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Serena

FORBIDDEN LOVE: BOOK TWO



TIFFANY PARKER

Serena
Forbidden Love Series
Book Two
By
Tiffany Parker

Dedication

*As always, I dedicate this book to my mother—
Dot. Mama I love you so much. I continue to
wish you were still here with me in body as you
are in spirit. You always believed in me and
encouraged me to follow my dreams. I hope I've
made you proud.*

Acknowledgments

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My husband is next. Thanks for putting up with my long hours on the computer. I know how much you hated it when I took my laptop everywhere we went and I appreciate your understanding. Even though you moaned and groaned at times, your support never wavered.

Now for my children, thank you! I know I've told you before, but I'll never tell you enough how much it means to me that you're proud of your mother.

For my many friends and family that keep me encouraged – thank you as well. Every writer knows what it's like to have bouts of writers block. I pray they have an incredible support system as I do.

I'd like to give a special acknowledgement to my girl, Melinda Sejour; Many, many, many thanks for always being there. We spend countless hours laughing, talking and encouraging each other.



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Serena

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Chapter One

After parking her sleek, red, Suzuki GSXR 1000 at her best friend Darnell's house, Serena James began her nightly ritual of walking home through one of Atlanta's less than desirable, West End neighborhoods. Tonight however, her thoughts were plagued with the sinfully handsome, Elray Carter.

Their first meeting was funny as hell. Around the racing circle Serena frequented, she went by JT, so other racers who didn't know her wouldn't know her gender just by her name. Of course, Elray assumed that JT was a man. A relatively new comer to street racing, she was told that he'd bet two hundred dollars on her to win that night after watching a couple races. When she won, he collected his money then came over to congratulate the winner. When she took her helmet off, his surprise was evident, he actually said, "I'll be damn, you chumps got beat by a girl."

Offended, Serena responded. "I suppose you think you'd have done better?" Not waiting for an answer, she left him standing there looking bewildered.

Now two weeks later, Darnell said he was still asking about her. "Don't tell him a damn thing." She instructed. "I don't need—or want—somebody like him in my life."

Serena learned Elray Carter was rich, arrogant, and gorgeous as hell, and worse; he knew it. A self admitted player, who definitely was not her type. At present, he was working her last nerve about getting together. It was pretty obvious that he was a man used to getting what he wanted. Well that was just too damn bad because he wasn't getting her.

She would sooner drop dead, than deal with somebody like him. She only had time for one thing; that was racing. Racing would make her the money she needed to get away from a dismal life of poverty and her mother's perverted boyfriend. An added bonus would be if her success, in some way, would inspire her mother to stop drinking.

No time to think about it now she thought, as she placed her helmet on her head for her next race. If she won tonight, she would have twenty grand saved up. It was a good start for what she wanted —to become a professional racer—so she could earn some real money. Placing the key in her bike, she was just about to start it up when Darnell and, of all people, Elray Carter pulled up.

"Hi, Serena." Darnell said but she ignored him.

Both men moved to the sidelines to watch. Two races later Serena, Darnell and Elray were collecting their winnings. Darnell pulled her to the side once again to ask her about getting together with Elray. As badly as she wanted to say no, the

only way to get him out of her hair for good, was most likely to just go and get it over with.

“Fine. Let’s do Denny’s on highway 85 and Forest Parkway around noon tomorrow.”

Darnell was really stretching his friendship strings with this request. He was definitely going to have to make this up to her.



Twelve fifteen the following day Serena roared into the Denny’s parking lot. Unfortunately, she was running late because her mother, drunk as usual, started in on her just before she left. Elray and Darnell were still talking next to Elray’s ride as she skillfully brought the bike to a stop. She got off, pulled off her helmet, and began walking toward them.



It was a good thing Serena wasn’t a mind reader because her opinion of the handsome Elray Carter would have sunk just a tad lower. The wicked grin on his face as he watched her approach told her his mind was in the gutter. Since he was checking her out, she took the opportunity to do the same with him. Even in simply jeans and a tee shirt; he was sexy as hell.

No doubt about it, she thought as the waitress seated them. I have got to stay the hell away from him.

Darnell's cell phone rang just as they finished placing their order for drinks. He had to leave. Serena didn't want to stay either, so she got up.

Reaching out Elray grabbed her hand, "Please stay so we can get to know each other better."

Darnell leaned over and whispered. "Yeah, remember you promised."

Oh yeah, Darnell's definitely gonna get his, she thought as she glared at him. Maybe not now, but he was going to get it just the same. Smiling through gritted teeth, reluctantly, she agreed.

"Bye Darnell. I'll talk to you later."

"Somehow I already knew that," he responded as he walked away.

Now that Darnell was gone, Elray asked. "So tell me about yourself."

"There isn't much to tell, it might be easier if you tell me what you want to know."

"Tell me what you want me to know."

"This will be a very short conversation."

"Oh really," He replied while shifting his chair closer to hers. "Why is that?"

“Because there’s nothing I want to tell you. I’m pretty sure we have nothing in common and I seriously doubt with the exception of Darnell, that we have any friends in common.”

“Okay, then I’ll ask you what I want to know.”

Amazingly, she found him extremely easy to talk to. Over the next few hours, he asked questions and she answered. He also told her a lot about himself, she hoped it wasn’t too obvious, that the thing that impressed her most about him was that his brothers were, Rayvon and Rayden Carter. She had been following their careers in racing for years. There were so few African Americans in car and motorcycle racing.

After lunch while walking to her bike, Elray asked. “Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? You have to eat.”

Since she had the feeling he wasn’t going to give up easily, again against her better judgment, reluctantly, she agreed. “Okay, here tomorrow at seven thirty.”

At seven thirty on the dot, the next day both Serena and Elray were pulling into the Denny’s parking lot. When he got out of his car and approached her bike he asked, “Are you sure you want to eat here, we could go some place nicer.”

“No, this is fine. In case you didn’t notice, I am wearing jeans.”

The way his eyes suddenly roamed over her body made Serena feel a little uncomfortable. Thank God, he kept whatever he was thinking to himself, because she was sure that it would have embarrassed her. Instead, he nodded and they went inside. After dinner, he asked. “Would you go for a ride with me?”

Since she didn’t want to leave her bike in the parking lot of the restaurant, he followed her to Darnell’s. She parked her bike for the night and got in his car.

They arrived at Dillon’s customization shop. Now why would he bring her here? She got her answer when they walked in. His brother Dillon and the twins were inside working on Rayden’s car.

“Dill, Ray’s what’s up?” Elray asked greeting his brothers.

“El, what brings you down here?” Rayden responded.

“I wanted you to meet a friend of mine. Dill, Ray’s this is Serena.”

Serena was awe struck when she realized just who they were; she couldn’t do anything but stare. She snapped out of here daze when Dillon stepped forward.

“Hi Serena, I’m Dillon.”

“Dillon hi, it’s nice to meet you,” she responded just as Rayden Carter pushed Dillon out the way.

“Serena, I’m Rayden and the young pup behind me is our other brother Rayvon.”

She giggled.

“Aren’t you and your brother twins?”

“We sure are, but I was born first. I’m finer and a better racer.”

“Whatever. Get out of the way Rayden. I can speak for myself. Hi Serena.”

“Geesh, you’d think you fools never saw a woman before,” Elray said as he shooed both his brothers away from her.

“Man, it’s not like you to ever bring a woman around the family.” Rayden said. None of them had ever been one to share their personal life with a woman, so her presence declared her special.

For the moment, as she took in her surroundings, Elray was totally forgotten. Serena walked around the car they were working on, appreciating the sheer power and beauty of it. This, she thought to herself, was as good as it got, the car was perfection. She stopped in front of the car and ran her fingertips over the engine. When Dillon came to stand next to her, she asked. “What are you working on?”

“Rayden has a race coming up in a few weeks. During his last race he said the car was sluggish.”

To everyone’s surprise, she removed her jacket, picked up some tools, and started working. By two o’clock in the morning, Dillon, Rayvon and Rayden had already called it a night, but not Serena. Elray and his brothers sat quietly watching her work on the car. Seeing how passionate she was about what she was

doing, Elray wondered if she were that passionate in other areas. Forty-five minutes later, she started the car and the engine purred like a kitten. A triumphant smile lit her beautiful face.

“You really do love cars don’t you?” Elray asked as he walked around Rayden to get to her. The brothers were in awe. Rayden just looked at her and smiled. His car was definitely ready for his next race.

Still feeling the high of excitement, she hugged each man there. When she got to Elray, she pulled back when she felt the proof of his desire as he held her. “Yes, I really do.” She responded looking deeply into Elray’s eyes. It was definitely desire she saw in them. Hating to admit it, even to herself, she was attracted to him too—in a big way. He made her skin tingle all over. And the knowledge that he desired her made her blush.

“Well, it’s been real but I think it’s time I took this lady home.” Elray said.

“I really enjoyed meeting you guys. Good luck with the race,” Serena said. She couldn’t believe she had actually worked on Rayden Carter’s car. Before she left Dillon handed her his card and offered her a job.

“Thanks Dillon. I’ll think about it and give you a call,” she said.

On the ride to her house, neither of them said anything. Part of her silence was because she was ashamed; ashamed of where she lived. She was sure Elray

was aware of the fact she didn't come from money like him, but knowing it—and seeing it—was two different things.

Elray got out of the car to open the door for her. Not sure if her mother or Jerry were up, she didn't want him to walk her to the door, but he insisted.

“I'd like to kiss you good night.” He said as they stopped at her front door.

She had to make an embarrassing confession. Lowering her head, she said just above a whisper. “I don't really know how. I've never kissed anyone before.”

Before Elray could say anything about what she had just told him, she slipped her key in the door and disappeared inside the house. Walking back to his car he glanced back once more before getting in. As he pulled away, he thought to himself, “What a woman.” How was she able to be so damn sexy without any effort or experience for that matter? One thing was for sure, he intended to find out. For the first time in his life, a woman completely intrigued him. Serena James was not like any woman he had ever dated and he was determined to get to know her better.

Chapter Two

The next morning Elray was awoken by the doorbell. His clock on the nightstand showed it was nine thirty. Knowing it could only be one of four people, he put on a robe and went to the door and yanked it open. Of course he was right; it was Dillon and the twins. Attempting to close the door in their faces, he turned around to head back to bed. Thanks to the lustful imagines of the beautiful Serena, he didn't get much sleep last night.

Dillon stopped just outside his bedroom door and yelled, "Are you alone?"

When he didn't answer, Rayden just walked in anyway. Sitting on the side of his bed, Elray looked up at Rayden and growled. "Did I say come in?"

Rayden shrugged. "If you didn't want us in here you would have said something."

Rayvon sat down next to him and handed him the breakfast they brought. While he ate, they grilled him about Serena.

"There isn't much to tell." He said between bites. "She street races. Actually, she's a damn good one. She loves cars and motorcycles; she's a natural mechanic and has never gone to school for it. Hell, I think she taught herself almost

everything she knows. The love of cars and bikes made her want to learn everything she could about them.”

“Do you think she’ll take me up on my job offer?” Dillon asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know her well enough to say one way or another.”

Secretly, he hoped she would if it would stop her from racing. He really liked her and thought street racing was just too dangerous. The thought of her getting seriously hurt, really bothered him. He was grateful for Dillon’s question; it gave him a reason to stop by her house later.



When Serena got home later that evening, her sister Starlett was there. They were very close. When Starlett moved out, part of her wanted to follow; but she had moved in with her boyfriend. While Serena understood why Starlett left, unlike her sister, she wanted to be able to stand on her own two feet. She didn’t want to be financially dependent on anyone. Much less, a man like her mother and Starlett seemed content on doing. Speak of the devil—Jerry—her mother’s boyfriend walked in. This was one man she despised.

“Some pretty boy by the name of Elray Carter stopped by this afternoon looking for you, Serena.” Jerry said. The contempt in his voice evident.

Starlett looked up surprised. “I didn’t know you knew Elray.”

“I don’t really. We met a couple days ago. Darnell, Elray and I had lunch. It was no big deal.”

“Really, then why is he sniffing around here?” Jerry asked.

When neither Starlett nor Serena responded, he muttered something under his breath and walked out of the room.

“What a dick,” Starlett said, then turned her attention back to her sister. “Do I look as stupid as Jerry to you? Why is Elray coming by here for you?”

“Okay, so I had dinner with him too. And he took me to meet his brothers. Like I said, no big deal.”

“No big deal. Serena, do you have any idea how much money he has?”

Many people would probably view her sister as a gold digger, but she knew better. Starlett just wanted a better life. She did too. But like their mother, Starlett just kept picking the wrong man.

“I hope you’re encouraging him. If Elray is coming over here—he’s interested—believe me.”

“No, I’m not going to encourage him. I don’t care how much money he has.” She politely told her sister. She wasn’t looking for a relationship with him, or anyone else. She liked Elray, but not that way. Or so she was trying to convince herself of that. She wasn’t going to tell Starlett that she might be attracted to him

when she didn't even want to admit it to herself. Since she had already eaten dinner with Darnell, she took a quick shower and went to bed.



A week later, Serena was on her bike at the starting line waiting to race. She did not see Dillon, the twins, and Elray standing on the side watching the race. They had decided to come since she hadn't called Dillon about his offer, even though Elray had gone to her house twice and missed her both times. The race started. Serena was immediately in the lead. One of the other racers, Miles, who obviously didn't have her skills, tried to cheat and nudged her over.

She won anyway, but Elray was mad. That fool could have caused her to crash. When the racers all came to a stop, Elray headed straight for Miles; the idiot, who had nudged her. He punched him dead in the stomach.

"Stupid ass, you could have killed her. If that's the only way you can win, you need to quit!"

When Miles recovered from the vicious punch, he took off his helmet and was actually stupid enough to go after Elray. She saw his brother's Rayvon and Rayden both shaking their heads. It was exactly what Elray wanted. It gave him a legitimate reason to kick his ass. Serena, now standing next to Dillon watched as Elray beat the shit out of her adversary. Since she had wanted to do the same thing, she was glad Elray was there to do it for her. Neither of his brothers tried to

stop the fight, even when it was obvious that his opponent didn't stand a chance. They probably felt he deserved what he got.

After the fight, Elray collected Serena's winnings and handed them to her. Taking her keys from her, he straddled her bike and yelled. "Get on."

Not giving it a moment's thought, she hopped on the bike.

"I'll call you later." He said to his brothers as he took off.



Elray took Serena to his apartment where she, hesitantly, followed him inside. Just inside the apartment, Elray leaned back against the closed door. The urge to walk over to her and kiss her was so strong—that he had to close his eyes to fight for control. When he opened his eyes and looked back at her, she, unconsciously, bit her lower lip. Walking over to the couch, he sat down and motioned for her to do the same.

When she sat down, she said, "I didn't know you were a rider. When did you learn to ride?"

"My brothers and I all had dirt bikes when we were growing up. My mother hated it, but my dad said she needed to let boys be boys. My brother Rayden and I still ride, but we hide it from my mother; it makes her nervous." He changed the subject.

"Serena, don't you think street racing is too dangerous?"

“Of course I know how dangerous street racing is. I’m not stupid, but it pays extremely well and I need the money.”

“You’re a beautiful woman. You could be doing so many other things. I’m in the modeling industry, and I can tell you with honesty —that you’d make a fortune as a model.”

“Well, I’m not a model. I’m a street racer and I enjoy it so I don’t see any reason for us to continue this conversation,” she said standing up.

“What if I told you that I’d like you to stop racing?” Elray responded grabbing her arm to prevent her from walking away.

First, she looked down at the hand holding her arm. Then her gaze traveled back to his where the look in her eyes said—just who do you think you are?

Angrily, she snatched her arm away from him.

“Look, you are not my daddy. You aren’t even my man. And you have no right to tell me anything!”

Seeing how angry she was, Elray realized he had handled the situation wrong and quickly tried to smooth things over.

“I wasn’t trying to upset you. I care about you and don’t want to see you get hurt.” As an attempt to appease her, he added. “My brothers want you to be a part of their racing team. They would even consider sponsoring you in legitimate racing; if that’s what you really want to do.”

The radiant smiled Serena gave him before wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing with all her might was a pretty good indication that he'd struck pay dirt.

"Are you kidding? That's what I've always wanted since I first hit the street racing scene. But it's nearly impossible for a street racer to cross over to pro racing."

"I know and so do my brothers. That's why they made the offer. They are willing to help you get into legitimate racing. All you have to do is give the word."

She took a step back and looked into his eyes.

"You'd do that for me?"

Why did she have to do that? He was just barely keeping his emotions in check, as it is, being this close to her. He pulled her to him as he lowered his head to kiss her, but she pulled back.

"I'll teach you," he whispered, just before he captured her lips. For someone that had never kissed before, she was doing a good job. She opened her mouth when she felt his tongue pressing against her lips. When she felt his tongue in her mouth, she met it with her own.

Right or wrong—he wanted her. She was a, inexperienced, virgin, and he knew he shouldn't—but he had never wanted a woman the way he wanted Serena.

The sensations that Elray created within her, felt like nothing she had ever experienced in her life. She wasn't ignorant about sex, she just never had sex before. But she was smart enough to know that if they didn't stop, they would be having sex tonight.

Strangely, the thought of having sex with Elray, didn't bother her. Serena knew she would just be another conquest for him; but right now she didn't care. Desire was new to her, but she wanted desperately to see where it would lead her tonight.

Elray seemed to sense the minute she gave in to what she was feeling. He broke their kiss: picked her up, and took her into his bedroom. Placing her on his bed, he stood and began to take his shirt off, kicked off his shoes, and joined her. Slowly, and lovingly, he removed most of her clothes; leaving her panties and bra on.

"A thong." He said, sounding surprised by the very feminine undergarment.

"I am a woman, Elray."

"Your body is even more perfect than I imagined. I've always seen you in jeans and tee shirts—it drove me wild wondering," he murmured, as he placed gentle kisses on the top of her breasts.

Serena was so aroused. She could barely see Elray as he gazed at her body from above her. His hands felt like they were everywhere. She felt his fingers slide

over her breasts: between her legs, touching her mound causing her hips to rise off the bed. Suddenly, she wasn't sure she was ready for this.

Elray unhooked her bra to free her perfect breasts. He immediately began feasting on them. He licked, and sucked them until she cried out clutching his head; bringing it back up to her lips. That was it, he couldn't take it anymore. He needed to be buried deep inside her. As badly as he wanted to join his body to hers, he also wanted to make her first time special. He didn't want her to feel cheated in any way after it was over.

Rolling to the side, he finished removing the rest of his clothes. Next, he pulled Serena on top of him.

"Open your eyes sweetheart," he said to her as he took her hand and placed it on his chest. He started her hand in a slow exploration of his chest and arms.

"Now I want you to touch where ever you like."

He smiled when her eyes widened.

"Especially there," he said as he also allowed his hands to roam freely over her body.

As if she were following his lead, Serena ran her fingertips over his skin causing goose bumps to pop up where ever she touched. If he circled her nipple,

she circled his. He pulled her forward and licked around her puckered bud, before sucking it gently, between his lips. Once she recovered, she did the same.

