

*Adam,*

*a mother's love lasts forever*

*The Unfinished Business of Love Volume 3*



by  
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## **ADAM, a mother's love lasts forever**

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## *Chapter One...Still crazy for you after all these years*

I didn't know what I was going to say when I arrived at my ex-lover's home. I just knew I had to go. My best friend Lonnie told me that Adam, Nikki's son, was ill. She strongly suggested that I go see him. I argued with her, telling her why I couldn't do that. We weren't together anymore, so I didn't owe Nikki a damn thing. After all, she was the one who kicked me out under false pretenses. I didn't leave because I wanted to go. Lonnie said that was an old argument I'd never win. She said I should go see Adam. Something about Lonnie's voice—she sounded so sad on the phone and wouldn't say more—made me wonder if my resolve not to see Nikki again was foolish.

I glanced through the kitchen window after I hung up and shivered. The hairs on the back of my neck danced as though I'd stepped on a gravestone. What was wrong with me? What was I afraid of if I went to see the ex-love of my life? She was a woman just as I was...not a witch who could weave her spell on me. I'd just go see her and Adam to close that chapter in my life once and for all, I told my inner voice.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in my small living room glancing at a photo album of our lives together before the bitch in Nikki came out. I thumbed through fifty pages of pictures. There we were, the three of us, smiling at an amusement park. I'd talked a clown into snapping that one. I had my arm around Nikki while Adam stood in front of both of us with a wide, delighted grin. Actually, he was leaning backwards against both of us to see if we'd be there to catch him. He did that a lot in those early days. I think he wanted to make sure that we'd be there for him literally and figuratively, since his father wasn't.

If any man deserved killing, it was Adam's father and Nikki's ex-husband. The man was a deranged animal to beat on Nikki the way he did. When he started to include Adam in their weekly "attitude adjustment sessions," Nikki grabbed Adam and left. She filed an order of protection while she and Adam were living in a women's shelter. How she managed to find the courage to do it, I'll never know, but she did.

After looking at pictures of her bruised body and then her husband's large, smirking face, the judge granted a thirty-day temp order and set a trial date. I was working as a court officer when I saw her in court for the first time. I knew then that I wanted to meet her, but I was shy around women. I also figured she had enough on her plate without me making a pass at her. Besides, she

didn't appear to roll like me. I shook my head at the photos and sighed as the reality of my situation tumbled down on me.

"That was then and this is now," I muttered, closing the album and shoving it onto the shelf harder than I meant to do. "Lonnie's right; I oughta go see the bitch so I can get on with my life."

I glanced at my watch. Did it matter that today was Saturday and I was off all day? I was trying to stop looking at my watch as if I was late for something. Just like my memories of Nikki, it was one of those bad habits that I'd been trying to eliminate. I felt a tickle at my feet and grinned at the large tabby rubbing against my ankle. Dex looked at me and meowed, then licked a bare toe. That was my signal to pet him or cuddle with him or talk to him. "Okay, okay, Big Guy, I'm not ignoring you," I said, picking him up and allowing him to curl against my chest. I could hear his contented purr as I stroked his yellow and beige fur coat. "Guess who is sick, Dex? Do you remember the mean bitch I used to tell you about when I was pissed? You know, the one with the nice kid named Adam?"

Dex pressed deeper into me to get more of my hand stroking his fur. He meowed as though he understood perfectly the confusion I was feeling, so I continued, "Anyway, Adam's sick, so I'm going to visit him. You should come with me," I muttered, feeling his body shift in my arms. "I bet Adam would love to meet you."

I started laughing because I remembered Nikki's alleged "allergy" to four-legged creatures. She announced it as Adam and I were staring at the wiggling little puppies and kittens in the large picture window of the local pet store. "His mother, on the other hand, would hate all the attention I give you, my friend."

Dex climbed onto my shoulder, which was his favorite launching pad. He jumped to the sofa and then the floor. When he landed, he eyed me one time and then sauntered down the hallway to the kitchen. He'd had enough affection for the day while I was still trying to make up my mind if I should visit Adam. It wasn't seeing Adam that worried me. Seeing his mother again after she'd kicked me out for an imagined infidelity four years ago got me to thinking about things.

