

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRENDA
JACKSON

Perfect

MOMENTS

A BRENDA JACKSON PRESENTS NOVEL

Perfect Moments

BRENDA JACKSON



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**AUTHOR BRENDA JACKSON BRINGS YOU THREE
UNFORGETTABLE STORIES UNDER HER LOVE,
PASSION AND PROMISE IMPRINT**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE MAN WHO WILL
ALWAYS AND FOREVER BE THE LOVE OF MY LIFE
GERALD JACKSON, SR.**

FEBRUARY 11, 1951 - DECEMBER 15, 2013

THE PERFECT SERIES

Perfect Timing

Perfect Fit

Perfect Moments

The Makeover

This story is dedicated to my readers, who after reading **PERFECT FIT**, wanted Parnell and Rose's story. This one is for you.

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that
getteth understanding.

Proverbs 3:13

ONE

Parnell Cabot turned around from his kitchen sink and glanced over at the woman sitting at the table. For the last three weeks Rose Woods had been his daughters' babysitter.

He could still remember the day she had first approached him about the job. She had shown up at the job site where he and his men had been hard at work, trying to meet the completion deadline for his employer's, The Regency Corporation, latest business venture, a ski resort here in Anchorage, Alaska.

Curvy and attractive, she'd nearly caused havoc that day when she had shown up looking too sexy to be on a job site surrounded by over forty of his men, many who were single. Even the married ones had stopped work to stare. He'd figured then the woman was going to be trouble.

Surprisingly, that day she had been a godsend, at least to him. After explaining that she was in Anchorage to spend time with her good friend, Sage Dunbar, and that she had heard about his plight. He needed someone dependable to take care of his four-year-old twin daughters while he worked. His live-in babysitter/housekeeper, Mrs. Summers, had left town after a few weeks on the job when her sister had taken ill.

All the babysitters he'd hired since Mrs. Summers hadn't been dependable, and he'd been toying with the decision of whether to send the girls back home to Detroit for his parents to take care of them. That was something he hadn't wanted to do. Joya and LaToya were his life. Just a few days shy of celebrating their first birthday, their mother had gotten killed in a car accident. Even now he could remember that day three years ago when he'd lost his wife and he'd been constantly battling both pain and loneliness since.

He glanced at his watch. He was away from the job site on his lunch break and he knew Rose had a good reason for asking to meet with him so he might as well let her have her say, although he figured he knew the reason. He had mentioned to her on yesterday about the phone call he'd gotten from Mrs. Summers. The older woman was to have returned to town next week, but had called to advise him of her decision not to return to Anchorage after all. She would remain in Florida with her sister.

Rose had volunteered to be his babysitter only temporarily, to help him out until Mrs. Summers returned. He had hated telling her on yesterday that Mrs. Summers wouldn't be returning and had asked if she would consider staying on for a while until he found a replacement for her. She had told him that she would let him know today whether she could continue to work for him or not.

Parnell knew that he couldn't expect her to keep his girls forever. When they had originally met eight months ago at a business meeting, she'd been earning a huge salary as an advertising consultant at a major marketing firm in Charlotte. She had resigned after she and a new boss couldn't see eye to eye. It would be just a matter of time before she would leave Anchorage to return to Charlotte to begin interviewing for another job. And he doubted she would have a problem getting one. In the short while he'd known her, he could tell she was smart, highly intelligent, well-educated, and very attractive.

Very attractive.

When considering all her attributes that was the one thing that always came to him regarding her. Rose Woods was a very attractive woman. He suddenly felt a stirring in his gut when she looked over her coffee at him. As usual, he found himself tensely aware of her, something he'd never been crazy about, and tried like heck to downplay the physical attraction whenever the two of them were alone together. During the three weeks she'd been the girls' babysitter their relationship had remained professional. Even those few times she'd slept over because of bad weather.

“I’m glad you could take the time to meet with me, Parnell. I know how busy you are.”

Her words interrupted his thoughts and he took his own cup of coffee and moved over to the table to sit across from her. “No problem.” After taking a sip of coffee, he asked, “So what have you decided?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. She was nervous about something. He could sense it. His stomach knotted with panic at the thought that perhaps she was getting ready to tell him that not only could she not continue to be the girls’ babysitter but that she couldn’t hang around while he found a replacement. If that were the case, he didn’t know what he would do.

As building foreman for the Regency Corporation, he had an important responsibility in making sure they met contract deadlines. He would be forced to send the girls back to his parents. The thought of doing that killed him inside. He loved his daughters and wanted them with him. He needed them with him. With Becky gone the girls were all that he had.

He inhaled deeply, thinking if Rose had bad news to deliver, she might as well get it out. Then he would somehow come up with a plan to deal with it. “Rose?”

She placed her coffee cup down and met his gaze. “I have a proposal that I think would solve both of our problems.”

Parnell lifted a brow. He knew he had a problem but hadn’t known she had one. Switching his gaze from her to his coffee cup, he asked. “And what’s your problem?”

He could see out the corner of his eye how she shifted around in her chair and wondered again just what had her so nervous. He was about to ask her about it when she began talking.

“My problem is that at twenty-eight I don’t know what I want to do in life. Granted, I’ve worked at the Demark Group for a number of years earning a good income, but now I’m not sure if I want to go back into the advertising field. I’ve even

thought about taking classes at a university somewhere to earn another degree, one for something other than in business.”

He lifted a brow. “A degree in what then?”

She shrugged. “Computer technology, perhaps. I’ve discovered I’m good at computers.”

He could believe that since in just the short while she’d been there, she’d taught Joya and LaToya about them. It wasn’t uncommon to come home from work and find them taking turns playing educational games on his personal computer.

“So,” he said slowly. “Did you call this meeting to let me know that you’ve decided to leave Anchorage to go back to college somewhere?”

“No. Like I said, I called this meeting to present a proposal that I think will help the both of us. Again, I’m not sure returning to college is what I want to do, it’s just one of the options I’m considering.”

“Oh.” Now he was more confused than ever. “Then maybe you need to just come out and tell me what this proposal is about, Rose.”

He watched as she put aside her coffee cup and placed both hands on the table. He glanced down at them. Not for the first time he thought she had nice hands, smooth and soft looking. And he knew that to be true since he’d accidentally touched them one day while she’d been helping him give the girls a bath. It was a day they hadn’t liked the thought of their play time being cut short and had tried giving him a hard time.

“My proposal is this... ”

He moved his gaze from her hands back to her face and thought again it was very attractive. She had an oval face with shoulder length dark brown hair and skin the color of cocoa. Then there was her perky nose and a set of full lips that blended in well with her other features. What he always found captivating was her eyes. They were light brown with beautiful long lashes covering them. But then her lips were

pretty sexy too, he thought, shifting his gaze from her eyelashes to her mouth.

“... And so, considering all of that ... I think the best thing to do is get married.”

His gaze snapped from her mouth to her eyes upon hearing the M word. Evidently, he'd missed something along the way. “Excuse me. Did you just say something about getting married?” he asked, hoping he had misunderstood the part he remembered hearing. Hell, he hadn't known she had a boyfriend and here she was breaking the news to him that she was getting married.

She gave him a look that indicated he'd been caught not paying attention. Okay, he would admit that. He had been too busy checking her out for the umpteenth time. Already he had escalated her features from just being very attractive to simply gorgeous. The baby blue sweater she was wearing did something to her eyes. Made them even more beautiful.

When she was certain she had his attention, she said, “All right then, I'll start over. My proposal is this. I'm not sure what I want to do with my future yet. However, the one thing I am sure about is that I've grown attached to your girls. In just three weeks, Joya and LaToya have come to mean a lot to me. They are so very precious.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome. And after what you told me yesterday, about your former babysitter not returning, I knew I had to come up with a plan; one that would benefit us all. So, my plan is this.”

He watched her hesitate for a second and then she said, “I will agree to continue to be the girls' babysitter as well as your housekeeper.”

He gave a relieved sigh but from the look on her face he figured there was more to it than that. Besides, she had yet to explain the part about her getting married. “And?” he asked.

“And I would like to make the position a permanent one. That way, no matter where your job might take you, you'll

never have to worry about finding someone to take care of the girls.”

He lifted a brow, not believing what she was saying. He'd already heard from Gabe Blackwell, one of the owners of the Regency Group, that the company's next project would more than likely take him to California for about six months where they would be building a new mall. “You would travel with us?” he asked to make sure he had heard her correctly.

“Yes.”

“No matter where we go?”

“Yes. No matter where you go, I'll be there for you and the girls,” she said. She took a sip of her coffee and then added, “I understand that because of your job you travel quite a bit. It's important to keep in mind that in another year, the girls will need to start kindergarten. However, with your work schedule and since you travel around so much, getting them situated into anyone's school system will be hard. I've checked into the possibility of home school for them. I would enjoy doing something like that since my minor in college was education.”

Parnell leaned back in his chair, not knowing what to say. The thought that Rose was willing to do all that for him and the girls left him totally speechless and deeply touched. What she'd said was true. His job included travel, sometimes from one part of the country to the other. And more than anything he wanted his girls with him all the time. They would need to start school soon. He hadn't thought that far ahead yet. In a way he'd been almost afraid to, not sure how things would pan out from job to job. His parents were more than happy to take care of the girls while he worked and traveled, but they were his responsibility. They were his life.

He couldn't help but smile as relief flooded his insides. Things were definitely looking a lot better than they had on yesterday, after he'd gotten the call from Mrs. Summers. But still he had a feeling Rose's offer wasn't being made out of the goodness of her heart. There had to be more to it.

Earlier, she had mentioned something about getting married. Did she plan to suggest that her fiancé move in with

them? How else would she be free to travel with him and the girls? And if that was the case, what sort of man would agree with such a thing? What did he do for a living?

An unsettling thought pricked his mind. Was she involved with one of his men and he hadn't known it? He knew there were a number of them interested in her. A few had even asked her out, but she'd refused by saying she was not interested in dating. Had she been secretly seeing one of them? If so, then that would explain why she felt she could follow him and the girls wherever they went. Usually, the same group of men worked for him and were a part of any project he headed.

Deciding she was the only one who could provide answers to his questions, he said, "A few moments ago, you mentioned something about getting married."

He could tell by the way she was taking her fingers and tracing around the placemat that his statement had made her nervous again. She met his gaze. "In order to be able to be there for you and the girls like that means I'll have to get married."

Parnell nodded. So, she was involved with one of his men. For some reason finding out was like a sucker punch to his gut. He hadn't known. He had no idea. He shouldn't rightly care, but he did. "Who is it?" he heard himself asking. "Who's the man you plan to marry?"

She hesitated for a brief moment, and then said, "You, Parnell. I will need to marry you."

TWO

Rose leaned back in her chair and watched the different emotions that crossed Parnell's face. First, he blinked like there was some mistake, and he hadn't heard her correctly. And then there was shock, as if what she'd said was the most outlandish thing he'd ever heard. And then there was anger. The latter is what she was seeing now more than anything. He was no longer sitting down. He was now out his chair staring at her.

“Rose, are you crazy? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.”

She immediately took offense to what he said. “Please keep your voice down. The girls are still taking their nap,” she hissed through her teeth as she also stood and placed her hands on her hips to glare at him. “And no, I am not crazy. I merely racked my brain yesterday trying to come up with something that would help you. Think about it, Parnell. You get to gain a lot more out of a marriage between us than I do.” She could tell by the look that appeared on his face that now it was his time to take offense.

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

She inhaled deeply, deciding to choose her words carefully since she hadn't meant it the way it sounded. “What I mean is that I'm a single woman walking into a marriage that would require a lot of responsibility on my part, Parnell. It would be responsibility that I would not mind taking on, but it will be a lot of responsibility just the same. The worst thing you can do right now for your girls is play musical chairs with a babysitter. They are at the age where they need someone constant in their lives. Someone who they know will be there when you aren't. Someone they can grow to depend on. That's all I'm saying.”

She sank back down in her chair when he moved to walk over to the window and look out. She knew he was thinking about what she had said. Moments later he turned around. “But why do we have to get married? Why can’t I just hire you to travel with me and take care of the girls?”

“Because there isn’t a guarantee that one day you won’t decide to get married and your future wife will see me as a threat and wouldn’t want me around any longer. And then it will be too late.”

He looked at her and raised a dark brow. “Too late for what?”

“To become detached.” She knew she had to explain things to him. Maybe then he would understand. “Years ago, I dated a divorced guy who had full custody of his two-year old son. While Mark and I dated, Little Mark became the world to me, and I always figured because Mark and I had such a good relationship that I would eventually become Little Mark’s stepmother. One day I found out that while I was home being the pretend wife to Mark and a mother to Little Mark, that Mark was out seeing other women. When I confronted him about it, he said I was being too possessive and broke things off. Ending our affair wasn’t so bad but what really tore me up was losing Little Mark. I had begun to think of him as mine.”

She inhaled deeply. “I couldn’t go through something like that again, Parnell. I can’t travel around the country with you and have you come home one day to announce I need to leave because you’ve become involved with someone.”

“That won’t happen because I don’t ever plan on marrying again,” he said gruffly. “I never wanted another wife after Becky and planned to stay a widower for life.”

“And what about your lady-friends? What happens if one of them thinks it’s time for the two of you to get serious?”

He frowned. “I don’t have any lady-friends, at least not the way you’re referring. I haven’t been involved with anyone, seriously or otherwise, since my wife died three years ago. My girls are the only female companionship I need.”

