did in Six Flags. That didn’t tire you out much.”

“I did that, didn’t I?” Keith assured. “Please don’t cancel the hiking trip. Pleeeassee.”

“I wasn’t planning on it. But tell me if you don’t feel up to it that day and we’ll make other arrangements.”

“I feel okay! Really, Dad.”

“Okay, son.” Reese turned to Suzette. “Why don’t you pack a bag so he can stay with me at the hotel tomorrow night? It’ll give me more time to spend with him.”

“I’m glad you’re taking such an interest, but...,” Suzette said regretfully, “you should have said something sooner. I’ve got tickets to take him to the Blue Puppets live play.”

“Keith is needing...” Reese felt a tinge of guilt for not being around enough to know the latest on his son.

“Really?” Keith said, excitedly, drowning out his father’s soft statement. “I didn’t know we were going to a play!”

“Sure, you did, sweetie. We talked about that.”

“When?” Keith questioned.

“Keith, they have your favorite, macaroni and cheese. Why don’t you order that?” Suzette flipped to the front of the menu. “Reese, you want an appetizer or something?”

“No,” Reese said, attempting to avoid the guilt trip he was reluctantly headed toward. Keith seemed to be doing well. “I have dinner plans.”

The look Suzette gave him was unflattering. He remembered what caused that particular look. She wanted him to change his answer to something else. During their marriage, it had been easier to tell her what she wanted to hear instead of dealing with her unreasonable attitude. Today he could walk away and not lose a minute’s sleep. He added for clarity, “Leila and I are going to dinner.”

“Oh.” Suzette’s smile was forced. “Well, since you can’t stay and have dinner with your son and me, then you can make it up to us by going to the park this Saturday. They’re having activities all day and a few father-and-son events. Why don’t you come with us and participate with Keith in some of the activities?”

“But Daddy already planned to take me hiking on Saturday, Mama. Miss Leila is going with us.”

“That’s right,” Reese said fervently, feeling he needed to fight to keep his weekend. “Suzette, you’ve already promised that I could have Keith this weekend. He and I already have some father-son things planned. But thanks for the offer.”

“I want to go hiking, Mom!”

“Alright then,” Suzette huffed, then glared at Reese. “Don’t let us keep you from your date.” Suzette couldn’t avoid a sharp tone.

“Thanks.” Reese hurriedly stood up before Suzette could change her mind. Too much talk of Leila would certainly cause her to. *If looks could kill*, Reese thought, *I would be bleeding to death right now*. “Reese’s Piece, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See ya, Daddy.”

Reese knew hearing Leila’s name had rubbed Suzette the wrong way. The kind of anger he saw forming in her eyes would only get worse. It was best for him to walk away and allow her to cool off. Things just weren’t going to change with Suzette. She was obviously jealous. At some point, she would have to accept that there wasn’t a future for them. It had been a few years, yet she was still trying to hold on to it. How could he have wasted so much time trying to make that marriage work?

Then he thought of Keith; that was why. Reese never would have married Suzette if not for the pregnancy. He had broken off the relationship with her but had continued to see her on occasion. Then she got pregnant. He’d reluctantly walked down the aisle with the hope that things would get better. Prayed for the best. What he’d gotten was barely mediocre, at best. At least he

was moving on with his life, trying not to hold a grudge for the sake of his son. He would endure some of Suzette's mood swings if it avoided making visits with Keith difficult. Now, Reese would have to keep a closer eye on Keith's health, so dealing with Suzette wasn't going to be as easy to walk away from.

Outside the restaurant, the hot weather, though humid, was more comfortable than the stifling atmosphere Suzette had created inside the cool, cozy restaurant.

Even Leila's family was more appealing at the moment. At least they tried to do what they thought was best for Leila, even if it wasn't necessarily right. He had yet to meet her uncle and his wife, but dinner with them was already scheduled. Since moving into the hotel, Leila was more relaxed, more like herself again, which must have meant they weren't pressuring her anymore.

Reese hoped he could smooth things over with Leila's family. It seemed their only concern was protecting Leila. And that wasn't a bad thing. If someone had protected him from Suzette, he wouldn't have endured so many years of pain.

He promised himself to spend the next few days finding out as much as he could about her family. Leila fretted over his suggestion to meet them, but what other choice did they have? He couldn't win the battle if he didn't partake in the fight. *Right?* He surely hoped that was the case.

Reese felt he was in danger of losing the ties that held him close to Leila. And now there was this new thing with his son. Why had he expected his life would be going smoothly at this stage? Unfortunately, his life held similar static, just new causes.

CHAPTER

Seventeen



“Don’t worry, Leila.” Reese found himself trying to reassure her. She’d seemed okay with this visit with her family until they got on the road to Alpharetta. The closer they got, the quieter she got. “I’m a divorced workaholic who lives five states away. I’m sure for those reasons alone your uncle and Mrs. Shirley will love me.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about.” Her lackluster smile faded even more. “Mrs. Shirley has been...I guess still is, quite important to my business success. I tolerate their intrusion into other aspects of my life because I must. I just hope you can stand being around them for an entire meal.”

“I understand how you’re feeling.” Reese again tried to lighten the mood. “But if she’s a good cook we shouldn’t have a problem. We should get along just fine.” The joke fell short. Leila’s smile was still weak. He reached behind her neck and slightly massaged tense muscles. Since this was bothering her, he needed to focus on

how he contributed to the problems with the Stanleys. It was rumored he was a playboy. Regardless of the truth, the Stanleys—or at least Mrs. Shirley—probably believed it. The distance he and Leila lived apart wasn't going to change soon. He didn't have any definite business plans for working on the East Coast and couldn't promise that would change. Given all of that, the Stanleys probably wouldn't support their relationship.

“What kind of impact can they have on the daycare?”

“My mother would say that if not for them, I would be running a small babysitting service that specializes in diaper changing.” Leila attempted a smile. “But I was the one who got the funding, designed the building, and created a corporate referral program before ever opening the doors. Within the first few months, I was able to increase headcount to cover expenses. It's grown a lot over the past three years, thanks to Mrs. Shirley's help. The church referrals make up roughly thirty-five percent of my current enrollment. My biggest concern is the new tutoring center. I'm dependent on Mrs. Shirley.”

“Do you have a waiting list of students?”

“Yes.”

“Enough to quickly replace any students lost?”

“Not quickly,” Leila said. “The majority of the waiting list are church referrals.”

When they pulled into her uncle's circular driveway, Reese gave the expensive neighborhood with well-manicured lawns an appreciative look as he stepped out of the passenger side door. He was dressed in navy slacks and a collarless matching shirt and Leila purposely wore a navy-blue sundress. As they walked to the front door, he thought they made the perfect couple. In terms of looks, the battle was won.

“Tonight, will go okay,” was Reese's frail promise backed up with a false smile that was to give reassurance.

Reverend Stanley answered the door. “Come in! Come in! Leila, I’m glad to see you.” He was a distinguished-looking man, tall, fit, with more salt than pepper hair. He extended his hand to Reese in a friendly shake. “Reese McCoy, I used to follow your pro ball career. You lit up the field.”

This was going to be easy, Reese thought. *Just talk about football.* “Thank you, Reverend Stanley. You sound like a football fan.”

“Played back in college.” The reverend grinned proudly. “I didn’t like it when you left my favorite team, the Raiders. They had their best seasons with you.”

“If there’s a past game you ever want to see again, I have an extensive collection.”

“I plan to take you up on your offer. Come meet the Mrs.”

Reese winked at Leila. This wasn’t going to be as difficult as he had thought. They followed Reverend Stanley to an enormous, richly designed den with a back wall filled with books. Six wing-back chairs arranged in a semicircle sat on a fine Persian rug in the center of the room. The women in those chairs immediately turned to look up.

Mrs. Shirley Stanley stood; her face etched in indignation. “Ladies, let me introduce you to the person who’s caused our recent concern.” Her stern look was fixed on Reese.

This was not going to be easy after all, Reese corrected.

It was six against one. Those odds wouldn’t be good for anyone. Reese turned to the group, half-expecting this to turn into an immediate interrogation. He was slightly surprised that a few of the women only smiled up at him.

“Now, Shirley.” It was the reverend warning his wife to behave. “Reese McCoy, meet my wife.”

“Mrs. Shirley.” Reese went to her, offering his hand in a warm shake.

Mrs. Shirley’s look softened but her professionalism stayed as she introduced the four church members who supervised different

groups within the church and the director of the church's daycare center. They all shared a hello.

The elegant, petite director in a purple suit with matching shoes said with a bit of humor, "You have been the center of discussion today, Mr. McCoy."

He appreciated the warm greeting. "So, I'm the center of attention for you ladies." He turned to the group, thinking of the calendar, and smiled. "That's a surprise."

The women broke into laughter and then the mood lifted. They all had probably seen the calendar and used it as research into the depths of his wrongdoing. His playful comment won the group and chipped away some of the ice surrounding Mrs. Shirley's gaze. At least she did the hospitable thing by smiling.

Reese glanced meaningfully at Leila. "But there's one in particular whose attention I'm beginning to cherish." He watched as Leila's concern melted, leaving behind an endearing smile. "Mrs. Shirley, I was told about the misunderstanding. I want to talk to you about that later this evening. Your opinion is important to Leila and therefore important to me."

Reese probably should have been more cautious, but he could only respect someone who was that concerned about the well-being of a family member. Something was fueling Mrs. Shirley's concern and the sooner he addressed it, the better.



THE STANLEYS WERE MASTERS OF ENTERTAINING. THE WOMEN HAD ended their meeting once Leila and Reese arrived but stayed for hors d'oeuvres. Later, Leila and Reese sat down for dinner with the Stanleys. Leila sat across the dinner table from Reese, the Reverend was at the head, and Mrs. Stanley at the other end.

It was typical for visitors under the Stanleys' scrutiny to be uncomfortable. Some would 'put on airs' by pretending to be from some social strata they assumed acceptable. Some were too ner-

vous, some overly cautious of what they talked about, not sure if politics or gossiping would be frowned upon or reflect poorly on them.

Reese, however, talked comfortably about football, his profession, and current events. He and the reverend laughed easily together. To Reese, Leila seemed pleased at how genuinely interested he was in Mrs. Shirley's community involvement and how he didn't waver when asked a direct question about his interest in Leila. He was a little surprised she wasn't very talkative tonight, so he figured she was purposely being reserved, not wanting to strike a wrong chord in the conversation.

Mrs. Shirley had hinted at the seriousness of social decorum by outlining what behaviors she felt weren't polite: like arguing in the house of the Lord and, therefore her home. Reese was sure that was a prelude to the conversation she wanted to have with them. Leila's face became stoical, and she leaned back in her chair.

The mild interrogation started.

Reese was asked questions about the nature of his friendship and where it was headed, his area business plans, and his current marital status. When the reverend turned the conversation back to football, Reese assumed the worst was over.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Shirley jumped into the deep end of her concern. "Reese, there is this one last issue that we got several disturbing calls about."

Reese got to the point. "You've heard both Leila's and my side of the story. What still concerns you?"

"Well," Mrs. Shirley hadn't expected his directness. He had switched from easy chatter to absoluteness just as quickly as she had. "I'm a little old-fashioned, but not naïve. You two will do what adults do. But I expect more decency and less provocation at the daycare. Leila must set an example. Now that we understand there isn't a reconciliation planned with your ex-wife, we can re-

spect this affair between you two, but keep your business behind closed doors.”

“I hope you aren’t suggesting we pretend we aren’t dating,” Reese said, taken aback, “because I’ll just have to disappoint you now by telling you I don’t plan to hide it.”

Mrs. Shirley sat a little taller, spoke a bit stronger. “I’m speaking of your walking around the daycare property barely clothed. The concern was for indecent exposure around the kids. Leila gave us an explanation, but I just want to hear yours.”

Leila busied herself with brushing imaginary crumbs from her lap. She was attempting to hide her face, obviously embarrassed at the tone and word choices. It looked as though she were taking deep breaths as well as counting to ten to stop from shouting at the absurdity. Just as Reese wanted to do.

What the hell was going on with these crazy, nosey church members? What quack had called in such a ridiculous complaint? Reese wondered. He continued to look at Leila, but she never looked at him, instead reaching for her glass of iced tea. He suspected if at that moment he were to ask her to take sides with either him or her family, he would lose. Why else would she keep quiet and avoid eye contact?

“I’m confused,” he finally said to no one in particular.

“Reese,” Reverend Stanley attempted to add clarity, “my wife is referring to the morning you retrieved your bag out of the car wearing only jeans. We got a more graphic description of what you had on, or should I say, didn’t have on. Leila cleared that up.”

“I do believe the daycare was closed and I was on the side of the building by Leila’s loft.” Reese reflected on that morning after making love to Leila. If the nosey churchgoers had been snooping while they made love and complained about the volume of the moans, he might have slightly understood. But the day after with him walking around in jeans was damn silly. He knew laughing would be a mistake, but he couldn’t help it.

Mrs. Shirley chastised, “I don’t think a rumor about flashers is funny at all.”

Reese countered, “But a false accusation when I was dressed in more clothes than most people wear on a hot day, is quite funny to me. I find that rumor to be a little more than silly.”

Leila chimed in. “I still believe someone must have driven onto the property to see Reese. Must have purposely snooped because from the street you can’t see what that person claimed to see.”

“During my football days, it never surprised me what some people would do to spy on players. It rarely happens to me now, but there is an occasional instance.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you had a parent on the property when it was closed.” The reverend’s neutral statement seemed to support his wife.

Mrs. Shirley was motivated to make her point now that she had her husband’s support. “Perception is reality. I just want to remind you that my husband’s church, Leila’s image, and my involvement with the daycare are important to me. Important to the daycare’s future. I won’t stand for careless actions that could jeopardize that. Just look at all the trouble these current misunderstandings have caused. All I ask is that you keep that in mind in the future.”

Reese wanted to tell her the misunderstanding probably would have been moot if she had told the overly concerned snooper to mind their own business, but thought better of that and said, “I understand your position.” Then he stated his own. “I’m looking to expand my business this way. My son lives in this city and his well-being is important to me. I suggest the church shut down these gossipers as soon as you know the rumors are unfounded. I don’t want something like this to make the news and my son or potential business partners experience it.”

“It seems we have an understanding,” Mrs. Shirley conceded.

The Stanleys were powerful and hadn't threatened to go against him, but he felt the need to clear the air since everyone else had. Their concern seemed to center on image and Leila's well-being. As long as it did, he would allow this. Reese couldn't be too harsh on the Stanleys. He had witnessed what bad rumors could do to someone's career and life. It was part of the reason he'd left town in the first place, too much bad publicity. It was like the situation some Black men face with the judicial system. Innocent until proven guilty wasn't always the order applied although it should have been.

Leila looked at the reverend, then at Mrs. Shirley. "The next time you get a call of concern, I wish you'd give us the benefit of the doubt. Too much energy went into misunderstandings this time."

Reverend Stanley wiped his mouth with the linen napkin and said, "It's good we're all in agreement." He looked at Reese. "You mentioned your son earlier. How is he?"

"Keith is great." Reese eased back into the comfortable topic. "He's been spending his afternoons in the Midas Touch summer program."

Mrs. Shirley's eyes widened. "He doesn't need specialized care with his condition?"

Reese's brows came together. Confused yet again, he said, "He's a little hyper at times, but no more than any other kid his age."

"But I thought..." Mrs. Shirley quickly glanced at her husband. "It must have been another miscommunication. I might be wrong, but I thought your son's mother was looking for places that provided specialized childcare. I was at the church's facility when she came by. The director said Mrs. McCoy mentioned Keith's attention deficit disorder and difficulty with adjusting in large groups, so she was looking for a small, structured facility."

“That’s not the case at all,” Reese defended. “But Suzette is a little overprotective and over dramatic. I can only assume her comments were misunderstood.”

Leila jumped into the conversation before Mrs. Shirley could say anything else. “I agree. I’ve been with Keith every day he’s been at Midas Touch. I don’t see any indication of his having problems adjusting. He’s quite the socializer and well-mannered.”

Leila’s defending my son! This was the first indication in Reese’s mind that she would be on his side if she had to decide tonight. Reese smiled inwardly.

“That’s good to hear,” Mrs. Shirley said mildly before standing. “Dessert anyone?”

After dinner, Leila disappeared into the kitchen with Mrs. Shirley, leaving Reese to talk with the reverend. Despite the awkwardness of the dinner conversation, they talked easily, and Reese found the reverend to be well-versed and extremely wise. That made the dinner conversation seem that much more bizarre. Reese could only imagine that the reverend was indulging his wife by allowing such nonsense. That made Reese wonder about the congregation. It might be good to visit the church to get a better understanding of the Stanleys.



THEY WERE ON THEIR WAY HOME.

