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# ROCHELLE ALERS

FOREVER  
AN EATON

*An Eaton Novel*



Rochelle Alers

**Forever an Eaton: Bittersweet Love**

«HarperCollins»

## **Alers R.**

Forever an Eaton: Bittersweet Love / R. Alers — «HarperCollins»,

**BITTERSWEET LOVE** Belinda Eaton is dedicated to her job as a history teacher in one of Philadelphia's most challenging high schools. Committing to a man? Not exactly on her agenda. But then a tragedy brings her closer to gorgeous attorney Griffin Rice and they have to share custody of their twin goddaughters. Griffin never saw himself as husband or father material. But suddenly family vacations and Sunday dinners with the girls are the highlight of his schedule—and getting closer to their smart, sexy-looking godmother is his number one priority. Can he teach her that their partnership has turned into a loving relationship powerful enough to last?

**SWEET DECEPTION** Law professor Myles Eaton knows a lot can happen in ten years. A decade ago, Philadelphia's finest bachelor was a hotshot attorney engaged to a woman he swore he'd love forever—until she left him to marry a powerful politician. The only thing more difficult than forgiving her has been forgetting the searing heat they shared. And just when Myles is sure he's over her, Zabrina Cooper is back in his life. Nothing could stop Zabrina from loving Myles, not even when she was blackmailed into becoming wife—in name only—to another man. And as her secrets are revealed, Zabrina has one summer to convince Myles that beyond their incredible chemistry is a soul-stirring bond that never faded.

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Two classic Eaton family novels from national bestselling author ROCHELLE ALERS  
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**CONTENTS**

[Bittersweet Love](#)

[Sweet Deception](#)

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Eaton family miniseries. This collection will take you back to where it all began with two incredibly sweet stories about a second chance at love.

In *Bittersweet Love*, Philadelphia high-school history teacher Belinda Eaton has made it a practice to avoid Griffin Rice. Now she finds her future inexorably entwined with his when they share custody of their goddaughters following a family tragedy. In this story, Belinda encounters a very different Griffin when the high-profile sports attorney romances her, and proves he can be a loving father and husband.

In the second installment of the Eaton family miniseries, Zabrina Cooper's wish is granted when she reunites with Myles Eaton at his sister's wedding. But will the secrets she has coveted for more than a decade bring them closer—or destroy a future that promises forever? Myles only has the summer to uncover why Zabrina broke their engagement weeks before their wedding to marry an

influential Philadelphia politician. As you read *Sweet Deception*, please keep in mind what Zabrina has had to sacrifice in order to protect her family.

Yours in romance,  
Rochelle Alers  
To Michele Robinson...  
A true Philadelphia princess.  
Hear, O children, a father's instruction,  
be attentive, that you may gain understanding!  
Bittersweet Love

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

Prologue

No one sitting in Grant and Donna Rice's family room had even noticed Belinda Eaton's brittle smile, clipped replies or that her delicate chin was set at a stubborn angle. They had come together to celebrate the birthday of twelve-year-old fraternal twins Sabrina and Layla Rice.

The two girls took turns opening envelopes, reading birthday cards, unwrapping gifts and hugging and kissing their parents as well as both sets of grandparents and their aunt and uncle.

Belinda, the twins' aunt, hadn't realized she was grinding her teeth until she felt the pain in her gums. It was either clench her jaw or spew expletives that were poised precipitously on the tip of her tongue. Her eyes narrowed when the object of her fury flashed his Cheshire cat grin.

That's it! she raged inwardly. It ends tonight. Bracing her hands on the arms of the club chair, she rose to her feet and made her way to where Griffin Rice stood with his arm around his mother's shoulders. The expressive eyebrows that framed his olive-brown face arched with her approach.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Rice, but I'd like to speak to your son." Belinda deliberately neglected to acknowledge Griffin by name.

Griffin Rice's large, deep-set dark brown eyes widened appreciably. Whenever he saw his brother's sister-in-law, which wasn't often enough, she looked different. Belinda had a wealth of thick dark hair that she'd styled in a ponytail. The soft glow from the recessed lighting in the room flattered her flawless sable face. A light dusting of makeup accentuated her exotic slanted eyes, high cheekbones, short nose and generously curved lips.

A hint of a smile lifted the corners of his lips as he stared boldly at the fullness of her breasts under a burnt-orange cashmere pullover, which she'd paired with black wool slacks and suede slippers. He'd always found her alluring, but Belinda gave off a vibe that made her seem snobbish and

aloof. She'd been that way at nineteen, and now at thirty-two she was even more standoffish. Her request to speak to him was somewhat shocking yet a pleasant surprise.

"Where would you like to talk?"

"Outside."

The response came across as a direct order and Griffin curbed the urge to salute her. He pressed a kiss to Gloria Rice's forehead. "I'll be right back, mother." Grabbing Belinda's arm, he steered her toward the rear of the house.

"The front porch," Belinda ordered again. The back porch was too close to the kitchen and she didn't want anyone to overhear what she had to say to him.

Reversing course, Griffin led her through the dining and living rooms and out to the front porch of the modest Dutch Colonial-style house. He held the front door open, waiting for Belinda to precede him, then stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind them.

Leaning against a thick column on the porch, he slipped his hands into the pockets of his slacks and crossed his feet at the ankles. The seconds ticked off as Belinda sat on a cushioned love seat. Twin porch lanterns flanking the door provided enough light for him to make out her features. Griffin glanced away to look at the large autumnal wreath hanging on the door.

"What do you want to talk about?"

Belinda sat up, her spine ramrod straight. "What the hell do you think you're doing buying the girls a PlayStation when I told you that I planned to give it to them for Christmas?"

Nothing moved on Griffin, not even his eyes as he glared at the woman who was godmother and aunt to his nieces. "You told me nothing of the sort."

"When I spoke to Donna and asked what the girls wanted for their birthday she told me to give them gift cards for their favorite stores and to save the electronics for Christmas. I also remember her saying that she was going to tell you the same thing." She'd given her nieces gift cards to several popular clothing stores.

"Your sister didn't say anything to me, so take it up with her."

"No, Griffin, I'm taking it up with you. Every year you do this. We talk beforehand about what we're going to give the twins for Christmas and their birthdays, and invariably you do the complete opposite." She stood up and closed the distance between them. "This is the last time I'm going to let you play Big Willie to my nieces."

"Your nieces, Lindy?" he said mockingly. "How did you come to that conclusion when they're my brother and your sister's daughters?" He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to come back at him. "Unlike you, I don't have the time or the inclination to hang out in the mall. Layla and Sabrina said they wanted an Xbox, Wii or PlayStation, and I gave them the PlayStation."

Belinda closed her eyes rather than stare at Griffin Rice's gorgeous face. As an attorney for some of sports' biggest superstars, Griffin had become a celebrity in his own right. Paparazzi snapped pictures of him with his famous clients, glamorous models, beautiful actresses and recording stars. His masculine features, cleft chin and exquisitely tailored wardrobe afforded him a spot on the cover of GQ. He not only looked good, but he smelled delicious. His cologne was the perfect complement to his natural scent.

"Next time speak to me before you decide to give them what they want."

"Are you asking or telling me, Belinda?"

Her chest rose and fell, bringing his gaze to linger on her breasts. "I'm asking you, Griffin," she said in a softer tone.

Straightening, Griffin stared down at his sister-in-law, wondering if she was aware of how sexy she was. If he'd had a teacher who looked like Belinda Eaton he would've failed, just to have to repeat her class.

He dipped his head and brushed a kiss over her ear. "I'll think about it." Turning on his heels, Griffin went back into the house, leaving Belinda staring at his back as he walked away.

Her fingers curled into fists. She'd called him out for nothing. He had no intention of checking with her. It was as if they were warring parents competing to see who could win over their children with bigger and more expensive gifts.

She folded her arms under her breasts and shook her head. There was no doubt Griffin would continue to undermine her when it came to their nieces, but there was one thing she admired about the man: since he wasn't a father himself, he'd spared some woman a lifetime of grief.

Belinda waited on the porch a few minutes longer until the dropping temperature forced her indoors. Affecting a bright smile, she walked into the dining room in time to sing happy birthday before Sabrina and Layla blew out the candles and cut their cake.

## Chapter 1

The soft-spoken attorney shook hands with Belinda Eaton and then repeated the gesture with Griffin Rice. "Congratulations, Mom, Dad. If you need a duplicate copy of the guardianship agreement I recommend you call this office rather than go to the Bureau of Records. I've heard that they always have a two-to-three-month backlog."

Belinda still could not believe she was to share parenting of her twin nieces with her sister's brother-in-law. Less than a year after she became an aunt, her sister had asked Belinda to raise her daughters if anything should happen to her and her husband. At that time she'd wondered, why would a happily married, twenty-two-year-old woman with two beautiful children think about dying? Apparently, her older sister, Donna, was more prophetic than she knew. Just weeks after the twins' twelfth birthday, their mother and father had been killed instantly when a drunk driver lost control of his pickup, crossed the median and collided head-on with their smaller sedan.

Belinda forced a smile. The meeting with the attorney and signing the documents that made her legal guardian of her twelve-year-old nieces had reopened a wound that was just beginning to heal. Her sister and brother-in-law had died days after Thanksgiving and it'd taken four months for their will to be probated.

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Connelly."

Impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, Jonathan Connelly stared at the young schoolteacher whose life was about to dramatically change. Her nieces were moving from the two-bedroom condo where they were temporarily living with their maternal grandparents into her modest house in a Philadelphia suburb. Although the children had been well cared for by their grandparents, Jonathan, the executor of her sister and brother-in-law's estate, felt that the emotional and social interests of the twin girls would be best served living with their aunt.

His shimmering green eyes lingered briefly on her rich nut-brown attractive face with its high cheekbones, slanting dark brown eyes and hair she wore in a flattering curly style. With her wool gabardine suit with a peplum jacket, pumps and the pearl studs that matched the single strand gracing her slender neck, Belinda appeared more like a young executive than a high school history teacher.

"If you need legal advice on anything, please don't hesitate to call me," Jonathan said, smiling.

A slight frown began to creep across Griffin Rice's good looks. "I believe I can help her with any legal problem," he said curtly. Griffin intended to make sure that he was available for Belinda if she needed legal counsel.

He had spent the better part of an hour watching Jonathan Connelly subtly flirt with his sister-in-law. He and Belinda shared guardianship of their nieces, but he'd be damned if he'd allow the smooth-talking, toothpaste-ad-smiling, little-too-slick-for-Griffin's-taste attorney take advantage of her.

Although they were related through marriage, Griffin and Belinda hadn't spent much time together and when they did, they usually butted heads. Most of the time, he was involved in contract negotiations for his pro-athlete clients or taking a much-needed vacation. And whenever he invited her to his home for an informal get-together, she always declined. The last time they had been together was when the two families were making funeral arrangements for Grant and Donna.

Reaching out, he cupped Belinda's elbow. "I think it's time we leave."

Belinda forced herself not to pull away from the pressure of Griffin's hand on her arm. She didn't like him, had never really liked him, but now they were thrown together because they shared custody of their nieces. She didn't know what her sister was thinking when she and Grant decided on Griffin as the girls' guardian. The high-profile, skirt-hopping sports attorney lacked the essentials for fatherhood.

She gave Jonathan a dazzling smile that curved her full, sensuous mouth. "If I need your assistance, I won't hesitate to call you."

Belinda sensed her brother-in-law's annoyance at her rebuff of his offer of legal help when his fingers tightened around her elbow. At five-six and one hundred thirty pounds she knew she was physically no match for Griffin's six-two, one hundred ninety pound viselike grip. Glancing over her shoulder, she glared at him.

"I'm ready."

Griffin led Belinda out of the lawyers' offices and waited until she was seated in his late-model Lexus hybrid and he was beside her before he allowed himself to draw a normal breath.

"Did I not say that I would take care of your legal concerns?"

Belinda shifted on the leather seat, glaring at the cleft in the chin of an otherwise incredibly handsome man who'd landed unceremoniously in her life. She'd lost count of the number of times women colleagues had asked her whether Griffin was available.

"Watch your tone, Griffin. I'm not one of your dim-witted girlfriends who is honored just to be in your presence." Belinda knew she'd struck a nerve when she saw his flushed face.

"In case you didn't notice, the man wasn't looking to offer legal advice."

She frowned. "Then please tell me what he was offering."

"His bed."

Griffin's comment caught her off guard for several seconds. "How would you know that?" Belinda said when she recovered her composure.

A subtle smile parted Griffin's lips as his gaze slipped from Belinda's face to her breasts and back to her stunned expression. "I'm a man, Belinda. And as such, I recognized all the signals Jonathan was sending your way."

Heat pricked little pinpoints across Belinda's skin as she struggled not to look away from the large dark eyes that were sending sensuous flames through her body. She couldn't move or blink. "Not every man who looks at me wants me in that way, Griffin."

Griffin's smile widened. "With your face and your body, you look nothing like the spinster schoolmarm."

"Wrong century and definitely wrong woman," she countered. "I'm not a schoolmarm but an educator. And whether I'm thirty-two or sixty-two I'll never think of myself as a spinster."

"The fact remains that Jonathan wants you. So I suggest that you not lead him on if or when you need legal advice. And, the offer still holds. If you need a lawyer, then I'm always available to you."

She shook her head. "Why would I need you when my brother is a lawyer?" Her older brother, Myles, had recently resigned as partner at a leading Philadelphia law firm to teach at Duquesne, a private university law school in Pittsburgh.

Griffin inserted the keyless fob in the ignition slot and pushed a button, starting up the SUV. "Just make certain you use him."

As Griffin maneuvered out of the parking lot, Belinda wondered if he was as brusque with the women he dated or slept with. Other than his looks and his money, she didn't know why any of them would put up with his attitude.

They'd agreed that the girls would stay with her during the week and with Griffin on the weekends. But she doubted, with his busy social life, that there would be many weekends that the

twins would stay with Griffin. That suited Belinda just fine, because what they needed more than anything was stability.

Sabrina and Layla Rice had lost both parents and since then had been living with their grandparents for the past four months. Now they would be moving again when they came to live with her. The fallout after the funeral and burial was difficult when grandparents and relatives began arguing about who would raise the twins. As an investment banker, Grant Rice and his family had been financially sound. And the prospect of the girls' inheritance drew relatives Griffin hadn't known or seen in decades like hungry sharks to the smell of blood.

The speculation as to the extent of Grant's wealth ended when Griffin announced that he and Belinda were the legal guardians, and that Belinda was the beneficiary of Grant and Donna's multimillion-dollar insurance policy. He had inherited vacant parcels of land that developers were interested in. The only thing he and Belinda had agreed upon was that all the proceeds and profits would be put aside for their nieces' education and financial future.

Belinda had used the few months that the girls were living with their grandparents to decorate her house to accommodate the growing twins. She wanted the transition to be smooth and stress-free for everyone involved. She'd had more than ten years of teaching young adults, but this was to be the first time Belinda would become a parent in every sense of the word.

\* \* \*

The drive from downtown Philadelphia to a nearby suburb was accomplished in complete silence. When Griffin turned off into the subdivision and parked in the driveway where her parents had purchased the town house after selling the large house where they'd raised their four children, Belinda was out of the car before Griffin could shut off the engine. She didn't see his scowl, but registered the slam of the driver's-side door when he closed it.