I wondered if she'd had changed much. How did she look now? Had she gained weight or lost it? Would she remember me with kindness or was she still pissed off about the affair she imagined I'd had with What's-her-name? Did she still hate animals? Did she still like peppermint tea with a dash of honey and a slice of lemon first thing in the morning? What was her mother, Mavis, up to these days? What was she doing to keep busy? Oh, to hell with all that shit! I really wanted to know if she was still doing the same woman Lonnie mentioned. That was when I knew there was no real decision to make. I was going to see Nikki and get the answers I'd been dreading for four years.



I knocked on Nikki's front door, then stepped down to the bottom step in case I needed to escape in a hurry. I cleared my throat several times, preparing to explain my presence to Nikki's new girlfriend, Tanya. Lonnie told me about her two years ago or maybe it was three years ago. Whatever the timeframe, it was a set of details I tried hard to forget. Tanya was the love of Nikki's new life without me. According to Lonnie, they were inseparable. She saw them at the clubs, a few street festivals, Sunday church we used to go for Adam's sake, and our favorite movie theater. She also let it slip how Adam didn't seem comfortable with Tanya the last time she saw the three of them coming out of the movies together.

Lonnie said Adam hung back as if their antics embarrassed him. He was about fifteen at the time, so any show of affection between the two women bothered him. When I mentioned that to Lonnie, she rolled her eyes and said she didn't think so. She described how he shrugged off the woman's attempt to include him in her protective embrace. That bothered me almost as much as the mention of Nikki's new ladylove. I missed that kid more than I thought I would. I remember being secretly glad Adam didn't approve of his mother's new lover until I thought about it.

Adam had a way of sensing things that most kids didn't. I guess he had to read adult behavior real well because of his father's history of violence. I wondered what he sensed about the new woman in his mother's life. Lonnie didn't say Nikki looked unhappy with her choice in women. In fact, Lonnie said they looked like the perfect couple. I figured Adam would come around to his mother's way of thinking eventually.

Anyway, I left my past with Nikki behind me and I tried to move on with my life. I dated like a madwoman that next year after Nikki kicked me out. I also tried hard not to look at what had gone wrong with us. My only goal was to find the next Ms. Right Now and screw her until the cows came home. I didn't give a shit how I was going to make the relationship work when I found her.

Lonnie claimed that with my solid frame and distinctive eyes, I was easy to look at. I'm an inch shy of six feet tall. I have skin the color of burnt caramel. I wear a short Afro now, but I've worn cornrows, dreads, and braids too. I have light brown eyes that sometimes look green in the right light. What Lonnie said was true. I've never had a problem in finding women. I'm no female Don Juan, but once I know what a woman likes, I give it to her, sometimes at the risk of putting my own pleasure in jeopardy. Nikki was one of only two women who understood how to give me pleasure.

Oh my, how Nikki loved to sex me almost as much I loved sexing her. I shook my head to clear my mind of her gloriously naked body sprawled across mine. I shoved hands in my jeans and grinned. I was gonna have fun playing with myself tonight before I went to sleep alone. Yeah, that's right, I said "alone." When Nikki threw me out, I spent that first crazy year of singleness screwing any woman who came near me, but I calmed down after that. I started thinking. You know, mulling over things, which is always a bad sign for me. If I think too much, I don't do much. That translates into thinking about sex rather than having sex, so it's no surprise I've been a monk

for the last two years. There's been nobody playing with my southern stuff and making me wet but my ten digits with an occasional boost from Killer Karla, my multipurpose dildo.

I stared at Nikki's front door and sighed. *This is crazy. I don't belong here. I can call Adam tomorrow if I really want to find out how he's doing.*

I turned to walk down the steps when the door opened slowly. Nikki's mother, Mavis Barrett, answered the door with a frown, then pulled glasses out of a pocket. She perched them on the bridge of her nose for a moment and then shoved them back into the same pocket. One thing never changed; Mavis was still too proud to wear glasses for her nearsightedness. Next to Adam, she always was my biggest fan. She grinned broadly when she recognized me, allowing perfectly capped teeth to show.