The drive to Leila’s was filled with considerably less conversation than the drive to the Stanleys’. During dinner, Reese had gotten the impression Leila was sometimes on his side and at other times wasn’t. Up until this point in their relationship, he’d had no reason or desire to walk away. However, the accusations, the tone of the dinner conversation, and Leila’s lackluster support were all nagging at him.

Yet Leila added a brightness to his life he hadn’t had in so, so long. *Actually, I had never had.* He wanted the kind of life Parker had.

Could he have it with Leila? Parker, who was an excellent judge of character, said Leila was definitely ‘good people.’ But what about that family of hers? Reese had had enough insanity with his ex-wife to last several lifetimes. All he wanted now was peace of mind and some semblance of normalcy in his life.

Reese turned to Leila. “If you had to decide between your family and a wholesome relationship with someone, what would you choose?”

Leila looked solemn. “So, you now understand why I was hesitant about meeting my family? I love them and you want me to decide against them?”

Wrong tactic, Reese thought. He wasn’t trying to affirm her suspicions about her family. He felt the need to fix the wrong turn. “Mrs. Shirley seems the type to deal with an issue head-on. Since she knows I have no intention of mistreating you, she’s okay. Now that we’ve clarified that with her, you and I can focus on other things.”

“Do you believe that? Or just saying what you think I want to hear?” Leila kept her eyes on the highway. The dark night and the red lights from cars ahead seemed to have her attention.

“I make my own decisions on things that are important, Leila, and speak my mind. I would think you would have figured that out by now.”

She finally glanced at him. “I have. But I don’t understand why you asked me about deciding between family or a relationship.”

Reese spoke to what was nagging him. “I found Mrs. Shirley somewhat imposing. This shouldn’t be her concern.”

“She loves me,” Leila defended.

“Considering everything she said revolved around protecting her family, I would assume so.”

“She wants what’s best for me. She’s acting on my mother’s behalf.”

“This gets us back to my question. Your dating has been limited because of their opinions. So much so that you haven’t dated much since coming back to Atlanta. I get the impression they will be very involved with whatever you do.” He touched her leg. “My question is: Are you willing to let this go on?”

“It’s always been this way with them,” Leila said warily.

Reese threw a hand in the air, finally flustered by the whole thing. “It’s a simple question.” The answer could determine the direction of their relationship, but instead repeated, “If you had to decide between them and a relationship, what would you choose?”

Leila swallowed so hard it must have hurt her throat. It was true that her loneliness could be attributed to her family’s involvement in her life. But they had been right before. Or maybe she hadn’t stayed in a relationship long enough to find out if they were wrong. Her relationship choices hadn’t been that great when she was living away from them, so she wasn’t quite sure if she could completely blame them for the sorry state of her love life.

She gave the only answer she possibly could to that question. “I believe my answer would be much like the one you would give if I asked you to choose between me and your son.” Leila looked at him then.

“That’s not fair,” Reese said curtly. “He’s a child. And he’s not forcing any decisions on me.”

“Really?” Leila said, reflecting. “I don’t agree. If Keith had his way, you and Suzette would be back together. He is also putting pressure on you to ensure his happiness. Any woman who tries to replace his mother will be challenged and should expect problems.”

Reese shook his head. Mrs. Shirley’s authoritarian attitude flashed in his mind. Maybe Leila was more like her than he thought.

“Think about it, Reese. Why else would Keith be acting strange suddenly?”

“Maybe some sort of imbalance from not eating properly,” he defended.

“I’m not talking about these shakes he’s supposedly getting when he doesn’t eat. I’m talking about his possessiveness. Not wanting you and me to be close. He’s afraid of that. Don’t pretend you can’t tell.”

Some of the heat leaked out of Reese’s anger. She was right about that. “I have noticed.”

“What has Keith said about it?” she asked.

“I’ve approached this by telling him how important he is to me. And how his mother and I will always be in his life, regardless of whether we date other people. I think he’s beginning to see that now.”

Leila got the opening she wanted. “Do you think Suzette believes Keith is having problems?”

“She’s convinced, but I’m not. I plan to take Keith to a doctor if she doesn’t. If it’s something serious, I want to know about it now. If Suzette is overreacting, I don’t want Keith going around believing he’s weird. Tell that to a person long enough, they’ll believe it.”

“I’m pretty good at spotting a child with problems. I haven’t seen any with Keith.”

“I should have been around him more.” Reese’s tone held remorse. He was staring out the windshield, seeing nothing but memories of his son. “I work too hard. If I’d been there more, then maybe I could have prevented whatever is going wrong with Keith. Suzette says he seems better when I spend significant time with him.”

Leila had witnessed the impact troubled relationships had on children. Big issues often stem from parents using their children’s love as weapons to hurt or manipulate one another. From the little Leila knew about Suzette, she seemed like the type who wasn’t beyond doing that very thing.

“He misses you. He’s happy to have his father around.”

“Suzette said as much when I dropped off Keith last night.”

Now Leila was sure Suzette was using Keith to manipulate. “Suzette has probably been saying a bit too much lately.”

That snapped Reese away from his unconstructive thoughts. “What are you trying to say?”

Leila glanced over as she drove, attempting to gauge his reaction. “I talked to the Church’s daycare director before she left tonight. I know her; she’s very good. Very meticulous. A person must be when she works for my Mrs. Shirley. I asked her about the conversation with Suzette. Based on what Suzette told her, she became concerned for Keith.”

“What are you suggesting?” he questioned softly. Reese was following along but wanted to hear Leila’s version.

“I know Mrs. Shirley. She doesn’t react this strongly unless she has just cause.” Leila stole another glance at Reese as the car went around a curve. “I don’t want to come across as the paranoid girlfriend, but...”

“Say that again,” Reese interrupted, finally smiling.

“What? That I might sound paranoid? I don’t want you to think the same of me that I’m sure you do about Mrs. Shirley... but...”

“No.” He grinned. “The part about being my girlfriend. It’s the first time you’ve used that title. I like it. I wanted to acknowledge the good part of this conversation because whatever else you’re going to say probably won’t be.”

That made some of Leila’s concerns melt. She did enjoy his smile, especially one as genuine as this. “I don’t know Suzette, so I don’t have anything to reference, but I think that her going around talking about us started the problems between us. She doesn’t attend my uncle’s church and Mrs. Shirley didn’t even know of her until I started to date you. To be honest, if you had not suggested meeting with them tonight, I would be under a lot of pressure to

end this with you. My mother still isn't convinced that I shouldn't. Mrs. Shirley thought I was coming between you and Suzette, and that it was hurting Keith. I find it an odd coincidence that Suzette showed up at the church's daycare. So, I wonder how much of what she said about Keith while there was done on purpose, knowing it would cause us problems.

"That's why I questioned the church director tonight. To test my theory. After seeing Mrs. Shirley's impression of us again, I'm more than convinced that someone wants to cause trouble between us. And is using my family to do it."

Leila watched as Reese seemed to be processing this new perspective for the first time. He didn't say anything, so Leila asked, "Am I being paranoid?"

Whatever budding disagreement was now gone. Reese reached over and touched her leg. "You're making a lot of sense."

When Leila parked her car next to Reese's in front of her home, he said, "I'm supposed to pick up Keith. Based on what we just talked about, I want to talk to Suzette tonight about it."

Leila touched his hand. She hadn't planned to have him run to be with Suzette. "Are you coming back here? You and Keith can stay with me."

"We'll stay at my hotel. I want some private time with him as well. Set my mind at ease."

Leila leaned over and kissed him. The kiss held a touch of desperation. "I didn't want our visit with my family to end with your leaving. Have I scared you off?"

"Not yet," Reese said, a reassuring smile in place. "But you're avoiding the question I asked about us earlier just might."

Leila wasn't in a position to choose this soon between him and family. He didn't look as though he was in any position to choose either. She dropped the matter for now. If she was right and Reese couldn't stop Suzette from interfering, who knew what the out-

come of any of this would be? Since he was still looking at her for a response, she needed to say something, anything.

“I’ll see you later,” was the best she could come up with.

CHAPTER

Eighteen



Scaling the mountain of granite was sure to be an easier challenge than anything else Reese had encountered in Georgia. He and Keith had picked up Leila and then headed to Stone Mountain for breakfast. As usual, Keith wanted pancakes, so they went for a country breakfast at the Sweet Potato Cafe. It was a quaint house with an oversized patio. Dressed in hiking shoes, shorts, and comfortable shirts, the three of them sat at a table on the restaurant's patio discussing their hiking plans.

"Daddy, it says here that this mountain used to be named Rock Mountain, but that the name was changed in 1825 by Reverend Adel Sherwood."

"It seems that reverends in these parts are pretty powerful."

If that was a jab against her family, Leila ignored it because Reese was partly right. She said to Keith, "What about us riding the cable car to the top of the mountain to take pictures? We can

hike back down. Look at these trail maps and tell me what you think.” She passed the maps across the table to Keith.

“Oh yeah, I like this one. But I wanted to climb up the mountain, too,” Keith said.

“Reese’s Piece, go easy on your old man. Any one of those trails is pretty strenuous. You’ll have to pick one.”

“You’re not old,” Keith said matter-of-factly, never looking up from the maps he was studying. “I want to hike them all and Mama probably won’t come back here without you. So, we’ve got to get them all done today.”

“We can come back again,” Reese said to him.

Keith looked questioningly at his father. “Are you sure you can come back to Atlanta so that we can do the other trails?”

That felt like a stab to Reese’s heart. He didn’t like hearing the uncertainty. He’d thought his long talk last night had addressed this. Good grief, how much more proving did he have to do?

“Of course, I can,” Reese said. “Any time you would like.” He knew that was a dangerous promise because it ran the chance Keith might ask for a time he couldn’t keep. But he was desperate for his son to feel as though he had some say-so in his father’s life.

“Maybe, uhm...” Keith took a stalling sip of his Sprite. “I know you have to go home to Arizona and also spend time with Leila. I don’t want to be in your way. Maybe...”

“My spending time with Leila doesn’t mean I won’t be seeing you.”

Keith looked surprised by that news. “You sure? Because Mama said...” Keith stopped himself. “Because it will be okay if you’re too busy.”

Reese didn’t comment on the slip-up but looked at Leila. She hadn’t missed it either. Suzette was playing mind games with their son, compounding Keith’s doubt by suggesting Leila would come between them. Reese hadn’t talked to Suzette about that last night, but certainty would soon.

“Whenever you want to see me, I’ll come here, or you can come to Arizona like you always have,” Reese said reassuringly.

Keith frowned, looking between Reese and Leila as if he wasn’t sure that was a completely true statement.

“You can come the next time too, Miss Leila.” Another sip of Sprite. “If you can make it.”

“I tell you what.” Leila looked over at the maps. She arranged them in her order of preference with Keith’s first choice on top. “That’s the order I would like to hike through the park. We’ll do the one on top today. Then the three of us will come back for the other hikes. Do you want to do a Saturday or Sunday trip?”

“Saturday,” Keith said. “Then maybe I can come to the day-care during the week when Daddy’s here.”

“Is next Saturday too soon?” Reese asked Keith.

Keith’s eyes widened. “No, it’s not,” he almost shouted. “You coming back?”

That hurt. “Of course, Keith. If you want to go next Saturday, then we will.”

“That’ll be cool, Daddy!”

They finished with breakfast and was leaving.

Keith was rushing ahead of them on the way to the car and out of earshot. “You were right about Suzette. I plan to extend my stay in town next week, so I can deal with Suzette face to face. And get to see more of Keith.” He wrapped his arm around her waist. “And you.”

Leila chanced a smile. She really couldn’t help melting under his gaze. “You won’t get any complaints from me, but what about your office? Don’t you need to get back?”

“My office manager can handle running the place without me. That’s why I hired him. Since I’ll be in Tampa on business on Tuesday and Wednesday, it doesn’t make much sense to fly home for a day, come back to the East Coast for two days, then turn around and go back to Arizona, knowing I plan to take Keith

hiking next weekend. I would rather be here and not hanging out at airports.”

“I really like that plan,” Leila said, tightening her arm around his waist.

“I need to be here,” he looked meaningfully at her, “for a lot of reasons. But I need to fix this issue with Keith.”

“Other than the doubts about you and me, Keith seems okay,” she added.

“I think all this nonsense Suzette is telling Keith started with this visit. But I’m not sure. I just didn’t pay enough attention to pick up on the subtle signs I see now. It’s clear to me that he thinks I’m going to abandon him.”

“Possibly abandon him for me,” Leila added. “He’s a good kid. I just hope she’s not purposely using Keith to cause problems.”

“I’m not putting anything past her.”

“Have Suzette ever tried to interfere with your relationships before?”

“Yes.” Looking into her concerned eyes, he said, “Let’s forget about this for now. I promise you I’ll deal with it. But right now, I want to have fun with Reese’s Piece.”

They headed for the mile-high mountain of rock surrounded by 3,200 acres of pristine woodlands and streams that made up Georgia’s Stone Mountain Park.

After the hike they stopped at a shop for bottled water, then headed for the Jeep. As Reese maneuvered the Jeep out of the parking lot, Stone Mountain in his rearview mirror, his cell phone rang.

He couldn’t help frowning when seeing the caller ID. “Hey, Suzette. We’re just leaving the park.” He listened. “As a matter of fact, I’m not busy tonight. Let’s have dinner.”

Reese saw Leila’s face before she tried to hide it by staring out of the passenger window. She obviously wasn’t pleased with what she heard.

When he disconnected, Leila asked, “Are you still going to the morning church service with me?”

“Leila?” Reese waited for her to look at him. “You’ll see me tonight. We’ll leave for church together.”

Her smile never returned; neither did her look hold confidence. But why so gloomy, he wondered? It had been her idea to deal with Suzette.



SUZETTE OPENED THE DOOR TO HER PENTHOUSE APARTMENT WEARING a tight mini dress that showed off shapely legs. Her stylish woven hair flowed across her shoulders. “My two favorite guys!” she said to Reese and Keith. She was glad to see that they had showered and changed at the hotel before coming home.

“Mama, we had so much fun!” Keith dropped his backpack on the tiled floor. “You should have been there!”

“I would have come if I had been invited.” Suzette’s blaming eyes fell on Reese as he stepped inside the familiar foyer. The penthouse with its exquisite furnishings showed off the money she’d been awarded via the divorce.

“It was an outing for me, Leila, and Keith. We need to spend time together.”

“Keith, go put your dirty hiking clothes in the laundry room.” Suzette led the way to the living room. With Keith out of earshot, she tossed out tartly, “You certainly do need to spend time with Keith.”

Reese jumped all over that comment. “Keith gave me the impression that you’ve said something to suggest he’s interfering with Leila and me. It seems you have been.” He paused but she didn’t say anything, just held a false smile. Reese added, “I reassured him that’s not the case, even though Keith seems to think you disagree.”

Suzette’s fake smile stayed intact. “Good to know you are reassuring him.”

“I would appreciate you not filling Keith’s head with doubts.”

Suzette whirled around heading to the kitchen. “I made steaks and pork chops for dinner. I wasn’t sure how famished you both would be after all that hiking.”

Reese followed, cutting through the dining room. He noticed the table already had place settings for three. Candles were lit. “What exactly are you telling Keith about Leila?”

Suzette looked as though she were contemplating a series of answers before saying, “She’s your new interest. I assume you want to spend as much time as possible with her. Both Keith and I understand that.” She slid on oven mitts, then retrieved the meal of meats and vegetables warming in the oven. “I didn’t want him to get his hopes up to see you, then be disappointed when you blew him off to be with Leila. So, I told him not to expect to have your undivided attention. This way he won’t be surprised by anything you do.”

It was times like this that divorce therapy came in handy. He wouldn’t snap in anger as he used to do, but he would set her straight. “Stop telling him that crap,” Reese demanded. “I will not blow off my son and he does have my attention.”

“Please, Reese. Don’t get huffy.”

“I mean it, Suzette. I don’t want you filling Keith’s head with this nonsense. As a matter of fact, I don’t want you...”

“Hey, Mama, what’s for dinner?” Keith hurried into the dining room and Reese cut short his lecture.

It was a good thing Keith interrupted him because Reese was about to shout. Suzette would have bitten back just as hard, possibly harder and an all-out shouting match would have started. His son didn’t need to witness that.

Suzette placed the hot dish near the floral arrangement. “Keith, take your seat.” She looked at Reese, “What were you saying?” she baited.

Reese looked down at the table to gain control. The plates were sparkling in the light, sort of like Suzette's smirk, and just as hard, too. He would be wise and change the topic. "Have you made the appointment for Keith's physical?"

Pleased with where Reese was standing, Suzette responded with, "I remembered how you like eating at the head of the table facing the window. You went right to your favorite spot, Reese."

"Answer me."

"Answer what?" Suzette frowned.

"About the doctor's appointment."

"Of course I scheduled it. I said I would, didn't I?" Her tone was sharp.

Keith interrupted, "We're eating now, right?"

