



**Juicy Central**

*Nishell*

Artistic, loyal, generous, secretive

**Tempted**

Book 9 | Ayshia Monroe

**D**amn that Jackson Beauford,” Nishell Saunders muttered to herself as she walked down the hill to the river’s edge. Her treasured Nikon Coolpix digital camera clomped against her white peasant blouse; she felt a bead of sweat roll down her tawny forehead.

It was so hot on this late Tuesday afternoon in June that her sandals seemed to stick to the sun-baked asphalt path. Right before Nishell had left the day-care where she was working as a summer counselor, she’d checked an outdoor thermometer. Ninety-two in the

shade. Waiting for the bus that brought her here, it had felt like two hundred and ninety-two.

“Damn that Jackson,” she repeated. Most days, the asphalt path along the river was filled with people walking, bicycling, rollerblading, or just tossing bread to the ducks. Not this day, though. Just too hot. “He makes me mad. Why’d I even show up?”

“Yo! Nishell! Yo! Up here!”

Nishell turned and saw Jackson standing under a weeping willow about fifty yards away. He looked better than any eleventh-grade boy should, in baggy khaki shorts and a white-ribbed undershirt beneath a paisley short-sleeve shirt. Nishell knew that his handsome face framed startling blue eyes—not so common for a brother.

Nishell thought of all the reasons she had to stay angry at Jackson. He’d

flunked all his classes last semester at South Central High School. She'd told him that he could forget about hittin' it with her if he couldn't even manage D-minuses. Jackson had taken Nishell's declaration badly. He'd—

“Hey!” Jackson called. “Whatchu wanna do, Nishell? Stand there and melt into a pool of the sweetest chocolate in America? I wouldn't mind a honey dip, but I think I want you whole, you know what I'm sayin'? Come on up here, you fly girl!”

Nishell grinned.

“There's nothing finer than a man who makes you laugh,” she thought. “If a man can make you laugh, you can't stay mad.”

“Okay, okay.” She made her way through some tall grass up to where he was standing. When she got there, she saw he'd set out a fancy picnic under the cool—well, cooler—shade of the willow.

There was even a pillow for her with a rose atop it.

“Hey. I’m glad you came,” he said softly when she reached him.

She took in the picnic and cocked an eye at him. “If you worked half as hard on algebra as you did on this, you might have passed.”

“Maybe,” he allowed. “Course, settin’ this up didn’t put me to sleep like all that  $A$ -squared plus  $B$ -squared equal  $C$ -squared bull-dinky does.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Nishell retorted. “You just have to pass it.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You know how fine you look when you throw shade at me like that? Course, you look fine anyway.”

*Aww ...*

Nishell loved it when Jackson complimented her looks. She knew she wasn’t as skinny as the rest of her friends. Her

clothes size started with the number “1,” and she’d put herself on a diet more than once. She kept her hair long and straight and dressed to hide her major-league curves more often than not. Otherwise, every man she passed on the street made kissing noises and asked what she was hiding between them fine-lookin’ twins. Today, she’d come straight from work, and she was still in jeans and the official Northeast Towers day-care yellow T-shirt.

At Jackson’s invitation, she sat on the pillow. He opened a cooler and handed her a bottled iced tea, plus a plate with sliced ham, fresh potato salad, and an apple cut in half. He got the same thing for himself.

“I made all this myself,” he told her.

She grabbed her camera, snapped a picture of the plate, and then took a forkful of the potato salad. It was

seasoned with salt, pepper, garlic, and a little paprika. Her eyes grew wide as the tastes rolled around her tongue. “Omigod, Jackson. Where’d you learn to cook like this?”

“It’s good?”

Nishell nodded. “Crazy good.”

“Well then, I don’t get a D-minus from you.”

Nishell laughed. “No D-minus. Maybe a C-plus.”

“You a hard grader,” Jackson cracked.

For a couple of minutes, she ate contentedly. It was pleasant under the willow. A gentle breeze has started up. The food was brilliant. And Jackson was—was this possible?—even more gentle than the wind.

“I want to say something from my heart, ’cause I know you mad at me,” Jackson told her when he saw she was halfway through her food.

“You gonna say you acted like a jerk last week after I told you what I told you?” Nishell asked. “It’s true. You were a jerk to me; you were a jerk to Kiki Butler, and you were a jerk to her man, Sean—you practically killed him on the basketball court, and he your cousin!”

“I thought you were bein’ unfair,” Jackson stated carefully.

She drank some of the tea. “Because I said we couldn’t do the deed till you started makin’ yourself some grades?”

“You know it. My grades be my business, not yours.”

Nishell shook her head. “No, Jackson. If you gonna be my man, they also be my business. I think you forget I was homeless, once upon a time. No way I let you end up the same way.”

Jackson held the cold tea bottle against the back of his neck. “Day-um, Nishell! I ain’t gonna be homeless.”



“Tell me that when you don’t get your diploma next year, and your mama toss you outta your house like my grandparents tossed out my mom,” Nishell declared.

“That was different,” Jackson maintained. He brushed his hand at a stray yellow jacket that was flitting around the picnic basket.

Nishell shook her head. “Not so much. Anyway, we can hang if you want. Just don’t be ’spectin’ nothing from me till you shape it up. Plus you owe Kiki Butler and your cousin a big-ass apology.”

Jackson nodded. “Maybe I’ll see ’em at Mio’s tonight.”

Mio’s was the local pizza joint that was the unofficial headquarters of the yearbook club of South Central High School. Both Nishell and Jackson had been YC members last year. Nishell’s friend Sherise—Kiki Butler’s older-

by-two-minutes twin sister—had been president of that club, and Nishell was the main photographer. Jackson hadn't joined YC by choice. He was forced there after he'd cut class one too many times.

When they finished their food and drinks, Nishell asked if they could walk down to the river so she could take a few pictures. A summer thunderstorm was moving in from the west. The storm was still many miles away, but sunlight streaked through thick clouds, playing on the buildings across the water. "It's gorgeous light."

Jackson grinned slyly. "Not as gorgeous as you. Course, I can't do anything but hold your hand now."

"Then hold it good." Nishell found her camera; Jackson helped her to her feet. Then she and Jackson walked hand-in-hand down the hill. It felt natural. Right. In fact, it felt so right that Nishell was