"Come in, Jules. I said a prayer that you'd come. God surely heard me today." Mavis looked me up and down, then shook her head. "My daughter is so stubborn sometimes. Well, don't just stand there, Woman, give me a hug. It has been so long, you don't remember your own mother-in-law?" She opened her arms to me.

I surprised myself and walked into her embrace. Mavis Barrett smelled expensive and delicious as always. I could feel her body trembling as she clung to me. I rubbed her back. "Hey, Mavis, are you all right?" She cuddled into my chest without answering. I realized she was crying when her shoulders shook. "It's okay. Whatever's wrong, it's gonna be fine." Her head burrowed deeper into my chest as her sobs grew louder.

"No, it's not."

"What's not?"

"Him, he's not fine." Mavis sniffed.

"Who?"

Mavis shifted out of my arms to squint up into my face. Her dark eyes studied me without speaking. "My God, she didn't tell you, did she? When I saw you at the door, I thought Nikki did something right and finally asked for your help with all this." Her eyes filled with tears again. She wiped at them with a lacy hanky she pulled out of a pocket of her apron.

"That's enough, Mother! I'll take it from here," Nikki called from the hallway. She strode down the hallway and stopped somewhere behind me. "Adam wants to see you, Mother."

I was facing away from the hallway and didn't see Nikki arrive, so I had to rely on Mavis' reaction to confirm her daughter's presence.

Mavis frowned as she stepped around me. "You should tell her, Nikki. It's cruel not to do so."

Nikki sighed loudly. Her warm breath tickled the back of my neck like a feather wandering against it. "Mother, I said I'd handle it!" she exclaimed briskly, then caught herself to add something in a more polite tone. "Please, just go see what Adam wants."

"Humph! If you don't tell her, I will." Mavis squeezed my forearm, looked up at me, and winked. "Still working out with weights, I see."

I returned her wink. "You should come with me to the gym, Mavis. My offer's still good." I made a production of looking her up and down. It was an old habit, a thing we did. I thought Mavis Barrett was the sexiest woman, next to her daughter, that I'd seen in a long time. "I'll show you

how to keep fit, although I don't think you need any advice from me. You're looking good as always."

"Aw! Go on, Jules. I'm just an old broad looking for a little attention."

"Old, huh? Yeah, sure you are, Mavis. I bet you could run circles around Adam and me without breaking a sweat. It's too bad you're not a dyke or I'd give you a run..." My voice trailed off with Nikki's interruption.

"Jesus Christ, Mother!" Nikki exploded. "Go see Adam, now!"

I turned around, preparing to chastise Nikki for her rude behavior when Mavis squeezed my arm hard enough to bring on tears.

"Don't say it. Let it go, Jules. She needs you. Just remember that, no matter what she says or how crazy she acts." Mavis cleared her throat. She studied her daughter's face for a moment and then frowned. "I think I'll go see what Adam wants."

I watched Mavis square her shoulders, then stride down the hallway. I almost whistled as I watched her hips sway and twist as if she was putting an extra oomph in them just for me, until I remembered where I was and who I was admiring. I could feel Nikki's angry eyes on me, so I turned to face her and cleared my throat. "Your mother let me in. I hope your girlfriend doesn't mind me being here."

"Humph! How could she? I run things here. This is my house. If Tanya doesn't like it, she knows what she can do!" Nikki's eyes narrowed as she spat out the last words. She stared at me as if she was daring me to say something. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"I heard my mother greet you at the door. I know you hugged her, so how about one for me?" Nikki's dark eyes studied me. She was waiting for me to make the first move. I knew just how she'd fit in my arms. How good she'd feel snuggling into me. She liked to rub against my breast with a cheek or a hand. If that didn't get me aroused, she'd start in on my left nipple—teasing it with her mouth and then, *Oh shit!* What was I thinking? "No, that wouldn't be a good idea." I offered a hand. "How about just shaking hands?"

Nikki looked at me with disgust. "Are you afraid I might try to screw you?" She sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes. "Well, I'm not that desperate!"

I surprised myself with my answer. "No, I'm worried I might try something." I didn't add that while she might not be desperate for sex with another person, I certainly was. "Old habits die hard, Sugar Tits."