"Yes..." Reese saw his son's sad look, so he took a seat. In a more reasonable tone, he said to Suzette, "Is it the same pediatrician as before?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I plan to follow up on the findings," Reese said.

"I told you this wasn't anything to worry about. Good grief, Reese, I hope you aren't going to act this way all night. You're here for dinner."

"You're right." Reese reached for the serving fork and stabbed at the steak. His appetite had disappeared a while ago, but his need to sort this out overrode that. "We'll talk later about it. You want steak or a pork chop, Keith?"

Suzette adjusted the burgundy linen napkin in her lap. Her voice held warmth when she said to Reese, "I have your favorite Chianti. I'll pour us both a glass." The smoothness in her voice would have been appropriate for following a heated kiss, not an argument.

Reese's head snapped up. Suzette looked serene. At least she was faking for the sake of Keith, Reese thought. He should do that

as well because the other line of questioning was headed toward a shouting match.

Suddenly, the thought of having wine had appeal. He picked up the glass Suzette had just filled. Her Martha Stewart act was causing his head to pound. He sipped, then sipped again. He hadn't even started the discussion about her purposely causing issues for him and Leila. He needed to approach this delicately, or else Suzette would explode for being falsely accused.

"You and I will talk privately after dinner," Reese said, then turned to his son. "You have a big appetite tonight."

"All that darn hiking."

The dinner conversation was filled with Keith's funny interpretations of the hiking trip. After the meal, Suzette and Keith cleared the table. Then they all met in the den. She put in a movie.

"Suzette, let's talk in the living room."

"I'm dying to see this movie," she said. "Let's watch it with Keith, then we'll talk. Wouldn't that be fun, Keith?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you picked it out. Come watch it with us, Daddy."

"Do you have time, or do you have a date?" Suzette said, sitting on the plush carpeted floor next to Keith. It was obvious she was waiting to see if Reese would disappoint Keith just as she had predicted earlier.

Reese looked at his watch. "Be right back." He went into the hall and called Leila on his cell. "Hey. This is taking longer than I thought. I should be there in a few hours."

"Still at Suzette's, huh?" Leila calculated the time he had been gone. "I guess I shouldn't wait up."

"Leila, try and understand. I need to deal with this as soon as possible."

She exhaled doubt. "I do understand. See you when you get here."

Reese hung up and returned to watch the movie.

They watched the two-hour space movie and Keith was glad to have his parents with him. Just before the movie ended, Suzette stood and left the room.

As the credits rolled on the TV, Reese said, "Son, I enjoyed our time today."

"Me too. Especially the hike. It tired me out though." Keith looked up from the carpeted floor at his father who sat in the chair. "I'm glad you stayed for the movie. I heard you talking to Leila. I hope she's not mad because you stayed."

Reese answered carefully. His kid shouldn't be worrying about adult problems. "I didn't know I would be here this long, or else I would have planned tonight a little differently. Not a problem though. I got to be with you a little longer."

"With both me and Mama."

Reese sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He needed to clear up a lot of things tonight. "Mama and I will continue to raise you separately. Just as we have been doing. We love you and that isn't going to change regardless of whomever else is in our lives. I know your mama has concerns about my seeing Leila. I'm going to talk to her tonight about that because she shouldn't worry. And you shouldn't worry either. Nothing will come between you and me. You're my main man. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy."

"I mean that, son. Don't ever doubt it. If you do or if Mama tells you she's concerned, you come to me, and we'll talk about it. I don't want you going around thinking that I love you any less."

"Okay."

"Come give me a hug," Reese demanded and his son knee-crawled over and hugged him fiercely. "You look tired. Head to bed while I go talk to your mama."

"G'night, Daddy."

Reese kissed the top of his son's head. After Keith disappeared down the hall, he went in search of Suzette. One down and one

more to go. He knocked on Suzette's closed bedroom door several times before reaching to open it. He called to her through a slight crack. "Suzette, are you decent?"

"Yes, come on in." Suzette came out of the connecting bathroom wearing a towel, her hair tied up. "I thought I heard a knock. I'm going to take a bath. You're more than welcome to stay."

"Suzette, I want to talk about Keith. Get dressed."

She turned and went back into the bathroom, dropped the towel, and stepped into the tub. "Pull up a chair and we can talk while I'm in the tub."

Reese stood in the bedroom, shaking his head. He wasn't going to chance going inside to watch his ex-wife bathe. She could be quite enticing when she wanted to be.

"Come on, Suzette. Slip on a robe and let's talk in the den."

"Reese, you've seen me naked enough times. Just come on in."

Reese contemplated whether to go inside or wait for her to finish. He headed toward the bathroom. At the doorway, he pulled the door closed just enough to hide her but still be able to talk through the crack as he leaned against the doorjamb. "I want to know what to expect with Keith's behavioral issues. I've spent a lot of time with him, and I don't see anything out of the ordinary."

"That's good." Suzette splashed around. "I haven't noticed much of it either, recently. I guess your being around is helping that! Reese, can you give me the shampoo off the counter?"

Hell no, he wouldn't. "So, you don't think he needs specialized classes because of it?"

She kicked bubbles with her toes. "I'm not going to rule out anything until he goes to the doctor."

"Why did you go to the facility at Stanley's church? You haven't gotten back any proof of anything wrong and yet you're investigating specialized care?"

Her voice turned hard. "I was just covering all my bases. It's what concerned parents do."

“Suzette, the conversation you had with the director at Stanley’s church made it seem as though you were certain he had behavioral issues. I don’t want rumors to start about Keith that aren’t true. Get your facts together first.”

“Damn it, Reese, I’m trying to do the best job I can under the circumstances. I wanted to check all my options beforehand. Why can’t you just trust me to do the right thing?”

“It’s both our jobs to do the right thing. Why deal with a rumor of him having mental issues, especially since I don’t think it’s true? And I question why you went to that facility out of all the ones out there.”

Reese heard wild splashing as though she had jumped up. Through the crack, he caught a glimpse of her legs stepping over the tub, then heading toward the door. He might have the anger and resistance to confront his naked ex-wife behind the bathroom door, but not up close and in person. Besides, he couldn’t trust Suzette to stay a safe distance away. Damn her! He turned to retreat and regroup.

“You don’t have to leave,” Suzette said cautiously, her anger vanishing once she saw him strut away. She had made it to the bathroom’s doorway; white suds were clinging to chocolate nakedness. Determined to stop him she said, “Come back and talk to me. I can tell this is important to you.”

Reese stopped his exit from the bedroom, his back to her. “We’ll finish this conversation later.”

The carpet muffled her steps. Standing just behind him she said, “Let’s finish it now.”

CHAPTER

Nineteen



Thoughts of Reese having sex with Suzette plagued Leila's mind.

"I'm glad we went to evening service instead today," Leila said, coming to sit on the sofa next to Reese. "Gave us a chance to visit more with my family afterward."

"Your Uncle gave a good service."

They had been at her place long enough to shower and dress for bed. He had slipped on pajama pants and rested with his back against the arm of the sofa. She wore a floor-length nightgown. She leaned against the opposite end of the sofa, her legs resting in the center. She watched him carefully, pondering how she would ask about his disappearing act. Reese had called again late last night to apologize and had claimed it was better if he didn't come by. He wanted to get up early at the hotel and prepare for his Tampa meeting. Therefore, he suggested that they go to the Sun-

day evening service instead. Though Reese also hadn't sounded like himself last night, he was in better spirits today.

Leila was struggling to maintain her happy façade, despite her speculation. "My family was glad to see you."

"They were much more hospitable tonight," Reese said, reaching to pull her legs toward him to massage her calves. "I guess they realize I'm serious about you."

Leila just stared at him. She wasn't sure how to respond to that after he'd stood her up last night. If made of stronger stuff, she might have blown off the entire thing as nothing. The last thing she needed to be was accusatory. She had no reason to believe he'd had sex with Suzette. Or did she?

"Church service has a way of softening up the toughest of doubters," she finally said.

Reese adjusted his position so that Leila's feet rested against the junction of his legs. He continued his massage. "When you've had time to reflect on things, you come up with more options. I think they have. The reverend is a good man. I can understand why his church is as big as it is. I may attend there when I'm in town."

A neutral discussion wasn't all that bad, she thought. It was true, Reese had completely won over her uncle. Maybe she should concentrate on that until she could figure out how to ask him about last night.

"You're his idol." Leila lay back, staring out the window. Why was she feeling so insignificant right now? Was it because she hadn't dealt with her concerns directly? Reese was saying something about the sermon when Leila finally got up the courage to ask about the previous night. "You never said how the discussion with Suzette went. How did it go?"

"Not anything like I planned." Reese shook his head. "I only got a chance to make my point about Keith's doctor visit. I think he's healthy. I don't want Keith around when I question her mo-

tives for everything else she's done. Since your daycare has that field trip happening Monday, I'm thinking of letting Keith go on it so that I can meet with Suzette to finish our talk."

"Of course, Keith can go."

"This way she can't use him as a diversion when I talk to her," Reese added.

Leila's insecurity began to rear its ugly head. She bit back the urge to ask if he were going back for another sensual helping. What managed to slip out was, "That's all you two talked about last night?"

Her abruptness got his full attention, but he didn't answer her. When she pulled her legs away from him, he said uneasily, "Hey..., what's this?"

She sat up, her shoulders tense. She attempted a laugh, but it came out like a mocking shriek. "I asked a simple question."

"It's not the question that concerns me. You were a little distant today. I figured it had to do with us seeing your family again. That went well, so I guess it's something else. What's bothering you?"

She glanced at her hands, stalling for calmness. "What's the real reason you didn't come over last night?"

"I told you I needed time to prepare for my trip." He turned, placing both feet on the floor. "But I guess you don't believe that."

This wasn't going well, and his pained look was about to make her fall apart. "It's not that I don't, but you stayed at Suzette's so long, then called to cancel on me. It's easy to conclude..." Her explanation wasn't coming out as it should.

"So, you concluded that I preferred being with my ex-wife?" He silently watched her, then ran frustrated fingers over his defeated facial expression. "Do you think I'm such a bastard that I would neglect my business so that I could get in a few extra lays in bed with my ex-wife? That I would sleep with a woman who has put me through hell, and now is doing the same to my son for my attention? Do you really think that?" Reese stood up and

paced. He added, "I'm in this city living out of a hotel subjecting myself to both your family's crap and my ex-wife's bullshit because I want..." He took a deep breath because his voice was rising. "You know I could just pack up my son and take him to Arizona for the summer and all of these bullshit problems would go away. But because I thought there was a chance at finding something worthwhile with you...I'm here."

An errant tear ran down Leila's cheek. He looked so hurt. Now that her concern was out in the open, she wished she could hit rewind and erase it all. When it was her private neurosis, she could beat up on herself. Now that she'd thrown her secret fear at him, his painful reaction caused her heart to tighten.

He was right. She had been treating him differently because she wasn't woman enough to voice her concerns calmly or trust him willingly. Instead, she'd allowed herself to soak in apprehension until she was a sensitive, fear-driven basket case. At this rate, if given another day of wallowing in her fear, she'd probably see pink elephants.

Leila slowly stood up, wringing her hands. "I didn't mean to accuse you like this. Your staying in town has meant so much to me. The more I'm with you, the more I want to be. The day you leave for a long period will be a very hard day for me." She pressed a hand to her heart. "Much harder than I thought it would be."

"Then why this doubt? Why confuse our time together with this?" His question sounded like a painful croak to her. "Have I once misled you?"

"I've misled myself." She shook her head, then looked heavenward for strength. "And you." She needed to get this out. "When you asked me about my parents' relationships, I lied. They were never happy. And I wasn't happy with them. Although you thought it was admirable how they stayed together for so many years, that wasn't the case. My father left her when I was young. My mother kept going back, pleading to reconcile, trying to make it work.

They never divorced but continued to date and sleep together occasionally. I know you are not that fond of your ex-wife, but you went back one time before.”

Reese took a step toward her. “So, you thought I was doing what you watched growing up. Believing some old, bad memory instead of me?”

Another dreaded tear. Lord help her, she didn’t want to fall apart now. She said to the floor, “Yes. Unfortunately, that’s all I know.”

Reese walked over and then flopped down on the sofa. He was feeling tired after all. “I didn’t have sex with Suzette. She wants that, but I can’t put myself through that again. Why didn’t you bring this up before now?”

Leila exhaled fear and inhaled a bit of strength. She would just have to be stronger right now. Reese needed that. He looked so deflated. “I didn’t want you to know I was this weak. You had enough to worry about. I figured I would deal with it in my own way. But I guess, I couldn’t.”

Since she was standing in front of him, he reached for her hand and pulled her closer. “If two people who care for each other can’t talk to each other, then how can they make it? I’ve failed you in some way,” he said sadly.

“No, you haven’t. You don’t deserve to feel like this. You’re such a great person.”

He leaned forward, placing his forehead against the satin covering her stomach. “I don’t feel all that great. I can’t seem to pull everything together as it needs to be. Now I’ve given you a reason to doubt me too.”

Goodness! She couldn’t let the only man that pulled her world together crumble like this. This was all her doing. If only she could come to him without blame, without doubts. She wrapped her arms around his neck, caressing his hair. “Reese, you’ve given me a reason to care, and I didn’t think I would ever get that chance. I

don't doubt you, just myself." He squeezed her thighs. "I'm sorry I wasn't woman enough to tell you about my fears. This is my fault."

He leaned back, tugging at her arm. Her only option was to sit in his lap. She willingly sat and captured his face in her hands. "Let me make this up to you."

Reese wrapped his arms tightly around her, burying his face at her neck. She fiercely hugged him back. They sat there for long moments just holding each other.

Somehow, she had allowed this episode to dim their relationship. She needed to remove this unfair pain from him. She was anxious to see that smile.

I was so wrong. So very, very wrong! That was a stupid thing to do, she told herself. "Let me get you something to drink," she whispered into his ear. He didn't say anything, didn't release his hold. "Let me try to make you feel better."

He leaned back. "I'm not sure if that's possible right now. Not to worry, I'll be okay."

She was worried. "Come here." Leila moved to sit on the floor and pulled at his arm. She asked him to help push the center table out of the way. She grabbed the pillows from the sofa and arranged them on the thick Persian rug. Reese just watched.

"I'll be right back." She reappeared with a thick blanket, a towel, and a bottle of scented massage oil. She knelt and positioned the pillow for his head. "It's ready. Come lie on your stomach." She knew how 'to make up' better than anyone. That was one lesson she'd mastered.

"What's all this?" he asked, lying down.

"There's been enough tension between us. Let's spend some time not being tense."

"Don't feel as though you have to do this."

"I want to," she whispered, removing his pajama pants. He stretched out in the nude. Once he was comfortable, she sat astride his lower back, lifting her satin gown so the insides of her legs

rested against his warm skin. Her fingers began working miracles up and down his arms, shoulders, and back for long minutes. She planted wet smooches down his spine.

She moved to sit between his legs near his feet. Her oiled hands ran up and down both thighs again and again, then in soothing strokes across his butt, feathering light circles accompanied by more warm kisses.

“Mmmmm.” Reese groaned.

“Feel better?” she asked softly as she kissed up his thighs to his butt.

“I do feel better. I like what you’re doing.”

“Good.” Leila ran warm fingers from calves up to his back in slow kneading strokes. “Turn over.” She repositioned herself between his legs.

Her hands began to explore his body as her mind enjoyed the fantasy that the feel of him induced. Her hot, oiled hands went up his thighs, over his hips, and to his firm chest in one smooth motion. On the way back down, she reached for his rising penis.

He reached for her shoulders. He desired sex just as much as any man, but he wanted more than that. “Do this for more than just the physical connection.”

Leila looked into an aroused stare. She also spotted concern. Reese always questioned the meaning behind their lovemaking. She needed to end his concerns.

“I want you because you make me feel special. Making love to you is a wonderful bonus.” She watched as his full mouth finally turned into a smile.

He caressed her cheek. “I’m glad.”

“I do want you, Reese. Do you want me?”

“More than I should.”

Leila kissed his fingers as her hands caressed his thickening penis. She stroked every inch of it as it hardened in her hands. His

eyes closed, and his mouth tipped up in a contented smile. She increased the very erotic sensations up and down his hardness.

“Mmmmmmmmm. Yessss.” Reese’s audible pleasure intensified the moment. Leila wanted to hear more of those sighs.

His erection was demanding she experience it firsthand. She reached for a condom hidden within the folds of the towel. She rolled the berry-flavored condom over his penis as her mouth followed, sucking, and enjoying the sweet taste along the way.

“Leeeeilla.”

She positioned her body to insert his stiffness inside her wetness. Leila let out a soft moan of satisfaction as Reese raggedly sucked in air.

Leaning forward, she whispered to his mouth, “Let me tell you how good you feel inside me.” She kissed him deeply, then in very erotic details told him how wonderful he was. The words she used were so explicit, that it intensified his throbbing. He grabbed her hips and braced himself for a lusty, heightening ride as she settled down with him inside her.