Elray knew if he didn't have her soon—he'd explode the minute her hand, finally, reached his throbbing penis and began stroking him. She had given in to her feelings and wasn't allowing her inexperience to stop her now. Bold movements pleased him and obviously excited her—because her secret treasure gushed her essence onto his leg.

Switching positions he reached over and pulled a condom pack from the nightstand drawer. Quickly he put the condom on. Spreading her legs wide, he positioned himself above her. Teasing the tip of his erection against the entrance to her woman hood, he began easing himself in. Carefully, he eased himself as far as he could go; reaching the barrier he had to break. He had never slept with a virgin before. But knowing there was no way to keep from causing her some pain; he decided to just get it over with. Bracing himself, he thrust forward going through the barrier of her virginity; capturing her lips as she gasped from the pain of his entry. Now, completely inside her—as far as he could go—he lowered his head to her shoulder, to savor this closeness he'd never experienced with any other woman.

He didn't move. He just kept kissing her until her soft moans and the wriggling of her hips, told him she was ready for him to ride. Pulling in and out of

her delicate body proved to be more pleasurable than he ever would have imagined. Never, could he remember having been so in tune with anyone. When her orgasm broke, her whole body shuddered with the intensity of what she had just experienced for the first time. Elray's climax was just as potent. Sexual pleasure like he'd never known, kept him hard as a rock; wanting more.

Feeling self-conscious, Serena reached for the covers as soon as Elray gained the strength to roll off her. It took several minutes before he could get up to walk into the bathroom to discard the used condom. She heard the shower when he turned it on. When he came back in the room naked as you please, it was obvious that he wasn't ashamed of his body. Not that he should be, he was one finely made man. Stopping beside the bed without a word, he reached his hand out to her, she took it, and he pulled her up. Part of her wanted to cover herself, but after what she had just shared with him; she was sure he would think she was being silly.

Opening the shower door, he got in and pulled her in with him. Taking a shower with a man was not something she had ever envisioned herself doing, but something about Elray was different. He made her feel so at ease. Like this was where she was meant to be.

The water felt wonderful and when Elray pulled her back against him they stood there embracing each other for several minutes. He reached around her to grab the soap and lathered up his hands before he gently used them to lather her

entire body; even between her legs. She had never thought that she would have allowed a man to perform such an intimate act. Instead of being appalled, she found herself wanting to do the same for him.

Once they had rinsed off, they both stepped out of the shower and dried each other off. Wrapping her in a towel, he patted her behind and said, “Go get dressed while I straighten out the bathroom.”

“Are you hungry?” He asked when he walked into his bedroom naked.

“A little,” she responded averting her gaze from his magnificent body.

Leaving her bike at his place, they took his car. “Do you mind if I stop at my folks place real quick?” He asked as they left the restaurant.

“Of course not.” She replied, which really pleased him.



Everyone looked up when Elray and Serena walked into his parent’s living room. Serena wondered if they looked like they had just slept together the way his family was staring at her.

Alex, his sister, was the first to get up and introduce herself.

“Hi, I’m Alexandra, Elray’s sister.”

Dillon, Rayvon and Rayden hugged her, and said it was good to see her again. Venice, Dillon’s wife, introduced herself and their daughter, Sherice. Kimble stood and introduced himself as Alex’s husband, then picked up his son who was

playing on the floor, and introduced him. Lastly, Elray introduced her to his parent's. She actually already knew Trent, because he was a friend of Darnell's. She couldn't believe she'd never made the connection. But then again, Elray was nothing like his fun loving silly brother Trent.

Looking around at his family, Serena thought that Sherry Carter, Elray's mom was a beautiful woman and Brandis Carter, his father, was one good looking man. It was plain to see why Elray, his brothers and their sister were all so good looking. Kimble, his sister's husband, was also a real looker; she understood now why the brothers had been concerned about him being faithful. She and Elray spent the remainder of the evening with his family.

Just as they were leaving, Dillon asked. "Have you given any thought to my job offer?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I've decided to take you up on it if it still stands."

"It does. How about we get together on Wednesday."

"Wednesday it is. Thank you."



They arrived back at his apartment. It surprised her that Elray didn't want her to leave. "Stay with me tonight, Serena." He said. Elray had never asked a woman to stay the night, but he wanted her to.

Turning her head in his direction, she studied him for several moments before responding. “Okay.”

By the time he was ready to take her home the next day, he’d made love to her so many times, she was certain she’d never ride her bike again. She decided to leave it at his place until later. Now that she knew Elray a little better and understood how his mind worked, she knew he wouldn’t mind. It would give him an excuse to see her.

Elray picked her up and took her to work; and back to his place every evening for intense lovemaking sessions. This went on for weeks.



Today when he arrived at her house, Serena’s mother answered the door drunk. She attempted to make sexual advances towards him. When Serena came down the stairs and saw her—she was obviously embarrassed by her mother’s actions. Elray didn’t think the woman could embarrass her any more than she had until her mother said to him, “Why stop at screwing the daughter when you could have had us both. But trust me, I’m better.”

“Mama!”

Tears were flowing freely down Serena’s face when she told her mother. “How could you say something like that? I never want to see you again!”

Serena ran from the house, before Elray could stop her. He ran after her, but didn't see her anywhere. He figured she needed some time to herself, so he left. He looked for her the next few days after that—but still no Serena. She didn't come to work, and she hadn't gone back to her house in over a week. Desperate to find her, Elray reluctantly asked Darnell for his help. Darnell told him that Starlet had come by earlier and had left a note for him.

Darnell handed Elray the note, "I'm sorry man."

Wanting to be alone, Elray took it and went home. Sitting on the couch, he opened the note from Serena.

Elray,

I asked my sister to give this note to Darnell to give to you, because I can't face you, at least, not right now. Please don't look for me; when I'm ready, I'll contact you. I should have never allowed you to come to my house and I'm sorry for what happened. I will cherish the time I've had with you forever. I might have never known love if I had never met you. For that I will always be grateful. If you are feeling guilty because I love you and you don't love me, don't, I didn't expect your love. A girl like me should never have been with you in the first place.

I know you will be surprised by this, but I had over twenty thousand dollars saved up from racing and odd jobs that should get me by until I can find a job. I'm smart and a survivor; if I can live in that house my whole life—starting a new one should be easy. Tell Dillon not to worry that he didn't get to pay me, because I would have worked with him and the twins free anyway.

I'm not sure when or if I'll ever come back to Atlanta, but I wanted you to know what you meant to me., What you will always mean to me.

Love Always,

Serena

Chapter Three

One year later. That's how long Serena had been gone from Atlanta. Just over a year—so why did it seem longer? So much had happened in that year. Even though she called her sister and Darnell at least once a month, she hadn't mentioned her pregnancy or the birth of her daughter. After leaving Atlanta, she went to Arizona and got a job right away at a biker bar.

One night her coworker and roommate, Heather and she were talking about her former racing days. One of the regulars, Rico, who had been trying to get in her pants since she started, said if she were a racer—he'd give her his bike.

She accepted the challenge.

“Oh really? Are you brave enough to put your money...where your mouth is?”

“Without a doubt my sister. But when I win—and I will—I get to choose what I want as payment.”

Without even asking the terms, Serena said. “Fine.”

“Good. But so there's no misunderstanding, let's lay out the terms of the bet,” Rico responded.

“Fine. It’s not going to change my mind—because you don’t stand a chance in hell of winning.”

She watched him, being the jerk that he is, walk around slapping five with some of the other locals who were rooting him on. What amazed her most was nobody really liked Rico because of his arrogance. What she couldn’t deny was his skill as a street racer. She just didn’t let him know that.

“When you’re done making a fool of yourself; I’m ready.”

“Naw baby, I’m just one happy man cause when you lose, I’ll have you exactly where I’ve wanted you —since the day I met you. In my bed. Whenever I want. For as long as I want. You still game?”

“Oh I’m game. Because when I win, I’ll take great pleasure in taking your bike and telling you to stay the heck away from me for good. Now...are you game?”

“Lets do this!”

They headed outside where Jordan, Heather’s boyfriend loaned Serena his bike to race Rico. A short time later, Serena won.



After that, she raced every weekend for two months before she realized she hadn’t had her period since leaving home. At first, Serena attributed it to stress. She had missed her period once before; when she was sixteen and one of her friends from school had committed suicide.

One morning, however, when she came out of the bathroom after a bout of morning sickness, Heather confronted her.

“Don’t you think you should go to the doctor?”

“For what I’m fine. I’m just stressed out. It’ll pass.”

“Serena how long are you gonna keep telling yourself that lie? Girl you need to face facts—you’re pregnant.”

Shaking her head. “I can’t be pregnant. I’ve only been with one man my whole life and we used protection.”

“Obviously, it didn’t work. Look...I’ll take you to the clinic.”

“Alright. But I know you’re wrong.”

A few hours later Serena walked out of the free clinic with Heather. She still couldn’t believe it. She was pregnant with Elray’s baby. Staring out the window, Serena vaguely heard Heather ask her a question.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I asked if you were going to call the baby’s father.”

As far as she was concerned, that was one option that was out of the question. Even though she was overjoyed at the prospect of having Elray’s baby. Elray would never know he had fathered a child, at least not hers. It wasn’t like they were a couple in the first place. He probably wouldn’t even care. For all she

knew, he had babies spread all over the place. In her heart she knew that wasn't true. The real truth was—she was still too embarrassed to face him.

“No.”

“Why not? You can't go through something like this alone.”

“I'm not alone. I have you and Jordan.”

Thankfully, Heather dropped the subject. It was true though, Heather and Jordan had become like family to her.

Over the next few months as her pregnancy progressed, Serena was glad she hadn't used much of the money she'd won racing. When it became too difficult for her to continue working, it wasn't a strain for her to pay her part of the rent and bills. She even started making payments on the costs associated with the impending birth of her child.

Periodically Heather asked, “Have you changed your mind yet about contacting your baby's father?”

“No I haven't. And you're asking me over and over isn't likely to make me change my mind.”

“God girl you are stubborn.”

“I know,” she giggled.



Serena was nearly a week past her due date, when she, Heather and Jordan were walking in the park and her water broke. After nearly thirteen hours of labor, her daughter was born weighing exactly eight pounds. Serena looked up and smiled broadly when she saw Heather and Jordan walk in.

“Isn’t she the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

Both Heather and Jordan leaned closer and replied, “She sure is.”

“What are you going to name her?” Heather wanted to know.

“Raiana.”

“That’s different,” Jordan said.

Looking down at her baby, Serena smiled. She thought the name fit, because the baby was the spitting image of her father.

“Trust me the name really fits her. It’s a combination of my name and her fathers.”

“Does that mean you’ve changed your mind about telling him?”

“No, Heather I haven’t. But that doesn’t mean I can’t name his daughter after him.”

Three days later she and the baby went home. Going back to work wasn’t at the top of Serena’s priority list. She was enjoying being a mother but every time she looked at Raiana, she realized how much she missed her father. Her love for

him was as strong now as it was when she left. Maybe she should consider going home.

During her monthly call home to Darnell, she learned that her mother was terribly ill. She would call him first every month to check on her family and let everyone know she was okay. Hanging up from Darnell, Serena called her sister.

“Hi Star it’s me. Darnell said Mama is sick.”

“She is. She’s been in the hospital for three days now.”

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know Serena, but I think you should come home. What if something happens and you aren’t here?”

She didn’t say anything for several seconds. Star was right. Although she was mad at her mother—she still loved her. She’d never forgive herself if something did happen and she hadn’t made peace with her mom.

“I’ll call you back once I make all the arrangements to come home. Don’t tell anyone that I’m coming because I may not stay.”

“I won’t. I love you Serena. I can’t wait for you to come home!”

“I love you too Star.”



Elray sat across the table from his brothers, and his brother in law Kimble. They had all just finished playing pool at The Pit. There were several young ladies

that had done everything short of parade naked, trying to gain their attention. Dillon and Kimble, the only two married men there, remarked that Elray was losing his touch.

“Isn’t it time you two went home,” Elray snapped.

“Not me, my wife trusts me,” Dillon said.

“Mine too,” Kimble chimed in.

“You know El, if you’d stop thinking about Serena all the time, your mood would improve greatly,” Rayvon suggested to his younger brother.

“My mood has nothing to do with Serena. In case you hadn’t noticed, I did lose quite a bit of money tonight. Losing money tends to put me in a bad mood.”

“Well damn, who did you lose all your money to last year? I’ll personally kick his ass, and get it back if it puts you in a better mood,” Trent spoke up a little too enthusiastically.

Elray reached for his soda—finished the last of it—got up and left. The roar of Serena’s Suzuki GSXR 1000 sounded as he peeled out of the parking lot. Since she had left town, he rode her bike almost as much as he drove his car. It made him feel close to her, even though she wasn’t there. In the short time that Elray had known Serena, he had fallen hard for her; something he had never done before. He hadn’t been celibate since she left, but he hadn’t dated anybody seriously either.

He couldn't bring himself to take another woman to his apartment. He hadn't ridden any woman on Serena's bike either. Though he'd told his brother Trent that he deserved the bike after the way Serena had just walked out on him, that wasn't the reason it was so special to him. For the life of him, he didn't understand how she could stay away. He knew what happened with her mother was embarrassing, but too stay away this long. It was easy to understand how hurt she must have been. He couldn't, however, accept that was why she had stayed away. There had to be something else. Each day he had expected her to show up.

It was obvious that Serena had been just as taken with Elray as he was with her. So it just didn't make sense that she hadn't come back. Out of concern, he continued making discreet inquiries trying to find her, but so far, he hadn't turned up anything. Elray did learn that Darnell, her best friend, received monthly updates that she was okay as did her sister, Starlett; who also didn't know where she was.

Elray pulled into his garage and turned off the motorcycle. He removed his helmet and just sat there. Even after he had told himself that he didn't care, he still couldn't get his mind off Serena. She was the only woman he had ever even come close to giving his heart to and she just left him. Obviously, he hadn't meant as much to her as she claimed in her letter. How could she stay away if she really

cared? What her mother had done he understood embarrassed her, but that couldn't have been the first time. From what he had found out, her mother had been a drunk most of Serena and Starlett's life.

He got off the bike and went into his apartment. Tossing his keys on the table, he laid down on the couch.

After laying there in the dark for awhile, he noticed the message light on his answering machine was on. Outside of Serena, there wasn't anybody he really wanted to talk too. The messages as far as he was concerned could wait until tomorrow. It was probably one of his brothers checking to make sure he had gotten home safely. The entire family had taken to mothering him. He knew it was due to his behavior since Serena had left. Being part of a close family like his — when one family member was hurting—it hurt the rest to know it.

Even his brother in law, Kimble, who he had been a pain in the butt to—when he married his little sister, Alex, even he tried to console him. After everything he had put Kimble through, he wouldn't have blamed him if he never spoke to him again. Instead, they resumed their previous friendship; he was as close to him as he was to any of his own brothers. This last year would have been almost impossible to bear if he hadn't had the love and support of his family. Thoughts of Serena pulled at his heart. How had she faired? Had she met somebody else?

Pushing thoughts of Serena out of his head, he reached for the phone and called Renee. “What’s up baby?”

“Nothing much, reading a book wondering why I haven’t heard from you.”

“You’re hearing from me now. Feel like some company?”

“From you, always.” She replied.

Elray could tell she was trying not to sound too excited. He’d met Renee a couple of months ago. He slept with her a few times, and right now that’s exactly what he needed. Elray grabbed his keys to his car and left.

It was three o’clock in the morning when he pulled back into the garage. He had no desire to spend the night at Renee’s, even though she wanted him to. Inside his apartment, he noticed the flashing message light again. He decided to listen to them before going to bed. The first couple of messages were from various women he’d had as bed partners, including Renee. He deleted each one as he listened to them. He had no intention of returning the calls, especially now that Renee had already seen to his physical needs.

The next message got his attention; it was Starlett. “Hi El, its Star can you call me. It’s important—I really need to talk to you.”

What did Starlett want? Had something happened to Serena? The next two messages were from his brothers making sure he’d made it home. But the last message was from Starlett again.

“Hi Elray. This is Starlett again. Please call me. I really need to talk to you. I don’t care what time it is when you get in, still call me. I’ve got some news about Serena that I think you’ll want to know.”

Even though it was three thirty in the morning, Starlett answered the phone on the first ring.

“Star it’s me,” Elray said, hoping whatever she told him wasn’t bad news.

“Serena’s coming home, Elray. My mother is much worse than we were originally told.”

“When?”

“I’m picking her up at the airport later today.”

“Give me her flight number and time she’s suppose to arrive. I’ll pick her up.”

“Elray, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I told you she was coming home, because I felt you should know. But she has a lot to deal with right now with our mother being sick.”

“Fine, but I still want to know when she arrives. Are you going to take her straight to the hospital or are you going to come home first?”

“Her flight arrives at two twenty, Delta 114. I’m not sure yet about the hospital, because she still hasn’t forgiven mama for what happened. I’m just

wondering if she can handle seeing her right away. But I wanted her here just in case.”

“Call me tomorrow Star. I’ve waited over a year for answers. I won’t wait much longer.”

As she hung up the phone, Starlett wondered if she had done the right thing telling Elray that Serena was coming home. What’s done was done; she couldn’t change it now, so she wasn’t going to worry about it.

Elray went into his bedroom—stripped down, got into the shower and digested what he had just learned from Starlett. Serena was coming home. He didn’t care what Starlett thought, because he was going to be at the airport tomorrow. Was he ready to confront the woman that had broken his heart? Yes, he was definitely ready. He desperately needed to see her; to find out how she could leave him after everything they had shared. In her letter—she said she loved him, but if that was true—how could she leave him the way she did? He’d get his answers tomorrow.

Drying off, he set the clock beside his bed. He climbed in and let the soft cotton of his sheets caress his naked body; into an exhausted sleep.



The alarm sounded, and as usual, Elray reached over and hit the snooze button. Ten minutes later the alarm sounded again, this time he sat up on the side

of the bed slipping his feet into the soft house shoes he kept next to the bed. Instead of getting up, he just sat there—trying to get himself mentally prepared to see Serena again.

Glancing at the clock, he saw that he had been sitting there over thirty minutes; he needed to get up and get dressed. An hour later, he was walking out of his apartment door headed for the airport. Arriving fifteen minutes before her flight landed, he stood discreetly off to the side. Elray wore sunglasses and a baseball hat turned backwards trying not to draw attention to himself. The last thing he needed was a bunch of females trying to get an autograph, or a picture with him. He hadn't worked as much this year as he had in the past, but he still could hardly past a magazine stand without seeing himself on one somewhere.

The sound of Starlett's voice caused him to look up when he heard her call Serena's name. Turning his head he saw her standing there. His first thought was she was still as beautiful as he remembered. His eyes moved slowly from her face to the rest of her body. Perfection was the one word that came to mind. As his eyes roamed over her, he noticed the baby stroller she was pushing. Whose baby was she pushing and why?

Starlett got out of the car and ran to Serena. They embraced and then her attention turned to the baby as well.

“And who do we have here,” Starlett said leaning over and looking at the baby.

“This would be your niece,” Serena said with obvious pride and love in her voice.

Straightening up, Starlett looked Serena in the face and gasped, “My what!”

“You heard me. I said your niece.” She laughed.

“Oh my God Serena, you had a baby! I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.” Starlett started looking behind her as though she expected to see someone else.