Ringling the bell, she waited for her mother to come to the door. It's not going to work, she thought over and over as the heat from Griffin's body seeped into hers when he moved behind her. How was she going to pretend to play house with the girls' surrogate father when she could barely tolerate being in the same room with him?

The door opened and Roberta Eaton stood on the other side, her eyes red and swollen. Belinda knew her mother hadn't wanted her granddaughters to leave, but the law was the law and she'd abide by her late daughter's request and the court's decision to have Sabrina and Layla live with Belinda.

"Hi, Mama." Stepping into the entryway, she leaned over and kissed her cheek. "How are the girls?"

Roberta pressed a wrinkled tissue to her nose. "They're much better than I am. But then, you know how adaptable young folks are. I've spent most of the day crying, while they came home going on about an upcoming class trip." Roberta glanced over her daughter's shoulder to find Griffin Rice's broad shoulders filling out the doorway. "Please come in, Griffin."

Griffin moved inside the house with expansive windows and ceilings rising upward to twelve feet. The elder Eatons had downsized, selling their sprawling six-bedroom farmhouse for a two-bedroom town house condo in a newly constructed retirement village. Unlike his parents, who divorced when he was in high school, Dr. Dwight and Roberta Eaton had recently celebrated their forty-second wedding anniversary.

He hadn't remembered a day when his parents did not argue, which had shaped his views about marriage. His mother said her marriage was a daily struggle, one in which she was always the loser. His father remarried twice and after his last divorce he dated a woman for several years, but ended the relationship when she wanted a more permanent commitment.

When his brother had contacted him with the news that he was getting married, Griffin had at first thought he was joking, because they'd made a vow never to marry. But within three months of meeting Donna Eaton, Grant had tied the knot. At first he had thought his brother wanted a hasty wedding because Donna was pregnant. But his suspicions had been unfounded when the twins were

born a year later. When he'd asked Grant about breaking his promise to never marry, his brother had said promises were meant to be broken when you meet the "right" woman.

Griffin dated a lot of women, had had several long-term relationships, yet at thirty-seven he still hadn't found the "right woman."

"Aunt Lindy, Uncle Griff!" Sabrina, older than her sister by two minutes, came bounding down the staircase. "Sorry, Gram," she mumbled when she saw her grandmother's frown.

Her grandmother had lectured her and Layla about acting like young ladies—and that meant walking and not running down the stairs and talking quietly rather than screaming at the top of their lungs.

Belinda held out her arms, and she wasn't disappointed when Sabrina came into her embrace. Easing back, she stared at her niece, always amazed that Sabrina was a younger version of herself. She used to kid Donna by saying that her fraternal twin daughters' genes had been a compromise. Sabrina resembled the Eatons, while Layla was undeniably a Rice.

"How's my favorite girl?"

Sabrina rolled her eyes at the same time she sucked her teeth. "How can I be your favorite when you tell Layla that she's also your favorite?"

Belinda kissed her forehead. "Can't I have two favorite girls?"

Sabrina angled her head, and her expression made her look much older. Not only was she older than Layla, but she was more mature than her twin. She preferred wearing her relaxed shoulder-length hair either loose, or up in a ponytail. It was Layla who'd opted not to cut her hair and fashioned it in a single braid with colorful bands on the end to match her funky, bohemian wardrobe. Both girls had braces to correct an overbite.

"Of course you can," Sabrina said. Pulling away, she went over to Griffin. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek. "I like your suit."

The charcoal-gray, single-breasted, styled suit in a lightweight wool blend was Griffin's favorite. He tugged her ponytail. "Thank you."

Sabrina gave her uncle a beguiling smile. "You promised that Layla and I could meet Keith Ennis. The Phillies will be in town for four days. Please, please, please, Uncle Griff, can you arrange for us to meet him?"

It was Griffin's turn to roll his eyes. Keith Ennis had become Major League Baseball's latest heartthrob. Groupies greeted him in every city and his official fan club boasted more than a million members online.

He'd considered himself blessed when the batting phenom had approached him to represent him in negotiating his contract when he'd been called up from the minors. The Philadelphia Phillies signed him to a three-year, multimillion-dollar deal that made the rookie one of the highest-paid players in the majors, and in his first year he was named Rookie of the Year, earned a Gold Glove and had hit more than forty home runs with one hundred and ten runs batted in.

"I'm having a gathering at my house next Saturday following an afternoon game. You and your sister can come by early to meet him, but then you have to leave."

"How long can we stay, Uncle Griff?" asked Layla, who'd come down the staircase in time to overhear her uncle.

Belinda shot Griffin an I don't believe you look. Had he lost his mind, telling twelve-year-olds that they could come to an adult gathering where there was certain to be not only alcohol, but half-naked hoochies?

"Your uncle and I will have to talk about this before we agree whether an adult party is appropriate for twelve-year-olds." She'd deliberately stressed the word adult.

Layla pouted as dots of color mottled her clear complexion. "But Uncle Griff said we could go."

"Your uncle doesn't have the final say on where you can go, or what you can do."

"Who does have the final say?" Sabrina asked.

Belinda felt as if she were being set up. Unknowingly, Griffin had made her the bad guy—yet again. “We both will have the final say. Now, please say goodbye to your grandmother. I’d like to get you settled in because tomorrow is a school day.”

Most of the girls’ clothes and personal belongings had been moved to her house earlier that week. Belinda had hung their clothes in closets but left boxes of stuffed animals and souvenirs for her nieces to unpack and put away.

“We’ll see you for Sunday dinner, Gram,” Layla promised as she hugged and kissed Roberta.

Roberta gave the girls bear hugs accompanied by grunting sound effects. “I want you to listen to your aunt and uncle, or you’ll hear it from me.”

“We will, Gram,” the two chorused.

Belinda lingered behind as Layla and Sabrina followed Griffin outside. “Why didn’t you say something when Griffin mentioned letting the girls hang out at a party with grown folks?”

Roberta crossed her arms under her full bosom and angled her soft, stylishly coiffed salt-and-pepper head. She wanted to tell her middle daughter that becoming a mother was challenging enough, but assuming the responsibility of raising teenage girls, who were still grieving the loss of their parents, and had just started their menses and were subject to mood swings as erratic as the weather, would make her question her sanity.

“I wouldn’t permit anyone to interfere with me raising my children, so I’m not going to get into it with you and Griffin about how you want to deal with Layla and Sabrina. Not only are you their aunt but you are also their mother. What you’re going to have to do is establish the rules with Griffin before you tell the girls what’s expected of them.”

Frustration swept over Belinda. Her mother wasn’t going to take her side. “I can’t understand what made him tell—”

“There’s not much to understand, Belinda,” Roberta retorted, interrupting her. “He’s a man, not a father. What he’s going to have to do is begin thinking like a father.”

“That’s not going to be as easy as it sounds. Layla and Sabrina will spend more time with me than with Griffin. Although he’s agreed to take them on the weekends that doesn’t mean he’ll have them every weekend.”

“Griffin Rice is no different than your father. As a family doctor with a private practice he was always on call. If it wasn’t a sprained wrist or ankle, then it was the hospital asking him to cover in the E.R. Dwight missed so many Sunday dinners that I stopped setting a place for him at the dinner table.”

“Daddy was working, and there is a big difference between working and socializing.”

“You can’t worry about Griffin, Lindy. Either he will step up to the plate or he won’t. At this point in their lives, Sabrina and Layla need a mother not a father. Once the boys start hanging around them, I’m certain he’ll change. Your father did.”

Belinda wanted to tell her mother that Griffin Rice was nothing like Dwight Eaton. With Griffin it was like sending the fox to guard the henhouse. And, if Griffin didn’t take an active role in protecting his nieces now, then she would be forced to be mother and father.

“Let’s hope you’re right.” She hugged and kissed her mother. “We’ll see you Sunday.”

Roberta nodded. “Take care of my girls.”

“You know I will, Mama.”

Belinda walked out of the house to find Griffin waiting for her. He’d removed his suit jacket, his custom-made shirt and tailored slacks displaying his physique to its best advantage. Sabrina and Layla were seated in the back of the car, bouncing to music blaring from the SUV’s speakers. Belinda fixed her gaze on a spot over Griffin’s shoulder rather than meet his intense gaze.

There was something about the way he was staring at her that made Belinda slightly uncomfortable. Perhaps it was his earlier reference to her face and body that added to her uneasiness. The first time she was introduced to Griffin Rice she was stunned by his gorgeous face and perfect

body, but after interacting with him she'd thought him arrogant and egotistical when he boasted that he'd graduated number one in his law school class.

Subsequent encounters did little to change her opinion of him. Every time the Eatons and Rices got together Griffin flaunted a different woman. After a while, she stopped speaking to him. Even when they came together as godmother and godfather to celebrate their godchildren's birthdays, she never exchanged more than a few words with him.

"We have to talk about the girls, Griffin."

His thick eyebrows arched. "What do you want to talk about?"

"We need to establish some rules concerning parenting."

"I'll go along with whatever you want."

"What I don't want is for you to promise the girls that they can attend an adult party," added Belinda.

"I didn't tell them they could attend the party. I said—"

"I heard what you said, Griffin Rice," Belinda interrupted angrily. "The girls will not go to your house to meet anyone."

Griffin's eyes darkened as he struggled to control his temper. He didn't know what it was about Belinda Eaton, but she was the only woman who managed to annoy him. He'd stopped speaking to her because she had such a sharp tongue. And rather than argue, he ignored her. But it was impossible to ignore her now because he would have to put up with her for the next eleven years. Once Sabrina and Layla celebrated their twenty-third birthdays he and Belinda could go their separate ways. Having his nieces stay at his house on weekends would put a crimp in his social life, but he was totally committed to his role as their guardian.

Griffin knew what meeting Keith Ennis and getting his autograph meant to the girls. His dilemma was finding a way to get around Belinda's demands. "Are you willing to compromise?"

"Compromise how?"

"You act as my hostess for the party. Let me finish," he warned when she started to open her mouth in protest. "You and the girls can spend the weekend with me. You can be my hostess, and I'll ask Keith to come early so that Sabrina and Layla can meet him. As soon as the others arrive they can go to their rooms while you and I—"

"Will meet and greet your guests," Belinda said facetiously, finishing his statement.

Grinning and displaying a mouth filled with straight, white teeth, Griffin winked at Belinda. "Now, doesn't that solve everything? The girls get to meet their idol, I get to interact with my friends and clients and you will be there to monitor Sabrina and Layla."

I don't think the girls need as much monitoring as you do, Belinda mused. "I hope when the girls stay over that you won't expose them to situations they don't need to see at their age."

It took a full minute for Griffin to discern what Belinda was implying. "Do you really believe I'm so depraved that I would sleep with a woman when my nieces are in the same house?"

"I don't know what to believe, Griffin." Belinda's voice was pregnant with sarcasm. "What you're going to have to do is prove to me that you're capable of looking after two pre-teen girls."

"I don't have to prove anything to you, Belinda. The fact that my brother thought me worthy enough to care for and protect his daughters is enough. And, regardless of what you may think—legally I have as much right to see my nieces as you do. I agreed to let them stay with you during the week because their school is in the same district where you live. It would be detrimental to their stability to pull them out midterm to go to a school close to where I live."

He took a step, bringing him within inches of his sister-in-law, his gaze lingering on the delicate features that made for an arresting face. What he hadn't wanted to acknowledge the first time he was introduced to Belinda Eaton was that she was stunningly beautiful. She had it all: looks and brains. Also, what he refused to think about was her lithe, curvy body. The one time he saw her in a bikini he'd found himself transfixed by what had been concealed by her conservative attire. It took weeks

before the image of her long, shapely legs and the soft excess of flesh rising above her bikini top faded completely. That had been the first and only time that Griffin Rice was consciously aware that he wanted to make love to Belinda Eaton.

“Okay, Griffin. I’ll compromise just this one time. But only because I don’t want to disappoint Layla and Sabrina.”

Griffin smiled, the expression softening his face and making him even more attractive. “Why, thank you, Belinda.”

Belinda also smiled. “You’re quite welcome, Griffin.”

Chapter 2

“Aren’t you coming in with us, Uncle Griff?” Sabrina asked as Griffin stood on the porch of Belinda’s two-story white house framed with dark blue molding and matching shutters.

Cupping the back of her head, Griffin pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I can’t. I have a prior engagement.”

Sabrina blinked once. “You’re engaged?”

Throwing back his head, Griffin laughed. “No. I should’ve said that I have a dinner appointment.”

“Why didn’t you say that instead of saying you were engaged?” Sabrina countered, not seeing the humor in her uncle’s statement.

Griffin sobered quickly when he realized she wasn’t amused. Everyone remarked how Sabrina had an old spirit, that she was wise beyond her years, while Layla the free spirit saw goodness in everything and everyone.

“It looks as if I’m going to have to be very careful about what I say to you.”

Sabrina winked at him. “That’s all right, Uncle Griff. I’ll let you know when I don’t understand something.”

Belinda listened to the exchange between Griffin and his niece. It was apparent he’d met his match. “If you’re not coming in, then I’ll say good night.”

Watching him drive away, she was grateful that Griffin had elected not to come inside because she wanted time alone with her nieces, to see firsthand their reaction to the rooms she’d organized and decorated in what she felt was each girl’s personal style.

Belinda glanced at her watch. “Girls, please go upstairs, do your homework and then get ready for bed. I’m going to have to get you up earlier than usual because I’m going to drive you to school. I also have to fill out another transportation application changing your bus route.” The sisters headed for the staircase, racing each other to the second floor.

Their bus route had changed when they’d gone to live with their grandparents, and it would change again now that they lived with her. It’d taken Belinda two months for the contractor to make the necessary renovations to her house when she realized the twins would have to live with her. She hadn’t known that when she’d moved out of her Philadelphia co-op and into the three-bedroom house. She’d originally bought the house because she’d been looking to live in a less noisy neighborhood with a slower pace. Now she would end up sharing the house with her nieces.

The house’s former owners, a childless couple who taught in the same high school as Belinda, had covered the clapboard with vinyl siding, updated the plumbing and electricity and had landscaped the entire property as they awaited the adoption of a child from Eastern Europe. The adoption fell through and the wife opted for artificial insemination. After several failed tries, she found herself pregnant with not one, but four babies. They began looking for a larger house at the same time Belinda put her co-op on the market. She made the couple an offer, and three months later she closed on what had become her little dream house.

Ear-piercing screams floated down from the second story. Glancing up, she saw Layla hanging over the banister. “Are you okay?” she asked with a smile, knowing the reason for the screaming.

Layla gestured wildly. “Aunt Lindy, I love, love, love it!” she shrieked incoherently before running back to her bedroom.

Minutes later Belinda stood in the room, her arms encircling her nieces’ waists. The contractor had removed the door leading into the master bedroom and installed doors to adjoining bedrooms that led directly into the space she’d set up as a combined office, study and entertainment area. The furnishings included two desks with chairs that faced each other and built-in bookcases along three of the four walls.

The remaining wall held a large flat-screen television. A low table held electronics for a home-theater system. Empty racks for CDs and DVDs were nestled in a corner, along with a worktable with a streamlined desktop and laptop computers and printer. Although the television was equipped with cable, Belinda had programmed parental controls on both the television and internet. French doors had replaced a trio of windows that led to a balcony overlooking the back of the property.