Nikki flushed at my nickname for her twin demons of pleasure. She picked invisible lint from the front of tailored slacks. "I used to love it when you called me that." She looked at me and finally allowed a small smile to break through that stony exterior of hers. "Nobody's called me by that name in years."

"That's because your woman doesn't know how sweet your milk tastes."

"You're the only one who managed to get my milk flowing besides Adam when he was a baby."

“Want me to give Tanya lessons?” I asked, watching as a reddish tinge crept down Nikki’s light milk chocolate cheeks, then move down her neck and disappear into the blouse she wore. I took a step closer, wondering what she’d do if I decided to trace the reddening path down to its source. It would be so easy to give in to the tingling I started to feel around the edges of my body and touch Nikki, stroke her until she felt the heat too.

Nikki’s eyes widened. Her hand fluttered to the collar of her blouse, then rested nearby on her chest near the second button. “No, yes. I mean...er...” She sighed. “Tanya and I went our separate ways months ago. Didn’t Lonnie tell you?”

I drew closer to Nikki until I stood an inch away. I leaned over as though I was going for a kiss. Instead, I inhaled deeply. “Your mother smelled expensive and delicious. You, on the other hand, smell like lust...pure, simple, Grade A lust.”

Nikki interrupted my speech to pull me against her. “Shut up, Jules, and kiss me hello.”

She didn’t have to ask me twice. I threw caution to the four winds, leaned down, and kissed her. It was the best hello kiss I’d ever delivered. Damned near licked the ruby red off her lips and sucked the breakfast taste from her mouth. My hands started wandering as they always did whenever I kissed Nikki. They had a mind of their own, touching her hips, lightly stroking them, then using a firmer touch, caressing them and pressing her pelvis into my heated crotch.

Nikki groaned her approval to what my hands had her body doing. She moved against me, moaning, “Ooo, Jules...I missed this.”

“Sugar Tits, can I taste one?” Damn my mouth and the words that came out of it. My words broke the spell or maybe Dexter did it with his whining. Whatever it was, all I know is that she pulled out of my arms as if she’d just come to her senses. When I stepped back, I could see the relief in her eyes. My hard nipples and achy pussy would have to wait to be sated until I was home alone in my bed.

Nikki looked down at her feet and smiled at my cat. She knelt down. “Well, hello, Big Guy. Who are you?” She picked up Dex and studied his face. “He has eyes like mine. Is that why you have him?”

I shrugged. I always wondered what attracted me to the skinny, half-frozen tabby I took in one winter day six months after Nikki kicked me out. Now I knew. Lonnie said his eyes were too dark for a tabby. She claimed they usually had eyes more like my hazel eyes. I never noticed before today. He was company for me after Nikki kicked me out. That was all I cared about at the time. I frowned when Dex snuggled into Nikki’s chest as if he belonged there. He never did that with strangers.

Nikki smiled, then spoke softly to Dexter as she stroked his fur. “Come to Mama, Baby. That’s a good boy. I’ll take care of you just like you’re mine.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Nikki couldn’t just claim my cat like that, could she? “Hey, he’s mine. Don’t tell him that you’ll...”

Nikki and Dex both looked up at me together as if they’d planned it. Two sets of dark eyes examined me thoroughly from my work boots to the top of my short Afro. I couldn’t tell what either one was thinking, so I shut up. They both studied me, staring at me without blinking until I

felt like a new species of bug under a microscope in a biology lab. I finally looked down to see if my shirt was unbuttoned. It wasn't. Then I shoved a hand in the front jeans pocket to check my zipper. I remembered zipping up when I got dressed this morning. I heard the little metal teeth bite through the denim fabric. Oh, yeah, my zipper was closed. I knew my shoes were on the right feet. My feet would have hurt if they weren't and they felt fine. In fact, I was thinking about using them to leave.

My frown took in both of them, but I meant it for Nikki. "What are you staring at, Nikki? Dexter's a cat. He stares at me all the time. What's your excuse?"

Nikki allowed a small smile to come forth. "I was imagining you," she murmured hoarsely and her voice trailed off. She flushed, swallowed, then cleared a husky voice. "Never mind; it's not important."

Dexter meowed loudly, then caught her eye.