“What are you looking at,” Serena asked.

“I’m looking for a boyfriend, a husband or something.”

Laughing, Serena said, “I’m not married and I don’t have a boyfriend. She’s Elray’s daughter.”

“Elray’s. You haven’t told him have you?” Starlett asked as alarm set in.

“No, and I’m not going to either.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Serena had given birth to his child, and she had no intention of telling him. Never in his life had he been so mad. Serena obviously didn’t know who she was dealing with. Unconsciously, he stepped forward in the direct path of Serena and Starlett as they began walking toward the street to the car.

Bumping into the stranger not watching where she was going Serena started to apologize, “Excuse me...I’m sorry I.....”

The words died in her mouth as she looked up into the angry face. The face of the last person she expected to see, Elray Carter.

“Hello Serena.”

“Elray, what are you doing here?”

“I came to see you. Imagine my surprise to overhear you’ve had a child that is mine. Can I see my baby, Serena?”

“Elray, please don’t do this,” Starlett pleaded.

“Do what—I simply asked to see a child that is supposed to be mine.”

Stepping around Serena and Starlett, he leaned over the stroller to have a look at the baby inside. She was wide-awake playing with a rattle. The first thing he noticed about her was her hazel eyes; eyes like his. Love that he didn’t know he was even capable of swelled in his heart as he picked up this beautiful little girl that was definitely his.

“How old is she?” He asked putting her on his chest close to his heart.

“Six months.”

“What’s her name?”

“Raiena.”

“You named her after us. What’s her whole name?”

“Raiana Danielle James.”

“Carter.”

“Excuse me?”

Elray looked at her, and repeated, “Carter, this baby is a Carter and her name should and will be, Raiana Carter.”

“Look Elray, maybe we can talk about this some other time. I really have to go.”

“Fine, but the baby is going with me. I can’t trust you not to take off again,” Elray said, as he walked away from them.

“Wait Elray—, you can’t just take my baby,” Serena said, as she grabbed his arm to stop him.

“I’m her father and I have just as much right to be with her as you do.”

He quickly turned to leave, but turned around and came back towards her. She thought he came to his senses about taking the baby, but instead he reached over grabbed the baby’s diaper bag, and turned to leave again.

Before he could, Serena grabbed his arm. When he looked down at her, he saw that tears had welled up in her eyes.

Beyond mad he was unmoved. “Let go.”

“Please Elray. I’m sorry!”

“What are you sorry for Serena? Having my baby or not telling me you’d had my baby!” he responded before stalking off.

As Elray got into his car, he was glad he hadn’t ridden Serena’s bike. As he laid the baby on the seat next to him and strapped her in as best he could, he pulled out his cell and called Dillon.

“Hey Dill, can you do me a favor? Can you call everybody and have them meet me at mamas?”

“Is everything okay?” Dillon replied.

“Actually everything is great, I have some wonderful news, but I want to be the one to tell everybody.”

“Okay see you in a few.”



Traffic was heavy leaving the airport, and it took him over an hour to get to his parent’s house. Pulling into the driveway, he saw that everybody else had already gotten there. Raiena had fallen asleep. Gently he picked her up and went into the house straight to the family room. Everybody looked up when he came in with a still sleeping Raiena in his arms. His father, the closest to him asked, “Who’s baby and who’d be dumb enough to leave their baby with you?”

“Very funny Pop. This is your granddaughter.”

“Excuse me,—did you say my granddaughter?” His father replied in disbelief.

“Yeah I did. This is my daughter, Raiena.”

The entire room crowded around Elray to get a look at the newest Carter member. By the time Raiena was passed around the whole room, she had woken up. Trent, who happened to be holding her, handed her to his mother when she began to cry. Sherry Carter took her newest grandchild in her arms. Holding her up, she saw her for the first time with her eyes open. “Oh my god,” she gasped looking at her granddaughter’s hazel eyes.

Elray went to sit next to his mother.

“I know, that was my first reaction when I saw her.”

Very few people outside of the family remembered that Elray had hazel eyes since he had worn contacts from the age of twelve years old. He inherited his eyes from his maternal grandmother. None of his sibling had and neither had his mother, but his daughter had.

“Why haven’t we seen her before now?” His sister Alex asked from across the room.

Anger flashed across his face before he answered, “Because her mother never intended me to find out about her.”

“Why...who is her mother,” Trent asked.

“Serena.”

“Serena!” Rayvon and Rayden said in unison. “When did she come back to town?”

“Today.”

The doorbell rang interrupting the conversation. Venice, Dillon’s wife got up to answer the door. When she came back in there were two police officers with her.

“Elray these officers want to talk to you.”

Elray rose from the couch and crossed the room extending his hand to the officers.

“I’m Elray Carter. Can I help you?”

“Yes, we are here because we have a report that you abducted Serena James’s daughter. Is that true?”

“No.”

“Do you know why she would file a report that you did?”

“No.”

“Do you know where her daughter is?”

“Yes. My mother is holding my daughter, her granddaughter, and she isn’t going anywhere.”

“Your daughter?” One officer asked obviously surprised.

“Yes my daughter. I take it Serena neglected to tell you that I’m the baby’s father?”

“No, Ms. James didn’t tell us that you were the child’s father. Only that the two of you had gotten into an altercation, and you took the child and left. Do you have joint custody?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Carter, but if you don’t have any custody arrangements—you can’t just take her baby. We’ll have to return the child to her mother.”

“I’m sorry too—because that’s not going to happen. I can’t trust Serena not to take off with her.”

“Mr. Carter you don’t have a choice. If you don’t turn her over, we’ll have to arrest you.”

“Then arrest me.”

“Elray, please don’t do this.”

Everyone in the room turned to see Serena standing in the doorway. Elray stalked across the room, and stood in front of her.

“If you don’t want this —then call it off.” He whispered to her.

Serena lowered her voice so no one could hear her, but him, “Please Elray I promise I won’t take the baby and leave. I didn’t want to call the police, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Let my mother keep her. She won’t try and keep her from you. Besides it will give us time to work things out.”

“Can I at least speak to your mother first?”

“After you tell the police that everything is okay here.”

For a minute, he wasn’t sure she was going to do it. Then she walked around him, and told the officers.

“I’m sorry. Everything is fine. I was upset and wasn’t thinking clearly. Elray and I will work this out.”

“Are you sure Ms. James? Did he threaten you in any way?”

“No, he hasn’t threatened me. I’m sorry I caused so much trouble. I know that Elray would never hurt me or our daughter. Neither of us was thinking straight after our argument.”

“Alright, but if you need to—don’t hesitate to call back.” The officer handed Serena his card on his way out.

Rayvon walked the officers to the door and watched them leave before returning to the family room.

Chapter Four

As soon as Elray saw Rayvon walk back into the room, he grabbed Serena by the arm and dragged her out of the room. “You have got a lot of nerve coming here,” he shouted at her.

“You didn’t leave me any choice, Elray. What was I supposed to do just let you keep my baby?” Serena began to cry fearing she had made a terrible mistake telling the officers to leave.

“You mean our baby and don’t waste your time—tears won’t work on me.”

“Elray! That’s enough. Your mother wants to see you,” his father said. He had walked up behind them and heard everything.

Sparing a glance at Serena, Elray turned and walked back into the family room. His mother was still seated on the couch holding Raiena.

“Alex, can you please take Raiena upstairs—change her; feed her and put her to bed in the nursery?”

“Yes ma’am,” Alex responded taking the baby.

“Why don’t the rest of you go on home? I think your father and I have a lot to discuss with Serena and your brother.”

“Okay Mama. We’ll call you tomorrow,” Rayden said as he, Trent and Rayvon walked out. Dillon and his family also left quietly.

“I’ll see if I can help Alex, Mom,” Kimble offered.

“Thank you Kimble,” Mrs. Carter replied then turned her attention back to Elray and Serena who were both standing patiently waiting.

“I’m not sure what’s going on between the two of you. I won’t interfere, because you’re a grown man, but I won’t have you fighting over my granddaughter. Is that clear Elray,” his mother demanded.

“Yes mama. I have no intentions of fighting with Serena, but I won’t just give her my daughter knowing she could very well just disappear with her. I heard her tell her sister she had no intention of ever telling me about my own child!”

“Is that true, Serena?”

“Yes, it is. I never meant to hurt Elray or anybody else. I swear I didn’t. I really thought I was making the right decision.”

“I’m sure you did, but don’t you think it would have been extremely selfish to keep not only my son, but the rest of us away from Raiena? We’re a very close family and we’d all like a chance to be a part of her life.”

From the stricken look on her face, Elray assumed Serena, for the first time, thought about what she did and felt ashamed. She obviously hadn’t given any

thought to the fact that she was also keeping Raiena from her grandparent's; an aunt, and uncles.

“Serena we have more than enough room here, why don't you and the baby stay here until you and Elray can work out some kind of custody agreement.”

“Thank you Mrs. Carter, but I couldn't possibly do that. Besides, my mother is sick in the hospital. I need to be with my sister.”

“Well, will you allow me to keep her? She will be well cared for. You can take care of your mother, and not have to worry about the baby. Of course you are welcome to come and go as you please to see her.”

“Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Carter, I'd like that. I appreciate you caring for my baby. I'll bring everything you'll need for her tomorrow after I go to the hospital to see my mother.”

“Honey there is no need to thank us. Bring what you can, but Elray and I will get her anything she needs. You don't have to worry about anything. Do you have a ride home? I can have my daughter, Alex, take you.”

“That isn't necessary. I can take a taxi. Thank you both again.”

“I'll take her home,” Elray spoke up.

“I'm not sure that's a good idea,” his father said.

“Dad, Serena and I need to talk. I'll take her home.”

“Thanks Elray. I’d appreciate you giving me a ride home. I think we do need to talk.”

“Let me get my keys. Mama, I’ll be back in a little while. I’m going to stop off at my place and get a change of clothes so I can stay here tonight.”

“Good night Mr. and Mrs. Carter. And thanks again for allowing Raiena to stay here.”

Elray opened the front door and they walked out.

“Thank you,” he said to Serena after closing the door.

“For what?”

“Making my parents feel at ease about me taking you home. Unfortunately, both my parents know I have a terrible temper.”

“You’re welcome. Besides, I truly don’t believe you’d ever hurt me and we do need to talk.”



The speedometer on Elray’s car showed he was doing ninety. Serena could tell from the tenseness of his body that he was still angry. She saw where he was going, but decided not to say anything that might make him any angrier than he already was. They needed to talk, and she wasn’t going to question where they did it.

Walking through the garage, she noticed her bike. She was surprised that he had kept it. She didn't think it was a good time to ask him about it. Elray opened the door to his apartment and then stood aside to let her enter. Serena jumped a little when she heard the door close behind her. Elray threw his keys on the table. He went over to the refrigerator and opened it. He grabbed two beers, handing her one too.

God, he hated that he was still so damn attracted to her. He could tell from the way she was fidgeting that she was nervous. Good, she should be after what she had done to him. Still, she had given him a daughter. The pleasure that they had shared had resulted in the greatest gift a woman could give a man.

Even now, as mad as he was with her, he wanted to reacquaint himself with the feel of her body. After everything that had happened between them, she was still the only woman that could set his blood on fire—just by standing there. There wasn't anything sexy about her appearance, but he still found her the sexiest woman he had ever seen. They were standing in his living room with the beers he had taken out of the fridge in their hands; neither of them had taken a drink.

Just a kiss—one kiss—and then they could discuss their daughter. Elray crossed the room and took the beer from Serena's hand. He sat it on the table and pulled her into his arms. She didn't resist. She went willingly. He lowered his

head to kiss her and she opened her mouth to him. Her taste was as erotic as he remembered. Breaking the kiss, he looked into her eyes.

“I want you, Serena.”

“I’m want you too, Elray.”

Reaching for her tee shirt, he pulled it over her head. He flicked the snap of her bra open. Filling his hand with her breast, he brought one to his mouth. She cried out his name as he sucked a nipple into his mouth. She tasted so good that he never wanted to stop. But he wanted—no he needed something else even more. He needed to slide his body into hers. To share the ultimate pleasure with her, and only her.

Kissing his way down her body, he unzipped her jeans and slid them off along with the sandals she wore. Gently, he laid her highly aroused body down on the large rug in front of the fireplace. She watched as he removed his clothes. When he laid down next to her, his muscles in his arms and chest moved and jumped with his smooth movements. The extra time spent in the gym during her absence must have paid off. He was sure she didn’t realize that she was running her fingers all over his chest and along his back.

When he slipped his hand up her leg, she opened them wide to allow him the access he wanted. Anxious fingers slid over the core of her mound, before he slid one inside. It was more than she could take. She grabbed his hand and

screamed when her body shattered from her climax. The sounds of ecstasy coming from her lips beckoned his kiss; happily he obliged lowering his head to taste her. Finally, when her breathing returned to normal, she opened her eyes. The intense look of pleasure on her face was pushing him over the edge. He had to become one with her now.

Reaching for his jeans, Elray pulled the condom from his wallet and prepared to roll it on. Serena took it from him.

“You don’t need that.”

“Why don’t I need it, Serena? What have you done,” he asked fearing she would say she’d had her tubes tied. He hoped she hadn’t done anything that drastic. If he ever had a son, he wanted it to come from her body.

“I started taking the pill after Raiena was born.”

Anger he had no right to have flashed across his features. Had Serena taken other lovers? “Why, Serena?”

“It’s not what you think, Elray. I would never let another man touch what belongs to you; even when I didn’t think we would be together.”

“Then why are you on the pill?”

“My doctor suggested it for one. It’s to regulate my period and if I ever became intimate with someone. I told him that when we made love we used protection.”

Elray raised his brow at what she had just said to him. Her body belonged to him—and only him. “If that’s true that you belong to me—then give me what’s mine.”

She didn’t have to be told twice. Pushing him down on the rug, Serena swung her leg over him and eased her body down on his erection. This was just one of his favorite positions and it pleased him immensely that she remembered. Over the next few hours, they made love over and over again, before finally falling into an exhausted sleep. Around midnight Elray’s phone rang.

“Elray this is Starlett. Is Serena with you?”

“Yeah she’s here, but she’s asleep.”

“Wake her up. The hospital called, we need to get over there now.”

“Alright we’ll be there.”

He woke Serena up, and told her what her sister said. Quickly they dressed and went to the hospital. She didn’t want him to go in with her, so she asked him to go back to his mothers with the baby, and wait for her call. Reluctant to leave, he decided to do what she asked without arguing, she had enough to deal with. On the ride back to his parent’s home he wondered where their relationship would go from here.



When he entered the house everything was quiet. No lights or televisions were on. Without turning on any lights, he made his way upstairs to the nursery, but Raiena wasn't there when he opened the door. Quietly closing the door, he made his way to his parent's room next. Outside the door, he listened for a few minutes to see if anyone was awake. After a few minutes of not hearing anything, he knocked softly. His father opened the door.

"I didn't wake you did I pop?"

"No. Raiena must be missing her mom. She has been fussy for the last half hour."

"Why didn't you call Mama," Elray said, as he crossed the room and sat down on the bed next to his mother.

"For what, she has to get used to us. I don't intend to call her mother every time she gets a little fussy."

"Here let me take her so you and Pop can get some rest."

"Where's Serena. You two didn't fight again?"

"No Mama we didn't. We haven't resolved anything yet. Her sister called and said her mother took a turn for the worse. I took her to the hospital, and she said she would call me."

"I'm sorry to hear about her mother. Is there anything I can do?"

"I'll let you know. Good night Mama, night Dad."

In his old room, Elray placed Raiena in the middle of his bed, then pushed it over to the wall. After undressing, he slipped on a pair of shorts and lay down next to his daughter. Raiena hadn't cried once since he'd taken her out his parent's room. Was it possible she already knew he was her father? Looking into her tiny face, he was still in awe of the love he had for this baby, after meeting her less than twenty-four hours ago.

He had never given any real thought to having children. He loved his niece Sherice, and his nephew Kimble Jr. But he'd been content with being Uncle Elray. The one thing he was grateful for—that it was Serena, and not some woman he really didn't care about, was the mother of his child.

Raiena stretched her body and snuggled closer to him falling asleep. Curling on his side, so as not to awaken his sleeping daughter, Elray also fell asleep. Panic set in when he woke up the next morning. Raiena was not beside him. Running downstairs into the kitchen, he found his mother and Alex there.

"Good morning, Elray," his mother said to him when he sat down.

"Mama, why didn't you wake me up? Was she crying?"

"No, she wasn't. But she was wet and she was hungry. I've given her a bath. Your sister went shopping this morning and brought over some clothes, diapers and baby food."

"Alex you didn't have to do that. Thank you. Let me know what I owe you."

“You are too funny big brother. As much as you’ve spoiled little Kim, you don’t owe me anything. I’ll tell you this though, I’m jealous. Both you and Dillon’s kids look exactly like you. You think my baby looks like me, no he looks just like his daddy.”

“Hey what can I say, we Carter men have strong genes.” He said grabbing an apple from the counter. “Mama has Serena called?”

“No she didn’t.”

“I’m going to take a shower and go by the hospital. Do me a favor and make a list of anything you need for Raiena. I’ll stop and pick it up.”

“Actually with the things Alex brought over this morning, and what was in her diaper bag, she’ll be fine for awhile. But your dad and I are going out later today to get her some things.

“Thanks mama. I’ll call you later after I check on Serena.”

“Take your time; I need to get better acquainted with my grandbaby anyway.”



Elray arrived at St. Joseph’s Hospital slightly after one o’clock in the afternoon. First, he stopped at the information desk to find out what room Serena and Starlet’s mother was in. Walking down the hall to the ICU, Elray wasn’t sure that Serena would want him there, but he wanted to make sure she was okay. At

the ICU reception area, the nurse wouldn't let him in because he wasn't family. She did offer to go in and get Serena for him.

Seated in the waiting area he thumbed through a magazine while waiting. A short time later Starlet came out.

"Serena left." She told him.

Confused, he asked. "When? She told me she was going to call me and I haven't heard from her."

Starlet started to cry. "It's all my fault. Mama was so mean to her. I was the one that asked Serena to come home. She didn't want to, but neither of us wanted something bad to happen and she wouldn't be here."

At the moment he wasn't concerned with Serena's relationship with her mother, he was more concerned with whether she was okay. Putting his arms around Star he assured her that he'd find Serena and everything would be okay.

"Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"I know she called Darnell to pick her up. She didn't say where she was going, but usually whenever she's upset; she races."

Damn, that wasn't what he wanted to hear. Upset with himself that he hadn't checked on her sooner; he left to try and find her. He checked all the known racing strips, with no luck. One worry he didn't have was her just up and taking off again. He'd seen how much she loved Raiena. There was no way she would

leave. Not when her baby was with him. Still having no luck finding her, he decided to try Darnell who told him he dropped her off at her mother's shortly after picking her up.

"What do you want?" Jerry asked when he opened the door.

"I'm looking for Serena, is she here?" Elray responded, just as hostile.

"No."

"Did she happen to say where she was going?"

"The little bi....., doesn't tell me anything, not that I'd ask her anyway. I wish she had never come back at all."