“You’re saying that now, but that might change. Mark claimed he would be a divorcee for life. However less than a year after we split, he had remarried,” she said softly. “I can’t take that chance. I can see myself getting attached to Joya and LaToya just like I did to Little Mark.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, he just glanced down as if studying his work boots and then he lifted his head and met her gaze and asked, “What if I were to go along with what you’re proposing? Exactly what type of relationship do you see us having?”

“I would be a good mother to your girls and -”

“I’m talking about us, Rose. You and I.”

Rose tried to ignore the heat that had started in the lower part of her stomach. Parnell Cabot was an extremely good-looking man. She had thought that the first time she’d seen him almost eight months ago when her employer had sent her and Sage to a seminar here in Anchorage to represent the company. He was tall, nearly six-three if she had to guess, and he was well built with broad shoulders and a nice pair of lean hips. From the first, what had captivated her most was the color of his eyes, a color so dark it reminded her of charcoal. Then there was his hair, neatly trimmed and cut low on his head; his high cheekbones; and what she thought was a beautiful pair of full lips. Last but not least, was the coloring of his skin, a deep, rich chocolate brown.

She knew he was thirty-eight, ten years older than she was. And he always came across as a kind and caring person who loved his daughters. She also knew he was highly respected by the men who worked for him. And she believed he was a man with strong values. He attended church regularly and from the three weeks she had been around him, she noticed that he didn’t drink, smoke or swear.

“Rose?”

“Yes?”

“You haven’t answered me yet. I inquired as to just what type of relationship you envision the two of us having?”

She nervously licked her lips, knowing he deserved an answer. “I can see our relationship becoming a relatively normal one ... after a while, of course. Once we really get to know each other. I’m twenty-eight so at some point in time, hopefully before I’m too old to consider it, I’d love to have a child of my own.”

Parnell frowned. “Don’t you think getting married to me will cheat you out of the chance of ever meeting the guy who is really your Mr. Right? Someone who won’t already have all those responsibilities you’ll be assuming if you married me?”

She shrugged. “No. I’ve done the dating scene, more than I care to remember. Last year I made a number of important changes in my life and one of those was giving up men who meant me no good. I haven’t dated anyone seriously or otherwise for quite some time.” From his expression she could tell he knew just what she was trying to say. In other words, she hadn’t been intimate with anyone since then. She’d been celibate.

Silence stretched between them and then Parnell spoke again. “Look, I don’t know what to tell you other than I don’t ever plan to marry or get serious about anyone until possibly after the girls are grown and have spouses of their own. I appreciate your offer, but I can’t take you up on it. As much as I need help with the girls, I don’t want a wife. I’ve had one and she couldn’t ever be replaced.”

He then glanced at his watch. “I’m sorry, but I need to leave and get back to work.”

And she watched as he opened the door and walked out.

THREE

Parnell slid behind the steering wheel of his truck wondering if he'd dreamed the entire scene that had just played out with Rose. What on earth could she have been thinking to come up with some kind of proposal like that? People didn't get married just for the convenience of doing so. Did they? What happened to people marrying for love? His parents had married for love over forty years ago. He then thought about the original owners of the Regency Group, Omar and Joella Blackwell. They had been married for just as long and he was certain they had married for love as well.

He smiled when he thought of the Blackwells. The company had been run by Omar when Parnell had first been hired right out of college with a construction management degree. After less than a year he resigned to serve his country in the Marines and had remained there for five years. At twenty-eight he had returned home to Detroit and resumed employment with the Blackwells.

At that time, Omar was grooming his only son, Gabriel, as well as another man about Gabriel's age who had begun working for the company by the name of Christopher Chandler, to take things over when Omar retired. Omar had retired a few years ago leaving Gabe and Christopher in charge. And they had taken the Regency Group into an entirely new direction. The Regency Group was no longer a regional operation.

Within the past five years it had become known world-wide and had built numerous upscale shopping malls, industrial office parks and department stores all over the United States. Their biggest contract to date was the project they were presently working on here in Anchorage, a multimillion-dollar ski resort called Eden. So far everything

was going well for the project and even with the bad weather they would occasionally encounter, there was no doubt in Parnell's mind that they would finish the resort on time.

He had worked for the Regency Group for over ten years and during that time work had always been steady. Now they were always moving around, from location to location, finishing one project and starting on another. Things had been great when Becky had been alive, and he had looked forward to always returning home and spending time with his family. But now he wanted his family – namely the girls – to travel with him. Those types of arrangements had been hard because of babysitting issues while he worked. Rose had offered him a solution to that problem if he were to take it.

When his truck came to a stop at a traffic light, Parnell rubbed his jaw with his hand. Rose was right. The girls were getting older and would need to start school pretty soon. Usually a job project took four to six months to complete, sometimes longer. That meant he would always be on the go, constantly moving around from place to place. That sort of living arrangement didn't offer a lot of stability to a child. It was worse than being a military brat. At least they got to remain in one place a lot longer than six months. He enjoyed having the girls with him and looked forward to coming home each day knowing they were there.

His thoughts then shifted back to Rose. Mrs. Summers had done a great job taking care of the girls before she'd left town, but he would be the first to admit that Rose was doing an even better job. She spent quality time with them. Once a week, weather permitting, they would go on a field trip someplace – usually to the library, the museum, a movie or to the mall. One day she had even brought the girls out to the job site so they could see where their daddy worked and get an idea of what he did for a living.

And she included a lot of educational enrichments for the girls. In addition to teaching them how to use the computer, she was teaching them how to speak Spanish, which was a second language she mastered, as well as how to play the violin, something else she did well.

The girls were always kept busy in a good way. Usually after he got in from work and spent quality time with them, by eight o'clock they would be in bed and fast asleep. And according to Joya and LaToya, there was never a dull moment in the Cabot household, and they thought Rose was a lot of fun. They were simply crazy about her. Rose indicated she was getting attached to his daughters. Well, he knew they were getting attached to her as well.

Even worse, he had gotten attached to her.

Over the past three weeks he had gotten used to coming home and her being there. Usually, she would have dinner prepared and was ready to leave once he got home. And she returned every morning before he left at six. On a few occasions, due to bad weather, she'd had to stay overnight. During those times she had slept in the guest room, located on the other side of the house. But each time he had been fully aware that she was there, sleeping under his roof.

By the time Parnell had made it to the job site, he couldn't help but admit to himself that one of the main reasons he was uncomfortable with Rose's proposal was that not only had he gotten attached to her, but he was attracted to her. She was the first woman to actually grab his attention since Becky. Although he knew that Becky would want him to be happy and to get on with his life, even after three years he just couldn't let go of the love he had lost and make the move to do so.

He grabbed his hard hat off the seat beside him and put it on thinking that it had taken Rose a lot of guts to come up with that proposal, and a part of him admired her for it. He also felt bad that past relationships that had gone wrong in her life had driven her to the point where she would willingly consider a loveless marriage.

Parnell inwardly flinched when he recalled how he'd asked her if she was crazy for coming up with the proposal when she'd only been thinking about the girls. She had been right to say that he would be getting a lot more from the arrangement than her. She was a single woman, a gorgeous one at that, and she had a lot going for her. For her to be willing to be tied

down to him and the girls, while moving from place to place, was a lot to take on.

Even though he hadn't changed his mind about not going along with her idea, he owed her an apology for the way he had reacted to her presentation. He would definitely apologize when he saw her later.

• • •

“And they lived happily ever after.” Rose smiled after reading the last line of the story for the girls. She closed the book and could tell from the smiles on their faces they had enjoyed it.

“Will you read us another story, Rose?” LaToya asked eagerly, jumping up and down.

“Okay, one more story and then it's time for your Spanish lessons,” she said pulling another book out of the pile beside her. “And then after that, the two of you can help me prepare dinner.”

The girls had awakened a half-hour ago and had asked that she read them a story. She had planned to take them to the library, but the forecasters predicted a snow-storm might be headed their way. She appreciated Joya and LaToya's enthusiasm for the written word. As a child she like listening to stories and reading as well.

An hour later Rose stood at the stove making a pot of chili while the girls sat at the kitchen table working on their various puzzles. The extent of their help with dinner was limited to preparing the yeast rolls. Since it reminded them of playing with their Play-Doh, it was a task they thoroughly enjoyed, and Rose was always amazed at how well they worked together.

She was even more amazed that she could immediately tell the identical twins apart when at times Parnell had a hard time doing so. Needless to say, the girls occasionally enjoyed pulling a fast one over on their daddy, but when it came to her, they knew not to try it.

Putting the chili on simmer, she walked away from the stove and over to the window to look out. She had no reason to doubt the weather report that there would be a lot of snow falling tonight. That's the one thing she had discovered about Anchorage since arriving a month ago. It always seemed to snow even when you least expected it. She had gotten a call from Sage to let her know she had arrived in Detroit and was determined to talk to Gabe when she saw him tomorrow night at his grandparents' anniversary party. Rose hoped everything worked out for Sage since she knew just how much she loved Gabe and their breakup was nothing more than a misunderstanding.

Rose then thought about her own personal situation. Although she was a little torn, she couldn't blame Parnell for his reaction to her proposal. In a way, her offer had been a little outlandish, but still, if he would just think about it and weigh everything that she was offering him, he would see what all the benefits entailed.

She had known from the first after meeting Parnell at that seminar here in Anchorage almost eight months ago, and learning that he was a widower, that he was still carrying a torch for his dead wife. At the time it didn't bother her because she had a life of her own and it didn't include getting interested in a widower; especially one with children.

But that was before she had made changes in her life; especially her lifestyle. Like she had told Parnell, she had given up on men who meant her no good. In fact, she had given up on men period. She wasn't looking for a marriage filled with love. If she was involved in one where the two people respected each other, then that would be just fine with her. Unlike the story she had read earlier to the girls, she no longer believed in happy endings.

However, she did believe in mutual respect and there had been something about Parnell that had stood out from the first moment she had met him. He had been at the opening reception for the seminar, a lavishly decorated affair where the attendees had been expected to be immaculately dressed. Parnell had been standing across the room alone, looking as

handsome as any one man could look, dressed in a nice pair of dress slacks and a dinner jacket. For some reason she could tell he felt uncomfortable being among such elegance.

The next night she and Sage joined Gabe and Parnell for dinner. During dinner she and Parnell had discussed a number of things and she had learned a lot about him. He had even admitted, just like she had suspected, that he had felt out of place at the dinner party the night before, and that he would have much preferred being surrounded by steel beams, concrete and cement slabs than the expensive looking china, crystal-stemmed wine glasses and stylish looking furniture.

From her conversations with him over dinner, she could tell that Parnell Cabot was a charming, soft-spoken, hard-working man who didn't need a lot of trimmings and frills to make him happy. What she'd really liked about him was the fact that unlike a lot of guys she'd dated, he didn't have an arrogant bone in his body. And when he'd told her about his two four-year-old daughters, and how he had lost his wife just days before their first birthday, it had been just heartbreaking to know the depth of what he had lost and her heart had gone out to him.

That was one of the reasons when she'd arrived in Anchorage a month ago, and upon hearing about the fix he was in with a babysitter, she had approached him about the job. After all, it wasn't like she had a lot to do during the day while in town visiting Sage. And she did not regret her decision. Joya and LaToya were adorable little girls. They were well-mannered, which meant Parnell had done a good job in raising them.

She turned around when she heard the back door opening. The happy squeals from Joya and LaToya meant their daddy was home. Rose glanced at the clock on the wall. It was only a little past three. They hadn't been expecting him for another two hours.

• • •

After picking up his daughters in his arms and giving them both tight hugs, Parnell placed them back on the floor and glanced across the room at Rose. Immediately, he felt a thickness in his throat and a familiar stirring low in his gut. She stood at the kitchen window looking so compellingly female wearing a pair of leggings, a pull-over sweater that emphasized her curves and a pair of snow boots. His reaction to her was spontaneous and for a brief moment, he was rendered speechless. She was wearing the same outfit she'd had on earlier, but then he had tried not to stare at her too much. Now he couldn't help himself.

“You're early.”

The sound of her voice floated over to him and he glanced down at the girls, mainly so he could stop staring at her. And then when he felt a little more in control, he looked back at her and said, “The weather report indicates a snow storm might be headed this way so I ended the work day early so the men could get home safely.”

She glanced back out the window. “The snow is coming down pretty heavy. Now that you're home I guess it's best that I head out myself.”

“No. Stay.”

When she lifted her brows, he said, “What I mean is that I'm not sure you should go out in it now. You might as well eat dinner with me and the girls and spend the night.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday.”

He sighed tiredly, knowing why she was reminding him of that fact. Usually when she left on Friday evening, they didn't see her again until Monday, unless they ran into her at church on Sunday.

“I know but with Sage out of town you'll be there all by yourself. Besides, I'd like to talk to you later.”

What he didn't say was, *'after the girls have gone to bed'*. She must have figured out what he couldn't say because after glancing down at the girls and studying them for a moment,

she nodded and said, “Okay. I can leave in the morning after breakfast.”

He couldn't help but smile, feeling somewhat relieved. He did need to apologize to her. “Thanks, Rose.”

“You're welcome.”

FOUR

A few hours later, Rose was staring at the snow through the living room window. It was a huge floor- to-ceiling bay window and she could see a lot more out of it than she could out of the kitchen window. The afternoon was long gone, and the night gripped the sky in a cold clutch. The only light were the stars that dotted the sky and a half moon. But she could clearly see the snowflakes that fell to earth, bathing the area in a mound of what appeared to be white frosting.