They stared at each other for a moment before Nikki set him down.

We watched him take off down the hall.

"I thought you didn't like cats."

"I like Dexter. I think Adam will like him too." Nikki's eyes grew large and round when she said his name softly. She closed her eyes. Her fingers formed a church steeple and she held them up to her lips. When she opened her eyes, I could see the pain in them. "How much did Lonnie tell you about Adam?"

I shrugged. "Not much. Lonnie said he was under the weather." I cleared my throat. "I brought Dexter over to cheer him up."

"And make me angry about having a cat in the house, right?" Nikki studied me with silent, dark, liquid pools of sadness.

I felt caught between a lie and laugh. I'd say anything right now to see her eyes light up with joy. I could think of a few things that might work, but they had to do with touching, tasting, and sexing. Somehow, that just didn't feel right for me to do. I stepped closer and stroked her cheek. "If I said yes, would you hate me?"

Nikki closed her eyes as a tear dripped down from the corner of her left eye. "It takes too much energy to do that. Lately, I haven't felt like doing much of anything."

"Oh, why is that?"

Nikki sighed and opened her eyes. "Adam is dying, Jules."

I yanked my hand away from her face and jammed it in a pocket. That was one helluva sick joke she'd just told me. "What did you just say?"

"Adam is dying."

The look on her face told me she wasn't joking. I stared at her in disbelief. Then I marched over to the living room window to look out and see if the world was upside down. It wasn't. Cars still honked their horns. People still walked by the house. I could see kids playing on the swings in the park across the street. Why did Adam have to die? Why couldn't God give one of them a death sentence? How about the little boy pushing the other kid's face into the sandpit? He looked like a good candidate. I'd bet he was a little bastard. How about taking his worthless little life in

exchange for my little buddy? *Shit!* Adam wasn't a little kid anymore. He was a gangly six-footer the last time I saw him on the basketball court.

I don't know what made me stop by the outdoor court to see if Adam still played there, but I did. It was where I taught him the fundamentals of pickup ball: how to elbow a guy where the ref couldn't see it, how to fall into a guy with a hard shoulder and disable him, or talk trash to mess with his mind and then outmaneuver him. I saw him hanging with his friends. They played a little b-ball but mostly they talked trash and watched females parade by. Adam looked good. I saw his mother's soft eyes and face, but his father's hard body and agility on the court. How could a kid who looked that healthy twelve months ago be dying now?

"Damn it, I shoulda told him I was there. He played a good game that day," I muttered, watching the little badass in the park burying another child's face in the sandpit.

I don't know why, but I started crying. Nikki came over and stood next to me at the window. For a time, neither one of us said anything. She didn't try to comfort me. I didn't try to lean on her shoulder either. We just stood side by side, watching the kids play in the park.

"Adam told me how you came to the court to watch him and his friends play several times. He wondered why you never came over to say hello. He said you watched from your car. One time, you got out and stood on the sidewalk to watch him play."

I wiped my eyes with the palm of my hands, then blew my nose into some tissues Nikki handed me. "I didn't want to upset him. I didn't think he saw me watching him."

"I see," Nikki murmured quietly and smiled at me. She tilted my chin to catch the sunlight streaming in from the window. "You have a piece of tissue stuck."

I wiped my nose, but that didn't get it.

"No, it's still there." Nikki pointed to her lip under her own nose. "It's right there."

I wiped my nose, missing the tissue.

Nikki raised a hand. "May I?"

I shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

Nikki flicked the stubborn crumb with a tissue and then traced the outline of my mouth with a gentle fingertip. "I wanted to tell you when we found out." Her hands dropped to her sides. "Only, I didn't know how to say it. He's so weak, Jules. It's as if he's a baby again. I spend my days changing his diapers, washing his sheets, and trying to get him to eat. I'm so tired and scared. I don't know how much longer I can take this."

I cleared my throat. "I have about four or five months of vacation leave and an understanding boss."

"I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Damn it, Nicole Louise Barrett! Take her goddamn offer!" Mavis hissed as she glared at her daughter's back.

I turned away from the window to grin at my favorite ex-mother-in-law. "Hey, Mavis, I didn't know you knew cuss words."