“Reeeessse...” Leila called breathlessly as the sensations began to make her tremble. This was too much. He was too good.

It was surrender. It was splendor. It always was between them. Yet somehow this time was even better. This time it was dipped in need and sprinkled with something very much like love.

And to Leila, it also held victory. She had faced her demon of insecurity and fear and overcame it. “This makes me care more for you,” she whispered to his mouth.

He kissed her deeply.

CHAPTER

Twenty



R Reese hurriedly tossed his suit into the overnight bag resting on the hotel bed. He would leave for his business trip to Tampa in less than two hours. The Monday night flight would allow an early morning tour of the Tampa shipping facility before his breakfast meeting with the regional director. That would be followed by a marathon of other meetings and site visits. Luckily, on this visit, he would discover everything he needed to know to move forward with the company. The sooner he realized his business plan, the sooner he could get his personal life on the right track because it was running amuck.

Leila was showing just how much more she wanted from him. Despite the issue, they'd had with her not trusting his motive around Suzette, they were still in a good place. It was naïve of him to think Leila, or any woman, wouldn't get upset if he spent significant time with his ex. He would have to be more careful when it involved Suzette.

This Tampa deal needed to be secured or eliminated from his plan as soon as possible so he could go to the next step. The results of this trip would determine some hard decisions. For example, how to proceed with the weekend visits with Leila and Keith. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it the way it was. He wanted more time with them. They completed him.

Leaving Leila this afternoon had been a downer. After last night, they seemed much closer. Both had shown a vulnerability that neither had taken advantage of. Their lovemaking had been sweeter. They'd talked about trust and fears and desires.

He definitely wanted Leila by his side. He cared deeply for her, and he was sure she felt the same. She and his son could be the start of his family, the start of his dream come true.

There was a name for what he was feeling, but he hadn't voiced it yet.

A knock at the hotel room door interrupted his thoughts. Reese looked at the clock. That would be Suzette. He had just enough time to meet with her before heading to the airport.

He tossed toiletries into his overnight bag, then went to open the door. "Come in, Suzette. I'm running behind. Let me finish packing, then we'll head downstairs to the restaurant."

"Don't rush on my account," Suzette said smoothly as she sashayed into the room. The lily-white dress wrapped alluringly around her body and belted on her side. With each step, the folds at the front opened, revealing shapely legs. She did a half-turn, deliberately sending the folds of the dress whirling away from her body, then sat and crossed her legs. The skirt fell open, displaying milk chocolate skin from the ankle practically up to the panty line. The deep cut at the dress's neck clearly showed she wasn't wearing a bra, and when she leaned back bracing her arms across the sofa, it revealed even more cleavage.

"Need help packing?" she asked, watching Reese's gaze make it up her legs.

“I’ve got it.” Reese mentally shook his head at her provocative appearance. Suzette had always been an attractive, shapely, naturally elegant woman. She could make any man, even the gay ones, take notice. Suzette’s body was her temple, and her goal was to have men worship her because of it. Reese had for years. Although she could attract any man she wanted, she’d never cheated on Reese. However, she was fiercely possessive, and she worked hard at keeping her possessions. For years Reese had interpreted that as devoted love. A little too late he’d realized it was a stifling, sickening, oppressive love.

In the bedroom, Reese placed folders in his laptop case, deciding not to take his briefcase with him. Double-checking the overnight bag, he discovered he’d forgotten his shaving cream.

He turned and almost collided with Suzette.

“Hey!” Suzette laughed merrily. “I came to help anyway. Look how you’re rushing.”

Reese stepped back and handed her the laptop case, then turned to head to the bathroom. “Mind putting that next to the front door? I’m almost done.”

Instead, Suzette sat on the bed, leaning on the laptop case. “I’m glad you’re planning to spend more time in our son’s life.”

“Me too.” Reese collected the remaining items off the bathroom counter. “I’m looking forward to taking him hiking again this weekend. Reese’s Piece spent most of the time watching the creatures and studying plant life. He has a fascination with that. I wonder if we have a biologist or zoologist in the making.” Reese was back at the bed tossing things into the overnight bag.

Suzette placed her arms at her sides, showing more cleavage. “You don’t think he wants to be a football star like his daddy?”

“I’m an ex-football player. But what happens if he suffers a bad injury, or his body gives out, or—like me—he gets tired of being banged around? I think we should give him lots of options.”

“You were the best player on the field. Watching you play was such a turn-on.” Suzette lightly rubbed a finger along his forearm. “You were so committed to it.”

“I was committed to a lot of things that, like football, are in the past. I’m not going backward.” Reese collected his luggage and overnight bag and then headed to the front door.

Suzette followed, then stopped to lean against the door jamb to the bedroom, placing the laptop on the floor next to her. “What did you want to talk about today?”

“After this trip to Tampa, I plan to come back here and stay through the weekend. While I’m here, I want to have Keith most of that time.”

Suzette moved to the sofa and sat down. “That would be nice. We like having you in town.”

“Let’s go. We can finish talking in the restaurant.”

“I’m not hungry. Let’s make coffee and talk here.” Suzette spotted the coffemaker in the mini-kitchen and headed for it.

“It might be better if we did talk here because I have a sensitive matter to discuss.” He sat on the sofa. “There’s a rumor about us reconciling. I’m making it a point to squash it.”

“I thought you wanted to talk about Keith,” she said curtly, stopping to look back at him.

He didn’t appreciate her sharp tone but decided to go with the flow for the moment. “I think Keith is going to be okay. He’s more like me than I realized. I plan on being there for him a whole lot more.”

“That will be good because I don’t see issues when you’re around. Maybe not being in a structured family or having his father’s guidance is the problem. I’m sure peer pressure is getting to him. People know he has a famous daddy, but they don’t see you with him.”

Reese frowned. “Keith doesn’t see me as famous, and I never brag that I am. Maybe you shouldn’t be doing that either.”

“I liked being married to a football star,” Suzette touted. “I’m not going to shy away from that.”

“We’re not married anymore.” This discussion was headed in the wrong direction.

“That’s not how I wanted it,” Suzette said.

He wasn’t about to address that. Reese gave Suzette a hard look. “The main reason we’re having a discussion is because of Keith. I don’t want you telling him or anyone else about these so-called emotional issues. I haven’t seen anything to confirm them. Got it?” When she nodded, he added. “I’ll be coming to town for the weekends a lot more. Keith knows I can’t promise every weekend, but a few times a month. I need you to understand I will be visiting with him and not put restrictions on my visits.”

“Your visiting more will be good.” Suzette looked hopeful.

“I think so,” Reese said. “Leila and I will also use that time to get to know each other.”

“Leila?” It sounded like profanity. That quickly Suzette went from nice to nasty. “So, you’re coming to town for Leila and squeezing in my son? That’s not going to work. I’m not letting her influence my child.”

“I’ll be spending time with Keith regardless.” Reese knew this was Suzette’s possessive side showing. She had hidden it better when they were married because she’d had more time to work her persuasion with him. Now, however, it sparked an immediate argument to get her way. It wouldn’t work. “Leila is none of your concern. Lots of parents entrust their children to her care. Based on my estimation, she’s doing a great job.”

“I don’t like how fanatical her overly religious family is. I want to limit his exposure to that group.”

“Loving God isn’t a bad thing,” Reese said simply. “And I like Reverend Stanley and his wife. I’ve visited the reverend’s church. It’s not that crazy fire and brimstone stuff. He’s a teaching minister. I don’t have a problem with that.”

Suzette walked to the sink, turned, and walked back as if wanting to say something, but instead headed back to the sink. She was pacing to calm herself and Reese knew it. “Want coffee?” Suzette inserted a coffee pack in the brewer and began to fill the reservoir.

“No,” Reese said softly, “but you go ahead.”

Suzette placed her hands on her hips and turned on him. “You want weekend visitations. You want to take Keith to this church. I guess you want him to enroll in this daycare’s after-school program. You want him to major in science. What else have you decided for him that I’m not going to have a say in?”

“I’m not making demands, Suzette. The only thing for certain is that I’ll be visiting Keith more. You’ve been saying it’s best for him. I’m giving you what you want. I want you satisfied with any agreement we make.” Reese knew she needed to feel as if she wasn’t losing, so he’d pointed out the obvious victory for her.

An easy smile lit up her face. She was getting some of what she wanted. “Yes, I do want that,” she said in a more reasonable tone.

“Is there any reason I can’t keep Keith the rest of the week?”

“As long as you bring him home to me each night.”

“That’s not what I meant. Today’s field trip is a sleepover and I’m out of town until Wednesday. Since we’re going hiking this weekend, I might as well keep him. But I’ll bring him home for dinner if you want.”

“Okay.” Suzette walked to stand in front of him. The small table separated them. “There’s only one condition.”

“What?” Reese wasn’t sure if he trusted her sweet smile.

“You be honest with me, Reese.” Suzette fingered the belt at her side. “It was nice having you at the house the other night. I could tell you were glad to be there. So, am I also part of the reason you’ll be coming to town more often?”

A catch-22. Reese ran his fingers over his hair. If he said no, she’d probably figure out some clever way not to allow him to see

Keith anymore this week. If he said yes, then he'd be admitting a lie that would fuel her unwanted attraction. Either way, he would be trapped with having to deal with her.

He wasn't quite sure how to answer without it ending in her exploding. "I'll see you when I bring Keith home." He stood and went to get his laptop case. "I never had a reason to doubt your love for Keith or skills as a mother. Up until now, I thought Keith was adjusting well to our divorce and my separation from him. However, I've seen signs lately that make me think you're using Keith to get to me. I want that to stop, Suzette."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The hell with easing into it! "Don't bad-mouth Leila to my son and don't spread rumors about us. That kind of thing can get back to him as well. It confuses the situation. I don't want Keith to ever think I don't love him just because we've stopped loving each other."

"I never stopped loving you, Reese," Suzette pleaded. She pulled at the belt knotted at her side and the belt easily fell away. A single button at the hip kept the dress from falling completely open. "Keith needs his family back together. What you're seeing with him is a reaction to your leaving us. He needs you back. I want you back. Let me show you how much." Suzette undid the button and the dress fell open, revealing plump breasts, a well-defined stomach, and lacy panties.

Reese remembered that body. It had only improved.

She was pleased with his response. "So, you do want me."

He spotted his cell phone on the table next to her.

Suzette followed his gaze. Smiling, she picked up the phone and took a few steps backward toward the bedroom. "You want it?" She stuffed the phone into the front of her panties. "Come and get it."

Reese debated the wisdom of venturing down that path. He could easily get his phone back but at what risk? "When you get

done using my phone, leave it on the desk.” Reese picked up his luggage and headed out the door.

The loud crashing sound he heard was his cell phone hitting the other side of the closed door.

“Screw you, Reese!” Suzette’s shouts were furious. “I want Keith back tonight! I won’t let her have you both!”

He heard another crash. Possibly the table this time.

“Thank God, I’m over her.” Reese headed toward the elevator that would take him that much farther away.



TALKING TO LEILA WAS WHAT REESE NEEDED. HE DIDN’T REALIZE how much until she said hello. Out of the two women who claimed they cared for him, she was the only one he longed to spend time with. Even uncomfortable situations ended well with Leila.

Her sexy voice allowed him to toy with a fantasy. “How was your flight?” Leila asked.

“Uneventful.” Reese wasn’t ready to talk to her about the episode at the hotel before he left. Why ruin another person’s day? He just hadn’t realized how good positive energy could be. “I like this comfort thing we do so well.”

“Comfort thing?” Leila was lying in bed, the phone nestled between her head and pillow. She cat-stretched and curled up closer to the phone. “You mean how comfortable we are with talking to each other?”

“More than that. How welcomed I feel. You take a lot of pressure out of the dating game. I don’t have to go through the mental gymnastics of having to say just the right thing at all the appropriate times.”

“I take it the talk with Suzette didn’t go as planned?”

He chuckled. “That’s another thing I like. No pretense.” Reese exhaled, lying back on the pillows. The hotel’s bed wasn’t as comfortable as Leila’s bed. Or maybe it had something to do with

her not being in it with him. “It didn’t. It never does. She’s either wanting to argue or wanting to entice me. But I did manage to discuss everything. She agreed to my having Keith more frequently. She denied everything else, just like you said she would.”

“What went wrong?”

“My choosing you over her,” Reese said simply. That was the best way, the only worthwhile way, to explain the strip show he’d walked out on. Suzette would always be tempting, but she wasn’t the temptress for him.

“I’m sorry you had to leave town on such a bad note. I wish I could’ve been there to send you off in a better mood.”

That was comforting. “Talking to you is helping a lot.”

“I hope this won’t affect Keith. I’ve seen how some parents turn their anger towards their children. I hope Suzette doesn’t plan to turn Keith against me.”

“I told her to stop that as well. But luckily, we don’t have to worry about that for a few days. By the time he returns from the field trip, Suzette will have calmed down. I told her I’d bring Keith back home when I return. But that means he’ll need to spend Tuesday night with you. Will that be a problem? If so...”

Leila stopped him. “That’s fine. He’s welcome here.”

“Thanks. Just call me on my cell phone when he gets back. I want to tell him about the change in plans.” Reese was feeling much better. “Oh wait, you won’t be able to reach me easily over the next two days. My cell phone is in Atlanta. Call me at this hotel or I’ll call you.”

“Okay.” Leila exhaled slowly, her breathing a soft hum. “Reese, I want to say something but I’m not sure how to phrase it.” She exhaled again. “For a long time, I thought my life was okay the way that it was. I avoided emotional relationships because either my family’s standards were too high, or my selection was too low.” She paused, thinking.

“And now?” he prompted.

“This feels just right,” she said softly. “And I want it to be better between us.”

A calmness washed over Reese. His heart felt caressed. The relationship felt damn good to him too. “What can ruin this for us?”

“I know how strongly you feel about family. I also put a lot of stock in my family, but I’m not planning to let them come between us. If this begins to not feel right... to you or me... for whatever reason, I want us to be able to tell each other. I didn’t like what happened before and I don’t want to do that again. If we can’t work through it, let’s promise to try to walk away as friends.”

Reese wasn’t quite sure if Leila was trying to give him a way out or herself. He had suspected she would say, ‘Suzette could ruin things.’ That was how he felt, but he wanted her to continue to stand by him regardless of Suzette’s meddling. He admired Leila’s tenacity and knew that it would be needed to withstand Suzette’s nonsense. Suzette couldn’t handle rejection. After that stunt today, things might get worse. He hoped Leila could handle it.

He sat up in bed on alert, not knowing the direction this conversation would take. “If you’re thinking of walking away, then tell me now. You see, I don’t have any intention of doing that, because my heart is in this too deeply.”

“Reese, I’m trying to tell you I don’t want too either.” Leila could barely get the words out over the emotions streaming from the warm place his words touched. “This is more than being in lust. Much, much more. I need you.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-One



Something bad was going to happen.

Leila had been in her office all morning. She scanned the interior of the room looking for a clue to her apprehension. The room felt as though it were sinking, shrinking in on her. All Wednesday morning she'd been feeling this way and couldn't shake it. She wasn't sure if the uneasiness resulted from the nightmare she'd had or a premonition. In her nightmare, Suzette had succeeded at winning Reese back and causing harm to her family. In real life, Suzette had failed in both areas.

Leila didn't have any cause to question the direction the relationship between Reese and herself was taking. He had already expressed strong feelings, and Leila, herself, was already past the point of easily returning to a life without him. She had been infatuated, possibly in love, with Reese before she had ever met him. And he had turned out to be more than she had ever dreamed of. He'd tiptoed into her life, her heart, her soul before she had a

chance to stop him. Now she didn't want to let him go. She had spent a lot of time with Keith after he returned from the field trip and couldn't imagine a more perfect son. He was the image of Reese, both inside and out. She was beginning to love him too.

Maybe that was why Leila was uneasy today. She'd realized just how vulnerable her heart was. Reese and Keith were very important to her, and Suzette was so determined to keep them both.

Maybe that was the reason for her apprehension.

Wanting to concentrate on other matters, Leila threw herself into her work, spending the better part of her day working on administrative issues. Then her telephone rang. Her mother had finally caught up with her at the office.

"Mother, I've been meaning to call you."

"Why is it so hard to return my call the same day you get it?" Elizabeth asked.

Because you never let up. "I'm playing catch-up with reviewing the accounting reports. I fell behind because of the proposal. But at least I've gotten the tedious part of it out of the way."

"You do like running this nursery?" Elizabeth asked.

"I love it because it's more than a nursery. And I want to see it evolve into an educational outlet. That's the kind of challenge I enjoy."

Elizabeth changed the topic to one of more interest. "The reverend spoke well of Reese McCoy. I understand you two went to his service together."

"Reese is a good man."

"How are things going between you two?"

"They couldn't be better. Reese is out of town on business. I'm keeping his son, Keith, until he gets back."