A shiver passed through her and she wrapped her arms around herself. Not that she was cold, far from it. Occasionally, her body would remind her of the oath of celibacy she had taken a few months ago. Not being intimate with a man when she felt the need was something new to her, but something she had successfully overcome. She had learned that there was more to life than indulging in meaningless affairs. But she would be the first to admit being celibate had its challenges; especially, when she was constantly around a man like Parnell. The man was oozing in sensual sexuality and didn't even know it.

He probably didn't have a clue of what he did to her every time he would smile over at her, or what seeing him in a pair of jeans and a shirt did to her inner feminine muscles. Just like she was pretty sure that he had no idea of her secret infatuation with him. She knew it was a foolish notion; after all she was far from being a schoolgirl experiencing her first crush. And that in a way was where the problem lay.

She was a woman in the fullest sense of the word. She was the same person who, while a freshman in college, had experienced her first real orgasm with a senior guy, and had felt cheated that she had dated her high school sweetheart for

an entire year and that having sex with him hadn't given her any such pleasure.

Thinking of pleasure immediately made her reflect on Parnell. Dinner with him and the girls had been great. She could tell Joya and LaToya had enjoyed having her there, and she appreciated the extra time she'd gotten to spend with them. It hadn't been the first time she had stayed overnight. In fact after that first hard snow storm a few weeks ago when she had gotten stranded here; and seeing how bad weather could pop up out the clear blue sky, she had made it a point to keep the guest room ready with extra clothing for that possibility.

She turned when she heard Parnell come into the living room. He had been tucking the girls into bed. She watched him cross the room toward her and couldn't help it when her heart began beating a mile a minute or when the sharp talons of feminine responsiveness bit into her all over, making her fully aware of him as a man. Tall, broad-shouldered and very well-built, he looked exceedingly handsome wearing a shirt and a pair of jeans and boots. And as she studied his features, she could tell he was tired. A couple of days this week he and his crew had worked overtime. Periods of bad weather had thrown the project behind schedule, but she knew that he and his men had been trying to make up for lost time.

"Still snowing?" he asked softly, coming to stand beside her to look out the window.

She tried not to feel his heat but couldn't help it. Even without touching her he was able to send warmth through her. It was a drugging sensation and she fought to retain her senses. "Yes, and worse than before," she said, looking up at him.

Then when moments passed and he didn't say anything she said, "You indicated earlier that you wanted to talk to me." She wondered what he wanted to discuss. Surely, she couldn't dare hope that he'd changed his mind since this morning.

He nodded. "Yes, let's sit down for a minute." She crossed the room and moved to the sofa and he sat down in the wingback chair.

Parnell didn't say anything at first. Then he said, "I want to apologize for my outburst at lunch. It was thoughtless and uncalled for and I regret it if I offended you in any way. My only excuse, although a poor one, is that the contents of your proposal caught me by surprise."

She saw the sincerity in his eyes and said, "I understand." And really she did. She hadn't only asked to become a part of his household, she had asked that she be allowed to become enmeshed into their lives and that he one day father her child. He had mentioned something about her being cheated out of the chance to ever find the right guy. The same could be said about her proposal hindering him in finding the right woman. A woman he could fall in love with; a love that could be just as strong and enduring as the one he had with the girls' mother.

"And I owe you an apology as well, Parnell."

"No, you don't. You were only thinking of me and the girls."

She shook her head. "And I was also thinking of myself. I've grown to love Joya and LaToya and it would hurt knowing the three of you had to be separated for any reason."

But what she wouldn't tell him, what she couldn't tell him, was just how much being around the girls had stirred longings within her regarding having a family of her own. She hadn't been able to stop imagining how it would be to have a baby, taking loving care of it and watching it grow up, bathed in her love. She truly believed that she had the ability to make any child a good mother. And it wouldn't be so bad if she didn't hear her biological clock ticking each day, reminding her that at twenty-eight, she didn't have much time left.

"And I do appreciate your concern, Rose, but I have to believe things are going to work out for me and the girls," Parnell said breaking into her thoughts.

"Yes, I'm sure they will, and I want to give you one less thing to worry about by saying I will continue to keep the girls until you find a replacement."

She saw acute heart-felt gratitude in the depths of his eyes at the same time he let go a relieved sigh. “Thanks. I appreciate that. It means a lot. I plan to place an ad in the paper first thing next week. I’m hoping the results will be a lot better than the other times.”

A few moments passed and then he cleared his throat and glanced down at his watch. “It’s getting late and I’m sure you’re tired from today. If the weather clears up tomorrow, I promised the girls that I would take them to the zoo.”

“Umm, that sounds nice.” She knew that at any other time, before their conversation of earlier that day, he would have invited her along, but she sensed that he was too wary to do so for fear she would get the wrong idea about things.

“You’re welcome to come with us if you’d like.”

Now she knew he was only asking to be nice. “Thanks, but I need to go home and do laundry.”

He nodded. “Have you heard from Sage?”

His question made her smile. “Yes, and I think when she sees Gabe tomorrow at his grandparents’ anniversary party, they will work things out between them. At least I hope so.”

Parnell leaned back in his chair. “He loves her.”

“I know,” was her reply, thinking how it would feel to have a man love her as much. “And she loves him. She was just trying to be cautious, not run him off.”

Parnell chuckled. “Trust me, she didn’t run Gabe off. He was just putting distance between them, giving her time to adjust to his feelings. Sometimes it’s best that way.”

“Yes, you’re probably right,” she said quietly, wondering if he had a reason for saying so. She slowly stood. “Like you said earlier, it’s getting late. I’m going to call it a night. Goodnight, Parnell.”

He stood. “Goodnight, Rose.”

• • •

Parnell watched as Rose left the room. He had apologized but for some reason he felt it still may not have been enough. He rubbed his hand down his face, still feeling pretty bad about things. He would never, ever intentionally hurt her. She had come through and helped him out; just minutes before he was about to order plane tickets to take his daughters back home to his parents. And even now Rose was still helping him. She had agreed to watch his girls for three weeks until Mrs. Summers returned, and now with the elderly lady's decision to remain in Florida permanently, he was virtually back where he'd started. But thanks to Rose, he wouldn't be having a panic-attack over it.

He couldn't help but think of how things had been for him over the past three weeks, how much peace and calm that she had brought into his life. He was able to go to work each day knowing his daughters were well cared for and would be there when he returned. And he no longer came home to a messy house since Rose was an extremely neat and clean person. Mrs. Summer's replacements either spent too much time watching soaps every day instead of cleaning or just didn't give a royal damn. More than once, he'd come home from a hard day at the construction site only to spend the majority of the night once the girls had gone to bed, doing household chores since he refused to let his daughters live in an unkept place. His mother had been a stickler when it came to cleanliness and she had passed that trait right on to him. He couldn't help but notice that Rose was now helping in passing it on to his girls. She was teaching them the importance of putting their toys away after they finished playing with them. And making a game of it, she was teaching them the ritual of dusting. They were both proud of the feather dusters Rose had bought for them in their favorite colors.

A part of him wished he could do something for Rose ... something other than what she'd asked for in her proposal. When he had married Becky, he had married for love, and he couldn't see getting married a second time for anything less than that. But he would admit that the thought of having another child had crossed his mind more than once. He and

Becky had always planned on having a big family, at least four kids. Both of them had been their parents' only child and had missed out on the experience of having siblings. Being told they were having twins at the first try had been nothing short of a blessing since multiple births weren't common in either of their families.

He didn't know a lot about Rose's childhood but he could certainly understand her wanting a child of her own. And she was great with kids and would definitely make some child a wonderful mother. He thought about what she had shared with him, regarding that divorced guy she'd gotten mixed up with, and how she had gotten attached to his young son. That had to have been hard on her and just to think the guy up and married somebody else less than a year later. What a jerk. The good thing as he saw it was that Rose, by her own admission, was no longer involved with men, who as she'd put it, meant her no good. He was glad she had made that decision.

He turned his attention to the activities he had planned for the girls on tomorrow if the weather improved. He had been sincere when he'd asked Rose to join them, although he certainly understood if she felt uncomfortable in doing so. If he was conscious of the heated sexual chemistry that often flowed between them then he was certain she was aware of it as well.

It was one of those indefinable things in life that was better left ignored.

• • •

“But Daddy, why can't Rose come with us?”

Rose reached down for her overnight bag, trying to ignore Joya's stubborn wail. Both girls were routinely mild-mannered but once in a while, Joya, the older of the two, would attempt to try everyone's patience. Like she was doing now.

“Sweetheart, I've told you. Rose needs to go home and do laundry.”

“But why can’t she do her laundry here?”

Parnell glanced over at her and Rose knew from the look on his face that he needed her help in making his daughter understand. Sighing deeply, she crossed the room where Parnell sat with his daughters on the sofa. Now she wished once she’d awakened that morning and seen the snowing had stopped, that she would have left before Parnell and the girls had gotten up. Doing so would have avoided all this drama Joya was determined to play out.

“Come here for a second, Joya,” she said softly, calling out to the little girl. She watched as Joya scrambled out of her father’s lap. Rose was not surprised when LaToya followed on her older sister’s heel over to her. She smiled when both girls stood in front of her, gazing up at her expectantly. Joya’s eyes were filled with tears and Rose swallowed the lump in her throat. She remembered the tears that had been in Little Mark’s eyes the last day she had seen him, and his father had unceremoniously announced to him that she was leaving and wouldn’t be coming back.

She hunched down to be eye level with the girls and took a tissue out of her jacket pocket to wipe Joya’s eyes. “You ladies know you’re going to have me to yourselves from Monday through Friday, right?”

Simultaneously, both little girls bobbed their heads up and down.

“And you know Saturday and Sunday is your dad’s time to spend with you. Right?”

“Yes, but why can’t you spend Saturday and Sunday with us, too?” Joya was asking.

“We see you at church on Sundays,” LaToya piped in. “We be wanting you to go home with us then, too. And now we want you to go to the zoo with us today.”

Rose smiled, deciding not to correct the girls’ use of improper grammar like she usually did. “I know, sweetie, but like your dad said, I need to go home and do laundry. I have a lot of clothes to wash.”

“But you can use our washing machine and we can help,” Joya said. She quickly turned to her father. “Can’t she use our washing machine, Daddy?”

Parnell glanced over at Rose and she had a feeling that he wouldn’t be much help. He proved her right when he said, “Yes, she can use our washing machine.”

Rose couldn’t help but shake her head and grin. The look she gave Parnell all but called him a traitor. “But all the dirty clothes I want to wash aren’t here.”

“Then go home and get them and come back,” LaToya implored, like it was as simple as that.

“Or you can go home and wash your clothes after we come from the zoo,” Joya tacked on.

Rose looked at the girls’ desperate expressions, and then she glanced over at Parnell, trying to garner from his features if he preferred not having her come along. She was surprised to see the huge smile that suddenly touched his lips when he said, “It seems my daughters are making it tough for you to say no, Rose. I think Joya’s suggestion might be a good one. Would you mind waiting to do laundry after our zoo trip? The girls would really like for you to come with us.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute. She knew the girls wanted her to come along but what about him? As if he read her thoughts, his smile widened when he said, “And I would love your company as well.”

FIVE

“Thanks for deciding to come, Rose.” Parnell leaned over to whisper in her ear as they made their way around the Siberian tigers’ cage at the Alaska Zoo.

The thirty-acre facility, that had a variety of native wildlife species such as bears, wolves, the musk oxen and reindeer, seemed like the place to be on this particular day. A number of families had decided to take advantage of the better-than-usual weather and spend a day at the zoo. This wasn’t huge by ‘big city’ standards, but Parnell thought the attractions were very rewarding. After a night of snow, it was nice to get out and enjoy the outdoors.

Rose glanced over at him. “You don’t have to thank me, I’m enjoying myself.”

He really hoped that she was. The girls were on their best behavior and had been excited about her decision to join them. They had taken the time to eat lunch at one of the restaurants before Joya and LaToya had talked them into going to watch an attendant feed the seals.

“The girls seem to be enjoying themselves as well,” she said smiling at him.

He glanced at his daughters and watched how they held hands while skipping merrily along, just a few feet in front of them. Chuckling, he said, “Yeah, they’re probably pleased with themselves at how we allowed them to easily manipulate you into coming. At some point we’re going to have to let them know that flashing those baby brown doe eyes won’t always work on us.”

For a heartbeat he didn’t say anything when he realized how what he’d said sounded; what it could have insinuated. Us. There wasn’t an “us” and he needed to be very careful not

to suggest otherwise. For a brief minute he'd made it seem as if the two of them were a couple and that wasn't the case. He glanced over at her as they continued walking. If she'd caught on to his slip, then she wasn't showing it.

"How much longer do you think it will be before Eden is completed?" she asked to break the silence that had developed between them.

He glanced over at her. Met her eyes. Almost drowned in their darkness to the point where he had to blink before answering. "If we keep on schedule, we're looking at another seven to eight months. We knew going in that it would take close to a year to complete things and we're trying hard to stay on schedule."

"Sage showed me the plans. It's going to be a beautiful resort."

"Yes, it will be. John Landmark is going all out to make Eden a spectacular ski resort, one that would outshine even the Vail ski resort. When finished, it's going to be twice as big and have a lot more amenities," he said proudly.

Rose nodded. When they reached an attraction that caught the girls' attention, Parnell and Rose stood back and leaned against a rail. A gust of wind caused the knit hat Rose was wearing to fly off her head and land near her feet. In her haste to get it back, both she and Parnell reached for it at the same time.