"I wouldn't have to use 'em if my daughter would show a little common sense!" She marched over to shake a finger at me. "You'd better not promise anything that you can't deliver either, Julia

Walters! This family has been through more than its fair share of troubles. Don't make it worse by promising you'll stay today and walk out tomorrow."

Mavis caught my eye and stared at me as though she was taking my measure, as the old folks say. I didn't know what my eyes said to her, but she liked what she saw in them because she stood on her toes to kiss my cheek. "I knew I could depend on you."

I frowned at her. "But I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to. I can see it in your eyes."

I looked over Mavis' shoulder and caught her daughter's eye, then raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah, Mavis. How's that work?"

"I know what you're thinking. No, I'm not crazy! I'm just a good judge of people. I saw that look you gave Nikki. You still love her, don't you?"

"I don't know what..." My voice faded when Mavis shook a finger at me.

"Don't bother to deny it, Julia. I saw it in your eyes." Mavis turned to glare at her daughter. "Humph! She feels the same way about you. She's just too stubborn to say it right now." Her head swiveled back to me. "You'll have time for showing all that later. Right now, we need to make a work schedule. How soon can you get leave?"

"I can start the process today." I cleared my throat and made the women look at me. "I...how long should I... I mean, how long does he have?"

"Not long," Nikki replied in a husky voice filled with pain. "His doctor said about four to six months."

I scratched the back of my head, then nodded. "How strong is he? Can he go outside to the park?"

Nikki shrugged. "We...I can't lift him. I fired the last nurse because she wouldn't wash Adam or change his diapers. She left him lying in feces all day. She'd always say he musta just had a bowel movement as she was leaving. I felt bad asking her to change him, so I'd wait for the night nurse to do it until I discovered raw sores on his genitals and buttocks one afternoon. That's when Mother and I took over his care."

"How long have you two been doing this?"

Nikki glanced at her mother. "I guess it's been three months...no, four months."

I couldn't contain my anger and I exploded. "Goddamn it, Nikki! You coulda asked me to help!"

Nikki smoothed down the front of her shirt with a hand. She wouldn't meet my eyes. "Mother wanted to, but I said no. I didn't think you'd care about us."

I sucked in a huge breath. I counted to ten and then maybe twenty-five. I held up a hand in surrender to my higher power. "What's done is done. Let me make a few calls. I know a couple friends in the medical field who might be able to help us."

"I trust his doctors."

"Yeah, I know you do. I was thinking about his nursing care."

"I can't afford that. Besides, I don't want strangers in my home, Jules."

I couldn't help it. I walked over, stood in front of Nikki, and placed both hands on her shoulders, then leaned down to look into her face. "Do you trust me, Nikki?"

Nikki took a long time to answer my simple question. "We haven't lived together in four years. How do I know you haven't changed?"

"The same way your mother knows I still love Adam. She says it's in my eyes, so I'll ask the question again. Do you trust me with Adam?"

Nikki finally looked at me. She sighed heavily, then nodded. "Yes, I trust you with him."

"Here's what I want you to do. Go to your bed and take a nap. I'll be in later to check on you." I gave her a gentle shove in the direction of the hallway.

Mavis watched her daughter trudge down the hall before she spoke again. "Thank you. I've been so worried that I'd be attending a double funeral. Nikki didn't want to make it difficult for me, so she took family leave from her job. She handles the day-to-day stuff. I help out here and there." She sighed. "I don't think she's gotten more than four or five hours sleep a day since this cancer business started."

"What about you, Mavis? How are you holding up?"

"I wish it were me with the cancer instead of Adam. I don't know what she'll do when he dies, Jules. I really don't. You have to promise me you'll be there to see her through all of this."

I rubbed my temples before I faced Mavis. I never stopped loving her. Even when everything got crazy and I got crazy, I never stopped loving Nikki. I sighed. Believe me; I hated her hold on my heart. I tried shaking it off with a variety of women, but none of them could hold a candle to her. They were either good in bed and bitches outside of the bedroom or vice versa. As for my little buddy, I mean, the big guy in the bedroom, I missed him too.

"Mavis, what do I call Adam now? I used to call him my little buddy, but the last time I saw him on the court, he was as big as me."