“I know which bedroom is mine,” Sabrina crooned.

“Mine is the one with the bright colors,” Layla said, her voice rising in excitement.

Sabrina pressed closer to her aunt. “This is the first time we’re not going to have to share a bedroom.”

Belinda gave her a warm smile. She recognized them as individuals and sought to relate to them as such. “I have a few house rules that I expect to be followed. You must keep your bedrooms and bathroom clean. I don’t want to find dirty clothes on the floor or under the beds. The first time I find food or drink upstairs there will be consequences.”

Layla shot her a questioning glance. “What kind of consequences?”

“There will be no television or internet for a week. The only exception is to do homework. You’ll also have to give up your iPods and relinquish your cell phones—”

“But we don’t have cell phones,” Sabrina interrupted, sharing a look with her sister.

A mysterious smile tipped the corners of Belinda’s mouth. “If you look in the drawer of your bedside tables you’ll find a cell phone. The phones are a gift from your uncle Griffin. He’s programmed the numbers where you can reach him or me in an emergency. You’ll share a thousand minutes each month, plus unlimited texting. You...”

Her words trailed off when the girls raced out of the room, leaving her staring at the spots where they’d been.

She’d turned the master bedroom into a sanctuary for her nieces, decorated Sabrina’s room with a queen-size, off-white sleigh bed, with matching dresser, nightstands and lingerie chest. Waning daylight filtered through sheer curtains casting shadows on the white comforter dotted with embroidered yellow-and-green butterflies. Layla’s room reflected her offbeat style and personality with orange-red furniture and earth-toned accessories.

Belinda had moved her own bedroom to the first floor in what had been the enclosed back porch. It faced southeast, which meant the rising sun rather than an alarm clock woke her each morning. Layla and Sabrina returned, clutching Sidekick cell phones while doing the “happy dance.”

“Girls, I want you in bed by nine.”

“Yes, Aunt Lindy,” they said in unison.

She walked out of the study and made her way down the carpeted hallway to the staircase. Giving her nieces the run of the second floor would serve two purposes: it would give them a measure of independence and make them responsible for keeping their living space clean.

\* \* \*

Griffin couldn’t remember the last time a woman had bored him to the point of walking out on a date. However, he’d promised Renata Crosby that he would have dinner with her the next time she came to Philadelphia on business. The screenwriter was pretty, but that’s where her appeal started and ended. From the time she sat down at the table in one of his favorite restaurants, Renata had

talked nonstop about how much money she'd lost because of the writer's strike in Hollywood. He wanted to tell her that everyone affected by the strike lost money.

"Griffin, darling, you haven't heard a word I've been saying," Renata admonished softly.

Griffin forced his attention back to the woman with eyes the color of lapis lazuli. Their deep blue color was the perfect foil for her olive complexion and straight raven-black, chin-length hair.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled apologetically, "but my mind is elsewhere."

Renata blinked, a fringe of lashes touching the ridge of high cheekbones. She'd spent the better part of an hour trying to seduce Griffin Rice, but it was apparent her scheme to get him to sleep with her wasn't working. She'd met the highly successful and charismatic sports attorney at an L.A. hot spot, and knew within seconds that she had to have a piece of him.

At the time, he was scheduled to fly out of LAX for the East Coast. So she had followed him to the parking lot where a driver waited for him and got him to exchange business cards with her. She and Griffin had played phone tag for more than a month until one day he answered his phone. She told him that she was meeting a client in Philadelphia, and wanted to have dinner with him before flying back to California. Of course, there was no client and it appeared as if she'd flown three thousand miles for nothing.

"You do seem rather distracted," she crooned, deliberately lowering her voice.

Griffin stared at his fingers splayed over the pristine, white tablecloth. "That's because it isn't every day that a man becomes the father of twin girls."

An audible gasp escaped Renata. "You're a father?"

Griffin angled his head and smiled. "Awesome, isn't it?"

Pressing her lips together, Renata swallowed hard. When she'd inquired about Griffin Rice's marital status she was told that he wasn't married. Had her source lied, or had Griffin perfected the art of keeping his private life very private?

"I'd say it's downright shocking. You didn't know your wife was having twins?"

"I'm not married."

"If you're not married, then you're a baby daddy. Or should I say a babies' daddy."

Griffin registered the contempt in Renata's voice. Although he wasn't remotely interested in her, he was still perturbed by her reaction. After all, he'd only agreed to have dinner with her to be polite. Raising his hand, he signaled for the check.

"I'm going to forget you said that."

Renata concealed her embarrassment behind a too-bright smile. "I'm sorry it came out that way. Please, let me make it up to you by sending you something for your girls," she said in an attempt to salvage what was left of her pride.

"Apology accepted, but no, thank you." He signed the check, pushed back his chair to come around the table and help Renata. When she came to her feet, he offered, "Can I drop you anywhere?"

Renata was nearly eye to eye with Griffin in her heels. She knew they would've made a striking couple if some other woman hadn't gotten her hooks into him. She'd met more Griffin Rices than she could count on both hands. Most were good-looking, high-profile men who were willing to be seen with women like her, but when all was said and done they married women who wouldn't cheat on them, or whom other men wouldn't give a second glance. As soon as she returned to her hotel room she planned to call an entertainment reporter and give him the lowdown about Griffin Rice having fathered twins.

"No, thanks. I have a rental outside."

He took her arm. "I'll walk you to your car."

Griffin gave Renata the obligatory kiss on the cheek, waited until she maneuvered out of the restaurant's parking lot and then made his way to where he'd parked his car. He wasn't as annoyed with Renata's inane conversation as he was with himself for wasting three precious hours he could've

spent with his nieces. Glancing at the watch strapped to his wrist, he noted the time. It was eight thirty-five, and he wanted to talk to Sabrina and Layla before they went to bed for the night.

He exceeded the speed limit to make it to Belinda's house in record time. She'd bought a house a mile from where Grant and Donna had lived, the perfect neighborhood for upwardly mobile young couples with children. Grant had tried to convince him to purchase one of the newer homes of the McMansion variety, but Griffin preferred the charm of the nineteenth-century homes along the Main Line. Though less exclusive than it once was, the suburb west of the city was still identified with the *crème de la crème* of Philadelphia society.

Whenever he closed the door to his three-story colonial on a half-acre lot along the tree-lined street in Paoli, he was no longer the hard-nosed negotiator trying to make the best deal for his client. Sitting on his patio overlooking a picturesque landscape of massive century-old trees and a carpet of wildflowers had become his ultimate pleasure. He opened his home on average about three times a year to entertain family, friends and clients. Living in Paoli suited his temperament. After growing up in a crowded, bustling Philadelphia neighborhood he'd come to appreciate the quietness of the suburb of fifty-four hundred residents.

Griffin maneuvered into Belinda's wide driveway and shut off the engine. His dark mood lifted when he saw soft light coming through the first-floor windows. It was apparent Belinda hadn't gone to bed. He rang the bell, waited and raised his hand to ring it again when the door opened and he came face-to-face with Belinda as she dabbed her face with a hand towel. Judging from her expression it was apparent that she was as shocked to see him as he to see her in a pair of shorts and a revealing tank top. And, with her freshly scrubbed face and headband that pulled her hair off her face, she appeared no older than the high school students to whom she taught American history.

"What are you doing here?" Belinda asked, her voice a breathless whisper.

Leaning against the doorframe, Griffin stared at the rise and fall of her breasts under the cotton fabric. He swallowed a groan when a part of his body reacted involuntarily to the wanton display of skin.

"I came to see if the...my daughters are okay."

Belinda was surprised to hear Griffin refer to his nieces as his daughters. It was apparent he intended to take surrogate parenting seriously. "Of course they're okay, Griffin. If you hadn't run off you would've known that."

Griffin straightened. "I had a prior engagement."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Call it what it is."

"And that is?"

"You had a date, Griffin."

A slow, sexy smile found its way over Griffin's face. "Do I detect a modicum of jealousy, Eaton?"

"Surely you jest, Rice. Let me assure you I'm not attracted to you, and there's nothing about you that I find even remotely appealing."

Griffin brushed past her, walking into the entryway. "Sheath your claws, Belinda. What you should do is channel your frustration in an anger management seminar because we're going to have to deal with each other until the girls celebrate their twenty-third birthday. You don't like me and I have to admit that you're certainly not at the top of the list for what I want in a woman."

Belinda affected a brittle smile. "At least we can agree on one thing."

"And that is?" he asked, lifting his expressive eyebrows.

"We won't interfere in each other's love lives."

"You're seeing someone?"

"Does that surprise you, Griffin?" she asked, answering his question with one of her own.

Belinda's revelation that she was involved with a man came as a shock to Griffin. He never saw her with a man, so he'd assumed that she spent her nights at home—alone. "I hope you're not

going to schedule sleep-overs with your man now that the girls are living with you. It wouldn't set a good example—"

"He'll only come when the girls stay at your place," she interrupted.

Griffin didn't know where he'd gotten the notion that Belinda wasn't seeing anyone. Although he would never admit to her that he was attracted to her in that way, it didn't mean that other men weren't. Earlier, he'd sat watching Jonathan Connelly unable to take his eyes off her. And Griffin didn't blame the man because Belinda Eaton was stunning.

If she hadn't been so unapproachable he would've considered asking her out. Even when they'd come together as best man and maid of honor for the wedding of their respective siblings, he'd thought her shy and reticent. But then he hadn't expected more from a nineteen-year-old college student who'd lived on campus her first semester, then without warning moved back home, driving more than thirty miles each day to attend classes. When asked why she'd opted not to stay on campus, her response was as enigmatic as the woman she'd become.

Griffin remembered why he'd come to Belinda's house. "May I see the girls?"

"I'm sorry. They've already gone to bed."

He glanced at the clock on the table filled with potted plants. "It's only nine-fifteen. Isn't that a little early?"

"No, it isn't, Griffin. My mother had a problem with getting them up on school days, so I've instituted a nine o'clock curfew Sunday through Thursday and eleven on Fridays and Saturdays."

"That sounds a little strict, Belinda."

"Children need structure."

"Structure is one thing and being on lockdown is another."

Belinda walked around Griffin and opened the door wider. "I don't want to be rude, but you really need to go home, Griffin. I'm going to be up late grading papers, and hopefully I'll be able to get a few hours of sleep before I have to get up earlier than usual to drive the girls to school. I need to stop in the school office to update their emergency contact numbers and bus route."

After seeing that Layla and Sabrina had completed their homework, she'd eaten leftovers, applied a facial masque and sat in a tub of warm water waiting for it to set. By the time she'd emerged from the bathroom the girls had come to kiss her good-night. They'd gone to bed, while she would probably be up well past midnight.

Griffin heard something in Belinda's voice that he'd never recognized before: defeat. Although they shared custody of their nieces, it was Belinda who'd assumed most of the responsibility for caring for them five of the seven days a week. And for the weeks when he had to travel on business, it would be the entire week.

"What time do your classes begin?"

"Eight. But I have a sub filling in for me."

Griffin knew he had to help Belinda or she would find herself in over her head. It was one thing to raise a child from infancy and another thing completely when you found yourself having to deal with not one but two teenagers with very strong personalities.

"Let me help you out."

Belinda stared at the man standing in her entryway as if he were a stranger. "You want to help me."

Slipping his hands into the pockets of his suit trousers, Griffin angled his head. "Yes. I'll take the girls to school and take care of the paperwork. That way you don't have to have to miss your classes."

"It's too late to cancel the substitute."

Attractive lines fanned out around his eyes when he gave her a warm smile. "Use the extra time to sleep in late."

His smile was contagious as Belinda returned it with one of her own. "It sounds good, but I still have to get up and prepare breakfast."

“Can’t they get breakfast at school?”

“Donna wouldn’t let them eat school breakfast because they weren’t eating enough fiber.”

“I’ll fix breakfast for them,” Griffin volunteered.

“It can’t be fast food.”

He winked at her. “I didn’t know you were a comedian. Why would I give them a fast-food breakfast when it has a higher caloric content and more preservatives than some cafeteria food? I’ll cook breakfast for them.”

Belinda hesitated, processing what she’d just heard. “You’re going to come here from Paoli tomorrow morning in time to make breakfast and take the girls to school?” The ongoing family joke was that Griffin Rice would be late for his own funeral.

“Yes.”

Belinda waved a hand. “Forget it, Griffin. I’ll get up and make breakfast and take them to school.”

“You doubt whether I’ll be here on time?”

She leaned closer. “I know you won’t make it.”

The warmth and the subtle scent of lavender on Belinda’s bared flesh wafted in Griffin’s nostrils, making him more than aware of her blatant femininity. For years he’d told himself that he didn’t like his sister-in-law because she was a snob—that her attitude was that she was too good for him because she came from a more prestigious family.

But in the past four months he saw another side of Belinda Eaton that hadn’t been apparent in the dozen years since they first met. Not only was she generous, but also selfless in her attempt to become a surrogate mother for her sister’s children. She had reconfigured the design of her house to accommodate the teenage girls. He hadn’t known she had a man in her life, and apparently that relationship would also change now that Layla and Sabrina were living with her.

“I’ll make it if I stay over.”

“You can’t stay here,” Belinda said quickly. “Have you forgotten that I no longer have an extra bedroom?”

She’d turned the master bedroom into the office/entertainment retreat for the twins and added half baths to the two remaining bedrooms. There was still a full bathroom on the second floor and a half bath off the kitchen, but with three females living under one roof everyone needed a bathroom to call their own.

Griffin affected a Cheshire cat grin. “I can always sleep with you.”

Belinda stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. “You’re crazy as hell if you think I’m going to let you sleep in my bed with me.”

“And why not?” he asked quietly. “Aren’t we family, Aunt Lindy?”

“First of all I’m not your aunt. And secondly, you and I don’t share blood, therefore we’re not family. If you want to stay over then you’re going to have to sleep in the living room on the sofa. It converts to a queen-size bed and the mattress is very comfortable.”

“How would you know it’s comfortable?”

“I slept on it before my bedroom was completed.” Although she’d moved her bedroom from the second to the first floor she liked her new space because it was larger, airy and filled with an abundance of light during daytime hours.

Griffin nodded. “I’ll take your word that it’s comfortable, but if I wake up with a bad back then I’m going to hold you responsible for my medical expenses.”

“You won’t need a chiropractor after I walk on your back,” Belinda countered confidently. “My feet and toes are magical.”

He glanced down at her slender pedicured feet in a pair of thong slippers. Her feet were like the rest of her body—perfect. Belinda Eaton was physically perfect, yet so untouchable. He wondered

about the man who'd managed to get next to her. There was no doubt he was nothing less than Mister Perfect himself.

"We'll see," he replied noncommittally. "I'm going to head out to Paoli, get a few things. Are you sure you'll be up when I get back?"

"I have an extra set of keys you can use."

"What about your alarm?"

"I won't set it."

"Set it," Griffin ordered. "I'd feel better knowing you and the girls are protected by a silent alarm before I get back. Now, give me the password. Please," he added when Belinda glared at him. He repeated it a couple of times aloud, then to himself. "I'll bring back a set of keys to my place for you, and I'll give you my password."