Their hands accidentally touched and for a heartbeat neither moved. Their eyes connected and held. Sexual tension, the likes Parnell had never known in his entire lifetime, gripped him—solid as a rock—hard as stone. He breathed in sharply at the same time he heard her release a shaky breath. Of their own accord it seemed, their heads moved in close, then closer, and just when their mouths were about to connect...

"Daddy! Rose! See the elephants!"

The sound of Joya's voice intruded, severed the moment and Parnell drew back. Rose straightened and without glancing

at him she quickly walked over to the girls. “Wow!” she said taking hold of both their hands. “They are big, aren’t they?”

Parnell drew in a deep breath and held it as he straightened and seized a tight hold onto the rail, waiting for the moment to pass. But the thought kept flashing in his mind of how close he and Rose had come to sharing a kiss.

“Daddy, aren’t you going to look at the elephants?”

He turned and sent his gaze directly to his daughters and fought valiantly to keep it off Rose. “Yes, I’m going to look at them.”

And then he walked over to where the three of them stood. When he came close, Rose stepped sideways, out of his way. She had never acted skittish around him before and he knew the reason she was doing so now.

“I think it’s time for us to go,” he said taking both of his daughters’ hands. Surprisingly, neither offered any resistance. He figured mainly because it was nap time and they were getting tired and sleepy.

Neither him nor Rose spoke on the drive from the zoo. Somewhere along the way both girls fell asleep, which gave them ample privacy to address the growing strain between them. But he honestly didn’t know what he could say. He could probably tell her that the subtle scent of her perfume was reminding him of the last time he had been intimate with a woman – three long years ago. He could also tell her that every time he saw her, he was reminded of that fact; especially today. Why, especially today he wasn’t sure. But the one thing he was sure about was that they needed to talk about it.

Parnell glanced over at her. She was looking out the window. Inhaling deeply, he said, “The offer still stands if you want to do laundry over at my place.”

It was then that she turned to look at him, tilted her head as if to get a real good view and said, “No, I think I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I feel like I did,” she countered.

He glanced over at her for a quick moment before putting his gaze back on the road. “Those feelings are wrong, Rose.”

“You sure?”

His car came to a traffic light. Turning toward her, he met her gaze. “Positive.”

Parnell watched as she inhaled deeply before saying, “Still, I think it’s best that I go home.”

He nodded, thinking it was best for her to go home as well.

• • •

Later that night after all her laundry was done and she had taken a nice warm bubble bath and put on her favorite nightie, Rose slipped between the cool, crisp sheets to replay everything that had happened that day at the zoo; especially the part when she and Parnell had come close to kissing.

That hadn’t been the first time sexual tension had flowed between them, but it was the very first time they had come close to acting on it. Her body began to tremble when she imagined how it would have felt for his lips to touch hers ... like they had done so many times in her dreams.

She almost jumped out of her skin when the phone rang and quickly reached over to pick it up. “Hello?”

“Hey, girl, I can’t talk but for a quick second. Gabe’s in the library talking business to a client.”

Rose smiled upon hearing Sage’s voice. “Where are you?”

“I’m still in Detroit. At Gabe’s place. We’ll be flying back to Anchorage on Tuesday.”

“So, I guess you guys straightened things out.”

“Yes, and I want you to be one of the first to know that we’re getting married.”

Rose sat up straight in bed. “Oh, Sage, that’s wonderful. When?”

“Umm, we haven’t set a date yet, but felt since we’re both deeply involved with Eden, we won’t be doing anything before it’s finished. So, we’re possibly looking at another six to eight months. But whatever date we decide on, I want to know if you’ll be one of my bridesmaids?”

Rose smiled through her tears, she was so happy for Sage. “Of course, I will. No matter when you decide to tie the knot, I’ll be there. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks. And how are things going for you and Parnell? Right before I left town you mentioned something about offering him a business deal that he wouldn’t be able to refuse.”

Rose inhaled deeply. She didn’t want to rain on Sage’s parade by saying that Parnell had refused it. “Well, you know how it is, girl. The man won’t know what hit him until it’s too late,” she said blithely.

“Rose, I know you and whatever it is you want you will eventually get it. If it wasn’t for you giving me some good advice, I might have lost Gabe.”

“No, you would not have. He loves you.”

“Yes, and I love him, too.”

A shiver ran through Rose at the degree of love she heard in Sage’s voice. “I hear you. Now get back to your man.”

“I will.”

After she hung up the phone Rose flipped on her back, gazed up at the ceiling and released a long sigh. She couldn’t help wondering what Parnell was doing right now.

• • •

Parnell pushed the covers aside and got out of bed. He couldn’t sleep. Walking out the bedroom and crossing the hall, he softly opened the door to his daughters’ room. The night light reflected on them both, showing they were fast

asleep. Even with the nap they had taken earlier, when bedtime came, they hadn't put up the usual fuss. They had, however, wanted to know if Rose would be coming home with them after church tomorrow.

He sighed as he slowly pulled their door back shut. After today it wouldn't surprise him if Rose didn't come back at all. Wasn't it just yesterday that he had scoffed at her proposal, saying the girls were the only female companionship he needed? Yet today, he had come close to kissing her. He had wanted to kiss her. Hell, he had gotten the urge to do a lot more than that. And all as a result of one innocent touch.

Going back to his room he sat on the edge of the bed, tempted to call her and talk about it. But what could he say? He knew clearly from her proposal just what she wanted. Was it fair to keep her around, wanting her the way he did and not do something about it? At least do the decent thing. If he didn't and continued to drive the both of them demented, was he any better than those other guys she'd been involved with? The ones who had meant her no good?

Maybe today was just a fluke. An off day with his libido. He shook his head as he eased back in bed underneath the covers. Hell, who was he kidding?

• • •

The next day after church Parnell drove to Sage's house, hoping Rose would be there. She hadn't come to church and he had promised the girls that he would check on her. He would admit he had gotten worried himself. Since coming to Anchorage she hadn't missed a Sunday at church, until today. He wondered if her absence had anything to do with yesterday. He hoped not because she had missed a good sermon. It seemed as if Reverend Tyler's message had been directed straight at him. The title had been, *Do You Recognize a Blessing When You See It?*

He let out a sigh when he saw the rental car Rose was using parked in Sage's driveway. Good, she was home. Not fully knowing what he would say, he knew he had to say something. Otherwise, things would continue to be strained and awkward between them and he couldn't let that happen.

Moments later he was knocking on the door, trying to downplay the anticipation of seeing her again. Hadn't he seen her just yesterday? Damn, what was wrong with him? Why was the thought of seeing her again sending his body in a tailspin, making heat course through him at a degree he hadn't felt in years? If ever. He mentally shook himself, trying to get a grip on his emotions as well as his control.

He heard her call out on the other side of the door that she was coming and braced himself. He knew at some point she had looked through the peephole and had seen him. He wondered what she was thinking. She had to be wondering why he was there.

He heard the sound of the door opening slowly, and then she was there, and he could see the surprise on her face. "Parnell?"

"May I come in?"

She looked at him as if she was having difficulty comprehending what he had asked, so he decided to repeat himself. "I asked if it would be okay if I came in. So, we can talk."

She looked past his shoulders and then back at him. "Where are the girls?"

"Mrs. Guthrie asked if they could go home with her after church to play with her little girl. She will bring them home later."

Rose nodded. And then as if she'd made a decision about something, she stepped back to allow him entrance. He tried not to notice the outfit she was wearing, a printed ruffle-front, crinkled shirt that hung low over a tan skirt that stopped just short of her ankles. The wide leather belt around her

emphasized her small waist, and she was wearing boots; a chocolate suede looking pair.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you,” he said, following her into the living room, liking the way the fabric of her skirt moved whenever she did, in a fluid motion that he thought was sexy, definitely arousing.

She glanced over her shoulder at him before taking a seat on the sofa and said, “No, I was just about to read the comics.”

“Oh. You weren’t at church. The girls missed you, and I promised I would check to make sure you were okay,” he said taking a chair across from her.

Waving dismissively, she said, “Well, as you can see, I’m fine.”

Yes, he could definitely see that. “I’ll be sure to tell them.” Then after a brief pause, he said, “But that’s not the only reason I’m here. I think we need to talk about yesterday.”

Rose shrugged. “I thought we did that already and you said I didn’t overstay my welcome.”

“And like I said yesterday, you didn’t. But I think our discussion should extend a little deeper than the issue of you overstaying your welcome, don’t you think?”

Silence stretched between them for a moment and then she said, “Okay, since you think there should be further discussion, I’ll let you go ahead and open it up.”

That was okay with him. The sooner they cleared things up, the better. “All right, then,” he said leaning forward. “I almost kissed you yesterday, at the zoo, in front of the girls, out in public ... and I’m having a hard time dealing with it.”

She stared at him and then turned in her seat to face him fully and said, “And I would have let you kiss me, at the zoo, in front of the girls, out in public and I’m *not* having a hard time dealing with it at all.”

Parnell felt his mouth drop. In fact, he could swear he actually heard it hit the floor. He leaned back, inwardly admitting she had definitely knocked him for a loop. “Okay,

then. Can you tell me why we're dealing with what almost happened on yesterday so differently?" he asked politely.

"I'll be glad to." She leaned forward. "To state it plain and simple, Parnell. You want me but you are too afraid to do anything about it."

• • •

There. She had said it, Rose thought. Now let him deny it. He probably would, once he moved beyond the shock that was reflected in his face. She hadn't expected him to show up here today. In fact, she would eventually have asked for forgiveness from God, for deliberately staying away from church because she wanted to avoid seeing him – at least until she got herself together and figured out a plan. But he had shown up and invaded her space. He'd asked a question and she had given him an answer. Now she would like to see him deal with that!

"You think I want you?" he asked, as if forcing the words out from deep within his throat.

She flashed him a smile. "Yes. If you didn't why would you almost kiss me yesterday, at the zoo, in front of the girls and out in public? Do you deny wanting me?"

"No," he admitted.

"Do you admit to being afraid about doing anything about it?"

He raised a brow. "Anything like what?"

Rose thought on his question and inwardly admitted she had been handling him all wrong. It had taken the conversation she'd had with Sage last night to make her realize it. Before Sage had left for Detroit, Rose had been fired up as to how she would tackle her problem with Parnell. Her plan would be simple. She would present him with a business deal that he couldn't refuse.

Well, he'd done just the opposite and had refused it. But Sage was right, she was a woman who went after what she

wanted and usually got it. She had made the mistake by assuming she should use a different approach on him, one that matched his personality. She hadn't wanted to overwhelm him, so she had tried being mild-mannered when she had presented her proposal. But it seemed a mild-mannered woman wasn't what Parnell needed. He needed a woman who could remind him of what it felt like to be a man. In other words, he needed to be overwhelmed.

"Anything you truly wanted to do," she said, finally answering him. "For example. Here we are. We aren't at the zoo. The girls aren't around. And it's just the two of us in a very private setting."

She stood and placed her hands on her hips. "So why don't we go ahead and do what we almost did on yesterday."

• • •

Parnell stared up at her, and all it took was a quick study of her expression to know she was completely serious. He drew in a deep breath, deciding she had issued a challenge and he would take her up on it. He wasn't afraid to kiss a woman and would admit to having kissed one or two since Becky, when Gabe's mother had fixed him up on a couple of blind dates. But no woman had so much as created an ache with his testosterone. Hadn't even come close. But he had a feeling that kissing Rose was really going to do a job on him.

He stood. "I haven't done any kissing lately so I might be a little bit rusty," he said, taking the few steps to come to a stop in front of her. And without waiting for a response, he pulled her into his arms at the same moment that his mouth swooped down on hers.

SIX

Rose's lips parted on a startled sigh and that was all the opening Parnell needed. Funny, he thought, to feel like you were coming home to a place you had never been. To feel you were in heaven while right here on earth.

He knew that later, in the privacy of his bedroom, he would recall all of this. He would drag every single moment from his memory and relish every provocative detail – like the way his hands tightened around her waist, drawing her even closer to him; the way his mouth was ravenous, seemingly insatiable on hers; and the way his tongue latched onto hers, mingled and tangled with a possessiveness that actually had his heart feeling like it was leaping out of his chest.

And then there was the way she looped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with a hunger that matched his own. He knew without a doubt that he had never embarked upon anything so powerful in his entire life; never had he shared anything so profound. Passion began rising to a peak that was destined to explode from a taste so addictive, he could only yearn for more. He wanted to draw back but instead he inched closer and became aware of his erection, full and hard, pressed against her.

He wanted to do more than kiss her. The state of his body was making that exceedingly clear, but a part of his mind was determined to keep it in check, fighting the temptation with everything he had. So, he continued to kiss her, with everything he could, sinking deeper into her mouth, tasting as much of her as possible. Intensely focused on doing just that.

Parnell felt her quivering in his arms and his pulse rate increased. He savored the pleasures her mouth was giving him, thinking it was so incredibly delicious and wondering why he had resisted such an enticement for so long.

He felt her trying to breathe through their locked mouths and he pulled back so she could draw in a quick breath, and then he was kissing her again, taking her mouth with a hunger that seemed perfect – stroke for stroke. Detecting her need to breathe again, he pulled back, but not before tracing a line around her mouth with the tip of his tongue in a seductive move that wasn't really him. When had he gotten to be so aggressive? So possessive? So ravenous for a woman?