Mavis nodded. "That was before the cancer got to him. He has the same old grin you remember, but he's lost so much weight. He doesn't eat much. He says he can't hold meals down. The doctor says there are things we could do to make him feel better...drugs...painkillers, but he won't take 'em. He wants to enjoy his last days fully conscious." Her face changed and I could read the sadness in it. "I don't believe I've heard him or Nikki laughing in the last year."

"There's not much fun in dying, Mavis." I cleared my throat. "Take me back to see him. I wanna see him before I call my nursing friends."

Mavis frowned. "I don't suppose I should ask, but those nurses of yours; are they ...er...former girlfriends?"

"Does that make a difference?"

"Not to me, but Nikki might have other ideas."

"I haven't seen them in years. We parted amicably, so they should be cool with this assignment."

"How much is 'they' gonna cost?"

"Once they meet Adam, I suspect they'll do it for cost. Both of them are mothers...were mothers. Hope lost a seven-year-old to cancer ten years ago. The little girl was her only child. The

other one, Darlene, is a breast cancer survivor. Her niece and one of her sisters died of the disease several years ago. They help people like Adam, Nikki, and you with support and hospice care if and when you need it.”

Mavis nodded as she watched a little girl race down the hallway. “There’s something I forgot to tell you about. Her name is Theresa.”

“Grandma, I up all by myself. See?” Theresa rushed over to her grandmother before she realized somebody else was in the room. Once she saw me, she hid behind her grandmother’s dress, peeking out at me with her mother’s dark eyes.

“Whoa, she looks just like Nikki.”

Mavis detached a little hand gripping her dress, then patted a little back. “Go on, Theresa; don’t act shy now. Everybody knows how much you love to talk. Say hello to my friend Julia.”

I knelt down and grinned at the little girl with the finger in her mouth. “It’s all right. I promise not to bite you like this.” I pulled her gently away from her grandmother, held her up to the sky, and nuzzled her belly. She giggled, then grabbed at my hair to pull on it, but her hands came up empty. “It’s too short to pull on, isn’t it?” I grinned and nuzzled her belly again when I stood up.

“Gimme piggy ride. I wanna ride!” Theresa bounced up and down in my arms. She grabbed my cheeks between two small hands and turned my head so I faced her. “I want a piggy ride now!”

I frowned. I knew most kid stuff, but a piggy ride? What the hell was that?

“She means a piggyback ride.”

“Oh. I’m too wide for that kind of thing, Kiddo. How about sitting on my shoulders while I go visit with Adam?”

“I love Adam. He my big brother.” Theresa studied me. “Mommy say he gonna be in heaven soon. Is dat good? What’s heaven? Adam says you gots be dead to go. Is dat right? What’s dead? Do Adam gotta be dead? Can I be dead too, Lady?”

I took a deep breath, then looked at Mavis with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ve explained it a million times to her. You’re fresh blood. You try while I start lunch,” Mavis whispered as she walked by. “Go check on Nikki on your way to see Adam.”

“Okay, heaven is where good people go to visit God. Got that, Kiddo?”

Theresa frowned as she thought about it, then nodded with vigor. “Yes. What’s God?”

“Let’s see, God is...he’s... I mean, he’s a person but he’s not a person. He made all of us, see?”

She nodded, then frowned again. “Did he run outta pills?”

“Pills?”

“Yes, pills. When Mommy head hurts, her take pills. My mommy say she busy all the time and she need pills. If God made you ‘n me ‘n Adam ‘n Mommy ‘n Grammy, he be busy like Mommy, so he take pills too.”

“Oh.”

“How did he make all of us?”

“Who?”

“God?”

“Oh yeah, God.” Mavis sure knew when to cut and run. I should have gone with her. The kid was wearing me out with her questions and I’d only been with her five minutes. “Why don’t I put you down so you can show me Mommy’s room and then Adam’s room?”

“Kay.”

I knelt to set Theresa on the ground. She promptly took off, then skipped back to hold a hand out. “Hey, you? You gotta hold my hand so you don’t be scared.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I took her hand and let her guide me down the hall. I could smell Nikki’s scent before I reached her door.