"It's a wonder she did, if this is what she has to come home to," Elray snapped turned and walked away. There was no way in hell he was going to leave Serena, or his daughter in that house. As he drove away, he strongly considered going back to kick the crap out of her stepdad. Dislike didn't begin to describe his feelings toward him. As much as that thought appealed to him, finding Serena was his top priority. He wanted to change clothes before going back to his mothers. Serena would eventually come for Raiena.

As he pulled into the garage and walked past Serena's bike, he swore he felt her presence. Turning his head, he glanced around the parking deck but didn't see anyone. Coming down the hall to his apartment, he knew immediately, when he

saw the woman sitting on the floor outside his apartment, that it was Serena. Relief flooded him—then anger. What happened and why hadn't she called him?

Serena looked up when she heard footsteps coming down the hall. It scared her when she thought about how after her fight with Jerry—her first thought had been to run to Elray. All her life she had depended on her sister and herself. Never letting anyone get close enough to her that she depended on them; not even Darnell. Even though they hadn't actually spent a lot of time together, she trusted Elray more than anyone she'd ever met.

Heather and Jordan she considered her friends, but she hadn't really depended on them. She always pulled her own weight. Even when she hadn't been working—her shares of the bills were always paid. Elray was different. Even after being gone for over a year, being back with him felt right and natural. He accepted his daughter with love and so did his family. So what she was about to request of him, did not make her feel nervous. Elray had come to a stop in front of her, but she hadn't even acknowledged him yet.

"Serena did you hear me?" Elray asked her for the third time.

Looking up at him she replied, "I'm sorry what did you say?"

"I asked you what happened. Where have you been?"

"Can we go inside first?"

He opened the door and went in.

“How is Raiena doing with your mom?” She asked as she followed him inside.

“She’s fine. She was a little fussy last night, but when I got there she slept the rest of the night with me. Now will you tell me what happened? And why you haven’t called me?”

She went into the kitchen and pulled out a chair to sit down before responding. “I really hate Jerry. He is such a creep. I don’t know what my mother ever saw in him.”

She was talking about her mother’s boyfriend, even though she was fairly certain he probably hadn’t paid much attention to his name prior to now. One thing was for sure, she knew after she told Elray what happened he’d think of a much better word to describe him than creep.

“Did something happen between you and him?”

“When Darnell dropped me off, I went inside to get some of my things and Jerry started in on me. He started calling me all sorts of names and saying it was my fault that my mother had gone completely over the edge. He shoved me and told me to get out. I told him it was my mother’s house.”

“He put his hands on you?”

“He only shoved me. I grabbed a knife off of the kitchen table and he backed off.”

“I don’t want you to go back there again, Serena.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not afraid of Jerry. Besides, my mother is going to need Starlet and me to help her recover.”

“I don’t want my daughter in that house.”

“Neither do I and that’s why I’m here. Starlet can’t take care of mama by herself ,and even if mama doesn’t want my help—I have to be there for Star. She hates Jerry as much as I do, but she’s afraid of him—I’m not.”

“I’ll pay for your mother to go to a rehab center, or I’ll get her a private nurse. You don’t have to go back into that house.”

“Thank you, but Starlet and I can take care of mama. I need to know if your offer to take care of our daughter still stands. I know your mother has offered, but she needs one of us as well. I’ll sign anything you want me too.”

“That isn’t necessary. I wouldn’t take her from you Serena. It’s obvious you love her.”

“I do more than anything in this world.” She admitted with tears forming in her eyes. “I never thought I’d be the maternal type, lord knows my mother wasn’t, but I realize more than ever what alcohol and my father did to her. That’s why I

need you to promise me you'll take care of Raiena until I can get mama back on her feet."

"I'm sure you already know you don't have to ask me to take care of our daughter. But under the circumstances, I want you to spend nights here with me. I'll also hire someone to help you and Starlett. We'll find someone who can stay overnight."

"I can't let you do that Elray. Believe me, Star and I can take care of mama."

"What about you staying here nights?"

"Alright."

Chapter Five

“Now that we’ve settled that, how about we go see our baby now?”

“I’d like that. Do I have time to grab a quick shower?”

Walking around the table, he pulled her up, kissed her softly on the nose and said. “Sure I’ve got some calls to make and I need to check my e-mail anyway.”

Raiena was in the kitchen with his mother when they walked in. Both mother and daughter faces lit up when they saw each other. Serena sat down on the floor and Raiena climbed into her lap. Elray and his mother leaned against the kitchen counter to watch them embrace one another. A little later Elray walked over to his family and sat down, holding his arms out to Raiena. Happily, she crawled into her father’s outstretched arms.

It was obvious to anyone that Elray loved Raiena. It didn’t seem to matter that he had been apart from her since birth. You could tell he already felt a strong connection with her. Elray wasn’t wearing his contacts and had taken off his sunglasses. The resemblance between him and Raiena was striking. Anyone looking at them would know they were father and daughter.

Getting up from the floor with his daughter in his arms, Elray said “Let’s take her for a walk in the park before heading to the hospital to see your mom.”

While walking in the park, Serena confided. “I haven’t told my mother about the baby. I was going to but she just started in on me and I left.

“How do you think she’s going to feel about it?”

“Who knows? She’s my mother and I love her. It’s just that she makes me so mad. I mean at times she acts like she doesn’t love me at all.”

Having come from such a close family, he couldn’t fathom what Serena was going through. However, he knew he wanted to help her through it. “Maybe knowing she has a grandchild will help strengthen your relationship.”

It surprised him that Serena’s happiness meant so much to him, but it did. He wanted her to be happy. His sister Alex and his mom were extremely close. And he really felt that Serena wanted that closeness with her mother; though he doubted she would admit it. They walked back to his mother’s house and left to go to the hospital.



Outside the door to her mother’s room, Elray felt the need to provide her with extra comfort. Placing his hand on her shoulder, he turned her to him and told her. “Our relationship is whatever you want it to be once we enter this room.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

Serena went in first. Starlet got up when she saw them enter, so Serena could take the seat closest to the bed. Serena sat down. Elray and the baby took the seat in the corner.

“How are you feeling mom?” Serena asked her mother when she finally took her eyes off Elray and the baby.

“I’ve been better. Why is he here?”

They hadn’t spoken of what happened the night she had left Atlanta over a year ago. Frankly, she didn’t know how much of that night her mother even remembered. She remembered everything and it still humiliated her.

“He’s with me mama. He wanted to come with me to introduce our daughter to you.”

She and her mother stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity before her mother spoke to Elray.

“Will you please bring my granddaughter to me?”

Elray looked at her and she nodded. He then got up to hand their daughter to her grandmother. Serena was deeply moved as she watched Lorinda hug Raiena close to her, as tears fell freely down her face.

“What’s her name?” Lorinda asked in between sobs.

“Raiena.”

“Raiena,” her mother repeated the name. “Serena, I’m so sorry. I want to make her proud that I’m her grandmother and not be ashamed the way you girls have had to be all your lives.”

Serena exchanged glances with her sister and saw that she too had tears in her eyes, as they watched their mother with her only grandchild. For the first time in her life, Serena felt their mother had a real chance of getting her life together. More than ever, Serena needed the comfort that Elray always provided to her. She turned her head to look at him still sitting in the corner. She expected to see him watching her. He acknowledged her with a slight nod of his head turning in the direction where she saw a silent apology expressed in her mother’s eyes

Raiena started getting fussy.

“Here, let me take her while you visit with your mom.” Elray offered. He took his daughter out into the family waiting area. Her diaper needed changing and she was hungry. Lucky for him, his mother had prepared a couple of bottles. He put the dry cereal in the bottle, like Alex had shown him on the rare occasions he’d been left alone with his nephew, Kimble. After his daughter completed her meal, he returned to the room.

When he entered, Jerry, Lorinda’s boyfriend had arrived. He walked over to Serena and handed the baby to her. He and Jerry stared each other down. It was obvious that neither one liked the other.

Jerry was the first one to “blink.” Dismissing him completely, Elray turned his attention to Serena. He wondered why Lorinda would put up with an asshole like Jerry. He could see that she had probably been quite pretty in her younger days, especially if her daughters were any indication. What would make her start drinking and throw away her life? He also wondered about Serena and Starlet’s father. It wasn’t a subject Serena liked to talk about, but he thought it would explain a lot about her mother.

As much as he kept trying to ignore Jerry, Elray didn’t like the way he was looking at Serena. He knew lust when he saw it. The older man had it written all over his face. Tension between the two men sent a chill throughout the room and both Serena and Starlett looked very uncomfortable. She must have sensed that things might get ugly, because she stood and said.

“Mom we better get going. I’m glad you’re feeling a little better, hopefully you can go home in a few days.”

“Thanks for coming. Hand me my grandbaby, so I can get a big hug before she leaves.”

Serena handed the baby to her mother. Jerry’s face turned dark and it was obvious to Elray that the man was about to start trouble.

“So that’s why you ran off. Why doesn’t it surprise me? I knew you weren’t as innocent as you pretended to be.”

“What Serena is or isn’t—is none of your business,” Elray said as he moved to stand in front of her.

“She must have really been good, because you were sniffing around here like a lost puppy ever since she left. Now she shows up with a baby, and she still has your nose wide open.”

Elray felt Serena grab his arm to keep him from going after Jerry.

“He isn’t worth it.” She whispered. “Please don’t get into a fight.”

Elray didn’t care and snatched his arm from Serena and he moved to stand within inches of Jerry.

“I’m only going to say this once—for your sake you’d better listen. I’d personally love to kick your ass—so if you don’t listen—that’s all good too. Serena is mine and so is that baby. You have a problem with them; then I have a problem with you. Trust me, on this; I’m not a man you want to cross—so if you’re smart—you’ll stay away from both of them. Another thing, if you ever put your hands on Serena again, I will personally kick your ass. Do I make myself clear?”

There wasn’t a smile on Elray’s face anywhere. Everyone in that room, especially Jerry, knew he meant every word he said.

“Yea right. Pretty boys with money don’t scare me. You don’t want that pretty face of yours messed up.”

Elray didn't respond, instead he turned to Serena and Starlett. "Ladies are you about ready to leave?"

It was obvious that both girls couldn't wait to get away from Jerry.

"Bye mama, we'll see you tomorrow." Serena and Star moved toward the door.

Elray allowed both women to walk out in front of him. Jerry took a seat in the chair that Serena had been sitting in. The arrogant fool even had the nerve to give Elray the evil eye as he left the room. He wasn't stupid though, because he didn't make a move to do anything further when Elray gestured for him to follow.



Once the room was empty, Lorinda started in on Jerry.

"Haven't I asked you to leave them alone?"

"I didn't do anything to either of them. Why should I let them treat me like dirt?"

"Jerry after almost dying, I'm ready to get my life together. I have a second chance with my girls, and I have a granddaughter now. I can do that two ways: with you by my side or without you. I'm tired, I'll see you tomorrow." Lorinda turned over placing her back to him and listened as he got up and left the room.

The nerve of that witch, Jerry thought as he walked to his car. He'd put up with her drunk ass for years and now she thought she was going to just diss him. Oh, he was going to stay around alright. Lorinda would be right back to her old drunken ways. Serena with her high and mighty self; he'd make sure he brought her down a peg or two. Starlett wasn't even worth the effort. She was too meek. He liked women who had fight in them.

That's one of the things that had attracted him to Lorinda back in the day; her spirit. She didn't take shit from anybody. Serena, however, he could tell that girl was a hellcat. It was no wonder pretty boy was so into her. He'd have his day; he was going to make sure of that.



"Do you need a ride home Star?" Elray asked.

"Naw, I'm cool I have my man's car. Call me later Serena."

"Okay I will."

Serena thought it was strange that Star didn't ask her where she was staying. But then again she was the one who had encouraged her relationship with Elray in the first place. She was probably hoping it was at his place.

On the way home, Elray needed to stop at the mall so he could order some things for his apartment for Raiena. As they stood in the store looking at baby furniture, bedding and other items, it amazed Serena just how particular Elray

was. Most men would probably say to get whatever; but he coordinated her room himself. He ordered all matching Unicorn décor. He even stopped by a shop that specialized in paintings. He wanted to hire the artist to come to his apartment to paint her room, so that it matched with the Unicorn theme he created.

“I’ll need to get into your place at least three days before the furniture arrives.” The artist informed him. It would take a minimum of two days for the paint fumes to die down completely.

Since it would take almost a week before everything he ordered to be available for delivery, he arranged for the artist to come by the following evening to take a look at his apartment.

After getting what he needed for his daughter, he asked Serena. “Is there anything you need or want to get for the apartment?”

“I’m only going to be there at night, and only for a couple months tops. You don’t have to get anything for me. I can adjust to whatever.”

“Okay, but I do want to get you a cell phone. I need to be able to reach you at all times.”

“That’s fine, but I’ll pay the bill.”

Before they were ready to leave the mall, Serena had her phone and they stopped at a few other stores. Elray’s mother called to say that everybody was coming to their house for dinner, and asked if they were going to join them.

“I’d really rather not go. Can you drop me off at your place?”

“Would you go for me? I’d like you to meet my grandparents. I’m sure they are going to want to meet Raiena’s mother.”

Of course, she agreed. How could she not when he had already done so much for her and Raiena. He hadn’t asked for anything in return.

First, they stopped at Elray’s apartment. She changed Raiena and her clothes. Elray also changed into something more casual. There were so many cars when they pulled up to his parent’s house that Serena asked, “Just how big is your family?”

“I probably should have warned you. When my mother said everybody was coming for dinner, she meant everybody. All my grandparents are here; my uncles; aunts and cousins and most likely the Brown’s; my sister’s husband’s family.”

Serena looked at him dumbfounded.

“Two questions. Why is your whole family here? And why is your sister’s husband’s family here?”

“Truthfully, I’m surprised they haven’t been sooner than this, once they found out about Raiena. Especially, my mother’s mom—since the only two people in the family to take after her; are me and my daughter. As far as the Brown’s, we all grew up together. My brother Trent and Kimble, my sister’s husband are best

friends. Rarely, is there a function by either household that the other isn't invited too."

"I thought you didn't like Kimble?"

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody, I just remember Star and Darnell talking about you trying to break them up."

"I never disliked Kimble, I just didn't trust him. Anyway, that's water under the bridge. Let's go inside."

He looked over at her. She looked so nervous, like she was about to face a firing squad. "Relax. My family will love you, just like I do."

He grabbed her hand and they walked in together side by side. Barely three steps inside the door, and his granny was taking the baby right out of his arms.

He smiled and then leaned over to place a tender kiss on her cheek. Both he and Serena followed her as she made her way across the room. They sat down next to his grandfather. Everyone in the room openly admired Raiena. Serena knew her baby looked more like Elray than herself, but if one more person said she was his spitting image; she was sure she would scream.

"Get used to it. I get the same thing with my son, and so does Venice with her daughter," Alex whispered in her ear as she moved to stand beside her. "My

family takes some getting used to. We are all very close, but you'll fit in just fine, I can tell."

"I think you're getting the wrong impression, Alex. Elray and I are not a couple."

"Serena let me let you in on a little secret. If you weren't very special to my brother, you wouldn't be here; baby or no baby."

Serena briefly thought that just before they came in. Elray had said he loved her. He'd never said it before. She wondered if he really meant it, or had he just said it to help her relax.

"I'm going to borrow Serena for a minute." Alex whispered to her brother.

As she walked through the house behind Alex, Serena felt like every set of eyes there were on her. Not that she was as nervous as when she had first got there, but all the inquiring glances certainly were not helping her nerves any.

Elray's mother and two of his aunts were in the kitchen when they went in. Alex took a seat and told her to sit down too. Venice, who Elray had introduced as his brother Dillon's wife, came in a short while later. After she arrived, both his aunts made a hasty exit. Serena had the distinct impression they wanted to talk to her, but didn't know how to approach the subject.

"Mrs. Carter was there something you wanted to discuss with me," she inquired to help move the conversation along.

“My son Trent tells me that you race motorcycles. Don’t you think that’s dangerous?”

“It can be if you don’t know what you’re doing. I do.”

“Please Serena don’t be offended, mama is just concerned about Raiena. What if you got hurt, or God forbid even killed. What would happen to her?” Alex asked.

“I’m sure Elray would take care of her. But I’ve been racing for years. I’m extremely careful, and I don’t take unnecessary chances just to win.”

“Serena my brother is an attorney and I’ve asked him to pull some strings to get you and Elray a court date to begin proceeding to have him legally adjudicated as Raiena’s father. I wanted to talk to you, because I don’t want you to think we are trying to take her from you. But right now, my son doesn’t have any legal rights.”

“Mrs. Carter, I don’t have a problem with having Elray legally named as Raiena’s father. I can see how much all of you care about her. Truthfully, I’m happy and relieved to know she has so many people who love her.”

Serena was on the brink of crying thinking of her own father. Why couldn’t he have loved her and Star the way Elray and his family loved Raiena? She excused herself from the kitchen before she started to cry right there in front of everyone.

Wanting to be alone, she quickly made her way through the house and out the front door.



Dillon saw her as she left. He could tell she was upset and wondered what upset her. Next, he saw his wife and sister emerge next from the kitchen. Within a few minutes, Venice came to stand next to him.

“Did something happen in the kitchen? Serena looked upset.”

“I think she was, but I’m not exactly sure why.” Venice told him.

He decided to go out and have a talk with her. He liked Serena, but more importantly, he felt she was good for his brother. Elray needed a woman with spirit. Serena was that woman. Dillon didn’t know exactly what the nature of Elray’s relationship with Serena was, but it was evident to everyone who truly knew him that he cared deeply for her. Unfortunately, woman had fallen all over him his whole life and it was hard for him to really open up. Because he wasn’t sure who was real, or who was fake.

There was no doubt in Dillon’s mind that Serena was interested in more than Elray’s looks. When she looked at him, he saw the same kind of love in her eyes that he saw in his mother’s; when she looked at his dad.

Serena was sitting on the porch swing when he approached her. “Mind if I have a seat?”

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, “Not at all. I suppose you want to talk to me too.”

“No I came to check on you. You looked upset.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“You didn’t,” he sat down on the railing facing her. “My wife told me what happened. I hope you know my mother is only trying to help.”

“I know. I’m just not used to being around a family that is as close as yours. My sister and I are close, but neither of us is especially close to our mother and our father was never around. I mean, we love mama, but we just aren’t that close to her.”

Dillon felt awkward. He wasn’t sure how to respond to her because he really didn’t know her that well. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye that she quickly swiped away.

“I’m usually not this emotional. I just need a minute to get myself together.”

“It’s okay if it helps you. We better be getting back. El and Raiena will be missing you soon.”

“I doubt Elray will notice I’m gone.”

“Trust me, I know my brother; my guess is he has already noticed and is making the rounds to find you now.” Dillon stood up and left.

As he entered the house, the first person he ran into was Elray. “She’s outside on the porch swing.” He didn’t tell him what had happened. He decided he’d let her tell him, if she wanted him to know.

“Thanks.” Elray responded not the least bit surprised his brother knew his question before he even had a chance to open his mouth and ask it.

“Why are you out here alone,” Elray asked as he sat down next to Serena on the porch swing.

“This is a family event, I really shouldn’t be here at all.”

“Why not, technically you are a part of this family now.”

“No I’m not, Raiena is.”