Belinda turned and walked in the direction of the kitchen where she retrieved a set of keys to her house from a utility drawer. She returned to find Griffin standing in the middle of her living room staring at photographs on tables and lining the fireplace mantel. His gaze was fixed on one of himself, Grant and Donna together at an Eaton-Rice family picnic. It'd taken her weeks to come to grips that her sister and brother-in-law were gone and that she would never hear their laughter again. She'd put away all of their photographs, then caught herself when she realized that if she wanted to remember them, it would be best to see them smiling and happy.

"Griffin."

Griffin turned when Belinda called his name, his expression mirroring the sadness and pain that returned when he least expected it. There had only been he and Grant, the two of them inseparable. Grant was two years older, but he never seemed to mind that he had to take his younger brother everywhere he went.

They were always there for each other throughout their triumphs and failures. Grant was gone, but his spirit for life lived on in the daughters he had called his "princesses." Grant had asked him whether he'd take care of his "princesses" if anything ever happened to him and Griffin hadn't hesitated when he said of course, unaware that a decade later he would be called upon to do just that. Grant had also revealed that Belinda Eaton had agreed to share guardianship of his children with him. He'd always thought Donna's younger sister was shy and very pretty, but that had been the extent of his awareness of the young woman who'd been Donna's maid of honor at his brother's wedding.

Now standing several feet away wasn't a shy, pretty girl but a very confident, beautiful woman who always seemed confrontational, something he'd never accept from other women. But he had to remember that Belinda Eaton wasn't just any woman. She was now the mother and he the father to their twin nieces.

"Yes?"

Belinda held out her hand. "Here are your keys." He took the keys suspended from a colorful Lucite souvenir from Hershey Park. "I'll make up the sofa and leave a light on for you."

Griffin nodded. "Thank you. I'll lock the door and set the alarm on my way out."

Belinda was still standing in the middle of the living room when she heard the soft beep that signaled that the alarm was being armed. In another forty-five seconds it would be activated.

Today she'd spent more time with Griffin Rice than she had since planning and rehearsing for her sister's wedding. Her opinion of him hadn't changed over the years. She still found him outspoken, brash and a skirt-chaser. What had changed was that she saw for the first time that he truly loved his nieces. His reference to Sabrina and Layla as his daughters really shocked her, and his volunteering to take them to school was a blessing. He'd stepped up to the plate much sooner than she'd expected he would.

Perhaps, she thought as she made her way upstairs to the linen closet, Griffin did have some redeeming qualities after all. What she didn't want to linger on was how good he looked and smelled. He'd removed his tie and jacket and when she opened the door to find him standing there in just a

shirt and trousers she discovered that her pulse beat a little too quickly for her to be unaffected by his presence, and at that moment she knew she was no different than the thousands of other women who lusted after the sports attorney who'd become a celebrity in his own right.

What Belinda had to do was be careful—be very, very careful not to fall victim to his looks and potent charm.

### Chapter 3

Belinda woke as daylight filtered through layers of silk panels covering the French doors. Every piece of furniture and all the accessories in her bedroom were in varying shades of white. The absence of color in the bedroom was offset by the calming blue shades in an adjoining sitting/dressing room. Blue-and-white striped cushions on a white chaise, where she spent hours reading and grading papers, and a blue-and-white checked tablecloth on a small table with two pull-up chairs were where she usually enjoyed a late-night cup of coffee and took her breakfast on weekend mornings.

Stretching her arms above her head, she smiled when the sounds of birds singing and chirping to one another shattered the early-morning solitude. It was spring, the clocks were on daylight saving time and she'd spent the winter waiting for longer days and warmer weather after a brutally cold and snowy winter season. Rolling over on her side, she peered at the clock on the bedside table. It was six-thirty—the same time she woke every morning.

She'd just gotten into bed when she heard Griffin come in around midnight. She didn't know why, but the notion of whether he slept nude, in pajamas or in his underwear made her laugh until she pulled a pillow over her head to muffle the sound. That was her last thought before she fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Sitting up, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for the wrap on the nearby chair. Today was Thursday and she had a standing appointment with her hairdresser. Wednesdays were set aside for a manicure and pedicure and she planned to ask her nieces if they wanted to accompany her.

The house was quiet as she took the back staircase to the full bathroom on the second floor. Belinda hadn't wanted to walk past the living room where Griffin slept. Her feet were muffled by the hallway runner as she made her way past the closed doors to Sabrina's and Layla's bedrooms. She'd told the girls to set their alarms, because she wasn't going to be responsible for waking them up. Like Griffin, they also liked to sleep in late. It had to be a Rice trait.

Belinda didn't linger. Having completed her morning routine, she left the bathroom the way she'd come, encountering the smell of brewing coffee. A knowing smile parted her lips. Griffin was up.

By the time she'd made up her bed, slipped into a pair of faded jeans, T-shirt and brushed her hair, securing it into a ponytail, the sound of footsteps echoed over her head. It was apparent her nieces had gotten up without her assistance. Donna had made it a practice to wake them up and the habit continued with Roberta.

When she and Donna were that age, Roberta had insisted that they set their alarm clocks in order to get up in plenty of time to ready themselves for school. Griffin had accused her of being rigid, while she thought of it as preparation for the future. No one would be coming to their homes to wake them up so they could make it to work on time.

\* \* \*

Belinda walked into the kitchen to find Griffin transferring buckwheat pancakes from the stovetop grill onto a platter. The white T-shirt and jeans riding low on his slim hips made her breath catch in her throat. Her gaze was drawn to the muscles in his biceps that flexed with every motion. She regarded Griffin as a skirt-chaser, but after seeing him moving around her kitchen as if he'd done it countless times she realized he would be a good catch for some woman—provided he would be faithful to her.

“Good morning.”

Griffin glanced up, smiling. “Well, good morning to you, too.”

Belinda walked into the kitchen and sat on a high stool at the cooking island. “I didn’t know you could cook.”

He winked at her. “That’s because you don’t know me.”

She decided not to respond to his declaration. “How’s your back?” Belinda asked instead.

“Good. Remember when you banish your man to the couch that it’s not going to be much of a punishment.”

“When I have to put a man out of my bed he won’t end up on the couch but on the sidewalk.” She’d stressed the last word.

Griffin grimaced. “Ouch!”

Belinda slipped off the stool. “Do you want me to help you with anything?”

“I stopped at a twenty-four-hour green grocer and bought some fruit. I put it in the refrigerator, but if you prepare it for me I’d really appreciate it.”

Working side by side, Belinda washed and cut melon, strawberries and pineapple into small pieces for a fresh fruit salad while Griffin finished making pancakes. When Sabrina and Layla came downstairs, dressed in their school uniforms—white blouse, gray pleated skirt and gray blazer and knee socks—the kitchen was redolent with different flavors of fruit, freshly squeezed orange juice, pancakes and coffee for Belinda and Griffin. There was only the sound of a newscaster’s voice coming from the radio on a countertop as the four ate breakfast.

“I have an appointment for my hair this afternoon,” Belinda said, breaking the comfortable silence. She looked at Sabrina, then Layla. “Who would like to go with me?”

“I do,” Sabrina said.

“Me, too,” Layla chimed in.

“I’ll pick you up from school, and we’ll go directly from there to the salon. Make certain you bring your books so you can do your homework while under the dryer. Thursday is girls’ night out, so let me know where you’d like to eat.”

Belinda’s last class would end at two and the twins weren’t dismissed until three. The half-hour drive would afford her more than enough time to pick them up. However, if she ran into traffic, then she could call her mother to have her meet them. Layla peered over her glass at her uncle. “Even though it’s for girls, can Uncle Griff eat with us?”

Belinda stared at Griffin, silently admiring his close-cropped hair and the smoothness of his clean-shaven jaw. Mixed feelings surged through her as she tried to read the man sitting in her kitchen who continued to show her that there was more to Griffin Rice than photo ops with pro athletes, A-list actors and entertainment celebrities. His success in negotiating multimillion-dollar contracts for athletes was noteworthy, while his reputation for dating supermodels and actresses was legendary. A tabloid ran a story documenting the names of the women and a time line of his numerous relationships—most of which averaged six to nine months.

“I can’t answer for him, Layla.”

She smiled at her uncle. “Can you eat with us, Uncle Griff?”

Dropping an arm over Layla’s shoulders, Griffin kissed her mussed hair. “I can’t, baby girl. I’m going to see my folks before they leave on vacation.”

In their shared grief over losing their firstborn, his parents had become at sixty what they hadn’t been in their twenties—friends. Now they were embarking on a month-long European cruise they’d always planned to take for their fortieth wedding anniversary. Lucas and Gloria Rice’s marriage hadn’t survived two decades. However, both were older, wiser and sensible enough to know they couldn’t change the past, so were willing to make the best of the present.

“When are Grandma and Grandpa coming back?” Sabrina asked.

“They won’t be back until the beginning of May.” Griffin stared at the clock on the microwave.

Layla wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Are you going to fix breakfast for us tomorrow, Uncle Griff?”

“Your aunt and I agreed you would spend the weekends with me, and that means I’ll make breakfast for you Saturday and Sunday mornings.”

“I hope you don’t expect me to make pancakes every day, but I’ll definitely make certain your breakfasts will be healthy,” Belinda said when the two girls gave her long, penetrating stares. “As soon as you’re finished here I want you to comb your hair. Your uncle will drive you to school this morning.”

A frown formed between Layla’s eyes. She appeared as if she’d been in a wrestling match, with tufts of hair standing out all over her head. “I thought the bus was picking us up.”

Belinda stood up and began clearing the table. “Griffin will fill out the paperwork today changing your official address to this house. As soon as it’s approved, you’ll be put on the bus route.”

“Layla’s boyfriend rides the bus,” Sabrina crooned in a singsong tone.

A rush of color darkened Layla’s face, concealing the sprinkle of freckles dotting her pert nose. “No, he doesn’t!” she screamed as Griffin and Belinda exchanged shocked glances. “Breena is a liar!”

Resting his elbows on the table, Griffin supported his chin on a closed fist. “Do you have a boyfriend, Layla?” His voice, though soft, held a thread of steel.

Layla’s eyes filled with tears. “Stop them, Aunt Lindy.”

Belinda felt her heart turn over. Her sensitive, free-spirited niece was hurting and she knew what Layla was going through, because she’d experienced her first serious crush on a boy in her class the year she turned twelve. She’d confided her feelings to her best friend and before the end of the day everyone in the entire school, including Daniel Campbell, knew she liked him.

“If Layla likes a boy, then that’s her business, not ours.”

Griffin sat up straighter. “She’s too young to have a boyfriend.”

“But I don’t have a boyfriend,” Layla sobbed, as tears trickled down her cheeks.

Belinda rounded on Griffin. “Griffin, you’re upsetting the child. She says she doesn’t have a boyfriend.” She held up a hand when he opened his mouth. “We’ll talk about this later. Sabrina and Layla, I want you to finish your breakfast then please go and comb your hair. And don’t forget what I said yesterday about leaving clothes on the floor.”

Layla sprang up from the table, leaving her twin staring at her back. Sabrina closed her eyes. “I didn’t mean to make her cry.”

Belinda shook her head. “If you didn’t mean it then you shouldn’t have said what you said. Remember, Sabrina, that your words and actions have consequences.”

Nodding, Sabrina pushed back her chair. “I’ll tell her I’m sorry.”

Belinda closed her eyes for several seconds and when she opened them she found Griffin glaring at her. “What?”

“The girls can’t date until they’re eighteen.”

“Are you asking me or telling me, Griffin?”

He stared, not blinking. “I’m only making a suggestion.”

“I believe seventeen would be more appropriate.”

“Why?”

“By that time they’ll be in their last year of high school and that will give them a year to deal with the ups and downs of what they’ll believe is love. Then once they’re in college they’ll be used to the lies and tricks dogs masquerading as men perpetuate so well.”

Griffin’s expressive eyebrows shot up. “You think all men are dogs?”

Belinda rinsed and stacked dishes in the dishwasher. “If the shoe fits, then wear it, Griffin Rice. If a woman dated as many men as you do women, people would call her a whore.”

“I don’t date that many women.”

“Why, then, didn’t you sue that tabloid that documented your many trysts?”

“I don’t have the time, nor the inclination to keep up with gossip.”

Resting a hip against the counter, Belinda gave him a long, penetrating stare. “Are you saying what they printed wasn’t true?”

There came a lengthy pause before Griffin said, “Yes.”

“What about the photographs of you and different women?”

“They were photo ops.”

“They were photo ops for whose benefit?”

“Most times for the lady.”

“So, all that dishing about you being a womanizer is bogus.”

Leaning on his elbow, Griffin cradled his chin in his hand. “If I’d slept with as many women as the tabloids claim I have I doubt whether I’d be able to stand up.”

Belinda turned her head to conceal her smile. “Real or imaginary, you’re going to have to clean up your image now that you’re a father.”

Now that you’re a father.

Belinda’s words were branded into Griffin’s consciousness as he got up to take the rest of the dishes off the table. He, who hadn’t wanted to marry and become a father because he didn’t want his children to go through what he’d experienced with his warring parents, now at thirty-seven, found himself playing daddy to his adolescent nieces.

When Jonathan Connolly had called to tell him that he had received the documents legalizing the girls’ adoption, Griffin felt his heart stop before it started up again. He’d feared his life would change so dramatically, that he would have to hire a nanny to take care of his nieces and that he wouldn’t be able to recognize who he was or what he’d become until he remembered Belinda telling him she would have the girls live with her, and if he chose he could have them on weekends.

Belinda’s suggestion had come as a shock to him. He’d thought of her as the consummate career woman. She taught high school history, spent her winter vacations in the Caribbean or Florida and traveled abroad during the summer months.

He had vacillated between indifference and newfound respect for Belinda when she’d decided to renovate her house to address the needs and interests of the two children she’d thought of as her own within days of them losing their parents.

Belinda Eaton had sacrificed her day-to-day existence for “her children” while he hadn’t given up anything. When he’d come to her house the night before he said he’d come to see his children. They weren’t only his children or Belinda’s children. Sabrina and Layla Rice were now legally the children of both Belinda Eaton and Griffin Rice.

“I’ll try, Belinda.”

She gave him a level look. “Don’t try, Griffin. Just do it.”

He nodded in a gesture of acquiescence. “I’m going to change my clothes. I want to get to the school early enough so I don’t have to wait to be seen.”

Belinda turned back to finish cleaning up the kitchen. She didn’t have to be at the high school until eleven, which left her time to dust and vacuum. As the only person living in the house her house was always spotless. But she knew that was going to change because Donna hadn’t taught her daughters to pick up after themselves.

As a stay-at-home mother and housewife Donna didn’t mind picking up after her husband and children. Roberta Eaton had picked up after her four children, and Donna continued the practice. However, that would end with Belinda. As a certifiable neat-freak, the girls would either conform to her standards or they would forfeit their privileges.

She’d loaded the dishwasher and had begun sweeping the kitchen when Sabrina and Layla walked in with backpacks slung over their shoulders. Both had combed and neatly braided their hair into single plaits. The fuzzy hair around their hairline was evidence that it was time for their roots to be touched up.

“Before you ask, Aunt Lindy, we brushed our teeth,” Sabrina announced with a teasing smile. Resting her hands on her denim-covered hips, Belinda looked at her from under lowered lids. “I wasn’t going to ask, Miss Prissy.”

“Who’s prissy?” asked a deep voice. Griffin stood at the entrance to the kitchen dressed in a lightweight navy blue suit, stark white shirt, striped silk tie and black leather slip-ons.