Those questions made him take a step back and he drew in a tight breath as he watched her eyes open, lock with his, and when he heard her breathing attempt to get steady, he had to think. He had to say something. Or else he would be pulling her into his arms for another kiss. Instead he spoke in a husky tone to say, “Like I said, I’m a little rusty.”

For a moment, Rose merely stared at him, and then unexpectedly she released a little laugh. “If that’s how you kiss when you’re rusty, then I hate to be around when you consider yourself fine-tuned.”

He tried to smile but couldn't. The kiss they'd shared was serious. It had shaken him to the core, and he had a feeling it had affected her as well. However, he didn't want her to get any ideas. Just because they might enjoy kissing each other, that was not a foundation on which to build a relationship ... and definitely not a marriage. “Ahh, I need to go,” he said backing up. “Mrs. Guthrie will be bringing the girls home shortly.”

He then stopped in the middle of the room and added, “And about the kiss. I hope you don't think what we just shared changes anything.”

Without waiting for her to answer, he quickly moved to the door. “Goodbye, Rose,” he threw over his shoulder, moving like one of those Siberian tigers they'd seen at the zoo yesterday was right on his heels. “I'll see you in the morning,” he said, before opening the door and walking out.

Rose stood in the doorway and watched as he got into his SUV thinking that he was wrong. The kiss had changed everything.

• • •

Late that night Parnell was wide awake in bed staring up at the ceiling, wondering just how much more he could take. The kiss he had shared today with Rose was still so much a part of him, embedded deep within his mind, that he hadn't been able to close his eyes and get any rest.

The girls, for a little while, had been able to hold his attention after they had come home. Joya and LaToya had been excited about spending time with their playmate, Melody Guthrie, and had a lot of stuff to tell him. He had listened while giving them their baths, and later he had gone over the Spanish words that Rose had taught them that week.

But when they had pretty much quieted down and once he had read them their bedtime story and they had drifted off to sleep, he had experienced something that he hadn't paid any attention to before.

Loneliness.

And it was then that his mind had shifted to Rose and her proposal and wondered what if he were to take her up on it. What would it mean? He definitely wouldn't have to worry about the girls' fate from project to project. They would be able to stay with him no matter where his work took him. And he would leave home and go to work every day with the peace of mind that Joya and LaToya were well cared for by someone they truly liked. That was evident this weekend. In fact it had been evident from the day Rose had set foot into his house.

Parnell shifted in bed thinking of the advantages marrying Rose would bring to him. One sure thing, it would erase his loneliness. He had begun getting used to having her around and would have to admit that he missed seeing her on the weekends when she had no reason to come over.

He would be the first to admit he had enjoyed her presence with him on Saturday when he had taken the girls to the zoo. And more than anything, he had enjoyed the kiss they had

shared earlier today. He had feasted on her mouth like a hungry person, a man starving for passion ... and in a way, he had been. What other reason would he have for focusing so much on her taste, being so in tune to the little moans she had made when his tongue had tangled with hers? And when she had wrapped her arms around his neck and had stretched up against him, where he had felt her from thigh-to-thigh and breast- to-chest, his loins had gotten fueled, his erection had been taunted. He would be the first to admit she had the ability to stir something within him; something that had been pretty damn dormant since he'd lost Becky.

So, now back to his earlier question. What if he were to take Rose up on her offer? Could he handle coming home to her every night, being able to kiss her whenever he liked, have her share a bed with him? Could he give her the child she wanted knowing that doing so would then carve her a permanent place in his life because she would be the mother of *his* child? Could he finally move on with his life and invite another woman into his arms as well as into his heart?

Parnell rubbed his hand down his face, not certain of the answers to any of those questions. But one thing was for certain, that kiss they'd shared today had started him to thinking. Had commenced him to imagine things. And the one thought he just couldn't let go of for some reason was how it would be to have Rose share his bed. To sleep cuddled up to her each night. To wake up with her in his arms every morning. To make love to her before going to sleep.

He closed his eyes and the image of them together intimately took shape in his mind. She was on her back and he was positioning his body on top on her, his erection moving toward her feminine entrance where he would sink into her moist heat.

On a moan he snatched his eyes back open. His body was beginning to throb and that wasn't good. Gritting his teeth, he shifted positions in the bed wondering if he would get any sleep tonight.

SEVEN

“Good morning, Rose.”

“Good morning, Parnell.”

Rose and Parnell exchanged their usual greeting after she had let herself inside the house the next morning. As the norm, she had parked in the double- car garage and had entered through the kitchen, and as always, Parnell was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee and going over what she always assumed to be some work notes.

“Anything special about today?” she asked as she normally did. She had begun keeping up with the girls’ doctor or dentist appointments, but on occasion there would be other things going on that day that he would want her to know about.

“Mr. Fulton will be dropping by around noon to take a look at -”

Parnell stopped talking and stared at her. She had just taken off her coat to hang in the small closet by the kitchen door.

She glanced over at him, saw the way he was looking at her; specifically her outfit. She was wearing a stylish knit dress, which wasn’t what he was used to seeing her wear. Jeans or leggings with a pull-over top or sweater were the usual dress for her; definitely not this clingy number.

“Is anything wrong?” she asked him when he continued to stare.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” he said before glancing back down at the papers in front of him.

“You were saying?” she asked a few moments later.

He looked back at her. He looked at her dress. “Excuse me?”

“You said something about Mr. Fulton.”

Averting his gaze, he said, “I needed to tell you that Mr. Fulton will be coming by around noon to take a look at the torn carpet upstairs.” Glancing back at her, he asked, “Are you and the girls going out today?”

Rose didn’t hesitate in saying. “No, we don’t have any plans.”

She knew he was probably dying to ask her about the dress but probably thought it wasn’t the gentlemanly thing to do. Deciding to follow her regular routine, she began preparing breakfast for the girls. Although it would be a few hours before they got up, she had quickly caught on to the fact that they expected to eat as soon as they did so.

“You look nice today.”

She was standing in front of the refrigerator and glanced over her shoulder at him. “Thanks.”

“Any reason you’re dressed up today?”

She turned to place the milk on the counter. “I’m not dressed up, Parnell. Today I just wanted to dress differently.”

A confused look settled on his face. “Why?”

“No reason.” She then turned back to the counter to prepare the batter for the pancakes.

Rose heard the sound of him shuffling papers around on the table for a few minutes and then he said, “It’s time for me to leave.”

Without turning around, she said, with as much indifference in her voice as she could put there, “Okay, Parnell. Have a good day.”

“You do the same, Rose.”

She waited until she heard the back door close behind him before turning around. She couldn’t help the smile that touched her lips. He had noticed her.

• • •

“Hey, Parnell, Gabe’s on the line,” one of the construction linemen said, handing Parnell the phone.

Parnell took off his earmuffs and placed the mobile phone to his ear. “Yeah, Gabe?”

“How are things going?”

“Good. No problems. We’re still on deadline.”

“That’s what I like to hear. I’ll be back tomorrow. Christopher is flying in too, but on a later flight. We have a dinner meeting with Landmark on Wednesday and would like you present at that meeting to give an update. Mrs. Summers is back, right, so there won’t be a problem with someone watching the girls?”

Parnell appreciated Gabe for being the kind of employer who cared about any issues involving his employees, business or personal. His partner, Christopher Chandler, was the same way. Their thought processes were that a happy employee was a good employee. “Mrs. Summers decided to remain in Florida permanently. However, Rose has agreed to continue to fill in until I find someone.”

“That was nice of her.”

He didn’t have to give it much thought, because Gabe was right. It was nice of her. “Yes, it was, and I doubt she’ll have a problem with staying over a little longer tomorrow. I’ll check to be sure, though, and call you later.”

“That’s fine.”

Parnell clicked off the phone and sighed deeply. He had pretty much stayed busy all morning since they were working on a section of Eden that demanded his absolute attention. But now, things had settled down and he was going over one of the engineer’s reports and he was finding it hard to concentrate. He wished he could say that his flaring desire of the night before was a thing of the past, but it wasn’t. Anytime Rose

would cross his mind an unwelcome shiver would flow through him. And that wasn't good.

He glanced at his watch. It was close to noon. Normally he didn't go home for lunch, but for some reason he wanted to see the girls. After putting aside the report he'd been reviewing before Gabe's call, he crossed the yard to his truck. As soon as he started the engine, he couldn't help but ask himself just who he was trying to fool. He was more than aware that this was the girls' nap time. The reason he was going home in the middle of the day was because he wanted to see Rose.

• • •

Rose turned at the sound of the back door opening. She had been busy lining the kitchen cabinets with new contact paper when she looked at Parnell questioningly. A surprise look etched into her features since she hadn't been expecting him to come home for lunch. He rarely did. "Is anything wrong?"

He shook his head. "No, I just thought I'd drop by to see how you and the girls were doing."

She nodded thinking he didn't have to leave work; he could have called. "We're fine. The girls ate around eleven-thirty and this is their nap time." She wondered why she was telling him that. It wasn't like he didn't know the girls' daily routine.

"And," she decided to add before he could ask, "Mr. Fulton came by and checked out that tear in the carpeting upstairs. He agreed that the entire area has to be replaced and will arrange for someone to come in to take care of it."

Parnell nodded as he leaned against the kitchen counter that was across from where she was standing. "Did he say when?"

"No. He indicated he would call you. And Gabe's mom called to check on the girls. I thought that was real thoughtful of her."

“Yes, it was,” he said, heading for the sink to wash his hands. It then came to his attention that Joella Blackwell had been calling a lot lately to check on the girls and he appreciated it. “Have you eaten lunch yet?”

“No, I’ve been busy doing this since the girls went to sleep.”

“How about taking a break and joining me for lunch,” he said, leaving the sink to head for the refrigerator. “Do we have anything that I can fix?”

Rose was surprised by his request since she had never shared lunch with him, unless it was one of those times like Saturday when they had been out with the girls. “Yes, there’s the chicken salad that I made this morning. The girls enjoyed it on a croissant with chips and a pickle.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“All right, I can fix it,” she said, moving toward the refrigerator.

“No, I can do it. I didn’t come home for you to wait on me. Go ahead and sit at the table.”

She wanted to ask why *had* he come home, but didn’t. Instead she moved over to the table. She hadn’t expected his presence and had come up with a plan to set in motion when he’d come home. But she did not intend to miss any opportunity – any perfect moment – to make Parnell see the advantages of them getting married.

“You sure you don’t need my help?” she asked as she took a seat.

“No, I can handle this. Besides, you’ll have your hands full once the girls wake up from their nap. Most kids are fussy before their naps, but my girls tend to be fussy after their naps.”

Rose couldn’t help but smile. “Boy, don’t I know it.”

“But still, Becky would be proud of them.”

She wondered if he was bringing up his deceased wife’s name to keep some sort of declared distance between them. If

so, he would find out it wouldn't work with her, and she was determined not to let it work with him either. "Yes, I'm sure she would be. Just like I'm certain that she would be proud of you as well. You've done a wonderful job, Parnell. Not all men would have been able to handle what you've done. Overall, what do you see as your biggest challenge in taking care of the girls?"

Parnell placed a plate of chips, sandwich and a pickle in front of her, chuckled and said, "The hair. How can two little girls have so much of it is beyond me. I had to take the class, Hair 101, from my mom. I appreciate the way you braid it on Mondays, then all I have to do is make sure it's decent on Sundays."

Rose thought there was never a time when she'd seen the Cabot twins and they hadn't been decent – from their hair all the way down to their toes. Parnell did a good job of dressing them as well. They always wore cute identical outfits.

"What do you want to drink, Rose?"

She glanced up at Parnell. "Water is fine."

He nodded and opened the refrigerator. His back was to her and that gave her a chance to check him out from behind. As always, she liked what she saw. His jeans fit so perfectly on his body and his backside was nice, real nice; so nice she could feel her stomach doing a flip.

When he turned around, he almost caught her staring. She quickly bowed her head to say grace and then picked up her sandwich. When he placed the water down beside her plate she glanced up and looked at him and she felt the pulse beat rapidly in her throat.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Parnell then took the seat across from her and after bowing his head to say grace, he began eating his sandwich as well. After a few moments, she asked, "So, Parnell, what's the real reason you came home from work?"

Rose saw surprise flicker in his eyes as if he was taken aback by her question. After washing the portion of his sandwich he'd just eaten down with iced tea, he looked over at her and said, "I told you, I wanted to check on you and the girls."

"Why? You've never dropped in at lunch to check on us before. Don't you think that I can handle things around here?"

"You know I do."

"Okay, then why are you here?"

He gave her a crooked smile. "I live here," he said in a teasing voice.

Something intangible shimmered through her with his smile and she couldn't help but smile back. "I know that. Tell me something that I don't know."

Parnell didn't say anything at first and then out of the clear blue sky, he said, "What if I told you that I've been giving your proposal some thought."

Now it was her time to be surprised. She hadn't been prepared for that; especially, when she hadn't started overwhelming him yet. She couldn't stop the feeling of pure happiness that flowed through her at that moment. Her decision to do what she felt she had to do was reinforced even more. She was determined to show him every chance she got just how much passion the two of them could generate. She had never known a man who wouldn't weaken if the right amount of passion was applied. It wasn't called seduction for nothing. "If you were to tell me that then I would say that I'm glad to hear it," she said.

He leaned back in his chair and she figured he must have heard an inexorable amount of optimism in her voice and decided not to get her hopes up by saying, "I said I've been giving it some thought, Rose. I still haven't changed my mind about anything."