Elray pulled her into his arms, kissed her on the forehead, and then gently on the lips before responding. “You both are. Unless that’s not what you want.”

Serena had never felt so safe and loved in her entire life. Elray was opening up to her. He was putting his feelings on the line. Of course she wanted to be with him. She had been attracted to him from the moment she first saw him—not that she would admit that to him.

“Yes, Elray, that’s what I want.”

“Stay here. I’m going to tell my mother that we’ll be back”

“Wait, where are we going?”

When Elray stopped, and looked at her he didn't need to answer her question because she knew the answer just by looking at him. Jumping up from her seat, she went to his side so they could go back in the house together.

“Oh no we're not! Your family barely knows me. I don't want them to think I'm some slut that spreads my legs every time you smile at me.”

“Well, considering my daughter is being passed around by my family at this very minute, I'd say it's safe to say they already know that you've spread them for me,” he remarked smugly.

Serena punched him in the arm, “That's terrible, Elray! I can't believe you even said that.”

“What,” he smiled at her before opening the door for them to go back inside.

As they sat down on the couch, Elray's dad who had been holding Raiena when they came in handed her to Elray. His brother Dillon was holding his daughter Sherice, and his brother in law Kimble was holding his son, Kimble Jr. Serena took a quick survey of what Alex had said earlier, and found that she was right; all the Carter grandchildren looked like their fathers.

“Dinner is ready.” Mrs. Carter announced.

Tables had been set up in the back yard so that the entire family could eat together. Mrs. Carter had thought of everything. There were high chairs and

smaller tables set up for the kids. Their family must do this sort of thing a lot. After everyone was seated, Mr. Carter asked his father to bless the food, but his father insisted he do it since his wife was the hostess.

After grace, Alex and Venice got up to help Mrs. Carter.

“Serena, would you please join us?” Elray’s mother asked to her surprise. She felt awkward, but got up to go and help as requested. After helping serve, Serena sat back down next to Elray who was feeding Raiena a small bottle.

“I’ll take her. Go ahead and eat while your food is still warm.”

“I got her baby. Enjoy your food. I can eat something later; I’m not that hungry right now anyway.” He winked at her then added. “Not for food anyway.”

It was a good thing Serena didn’t notice that his parents had been watching them. When he said things like that, it made her blush profusely.

Had she heard his mother when she leaned over to her husband, and said, “I told you so.” She would have undoubtedly blushed even more.

It was late: Alex, Venice and Serena were all still in the kitchen with Mrs. Carter cleaning up after dinner was over. The last of the guest finally went home. Everyone was exhausted, so Mr. Carter suggested that everyone stay the night. It had been sometime since all the now grown Carter children had stayed all night, but everyone agreed. Everyone took their old rooms. Serena felt self-conscious

about sleeping in the same room as Elray, since they were the only couple not married.

Elray was already awake when Serena woke up. As she opened up her eyes, he leaned over placing a kiss on her lips. “Good morning.”

“Hi.” She responded careful not to move too much and wake Raiena up.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“Well I hope you got plenty of rest. Dillon and Venice want Raiena to come and spend the night at their place. I already told them yes, so that means I’ve got you all to myself tonight.”

The very thought made her tingle all over from anticipation. However, that was tonight. Right now she wanted to go by the hospital and check on her mother. As though reading her thoughts Elray said. “Grab a shower. I’ll get the baby dressed.”

Once she was dressed, Serena took the baby downstairs while Elray took a quick shower. The rest of the Carter siblings were all still there too, hanging out in the family room. Trent always one to say something inappropriate, held true to form, raising his juice glass in salute as she walked through saying, “Here’s to the woman that finally tamed the wild one.”

She giggled when his father slapped him on the back of his head, even though it was obvious that his son's comment amused him. Serena was embarrassed, but she didn't say anything.

A short time later, she saw Elray coming down the stairs and a helpful Rayden informed him of their younger brother's comment. The look on his face told her he wasn't amused but his words confirmed it.

"Don't make me show you I can still toss you around Trent."

"Stop being a bully, it's not my fault you been tamed."

"Dad."

"Shut up Trent before your brother tosses you around." His father laughed.

Just then, his mother walked into the room, the subject automatically changed.

"Oh, what, nothing to say now Trent." Elray goaded his brother. To which he stuck out his tongue, but said nothing.

When they left Elray was laughing as they got into the car so Serena asked. "What are you laughing about?"

"You."

"And why am I so funny?"

"Because you're beet red."

"Okay, so it's not everyday a girl meets a family as open as yours is."

Even though she was sure he knew exactly what she meant he decided to play dumb anyway, “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean. I’m not stupid, and neither are you. I know what they meant by taming the wild one.”

“I’ve never had a woman like you before.” He shrugged.

“Is that good?”

“Very.”

God she didn’t think it was humanly possible to blush any more, but she certainly felt like she added a shade of red.

“I’m sorry if I embarrassed you,” Elray said to her as he pulled onto the freeway.

“You didn’t. Your brother did, but I’m getting used to your family.”

He reached over and turned on the radio. The rest of the ride to the hospital they didn’t say much of anything. Starlett was already there when they walked in. Her mother was awake and wanted to know where the baby was.

“She’s with Elray’s parents now, but she will be spending the night with her uncle and his wife.”

Serena didn’t miss the look of disappointment on her mother’s face. But like a trooper she sucked it up. “The doctors say if I continue to improve I’ll be able to go home soon.”

“That’s great, Mama.”

Elray who was sitting in the corner, made a mental note to start looking for a nurse to help with her mother’s care first thing tomorrow morning. He didn’t doubt that Serena and Starlett could care for their mother, but neither of them actually lived there anymore. He also wanted somebody else in that house if Serena was going to be there with that ass hole Jerry.

Not ten minutes after thinking about that asshole, Jerry arrives to visit with Serena’s mother. He must have assumed that the girls would be visiting their mother alone, because he shot a malevolent glance at him. Much to Elray’s disappointment, when he gestured for him to follow him out of the room he sat down. Both Starlett and Serena got up from sitting on the edge of the bed when Jerry came in.

Serena’s mother tried to ease some of the obvious tension in the room by saying, “It looks like I’ll be coming home soon.”

“That’s great news,” Jerry told her but Elray noted that he kept a watchful eye on him.

“I’m so excited to have my girls back home, even if it is only to help me until I get back on my feet.”

“Where’s your baby, Serena?” Jerry asked.

“With her grandparents.”

“So what are you two just one little happy family now?”

Elray, who still had not said anything took over the conversation, “I suggest you focus on your woman and not worry about mine or my daughter.”

“Touchy—aren’t you.”

Elray didn’t respond he knew when someone was trying to goad him. Though he’d like nothing better than to kick the man’s ass on principle alone, for Serena he kept quite.

“Mama we really should get going, we have a very busy day.”

“Okay, well I’m glad you girls came.”

“Nothing would keep us from visiting you Mama,” Serena replied and Elray had to admit he was proud of her because she’d looked directly at king ass wipe.

Chapter Six

Tomorrow wasn't soon enough, as soon as Elray reached the parking area, he got into his car and called Trent. "Hey little brother, I need you to do me a favor and get started looking for a nurse for Serena's mom ASAP."

"Why, what's the rush?"

"I refuse to let her be in that house with her stepdad. That fool is going to make me hurt him."

"Alright, I'll get started on it today."

"Just keep me posted I want someone hired ASAP."

"Yes, I heard you." Trent responded before hanging up.

Both Serena and Starlett were still standing next to the car talking. He had no problem making out most of what they were saying.

"It sounds like a good idea to me Serena, why are you so against it?"

"I'm not against it Star, but we can't afford a private nurse."

Shrugging her shoulders Star questioned. "So, didn't you say Elray offered to pay for it?"

"Yes, but mama isn't his responsibility."

Elray interrupted the conversation by letting the car window down to tell Serena. "I need to get going. The artist who is going to paint Raiena's room had a cancellation."

The artist was already in the parking lot of the apartment as Elray maneuvered his car into a parking space.

"Thank you so much for coming." He greeted the artist as he and Serena got out of the car. After looking at the room and discussing what Elray wanted done, he gave his opinion.

"I think it's a bad idea since you don't actually own this place."

"I've lived here several years and I don't have any immediate plans to move." Elray responded. Purchasing a home was not at the top of his priority list. He was a bachelor and he traveled a lot.

"Don't get me wrong, I'd be happy to do the painting for you. It's just considering the cost and you not owning this place. I really feel it's a waste of money."

"Thanks for being honest, I appreciate it. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. If you do buy a house, maybe you'll still allow me the opportunity to work with you." He said extending his hand.

"No doubt. I'll be in touch."

After the artist left, Elray changed into jeans and a tee shirt then grabbed his riding jacket and helmet.

“Take a ride with me, baby.” He said to Serena.

“I’d like that.” She responded walking toward the bedroom. She was already wearing jeans, but replaced the sandals on her feet with a pair of tennis shoes before grabbing the extra helmet hanging in the kitchen.



They hadn’t gone riding together since her homecoming. Actually, Serena hadn’t ridden a bike since she was five months pregnant. It felt exhilarating to be on the back of a bike again. They had been riding for a little over an hour and she couldn’t help but think Elray handled the bike as superbly as he handled a woman. By her standards, he was considered an expert in both regards. Twenty minutes later, they were pulling into a newer subdivision in Fayetteville.

“What are we doing here?” Serena asked as she got off the bike.

“The painter was right. I need to find a house.”

“Why? What’s wrong with your apartment?”

“Nothing. I want Raiena to have a home.”

She didn’t know what to say. Elray was capable of giving their daughter everything she never had growing up. A stable home and a father who adored her, was all she ever wanted as a child. Each of the homes offered something different.

Something that made it stand out. The real estate agent walked them through the last house continuing to offer bits of commentary about the features of each home.

“Mrs. Carter, do you have any additional questions you’d like to ask about any of the homes, or the community?”

“We aren’t married,” Serena, replied.

“Oh I’m sorry,” the agent responded obviously embarrassed.

“Can we have a moment alone?” Elray said to break the tension.

“Of course, please take all the time you like. I’ll be in the model house in case you need anything else.”

He watched as she walked away then turned to ask Serena. “Do you like any of the homes here?”

A slight lift of her brow told him that he’d surprised her by his question but she answered, “I like all of them, but you’re the one that has to live in it.”

“I want you, and the baby to live with me.”

“I can’t do that, Elray.”

“Why not? You wrote in the letter that you left for me that you loved me. You also said you always wanted to be part of a happy family. Do you still love me?”

Telling him a lie obviously didn’t even cross her mind, she answered quickly. “Yes.”

“I remember you telling me how much you wished you had grown up in a happy home. We can give that to our daughter.”

“Maybe, but for how long?”

In truth, he hadn't given any thought to that. He knew with certainty that Serena and his daughter belonged with him, sharing his life. “I can't answer that, but I think we owe it to Raiena and ourselves to at least try.”

Her emotions showed on her face. He'd been her first in so many things. The first to kiss her and the first man she trusted totally and completely. He was the first to make love to her and the only man she had truly given her heart to. Why not the first man she lived with, even if he hadn't mentioned marriage. She didn't think he was ready for that step yet, but she was certain he wanted her and his daughter to be a major part of his life.

“How far are we from our families?” She asked not being familiar with this part of town.

“Less than a twenty minute ride in good traffic. Why?”

“I know how close you are to your family.”

“We can look at some houses closer if you like. My parents have lived in that house in Rex since we were little. They most likely are not going to move.”

“Yeah, I think I would like to look a little closer.”

“Alright.”

Before leaving he stopped at the sales center to pick up a listing packet for this subdivision, in case they changed their minds. They needed to make another stop at Serena's mothers. Starlett was waiting for them. After the pleasant day they spent together, possibly running into Jerry did not sit well with him. He hoped she wouldn't be too upset by what he was going to ask.

"Would you mind calling your sister and asking her if it's okay if we just see her tomorrow?"

"Of course not," she responded and called Star. After finishing her call, she then asked him. "What now?"

"Do you care if we stop by mamas?" He asked just before pulling out.

"Not at all, I'll bet your mom is spoiling our daughter like crazy."

Laughing he told her. "You're probably right. That is...if Dillon hasn't picked her up already, in which case she'll be getting spoiled by my brother and his wife."

No one was home at his parent's house. Wondering where everyone was he called his dad.

"Hey Dad. I'm at the house and there's no one here. Where is everybody? Oh I guess if Mom is gone shopping with Alex and Venice she won't be home anytime soon."

"Your mother sure likes to shop a lot," she stated when he hung up his phone.

He chuckled.

“Baby, shop-a-holic describes them all perfectly. My mother and Alex don’t need a reason to shop. And, I swear, Venice is just as bad. Poor Dillon.”

Following him further into the house, she sat down on the couch in the family room as he looked through some mail on the table.

“I’m going to check the kitchen to see what Mama has to eat. You want anything?”

“No. I’m not hungry. On second thought, I will take some water.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a minute.”

When he came back into the room and stood over her with the bottled water in his hand, Serena recognized that look in those mesmerizing eyes and she wasn’t having it.

“Elray, I am not making love in your mother’s house.” She shrieked putting her hands up to his chest.

“Uh huh,” he whispered pulling her closer for a gentle kiss. “Me either.”

Nibbling at her lower lip, he moved down her neck with soft kisses before her ear lobes became the object of his desire, biting gently. All the while, he was maneuvering her toward the family room door. Once there he closed the door locking it. Skin to skin contact never broken, wherever he chose to kiss, lick or

nibble was fine with her. She was fighting a losing battle. She knew it, but tried again to remind him where they were.

“Elray, did you hear what I said?”

“I heard,” he said pausing to remove her tee shirt. God the man loved front hook bras. He’d told her so on several different occasions. She definitely intended to make sure she never wore anything else. One flick and her breasts were before him to pleasure, any way he saw fit.

Serena didn’t know her name, let alone care where she was. He had her so delirious from the heat of his mouth. Things were getting out of hand fast. Initially, she only intended to enjoy a kiss or two, but she wanted him the minute his lips touched hers. She felt him sinking down to his knees and pulling her along down onto the plush carpet. Placing her hand against the throbbing erection she’d caused, Serena felt the hard length of him through his jeans. That wasn’t enough; she wanted to feel him inside her. His belt buckle poked her finger, but still she managed to get it open. She unzipped his jeans and slide her hand inside to free him. Tremendously aroused, possibly even more than Elray, Serena took over the seduction.

Minutes later Elray frightened her when he suddenly jumped up, pulled her up and shoved her behind him. It took her a minute to realize that he’d heard the back door open.

“I forgot to lock the other door,” he said in explanation just seconds before his brother Trent walked in.

“Hey El I saw the bike what are you.....” Trent’s words died out. No doubt he’d just seen the bra and tee shirt lying on the floor next to Elray’s foot.

“I know you don’t have some hoochie in my mama’s house. What’s wrong with you El? I know you know better. What about ...,” he stopped himself before saying her name.

“Trent, shut up, and get out of here,” Elray growled at him.

From behind Elray, Serena peeked between his arm and saw Trent fold his arms across his chest and glare, before responding, “I’ll give you two minutes to have her out of here.”

By the way the muscles in his back tensed, she knew Elray was mad, “Trent, get the hell out of here so Serena can put her shirt on.”

“Serena. Oh I thought—never mind I’m going.”

When Elray turned around, she had her hand up to her mouth trying to hold in laughter.

“You’re not mad?”

“No, why should I be?”

“Didn’t you hear what Trent said?”

“Yes,” she said as she slipped into the bra she had just picked up from the floor. After hooking it, she then bent down to retrieve the tee shirt.

Apparently, he decided not to press his luck or question a woman’s logic because he didn’t say anything else. Appearances fixed, Serena followed Elray into the kitchen where a very shame faced Trent was waiting on them. Deciding not to pick on him, she walked over to the counter and picked up an apple from the fruit bowl; and took a bite.

“Can you let mama know we’ll pick up the baby tomorrow?”

“No problem.” Trent replied.

She had to giggle because he was unable to make eye contact with her. Who’d have thought that someone who was as prone as he was to making inappropriate comments would be nearly as embarrassed as he was?

“Oh yeah, did you set up any interviews for me for possible nurses?” Elray asked.

“No, but I did hire that same nurse that took care of granddaddy when he had a stroke two years ago. I figured you wouldn’t need to interview her,” Trent replied still not making any eye contact.

“You’re right I don’t need to. Hopefully Serena’s mom will be out of the hospital day after tomorrow. Will she be able to start right away?”

“Yeah, she just finished a private duty job last week. She was going to take some time off, but I convinced her that you’d be very grateful if she took this job.”

“Just how grateful am I going to be, Trent?”

He shrugged, “Grateful enough to take her out to dinner.”

She looked at Elray to see how he’d react to that bit of news, but he didn’t respond instead they grabbed their stuff and left Trent standing in the kitchen.

As they walked to the motorcycle, Serena said, “I’m hungry.”

“I tell you what, since we’re on the bike how about I cook for you when we get home?”

“You’re going to cook for me? Let me see, well I guess I have a pretty good tolerance for food that doesn’t taste so good.”

He got on the bike and waited for Serena to get on behind him. Just before he started it, he turned to her slightly and said, “Bad food, oh baby there’s nothing bad about me unless I want it to be.”

“We’ll see,” she responded playfully.



The message light was flashing as they entered the apartment. Tossing the keys on the table, Elray pressed the button, as was his usual habit. His agent left several messages that he had a job for him and needed to talk to him right away.

His mother called saying—Uncle Walt called with the court date to have him legally adjudicated as Raiena’s father and the last message was from Renee.

“Hey baby, I haven’t heard from you. Call me—I need some emergency maintenance.”

Knowing Serena heard that message, embarrassed he turned to her. She put up her hand, “Save it. What you did before I came back is your business, but let me warn you now, if you intend to have a relationship with me. I don’t share.”

Without another word, she walked away down the hall toward the bedroom. Feeling it best, Elray let her go. She probably needed some time to herself. He knew he did. Wow, a serious one on one relationship. Was he ready to have a woman dictate to him? To question what he did or always be conscious of someone else’s feeling. Putting those thoughts aside, he went into the kitchen to fix Serena the meal he’d promised her.

Taking two steaks out he placed them in the microwave to defrost, then unbuttoned his shirt as he worked. Music always improved a woman’s mood if she was pissed. Armed with the knowledge of what a woman liked he switched on the stereo, then put in a slow grooves CD before going back into the kitchen. After everything was ready—the table set, flowers arranged just so and the atmosphere romantic, he went to get Serena. Feeling he needed all the help he could get, he poured two glasses of wine to take with him.

Outside his bedroom door, Elray paused before going in. Serena was laying on the bed in one of his large tee shirts sleeping. Deciding to let her sleep, he went back into the living room to return calls. First, he called Uncle Walt to get the details for their court date. He certainly hadn't given them much notice. Court was set for tomorrow morning at eight. Uncle Walt—well connected—in family court, had done them a huge favor; it usually took months to get into family court. Since his parent's had already expressed an interest in going along, he called his mother, but his uncle had already called.

Just as he was hanging up from his mother his agent called, "I've left several messages for you. Why haven't you called?"

"Sorry Parker, I had some personal family business to deal with. What's up?"

"Oh nothing much, just an opportunity for you to do an intimate apparel spread with Tyra Banks!"