Belinda couldn’t contain the soft gasp escaping her parted lips as she stared at Griffin like a star-struck teen seeing her idol in person for the first time. Now she knew why women came on to Griffin Rice. He radiated masculinity like radioactive particles transmitting deadly rays. Her knees buckled slightly as she held on to the broom handle to keep her balance.

A nervous smile trembled over her lips. “Your daughter.”

Smiling, Griffin strolled into the kitchen. “Which one?”

“Sabrina,” Belinda and Layla said in unison, before touching fists.

Looping his arm around Sabrina’s neck, Griffin lowered his head and kissed her forehead. “Are you being prissy, Miss Rice?”

Tilting her chin, she smiled up at her uncle. “I don’t even know what prissy means.”

He ran a finger down the length of her short nose. “Look it up in the dictionary.”

Sabrina snapped her fingers. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

“That’s because you’re smart.”

Belinda propped the broom against the back of a chair. “Come give me a kiss before you leave.”

She hugged and kissed Sabrina, then Layla. “Remember we have hair appointments this afternoon.”

“Yes!” they said in unison.

Griffin shook his head. He didn’t know what it was about women getting their hair and nails done that elicited so much excitement. He got his hair cut every two weeks, but he didn’t feel any different after he left the hair salon than when he entered.

“Girls, please wait outside for me. I’ll be right out after I talk to your aunt.”

Belinda didn’t, couldn’t move as Griffin approached her. The sensual scent of his aftershave washed over her, and she was lost, lost in a spell of the sexy man who made her feel things she didn’t want to feel and made her want him even when she’d openly confessed that she hadn’t found him appealing.

She’d lied.

She’d lied to Griffin.

And she’d lied to herself.

“What do you want, Griffin?” Her query had come out in a breathless whisper, as if she were winded from running.

He took another step, bringing them only inches apart. “I just wanted to say goodbye and hope you have a wonderful day.”

She blinked. “You didn’t have to send the girls out to tell me that.”

“But I couldn’t do this in front of them,” he said cryptically.

“Do what?”

“Do this.” Griffin’s arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against his body at the same time his mouth covered hers.

Belinda didn’t have time to respond to the feel of his masculine mouth on hers as she attempted to push him away. Then the kiss changed as his lips became persuasive, coaxing and gentle. Her arms moved up of their own volition and curled around his neck, and she found herself matching him kiss for kiss. Then it ended as quickly as it had begun.

Reaching up, Griffin eased her arms from around his neck, his gaze narrowing when he stared at her swollen mouth. Passion had darkened her eyes until no light could penetrate them. Belinda

had called Sabrina prissy, when it was she who was prissy. And underneath her prissy schoolteacher exterior was a very passionate woman, and he wondered if her boyfriend knew what he had.

“Thank you for the kiss. You’ve just made my day.” Turning on his heels, he walked across the kitchen, a grin spreading across his face.

“I didn’t kiss you, Griffin,” Belinda threw at his broad back. “Remember, you kissed me.”

He stopped but didn’t turn around. “But you kissed me back.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did. And I liked it, Miss Eaton.”

Belinda wanted to tell Griffin that she liked him kissing her. But how was she going to admit that to him when supposedly he didn’t appeal to her? The truth was she did like him—a little too much despite her protests.

“Have a good day, Griffin,” she said instead.

“Trust me, I will,” he called out.

Looking around for something she could throw at his arrogant head, Belinda realized she’d been had. Griffin hadn’t kissed her because he wanted to but because he wanted to prove a point—that she was no more immune to him than the other women who chased him.

Well, he was about to get the shock of his life. She’d go along with his little game of playing house until she either tired or lost interest. And in every game there were winners and losers and Belinda Eaton didn’t plan to lose.

\* \* \*

Belinda stabbed absentmindedly at the salad with a plastic fork as she concentrated on the article in the latest issue of *Vanity Fair*. She glanced up when she felt the press of a body next to hers.

“What’s up, Miss Ritchie?” she asked.

“That’s what I should be asking you, Miss Eaton,” said Valerie Ritchie as she slid into the chair beside Belinda. “You didn’t come in yesterday, and when I saw a sub cover your classes this morning I was going to call you later on tonight.”

Closing the magazine, Belinda smiled at the woman whom she’d met in graduate school. Valerie was one of only a few teachers she befriended at one of Philadelphia’s most challenging inner-city high schools. Much of the faculty, including the administration, remained at the school only because they were unable to find a similar position in a better neighborhood. But she and Valerie stayed because of the students.

“The guardianship for my sister’s children was finalized yesterday,” she said softly.

“That was fast.”

“The lawyer and judge are members of the same country club.”

Valerie shook her head. “Why is it always not what you know, but who you know?”

“That’s the way of the world.”

Belinda stared at Valerie, a world history and economics teacher. Recently divorced, Valerie had rebuffed the advances of every male teacher who’d asked her out, claiming she wanted to wait a year before jumping back into the dating game. The petite, curvy natural beauty had caught the attention of the grandson of a prominent black Philadelphia politician who pursued her until she married him, much to the consternation of his family, his father in particular. Tired of the interference from her in-laws, Valerie filed for divorce and netted a sizeable settlement for her emotional pain and anguish.

“I don’t envy you, Belinda.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s very noble of you to want to raise your sister’s kids, especially when you have to do it alone.”

A math teacher walked into the lounge and sat down on a worn leather love seat in a corner far enough away so they wouldn’t be overheard. Belinda had made it a practice to keep her private and professional lives separate.

“I’m not going to raise them by myself.”

Valerie gave Belinda a narrow stare. “Have you been holding out on me?”

“What are you going on about, Valerie?”

“Are you and Raymond getting married?”

Belinda shook her head. She and Dr. Raymond Miller had what she referred to as an I-95 relationship when he accepted a position as head of cardiology at an Orlando, Florida, geriatric facility. They alternated visiting each other—she visited during school recesses and Raymond whenever he could manage to take a break from the hospital.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We’re just friends, Valerie.”

“Do you think you’ll ever stop being friends and become lovers?”

“I doubt it.”

Valerie’s clear brown eyes set in a flawless olive-brown face narrowed. “Are you in love with someone else?”

Belinda shook her head again. “No. Griffin and I share custody of our nieces.”

“Griffin Rice,” Valerie repeated loud enough for those in the room to turn and look in their direction.

Belinda angled her head closer to Valerie’s. She’d just finished telling her about the arrangement she’d established with her brother-in-law when the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. Papers, magazines and the remnants of lunch were put away as teachers left the lounge for their classrooms.

#### Chapter 4

“How is she getting along, Dad?” Griffin asked his father when he joined him at the picture window in the living room of the spacious apartment in Spring Garden, a neighborhood that had been completely transformed by gentrification. The nighttime view from the high-rise was spectacular.

He knew exactly what he’d look like in twenty years. An inch shy of the six-foot mark, sixty-two-year-old Lucas Rice claimed a ramrod-straight back, slender physique and a full head of shimmering silver hair. Balanced features, a cleft chin and a sensual smile drew women of all ages to him like sunflowers facing the sun. His looks and charisma posed a problem for his wives because women loved Lucas, and he in turn loved them back.

Nevertheless, Grant’s death had humbled Lucas, making him aware of his own mortality. In his shared grief with Gloria and his surviving son, he’d confessed his many transgressions. It hadn’t made it any easier for Griffin to hear about the number of women his father had slept with while still married to his mother, but he realized how much strength it took for Lucas to confess.

The confession signaled a turning point for everyone—especially Gloria. Surprisingly, she forgave her ex-husband, saying they’d married much too young and for the wrong reason. They’d met in college where Gloria was a library science major and Lucas was pre-med. Gloria discovered halfway through her sophomore year that she was pregnant. And instead of going to medical school, Lucas married his pregnant girlfriend and switched his major to pharmacology. Most of their marital strife was the result of Lucas not fulfilling his dream of becoming a doctor.

Lucas stole a glance at his son’s profile. “She’s pretty good during the day, but I found that she’s a wreck at night.”

Shifting slightly, Griffin turned to give Lucas an incredible stare. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been checking up on her since we...we lost Grant. We talk every day, and several nights each week we have dinner—either here, at my place, or at a restaurant. I always call her to say good-night, but that’s when I lose it, son.”

A slight frown furrowed Griffin’s smooth forehead. “Why, Dad?”

Lucas closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling heavily. “The sound of her crying rips my heart out. I know she used to cry whenever we had an argument, but this time it’s different.”

“She’s still grieving. We’re all still grieving.”

“Not like your mother, Griffin. That’s why I suggested taking the cruise. I know I can’t go back forty years and right all the wrongs, but I promised myself that I would spend what’s left of my life making your mother happy.”

“Do you love her, Dad?”

A sad smile crinkled the skin around Lucas’s eyes. “I’ve always loved her and I will always love her.”

“What about your other women?”

“There are no other women, and there hasn’t been one in a long time.”

Griffin chose his words carefully. “Is it because you’re trying to insinuate yourself back into my mother’s life?”

Lucas shook his head. “Don’t worry, son. I won’t hurt her.”

“I’m not worried, Dad. You will be sorry if you hurt her again.”

Lucas met Griffin’s withering gaze, knowing he wasn’t issuing an idle threat. He hadn’t stayed to see Griffin grow to adulthood, but he was proud of how he’d turned out nevertheless. He was proud of both of his sons, and had never hesitated to give Gloria all the credit for their successes.

“Glo has been hurt enough. I’d rather walk away than cause her more pain.”

Griffin smiled. It’d been a long time since he’d heard his father shorten his mother’s name. Reaching into the pocket of his slacks, he took out a small envelope, slipping it into Lucas’s shirt pocket. “There’s enough on that gift card to buy something nice in Florence or Rome for your cabin mate.”

Lucas took the envelope, staring numbly at the value of the gift card. It was half of what he’d paid for two first-class tickets for the month-long European cruise. “I can’t take this, Griffin.”

“You can and you will, otherwise I’ll give it to Mom, and you know she’ll buy gifts for everyone but herself.”

A smile flashed across the older man’s face. “You’re right about that. I want to bring something back for the twins. Do you have an idea of what they’d like?”

Griffin pondered his father’s question for several minutes. “I believe Layla would love a Venetian Carnevale mask, the kind revelers wear. Sabrina likes fashion, so anything from Rome or Paris will make her very happy.”

“What about Belinda?”

“What about her, Dad?”

“What do you think she’d like?”

Lucas mentioning Belinda’s name quickened Griffin’s pulse, as images of the kiss they’d shared came back with the force and fury of rushing rapids. He’d kissed her to see if she was actually a prude even after she’d disclosed that she was seeing someone. He hadn’t believed her. He’d discovered there was indeed fire under her staid exterior. The revelation had not only shocked him, but also made him jealous of the man who was on the receiving end of Belinda Eaton’s passion.

“Perfume.” He’d said the first thing that came to mind because he loved the way she smelled.

“What fragrance does she wear?”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” asked Gloria Rice as she walked into the living room carrying a tray with dessert plates of tiny butter cookies and petits fours.

Griffin walked over and took the tray from his mother. She looked better than she had in months, and he attributed that to the anticipation of going away for a month with the man who’d been and apparently still was the only one she’d ever loved.

In preparation for her trip, she’d had her hair cut into a close-cropped natural that showed off her delicate features and flawless chestnut-brown skin. Her dark almond-shaped eyes made her look as if she were perpetually smiling.

When she'd been informed of her son and daughter-in-law's death Gloria had stopped eating. It was only after Griffin threatened to have her force-fed that she had begun eating again, and then only small portions but enough to keep up her strength.

Now that Lucas had come back into her life, she'd managed to regain some of the weight she'd lost. When he'd asked his mother whether she was sleeping with her ex-husband, Gloria had come out with an unequivocal "no." She claimed all Lucas was good for was companionship.

"Do you know what perfume Belinda wears?"

"Yes. It's Dior's J'adore. Why do you want to know?"

"Dad's putting together a list of souvenirs he wants to bring back."

"I'm done with my list." She smiled at Lucas. "Please bring in the coffee. It should be finished brewing."

Reaching for Gloria's hand, Griffin seated her on her favorite chair. He sat on the matching ottoman, cradling her feet in his lap. "If you come back from Europe carrying my little sister or brother," he teased quietly, "I'm going to give Dad a serious beat down."

Throwing back her head, Gloria laughed until tears rolled down her face. "You don't have worry about beating up your father because it's not going to happen." Gloria sobered. "Speaking of children, Griffin."

"What about them, Mom?"

"I know you've adopted Grant's children, but do you see yourself having children of your own?"

There came a long silence as he pondered her question. "If I were to be completely honest I'd say I don't know. Playing daddy is still too new for me to make a decision. But I must admit I'm enjoying what little I've experienced."

"How are you getting along with Belinda?"

"We're doing okay. It's obvious she's going to be the stricter parent, while I'll probably let the girls do whatever they want—except when it comes to boys. If it were up to me they wouldn't have a boyfriend until they graduate from high school."

Gloria shook her head. "That's unrealistic. Your father was my first boyfriend and you see how that ended. My granddaughters should have boys as friends so they learn to differentiate between the good guys and the ones who only want to sleep with them." She paused, seemingly deep in thought. "I believe if I'd had a daughter, Lucas wouldn't have been such a philanderer."

Griffin wanted to tell Gloria that she was wrong. Lucas would've cheated on her if they'd had a dozen daughters. Unfortunately, it'd taken a catastrophic incident to bring Lucas Rice to the realization that he'd misused and mistreated the best woman he'd ever had and would ever hope to have. Perhaps, he mused, it wasn't too late for his parents to start over.

\* \* \*

Layla and Sabrina were waiting on the front porch for Griffin when he maneuvered his SUV into the driveway and parked behind their aunt's Volvo. They were bundled in down-filled jackets, bracing against the rapid twenty-point decline in the temperature. The past week the weather had challenged the late-March season, and won.

He smiled as he got out of his car. Maybe it was the profusion of hair flowing down and around their shoulders that made them appear older, as if they'd become young adults virtually overnight.

He wasn't disappointed when they raced off the porch to launch themselves at him. The spontaneity reminded Griffin they were still young, and as they'd done when they were children, they wanted him to catch them in midair.

"Whoa!" he cried out when he collapsed to the floor of the porch under their weight.

The front door opened and he looked up to find Belinda smiling down at him as Sabrina and Layla held him down while pinning him with what they thought were wrestling holds. Lamps flanking the door flattered her slender body in a pair of fitted jeans she'd paired with a chunky pullover. She'd

also changed her hairstyle. Instead of the usual curly look it was smooth, the feathered ends curving under her chin and down around the nape of her neck.

“Do you give up?” Layla shouted, tightening her headlock.

“Yes!”

“Count him out, Aunt Lindy!” Sabrina said excitedly.

Playing along with her nieces, Belinda went to her knees and slapped the porch close to Griffin’s head. “One, two, three. You’re out!” The girls released Griffin, falling back and gasping in surprise when he reached for their aunt, pinning her under his body.

Burying his face against the column of her scented neck, he pressed his mouth to the silken flesh. “Come with us this weekend,” he whispered near her ear.

Belinda swallowed a moan. There was no way she could ignore the hard body molded to hers, the solid pressure of bulging muscle between Griffin’s thighs. She closed her eyes when a gush of moisture bathed the area between her legs.

“I... I can’t.” She could hardly get the words out.