"I hadn't realized that." Elizabeth's voice held concern. "Angel, please don't tell me he's asking you to keep his child already? I thought Keith's mother lived in Atlanta?"

“Mother, please. My keeping Keith has given us time to get to know each other. He’s enjoyable to have around.”

“I don’t doubt that but be careful playing stepmother when the child’s real mother doesn’t even want you in his life. If she’s willing to falsely advertise that her son has emotional issues, no telling what else she is willing to do to come between you and Reese.”

“Reese talked with Suzette. She knows there is no future between them.”

“Angel, he divorced her a few years ago and that never stopped her.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I live so far away,” Elizabeth said, flustered. “I’ve talked to several people there and I’m just not sure about this Suzette woman. I wish I could be there to support you in some way.”

“Everything is fine. Don’t worry.”

“Has Reese been seeing Suzette?”

“He has to, Mother, because of Keith.”

“I’m asking if he’s seeing her more than necessary.”

Leila thought the visits were quite frequent, but Reese wanted to see his son. “No more than necessary.”

“I would hope that’s the case. I do have another concern.” Elizabeth drove home her point. “Do you remember Viola Collins? She’s a good friend of the previous mayor and was considering running for the congressional seat. Anyway, I was bragging to her about your relationship with Reese. She told me about a black-tie event held a few years back where Suzette made a terrible scene. Reese was there with another woman and Suzette attacked the poor woman.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Leila said. “Are you sure?”

“It didn’t make the news, thank Heavens, but several hundred people were there. She was trying to get him back. I wonder if she’ll try something that dramatic to separate you from him!”

“Reese doesn’t want that relationship,” Leila said a little too strongly.

“I hope you’re right. I just wish I could be sure about Suzette. The woman is violent! Her son may not have emotional problems, but I think that woman sure does. Why would anyone in their right mind want to make a spectacle of themselves like that? I heard that it was the most embarrassing thing. No wonder the man moved clear across the country. I’m not comfortable with you dating Reese. It’s not worth bringing trouble to your life.”

Leila’s bad feeling worsened.



REESE STOOD IN THE NOISY LOBBY ATTEMPTING TO TALK TO LEILA over the buzz of business-goers milling around. They had taken a break from the meeting, and he hurried to call her with an update. “How’s Keith making out?”

“It’s swim day. I saw him at lunchtime, and he practically begged me to let him go to the pool with the big kids. I couldn’t talk to you beforehand about it, but I figured you wouldn’t mind. You’ve talked about how much he loves to swim.”

“The kid’s part fish. I don’t mind at all. I’ll also call Suzette to let her know that I’ll bring Keith home tomorrow night instead of tonight. I want to spend some time with him.”

“When are you planning to get here?”

“It’s going so well here, I’ll probably take the last flight out of Tampa,” he said into the telephone in the hotel lobby.

“I’ll wait up,” Leila promised.

“Can’t wait to see me, huh?” He was missing her too.

“I can’t wait,” she said, wanting to be heard over the background noise. “I need to talk to you about something my moth...” She reconsidered. “We need to talk.”

He wasn’t quite sure about her change in tone. “Want to give me a hint about what?”

“Just hurry home. I need a hug.”

“Good.” Reese enjoyed hearing that someone’s need for him was healthy and non-demanding. His meeting was reconvening, and he looked at his watch. “I’ve got to get back to my meeting. It’s almost four. We’ll be in this meeting for a little longer, then I’m having dinner with them. You won’t be able to reach me, so I’ll see you at home.”

Eunice hurried into her office. “Leila, we have a problem!” Eunice was on the verge of hysterics.

“I’ll see you tonight.” Leila hung up as she gave Eunice a serious look. “What’s going on?”

“The police are here!” Eunice was scared. “Midas Touch is being accused of kidnapping a child.”

“That’s nonsense!” Leila jumped up. “What child?”

“Keith McCoy.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two



The scene in front of Midas Touch was chilling. Two police cars, blue lights flashing, were parked in front of the building. Several parents were parking as others ran toward the building in terror. Four o'clock was the start of the wave of parents coming to pick up children. The kids in the playground area were lined up along the fence staring in fascination. One of the officers was questioning several staff members in front of the building.

Leila hurried outside. The second officer, whom she didn't see initially, materialized next to her.

"Are you Leila Chamberlain?" His name badge read Sanchez.

"Yes. This is my place of business."

"We need to ask you several questions about the whereabouts of Keith McCoy. Is he here?"

"He's not here now. Keith is on a school outing to the pool." Leila gave the details of the sponsored trip.

“Did his mother authorize that trip?” The officer asked.

“No, but...”

“What about Mr. McCoy?”

Leila hesitated. Reese hadn’t authorized the trip but hadn’t disagreed with her decision to let him go. “Mr. McCoy knows about the field trip. He left his son in my care.”

“I see.” The officer pulled out a pad. “How can I verify this with Mr. McCoy or do you have signed documentation approving this trip?”

“Reese McCoy can verify all of this.” Leila remembered Reese was going to be out of touch for the rest of the evening. “However, you won’t be able to reach him. He’s on a business trip in Florida.”

The officer’s expression looked grim. “I’m going to need you to come to the station with us, Miss Chamberlain.”

“Oh, my God!” Eunice screamed from behind.

“What for? I haven’t done anything wrong. I have permission to take care of Keith.”

“Mrs. Suzette McCoy doesn’t seem to think so. A missing person report has been filed involving a minor. We need to go down to the station and resolve this.”

“May I get my purse?” Leila asked.

“I’ll need to go with you.” Officer Sanchez followed her into the building.

“Lord, Leila, you’re going to jail!” Eunice was crying.

“Eunice go to my apartment and leave a note for Reese, just in case.”

“I’ll also call Mrs. Shirley!” Eunice suggested.

“No, don’t,” Leila said loudly, then wished she hadn’t. It only frightened Eunice more. “Don’t get her or the reverend involved. This is all a big misunderstanding. I’ll clear this up. Just make sure the building is secured, and Reese knows what’s going on.”

As the officer placed Leila in the backseat of the police vehicle, parents, staff, and students all stood around gawking in disbe-

lief. By now the number of parents retrieving their children had doubled. The parking lot was full, and they all watched the horror unfold.

“This can’t be happening,” Leila whispered miserably. “I can’t believe I’m going to the police station.”



INTERROGATIONS WERE JUST AS BAD AS SHE HAD IMAGINED. BEING A criminal and being treated like one had very little difference. She was being questioned about Keith’s abduction. Leila gave as much information as she could, hoping they would verify it with Reese. Unfortunately, she didn’t have any proof or witnesses to support her story. She covered the bond and contacted her lawyer. Several hours later she was released.

“John,” Leila said to her lawyer, a tall man who sported his receding hairline and resulting balding head with pride. “I can’t believe this is happening. Suzette knew her son was at my daycare. Why would she do this?”

“You said yourself you never talked to Suzette.” John unbuttoned his expensive suit jacket. “We don’t know exactly what she knows.”

“She knew, John,” Leila said angrily. “She had to know. Luckily, my family doesn’t know about all this yet.”

As they exited the building, bright lights flashed in Leila’s eyes and a microphone was shoved to her face.

“Miss Chamberlain, I’m with Channel 4 news,” the demanding blond with piercing eyes said. “Isn’t it true you were arrested for the abduction of the son of the football star, Reese McCoy?”

“I’m innocent,” Leila said, then realized it was the worst thing she could have said. All guilty people make that claim. “I will be cleared of the charges once Mr. McCoy is contacted.” Leila rushed down the steps, looking away from the blinding lights of the camera.

“Was there a ransom?” The reporter was insistent. “Did you do it for the money, Miss Chamberlain?”

“That’s ridiculous,” John Perkins said. “You’ve heard her statement. We don’t have any further comments.”

Another boisterous male reporter chimed in, “What are the chances this will hurt your expansion plans, Miss Chamberlain?”

Leila avoided the question as her heart and soul began sinking. This would ruin everything she held dear. Especially her dream.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three



The trip to Tampa had been a success. All Reese wanted to do now was to get home and hug both Leila and Keith. The urge was intense.

As he pulled into Leila's driveway, he smiled, noticing both her car and the inside lights. The last time he had come home, it hadn't been pleasant at all. Leila hadn't been home, and he had been accused of causing problems.

He hurried up the stairs. He was thinking about moving back into her place for the next few days. Forget the hotel. He wanted to make full use of all the time he had to be with her. As he placed the key in the lock, the door opened.

"Reese!" Eunice stood there, dabbing at tears. "You finally made it!"

"Hello, Eunice." Reese stepped inside, confused. "Is everything okay?"

"Leila is in jail," Eunice cried frantically, "all because of you!"

Reese stumbled a step backward, his mind starting to spin. *This has to be a joke!* “Calm down, Eunice.” Reese was heading down the hallway, half-expecting Keith and Leila to jump out yelling, “Surprise!” Because the house was quiet, he turned to her. Her tears were real; her tone was real. *This wasn’t any damn joke!* Concerned, he said, “Tell me what’s going on.”

Eunice, in rapid succession, detailed the unnerving events that had led to Leila’s horrible arrest and the return of Keith to his mother.

“Suzette knew Keith was at the daycare.”

“No, she didn’t! Suzette filed a missing child report. You couldn’t be reached. That’s why Leila was arrested.” Eunice was chasing behind Reese who went to the small desk in the front room.

“What jail is Leila in?” Reese was punching numbers on the telephone. Eunice gave him a paper outlining the details. “Suzette isn’t answering.” He hung up and dialed another number. “Have Reverend Stanley and his wife been contacted?”

“Leila doesn’t want them to know. She said to tell only you.”

Reese hung up again. “I’m heading to the station. I’ll call Suzette again on the drive over.” He jogged out.



BY THE TIME REESE GOT TO THE JAIL, LEILA HAD ALREADY BEEN RELEASED. He provided a statement to clear her name and was told a detective would be handling the situation. When he returned to Leila’s home, Eunice had already left. He waited there for several hours. Leila never came home, and Reese wasn’t sure if he should call the Stanleys, based on what Eunice had said. But he couldn’t sit around doing nothing. Taking a long shot, he headed to his hotel, thinking Leila might have gone there.

“Mr. McCoy,” the desk manager called as Reese hurried through the lobby. Reese went to the desk. “We have a situation with your room. Let me go up with you.”

Reese couldn't handle any more bad news. He unwillingly followed the man to the elevator. "Was someone hurt?" he asked cautiously.

"Not that I'm aware of." The desk manager opened the room and turned on the lights. "Things were thrown around. A few items were broken." The desk manager pointed to Reese's cell phone on the table. "The cleaning people took care of most of the problems. You may want to check for theft. We can move you to another room if you want."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary. Leave whatever documents you need for me to sign. I'll take it from here."

After the desk manager left, Reese surveyed the room. The cell phone was in several pieces. The coffee pot looked new. All his clothes were in the closet. His briefcase lay open. The papers that had been inside it were piled atop the desk. Some papers were ripped to pieces.

"Damn it, Suzette. Another one of your temper tantrums. You went too far this time."

Reese hurried to his desk, urgently looking through the litter. When he couldn't find what he was looking for, he opened the small pocket inside the briefcase where he always kept the keepsake. His mother's antique locket was still there, still safe. He exhaled relief. *Thank God I haven't lost this too!* It was the only thing of his mother's he had left in the world.

The message light on the telephone was blinking. He had five messages. Four from Suzette, all demanding that he brings Keith home.

The last message, from Leila, had come in around midnight. "Reese, you've probably heard the news by now." She was crying. "Even when everyone finds out the truth, it's not going to make any difference. My life is falling apart. This isn't fair."

There was a long pause in which he could tell she was struggling to pull herself together. "Don't cry, Leila," Reese was saying

to the machine. It was destroying his resolve to hear so much pain, unnecessary pain, in her voice. “Where are you?”

Leila’s message continued. “It just isn’t fair. And there isn’t a way for me to fix this. Why Reese? Why would she hurt me like this?” More tears, then the line went dead. Leila had not said how to reach her.

Reese hung up the telephone, shaking his head. The weight of the misery was causing his shoulders to slump low. “Because of me.”

It was now three in the morning. He called Leila at home again, but there was no answer. He didn’t know any of her friends, except Chi. He didn’t know how to get in touch with Leila’s mother. He shouldn’t call the Stanleys.

Reese felt helpless. Leila was hurting and he couldn’t do anything about it. Not even hold her. He slouched on the sofa staring at the ceiling. “I’m so sorry, Leila. I should have protected you from this.”

He eventually fell asleep in that same spot, hoping Leila would call back. Several hours later he woke up and immediately dialed her number again. Still no answer. He went to shower and change. He would have to find her.

As he stood dressing, the television news played in the background. “Stay tuned for the latest on the abduction and return of Keith McCoy, son of football legend, Reese McCoy.”

“Shit!” Reese went to the telephone. It was answered after the second ring. “Mrs. Stanley, it’s Reese McCoy.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four



The Stanleys wanted someone to pay, and Reese knew it was going to be him.

Shirley Stanley stood in indignation as Reese walked into the den. “All I asked you to do was to not hurt my niece, not stain my husband’s reputation and not compromise the daycare!” Mrs. Shirley pointed an angry finger at Reese. “You managed to do all of that in less than a day!”

“Calm yourself,” the reverend said to his wife. “This will get us nowhere.”

“If you need someone to blame to feel better,” Reese said, softly, “then I’ll be that person for right now.”

“How could you allow this to happen!” Mrs. Shirley screamed.

“As I explained to you before, Suzette wanted to hurt me in any way she could. This was done in anger and on impulse. She will have a lot of explaining to do, not only to us but also to the police.”

“What was Suzette’s reason for reporting her son missing?” the reverend asked.

“The agreement that Suzette and I had was that I would keep Keith during the day and would return him home at night. I’d asked to keep him this week and let him attend the daycare. According to the police report, Suzette never agreed to that. When she couldn’t reach me, she assumed the worst.”

“She couldn’t just go to the daycare to check herself? She had to send the police?” Mrs. Stanley was dumbfounded.

“This is insane.” The reverend went to a chair and sat down.

“Suzette is insane.” Mrs. Shirley joined her husband.

“Any word from Leila?” Reese came to sit with them.

“Nothing. Not even a call,” Mrs. Shirley said, and Reese’s expression saddened. “You really do care for her, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Reese nodded, then added despondently, “She’s hurting, and I can’t do a thing about it. Not even hold her.” He looked at the reverend. “Where would she go?”

“Leila doesn’t like to bring her problems to us. I can understand why since we tend to be critical.” The reverend looked at his wife. “I would assume she would go to her friends. Or to work.”

“She’s not at the daycare,” Mrs. Shirley said. “We checked with the few friends we know of. They haven’t heard from her either.”

The doorbell rang.

“Let’s pray that’s her.” The reverend stood and Reese and Mrs. Shirley followed. He opened the door to another startling surprise. “Elizabeth? What are you doing here?”

Elizabeth Chamberlain was a mature-looking version of Leila. Tall. Attractive. She walked with an elegance that screamed elite. “I’ll be damned if I am going to stay in Chicago while my daughter is suffering. I got a call last night from a friend who saw it on the news. Where is Leila?”

“We don’t know,” Mrs. Shirley said, then looked back. “This is Reese McCoy.”

Elizabeth walked up to Reese. “I don’t know if I should slap your face or not. You brought this mess into Leila’s life. I told her something like this would happen with Suzette!”

“I didn’t suspect things would get this bad. I know Leila didn’t take my son. The authorities do too.”

“Suzette is really to blame,” Elizabeth said. “I talked to Leila just yesterday, warning her. Don’t you think you need to go get your son from his mother?” Elizabeth asked. “I’m not sure he’s in a healthy environment.”

“And do what?” Reese asked sternly. “Have him sit and watch me worry about Leila? I will deal with Suzette in my own way. This stunt of hers got out of control. But Keith is safe. The police have been notified of the truth. My concern right now is for your daughter.”

“Why should I allow you to continue to see my angel after this?” Elizabeth demanded to know.

Hours ago, Reese might have been able to control his anger. Now it was a different matter. “You don’t have an ounce of say in either how I raise my son or what your daughter and I decide.”

Elizabeth didn’t flinch but turned to her brother. “Rev, has Leila called you?”

“No, but she called Reese.”

Elizabeth gave him a puzzled look. “You?” was barely audible.

“She needed comfort.” Reese let that settle in before turning to the reverend. “I’m going to look for Leila. If she calls me again or if I find her, I’ll call you.”

“Since she hasn’t shown up at the daycare, we need to get over and manage the place,” Reverend Stanley said. “Try reaching us there when you get an update.”

“I want to go with you,” Elizabeth said to Reese. “She hasn’t contacted any of her family but is calling you. I want to be there if she calls again. It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I don’t know where to start looking, but I’ll find her,” Reese said. Her daughter trusted him more and felt more secure with him than she did with them. “Elizabeth,” Reese asked kindly, “why don’t you go over to the daycare? I’m sure the staff needs reassurance and guidance now.”