"Don't play!"

"Would I play about Tyra? I know how much you've wanted to work with her."

"When...where...and how much?"

"LA, in two weeks. And since Tyra asked for you—it's negotiable, but I need to respond by tomorrow."

"Hell yeah. Do you know who else will be on the shoot?"

“Well, I know of your brother in law Kimble, Tyson and Eva Picford for sure. I’ll call you and give you all the details then we can get together so you can sign the contracts.”

“Cool. If I’m not here, call my cell. I’ll make sure I keep it on until I talk to you.”

On top of the world was the only phrase that came to mind. Could life get any better? He had the woman he loved, a beautiful baby girl and he was about to work with Tyra Banks. Jumping off the couch, he went to give Serena the great news. Working with Tyra would elevate him to a more international level. Modeling was something he kinda just fell into and in the beginning of his career he hadn’t taken it very seriously. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to continue doing it at one point. Now he couldn’t imagine doing anything else. He had tried college, but quit after two years. In his opinion, school wasn’t for everybody. The only ones in his immediate family with college degrees were Alex and Trent.

Serena was still asleep. Instead of waking her, he slipped into bed beside her. The warmth of his body drew her to him and she snuggled closer without waking up. Laying there next to her made him more aware of how fragile she was, even if she didn’t agree with him. Before leaving for this next job, he definitely needed to make sure everything was straight with her mom. He still didn’t want her around Jerry any more than necessary. Getting his brothers to take turns going

over to make sure Jerry knew she and the baby were not without protection, whether he was there or not, shouldn't be a problem. Both, Dillon and Rayden knew a little about Jerry and the run ins he'd had with him.

The clock on his nightstand went off, causing him to sit straight up. He didn't remember setting it, and it wasn't a time he would normally have set, so he figured Serena must have done it before laying down.

"Hey. I was a little tired and just needed a quick nap. Is dinner ready?" She asked stretching out beside him.

"Yeah, but I'll need to warm the steaks up again before we eat," he said slipping from the bed. "Come on in the kitchen in a few minutes, I've got some great news."

"Okay, I'll be out in just a second."

Standing in the bathroom mirror, she fixed her hair, washed her face then went into the kitchen. The table was set beautifully. He'd gone all out with candles and flowers placed strategically around the kitchen. Luther played softly in the background to create a very romantic atmosphere. Suddenly, she felt very under dressed standing there in nothing but her panties, bra, and his oversized tee shirt. Not that he was dressed any better; Nike basketball shorts and a pair of Nike flip flops on his feet. She watched as he pulled out the chair for her to sit down.

"Thank you. You are such a gentlemen."

“I do try, especially for someone I care so much about.”

Serena was certain she was blushing, so she turned to a safer topic, food.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a salad with so many toppings on it.” She remarked. It had everything from cucumbers to mandarin orange slices, two meats; chicken and turkey; tomatoes, onions, cheese, eggs and croutons. In bowls were three dressing selections, vinaigrette, ranch and french. Placing a small amount of salad on her plate, she offered to share her steak with him.

“There is no way I’m going to eat all this, especially the steak. You can have half.”

“I’m not that hungry either. What I have is fine or should I say I want dessert more than I want dinner.”

“Oh God,” she whispered watching him pull his chair around the table so that he sat closer. He cut her steak into small bite size pieces. The first piece went into his mouth. The second he held up for her. After the delicious meal Elray fed her, he got up and took out a bowl of chocolate pudding topped with whipped cream. Placing the bowl on the table, he put his hand out. “Join me in a dance before dessert.”

Hand in hand, she followed him into the living room on shaky legs. All the while worried they were not going to support her. Even the music playing in the background seemed to be in tune with the mood. Just as he stopped in the middle

of the room to pull her into his arms to dance, a new song began to play. Shirley Murdock's AS WE LAY set the sensual slow dance. As the song ended, she found herself sitting on the couch. For the life of her, she didn't even remember how. Elray was way too tempting of a man for a woman with her limited experience. When had he retrieved the pudding or sat on the couch next to her?

"Where are the spoons?"

"We don't need any." He replied using her finger to scoop up a small amount that he sucked off tenderly. Mesmerized, she watched as he took his own finger and scooped up more. He put some on each corner of her mouth, then licked it off. That brought shivers traveling down to her spine. Chocolate was her favorite flavor of pudding, but if someone offered her a million dollars to tell them the flavor they were eating right now, she'd still be broke tomorrow.

The phone rang several times in the background, but Serena barely recognized the sound. Elray must have because he reached over and turned the volume down to let the machine get it.

"I know you're home pick up the phone," his father said into the machine.

His face if not his voice showed had it been anybody else, there definitely would have been plenty of attitude in his voice.

"Hey pops." A minute later, he had Serena's full attention when he said, "Which hospital are you going to?"

Grabbing her chest as though she were in pain, Serena screamed. “Oh my God, what happened, what’s wrong with my baby?”

He hadn’t even said anything to her and Serena knew the call involved Raiena. “Calm down, she has a fever, my mother just wants to have her checked out,” he tried to reassure her. Ten minutes flat, they were both dressed and in Elray’s car and heading for 285. Raiena was going to Children’s hospital on the perimeter.

When they arrived at the hospital, his mother was at the nurse’s station talking to the triage nurse.

“I’m the grandmother, what do you mean I can’t consent to treatment.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Carter, but if you are not the legal guardian. You cannot legally consent to treatment. Can you have the child’s mother meet you here?” the nurse responded.

From what Serena had seen and heard, it was a good thing they arrived when they did. Rushing up to the nurses’ station, she said. “I’m the baby’s mother”

“Do you have ID ma’am?”

“Yes of course I have my ID.” Serena indicated pulling it from her wallet. Finally, after all proper ID was shown, the nurse took all the information Mrs. Carter originally tried to give. Before the triage nurse completed her examination of Raiena, she had fallen asleep in her father’s lap. Never in her life had she felt as

helpless as she did at this minute with her precious daughter lying peacefully asleep.

A few minutes later the admissions rep called Raiena's name.

"Ms. James we'll need your daughter's insurance card."

"We don't have any insurance." Serena replied.

"How will you be taking care of tonight's visit?" The rep inquired.

At that moment, Mr. Carter walked up to the window and handed the rep his American Express card.

"Mr. Carter, I can't let you do that." Serena protested. "I have some money I can take care of the charges."

"Serena, this is our granddaughter. It's no problem."

Resigned to accepting his help, she added. "Thank you. I'll pay you back every penny."

"Nonsense, it's the least we can do after missing out on her first six months."

When they sat back down, while waiting to be called into an exam room, Elray told his father. "You can send me the bill. I'll take care of it."

The look his parent's gave him was priceless. She already knew he would never see that bill. As it turned out, there was nothing seriously wrong with Raiena. She had a minor ear infection coupled with her teething that had caused

her fever to rise. The doctors gave her an antibiotic and told them to give her over the counter Children's Tylenol for the fever and follow up with her pediatrician.

"Both Sherice and Kimble Jr. have the same pediatrician, I can get their doctor's information and make the baby a follow up appointment tomorrow." Elray said to her as they all walked out to the parking lot. "We shouldn't have this problem again after court tomorrow, because Raiena will be added to my insurance."

After they got in the car to leave, Serena could tell that something else was bothering him, so she said, "Yes, it will be nice to have her covered by insurance in case anything does ever truly happen."

"Baby, after what happened tonight, do you think it might be a good idea to see if Uncle Walt could have papers drawn up giving my parents the right to make medical decisions for Raiena. I mean just in case we can't be reached or something."

"That's a great idea. I don't want Raiena to have to wait."

Since there was no way she was going to sleep well tonight anyway, Serena didn't mind at all when Elray suggested they all spend the night with his parents.

"Hey Mom, Serena and I are going to go home and get clothes for tomorrow. If you guys don't mind, we'll all stay at your place tonight," she heard him say into the phone.

Instead of keeping Raiena up longer than necessary, she had already got in the car and went home with her grandparents.

After getting a change of clothes and putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, she and Elray hurried back over to his parent's house. Raiena was asleep in his parent's room when they got there.

"It's okay let her stay in there with them." Serena said, when he said he was going to get the baby.

As expected, Serena hadn't slept well that night. They were already up, dressed, and in the kitchen having a bowl of cereal when Mr. and Mrs. Carter came down the next morning. Serena reached for the baby as soon as Mrs. Carter sat down next to her. After hugging and kissing her several times, she passed her to Elray for a dose of the same.



Traffic in Atlanta was always unpredictable and they did not want to chance being late.

"Dad, I was thinking maybe we should actually take separate cars today just in case. That way no one person is stuck if the other has something to do."

His parents agreed. Taking just enough time to pack a diaper bag, Mr. and Mrs. Carter got into their car to follow them to the courthouse. Uncle Walt was already there, he signed them all in then went over what they wanted to

accomplish in the hearing. Serena was shocked to learn that Elray was also petitioning to have Raiena's name legally changed to Carter.

"Elray, we didn't discuss changing her name."

"I know, I didn't think you'd mind."

"I don't. I just wish you'd told me that's all."

Uncle Walt was still going over all the petitions when their names were called. Because Elray traveled a lot with his job, a petition for guardianship for his parent's was filed, so they would have the authority to consent for medical treatment in the event neither of them could be reached. All the petitions filed were granted and as the judge brought up the issue of child support Serena leaned over and asked Uncle Walt to decline.

Even though she didn't want the child support, she did agree to have a trust fund set up for Raiena that Elray would put the money in. However, having reservations about this, Serena also agreed to have her name added. It did make sense that if she needed the money for the baby's care, she would have access to it. After all the necessary papers were signed, Uncle Walt informed them that he had even set them up to be officially tested for paternity. It was nearly noon before everything was completed.

"I didn't expect it to take this long. Can we go and check on my mother?" Serena asked.

“Of course, I’m sorry I didn’t expect it to take this long either, but I really wanted to get as much done today as possible. I don’t know about you, but I’d just as soon not have to come back.”

Now that was definitely something they agreed on. If she never saw family court again, that would be fine with her.

Chapter Seven

Elray's parents expressed to Elray and Serena that they would like to meet their granddaughters other grandmother. Serena wasn't sure it was a good idea, but it wasn't as though she could put it off forever. His mother suggested that she call her sister and see if it would be okay for them all to stop by the hospital. After finishing the call, Serena turned to Mrs. Carter.

"My sister said Mama just woke up so now would be a good time. I told her we'd be there in less than an hour."

"Wonderful. After that, let's have lunch, and of course, it would be our treat."

"That sounds good to me," Elray said then took Raiena from her and strapped her in the backseat in the car seat.

"We'll meet you at the hospital. I need to stop for gas," Mr. Carter said before opening the door for his wife to get into the car.

"Okay Dad. We'll wait in the lobby for you."

Twenty minutes later, Serena was sitting in the lobby of the hospital nervous about how this first meeting with her mom would go. Elray must have

sensed her insecurity because he reached over and grabbed her hand and squeezed it; then brought her hand up to his lips. He turned it over and kissed her palm before resting his face in her hand.

“Everything will be fine Serena.”

She smiled and nodded but that didn’t really make her feel any more at ease. She hadn’t asked if Jerry was there and truthfully she hoped he wasn’t. Just as she was about to tell Elray what she was thinking his parents walked in. Well there was no backing out so she got up and they went to the elevator.

“Hi Mama,” Serena said when she entered her room. “I’ve brought your grandbaby to see you and Elray and his parent’s are here too.”

Starlett got up from her chair and greeted Elray who introduced his parents.

“Hi Star. This is my mom and dad.”

“Hello. It’s nice to meet you both,” Starlett replied shaking their hand. She moved aside to allow them to get closer so Serena could introduce their mother.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carter this is my mother, Lorinda James.”

Mrs. Carter stepped forward first.

“Ms. James I’m pleased to meet you, please call me Sherry and this is my husband Brandis.”

“Nice to meet you Ms. James,” Mr. Carter said.

Serena didn't know where Jerry was and frankly, she didn't really care. It was just nice to see their mother so happy, and, most importantly, sober.

Her mother and Elray's parent's spent the better part of an hour talking. She was so grateful for the kindness the Carters showed her mother, they treated her like she was somebody; an equal. Since she hadn't checked Raiena to make sure she wasn't wet or hungry, Serena excused herself to go down to the hospital cafeteria to get her changed and fed – Elray followed.

“Hey baby, I'm gonna check my messages while you change the baby.”

“Okay. I'll go change the baby and meet you back here.”

When she returned, Elray had a huge smile on his face.

“Guess what,” he said as soon as he hung up the phone.

“What?”

“My agent called to tell me all the details for that Tyra project.”

“What Tyra project,” she responded.

“That's right, I didn't get a chance to tell you before did I?”

She sat and listened while Elray told her the details of the Tyra project.

“That's great, Elray. I'm very happy for you,” Serena told him sincerely.

“Thanks. Let me know if there's anything you need before I leave. Serena, I still don't want you staying at your mom's place while I'm gone. You can stay at my place or I'll talk to mama and arrange for you to stay at my parents.”

“Elray, I’ll be fine. I did take care of myself for years before I met you.”

“I know, but I want to take care of you now; you and the baby,” he told her and she could feel that he meant it. She realized for the first time it wasn’t just her body or making love to her that he loved; he loved her completely.

“Raiana is your only responsibility. We’ll see what happens between you and me okay?”

“Okay, for now,” he said before leaning over to kiss her gently.



Before leaving the hospital, Elray discussed with Serena and Starlett the arrangements for their mother’s homecoming; as she was being released tomorrow. Elray, was glad he would have plenty of time to get them all settled before he left. As promised, his parents treated them out to lunch. He had some errands that really needed to be taken care of, so he told Serena to go home with his parent’s.

Dillon looked surprised to see him when he walked into the shop a short time after leaving Serena and his parents. He knew that Dillon was aware he and Serena had court that morning.

“What brings you down here today?” Dillon asked him in that older brother worried or annoyed tone.

“Happy to see you too big brother, where are the twins?”

Dillon laughed pointing upstairs and told him, “Rayden is upstairs in my office with Mrs. Williams. Rayvon went to pick up some supplies I ordered, but couldn’t get for three days, unless someone drove to Orlando to get it; he volunteered.”

“Rayden is going to get the hell beat out of him if he doesn’t leave that woman alone. Doesn’t that fool know her husband is in the NFL?”

“I don’t think he cares, she certainly doesn’t, and in all fairness she’s the one chasing him. Not that he’s trying to get away. Besides, I’m sure you are not here to discuss Rayden’s love life, what’s up?”

“I’m doing a photo spread with Tyra Banks for a lingerie line. I’ll be leaving in two weeks, for about a week. I want to know if you all can keep an eye on Serena and the baby.”

“Sure. You really care about her don’t you?”

Elray took a deep breath and nodded before he replied, “More than I wanted to admit at first.”

“You wanna talk?”

Since Dillon’s office was already occupied, they went outside and sat on the bench out front, to have a brother-to-brother talk. He went into details about his feelings for Serena, as well as why he wanted them to keep an eye on her and the baby.

“Jerry sounds like a real joy. He’ll find out soon enough you don’t mess with the Carter’s, if he gets out of line, we’ll handle it.”

Elray laughed. “I knew I could count on you Dill. I appreciate it. Tell the twins thanks for me too.”

“Will do, but I’m sure we will see you before you leave.”

As it turned out, he was so busy with Serena getting her mother settled with the nurse and looking at houses that he didn’t see his brothers, except briefly in passing at his parent’s, until the night before he was leaving. He’d spoken to them on the phone several times and set up a schedule for them to help with Serena. Alex and Venice also offered to help but he wasn’t sure he wanted them around Jerry any more than he did Serena and the baby.

Each day Elray had gone to the James house in the last two weeks; Jerry had actually been on his best behavior but he wasn’t fooling him. The lusty looks he caught him giving Serena several times made him want to beat the crap out of him on principle alone. He put Jerry on the back burner for now, because he had total confidence in his brothers, as he boarded the plane for LA while Serena, Raiena, Venice and Dillon waved goodbye. The good bye that stuck out in his mind was the one Serena had given him last night. She might consider herself a woman of limited experience, but he must have taught her well, he doubted if he could get it up again anytime soon even if he wanted to. Serena whispered in his ear when he

kissed her bye at the terminal that last night had been to hold him until he came home to her. She then joked and reminded him that she didn't share. She was such a contradiction; on one hand she didn't consider them a couple then in the next breath she was telling him she didn't share.

He had never met anyone like her before. Once he got back home, he intended for them to move to the next level in their relationship.



Early the next morning breakfast was ready when Rayden arrived at Elray's place. Rayden was first up for Serena duty. Raiena, like her cousins Sherice and Little Kim already had all her uncles twisted around her little finger. He and Raiena played on the floor in the living room while Serena showered and got dressed to go over to her mother's house.

"Rayden I really don't need you to stay at Mama's with me. I'll call you when I'm ready to go since you insist on taking me."

"It's okay it's not like I have anything else I'd rather be doing anyway."

Rayden smirked to himself when he saw her roll her eyes as she followed him out to the car.

When they got to her mother's house, he got out of the car to get Raiena. Serena entered first and he followed her in carrying Raiena.

Before she had a chance to introduce him, a man whom he assumed had to be Jerry looked him over, then smirked, “Just how many baby daddies have you got?”

Rayden looked at Serena and smiled then turned back to Jerry before he replied, “Oh El was right about you.”

It as obvious Jerry didn’t like his comment one bit. “Right about what may I ask?”

“That if he didn’t kick your ass, one of us would.”

“Just who the hell are you anyway, you can’t come in here and disrespect me in my house.”

Serena answered, “He’s Raiena’s uncle Jerry and you started this.”

“Jerry can you please help me go in the other room and lay down,” her mother said then added. “Serena, bring my grand baby in to see me.”

“Alright mama I’ll be right there. Rayden I’ll probably be here most of the day, I’ll call you when I’m ready to go.”

“Like I told you earlier, I’ll stay awhile. Where’s the nurse I’d like to talk to her.”

“She’s upstairs,” Starlett answered.

“Really, Rayden you don’t need to stay, I’m fine.”

He had already sat down on the couch picked up the remote and began flipping through the channels. Serena would learn that he was just as stubborn as Elray when he chose to be, and he wasn't going anywhere. She stood there for several seconds before giving up and following her sister in the other room with Raiena.



Serena was a bit surprised when Jerry came behind them. He'd never shown any interest in Raiena before so when he asked her mom to let him hold her everyone was stunned. Her mother looked at her to make sure it was okay, and when she nodded her agreement Lorinda handed the baby to Jerry. He hadn't even sat down when Raiena began to cry, apparently even a baby saw right through him. Starlett the closest to him took the baby and she stopped crying immediately.

"She doesn't like people she isn't used to," Serena offered by way of an excuse.

"Lorinda I've got to take care of some business. I'll be back later," he said leaving the room.

Serena didn't trust Rayden to be good so she followed Jerry. When they walked into the kitchen his disappointment that Rayden was still there showed in his facial expression. Rayden who was talking to the nurse looked up when they

entered the kitchen, the nurse acknowledged him, Rayden didn't. Grabbing his keys off the hook above the kitchen sink, Jerry left.