“If you give her a headlock she’ll give up, Uncle Griff,” Layla suggested.

Griffin eased his arm under Belinda’s neck. “Give up, baby,” he crooned for her ears only. “Are you coming with us?” he asked loud enough for his nieces to overhear his entreaty.

“No-o-o-o!”

Sabrina went to her knees. “Please, Aunt Lindy. Please come with us. Uncle Griff said we were going to have a movie night.”

“Pul-eeese,” Layla moaned melodramatically.

Belinda closed her eyes. Oh no! a silent voice shouted when Griffin ground his groin against hers. She couldn’t believe what he was doing to her—in front of their nieces no less. If she didn’t stop him, then she was going to embarrass herself. Her long-celibate body indicated that she was on the brink of climaxing.

“Okay. I’ll go.”

“Pinky swear?” Griffin asked, grinning triumphantly.

She nodded. “Yes. Pinky swear.”

Layla and Sabrina exchanged high fives as they turned to go back into the house to retrieve their overnight bags. They’d spent most of the afternoon exchanging text messages with their uncle to enlist his help in getting their aunt to join them for the weekend after she revealed she hadn’t planned to do anything but read and watch DVDs.

As soon as the door banged behind them, Belinda said between clenched teeth, “Get the hell off me!”

Griffin eased up, but not enough for Belinda to escape. He didn’t want to stand up until his erection went down. He hadn’t expected his body to betray him, nor had he expected Belinda’s response.

“Watch your language, baby. You don’t want our children to grow up using foul language.”

“They’ve heard worse,” she said flippantly, “and no doubt from their classmates.”

“I know you hear it at the high school, but I’d prefer that Sabrina and Layla not hear it at home.”

Belinda affected a facetious smile. “Please let me up, Griffin.”

He smiled. “That’s better, darling.”

Waiting until Griffin moved off her and helped her to her feet, Belinda caught the front of his sweatshirt. Standing on tiptoe, she thrust her face close to his. “If you ever hump me in front of the girls again I’ll hurt you, Griffin Rice.”

Griffin winked at her. “Would you prefer that I hump you in private? I know I don’t appeal to you, but your body is saying something else.”

Her fist tightened. “What exactly is my body saying?”

“That regardless of how we may feel about each other, our bodies are in agreement.” He leaned in closer. “I could smell sex coming from your pores.”

Belinda let her hand fall at the same time her jaw dropped. “How dare you! Your arrogance just supplanted whatever common sense—”

“Cut the act, Belinda!” Griffin said angrily, cutting off her tirade. “It’s only a normal reaction between a man and woman, so don’t confuse sex and desire with love. I’m not in love with you, and I doubt whether you’ll ever be in love with me. Circumstances beyond our control have forced us into a situation we never would’ve or could’ve imagined. I didn’t ask to be a father but I intend to make the best of it, and if that means making sacrifices to keep my vow to my dead brother then I will.”

“Pray tell, Griffin, just what are you sacrificing?”

The seconds ticked off as he stared at the woman who intrigued him more than he wanted. The sexy godmother who made him want her when everything said that she was so wrong for him.

“Having a normal relationship with a woman.”

“Don’t you mean sleeping with other women?”

“That, too.”

“My heart bleeds for you, Griffin. If you think I’m going to become a replacement for your other women, then think again, mister. I don’t play house.”

His eyebrows flickered. “Do you play at all?”

“Yes,” she retorted. “What I do play is for keeps.”

“If you play for keeps, then where is your so-called boyfriend?”

Oh, you’re trying to be slick and get into my business, Belinda mused. “You’ll get to meet Raymond when he comes up from Florida this summer.”

“Why do I have to wait for the summer?”

“That’s when he’ll be able to get away.”

“Don’t you mean that’s when he’ll be paroled?”

“Oh, no you didn’t!”

“Yes, I did, Belinda. Is your Raymond in a Florida jail? I’m asking because I don’t want that type of element around my daughters.”

“Why are they always your daughters, Griffin?” Belinda shot back, the timbre of her voice escalating along with her temper. “Aren’t they also my children?”

“I thought we now belong to both of you.”

Belinda and Griffin spun around. They hadn’t heard Sabrina when she’d come out of the house. They were so busy going at each other that they hadn’t realized they weren’t alone.

Belinda went over to hug her. “Of course you belong to both of us. You and Layla are my daughters.”

“What about Uncle Griff?”

“You’re his daughter, too.”

“If that’s true, then why were you fighting?”

“We weren’t fighting, sweetheart.”

“It sounded to me as if you were fighting.”

Belinda met Griffin’s knowing gaze over Sabrina’s head. As new parents they’d made an unforgivable faux pas—argue in front of their children. “There’re times when adults don’t agree with something, so it may sound as if we’re arguing. Your uncle and I love you and your sister. We made a promise to take care of you and make certain you’re safe. I’m going to ask you and Layla to be patient with us because we’re newbies playing mom and dad.”

Sabrina smiled. “You already sound like a mom even though Uncle Griff needs more practice at being a daddy.”

“Well, excuse me,” Griffin drawled. “What do I have to do to sound like a daddy?”

“First of all you have to learn to say ‘that’s enough, young lady.’”

Griffin forced back a smile. He'd lost count of the number of times Grant had issued his favorite warning. "What else?"

Sabrina narrowed her gaze. "There's 'did you do what your mother told you to do?'"

Belinda pressed her palms together. "I like that one."

"You would," Griffin mumbled under his breath.

Layla, carrying a large quilted tote, joined them on the porch, frowning. "Aunt Lindy, I thought you were coming with us."

"I am. I just have to put a few things in a bag. Don't leave without me."

"We won't" came three voices.

## Chapter 5

Proper attire for movie night in Paoli was pajamas and fuzzy slippers. Belinda, her head supported on a mound of overstuffed pillows, lay on the carpeted floor beside Griffin, while Layla and Sabrina were huddled together, sharing a large throw pillow. They were watching *Akeelah and the Bee* for the umpteenth time. The film had become a favorite of the twins, along with most of the feature-length animated films from Disney/Pixar. Sabrina, who'd demonstrated promise as a budding artist, had expressed interest in becoming an animator.

It was only Belinda's second trip to Griffin's house, and there were a few changes since her last visit more than five years before. He'd added an in-ground pool, expanded the outdoor patio to include a kitchen and added another room at the rear of the house that served as a home office. File folders bulging with contracts, strewn over a workstation, were a testament to a less-than-efficient filing system.

Griffin made a big production of preparing for movie night when he taught the girls how to build a fire in the fireplace. Refreshments included popcorn, s'mores, bonbons and cherry Twizzlers.

"Who wins the bee?" Griffin whispered to Belinda.

Layla sat up. "Don't tell him, Aunt Lindy!"

Belinda tickled Griffin's ribs through his T-shirt. "I'm not telling."

Griffin caught her fingers. "Don't do that."

"Are you ticklish?"

Not releasing her hand, he stared at Belinda for a full minute before lacing their fingers together. "Yes."

Smiling, she winked at him. "Do you have any other weaknesses I should know about?"

Griffin closed his eyes rather than let Belinda see how much she affected him, how much she'd changed him and his life in less than a few weeks. How could he tell her that he liked her because she was different from the other women he'd been involved with, that he wanted what she gave Raymond—her Sunshine State lover—and like Belinda, if he had to play then he wanted it to be for keeps? Spending a Friday night at home watching movies with Belinda and the girls was the highlight of his week—and something he could very easily get used to.

"That's it," he lied smoothly, redirecting his attention to the large plasma screen mounted on the wall. Griffin pretended interest in the movie when it was the woman pressed to his side that he found so intriguing.

\* \* \*

Belinda had just dozed off when she heard the soft knock on the door. Sitting up, she turned on the bedside lamp. "Who is it?"

"It's Count Dracula, and I've come to suck your blood" a deep voice crooned in a perfect Romanian dialect.

Belinda smiled. "Sorry, count, but I'm all out of blood."

"Curses!" he snarled, this time sounding like a pirate.

"Come in, Griffin." The door opened and Griffin walked in, wearing a pair of black pajama pants and matching T-shirt.

Friday night at the movies had not only been enjoyable but also enlightening. She had seen another side to Griffin's personality, the opposite of the aggressive and competitive attorney who'd become notorious for holding out until he got the best deal for his clients. He had a really wicked sense of humor, telling jokes and deliberately flubbing the punch lines. Sabrina and Layla had adored the attention he lavished on them and they, in turn, reciprocated in kind.

"Is movie night over?" She'd found herself dozing off and on until she decided it was time to go to bed, leaving before the end of the film.

Griffin nodded. "When I told the girls they had to brush their teeth before turning in, they said I sounded like Aunt Lindy."

"Is that a good thing?" she teased, smiling.

"I'd say it is."

"What are you doing?" she shrieked when he ran and jumped onto the bed, flopping down on the mattress and pressing his back to the headboard.

Crossing his bare feet at the ankles, Griffin gave Belinda a sidelong glance. "I came to talk." Before settling down to watch the movie, he'd watched as she brushed and pinned Layla's and Sabrina's freshly relaxed hair, covering theirs with bandannas before doing her own. Her smooth transition from aunt to surrogate mother was nothing short of amazing.

"What's so urgent that you can't wait until tomorrow?"

"What do you think about getting the girls a dog?"

Belinda went completely still. "What kind of dog, Griffin?"

"Don't worry, Belinda, it won't be a pit bull or Rottweiler."

"What kind of dog?" she asked again.

"A Yorkshire terrier. One of my neighbors has a purebred bitch that whelped a litter of pups about three months ago. She's sold off all but two, and I told her that I would have to talk to you before offering to buy one."

"A puppy," she whispered. "You want me to take care of a puppy?"

"Sabrina and Layla will take care of it."

"I don't think so, Griffin. You're fooling yourself if you believe girls their age are going to take care of a dog. I'll wind up feeding, bathing and walking it. And what's going to happen when it gnaws on my rugs and furniture?"

Griffin dropped an arm over Belinda's shoulders, bringing her cheek to his chest. "You've got it all wrong."

"No, I don't."

"Please don't say no until you see them. They're adorable."

"I'm certain they're adorable but—"

"Baby, please," he crooned softly. "Grant promised the girls they could have a dog."

Tilting her head, Belinda stared at Griffin looking down at her. The soft glow from the lamp flattered the contours of his lean face. "Donna didn't say anything to me about getting a dog."

"Grant wanted to surprise them. I'll buy the cage, wee-wee pads, food and chew toys. I'll also commit to covering the vet and grooming expenses, and of course the pooch will need one of those designer puppy carriers that cost an arm and two legs."

She smiled. "Why does it sound as if you're running a con on me?"

He returned her smile. "I didn't mean for it—"

"It's okay," she said, cutting him off. "When are we going to look at the puppies?"

Griffin kissed her forehead. "Tomorrow after breakfast."

"I must have sucker written on my forehead."

He laughed softly, the warm sound rumbling in his chest. "Why should you be any different from me?"

"Are we really soft, Griffin?"

“No. We’re just two people who want the best for the children we’ve been entrusted to love and protect.”

“You’re right,” Belinda said after a pregnant pause. “I always believed I’d grow up to fall in love, marry and have children of my own. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that I’d be raising my sister’s children. What makes it so challenging is that they’re not little kids, but pre-teens who’re beginning to assert their independence. I try and do the best I can, but what frightens me is what will I do or say if, or when, they come out with ‘you can’t tell me what to do because you’re not my mother.’”

“Let’s hope it never happens, but if it does then I’ll step in.”

Belinda tried to sit up, but was thwarted when Griffin held her fast. “You’re not going to hit them.”

He frowned at her. “I’d never hit a child. What I can assure you is that my bark is a great deal louder than yours.”

“I’ll not have you yelling at them.”

“What’s it going to be, Belinda? You can’t have it both ways. There’s going to come a time when they’re going to challenge you, because all kids do it. But the dilemma for us will be how do we deal with it as parents. And if I have to raise my voice to get them off your back, then I will. Remember, they’re twins, so they’re apt to tag-team you.”

Belinda remembered when Donna broke curfew and Roberta was sitting in the living room waiting up for her. Donna said something flippant and all Belinda remembered was Roberta telling Donna that she’d brought her into the world and she could also take her out. Her mother’s tirade woke up the entire household and it took all of Dwight Eaton’s gentle persuasion to defuse the situation.

It was after the volatile confrontation that Belinda made a promise to herself: if and when she had children she would never scream at them, because not only was punishment more effective, but also the results lasted longer.

“If you’re going to raise your voice, then I don’t want to be anywhere around,” she told Griffin.

“Dammit, Belinda, you act like I’m going to verbally abuse them. When it comes to discipline we are going to have to be on the same page, or else they’re going to play one off the other.”

“I know,” she whispered, burying her face between his neck and shoulder.

“What do you do when your students act out?”

“I put them out of my class, and then write them up.”

“Do you have problems with the boys?”

“What kind of problems?”

“Do they try and come on to you?”

“A few have tried, but when I give them a ‘screw face’ then they usually back off.”

“Show me a ‘screw face.’” Easing out of Griffin’s comforting embrace, Belinda sat up and glared at him. There was something in Belinda’s gaze that was frightening. “How do you do that?” he asked.

She smiled. “Practice, practice, practice. I have more problems with my female students than the males. Some of them outweigh me, so they believe they can take me out with very little effort. In not so many words, I tell them I can roll with the best of them.”

“You’re not talking about fighting a student?”

“Of course not. But what they don’t know is that I have a black belt in tae kwon do, with distinction in sparring and power breaking. Myles studied karate for years, earned his black belt, but didn’t like competing. I, on the other hand, loved competitions.”

“Do you still compete?”

“No. It’s been a long time since my last competition. A lot of teachers refuse to teach in rough neighborhoods, but the confidence I gained from a decade of martial arts training and the fact that these kids need dedicated teachers is why I stay.”

“So you can kick my butt.”

Belinda smiled. “With one arm tied behind my back,” she said, teasingly.

“Ouch!” he kidded, pressing her back to the mattress. “When I first met you I thought you were cute and I wanted to ask you out, but you were Miss Attitude personified.”

“I was nineteen and you had already graduated law school, so I thought you were too old for me.”

“I’m only five years older than you. I graduated high school at sixteen, college at twenty and law school at twenty-three. That made me an accelerated student, not an older man.”

“You seemed so much older then.”

“What about now?”

“When I saw you rolling around on the porch with Layla and Sabrina I had serious doubts as to your maturity.”

“They love it when I wrestle with them,” Griffin drawled. “Fast-forward thirteen years, and I’m going to ask you something I should’ve asked when you were nineteen. Belinda Eaton, will you go out with me?”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“Why do you think I’m kidding?”

“Not only are we aunt, uncle and godparents but our nieces’ legal guardians. We sleep in each other’s homes, you have a key to mine and I to yours, but right now we’re in bed together. Dating would be ludicrous given our situation.”

“You’re right about us sharing a situation.”

“Is there something wrong with that, Griffin?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, but I would prefer having a relationship with you aside from what we share with Sabrina and Layla. That way I could get to know you better.”

Belinda was strangely flattered by Griffin’s interest in her. She experienced a gamut of emotions that didn’t let her think clearly. Circumstances beyond their control had brought them together and the man whom she’d come to believe couldn’t be faithful to one woman wanted a relationship with her.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

His expressive eyebrows lifted. “What’s there to think about?”