REESE WENT BACK TO THE HOTEL. HE NEEDED TO FIGURE OUT A PLAN of attack. He had to do something to right this wrong. Leila hadn’t contacted her family yet and had called him. She felt more comfortable reaching out to him. That made him feel incredibly special. If only he had been here when she called.

If he couldn’t talk to her, the least he could do was try to help the situation.

Back in his hotel room, he called the detective assigned to the case to discuss his statement. Then he called each of the television stations offering an interview. All jumped on the chance at more late-breaking coverage. Since Reese planned to visit the police station again, he suggested a time to meet. Next, he called Leila’s attorney. He had gotten the telephone number earlier from the Stanleys.

Reese got up and changed clothing from his jeans and polo shirt to a business suit. Back at the police station, he met the lawyer in the parking lot. The media hounds were already circling.

On the steps of justice, Reese looked into rolling cameras. His football fame and status had gotten them there. He would use it to his advantage.

“As many of you may know, my eight-year-old son, Keith, was previously reported missing but is now home. Any parent could probably relate to how devastating it would be to lose contact with

a child for even the shortest period of time. My ex-wife experienced that and did what any concerned parent would do. Unfortunately, I wasn't available to resolve the issue. A last-minute field trip was planned for my son, there was a communication glitch, and steps were taken to find him before the misunderstanding was cleared up."

Reese glanced around at all the cameras after a quick nod to John. "My son is fine. Nothing improper happened. Midas Touch Daycare did a fabulous job of providing care. I'm here today to ensure the authorities are notified that this was just an unfortunate mistake. Thank you."

Reese immediately turned and headed up the steps, the lawyer in tow. Media questions were shouted from behind, but Reese continued into the building, leaving them outside to wrap up their coverage. Reese purposely avoided questions because he didn't want to give anyone the chance to ask something he didn't want to answer. Like, was this all a hoax? In which case he would have to lie and say no.

"That should be in the news for the next two days," Attorney John Perkins said after entering the building.

"That's the plan," Reese said. Further down the hall in private, Reese turned to Leila's lawyer.

"Have you heard from Leila or know where she is?"

"Not yet. The last time I talked to her was at dinner last night. I know she didn't want to go home. She left the restaurant by Uber. I assumed she finally went home."

"No." Reese shook his head. "I'm also in need of legal assistance. I need to start the process to gain full custody of my son. I need help with quickly maneuvering around the system."

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five



The floor hurt like hell. But not as bad as the throbbing headache Leila had. She couldn't stand hangovers. But part of her headache was from too much alcohol the previous night.

She hated the taste of cigarettes and detested smoking because it was the sin that had painfully killed her father. She took another long draw from the cigarette. The ash from the menthol was over an inch long, threatening to drop on the carpeted floor because her hand was shaking.

She had been in the same spot on the floor of the hotel room all morning. After waking, she had gotten out of bed, grabbed her newly purchased cigarettes, and walked to the window. People moved about happily. The sun shone brightly. The day signified joy. Leila turned her back to it and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. Nothing joyful was happening with her.

She couldn't even go home. The scene at the police station with media hounds chasing after them as they headed to John's car wasn't something she wanted to repeat at her home. It was supposed to be her sanctuary. Most of the reporters probably knew where she lived. Those who didn't realize where would have hung around the daycare lying in wait to pounce on her. They would have found her again. She just hadn't had the strength to deal with that. She needed time to think. To figure out a way to change everything back to the way it had been.

Her family was surely disowning her, blaming her, waiting to tell the 'I told you so' story. Work was always rewarding, but she couldn't go there either. They all knew; they all were suffering too. Especially the children. Some had cried as the officer put her in the back of the police car. Now she was all over the news. Even though she wasn't guilty, some of the parents would believe she was.

She wouldn't have been taken to the police station, if she wasn't guilty of something, the rumor mill would say.

Leila was sure her student enrollment would drop to a miserable low. How would she be able to pay her staff? How would she be able to regain the community's confidence? The contract with the city was not going to happen now. What politician in his right mind would support a publicly known criminal? Her daycare license, if not revoked, would probably be challenged due to petitions from concerned parents asking that she be barred from ever being around children. Fanatical protesters were probably on the corners in front of the daycare holding up scary signs, warning people of the horrors that would befall their beloved children if they turned down the road that led to Satan's playpen, her hard-earned facility.

A tear ran down her cheek. She hated having to admit her mother was one hundred percent correct.

Suzette played this game better than anyone Leila had ever known. She'd never considered her daycare would be in jeopardy,

assuming Suzette would attack her via her family and Reese. She just hadn't realized it was her most vulnerable spot. The attack was a blindside kick that knocked the air out of her lungs, leaving her spirit crushed.

"Ouch!" Leila yelled, dropping the cigarette that had burned down to her fingers. Now the carpet began to smolder. Quickly, she slapped the burning material with her hand to put it out.

She stood, still wearing the sundress she had worn yesterday, and looked at her hands. Cigarette ashes were on some of her nails. The cigarette burn stung her finger, and her palm was stinging from beating the floor.

Whether from lack of sleep or lack of sanity at the moment, for some reason Leila started to laugh.

Here she was wallowing comfortably in her misery, not even attempting to save herself. And why? Because of a woman like Suzette?

What good is this doing me? Leila thought. That cigarette burn had come just in time. It snapped her out of a terrible mood.

She went to the bathroom to wash her hands. As the warm water and soap removed the grit, the truth hit her solidly between the ears. What Suzette had done might have stained her, but she could also wash away that as well. Why act as if Suzette had won? It wasn't over unless Leila admitted defeat.

She just needed a better place to sit and think. She needed to talk to someone. Splashing water on her face, she said, "I'm not going to let this ruin me."

Leila thought of places where she could find comfort. She dialed Reese's hotel and his cell phone. He didn't and she didn't leave a message.

Reese. Talk about coming and leaving an impact. The one thing Suzette had done correctly was to love him. Too bad it was a crazy love, or else he would never have divorced her. He enjoyed devoting himself to the people he cared about. He just wanted to

be happy and make the other person happy. He didn't seem to care about pretense or someone's past indiscretion or past pain. He didn't judge quickly, instead, he allowed people a chance to prove themselves. Some people would think that was a personality flaw; Leila thought it was precious.

It was easy to care for Reese. She more than cared. Leila was sure she was in love with him.

Why did it have to come to this for her to admit it?

"Where are you, Reese? I need you."

Actually, I need to think. Maybe I'll go somewhere to think first. I shouldn't wallow like this around him. I need to pull myself together.



LEILA STOOD KNOCKING ON THE DOOR. SHE FELT LIFELESS AND looked worse. She didn't give a damn.

"Leila!" Chi opened the door and hurried out of it to embrace her friend.

"How was the honeymoon?" Leila said, tears running down her cheeks.

"Great." Chi pulled her inside and down the hall. "Enough about that. I saw on the news you'd been arrested for taking Keith. What the hell happened?"

"Suzette," was Leila's all-inclusive answer.

"I should have suspected that. What a bitch!" Chi pushed her in the direction of the sofa. "Have a seat. I'll make you a drink."

"Thanks," Leila said. "I need a bath, too. Maybe borrow some clothes. I can't go home because the news reporters are there."

"Of course." Chi passed her a glass of wine. "Tell me what's going on."

"My business will suffer because of this. My mother will kill me. Mother predicted Suzette would do something insane. She was right and I'll never hear the end of it. I'm sure she'll demand

I leave Reese to rectify all this. But I don't think I can stop seeing Reese now." Tears started again.

"Sweetie, you look so lost right now," Chi said. "But you know this will pass. And you'll be stronger because of it."

"My lawyer said once Reese gives a statement, it will straighten all this out."

"Of course, it will," Chi said. "I know Reese, too. He won't stand for this." Chi smiled warmly. "You know, the only time you look better is when you talk about Reese. I take it that things were going well before this?"

"He hasn't wanted to return to Arizona since coming to town. He's here for me because it was getting serious between us. And it was great...until now." More tears. "I don't think I can face anybody, including him, right now."

"He's who you need the most right now," Chi said. "I knew the two of you would be good for each other. Let me call him for you."

"Don't," Leila pleaded. "I just need time to figure all this out first."

"He can help, Leila."

"Please, Chi. Just let me hide out for a while and not listen to that damn TV. Every station is broadcasting my wrongdoing like it's the gospel truth."

"You know avoidance never solves anything."

"It will this time."

Chi reached up and wiped away her tears. "I'm going to run you a hot bath. Make you something to eat. We'll talk more later."



FINALLY, REESE WAS ABLE TO PURCHASE A REPLACEMENT CELL PHONE. Behind the wheel of the Jeep, he maneuvered through traffic as he dialed Suzette.

"We need to meet," Reese said to her.

"I'm not interested in hearing anything you have to say." Her anger was obvious.

"I thought you would like to hear what I told the detective investigating the case. Since neither Keith nor I was ever missing, he's quite interested in hearing why you felt that we were."

"I did think that!" Suzette screamed. "We never agreed to you not bringing Keith home each night. I couldn't reach you. I couldn't find Keith. What kind of mother would I be if I didn't call the police?"

"That's exactly my point," Reese said.

"What the hell are you insinuating? That I lied?"

"Funny you chose those words to describe it." Reese could sense Suzette was very uncomfortable. "Like I said, you can talk to me first, or you can explain it to the detective instead."

"What did you tell the police?"

"I don't want Keith to overhear any of this. Why don't you meet me in the hotel's restaurant around eight? And lose the strip-tease act. I'm not interested." He hung up the telephone.

Reese hadn't checked his voicemail service for his cell phone since this morning. He had two messages that he cared most about.

The first message: "Reese, it's Parker. We're back home. I saw the news. Call me."

The second message: "It's Elizabeth Chamberlain. We've been able to get the daycare running smoothly. Surprisingly, attendance didn't drop much. Leila's children and their parents have faith in her." He heard Elizabeth take a deep breath. "Have you found my daughter yet? Please let me hear something soon."

Reese felt he needed to deal with Elizabeth first and headed in her direction. He would call Parker later. He parked the Jeep in front of Leila's loft and took his laptop case upstairs to her place. Elizabeth would just have to get used to him staying there. Leila was his and Elizabeth couldn't do anything to change that.

After settling in, he used the private, inside entrance to the daycare. He found Elizabeth and Eunice dealing with a concerned parent.

“Mrs. Chamberlain, you need to stop this!” Eunice was saying. “David’s mother can’t take her son without the father’s consent. I called him, but she’s making a scene because I told her to wait.”

“Good Lord!” Elizabeth exclaimed, heading to the front door. “Does this happen all the time?”

“Only with this parent,” Eunice whispered.

David Kendal’s mother dripped expensive tastes and good breeding. Elizabeth took control; she knew how to handle this type of woman. “What’s the meaning of this, Mrs. Kendal? Your son is quite safe, and his father is on his way.”

“I will not allow David to continue at a daycare run by convicts.”

Elizabeth let out a snort. “Your husband enrolled David here because he recognizes the benefits of this daycare. We’re a step above the best and your son is not suffering because of the false accusation about its owner. Obviously, Mr. Kendal doesn’t take issue and as long as he doesn’t, then you shouldn’t.”

“You can’t tell me how to raise my child! I know what’s best.”

Right then Mr. Kendal walked in, and Reese decided to take a seat in the lobby. When a shouting match erupted between the Kendals, Elizabeth intervened. She confirmed Mr. Kendal’s approval to keep the child, then asked him to console David while she escorted his ill-mannered ex-wife out of the office.

When Elizabeth returned, she saw Reese. He stood and led the way into Leila’s office.

“What is it with these overbearing, controlling mothers!” Elizabeth exclaimed after closing the office door.

Reese’s look suggested he was thinking that description applied to her. “Elizabeth, I’ve given a statement to the press that

should hit the evening news. Hopefully, special reports have already started. It should put a stop to parents blaming Leila.”

Elizabeth sat down. “Thank you. I guess you think I’m a controlling mother too.”

“I doubt my impression would matter much to you,” Reese said.

“At least you’re wise enough to have quickly figured that out.”

“Elizabeth, I care for your daughter. I can’t promise that I won’t ever hurt her. This false arrest is the perfect example, but I can tell you that I want to love her. You might not find that acceptable, but I hope you will consider trying. I have no intention of walking away from her.”

Elizabeth softened a little. “I know Leila cares for you. She’s made good decisions so far, so I guess I should trust her now.”

“That would be wise,” Reese agreed.

Elizabeth looked like a deflated balloon. “She’s out there somewhere hurting, and I can’t even help her. I just need to know she’s okay.” Elizabeth visibly shook herself into dignity. Looking stronger, she asked, “So what did Suzette have to say for herself?”

“What she always says. Nothing is ever her fault. But she will not go unchecked this time. And she’s given me just enough ammunition to fight to get my son back.”

Elizabeth had a flashback to a nasty fight she had had over her daughter. “Think through what you plan to do. Keith will be the one who suffers because of it.”

“I want my son to be happy.” Reese stood up. “I’ll be staying in Leila’s loft. Come get me if you hear from her before I do.”

As Reese opened the office door, Elizabeth said, “Reese, I do see what my daughter sees in you.”

He smiled, nodded, then left.

Reese needed to get some work done and, hopefully, it would serve as the distraction he desperately needed. Back inside Leila’s loft, he sat at her desk working on his laptop. He reviewed

emails, outlined a proposed plan, and called his office manager for updates.

With no other distractions, the silence began to bother him. Reese walked to stand in the center of the front room and looked about. This room smelled of her, felt of her.

His cell phone rang, and he almost ripped his pants retrieving it. *It was Parker. Damn!* He'd forgotten to call his best friend back.

"Hey, Parker."

"You need to come over," Parker said. Just as Reese was about to disagree, because he wanted to wait for her, Parker added, "Leila's here."



PARKER'S FACE WAS SOLEMN AS HE OPENED HIS FRONT DOOR FOR Reese. "I leave town and you're a star. I come back, you're a bigger TV star."

"Unfortunately, they're not highlighting my football moves," Reese said flatly as he passed by Parker.

"How you doing?" Parker's voice held sympathy as he patted Reese's back.

"I'll know after I talk to Leila." Reese looked forlornly at Parker. "How is she?"

Parker shook his head before consoling his friend. "Leila didn't want us to call anyone. But I figured you should be here. She's on the patio."

"Thanks, man."

Chi saw Reese coming down the hall. "I'm so glad you finally made it." She hurried into his arms before gently saying, "You poor man. This is crazy."

"What a reception to come home to after a honeymoon, huh?" Reese tried to sound light.

“Don’t worry about that.” Chi stepped back. “I still have the rest of my life for Parker to make me happy. Leila needs a little of that from you right now.”

As Reese got to the sliding glass door, he wondered how he would start the conversation. He was relieved to have finally found Leila, but he was upset she had avoided him for this long. He stepped out on the porch. Leila was sitting on the white wicker bench, leaning back with her legs bent beside her, and a tissue in her hand. She stared at the backyard’s flower garden.

She was so caught up in her thoughts she didn’t see Reese until he was standing next to her. Her eyes were puffy from crying. Her smile was weak. “Hey.”

Reese eased down next to her. Elbows resting on his thighs, he stared at the flowers too. “I came up with several speeches to express how sorry I am. Now, none of them seem right. I never imagined this would happen.” Reese turned to her. “You’re the last person on the planet I wanted to hurt.” A tear ran down her cheek and he brushed it away. “I didn’t want to ever make you cry.”

A few more tears ran down her face. “I don’t think I’ve ever cried this much in all of my life.”

He opened his arms to her. Leila put her feet down and threw herself against him. She wrapped her arms tightly around him, inhaling his strength to fortify her own.

Reese felt a little of himself wash away with her next batch of tears. He leaned back, pulling her closer. “I wish I could erase all this. Tell you it was just a bad dream.”

She stopped crying, taking several deep breaths. Her head was nestled at his neck, her arms around his waist.

For several long minutes, Reese just rocked her gently, occasionally kissing her forehead. He felt her slowly go limp as if she had fallen asleep. Then she spoke.

“You feel so good,” she murmured. “I should have come to you earlier.”

“This is all my fault. If I had dealt with Suzette differently, she wouldn’t have gotten the idea there was a chance for me and her.”

“I think I’m mad now,” Leila said.

“I know. You should be. I’ve caused you a lot of embarrassment because I didn’t handle this situation right.”

Leila leaned back. “Not because of that.”

Reese frowned and apologized again. “I know I should have told you about Suzette’s jealousy. She used to try to come between me and anyone I’ve dated. But it’s been a long time. I thought she was over me.”

Leila was shaking her head. “Not because of that.”

He wanted a clean slate. He picked another apology. “I know I travel too much. If I had been here, then maybe...”