Serena hoped that Rayden would consider leaving now that Jerry had left, but after everything she was sure Elray told him about Jerry he probably didn't trust him not to return again. When it was time for Lorinda's physical therapy session she suggested that he take Raiena for a walk. Thankfully the nurse told him that the session would last about an hour and then they were going to help her shower before lunch.



Standing outside the house with Raiena in her stroller Rayden took out his cell phone and called Elray.

"How are things going in LA, have you seen Kimble yet," he asked when Elray answered.

"Every things good, but I haven't seen Kim. How's my baby?"

"Fine, I'm taking her for a walk now."

"And my other baby?"

"Serena's fine too. She and her sister are helping with her mother's physical therapy."

"Good, where is the but wipe?"

“He left. I got to tell you that you were right about him. He started in on me the minute I walked in. What a but hole?”

“I know, just keep him away from Serena and my baby.”

“Don’t worry I will and I’ll call you after I take them home tonight.”

As he started walking around the neighborhood where Serena and her sister had grown up he thought to himself again just how fortunate he and his family had been growing up. None of their grandparents were rich, but they were certainly comfortable. His parents weren’t rich when Dillon was born, but they were by the time he and Rayvon came along. Being brought up to appreciate their blessing and to not judge others that had less than them, his heart went out to the children that grew up in poorer communities like this one. Even in his expensive clothing, he didn’t feel the least bit out of place. The one thing he was surprised by was the fact that none of the neighborhood kids seemed to recognize him, but then again, not many inner city kids really got to enjoy professional racing.

As he continued walking he made a mental note to talk with his dad, Rayvon and Dillon about making sure some of these kids got to go to the racing camp that their foundation sponsored. It didn’t seem like he had walked that far until he turned around to go back to the house. He must have really been lost in his thoughts not to have noticed. By the time he got back Raiena had fallen asleep,

picking the entire stroller up he wheeled her in the house. Not wanting to wake her up he pushed the stroller next to the couch where he sat down.

He could hear the shower running before he turned on the TV. As usual there wasn't anything on that he wanted to watch, even as a child he'd never watched much TV. Relaxing, he closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of the couch. When he opened his eyes again Serena was sitting on the opposite end of the couch watching, of all things, Scooby Doo. Starlett who happened to be an excellent cook made dinner. Smothered pork chops with gravy, mashed potatoes, corn and dinner rolls with Peach cobbler for dessert. Rayden felt like he had died and gone to heaven being a man who appreciated a good home cooked meal.

After dinner, Serena informed him she was ready to go. She and the baby were going to spend the night at Alexandra and Kimble's house. Since Kimble was in LA with Elray, Alex asked her to keep her and little Kim company. It would be a nice way for them to get to know each other better. Everything she needed for an overnight stay was already packed in the back of Rayden's SUV. They made a pit stop at the Carter's house because Mrs. Carter called Rayden and told him she wanted to see Raiena, She had bought her some new clothes and wanted to try them on her.

In Serena's opinion, Raiena had more than enough, she more than likely would not be able to wear half the stuff her daddy and his family had bought her

before she out grew it. Going with the flow, Serena didn't say anything, especially since they missed out on the first six months of her life—because of her selfish behavior. Now more than ever she realized she should have told Elray the minute she realized that she was pregnant. She couldn't change the past, but she could indulge them now.



Over an hour after they got to Elray's mothers, both she and Rayden were still there. He had a date but rushing his mother was apparently out of the question. Luckily, Alex called.

"Hey Serena how much longer is it going to be before Rayden drops you off?"

"Let me check, hold on," she said laying the phone down to go ask.

"Rayden, Alex wants to know when we're coming?"

"Can you ask her if she has time to come and get you?"

"Sure."

Going back into the other room, Serena picked the phone back up.

"He wants to know if you can come get me?"

"Let him know I'll be right over."

She informed Rayden and he must have been comfortable with the arrangements because he left minutes after she told him. About an hour later Alex arrived.

Little Kimble was asleep in his car seat when she put Raiena in the car. She and Alex decided to have a girl's night vegging out in front of the TV and talking. Alex stopped at Kroger's and ran in while she sat in the truck with the kids. She came out with three bags of nothing but junk food.



With Little Kim and Raiena successfully put to bed for the night, Serena and Alex grabbed the baby monitor then headed downstairs.

"Why don't you go on in the living room and pick a movie while I get some snacks together," Alex suggested.

"Okay."

"So what'd you pick," she asked as she joined her in the living room handing her a glass of lemonade.

"I've never seen Training Day and I love Denzel."

"Cool, give it here I'll pop it in."

Alex put the DVD in then sat on the floor next to her placing the bowl with the chips, pretzels and popcorn between them.

"So tell me how did you and my brother meet?"

"Through a mutual friend."

“My brother Trent says you are really good at racing, my mother would die if I ever did anything like that. She hates that my brother’s race but she has at least accepted it.”

“Why doesn’t Elray race he handles a bike better than I do?”

“Nobody in my family got into it like the twins. They have always been the daredevils of the family. Don’t think I forgot my question.”

“There’s really not much to tell. I’d seen him at the races a couple times then my friend Darnell said he wanted to meet me. Truthfully, I didn’t like him much at first.”

Alex laughed, “Let me guess too fine or too arrogant?”

“Actually both. Everybody knows men that fine are never faithful and I wanted more than just a pretty face.”

“I agree. I’ve been in love with my husband since I was thirteen years old, but my brothers were dead set against us for pretty much the same reason.”

“Yeah, I heard they tried to break you guys up.”

“That’s an understatement. Looking back—I think they were just hurt. Kimble and my brother Trent have been best friends forever. Before everything happened with me, my husband and brothers were more like brothers than friends. I’ll tell you that story some other time. I want to hear about you and Elray.”

“Like I said before there’s not much to tell. After we met, I was still hesitant to get involved with him. I never really had a boyfriend before. I just wasn’t that interested in guys but there was something different about him. I’d never admit to Elray that I found him attractive from the first time I saw him. Once he kissed me, that was it.”

“You can tell me it’s none of my business if you want to, but was El your first?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be embarrassed—Kimble was my first too.”

“Alex, I hope your family doesn’t think I got pregnant on purpose?”

“Considering you were not even going to tell him about the baby—believe me nobody in our family thinks that. I am curious as to why you kept the baby if you were never going to tell him.”

Truthfully, I didn’t even know I was pregnant when I left town and when I realized I was, I looked at my life and where I came from and I felt he deserved better than me. I didn’t want him to be ashamed of having a baby with a girl like me.”

Alex had a puzzled look on her face when she asked, “What does that mean, a girl like you. Serena, you’ve met my family—none of us are snobs. We don’t look down on people because they have less than us.”

A tear slid down Serena's face, "I know that now but I didn't know it then. Besides, it wasn't like we were a couple. Things happened between us so fast."

"That's how I know my brother loves you. All my brothers are very private people. He has never gotten this close to anybody before. I mean don't get me wrong, he has always had a ton of women, but none that he actually cared anything about. And he has never brought any of them home to meet our parents. In fact, none of my brothers have—except him and Dillon."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. But I'm going to stick my nose in your business some more. I'm close to all my brothers, but El and I are especially close. He has never opened his heart to anyone the way he has to you. So, if you don't want the same thing he does—let him know before you hurt him."

"I'd never hurt Elray."

"Not intentionally, but he'd be hurt just the same."

Serena didn't say anything for a long time. How could she hurt a man that had as many women as he'd had? She couldn't possibly have that much power over him. From all that she'd heard he'd dated some of the wealthiest women in Atlanta. He'd dated models, women that outshined her in beauty and education. True, he wanted them to try and work on a relationship, but that was for Raïena's sake.

Needing some time to herself, she told Alex that she was tired and was going to bed. Leaving Alex downstairs in the living room, she went upstairs—showered, checked on Raiena then climbed into bed. She heard Alex turn off the TV and come upstairs, but she was still wide-awake. She was thinking about her life.

Now that her own life was finally on the right track she wanted to accomplish two things before she could totally commit to her own happiness and a life with Elray. One was to get her mother away from Jerry. The other was to confront her father about why he'd walked out on her and her sister. It was two in the morning when her cell phone vibrated on the dresser where she'd left it plugged. Thinking it was her sister she jumped out of bed grabbed the phone and without looking quickly said, "Hello."

"I'm sorry to call you so late but I couldn't sleep." It was Elray.

"That's okay I wasn't asleep. I couldn't sleep either," she said trying not to sound too excited to hear from him.

"I miss you."

"Same here. Elray, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You know what, it can wait. I'm glad you called is everything going okay there?"

“Yes, the reason I called this late is because I probably won’t be able to call you later today. Kiss the baby for me.”

“I will.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I can. Bye.”

She finally fell asleep just before five in the morning. The sun was shining bright in the room when she woke. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand she immediately jumped up to run downstairs.



Alex was sitting on the couch in the living room, Raiena lying at her feet on a blanket while Kimble played with some building blocks right in front of them.

“Alex, why didn’t you wake me up? It’s twelve thirty.”

“You obviously needed the sleep. I already called your sister and told her you might not make it over today. She said that was cool because she had a lot to do today anyway.”

“Thanks, but I better go over and check on my mother.”

“She’ll be fine. The nurse she has is more than capable of taking care of her. I left you some breakfast in the microwave.”

Serena walked in the kitchen and warmed up the food. After she finished eating she went upstairs and got dressed. She still wanted to check on her mother even if it was just for a minute.

“Alex, I’d like to go over and check on my mom. Would you mind watching Raiena? I won’t be gone long.”

“I can see you’re not going to rest until you check on your mama, so go ahead. I’ll call Dillon and he can take you over.”

“Don’t bother Dillon, I’m not going to stay long.”

“Okay, take my truck. I’m not going anywhere and even if I do, I can take Kim’s car—so leave Raiena’s car seat.”

“Thanks I’ll be back in a little while. Do you want me to pick up anything?”

Alex shook her head. Since there wasn’t much traffic this time of day, it didn’t take long to get to her mother’s. Luckily, nobody was there but her mother and the nurse. Deciding that this was the perfect opportunity, she broached the subject of her father.

“Mama, do you know where my father is?”

Shock clearly registered on her face before her mom responded, “What made you ask me about your dad?”

“Mama, me and Star are not little girls anymore. I have a daughter myself now. I want to know if I have any other brothers and sisters. I want to know why he stayed away from us.”

“Serena, leave it alone.”

“If you don’t help me, I’ll find him on my own anyway.”

Her mother had to know eventually this conversation would happen with her daughters. Serena already knew it would be a lie to say that her mother had gotten over Randy Greene. She never had and probably never would. Her daughters were well aware that they were all she had so she damn sure didn't seem to want to share them with him. She never wanted to discuss anything that concerned their father. Her mother responded, "Serena your dad doesn't want to be found by us. I've told you that over and over again. Just let it go." That didn't sit well at all with Serena.

"Mama, I don't mean any disrespect, you know I love you, but I want to hear that from him. I want him to look me in my face and tell me he doesn't want us."

After everything that has happen between them, Serena really did mean it when she told her mother that she loved her. Life hadn't been that kind to her mom; she loved a man that didn't love her back. She drank relentlessly, then she settled for a man that was beneath her. Now as a result of drinking for so many years, she suffered from liver problems and was trying to recover from having a stroke. She was just leaning over to kiss her mother's tear streaked face, when the nurse came in to ask her if she wouldn't mind staying with her mother while she ran to the pharmacy.

"That's fine I can stay."

Seeing that her mother was emotionally drained from their conversation, she told her to get some rest while she made her a cup of hot tea. She agreed and rested her head back against the pillows on her bed. Serena hated tea herself but her mother and Starlett loved it so there was always tea in the house. She put the water on to boil, called Alex then sat down at the kitchen table.

When the water finished boiling she made the tea, putting two slices of lemon in it and took it in to her mother. Her eyes were closed, not sure whether or not she was sleeping, she decided to leave the tea on the nightstand. A roast was in the slow cooker. She checked on it before sitting down in the kitchen to wait for the nurse to return.

The front door opened a short time later. Assuming it was the nurse, she walked into the living room only to see that it was Jerry. She went back into the kitchen. She was definitely in no mood to deal with him today. She should have known he'd follow her.

"What you're too good to even be in the same room with me, now that you've got your little rich boyfriend," Jerry said going over to the fridge for a beer.

"Look Jerry, I'm not in the mood today, okay."

She didn't notice he was standing right behind her, until his hand touched her shoulder. Pushing the chair back some she slid out sideways trying to escape his touch. "I'm leaving as soon as mom's nurse gets back."

She could see in his eyes that he didn't know the nurse wasn't there. There was something in the way he looked at her that made her wish she hadn't brought that fact to his attention. He backed her up against the kitchen counter. His hands rested on both sides of her on the counter.

"Excuse me," was all she got out before he leaned in to try and kiss her. Immediately, she closed her mouth and tried to turn her head away. He was too quick. His lips settled on hers, but her lips were pressed firmly together. His tongue was trying to force entry into her mouth. Pushing against his chest, she fought desperately to escape from him. Seeing that there was no way she was going to overpower him, her hands began to search the counter top coming in contact with a cup. Getting a good grip on the cup, she brought it up hard against the side of his head.

Letting her go, she watched him grab the side of his head. His eyes widened when he saw the blood on his fingers when he brought his hand down. The cup lay shattered on the floor. Serena flinched when she saw the rage in Jerry's eyes and tried to run. He grabbed her hair and yanked her back to him. He slapped her hard across the face splitting her lip. Dazed from the blow to her head, there was nothing Serena could do when Jerry kissed her this time. His tongue easily sliding between her lips.

Stopping just long enough to drag her into the washroom out of plain view, he closed the door. Serena spit on him the minute he turned around. This time he punched her in the face. She didn't lose consciousness, but felt helpless. Feeling his hand under her shirt, there wasn't anything she could do about it. He started squeezing her breast painfully—just moments before he pushed her shirt up along with her bra, and took her left nipple into his mouth.

“You uppity little bitch. If you can spread your legs for pretty boy, then you can spread um for me too.”

Closing her eyes Serena blocked out what was happening to her. This isn't happening she kept telling herself, as she felt him putting his hand in her shorts. He inserted a finger inside her and she wanted to die. The sound of a door opening had never sounded so good in her life. Jerry put his hand over her mouth to prevent her from saying anything.

“If you say anything about what happened here, I'll slit that mother of yours throat, or I'll finish what we started with Starlett without a second thought. Do you understand me?”

Shaking her head that she understood, he let her up. After fixing their clothes, they came out of the washroom. Jerry went out the back door while Serena started cleaning up the broken cup from the floor. She was still cleaning it up when the nurse came into the kitchen.

She stopped and looked down at Serena, “What happened to you?”

“Nothing, I just had an accident. Tell mama I’ll call her later,” she responded getting her keys from the counter and leaving before the nurse asked her anything else.

Chapter Eight

Serena needed to pull herself together before she went back to Alex's house. Pulling over on the side of the road she surveyed the damage to her face. Besides having a split lip there was a bruise under her eye, which she was fairly certain would be one heck of a shiner by morning. Staying away wasn't an option, because the first thing Elray's family would do was call him. He'd leave his shoot worried about her. No she'd think of something to tell Alex before she got there.

Wouldn't you know it when she pulled up to Alex's house she saw Mrs. Carter's car and Rayden's. Dang was she not going to catch a break at all today. She was prepared to deal with Alex, but not all of them at once. She just wasn't that good of a liar. She dreaded all the questions she was about to get asked. Telling the truth was out of the question, Jerry might just make good on his threat. That was something she couldn't risk until she figured out what she was going to do about him.

Alex had given her a spare key to use in case she wasn't there when she got back. Using the key and walking in she saw that everybody was in the living room. She wouldn't even get a chance to wash her face to help hide the bruises. Mrs.

Carter was the first to turn to her when she walked in, rushing over to her she asked, “Serena what happened?”

“It’s not as bad as it looks. I ran into someone I had a beef with some time ago and we got into a fight.”

“Sit down honey and let me take a look at you. Do you want to go to the hospital to be checked out?”

“No ma’am I’m fine. But I’d like to take a shower and change.”

She was relieved that Mrs. Carter didn’t object. As she walked out of the room, she could feel them all watching her as she disappeared up the stairs. Once she was inside the room, Serena faked closing the door so she could listen to whatever they were going to say.

“Well was I the only one who didn’t buy her story,” Mrs. Carter asked.

“She’s hiding something,” Rayden stated.

“Should we call Elray,” Alex asked her mom.

“No, not yet I want to see if Serena tells him on her own about her fight.”

She still heard voices after she finished showering and changing her clothes. She should have known they wouldn’t let it go that easily. It wasn’t like she could hide up there all day. Taking a deep breath, Serena opened the door to go back downstairs.



Raiena was sitting in her grandmother's lap sucking a bottle. When she saw her mother the bottle dropped and her little arms went up. Serena took her and sat down. No one asked her any more questions about the fight.

The tension in the room was obvious and she was glad when Elray's mother and brothers left. Several more minutes passed before Alex asked, "What do you have a taste for tonight?"

"I'm actually not hungry. It doesn't matter, pizza or chicken sounds good."

"Okay there's a Popeye's less than ten minutes away. You wanna go with me?"

"Sure."

Getting into Alex's truck they went to Popeye's and picked up a bucket of chicken with coleslaw and a side of mashed potatoes for the kids. On their way back home, Alex looked at her and said, "You know my mother doesn't believe you."

Still staring out the passenger window she responded, "I don't know why, it's the truth."

Serena wasn't stupid; Alex wanted her to open up about what really happened. No matter how much she would have liked to do just that—there was no way she would. If anything happened to her mom or Star—it would be too much to handle.

They drove the remainder of the trip home in silence. After eating, the kids started playing on the floor while Serena and Alex watched a movie. Kimble called and Alex left the room to talk to him. Serena hoped she wouldn't mention what happened. Alex came and sat back down to finish the movie about ten minutes later. Fidgeting and unable to sit still Serena wanted to ask if she had said anything to Kimble about what happened. Alex must have read her mind because she said.

"I didn't say anything to Kimble."

"Thank you," Serena said. There was no way she'd insult her intelligence by acting like she didn't know what she was talking about.

"You're welcome. But if there's anything to tell—I suggest you not lie to Elray. It will make it so much worse."

"There's nothing to tell. The only reason no one believes me is that in your world these types of things aren't common. In mine —people fight—it happens all the time."

"Well I certainly won't argue with you on that, because you'd be right. But not being around a lot of fighting growing up has nothing to do with why I think my brother should be told. Serena he loves you. Look at it this way. If someone hurt him wouldn't you want to know what happened and why?"

"Yes," she responded.



Serena woke up some time later to a room that was totally dark, the TV off and the kids and Alex gone. She got up and went upstairs. Opening the door to little Kimble's room she peeked in, both kids were sound asleep. Going into the guess room she was sleeping in, she laid down across the bed fully clothed and went back to sleep.

The next morning she was the first up. She got Raiena and went downstairs and changed her and gave her a bottle. Laying her down in the living room so she could see her from the kitchen, Serena started breakfast. Alex and Little Kim came in just as she was placing plates on the table.

"Good morning," Alex told her as she sat down.

"Hey, just thought I'd return the favor. Do you want some juice?"