Belinda gave him a long, penetrating stare. “I have to decide whether I’m willing to see you exclusively.”

“Does that mean you’ll give up Sunshine?”

“Who’s Sunshine?”

“Your pen-pal chump living off the taxpayers in a Sunshine State prison.”

“Raymond is not a chump,” she said in defense of the kindest man whom she had the pleasure of knowing.

“He’s in Florida and you’re in Pennsylvania, which means you live at least a thousand miles apart. How often do you see him, Belinda? Or better yet—how many times a year, if he’s not incarcerated, does he make love to you? How do you know if he’s being faithful to you?”

Her temper flared as she sat up. “How do I know you’ll be faithful to me?”

“You don’t. All you’ll have is my word.”

Belinda wanted to tell Griffin that she was beginning to like him, in fact, like him a little too much to be indifferent to his sexual magnetism. When he’d held her down on the porch she’d been on the verge of climaxing and that just looking at him made her body hot and throb with a need long denied. Griffin was right about Raymond. She didn’t know whether he was sleeping with another woman but that wasn’t her concern because he was her friend. She’d fallen in love only once in her life, and it ended with her moving off campus to come back home. It took years before she trusted a man enough to sleep with him.

“If I can’t have Sunshine, then it definitely has to be no skanks, ‘chicken heads’ or hoochies for you.”

Throwing back his head, Griffin laughed. “You drive a hard bargain, Lindy Eaton.”

“It has to be all or nothing.”

Griffin ran a forefinger down the length of her nose. “If you ever have to negotiate a deal always remember to give your competitor an out.”

“Is that how you see me, Griffin? Am I a competitor or an opponent?”

“Neither.”

“Then what am I?”

“I’m someone who’s concerned about you. You’d fallen asleep less than half an hour into the movie. I know you’re exhausted. You no longer cook, clean, wash and iron for one, but three. Layla told me you spent more than an hour folding laundry.”

A scowl settled into Belinda’s features. “You have the girls spying on me?”

“No, Belinda. I only asked them how their week went and both were only too willing to tell me. The reason I want to take you out is to give you a break. It can be one night a week. We can leave Layla and Sabrina at your parents’ or with my mother when she comes back. You can let me know in advance what you want to do or where you’d like to eat and I’ll make it happen.”

Belinda’s expression brightened. “If all you want to do is to take me out to dinner, then that means that I don’t have to give up Raymond.”

“It doesn’t matter because I get to see his woman a lot more than he does.”

The slow, sexy smile that never failed to make women sit up and take notice of Griffin Rice spread over his face as he moved over Belinda, supporting his weight on his elbows.

Belinda’s breasts felt heavy, her nipples swelling as she leaned into the solid wall of his chest. For years she’d watched Griffin with other women, wondering why, other than his gorgeous face, they chased him and now she knew. He was inherently masculine and sexy, and it didn’t matter that she was another in a long line of women who would get to sample what the celebrity lawyer was offering. She opened her mouth to his kiss, drowning in the sexual heat, succumbing to the sensual spell that made her feel as if she and the man holding her to his heart were the last two people on earth.

Griffin’s heart slammed against his ribs when he showered kisses around Belinda’s lips and along her jaw. Lowering his head, he fastened his mouth along the column of her velvety, scented neck, nipping, suckling, licking her as if she were a frothy confection.

“You taste and smell so good,” he mumbled over and over.

Baring her throat, Belinda closed her eyes. She wanted to tell Griffin that he felt and smelled good, too, but the words were locked in her throat when a longing she’d never known seized her mind and body, refusing to let her go.

Without warning the spell shattered when his hands moved under her pajama top and cupped her breasts. “Griffin, no! We can’t!”

“I know, baby,” he gasped near her ear. He couldn’t make love to Belinda while the girls were in the house, and not when he couldn’t protect her against an unplanned pregnancy.

Her breathing coming in uneven pants, Belinda moaned softly. “Go to bed, Griffin.”

He smiled. “I’m already in bed.”

“Your bed,” she ordered softly. “Good night, Griffin.”

Burying his face between Belinda’s breasts, Griffin closed his eyes. He didn’t want to let her go, but he had to. Reluctantly, he moved off the bed. “Good night, Belinda.”

It took a long time after Griffin left her bedroom for Belinda to fall asleep. The thrumming in the lower part of her body had become a reminder of what she’d missed and needed.

Chapter 6

“I’ll take both of them.”

Belinda turned on her heel, walking out of the room to wait on the Sandersons’ back porch. She had to get away from Griffin or say something she would regret for the rest of her life.

Griffin had called his neighbor and set up an appointment to see the puppies. He'd told his nieces that they were going shopping after eating out at a local diner. But they were totally unaware that going shopping meant looking for a dog.

The remaining three-month-old Yorkies, both males, were spirited, friendly and adorable. The only question was which one Sabrina and Layla would choose. Belinda realized the quandary when each girl picked up a puppy, cradled it to her chest and then refused to relinquish them when Griffin told them to pick one. He'd become a victim of his own negotiating skills when each girl pleaded her case as to why they didn't want to share one dog.

"I think your wife is a little upset," Nicole Sanderson said in a quiet voice to Griffin. "Why don't you go and see what's wrong."

Nicole was pleasantly surprised when Griffin Rice followed through on his promise to set up an appointment to look at the puppies. She, however, was more than surprised when he revealed that he was also coming with his wife and daughters. Paoli was a small town, with a population of fifty-four hundred, and it was inevitable that most residents' paths would occasionally cross in the friendly, close-knit community. When Griffin Rice purchased a home in Paoli nearly eight years before, the town's grapevine hummed with the news that they had a celebrity living among them.

"I'll be right back," Griffin said to the woman who was looking forward to selling her last two purebred Yorkshire terriers. Opening the door, he saw Belinda with her back to him.

"Lindy, baby."

"Don't you dare say a mumbling word to me, Griffin Rice!" With wide eyes, she rounded on him. "Don't call me Lindy, and I'm not your baby."

Griffin didn't understand what'd set her off. She'd agreed to their nieces having a dog, so what could be so wrong with them having one more? "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Belinda repeated, approaching him. When she closed her eyes the tips of her lashes touched her cheekbones, and when they opened again the dark orbs were awash with moisture. "Marriages fail because couples don't communicate. They argue about money, child rearing and lack of affection but not necessarily in that order. We are not communicating, Griffin, and we aren't even married. I agreed to one puppy. How on earth did it become two?"

Griffin resisted the urge to pull Belinda in his arms. "Didn't you hear what Layla and Sabrina said? They said this is the first time in their lives they're not treated as if they're joined at the hip. You're the only one who doesn't refer to them as the twins, or who bought them matching outfits. They had to wait twelve years to get their own rooms, where they won't grow up as copies of each other. You relate to them as freethinkers, individuals, and that's what they've become. Sabrina doesn't want to share her puppy with Layla and vice versa."

"Two puppies translate into twice the mess."

Taking a step, Griffin rested a hand on the nape of Belinda's neck. "A mess you won't have to deal with. Each girl will be responsible for her own puppy. Not having to share will eliminate arguments as to whose week it is to clean the crate."

Belinda tried ignoring the subtle, seductive fragrance of Griffin's aftershave—but failed. "Why do you insist on complicating my life?"

"How am I doing that?"

"Instead of looking after one puppy when our daughters are away on their class trip, I'll have to look after two."

Griffin brushed a light kiss over her parted lips. "Remember, Lindy, you're not in this alone. I'll help you."

"When? Don't you have a company to run?"

He nodded. "A business I'm currently downsizing from six to two. I've already begun moving files from the Philly office to Paoli. I'm putting my marketing manager on retainer, and I expect to

hire a retired paralegal who wants to come on board part-time, which fits perfectly into my business strategy. She'll be responsible for typing contracts and filing court documents."

"You're moving your office." The question was a statement.

"Yes. That's why I built the addition onto the house. To be honest, I should've done it years ago. The money I've spent renting a suite of offices in downtown Philly could've fed every child in a small African country for at least a year."

"Where are you going to conduct your meetings?"

"In whatever city the team owners' call home. If it's local, then I'll reserve a room at a restaurant with good food and service, or a hotel suite."

The seconds ticked off as Belinda and Griffin stared at each other. He hadn't shaved, and the stubble on his lean jaw enhanced rather than detracted from his classic good looks. Dressed in an olive-green barn jacket, jeans, black crewneck sweater and matching low-heeled leather boots he reminded her of a Ralph Lauren ad.

"When did you decide all this?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"It was the day I went to clean out Grant's office—something I'd avoided doing for weeks—because I didn't want to admit to myself that my brother had been right when he said that the price of success is grossly overrated.

"As I stood in his twentieth-floor corner office overlooking downtown Philadelphia I could hear a voice in my head. At first I thought it was my imagination, but it wasn't because I was reliving the one time I saw my brother drunk. He'd just gotten a promotion and a coveted corner office. I'll never forget his face when he stared at me, then said, 'Success don't mean shit when you look at what you have to sacrifice in order to achieve it.' At first I thought he was just being maudlin until he talked about how he was able to remember everything about his clients' stock portfolios but he couldn't remember his wife's birthday or their wedding anniversary. He talked about the meetings and business trips that took him away from home where invariably he'd miss a recital or his daughters' school plays. For Grant, making it had become all-consuming. I suppose it had something to do with proving to your parents that Donna hadn't made a mistake when she agreed to marry him."

"My parents were never against your brother marrying my sister," Belinda said, defensively.

"I didn't understand how Grant felt until I met your family for the first time. My first impression was that the Eatons were snobs. You come from generations of teachers, doctors and lawyers, while my mother and father were the first in their family to graduate from college. Grant had less than a month before he would get his degree and he still hadn't heard from any of his prospective employers when your father took him aside and said that if he ever needed money to take care of his daughter or grandchildren then he shouldn't hesitate to come to him. His offer cut Grant to the quick, but he smiled at Dr. Eaton and said that he wouldn't have married his daughter if he hadn't been able to support her.

"So, the day Grant got his seven-figure salary and all the perks that went along with his position, he warned me about putting success before family. I never wanted children because I didn't want them growing up with parents who fought more than they made love. And since life doesn't always play out the way we want it to, I'm committed to making the best of the hand I've been dealt. I promised my brother I would take care of his children in the event anything happened to him, and that means being available for parent-teacher conferences, school concerts, supervising sleep-overs and chauffeuring them when it's time for college tours."

Belinda tried to hide her confusion. She'd believed that Grant worked long hours so that Donna could be a stay-at-home mother and the envy of the other women in their social circle who were jealous because they were working mothers.

"I didn't know," she said softly when she recovered her voice.

"I doubt if Donna knew how Grant felt. He wasn't one for opening up about himself—not even to his wife. In that way he's a lot like my dad. It has taken my father more than forty years to tell my

mother that he'd been carrying around a world of resentment because she got pregnant and he had to drop out of medical school to take care of her and their child."

Belinda couldn't stop the frown forming between her eyes. "He should've accepted half the blame. After all, she couldn't get pregnant by herself, Griffin."

"You're preaching to the choir, beautiful. People always blame others when something goes wrong in their life because it's easier than accepting responsibility that perhaps they, too, were wrong."

Belinda lowered her gaze, staring at Griffin's strong, brown throat. "I should apologize to you."

"For what?"

"I retract what I said about you not having any redeeming qualities."

"You said no such thing." Belinda's head came up, her exotic-looking eyes filling with confusion. "You said, and I quote, 'I'm not attracted to you, and there's nothing about you that I find even remotely appealing.'" He placed his free hand over his heart. "You have no idea of how much you hurt me when you said that."

Belinda was hard-pressed not to laugh at his affected theatrics. "Suck it up, Rice. What I said pales in comparison to when you said I wasn't at the top of your list for what you'd want in a woman."

Griffin angled his head and smiled. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I lied."

Her smile matched his. "I suppose since we're into true confessions, then I'll admit that I lied, too." She wanted to tell Griffin that she was attracted to him and found him very appealing.

Griffin brushed a light kiss over her parted lips. "Let's go back inside and close this deal. I'm certain Sabrina and Layla are anxious to take their puppies home."

Belinda caught the sleeve of Griffin's jacket. "Before we go in I just want to remind you that the girls are leaving to go on a class trip to D.C. two days before I'm out for spring break. We're going to have to make arrangements to board the puppies for those days."

"They won't have to go to a kennel."

"They're too young to be left alone."

"Don't worry so much, Lindy. I'll stay at your place until you come home."

"What if you have to leave town on business?"

"Whatever it is can wait," he said softly. "Remember, family comes first, even if it's of the four-legged furry persuasion."

\* \* \*

Roberta Eaton smiled at her granddaughters, each holding a tiny puppy with dark fur and tan markings. "What do we have here?"

"Grams, this is Cecil Rice," Sabrina announced in a loud, dramatic voice. "He's a Yorkshire terrier."

"And this is Nigel Rice," Layla said, introducing her puppy. "We gave them British names because Aunt Lindy told us that Yorkshire is in England."

Roberta Eaton pressed her palms together. "They're so tiny. How much do they weigh?"

"Nigel is two pounds and three ounces and Cecil two pounds and six ounces," Sabrina answered, bragging like a proud mother.

Roberta shook her head in amazement. "Together they don't even weigh five pounds." She leaned over, kissing her granddaughters who were now as tall as she was. "Go show your Grams the puppies, then put them away because it's time to eat."

Belinda hugged and kissed her mother before heading toward the kitchen. She hadn't missed sharing a Sunday dinner with her parents since Donna passed away because she knew what it meant to her mother to have at least one of her children with her for what throughout past generations had become a family day.

Myles, who lived and worked in Pittsburgh, wasn't expected to return until the end of the school year, and her younger sister, Chandra, was now a Peace Corps worker assigned to teaching young children in Bahia.

Roberta gestured to the tall, casually dressed man standing behind her daughter, clutching the handle of a crate. "Griffin, please find some place to put that doggy prison, and then come eat."

Griffin complied, putting the wire crate in a corner of the spacious entryway. "I have to go back to the car and bring in dessert."

"You didn't have to bring anything. I made a coconut cake."

Smiling and sharing a knowing look with Belinda, Griffin said, "I guess ours will keep."

"No doubt," Belinda crooned, playing along with him.

Roberta caught the surreptitious exchange between her daughter and Griffin. "What did you bring?"

"Carrot cake."

"From where, Griffin?"

"Ms. Tootsie's Soul Food Cafe."

"Bertie, stop playing," Dwight Eaton called out with his approach. "You know you love Ms. Tootsie's carrot cake. But then again, any dessert from Ms. Tootsie's isn't as good as yours," he added quickly, always the diplomat.

Belinda gave her father a wide grin. He always said the right thing. Dr. Dwight Eaton was only a couple of inches taller than his wife, but what he lacked in height he compensated for with wit and personality. His patients loved him as much for his medical expertise as his gentle bedside manner. His dark brown face was smooth, except for a few lines around his equally dark eyes behind a pair of rimless glasses.

"How are you, Lindy?"

"Wonderful, Daddy."

Dwight smiled at Griffin. "Are you taking good care of my girls?"

"I'm doing the best I can, sir."

The older man waved a hand. "Please, Griffin, none of that 'sir' business. Don't forget you're family."