Leila was shaking her head. She lightly kissed his cheek. “That’s not why.”

Reese smiled, a little confused. “Tell me why you’re mad so that I can apologize for it.”

“Because I couldn’t find you last night.” Leila wrapped her arms around him again. “All of this just doesn’t seem so bad, now that you’re holding me.”

“Oh, Leila.” Reese hugged her closer. “I looked everywhere for you. I was going crazy there for a while. Why didn’t you tell me where to find you?”

“I was hiding from the media mob and ended up hiding from everyone. Even myself. I called but just didn’t feel like talking to a machine. I wanted to hear your voice. No one else’s, especially not my family’s. They’ve probably exiled me by now for embarrassing them like this.”

“They don’t blame you,” Reese said against her hair. He ran encouraging strokes down her back. “I was with them this morning. I think they’re regretting being as tough as they have been. They’re realizing you don’t see them as a safe haven. Especially your mother. She’s worried.”

Leila sat back again. “Tell me she’s not here. I can’t deal with her ridicule right now.”

“Give your mother a chance. She came down to be with you. She’s helping at your daycare.”

“My mother? You’re joking.”

“No. And your family really does understand. I should call them just to let them know you’re okay.”

“Not yet.” Leila leaned against him, hugging him tightly. “Just hold me.”

And he did. To Reese, the sun was shining a little brighter, the flowers looked a little prettier. The problems that had weighed heavy on his shoulders felt lighter, and the person who leaned against him was the one he most wanted to hold.

Leila whispered to his neck, “I was feeling like I was falling from earth. I’m so glad you’re here to catch me. Don’t let me go.”

Reese nodded. Now that he had her, he would never let her go. Even in their moments of turmoil, she added a bit of stability. There would no longer be partial aspects to his life. He had someone to unite the pieces of his world.

But there was also another someone he had to wash his hands of. Completely get rid of. Reese would do that tonight. It was the only way his world would continue to freely turn.

“Now that I’ve found you, I won’t. Leila, I need you too much.”

“Me too.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six



Suzette admired her shapely figure in the mirror. She wasn't sure how Reese had resisted the temptation to touch her. It was obvious by the way he gawked at her that he enjoyed what he saw. She ran a hand over her flat stomach. For having had a child, it looked wonderfully firm. Working out four days a week helped.

She would be seeing Reese again tonight at his hotel. That silly comment about no more striptease acts was surely a joke. He used to love how seductive she could be. If he preferred a subtle come-on so that he could be the aggressor, that was fine with her. She would just be a tease tonight.

What concerned Suzette was what he had probably said to the police. But she didn't think she'd done anything that could be described as acting inappropriately. She'd never spoken to Leila. She was careful not to talk to Keith about staying away from home more than one night. She'd never promised Reese he could take

Keith for the week. Her actions had been completely appropriate for a concerned mother. She had even gotten sympathetic calls from friends and co-workers who were devastated by the news that Keith was missing. They all understood her traumatic state.

Of course, she never figured the television stations would get wind of it. Minus that small glitch, everything else had gone as it should. So, what if Leila had been arrested? Served her right.

Suzette's phone rang. She slipped on a housecoat and went to get it.

"Hi, Donna." Her mood changed dramatically when she heard her friend's voice. She was on edge unnecessarily.

"Turn on the news, Suzette! Reese is on TV and it's bad."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Suzette screamed, running to the television to turn it on. Reese was standing at the police station, telling the world his son was safe. Suzette watched as he told the viewing public it was all just a big misunderstanding. "Why would he do something so cruel?" Suzette was pacing, flailing one arm. "Our baby was missing! I was worried *sick!*"

"Reese says it's no big deal," Donna summarized. "Why would he say that?"

"Because I..." Suzette had to stop herself. She was about to say, "Because I knew where Keith was." Luckily those words never passed her lips. "...I don't know. I just don't know," she murmured sadly. Suzette marveled at how devastated she sounded. If she hadn't known better, she would have believed what Donna was now thinking.

"Oh, Suzette, girl. This is upsetting you. I feel so bad for you. I have a mind to cuss Reese's ass out for letting that heifer get off this easily. I always thought he was a pushover, but damn."

"Don't talk about my husband like that," Suzette defended.

There was a long pause. "You mean your ex-husband."

“Reese and I are having dinner tonight and we’ll talk about this news conference. Do you mind watching Keith? After this week, I don’t want to leave my son with just anyone.”

“Sure. Just bring him by.” Donna had one last thing to say. “Suzette don’t obsess over Reese. You know how you get when it comes to men. Especially Reese. You’ve been acting peculiar since he came to town.”



SUZETTE WORE A STRIKING PURPLE DRESS TO DINNER. PURPLE WAS Reese’s favorite color. When she entered the softly lit, richly decorated restaurant, she spotted him sitting in a booth at the far end. Not too many people were in the restaurant, which made her wonder about the quality of the food.

“Hey, Reese,” she said, walking up to the table. She waited for him to stand to kiss her forehead. That’s what he always used to do when they met on dates.

“Have a seat,” Reese said, never standing.

Slightly annoyed, Suzette slid into the booth. “How’s the food in this place?” She was looking around.

“Decent. They’re known for their steaks. But I don’t plan to stay for dinner.”

“Want to do room service?” Suzette asked, hopeful.

Reese gave her a scornful look. “I thought we should talk here.” Reese leaned back, placing his hands in his lap. “Just what were you hoping to accomplish by calling the police?”

Suzette’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. “To find our son.”

“He was never missing. We agreed that I was to keep Keith all week.”

“I don’t recall ever making such an agreement,” Suzette defended. “We always discussed you bringing him home each night.”

“Yes, of course. Because you wanted to make sure he hadn’t been acting strange while he was with me. And you needed to hear

all about our outing from me. Those were the reasons I had to bring him home. But we had discussed my keeping him all week.”

“Reese don’t sound so annoyed. We had those talks because I wanted to find out if Keith’s behavior improved when you were around. It does. I told you we... he needs you in his life full time.”

Reese nodded. “Well, these behavior issues seem to happen only with you, Suzette. No one else notices a thing wrong with Keith.”

“As his mother, I would think I have better insight into my son’s behavior. Just who is telling you differently? And don’t say Leila. I wouldn’t trust a word...”

Reese cut her off. “Anyone who has spent a significant amount of time with Keith recognizes he’s okay. Namely me.” Reese looked away as Suzette pouted. “What I do remember about our discussion about Keith was that it ended with you offering your body in exchange for me seeing my son. I refused, but still insisted on keeping him. Are you saying since we didn’t have sex, I couldn’t have my son?”

“Making love to you isn’t a bargaining tool,” Suzette cooed. “It’s a pleasure.”

“It’s also never going to happen again. We’re history. I’ve moved on. So should you.”

Suzette slowly opened the folded napkin that contained the silverware. She carefully placed the silverware on either side of the placemat before spreading the white linen napkin across her lap. “I’m a little hungry. Mind if I order dinner?”

“Go ahead,” Reese said.

Suzette didn’t like the way he was scrutinizing her every move as if looking for a flaw, a mistake. She was glad when the waiter showed up. She ordered a steak and a glass of wine. “You sure you don’t want to join me?”

“No, thank you,” Reese said to both the waiter and Suzette. After the waiter was long gone, he said, “I told the police what

happened between us Monday night. Your destruction of the hotel room. I told them about the disagreement we had and my telling you about Keith's overnight stay at Midas Touch and my keeping him all week."

Again, Suzette only picked up on the part of his statement that bothered her. "Our disagreements are nobody's business." She was alarmed. "How could you tell them any of our business?"

"When it involves you calling the police for no apparent reason and my lady friend being accused of something she didn't do, I say it's just cause."

Suzette slammed her fist down on the table. The silverware rattled a bit from the impact. "What we should be talking about is us. Not Leila."

"There is no us to talk about," Reese said, shaking his head. "There will never be an 'us' again. I don't know how many ways I need to say this. But for the hundredth time, get on with your life, Suzette."

The waiter showed up with a glass of wine and added a large steak knife to her setting. Suzette desperately needed a drink. Swiftly picking up the glass, she took several swallows. Reese's words hurt like hell, and she couldn't bear the pain. Her mind began flipping through all the lovely scenes of their married life. Every day they were together had made her life that much more worthwhile. Reese had given her so much love, cared so deeply. But no matter how much he loved her; it had never seemed quite enough. She wanted him to desperately love her, worship her just as she did him. His being a football star had made him a larger-than-life figure, requiring that much more of her love and attention. For Suzette, those days had been almost perfect. She certainly had been the happiest. She wanted those days back.

Suzette found herself crying and hadn't realized that she was. She looked at Reese through blurred eyes. "Why would you say

something like that to me? All I ever wanted was to be your wife and the mother of your child.”

“Suzette.” Reese exhaled, struggling to find the best words. “I’m here to talk about the present, not the past. The detective is planning to talk to you about the report you filed. You need to realize this could be trouble for you. I didn’t suggest to the police that you filed a false report, but it’s not a long stretch of the imagination to conclude that, considering I’m dating Leila.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! I was just concerned about our son. And all I’m hearing from you is how Leila is the innocent one. She isn’t!”

“Keep your voice down,” Reese said calmly. “This isn’t about Leila. This is about you. Just how did the police know where to find Keith?”

“I don’t know. Some anonymous call, I guess.”

“Where did you tell the police Keith was? Where did you tell them I was?”

“Are you listening to me, Reese? I told you I didn’t know where you and Keith were. I was scared for you both.”

“I don’t believe you,” Reese said. “Years ago, I would have fallen for this crying act of yours. I won’t today. But you’re the mother of my child and for that reason I don’t want to see anything bad happen to you because it will hurt Keith. But I just can’t have you hurting the woman I’m in love with and not do anything about it. Leila is too important to me.”

Suzette’s expression went from sadly teary to explosively angry. Through tight lips, she spat, “I’m sick of hearing that name!” She put her hands over her ears as if to stop the flow of pain.

Reese held up his hands. “I’m just trying to help you, keep you from going to jail for that crazy stunt. But I can see you don’t want to talk about that. That’s fine.” Reese slid out of the booth. “Good night.”

Suzette became desperate. She grabbed his arm. “Where are you going? Don’t go! I just... I mean... I’m still shaken by all that’s happened this week.”

Reese peeled her fingers from his arm. “I only want what’s best for you. I’ve said what I had to say. I thought we should get our stories to jive in case this comes back to haunt you. But I can see you’re not interested.”

“What I’m interested in is our family, Reese.” Suzette was sounding weak and vulnerable as if her universe were crumbling.

“I’ve gotta go.”

“To be with Leila?” Suzette asked hauntingly.

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Reese turned and walked away.

Suzette started to cry uncontrollably. For some reason, nothing was going as planned. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to go to Leila. She used the cloth napkin to wipe away the tears, then calmed herself.

“Leila,” Suzette said, eyeing the steak knife as she ran her finger across its sharp tip. “If Leila wasn’t in the way, Reese would come back to me.”

The waiter showed up as Suzette was preparing to leave. He placed the dinner on the table. “Here’s your meal, ma’am. I thought...” He searched the table. “You’re missing a steak knife. I’ll go get you one.”

As the waiter rushed off, Suzette got up and left the restaurant.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven



W*hat the hell was I thinking?*
He had just left Suzette in the hotel's restaurant and was heading upstairs to his room. Why on earth did he think he could rationally talk to her about having a separate life that didn't include her? Why did he think he could work out a strategy to keep the mother of his child out of jail? All he wanted to do was prevent Keith from being more traumatized than necessary. Reese hadn't known that Keith had witnessed Leila's arrest at the center until Leila mentioned she spotted the field trip bus pulling up as the police car took her away. Reese had called several times throughout the day to talk to Keith about it, but never connected with him.

The elevator door opened, and he stepped inside, pressing the button for his floor.

Reese would give Suzette some time to cool off before discussing visitation. He needed to have that conversation soon, though,

because he wanted to know what Keith was feeling about the arrest and media coverage. He'd foregone asking Suzette if Keith could stay with him the remainder of the week. But at least he'd reinforced in Suzette's mind that Leila was the woman for him. Maybe this time it would stick. This time the interference had had more damaging results.

Reese was disturbed by Suzette's behavior tonight. She had never had anything pleasant to say about anyone he dated, but that was to be expected. What he'd never expected was for Suzette to get so emotional about it. They had talked about Leila before, and while Suzette wasn't thrilled, she certainly hadn't been irrational.

But he'd gotten his point across: Leila was his future. Suzette was his past.

The elevator opened on his floor, and he stepped out.

Reese needed to finish packing and check out of the hotel. He and Leila had planned to meet back at her home once he'd talked with Suzette. They'd agreed he would stay with her until he left for Arizona.

Leila's family had more than enough reason to believe his interest in Leila was genuine. And Reese felt he had been more than reasonable respecting their initial wishes. At this point, whatever he and Leila decided really didn't require her family's approval.

Everyone knew Reese wasn't going to allow her family to run their relationship. Everyone accepted it.

In his room, he placed the remaining business papers in his briefcase, called to have a bellboy sent up for the luggage, then double-checked the room for forgotten items.

When he got to Leila's, it would be the start of a very long future together. He was sure of it.

There was a knock at the door.

The bellboy is quick tonight, Reese thought. "Too quick, actually."



“THANK YOU, MOTHER, FOR ALL YOUR HELP TODAY AT THE DAYCARE,” Leila said, sitting next to her on the sofa.

“I can’t believe how much fun I had,” Elizabeth said. “I’d forgotten how calming rocking babies could be. I was thinking of coming to help tomorrow, if you’re not up to it.”

“I’ll be at the daycare tomorrow, but I would love to have you back.”

“Consider it done.” Elizabeth patted her daughter’s hand. “Shirley and I both had a good time at your daycare. You’ve done a terrific thing here, Leila. I should have known you would have. Shirley and I both believe your expansion plans are vital.”

That touched a spot deep down inside Leila, warming her tremendously. “Thank you, Mother. I’m so glad that you do.”

Elizabeth patted her again, a genuine expression of love. Leila knew her mother’s touch was the way she communicated affection, and she placed her own hand atop her mother’s.

“What a nightmare all of this must have been,” Elizabeth said. “Most people would be a nervous wreck by now. My daughter isn’t like most people.” She smiled.

“I had Reese by my side,” Leila said. “That’s how I made it through.”

“That press conference cleared up all the confusion,” Elizabeth said. “However, Suzette has a lot of explaining to do. At least now she’s figured out she can’t hurt you in order to get to Reese. He’s not going to stand for it.”

Leila looked at her mother and smiled. Reese had successfully won the heart of Elizabeth Chamberlain. That had been an impossible feat for all the men Leila had previously dated. “I take it you find Reese acceptable?”

“Acceptable? More than acceptable. That boy is quite the catch. Much like your father was. But don’t do as if I did, Leila.

Do all you can to work through your differences. That's the key to a successful marriage. I don't think I ever mastered that."

"I'm glad you like Reese. It's important to me." Leila smiled meekly. "He's great. I can talk to Reese about anything."

"That's good." Elizabeth stood up. "Well, let me get going. You need to start getting dressed to meet with Reese."

"Stay until he gets here, Mother. He should be here in a few minutes."

"I promised Shirley I would get back in time for dinner. I'm already late. Since I'm not due to return to Chicago until Sunday night, I'll plan something for all of us." Elizabeth picked up her purse. At the front door she turned and hugged her daughter. "See you tomorrow."

"Good night. And thanks for all your help at the daycare."

"I had to do something to help." Elizabeth stepped outside. A comforting breeze blew by. "It's a nice night out. A wonderful way to end a trying day." She headed down the stairs.

Leila put the locks on the door and went to her bedroom. She needed to shower and change. Afterwards, dressed in Capri pants and a blouse, she went to the kitchen to start dinner. She would make something light but special for tonight.

There was a knock on the door. Leila came around the corner and noticed all the locks on the door. She either needed to give Reese a key to the other locks or break this habit.

The doorbell rang. Knock. Knock.

"I'm coming, Reese!" Leila hurried to the door and opened it wide, smiling.

"Don't look so surprised."

"Suzette? What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight



The strange look in Suzette’s eyes was frightening. Then Leila saw the knife she held partially hidden in the folds of the purple dress. If not for the porch light’s reflection off its sharp tip, she wouldn’t have seen it at all.

Leila tried slamming the door close, but Suzette threw herself against it, stabbing the knife at her. Leila jumped back to prevent from being sliced, allowing Suzette to wedge her body between the sliver of an entry.

“Stop this, Suzette! Stop it!”

Suzette kept stabbing around the door. The last swing came dangerously close to Leila’s face. She jumped back, the knife’s tip missing by an inch. When Suzette burst through the unguarded door, Leila ran down the hall, looking for safety.

“Come back here, you bitch!” Suzette was gaining on her.