She nodded. "And I can respect that. I would also like to make a suggestion," she said picking up her glass of water.

"What?"

Rose could feel his eyes on her. “I think the best thing I can do is to convince you that together, you, I, and the girls would make a good family. And the only way I can do that is to move in.” She slowly glanced over at him, needing to see his reaction to her suggestion.

Parnell put down his sandwich and stared at her. “Do you honestly believe that will help things?” he asked in a low, yet incredulous tone.

She shrugged slightly. “I don’t see how it will hurt. I get to play the role of wife-for-hire. At least, to a point. Until you make a final decision, I’ll still sleep in the guestroom.” There. She was making it absolutely clear just where she drew the line.

A slight frown touched his lips. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Rose felt her lips twist in a smile. “What? Me being a wife-for-hire or me sleeping in the guestroom?”

He lifted a brow before picking back up his sandwich. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“No. I’m trying to be someone who wants you to see my value in your household.” She didn’t add - *In your life*.

His dark eyes seemed to rest more intently on her. Placing his sandwich back down, he said, “I do see your value, Rose.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then prove it.”

She knew he heard the challenge in her words. It was reflected in the handsome yet cautious face that stared at her. Then, as if in slow motion, he pushed his chair back from the table to stand. She watched as he rounded the table to come where she sat. She tried to downplay the trembling of her hand that was holding the water glass. In a surprise move, he bent and took the glass out of her hand and set it down.

Then he took that same hand in his and pulled her up from her seat. He didn’t take a step back as her body pressed tight

against his. She dragged in a deep breath when he wrapped his arms around her.

“The girls? How much longer do you figure they’ll be sleeping?” he asked her.

Rose felt the heat of his gaze touch her lips. “Why?”

“Why do you think?”

She really didn’t have to think because she knew she’d driven him to prove a point. Little did he know that she intended to prove one as well. In a bold move, she looped her arms around his waist. “I think we’re standing here wasting time. And don’t worry about the girls. They have another hour to go.”

“Good.”

And then he was kissing her, with the same urgency and hunger that he had kissed her on yesterday. And she returned the kiss, stroke for stroke. She held back nothing and heard his gasp of surprise when she pulled his shirt from his pants and took her hand and gently rubbed his back. His skin felt warm, manly. It felt right. As he kissed her mouth with a hunger that had her body throbbing, she couldn’t help but wonder how it would feel being skin to skin with him. How did his skin taste? Was it always this warm?

Rose then recalled once seeing him on the floor tussling with the girls. She wondered how it would be if he got down on the floor and tussled with her. And what if they were completely naked while doing it? Her body tingled at the thought.

Parnell deepened the kiss and then she couldn’t think at all. She felt an outpouring of passion and desire all through her pores with the way he was kissing her. He was milking her imagination for all it was worth and then some.

Moments later, he slowly drew back from her mouth. Paused a second and then leaned closer to her moist lips and said, “Trust me, Rose, I do see your value. And I like tasting it as well.”

He slowly released her from his arms and took a step back while putting his shirt back into his jeans. "I need to get back to work, but I will take into consideration you moving in. In a way I kind of like the idea." He continued walking backward.

She tilted her head back, placed her hand on her hips and asked saucily, "Do you?"

Parnell stopped walking backward for a moment and looked at her. His gaze raked her from head to toe and she actually felt its heat. "Yes, I do."

And then he walked back to her and held her gaze steadily when he said, "So I suggest you think good and hard about what you put in that proposal; and make sure it is what you really want." He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers before turning to cross the kitchen. Before opening the door, he turned around. "I almost forgot to ask if you'll be able to stay a little later tomorrow. I talked to Gabe earlier and he indicated he was flying back tomorrow and that he and Christopher would be meeting with John Landmark around five in the afternoon. They want me to be a part of that meeting."

"I understand and for me to stay late won't be a problem."

"Thanks. And since I don't have any idea how long the meeting will last, you might want to consider sleeping over tomorrow night."

Rose met his gaze. "And I don't have a problem with that as well."

He nodded and then he walked out the door. She sighed deeply and suddenly feeling weak in the knees, she dropped back down in her chair.

EIGHT

“Daddy’s home!”

Joya and Latoya’s shouts of joy had Rose’s heart thumping hard against her rib cage. She turned from the sink in time to see Parnell walk through the door. The girls didn’t give him a chance before they were all over him, and she wanted to join them and get all over him as well.

She wondered if this was how it would be if they were married. She would look forward to meeting him at the door and greet him with a kiss. She could see missing him during the day, even those times when he would surprise her and come home for lunch like he did today.

She watched as he picked both girls up into his arms and while they were giving him hugs, he glanced over at her. Memories of the kiss they had shared at lunch were sharp and painfully clear in her mind. She wondered if the same was in his. She believed they were from the way he was looking at her.

“Rose.”

His voice seemed to reach out and touch her. She thought that there was something seductive in his voice whenever he said her name. “Parnell.” She inhaled deeply before saying, “Dinner is on the stove and the -”

“You will stay to join us, won’t you?”

Rose felt a shiver pass through her. She hadn’t planned to do so. The look in his eyes was evident, quite unmistakable, that he wanted her to stay. “Yes, I’ll stay.”

“Good. There’s something I want to talk to you about later.”

• • •

Parnell closed the story book and glanced down at his girls. They had fallen asleep before he'd had a chance to finish the story. He sat in the chair and continued to study them and saw how peaceful they looked. Not for the first time he thanked Becky for giving them to him. Now he was glad that they hadn't waited an additional year to start a family. He didn't know what he would have done had he lost Becky and not have had the girls. Because of them he'd had no option but to be strong. They had given him a reason to go on when a part of him had wanted to just give up. When he looked at them, he was reminded of the one woman he had loved with all his heart. She was a woman a part of him would always love.

That was one of the reasons why lately, his emotions were sort of mixed. And if he was confused, he sure didn't want to confuse Rose. He didn't want to hurt her by giving her false hope that one day he would be capable of loving another woman. But he believed what they could share was a close friendship – a very intimate friendship.

If they were to marry that would be the foundation on which their marriage would be built. And as far as them having a child together, he didn't have a problem with that. He would gladly give her one. He would give *them* one. A smile touched his lips. And he would be giving the girls one, because he knew they would relish having a little sister or brother.

He stood and stretched his body, thinking he had been sitting in the chair way too long. Just like he could now admit that he'd been going without a female way too long as well. Before Rose, no other woman had piqued his interest. There hadn't been any woman he had even thought about making love to. It wasn't like he'd been too absorbed in Becky's memory to engage in such an activity, there just hadn't been any interest on his part. Not that there hadn't been any women who hadn't tried tempting him, mind you. At church, both here and in Detroit, things had gotten downright ridiculous with the number of women who'd come on to him. Some were more

blatantly bolder than others. But the more they had tried coming on to him, the more he had gotten turned off.

It had been just the opposite with Rose. First of all, she had never tried coming on to him; although he could tell there was some interest on her part, just like he was sure she'd known there was interest on his. She had taken the job with only one agenda on her mind and that was to take care of his daughters.

Parnell truly believed her proposal was a result of genuine compassion on her part, while at the same time a need to fulfill a dream of her own as well, which was to have a child. What he'd told her last week was true. Marriage to him could result in her losing the opportunity to meet Mr. Right. But according to her, she was okay with that and if she was, so was he.

He glanced at his watch. It was getting late and Rose had hung around for the sole purpose of talking with him and he appreciated it. Just like he appreciated the way she had graced his dinner table. The girls had enjoyed her dining with them, and he would have to admit that he had enjoyed her presence as well.

Sighing deeply, with a mixture of reluctance and anticipation, he headed for the door knowing it was time he met with Rose.

• • •

Rose stood by the living room window and looked out, seeing how clear the sky was tonight. Heavy snow fall was predicted for the weekend, which was fine with her; especially since she wouldn't have to go out in it.

She couldn't help but reflect on all the changes that had taken place in her life since resigning from her position with the Denmark Group and coming here to Anchorage to spend some time with Sage. Actually, she hadn't planned to stay but a week or two at the most, and now she was going into her fourth week all because of Parnell.

Standing here alone, she could admit the one thing she had been afraid to admit before. She had fallen in love with him. Although it hadn't been love at first sight eight months ago, there had been something that had stood out about him, something she had admired that she hadn't seen in all those other men she had spent time with.

And after accepting the job of his girls' babysitter, she had come to learn a lot about him. He was a man who could love relentlessly. Forever. He was compassionate all the way to the bone. He would honor the woman he claimed as his. He would treat her with respect. Like a lady. On the other hand, he could bring out her passion and appreciate it. What woman wouldn't want a man like that? What woman wouldn't find such a man easy to love?

She knew she had to be careful. No doubt if she mentioned the L word around Parnell, he would freak out. He was still in love with his deceased wife. He'd made that clear and she doubted he would want any part of anyone who felt those emotions toward him because they would be emotions he could not reciprocate.

And she was okay with that because she felt in time, if given the chance, he could love her as well. Maybe not as much as he did his wife, but love came in various degrees, and he was too compassionate a man not to share his love.

Rose rubbed her hands together, not from the cold but from wariness. She couldn't help but wonder what Parnell wanted to talk with her about. If he had changed his mind about the proposal, then she wanted to make sure he never regretted doing so. She would make him a good wife and his girls a wonderful mother. She couldn't help doing so because she loved all three of them.

She turned when she heard the sound of his footsteps and looked into his face the moment he rounded the corner. Those familiar stirrings started in her stomach, but tonight they seemed more intense than ever because she knew she loved him ... with all her heart. She cleared her throat thinking it would be pointless to ask how the girls were doing. It would only serve as small talk since she knew under his love, care,

and guidance the girls would always be fine. He was a man who took care of his own.

“Sorry, you were kept waiting,” he said, coming into the room.

She smiled. “No problem. I enjoy your and the girls’ company, so I didn’t mind waiting. Besides, for some reason I think what you have to say is important,” she said, moving away from the window to sit on the sofa.

“I hope that it is since it involves my future ... as well as yours.”

Rose lifted a brow. “Now you have me curious.”

A smile touched the corners of his lips when he took the chair across from her. And that smile touched her in a way she couldn’t explain. She knew if she had met Parnell a few years ago that she would not have appreciated the man that he was. As the *old* Rose, a totally different sort of man would have appealed to her. She had made a lot of changes in her life and one thing she now looked for in a man was sincerity.

She glanced over at him. Instead of leaning back in his chair, he had leaned forward as if to make sure he had her absolute attention. If only he knew just how much of her attention that he had he might be downright leery.

“I wanted to talk with you about your proposal,” he said. “Like I told you earlier today, I’ve been giving it some thought. And I think it might work.”

Hope flowed through her and she felt it all the way to her bones. “You do?”

“Yes, but I want to make a few things clear. I need to know that we’re on the same page about some things.”

“Okay. What part do we need to discuss further?”

“The part regarding you and me. I’m straight on your involvement with the girls. But I am sort of crooked on just what our relationship will be.”

She leaned forward in her seat as well. “Okay, tell me just what do I need to clarify?”

“Our sleeping arrangements.”

Rose nodded, thinking things couldn't get any more direct than that. She looked at him and then wished she hadn't. The light from the lamp hit his features at an incredible angle, detailing the solid plane of his face, making her awareness of him that much more intense. It was on the tip of her tongue to say their sleeping arrangements would be any way he wanted them to be. But she drew in a deep breath instead and asked, “What do you need to know? What part of it don't you understand?”

“Not sure. How about breaking it down for me again, Rose.”

She thought she could do better than that by giving him something to think about; something to mull over tonight. And definitely something to look forward to. She eased up off the sofa, knowing he caught a glimpse of her thigh when she did so.

When she stood, she saw how his eyes swept over her. A quiver went through her from the heat of his gaze. As she took the few steps over to him, she saw something flicker in his eyes. It was something she recognized. It was something she wanted. His desire. She might not have his love, but she did have his desire. When she came to a stop directly in front of the chair where he was sitting, the gentleman in him instinctively made a motion to stand, but she gently pushed him back down in his chair and in a surprise move, she eased down in his lap.

And before he could gather his wits, she looped her arms around his neck and kissed him. This was a bold move, she thought, as her lips parted under his, taking his tongue into her mouth with a hunger and yearning that had her hot between the legs. Before she left to go home tonight, she wanted to leave Parnell Cabot both breathless and helpless. And she wanted him horny. But just for her. She had to start somewhere, and she would start there.

She deepened the kiss when she felt the touch of his hand as it inched up her thigh; the same thigh he'd caught a glimpse

of a few moments ago. His touch was doing things to her. And when his hand traced a path even farther up her leg, easing its way between both thighs, she thought she would lose it. When he touched her center, she almost did. She pulled her mouth back and breathed in deeply. Inhaling both his scent and hers. Finding her voice, she asked, “The girls. Are you sure they’re asleep?”

His gaze never left hers. Nor did he remove his hand from between her thighs when he said, “Yes, they’re asleep. They were knocked out before I finished the story. Besides, the door alarm will let me know the moment one of them opens it.”

She knew that the door alarm was a safety feature he’d installed so he would know whenever the girls got up during the night for anything. It wasn’t a piercing sound that would frighten the girls; instead it released the musical jingle, “Three Blind Mice”.

Rose decided she didn’t want to make anymore small talk. What she wanted was to let Parnell know the answer to his question regarding what their sleeping arrangements would be. She sank back into his arms and went back to his mouth. It was a scorching kiss, hot and greedy. She made sure that like all the others they had shared, it would be a kiss he would remember.