Voices raised in excitement preceded a streak of dark fur running across the living room. Roberta caught a puppy—Belinda still couldn't distinguish whether he was Nigel or Cecil because their markings were identical—and Griffin put the runaway puppy into the crate, while she went to retrieve the cake from his SUV.

\* \* \*

A quarter of an hour later, everyone sat down at the dining room table to enjoy a traditional Southern dinner of macaroni and cheese, smothered pork chops, collard greens, buttery corn bread and sweet tea.

Sabrina and Layla talked nonstop about school, the students who rode the bus with them on their new route and the research they'd gathered from the internet on Yorkies. It was the first Sunday dinner since the death of their parents that the sisters were animated and their mood ebullient. Both decided to forego dessert to play with the whining, yipping puppies that were anxious to be released from their confinement.

Griffin, at Belinda's urging, said their goodbyes at six to return home and prepare for the upcoming week. When Belinda retired for bed later that night her thoughts were of Griffin—how she'd come to look forward to seeing him, sharing meals and the responsibility of raising their nieces.

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Belinda stared at her reflection in the mirror, not recognizing the image. It wasn't so much that her face had changed but the woman to whom the face belonged—she had changed.

She never would've imagined four months ago, or even four weeks ago that she would've accepted Griffin Rice's request to step into the role as his hostess. She'd rehearsed for the part by making his house appear lived in. With the exception of his home office, every room in the large colonial was picture perfect, as if each piece of furniture and objet d'art had been selected and positioned for a magazine layout.

Griffin admitted to hiring a design firm to decorate his house in a style reminiscent of grand Caribbean plantation homes erected during the British colonial period. Dark, heavy mahogany four-poster beds with posts engraved with decorative pineapples, leaves and vines, tables with curving legs, highboys, armoires, secretaries, settees, wall mirrors and chests of drawers transported you back to an era of ruling-class elegance whose enormous wealth was derived from slaves, sugar and rum.

It'd taken her less than a day to transform the house into a home with large green plants in glazed hand-painted vases, fresh flowers and dozens of pillars, votives and tea lights in decorative holders. The gathering was small, with a confirmed guest list of fourteen. A caterer and bartender arrived an hour before the first guests were scheduled to arrive.

For the first time in a week, anticipation at meeting their sports idol shifted Layla's and Sabrina's attention from their pets to the party. Much to Belinda's surprise, the girls kept their promise to take care of the puppies. They set their clocks to rise earlier than usual to clean the cage and put out food and clean water for Cecil and Nigel before readying themselves for school. Playing with the puppies had become a priority. As soon as they came home after school the cage was opened and each puppy bounded out to pounce on its respective owner.

She'd continued to call the Yorkies by the wrong name until Griffin pointed out that Nigel had a tiny tan spot on the tip of his tail. The dilemma of transporting the puppies and their supplies between households was eliminated when Griffin bought a cage large enough to accommodate both pups and purchased an ample supply of wee-wee pads, food, treats and chew toys to have on hand in Paoli.

Peering closer in the mirror, she checked her makeup for the last time, pleased with the results. Eye shadow, which she rarely wore, and vibrant vermilion lipstick highlighted her eyes and lips. And, because the get-together was casual, Belinda had chosen a pair of black stretch cuffed capris, a long-sleeved, off-the-shoulder fitted top and added an additional three inches to her five-six height with peep-toe pumps.

She left the bedroom and walked down the hallway to the staircase, shiny curls bouncing around her head and face with each step. After a week of painstakingly brushing her hair each night to keep the strands smooth, she'd gone back to her curly hairstyle.

Her steps slowed as she looked down to find Griffin waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase. Belinda smiled. She and Griffin were dressed alike. He was wearing a black pullover, slacks and slip-ons. The recessed light glinted off his close-cropped black hair.

Griffin extended his hand, helping Belinda as she stepped off the last step. His gaze lingered on the curls framing her round face, then moved lower to her full mouth outlined in a shimmering, sexy red shade. However, it was her eyes, the lids darkened, lashes spiked and lengthened by mascara that held him enthralled. Expertly applied makeup had served to highlight and accentuate Belinda Eaton's natural beauty.

He hadn't lied to Belinda when he told her that he'd dated his share of women, although he was very discriminating with whom he slept. But none of them could match her natural beauty.

"You look so incredibly beautiful." The sincerity in his compliment was evident.

Lowering her gaze, Belinda glanced up at him through her lashes. "Thank you."

He angled his head and pressed a kiss to her ear. "You're welcome." He didn't think he would ever get used to her smell. It was an aphrodisiac he was helpless to resist.

It'd taken Griffin only two weeks to come to the realization that he did like his nieces' surrogate mother, that he'd changed his opinion of her and he wanted to get closer to the intelligent, intriguing woman who unknowingly made him forget all the others.

Increasing his protective hold, he tucked her hand into the bend of his elbow and led her across the living room. Recorded music floated from concealed speakers throughout the first floor. An outdoor fireplace provided additional warmth for those who wanted to dine or sit outdoors.

“I asked Keith to get here earlier than the others. That way Sabrina and Layla can talk to him one on one.”

Belinda smiled. “I’m willing to bet they’ll do more gawking than talking.”

“You’re probably right.” Reaching into a pocket of his slacks, he took out an ultra-thin digital camera. “Evidence,” he drawled, grinning. “I’m certain they’re going to want to prove to their friends that they do know Keith Ennis.”

“I hope it doesn’t backfire on them.”

Griffin’s expression mirrored confusion. “Why would you say that?”

“If they tell everyone their uncle’s on a first-name basis with a major league ballplayer, some students can get jealous. I’ve seen it happen enough at my school with a few situations escalating into bullying and fighting.”

“I’ve seen that happen, too, but thankfully most are good kids.”

“Speaking of good—you know the girls adore you, Griffin.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “They don’t adore me any more than they love you, Belinda. I’m sure they see me as Santa or a magic genie that grants their wishes. It’s you who must deal with them twenty-four-seven, but instead of withering they’ve bloomed. I know they miss their mom and dad, but you’ve saved them.”

Belinda didn’t know why, but she felt as if she was holding her breath and waiting for the time when one or both of the twins would experience a meltdown. “You have to remember that they were in therapy only days after we buried Donna and Grant,” she reminded Griffin. “I don’t want to think of what would’ve happened to them if they hadn’t had professional help.”

Griffin shook his head. “Therapy aside, it’s you and how you relate to them that makes the difference. I overheard them talking about how much they love mani-pedies—whatever that is—and getting their hair done every week.”

“A mani-pedi is a manicure and pedicure. I go every week, so I just take them along with me.”

“Stop trying to minimize your importance in their lives, Belinda,” Griffin chided softly. “You’re not Donna, but she knew what she was doing when she asked you to take care of her children. In other words, Belinda Eaton, you are an incredible mother, and I hope Mr. Sunshine knows how lucky he is to have someone like you.”

Belinda was caught off guard by the warmth in Griffin’s voice and wanted to tell him that he didn’t have to concern himself with Raymond Miller. “I need to tell you—” The chiming of the doorbell preempted what she was going to tell Griffin about the man who was her friend and not her lover.

Griffin pressed his face to Belinda’s soft, sweet-smelling hair. “I’ll be right back.”

She stood in the middle of the living room staring at the massive floral arrangement on an antique English pedestal table until delicious wafting aromas coming from the kitchen propelled her into action, and she turned and made her way toward the rear of the house.

The night before, Sabrina had admitted that she liked staying over in her uncle’s house because it made her feel as if she’d stepped back in time. What the teenager liked in particular was that although Griffin had enclosed the back porch, it was still accessible through the French doors. When the doors were open the space was perfect for dining al fresco. Belinda viewed it as the perfect place for having tea or simply enjoying the landscape while rocking on the porch.

She stopped at the entrance to the kitchen. A toque-wearing chef, wielding a whisk with a vengeance in a large sauté pan, ordered a waiter to bring him a platter. “Today, please!” he drawled impatiently.

Leaving as quickly and quietly as she'd entered, Belinda reversed course, passing the dining room where the bartender was setting up. Griffin had decided on buffet-style service because it was more in keeping with the casualness of the gathering. His invitations stressed casual attire, and anyone wearing a tie or suit would be ushered out the door.

Grant and Donna had been frequent guests at the social gatherings Griffin hosted at his house, but Belinda always had responded by politely declining. At first the invitations slowed in frequency then they stopped entirely. Donna always called to tell her who she'd met, or brag about the quality of the food, then ended the conversation with "You don't know what you were missing." Belinda's rejoinder was always, "What I don't know, I don't miss."

Avoiding her brother-in-law had strained their relationship. She'd spent years believing what she read in the tabloids, and never bothered to ask Griffin if the stories about him were true. She'd fallen victim to a very human fault—believing what you read.

A deep voice, on an even lower register than Griffin's, reached her as she walked into the living room. Keith Ennis appeared taller, larger than the images she'd seen on television. She'd suggested Sabrina and Layla remain in their rooms until the ballplayer's arrival.

Griffin approached Belinda, beckoning. "Come, darling. I want to introduce you to a client who's also a good friend. Keith, this is Belinda Eaton. Belinda, Keith Ennis."

Belinda was too starstruck to register Griffin's endearment as she smiled at the larger-than-life superstar ballplayer. His sparkling raven-black eyes, shaved head, mahogany-hued smooth skin and trimmed silky mustache and goatee were mesmerizing.

She offered him her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Keith raised the delicate hand that he had swallowed up in his much larger one. "I can't believe Rice has been holding out on me," he crooned, winking, his baritone voice lowering seductively. "Where has he been hiding you?" he asked Belinda.

A rush of heat stung her cheeks. "I've been around."

Griffin looped a proprietary arm around Belinda's waist. "Sorry, man, but she's not available."

"If the lovely lady is unavailable, then why isn't there a ring on her finger, Rice?"

Belinda grimaced when she felt the bite of Griffin's fingers as they tightened on her waist. She flashed Keith a tight smile. "Please excuse me. I'm going upstairs to get Sabrina and Layla so they can meet you before the others arrive."

Belinda mentioning his meeting Griffin's nieces reminded Keith why he'd come to his attorney's home. His team had played a Saturday afternoon game, and he'd planned to unwind at his condo with the woman who usually kept him occupied during home games. However, Griffin got him to change his mind and his plans when he gave him a generous check as a donation to his alma mater.

Keith's gaze lingered briefly on Belinda Eaton before coming back to rest on Griffin's scowling face. "Look, man, I know I was out of line."

"You were." The two words were cold, exacting.

Keith recoiled as if he'd been struck. "Will you accept my apology?"

The seconds ticked off, the silence swelling and growing more uncomfortable with each tick. Griffin's face was a glowering mask of controlled fury. His client had stepped over the line. He'd taken Keith Ennis, a naturally talented athlete from a disadvantaged Baltimore neighborhood to instant superstar status with a five-year multimillion-dollar contract, along with high-profile product endorsements.

Griffin was normally laid-back, quick to smile, slow to anger and willing to give anyone three strikes. Unfortunately, Keith Ennis had just used up one of his three. He angled his head. "That's something I'm going to have to think about. Can I get you something to drink?" he asked in the same breath.

Keith flashed a tremulous grin. "Sure."

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Layla and Sabrina stared at their sport idol, tongue-tied as Griffin snapped pictures of them shaking hands with Keith, flanking him when they posed as a group picture and when he autographed their brag books. The ballplayer, seeking redemption for his misstep, signed autographs for their teachers and fellow students. Clutching their treasured memorabilia to their chests, the sisters raced upstairs to text their friends.

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Griffin and Belinda became the consummate host and hostess as they greeted guests with exotic cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. The Moroccan-style meatballs, deviled eggs with capers, mini crab cakes and beluga caviar on toast points were the highlight of the cocktail hour.

It didn't take Belinda long to understand why her sister liked socializing at Griffin's house. Excellent food, top-shelf liquor, friendly, outgoing guests and an attentive host made for certain success.

The thirtysomething crowd included college classmates, frat brothers and three newlywed couples. She knew a few of the guests were surprised to see her as hostess, but they soon got used to it. The music, which included old-school and new-school jams, had several couples up and dancing when everyone filed out of the dining room to the back porch.

It was ten o'clock when Keith bid his farewell, saying he had to get up early for batting practice. Others followed suit over the next hour. Griffin paid and tipped the bartender, the chef and waitstaff, then led Belinda out to the patio, seating her on a cushioned chaise. The outdoor fireplace emitted enough heat to warm the mid-forty-degree temperature. Dozens of candles lining a long wooden table flickered, competing with millions of stars in the clear night sky.

Belinda slipped off her heels. "I'm going to need a throw or a blanket," she said, as Griffin joined her on the chaise.

Griffin nuzzled her neck. "I'll warm you up." Without warning, he effortlessly lifted her so that she sat between his outstretched legs. "Lean back against me."

Fatigue swept over her, and she closed her eyes. "It was a nice little get-together."

"It was nice," Griffin said in agreement, as he, too, closed his eyes.

She opened her eyes and peered up at him over her shoulder. "Some of your friends were somewhat surprised when you introduced me as your hostess. Were they perhaps expecting to see you with some other woman?"

Griffin opened his eyes. "I don't know what they expected, Belinda, because I've never concerned myself with how other folks see me. If I did, then I'd stop being who I am. And I deliberately didn't introduce you as my brother's sister-in-law because I felt it was none of their business."

"Did you tell Keith that I'm the girls' aunt?"

"Nope."

"Do you plan on telling him?"

"Nope."

"Why are you so monosyllabic?"

Using a minimum of effort and movement, Griffin changed positions until Belinda lay under him. "I don't feel very much like talking, Miss Eaton, because I'd rather do this."

She knew Griffin was going to kiss her, but was helpless to stop him. The truth was she didn't want to stop him. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd replayed him kissing her over and over—in and out of bed. Griffin had ignited a spark that grew hotter and more intense each time she saw him. A part of her wanted him to stay away—the sensible Belinda. Then there was the other Belinda—the sexually frustrated woman who hadn't slept with a man in three years.

Blood-pounding desire rushed through her veins. Her lips parted, she swallowed Griffin's warm, moist breath as his mouth covered hers in a hungry joining that left them tearing at each other's clothes. Belinda grasped the back of his sweater, pulling it up from his waist and baring flesh in her

journey to get to know every part of Griffin Rice. She'd become addicted to him, his scent and the hard contours of his toned, slender body.

Griffin kissed Belinda with an outward calm that belied his hunger to take her—on the chaise and without protection. One hand slipped under her blouse, while the other slid up her inner thighs. The heat coming from between her legs was an inferno. Belinda was on fire, the flames spreading and racing out of control. He fastened his mouth over a breast, the nipple hardening when he suckled her through the cup of her lace bra.

“You are exquisite,” he whispered, pressing his groin to hers so she could feel how much he wanted and needed her.

Looping her arms under Griffin's shoulders, Belinda held on to him as if he were her lifeline while waves of ecstasy rocked her like a ship in a storm. He suckled one breast, then the other before trailing moist kisses down her belly. She was hot, then cold as Griffin released the zipper on her slacks, pushing them down her thighs; his head replaced his hands as he pressed his face to the apex of her legs.

Griffin inhaled the womanly essence through the scrap of silk. His longing to be inside Belinda bordered on insanity, but sanity won out when he moved up the length of her quivering body, his heart pounding in his chest like a jackhammer. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the chaise.

“One of these days we're going to finish this,” he promised.

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