Get to the phone, Leila thought frantically. *No, get a weapon. A pot. Anything.* She seemed to whirl around in a circle, with no forward movement.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Suzette running towards her. Leila turned to her opponent and braced herself for impact. As Suzette closed in, Leila grabbed the arm with the knife. She needed both hands to stop it from plunging into her flesh.

“You won’t have Reese!” Suzette screamed. “I’ll kill you first!” With her free hand, Suzette started punching Leila in the shoulder, in the chest, the stomach.

The blows to the stomach weakened Leila and she felt herself staggering backward. Suzette kicked and Leila’s legs went out from under her.

“Nooo!” Leila could have broken her fall if she’d dared to release the hand with the knife. Instead, they both went down, and the back of her head collided with the hardwood floor. Blinding pain shot through her as Suzette fell on top of her.

I can’t lose consciousness! Leila kept repeating the thought to herself. She struggled to hold the arm with the knife at bay, despite Suzette’s advantage of being atop her.

“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you!”

As Suzette managed to get the knife closer and closer to Leila’s neck, fear spurred Leila on. She wedged her knee between them and using her leg, forced Suzette off her.

Suzette fell away, the knife flying from her hand. She crawled toward it, but Leila grabbed the tail of her purple dress and pulled her away from the knife, the smooth floor assisting.

“Stop it, you crazy woman! Stop it!” Leila was trying to hold her, but Suzette started to kick fiercely. Leila pulled at the long hair extensions, jerking Suzette’s head back. Then Leila slammed her head into the floor, hoping to knock Suzette unconscious. She did it again and again until Suzette stopped moving.

Breathing hard, Leila stood up and staggered toward the telephone.

As she picked up the phone and pressed 9, Leila felt more than heard movement. Turning in the nick of time she saw Suzette charging toward her. The impact sent the telephone flying. They both fell onto the desktop. They struggled, knocking items to the floor, before Leila managed to push Suzette away.

Leila grabbed the slender lamp, snatching the cord out of the wall. She had to permanently stop Suzette this time.

Again, armed with the knife, Suzette spotted a long metal letter opener on the floor. Its pointed tip could do just as much damage as the knife. She grabbed it. With a knife in one hand and a letter opener in the other, she circled behind the desk to get to Leila on the other side of it.

Both hunched and circling the desk, they looked like two wrestlers sizing up each other.

Leila backed up toward the front room, holding the lamp as if a bat. "Suzette, I will hurt you before I let you cut me." Leila hoped the threat would stop the crazed woman.

"That's big talk for a dead woman," Suzette said, a wild look in her eye. Blood was trickling from her forehead and running down her face, but she didn't even notice it.

"Reese isn't going to come back to you if you hurt me." Leila tried to reason.

"Reese loves me. He'll realize that when you're gone."

Suzette was beyond rational thought. Sheer madness, Leila realized. There would be no reasoning with her. Leila would have to stop her. There was no other way.

Leila started to back out of the room. She didn't have a gun in the house and since the telephone was off the hook, running to another room to find her cell phone was out of the question. The kitchen offered the opportunity for weapons if she could only get to them.

Suzette charged and Leila started swinging the lamp. She didn't make contact, but it kept Suzette away from her. Leila batted again, this time knocking the letter opener out of Suzette's hand.

Suzette yelped in pain. Enraged even more, she grabbed figurines and desk items and threw them at Leila's head. Leila dodged them but in doing so took her eye off her attacker. Suzette charged her, knocking the lamp from her hands, forcing Leila back up against a column.

Leila ducked a punch and turning back to face Suzette, saw the knife descending toward her neck. Off balance, she couldn't counterattack.

Just as the tip of the knife was about to make contact, a hand appeared and miraculously Suzette flew backwards.

"What the hell is wrong with you!"

"Reese!" Leila said, relieved.

"Stay out of this, Reese." Suzette screamed, never taking her eyes off Leila.

Reese moved to stand in front of Leila. "This is not going to happen."

"I took care of the other woman who tried to take you from me."

"You never tried to kill her," Reese reasoned.

"Because she left you after I jumped her. Leila won't no matter what I do."

"You're not going to hurt Leila in any way again. Put the knife down, Suzette. If you don't, I will stop you."

"No, you won't," Suzette smirked. "I'm the mother of your son. That's why you always protect me. That's why you didn't tell the police that I knew Keith was never abducted, that I knew he was over here. If you didn't love me, you wouldn't have done that. So, you won't hurt me now."

"My protecting you stops now," Reese said flatly.

Suzette began to laugh hysterically, as if Reese had told a joke.

Leila stepped out into the hallway. She wasn't sure what was going to happen next but wedged between Reese and a cement column wasn't necessarily the best place to be.

Unfortunately, her reappearance infuriated Suzette even more. "I'm sick of you!" Suzette ran at her.

It all happened in slow motion. Just as Suzette stabbed the knife at Leila's chest, Reese lunged between them, picking Suzette up by the waist and running toward the hallway wall. It was a defensive move like the many used on the football field. The powerful blow against the wall knocked all the air out of her. She went limp and slid down the wall, dropping the knife to the floor.

"She's not out, Reese!" Leila screamed. "She's not out."

Reese kicked away the knife and knelt in front of Suzette. "She's out. Call for help. I would have been here sooner, but my tire was slashed. Now I know why."

Leila ran to the telephone and dialed 9-1-1. "This is Leila Chamberlain. I've been attacked in my home. Please send the police and an ambulance."

As Leila gave the dispatcher the details, Reese came to stand behind her. When she hung up, he said, "Damn, Leila, I seem to bring only pain into your life."

Leila turned and threw her arms around him. She was crying. "No, you don't. You just keep saving me from the woman who does. It's not your fault she's insane."

He tightened his hold and Leila found strength in it.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine



Several weeks later...

The arrest and arraignment of Suzette McCoy made the papers. Some were shocked by the news; others had suspected it would eventually happen. Anyone who would lie, stalk, and attempt murder was bound to end up paying for those sins.

Though Leila's minor injuries had fully healed, she still worked half-days at the daycare, spending as much time as she could with Reese and his son.

Elizabeth returned home to Chicago on weekends, visiting Atlanta four days a week. While there, she volunteered at Midas Touch and did what she could to assist Leila with the business expansion plans. Since Elizabeth had been retired for years, this gave her a renewed challenge. Elizabeth hadn't spent significant time in Atlanta since her separation from her husband eighteen years earlier but was now making every effort to spend as much time as possible there with her family.

Reese had started the process to gain full custody of his son. The courts looked favorably on him. He hadn't returned to Arizona and wasn't sure when he would. His office manager was doing an excellent job of running the business while Reese further negotiated the business deal with the Tampa company. If things continue as they were going, he could potentially open his East Coast office in another year. He was planning to propose to his Tampa constituents that they consider a remote office run by him out of Atlanta.

Keith hadn't fully comprehended the meaning of his mother's incarceration, but Reese was doing his best to fill in the gaps and minimize the negative news surrounding Suzette. Luckily, Reese had spent a lot of time with Keith during his formative years. That, plus Keith's visits to Arizona had helped shape a healthy psyche. Keith was doing fine, being the happy-go-lucky kid he had always been.

One afternoon after things settled down, the Ryans invited Reese, Leila and Keith over. As Keith played in the backyard with Chi's son, Anthony, both Reese and Leila sat talking on the patio under the cooling breezes of the ceiling fans.

Parker and Chi stood in their living room, looking out at the pleasant scene.

"Leila and Reese have been inseparable since the attack. Some couples would have separated because of something like that," Parker said.

"This has brought them closer." Chi wrapped her arm around his waist. "I think they're in love."

"He's been by her side constantly," Parker said. "It's too bad about Suzette. As long as I've known her, she's been possessive of Reese. Now I understand why he hated coming to town. Hopefully, jail and therapy will be the cure she's been needing."

"I'm glad they made it through all that," Parker said watching Leila lean over to wrap her arm around Reese.

Chi smiled. It widened when Reese leaned over and kissed her friend's forehead. Chi turned to face Parker, done with the discussion of Suzette. "Are you willing to admit you lost the bet?"

"Mrs. Ryan, it's a tie. They're equally lovestruck."

Chi smiled brightly. "We'll have to figure out how both of us are going to pay up." She leaned up and kissed him.

"Am I breaking up something?" Reese slid open the glass door.

"Yeah," Parker said, looking up at his friend.

"I need to go check on lunch," Chi said. "I'll be right back."

Parker followed Reese. "Mom called a few minutes ago. She and Coach are planning a road trip to the mountains. I think they're planning to elope."

"Good for Mama Harriett." Reese reached into his carry bag and found what he was looking for. "Better for Coach."

Parker got to the point. "What about you?"

"Leila has only to say the word," Reese said.

"Does this mean you're planning to move to Atlanta?"

"Are you in my business again?" Reese joked.

"I'm under instructions from my wife to find out your plans. I suggest you save us both from her questioning by giving me the scoop."

"Tell Chi I'm in love," Reese said honestly.

Parker grinned. "That should hold her for about a week. Let me go see what I can do with this outdated information you've given me. She's already figured that out."

Parker headed to the kitchen as Reese headed back to Leila.



LEILA MOVED TO THE GLASS WALL TO WATCH ANTHONY ATTEMPT A wobbly throw of the football to Keith.

Reese came to stand beside her. "I have something for you." When Leila faced him, he gave her a small white box tied with a red satin ribbon.

“This is a ring box,” Leila said softly. “Is this what I think it is?”

“It’s not a ring. It’s something I’ve treasured all my life. I want you to have it.”

Leila held the box to her heart and said softly, “How can you take a chance on someone else after what you’ve gone through?”

Reese reached up to press the back of his fingers gingerly against her cheek. “All the women who mattered the most in my life truly cared for me. An aunt and grandmother raised me. They were perfect role models of what to look for in a woman. In the beginning, I chose poorly, for the sake of my unborn son. I married because of him, not for love. And I paid the price. The next time will be the last and done for all the right reasons.”

Leila caressed his hand with her cheek. Then she nervously opened the box. Within the folds of red paper lay an exquisite piece of silver. Leila lifted the antique locket from the box. It had been placed on a silver chain.

“It’s beautiful,” she said breathlessly.

“It was my mother’s. It’s the only thing of hers that exists. She wore it to the hospital when she gave birth to me. It was to hold a picture of me. I never knew her, but based on everything I’ve heard about her, she would have loved me unconditionally. Totally. She had a rough pregnancy but held on long enough to bring me into the world. She died loving me, giving birth to me.” Reese lifted the necklace from her hand and placed it around her neck. “I always wanted to give this to the woman I could love completely. You’re the only one.”

The cool metal of the locket fell just above her heart. “Reese...” Tears streaked her cheeks. “I’ll cherish it forever.” She leaned up and kissed him softly. “And you forever. I do want you and Keith to be in my life. For a very, very, very long time.”

“It’s so good to hear you say that.” He kissed her forehead. “I came to town for a wedding. I realize now I want it to be mine.”

Smiling, she looked up, “You’re the best man in the world for me. And if you keep this up I’m going to admit that I’m falling in love with you,” she said.

“Falling?” He smiled. “So, you’ve started?”

“From the moment we met,” she whispered.

“Tell me what I must do for you to be in love with me,” he said, softly, lovingly.

“Kiss me. Hold me. Then tell me why you want me so.”

“Oh, Leila.” As his hands held her face, he kissed her forehead, her brow. Then his lips touched hers with a familiar comfort. “Because there is no other woman, I will be able to love after you.” Then his palm pressed the locket closer to warmer skin. “My heart has been completely taken by you.”

THE END

READER REVIEW

Hey there, Amazing Reader!

Want to make an author's day? (Spoiler: that's me!)

Use the QR code or click the link below and drop a quick book review.

Your Reaction to: ***Taken By You***



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WHEN DREAMS FLOAT “*Preview Gift*”

See the TLC Collection, Book #1, Pre-read on
the following page.

“WHEN DREAMS FLOAT”
BOOK EXCERPT



CHAPTER

One



“When Dreams Float” Excerpt

If there was ever a time to thank his lucky stars, this was it. But Winston Knight was a man of science and put little stock in chance or luck. He dealt better with facts. And the fact of the matter was that something about her halted him, excited his insides, and numbed him to the world around him. He didn’t understand why he felt so drawn to her, which intrigued him.

Another luscious thought ricocheted through Winston’s mind as he watched her slip the long gold chain around her neck, its attached pendant dipping into the valley of her breasts covered in pale-yellow lace. The pendant lay softly against her cinnamon-brown skin. How he would love to run his fingers up, down, and around that chain.

The problem was he had never met her before. And from where he was standing on the other side of the jewelry store, he wouldn't get the chance. She was about to leave.

Somewhere in his aroused fog, a voice called to him. "Final call for Flight Number TN1 to Papeete, Tahiti."

Winston quickly glanced down at his watch. He was booked on that flight, the start of his business trip, a medical retreat. It was the only plane leaving Los Angeles airport for Papeete this afternoon. His mind warred between rushing to catch his flight or missing it in order to go around the jewelry shop counter and talk to the attractive lady who had caused his current physical condition.

Making a quick decision, Winston took a step in her direction, stopping only long enough to put back the item he'd picked up to use as an excuse to stare at the woman as she tried the necklace around her delicate neck. He had never had an immediate reaction this strong and was dying to discover more. He would end this fantasy and go introduce himself.

Maybe this won't start as another mundane business trip after all, he thought. "Damn it!" he mumbled, looking around the store. "Where did she go?"

Entering the corridor, he looked to the left, away from his plane's gate, and saw a figure dressed in pale yellow moving with the crowd rounding the corner. He looked to the right and saw the airline attendant preparing to close the gate to his plane. He wasn't sure why he hesitated. Perhaps it was the sheer absurdity of being so mesmerized by a stranger. He was Winston Knight—calm, rational, logical. But nothing was logical about the immediate and unexplainable attraction she ignited in him. Even if he sprinted like an NFL

running back, he wouldn't make it to his dream girl in time to still make the flight.

"Damn," he said, reluctantly trotting toward his gate. That would teach him to hesitate before going after something he wanted.

As he boarded the plane, he spotted Chuck Rogers, a friend and fellow doctor. He waved, genuinely glad to see him. He and Chuck had been planning this trip for months. And he was glad to get it started. Besides, the past twenty-four hours had been more taxing than he had expected. His ex-girlfriend, Daphne, had called him last night to argue about his decision to go on this trip without her. It had ruined his evening. And the disappointment he had just experienced from missing a chance to meet someone new didn't help much. So, Chuck's friendly face was just what he needed.

"Glad you made it. I was getting worried that you wouldn't," Chuck said over the general chatter of travelers and movement in first class. "Where're you sitting?"

Winston glanced at his boarding pass. "Seat 3C. Aisle." He found his seat and placed his carry-on luggage in the overhead compartment.

"I think this one might be empty." Chuck pointed to the seat next to him. "Ask to change seats and join me back here."

As Winston removed his luggage from the overhead bin, someone, he assumed the flight attendant, asked, "Is there an extra blanket under your bag?"

"I'm about to remove my bag. I'll check." He took a step backward and bumped into her. Turning to apologize, he felt a jolt, partly from the contact but mainly from the shock.

An inviting smile greeted Winston first. That smile could melt the coldest winter, he thought. And he was no exception. Then he noticed the fullness of her ruby-colored lips, the soft slant of her chocolate eyes, the shine of her black hair that lay on soft brown shoulders. She was lovely. There was a hint of Jasmine, her perfume, in the air, entertaining him.

He was definitely the lucky one.

“No.” Winston had to think hard to remember the reason she stood next to him. It wasn’t just an attraction—it was curiosity, intrigue, and a pull he couldn’t explain. “Yellow looks good on you.” His eyes traveled farther down. “Especially with that necklace you have on.”

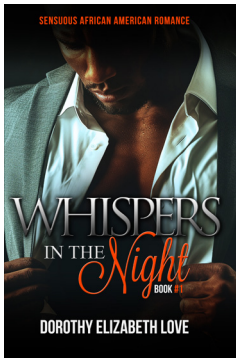


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I have this unyielding belief that love can conquer just about all. My goal is to provide a form of entertainment that allows readers to transcend their current situation, if only for a moment, to be pleasantly entertained and emotionally moved. My characters are flawed yet constantly strive to overcome, as most of us do. However, their stories are enhanced with a dose of sexiness.

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*“The chemistry between Parker and Chi in **And Then Came You** practically sizzles off the pages, and I found myself completely invested in their journey from their very first encounter” - K.C. Finn*

*“**And Then Came You** is a thought-provoking body of work look forward to reading something else by this author”. - Frank Mutuma*

*Dorothy Elizabeth Love’s, **When Dreams Float**, is one of the sexiest, exciting, and laugh-out-loud romance stories that I have read in a long time. Love scenes with Winston and Melanie will have you panting, and the scenes with Melanie and her best friend Sandra will have you in stitches. If you are a romance reader, pick this up. If not, you can check it out anyway. - APOOO Book Club*

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