And he seemed just as intent on giving her something to remember as well. His fingers were on the move again, caressing her center through her silk panties. The lips eating away at hers suddenly softened, gentled, but were just as meticulous. She drew back slightly, their heated breaths mingled, connected. Rose slowly eased out of Parnell’s lap and taking his hand, she pulled him out of the chair.

“Come with me in the kitchen,” she whispered suggestively, close to his ear, and taking the tip of her tongue she swiped a wet kiss there. She began leading him into the kitchen when suddenly she was swept off her feet into his arms.

They had barely made it into the kitchen and closed the door when Parnell placed her on her feet and was at her mouth

again, overriding any need for either of them to take things slow. Her fingers were at his shirt, undoing the bottoms and when he lifted her off the floor to pin her against the wall, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Rose didn't think there was anything that could have prepared her for this – a Parnell who was out of control; just as overridden with passion and desire as she was. A man transforming into a mass of need right before her very eyes, beneath her lips. She was conscious of everything, his very touch, the way his erection was poking into the apex of her thighs, and the way his arms were clamped tight around her like he didn't ever intend to let her go.

If only he didn't.

When she had gotten the last button on his shirt undone, she pushed the fabric aside, off his shoulders, needing to feel his warm skin. She moaned out loud when her hands blazed a hot trail through the curly hair on his chest, liking the way it felt to her fingers. This time it was Parnell who withdrew from the kiss, to pull in a deep breath but he continued to watch Rose through the heat of his gaze. Her touch was sending him over the edge, making him feel things he hadn't felt in years, and making him want things he hadn't wanted in that same length of time.

But he wanted them now and he wanted them with her. He actually trembled at the thought; felt a certain part of his body harden even more. But he knew before he put an end to this madness, there was a part of her that he needed to touch, he needed to taste. And with her still pinned solidly against the wall and her legs wrapped tight around his waist, he reached for the front of her dress and yanked the stretchy material down past her shoulders to her waist. Then with a flick of his wrist, he unsnapped the front clasp of her bra.

Her breasts, full, firm and inviting, seemed to leap into his waiting hands, and he gently closed his hands over them, kneading them methodically with his fingers. Automatically, he leaned over for a taste.

Drawing a nipple into his mouth, he quickly discovered that even the tip of her nipple was hot, delicious, and perfect for his mouth, tongue and lips. He became caught up in a degree of passion he wasn't aware he was capable of feeling; an urgency sharper than anything he'd ever experienced. He tried keeping his mind rational, logical. He fought to retain his control and found it getting shot to hell and back.

Moving his mouth to the other nipple, he wanted to give it equal attention, needing to hear the moans she had begun making, wanting to continue to feel how her center cradled his erection, made it feel at home.

He wanted to feel her heat, touch it. Shifting to support her against the wall, he lowered his hands to inch up her dress. Then his hand was there, his fingers finding their way beneath the lining of her panties, past the silk material to touch her feminine folds. And then he began to explore her there, taking his time to slowly caress her feminine mound, liking the way it felt beneath his searching fingers. Provocative.

She eased her legs farther apart for his questing fingers. He inserted his finger inside of her, sliding it in and out through her moist, wet and hot heat. The sound she made at his touch totally mesmerized his brain, filling him with a need that made him continue to stroke her intimately. And then she was shaking uncontrollably, and he knew why. He was giving her the pleasure she needed.

The rational part of his mind, the one trying to retain a level of decorum, was fighting for control, telling him that this wasn't the time or the place to now take his own. But he knew without a doubt when the time came for his satisfaction that Rose was definitely the woman who could give it to him. She was the one who could not only light his fire but keep it burning.

Pulling his mouth away from her breast and his hand from between her thighs, he held her tight against him until her shudders subsided. Then he straightened and slowly eased her feet to the floor, holding on to her while she became adjusted to the movement. For a while his senses had gotten suspended, overridden with passion but now he had his wits back. He

knew what he wanted. He knew just what he needed. Just what he had to have. The realization filled him with a gratifying sensation.

He swept her into his arms and crossed the room to sit at the kitchen table with her in his lap. It seemed the air surrounding him felt a little lighter. His mind felt free. He grinned, feeling the weight of something heavy lifted from his shoulders. He looked down at her, saw the satisfied smile she wore and felt somewhat giddy knowing he had placed it there.

“So, I guess that answers my concerns about our sleeping arrangements, doesn’t it?” he said.

Rose reached up and traced a finger around his mouth. The dark eyes staring up at him were filled with a fulfillment that touched him to the core. “Yes,” she said softly. “Once we’re married, I’ll have no problem sharing a bed with you,” she said quietly.

Parnell nodded. At one point, some weeks back, when she had first begun invading his dreams, he had thought that he would not want her that way, and doing so was disrespecting Becky’s memory. But he knew Becky. She would want him to move on with his life and to be happy. And what would make him happy more so than anything else was Rose. He wanted her to be a part of his life, his girls’ life. He wanted her to be the woman he came home to each night, whether it was here in Alaska or some other part of the world.

Wherever his job would take him, she would be there. To welcome him home and to warm his bed. He was not ashamed to admit that he wanted her. And he wanted her in a way he hadn’t ever wanted anyone else - not even Becky. His desire for his wife had been strong, but never this keen, sharp and obsessive. Never would he have considered taking her right here on the table, entering her body without ever coming out until the both of them had been totally and completely satisfied. Then he would want them to start all over again.

That thought, the harsh, brutal realization as to the extent of his desire for her no longer bothered him. He wasn’t sure why it didn’t; he just knew he had to acknowledge that it

didn't. Just like he had to acknowledge that Rose was the woman he wanted. They would be intimate friends; as sensuously connected as any two humans could get. He, she and the girls would be a family.

"I want to give you your baby," he said softly, knowing down deep that he did. For some reason, he felt making a baby with her would be the connection they would need in the absence of love. He looked down and saw pure joy line her pupils. "Would you want that?" he asked, although he knew that she did.

"Yes. I want that. That would make me very happy."

He nodded, then leaned down and kissed her lips. When he pulled his mouth back, he said, "And what will make me happy is for us to get married. This weekend."

Parnell saw her blink as surprise shone in her eyes. She hadn't figured he would want to move ahead quickly. But the way he saw it, when he made love to her, he wanted it to be done as husband and wife.

"This weekend?" she repeated, as if to make sure she had heard him correctly.

"Yes. I checked on things today, after I left here for lunch. There's a three-day waiting period. If we apply for a license tomorrow, then we can get married on Saturday. It won't give my parents time to get here but that's fine. What about yours?"

"I don't have anyone, other than Sage and a few other girlfriends who are scattered across the country, so that's fine with me too."

"Good. I prefer a private affair. Just me, you, and whoever we get to serve as our witnesses, and the girls. We can do it here or the pastor's study at the church."

"I want to do it at the church."

"Okay." He stood with her in his arms and then placed her on her feet. "So, I guess this will be a busy week for us then."

“Yes, it seems that it will. Sage will be returning tomorrow. I’ll ask that she be a witness.”

“And I’ll ask that Gabe be one as well.”

And then he pulled her into his arms believing in his heart...

NINE

“By the powers vested in me. I now pronounced you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, Parnell.”

Rose blinked back her tears and looked up into Parnell’s face, searching his eyes for any sign that he regretted asking her to be his wife. She didn’t see anything to cause her worry and when he reached out for her, she went willingly into his arms. The kiss was brief but effective. It held promises of what to expect later.

No sooner had Parnell released her from his arms, her friend Sage – who had stood in as her maid of honor - came forward to give her a hug. Next, Gabe hugged her and then Rose stooped down at the girls’ level for hugs from them as well.

She and Parnell had talked to Joya and LaToya on Wednesday to make sure they understood what their marriage would mean. According to Parnell, his daughters didn’t remember their mother, so to their way of thinking, Rose was the mother they never had. She had wondered if that would bother Parnell, but he didn’t give her any indication that it did. And when the girls asked if they could call her mommy, he hadn’t seemed bothered by that either. So, now on this beautiful day in April she officially became Rose Cabot, wife to Parnell and mother to Joya and LaToya and she couldn’t be more than happy.

Rose couldn’t even begin to digest how fast things got moving when Sage had returned to town and she had told her that she and Parnell would be getting married that weekend. Sage had taken things under control, deciding she wanted to make this a special wedding for her and Parnell; one they would always remember.

With Gabe's help, Parnell's parents had arrived yesterday along with Gabe's parents, on the company jet. Christopher Chandler and his wife Maxi had also flown in with the group. Another couple, friends of Christopher and Maxi by the name of Garrett and Mya Rivers, had also come. Rose recognized Garrett as a professional football player with the Dallas Cowboys.

Gabe and Christopher had declared that yesterday was a holiday for the men so that Parnell could get things ready for the honeymoon – a honeymoon that neither Rose nor Parnell had planned for. As a gift from The Regency Group, they had been presented a four-day stay in a cabin at Glacier Bay. Everyone figured due to the time restraints the couple had in going on a lengthy honeymoon, the get-away to the resort that was near the Glacier Bay National Park was just the place. It was known as the best place for fishing in the Pacific Northwest and their trophy halibut and salmon sport fishing there was second to none. The guys had relentlessly teased Parnell about not sending him to Glacier Bay to do any fishing.

Rose had liked Parnell's parents immediately and they seemed truly happy for their son. They had agreed to keep the girls while Rose and Parnell were on their honeymoon. Rose was grateful for that because she didn't want Parnell to worry about anything while they were away.

Gabe's mother, Joella Blackwell, and Sage had gotten together and planned a nice reception at one of the country clubs and had invited every single one of Parnell's men. Parnell had told Rose that a lot of them had been surprised by his announcement that the two of them were getting married since no one knew they had been dating.

A few hours later, while she was talking to Garrett and Mya Rivers and Sage and Gabe, Parnell came up, slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer to him. "Sorry to butt in, however, it's time for me and my bride to leave and we want to say goodbye to our girls before we do."

Joya and LaToya, excited about their grandparents' visit, gave Parnell and Rose hugs and asked them to bring them

something back. And then under a shower of rice Parnell and Rose raced to their car. Ignoring the “Just Married” window banner that some of Parnell’s men had placed on the car, they drove off, heading for their destination.

• • •

It was a clear night with stars dotting the sky. While waiting for Rose to come out of the bathroom, Parnell moved away from the window to stand before the fireplace to watch the way the logs were burning and thinking how well their special day had gone.

His parents liked her, he could tell. But then he had known they would. And he couldn’t help but see the huge smile that had been on Joella Blackwell’s face most of the day and couldn’t help wondering what that was about. Gabe’s mother was a known matchmaker and Parnell wouldn’t be surprised to find out that she had somehow played a hand in bringing him to the altar. He was well aware that she had called his house at least once or twice a week to check on the girls and would talk to Rose. She would always mention it to him whenever Joella called.

He turned around when he heard the sound of the bathroom door opening and almost stumbled speechless, barely able to catch his breath. She was wearing a nightgown so sheer it almost seemed invisible. He felt every part of him beginning to throb with a need he was becoming familiar with.

Feeling a degree of heat suffuse him, he held out his hand and she crossed the room and gave him her hand. His grip was strong. It was firm. It was for her. Some unnamed emotion touched him, had every nerve in his body fluttering. He bent and lifted her into his arms, and immediately headed straight for their bed.

He had looked forward to this day. He had looked forward to this night. It had been a while since he’d given so much of

himself to a woman, but he wanted to give everything that was him to Rose.

As soon as they touched the bed, he kissed her with a thoroughness that he felt in every nerve of his body, and at the same time opened up his senses to total awareness, a full scope of sensations he hadn't ever felt before. With his lips still connected to hers, he managed to pull off his bathrobe which left him completely naked, and he intended for her to be in the same nude state.

Drawing away from her, he bent and began removing her almost-invisible gown and watched how it caressed her soft skin in the process. He looked deep into Rose's eyes and saw the intense desire embedded in them; the same degree of desire he knew she had to be able to see in his. He lowered the gown past her waist and saw the fullness of her breasts. They were breasts he had held in his hands, tasted in his mouth. The thought of doing both again had his pulse beating wildly.

Lifting her hips for him, he tugged the nightie off the rest of her body. He drew in a shaky breath; a breath he barely had. She was completely naked, and staring at the essence of her femininity, the mainstay of his desire, made a shiver of sexual longing grip him with a tightness that mesmerized every single part of him. He had heard of women getting a Brazilian wax but had never seen first-hand how one looked. Now he was getting an eye full and he liked what he saw. It gave him the ability to see this part of her in its entirety. There was nothing hidden from his view. This special part of her was openly exposed for him to see.

Parnell forced his gaze to move slowly from the area between her legs to her thighs, the curves of her body and her long limbs – first one leg and then the other. He tossed the gown aside at the same time he reached out to touch her, needing his hand on her. He skimmed his hand up one leg and when he got a few inches from her feminine mound he heard the way her breathing had changed. He ran his hand over the smooth, clean surface, liking the way it felt.

Deciding he wanted to taste her all over, he bent his knee on the bed, drew her to him and began working on her mouth,

taking it with a hunger that even astounded him, while at the same time his hands were toying with the area between her legs, to get her wet and ready for him. When he heard her moan, he deepened the kiss, needing to brand every area of her that he tasted, and she was kissing him back with a voraciousness that he appreciated.

And then he slowly withdrew and kissed a path past her neck and shoulders, his mouth settled in on her breasts. He heard the whimper that escaped her lips when his mouth settled on a taut nipple, drawing it into his mouth to lave it with his tongue, lap circles around it, suck on it with a greediness he felt all the way to the bone. His fingers, that were toying with her down below, felt the dewy essence of her desire, and her scent, potent and hot, filled his nostrils; made him eager to taste her there.

Not capable of holding off any longer from getting what he truly wanted, he drew back and shifted his body to start kissing a trail down her stomach, taking the time to trace a hot circle with the tip of his tongue around her navel. And then he began nibbling his way downward, feeling the flex of her stomach beneath his mouth. He inhaled the sensuous scent her body was emitting.

With steady hands he grasped hold of her hips, licked his lips and lowered his mouth to the very essence of her. It seemed her legs automatically parted for him to provide better access. Angling his tongue just where he wanted it to be, he surged inside of her.

“Oh!” She grasped, then gripped the sides of his head and held to it tight, as if trying to keep his head in a fixed position. But he had no intention of going anywhere until he had gotten his fill, which may be for some time. Her taste was unique, it was potent, and it was driving him wild. He began to snack on her with an obsession and entice her with all out greed.

He lifted her hips to place her legs across his shoulders as his tongue continued to take her relentlessly. He felt her call out to him, heard her breath get caught on a sob just seconds before her body began shuddering, almost uncontrollably beneath his mouth. He curved his hands along her hips and

plunged his tongue deeper, needing to absorb the sweet essence of her.

Moments later, he drew away and waited for less than a heartbeat before positioning his body in place over hers. She opened her eyes and then he kissed her long and hard when at the same time he thrust into her body, all the way to the hilt. He pulled back and gazed down at her knowing this was the cultivating moment when they became one – in body and in soul. His body went still, the impact of their joining rendering him in a state he had never been before. A state of acceptance. A state of extreme satisfaction. For a moment he puzzled over how that could be. But then when she reached up and caressed the side of his face with her fingertips, the reason didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that they were here, together, and he was deeply embedded inside of her.

He began moving, slowly thrusting in and out and wanting her more and more with each deep stroke. He felt her body move, her willingness to respond, and together they began a rhythm that was perfect. It was one that was completely right.

Suddenly, he was struck with a sensation that made him scream her name as sharp talons of desire cut into him, made him explode inside of her, shooting his hot seed into her womb. There was no way she could not have felt it. Then she began shuddering to a degree that literally rocked him to the core of his being. Her fingernails bit into his shoulder blades but he didn't mind. Pain and passion often worked hand and hand. And as the bliss of ecstasy surrounded them, bathed them in pleasure of the most intense kind, he held on to his wife, someone who was now an important part of his life and when he leaned down and captured her lips with his, he knew this night would only serve as the beginning.

TEN

The next few weeks seemed to move rather swiftly for Rose and Parnell. She would be the first to admit she was falling more and more in love with her husband with each passing day. Although she was well aware that he didn't love her, he treated her with the utmost care and respect, and she couldn't ask for a more dedicated man in her life. She knew he still considered their marriage as one of friendship and tried not to think about it or let it bother her. To her, he was still the epitome of something wonderful and that was enough. She figured that some women were not as fortunate or blessed so she couldn't complain.

She enjoyed being there when he left in the morning and meeting him at the door when he returned in the afternoon. She enjoyed the time she spent with the girls each day and joining him to tuck them in bed each night. Her heart would sing out with happiness each and every time the girls called her "Mommy" and when the four of them sat together in church as a family, she knew she had a lot to be thankful for.

Above all, she liked knowing she was a permanent fixture in the Cabot's household and was not worried that he could come home one day and say things were over between them and he wanted her to leave like Mark had done. And at night when she went into Parnell's arms she did so with the happiness in her heart knowing she was sharing herself with the man she loved. Each night she went to sleep feeling breathless, totally satisfied and knowing he was there, near, while she slept in his arms. She would eagerly await the darkness of the evening when the girls feel asleep.

Like now.

She glanced over at him when he entered the bedroom. She studied his face that was outlined by the moonlight coming in

through the window. Her two favorite times with him – other than when they were making love – were the mornings before he left for work when they shared an early breakfast together; and now, when he would come to bed and share with her details of his day’s activities. She had visited the site a few times during the day with the girls when they had joined him for lunch and had seen just how the ski resort was coming together. Just like he’d said, there was no doubt in her mind that it would outshine even the likes of the Vail ski resort.

“Gabe just called,” he said, sliding into bed beside her and automatically pulling her into his arms just to hold her for now while they talked. “Forecasters are predicting a blizzard tomorrow so he’s having his secretary notify the guys to stay in.”

He smiled over at her. “That means that I’ll probably be underfoot for the next couple of days. What do you think of that?”

She smiled up at him. “I think it’s wonderful. The girls and I love having you underfoot.”

“Do you?”

“Yes?”

“Prove it.”

Reaching over, she cupped his face in the palms of her hand and drew his head closer to hers. She had no problem proving anything to him. He was the recipient of all her desire, love, and passion; especially her love.

He returned her kiss with a hunger that made her shudder and she slid her hands in the crotch of his pajama bottoms, needing to touch him there, take him in her hand. The first time she had pushed him over the edge of desire.

Deciding to take things further tonight she pushed him back on the bed and straddled him. She lowered her body over him, and little by little, inch by inch she took him inside of her. She heard the moment his breathing changed. She heard the groan from deep within his throat. And when she began riding him, she felt his hardness buried inside her to the hilt.

Over and over again she moved her body over his, needing this. Needing him.

And when she lowered her mouth to kiss him, he gripped her hips and shifted positions and suddenly, she was under him. Then he began riding her and her body began quivering at the impact. Together they climaxed, savoring each shudder all the way. In her opinion the link between them got stronger and stronger each time they came together this way, each time they shared this experience together.

When he gathered her into his arms, her love for him grew even more. He hadn't done anything that indicated he thought their relationship was one other than friendship. Once she came close to telling him she loved him but had quickly pulled back. He didn't love her but sharing her love with him this way was enough.

• • •

A week later

Gabe quickly hung up the phone with Sage and immediately left the construction trailer to find Parnell. He was standing by a huge steel beam that one of his men was using a crane to lift into the air.

“Parnell!”

Parnell glanced over at Gabe and seeing the look on his face he wondered what was wrong. He met Gabe across the yard. “Yeah, what is it?”

“I just talked to Sage. The hospital just called. On Rose's way back from dropping the girls off at piano practice, she was involved in a car accident.”

The blood seemed to drain from Parnell's face and Gabe quickly said, “Sage is at the hospital with her now and wanted me to let you know Rose is all right. She-”

“What hospital?” Parnell cut in, already headed for his truck.

Gabe had a hard time keeping up with his long strides. “Alaska Regional.” He glanced over at Parnell. “Like I said, Sage wanted to make sure I told you that the doctors said that Rose is fine.”

Parnell stopped walking and looked at the man who was his employer as well as his friend. “If you recall, that’s what the doctor said about Becky. They hadn’t known about that blood clot the trauma had caused.”

Gabe remembered and understood Parnell’s concern. “Okay, let’s see for ourselves, but I’m driving so give me the keys.”

• • •

Gabe had barely brought Parnell’s truck to a stop at the emergency room entrance when he was out of it. Racing toward the entrance, Parnell threw open the glass door and rushed inside.

When Parnell rounded the corner of the corridor, going in the direction a security guard had given him, he quickly glanced around thinking, different hospital, same scene. He would never forget that day he’d gotten a call to say Becky had been in a car accident but she was fine and was being released from the ER. Thinking he was arriving just to drive her home, he had gotten there just seconds before she had collapsed from a pulmonary embolism caused from the accident.

He stopped and closed his eyes, feeling an enormous amount of fear stab him in the heart. He couldn’t lose Rose like he had lost Becky; especially not now. Especially not now when things were going so well between them.

Especially not now when he knew that he loved her. That admission nearly made him stumble but he kept walking, determined to find his wife. When he had fallen in love with

Rose he wasn't sure, but he knew for certain that he loved her. Each and every time they made love he had felt it deeply. She had taken control of a big chunk of his heart and he had no qualms in her having it. He intended to tell her that when he saw her.

And he would see her. She would leave here with him and not the way Becky had in a body bag. That thought, along with deep determination, quickened his steps. He rounded another corner and then he saw her. She was walking his way with Sage and hadn't looked in his direction.

“Rose!”

She glanced up and he began walking faster toward her, nearly running. She left Sage and was walking just as fast to meet him. When they were within three feet of each other they stopped and he looked at her up and down.

“You okay?” he asked softly in a low voice. The effort it cost him not to reach out and pull her into his arms was almost killing him, but knew if he did so now he could hurt her from his overwhelming relief in seeing her. She looked fine, but he had to be sure.

“Yes, I'm doing all right,” she said, staring at him. “You got here quick.”

He forced a smile to his lips. “I would have gotten here sooner but Gabe was driving. He drove slow.”

She returned his smile. “He drove safe and I'm glad. If anything had happened to you I -”

“Me?” he cut in, shaking his head and thinking he loved her so much it hurt. “Need I remind you, Mrs. Cabot, that you were the one in the accident?” And then after inhaling deeply, he stared into her eyes and said, “And if anything had happened to you, I would not know what to do. I love you so damn much.”

His words spurred Rose forward and he caught her into his arms, kissed her like a man who needed the taste of her to live, to catch his next breath. He was filled with so much emotion, so much love.

“For goodness sake, Parnell, will you give her a chance to breathe. Besides, you have an audience.”

Parnell ignored Gabe’s words. He ignored the audience. His wife deserved his attention and he was giving it to her. Unfortunately, Rose didn’t ignore Gabe and withdrew from his mouth and gasped. They had drawn a crowd.

On tiptoe, she leaned in close to Parnell’s moist lips and said, “I love you too, but I think we should go home, don’t you?”

Smiling, he said, “Yeah, sweetheart, let’s get out of here.”

He took her hand and paused long enough to get his keys from Gabe. “If you’re nice, Gabe, your woman might give you a ride.”

Gabe laughed out loud. “Do you care?”

Parnell grinned. “Right now, the only thing I care about is getting my wife home and showing her how much I love her.”

And then he swept Rose off her feet into his arms and headed toward the hospital’s exit door.

• • •

Parnell shifted positions in bed to pull his wife into his arms. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Rose drew in a long breath, forced her eyes open as a grin tugged at her lips. “If I wasn’t before I’m definitely okay now. Where in the world do you get your stamina?”

He chuckled. “You’re doing a real good job in hanging right in there with me.”

“Only because I take Flintstone vitamins right along with the girls. Umm ... speaking of our girls, when are they coming home?”

“I spoke with Gabe. He and Sage are taking them out to dinner to give us more time.”

Rose smiled. “Do you think we need more time?”

“Yes. I want plenty of time with you, every possible moment. And with you, they’re all perfect moments.”

And then he leaned down and captured her lips knowing he would love her for the rest of his life and cherish all of their moments together.

EPILOGUE

Six months later

“May I have this dance, Mrs. Cabot?”

Rose gazed up at her husband, smiled and placed her hand into his outstretched one. “Yes, you may.” The moment Parnell escorted her out on the dance floor to join the other couples, he pulled her into his arms moving to the slow song being played by the deejay. “You look radiant, sweetheart.”

“Thank you. It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.”

She glanced around and saw Sage and Gabe, the bride and groom standing together on the sidelines talking to Sage’s parents. Everyone had come to North Carolina for Sage’s wedding. She looked simply gorgeous in her wedding gown and Gabe looked dashing in his matching white tux. What Rose had said earlier was true. It had been a beautiful wedding and she felt special having been asked to be one of the bridesmaids. Sage’s cousins, Cinnamon and Ginger had been her maids of honors and Joya and LaToya had been the flower girls. They had looked beautiful in their long gowns.

Rose shifted her gaze in the direction of where her daughters sat, talking to Gabe’s mother. Joella Blackwell was simply beaming with happiness. “I never did get around to asking you what part Joella played in getting us together,” Parnell said, drawing back her attention.

She gazed up at him and a smile touched her lips from corner to corner. “What makes you think she played a part?”

Parnell chuckled. “I know her. And I remember you saying she was calling a lot to check on the girls. I have a feeling she

was doing a little more than that.”

“Whatever she did is my and Joella’s secret,” Rose said, not ready to confess that Joella had given her the idea of presenting a proposal of marriage to him. “Does it matter?”

He shook his head. “No, it doesn’t matter. The girls and I got you and that’s all that counts.”

“And what if I were to tell you, Mr. Cabot, that around eight months from now we’ll be increasing our family?”

It took him a moment to catch on to what she’d said. And then he stopped dancing. A smile shone on his face that reached his eyes. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

She chuckled. “Yes. I found out this morning. I was going to wait until we got home but I just had to tell you. I couldn’t hold it any longer.”

A huge smile spread across Parnell’s face and without saying anything, he took Rose’s hand and led her out of the ballroom through a set of French doors to a beautiful flower garden. Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, happy beyond measure that she was having his baby.

He pulled back and whispered against her moist lips, “Thank you.”

Tears of happiness filled Rose’s eyes. “No, I want to thank you. You have fulfilled all my dreams, Parnell, and I love you.”

“And I love you, too, sweetheart.”

And then he was wrapping his arms around his wife and kissing her again, showing her just how much she was loved.