"Sure, orange for me and apple for Kim."

Placing two cups of juice on the table, Serena walked into the living room to get Raiena; so she could feed her some eggs. Rayden and Rayvon showed up just as she and Alex were cleaning the kitchen up. They kissed the kids and Alex and said good morning to Serena. She felt so self-conscious because they were both staring at her. Her lip was slightly swollen more than yesterday, and the bruise under her eye was a lot more noticeable. Thinking things couldn't possibly get any tenser; in walks Trent.

“Dang who sucker punched you,” the never-ending inappropriate speaker asked Serena as he plopped down in one of the kitchen chairs.

Since Serena didn’t answer him, Alex broke the silence, “Why are you all here so early this morning?”

Rayden who still gave Kimble a hard time every now and then answered, “Because your husband isn’t here to kick us out.”

“My husband never kicks you out.”

“Well not when you can see him he doesn’t, silly,” Trent laughed then asked. “Any food left?”

“We weren’t expecting company, but there’s cereal in the pantry help yourself. Come on Serena since we’ve got babysitter’s, let’s get dressed.”

They left the kids with their uncles. Alex finished before Serena so she sat on the bed in the guess room talking to her while she finished.

“Alex, how would you go about trying to find somebody if all you had was a name, no birthday or other information?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d try doing a Google search using the name. Does this person live in Georgia?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s still in Georgia.”

“I hope I’m not being too nosey, but who are you looking for?”

“My dad. I asked my mother about him but she wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“When did you see him last?”

“I don’t exactly remember, since Star and me were little. I know there’s some real bad blood between him and my mother. They were never married and he hurt her a lot. But now that I have a daughter, I realize just how much I want to know my dad.”

“Are you prepared to be rejected if you do find him? I mean if he’s stayed away all this time with no contact, maybe there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“That’s what my mom said will happen. But you know what —I’ll deal with that if and when I have too. I just want him to look me in my eyes and tell me he doesn’t want me. I have to at least try,” turning around she looked at Alex before asking her, “Can you understand that?”

“Yes. I’ll help you. My brother’s can watch the kids for a little while. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“To see my Uncle Walt.”

“The attorney.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he can point us in the right direction.”

“Thank you, Alex.”

“It’s my pleasure. You’re my sister now girl.”



Rayvon and Rayden had taken the kids into the living room when Serena and Alex came back downstairs. Trent was still in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal.

“Hey guys, Serena and I have some errands to run. Can you stay awhile and watch the kids?” Alex asked.

“Sure. We don’t have anything to do right now anyway,” Rayden responded then added, “Why don’t you take Trent with you? He’ll just get on our nerves anyway.”

Alex was no fool. She knew her brothers well. After what happened to Serena yesterday, there was no way they were letting her out of their sight. Elray was already going to be mad as hell when he saw her face. Luckily for her, her brothers were going to catch the brunt of his wrath.

“That’s fine. Trent make yourself useful, and call Uncle Walt to find out where he is.”

“He’s still at home. Why are we going to see Uncle Walt?” Trent asked as he followed them out the back door.

Getting into the driver’s seat Alex said, “Shut up and ride before I put you out.”

Arriving at their Uncle's house, Trent got out to enter the security code on the gate. Uncle Walt and his wife Stacey were on the back deck eating.

"Your aunt is extremely pretty," Serena whispered to Alex. "I don't remember meeting her at the get together at your mother's."

"She wasn't there. Aunt Stacey travels a lot and it's no secret that she and my mother don't get along."

Just as Alex finished her comment, her aunt stood up and extended her hand to Serena, "Hello, pleased to meet you. I've heard quite a bit about you from my husband."

Serena accepted her hand, "Pleased to meet you too."

Stacey excused herself after greeting her and Trent as they all sat down.

"Uncle Walt, Serena wants to try and locate her dad. So I thought you'd be able to help," Alex said.

"Well there's several ways you could try, but if you give me his information—I'll dig around to see what I can find."

"That's part of the problem. Serena doesn't have much information other than his name."

"That's a start. I'll e-mail you a list of things that will help me. Give me as much as you can and I'll get started."

“Thanks Uncle Walt. Well we gotta get going. We have a few more things to do and we left the kids with Rayden and Rayvon.”

“No problem. It was good seeing you again, Serena. Bye Trent.”

“It was good to see you again too,” Serena responded. “And thanks for your help.”

“Alright,” Trent said standing so he could leave. “I’ll check you later.”

Now was a good time to see if Serena would like to go by her mother’s. Since Trent was with them Alex wasn’t concerned about running into Jerry alone. That’s the last thing she needed. Elray was already gonna flip about the mystery fight. She really didn’t want to have to tell him that Jerry had gotten out of line with either of them.

“How about we check on your mom before we go back to the house?”

“That’d be great,” Serena answered.



Twenty minutes later they were walking in Serena’s mother’s house.

“What happened to your face,” her mother and Starlett asked as soon as Serena walked into the room.

“A fight, just drop it.”

“With who.” Starlett asked not about to just drop it.

“We can talk about it later, Star.”

“Can I please speak with my daughter alone?”

Everyone including Starlett left the room, so Lorinda James could speak with her youngest daughter.

“Do you want to tell me what really happened?”

“Mama, I had a fight with someone that I’ve had a beef with a long time. Honestly, I knew it would come to this one day.”

“Serena, I’ve never known you to be at odds with anybody. So who is this person?”

“It’s nobody you know, Mama.”

“Really, in case you haven’t noticed—I’m sober now—and I notice a lot more.”

“Mama, I promise it’s nobody you know.”

“You come in here with your face all bruised and I haven’t seen Jerry since yesterday morning. Look me in my eyes and tell me you two didn’t get into a fight.”

“Why on earth would I be fighting with Jerry, Mama? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Baby, I know you and your sister don’t like him. Please tell me if Jerry had anything to do with what happened to you.”

“Mom, he didn’t.”

Serena could tell her mom had her doubts, but she shook her head okay anyway. Not wanting to be there when Jerry did show up, Serena and Starlett helped with their mother's therapy session, while Trent ran out and grabbed them all something to eat. Lunch was simple; sub sandwich's from Blimpie's, chips and iced tea. After lunch, Starlett helped get dinner started, before they all left. Jerry was still missing in action and Serena was happy about that..

On the ride back to Alex's, Elray called Serena. She didn't want to talk to him in front of Alex and Trent so she didn't answer. Both the kids were asleep when they got back. Rayvon and Rayden were in the living room playing cards. The minute they saw her, Rayden said, "Elray wants to talk to you. He said he called your cell, but he didn't get any answer."

Pretending to look at her phone, she said, "Oh I do have a missed call from him. Excuse me while I go and call him."

She went upstairs and closed the door before calling him back.

"Hey Elray, I'm sorry I missed your call."

"Baby, what's this I hear about you getting into a fight?"

"Elray, it's nothing. I wish they hadn't said anything to you. Who told you anyway?"

"Who told me isn't important. Did you call the police?"

“No, I didn’t call the police. It was a simple fight with someone I’ve never liked and they have never liked me, it’s no big deal.”

“Male or female?”

“What?”

“It’s a simple question Serena—male or female?”

“It was a female.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re being much too evasive and secretive.”

“You know what I really don’t care what you believe—I’m not a child. Furthermore, I don’t appreciate being called a liar.”

“Why are you being so defensive if you’re telling the truth? I’m not trying to offend you Serena. I care about you and I care what happens to you. When I get home, we are going to the police, so you can file a complaint.”

“No, I’m not. Nobody filed a police report when you beat up Miles. This is no different; it was just a fight.”

“That’s different—he had it coming and it’s not like anyone wanted attention brought to why we were all there. Look, I’ve got to go. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Serena said and it was the truth.

Closing her phone, she sat on the edge of the bed realizing that was the second time that Elray told her he loved her. Maybe she should tell him the truth about what happened. No she wouldn’t be responsible for him getting into

trouble. If he'd gone after Miles the way he did, he would probably kill Jerry if he found out he tried to rape her. For now, she would just make sure she was on guard. She did however; intend to tell Starlett. She wouldn't knowingly allow her sister to be in danger. What if he tried to do the same thing to her?

The rest of the Carter clan came over later that evening. They ordered pizza and just sat around shooting the breeze. Serena enjoyed spending time with the Carter's. You would have a hard time finding a more down to earth, fun, loving family anywhere.

Mrs. Carter helped get the kids ready for bed before leaving. She also managed to get Serena alone long enough to tell her if she wanted to talk she'd listen. Did this entire family have a sixth sense? A nice hot bath that's what she wanted. Stopping by Alex's room she said, "Good night."

"Good night. I just checked my cell phone and I see I got that e-mail from Uncle Walt. Do you want to go ahead and answer his questions?"

"No I'm about to take a bath. I'll do it tomorrow."

"You can answer from my phone. Just take it with you. If I'm sleep when you're done, can you plug it in and leave it on my dresser?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

The hot steamy water felt glorious. Sinking further into the tub Serena closed her eyes. She and Alex were planning on going to the library tomorrow.

Alex's Uncle Walt told them to search old newspapers for information. The kids also had doctor's appointments in the afternoon. After sitting in the tub for well over an hour, she felt like a prune but was still reluctant to get out. Deciding that another fifteen minutes wouldn't kill her, she sank back down to enjoy the warmth.

After giving Alex her phone, Serena climbed in bed. She felt so much more relaxed. Laying in bed her thoughts were clear. Besides Raiena and Elray, finding her father was the most important thing to her right now. Thinking back on her confrontation with Jerry, she felt there was no way she was going to let Jerry dominate her life. Not that she had ever taken him for granted, but she would never have guessed that he would do what he'd done to her. She had never been afraid of him and she still wasn't. He definitely would pay for what he tried to do to her, and she would make sure of that.

Just as she turned off the lamp on the nightstand, she realized she never called Starlett. Getting up she grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number. Star would be mad that she was calling so late; but she'd get over it.

"Hello," a sleepy Starlett answered.

"Star, wake up its me."

"Serena, couldn't this wait until tomorrow?"

"No Star, it can't—now get up."

“Alright all ready, I’m up. What’s so important it couldn’t wait till tomorrow?”

“Star, I don’t want you going over to Mama’s alone. If the nurse isn’t there—either wait for her to get back, or wait for me and we’ll go together.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t get into any fight—Jerry tried to rape me.”

“Oh my God Serena, are you okay? Did you go to the doctor?”

“I said he tried. Mama’s nurse asked me to stay with her while she went to the pharmacy, but luckily she came back before he was able to do anything.”

Confused Starlett asked, “Well how did you get those bruises on your face.”

“I fought with him. Look, just promise me you won’t put yourself in the position that he might try it with you.”

“Don’t worry I won’t. I’ve never been as brave as you.” Starlett hesitated a minute before asking, “You aren’t going to tell Elray...are you?”

“No Star, I’m not. Oh and by the way, I figured out it was you who told Elray that I was coming back to town, and I’ve forgiven you for that. But I don’t want him to know about this. I’ll handle Jerry.”

“I won’t say anything, but I think you should tell him.”

“Well I don’t. I’ll talk to you tomorrow...okay.”

“Okay.”

Placing the phone back on the charge, she lay down and pulled the covers up around her head.



Raiana's cry woke Serena around six thirty the next morning. Once she feed and changed her, she laid her in the middle of the bed with a toy while getting dressed. Excitement poured through Serena at the thought of beginning the search for her father. A knock on the door brought her attention back to Raiana, who had scooted almost to the end of the bed. Rushing over to the bed, she picked her up and went to the door.

"Ready?" Alex asked standing there with Little Kim.

"Ready and excited," Serena answered. She walked out the door following Alex down the stairs.

They both grabbed their diaper bags that were packed the night before, heading toward the garage. With kids strapped in car seats, Alex maneuvered her truck down the street toward the freeway headed to her parent's for breakfast. Elray's parents were both up sitting in the living room drinking coffee when they arrived. Leaving the kids with their grandparents, Alex and Serena headed for the kitchen to get something to eat.

Mr. Carter who was holding Kimble, looked up when she and Alex came back in the room plates piled high. He just shook his head.

“You know women in my day didn’t eat that much food, at least not when anybody was around.”

Serena just laughed but Alex responded.

“Well it’s a good thing we aren’t back in your day hun Dad?”

They both fed their children from their plates as they ate, even going back for seconds. Full and ready to get started, Serena and Alex were leaving as Trent and Dillon were coming in.



Serena and Alex arrived at the library a short time later. Both headed toward the computers to do their search. After a few hours they left. Exhausted, frustrated and disappointed after the library didn’t turn up any information on her dad, she left to take Raiena to the doctor. The only good she could see that came from today’s excursions were Raiena was doing well and her ear infection was gone. The doctor felt she was slightly above average in weight, but otherwise a perfectly healthy baby. Serena wanted to be alone so she asked Alex, “Can you just drop me off at Elray’s.”

“Yeah sure, but can you promise me you won’t go anywhere unless you ask me or one of my brother’s to take you.”

“I promise.”

A short time later Serena put on a large tee shirt with fuzzy slippers then curled up on the couch at Elray's with Raiena to watch TV. Out of nowhere, tears began to stream down her face. Grateful to be alone she allowed the tears to continue until her body was completely racked with uncontrollable sobs. Breaking down having a good old-fashioned cry was a luxury she rarely afforded herself. She had always been the strong one that could handle anything. Right now, she didn't want to be strong. She wanted to be weak. For once, she wanted to be taken care of, instead of the one taking care of whatever situation needed handling.

In the confines of Elray's apartment, she felt safe from all the problems that were facing her. Nothing could touch her here or cause her harm or distress. It gave her tremendous satisfaction to know that her daughter wouldn't suffer many of the things she'd suffered in life. Her daughter, Raiena would never have to wonder why or what it was about her that her father didn't love. This thought made her cry even harder. In her own selfishness, she had almost denied her daughter the love of her father.

Starlett had actually done her a favor telling Elray she was coming home. It wasn't like Star knew about Raiena; she hadn't told Elray with the intention of betraying her. Hopefully everything with her father would work out for the best. Raiena touched her tear-stained face. It was as though her daughter understood her pain; she hugged her closely for the longest time.

Reluctant to relinquish the closeness with her daughter, Serena continued to hold her close. If anyone told her two years ago that she would have a daughter and a man in her life she adored and that she would gladly give up racing for—she would have looked them straight in the eyes and told them, “You must be losing your damn mind!”

The tears finally stopped and mother and daughter released each other from their embrace. Hungry, Serena made half a bottle for Raiena to hold her until she made a light dinner for them. While in the kitchen she noticed that the answering machine light was flashing, but she didn’t check the messages. It was only then that she realized the phone hadn’t rang once since she got there. It was just as well, because she wouldn’t have answered. Elray would call her on her cell if he wanted to talk to her.

Around eight thirty, Serena gave Raiena her bath. A bath always put her right to sleep. As predicted, within fifteen minutes, Raiena was fast asleep. Having put her to bed, Serena went back into the kitchen to clean up. Placing the monitor on the counter, she began making water to wash the dishes. Humming softly, she hoped that Elray’s uncle would have better luck getting some information on her dad.



Outside Elray's door, Trent held the key that Elray had given him to his apartment before leaving to go out of town. He didn't want to scare Serena so instead of using the key he rang the doorbell. Ringing the doorbell again, he wondered what was taking her so long to come to the door. Alex had told him that Serena promised not to go anywhere alone.

Just as he was about to use the key she opened the door, "Hey Trent. What are you doing here? You missed Raiena—she's already asleep."

Walking over to the refrigerator, Trent grabbed a beer then sat down on the couch, "Don't sound so happy to see me. Alex told El that she dropped you off here and since I didn't have any plans tonight, I volunteered to keep you company."

"Oh, okay. I was just finishing up in the kitchen, why don't you find something for us to watch."

"Cool."

Flicking through the channels Trent didn't find anything he felt was worth while watching. He already knew he wouldn't find anything in El's movie collection, which he'd watch with Serena. Settling on some movie on Lifetime, he sat back and took his shoes off, putting his feet on the table.

Sitting down next to Trent, Serena asked, "Would you put your feet on the table if your brother were here?"

"And without my socks on."

“Ugh, forget I asked.”

She hadn’t been sitting down more than five minutes when Trent said, “Isn’t that your cell phone ringing in the other room?”

“Oh crap,” she responded handing the baby monitor to him as she went to answer her phone.

She didn’t close the door so it was easy to hear her conversation when Serena answered.

“Hey Star. What’s up?”

A few minutes later she said, “Are you kidding me? I can’t believe that asshole. He actually brought flowers and candy for mama? Well you can throw away that teddy bear he got for Raiena. I don’t want shit from him.”

Wow. Trent couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Serena cussing. He knew she didn’t like her mother’s boyfriend, but he must have really pissed her off.

“You know I shouldn’t be surprised by anything that asshole does. Let him have his kicks. Trust me—I’ll have the last laugh. God I wish I had let Elray beat the crap out of him.”

Damn, he didn’t know that El had gotten to that point. This Jerry must be a real piece of work. He made a mental note to himself to ask Elray more about him when he got home.

Chapter Nine

The call from her sister put Serena in such a bad mood that she wasn't going to be good company. Instead of taking her frustration out on Trent, she went back in the living room and said.

"I'm calling it a night. If you're not spending the night let yourself out."

"Alright. I'll most likely crash here on the couch," he responded.

Sleep in many ways was Serena's cure for everything. Checking on Raiena one final time, she went back into Elray's bedroom. She laid down and turned off the lights and went to sleep.



Elray wrapped up shooting a day ahead of schedule. He wanted to get home to Serena and Raiena. They had become such an important part of his life that he wasn't the least bit surprised that he missed them both terribly. Wanting to surprise Serena—he decided not to call ahead. One of his knuckle headed brothers would have let it slip. Not even sitting in the back of the smelly taxi with a driver that kept burping every few minutes, could destroy his good mood. Under normal

circumstances, he would not have given the ill-mannered driver a tip. In this case he got him home so quickly he gave him one anyway.

It was late. Serena and the baby would probably be sleeping. Opening the door, he saw Trent knocked out on the couch—his head popping up as he tiptoed through the room.

“Go back to sleep it’s only me.”

Rubbing his eyes Trent asked him, “What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming home until tomorrow.”

“I finished early and decided to come home.”

That must have satisfied Trent’s curiosity. He laid back down turning his back to him. Stopping first to check on Raiena, Elray thought to himself that she was even prettier than when he’d seen her last a week ago. Leaning over her crib, he kissed her softly on the cheek. Not ready to leave yet he pulled up a chair, sat down and just watched her sleep while he thought about his new life.

He could now say he totally understood how his brother Dillon and his brother-in-law Kimble felt about their wives. A week without sex was totally unheard of for him yet not once since he’d been gone had he even thought about being with another woman. His every thought now literally consumed with Serena and his baby. They were so much a part of who he was now. No other woman could compare to what he felt for her. He knew that for the first time in his life—

Elray Carter was totally—and completely in love. If he had his way, his mother would be planning another wedding before the end of the year.

Sitting there thinking about Serena was making him horny as hell. Placing another kiss on his daughter's chubby little cheek, he left her room. Even with very little light in the room, Elray could see the outline of Serena's sleeping body on the bed. He walked over to the bed where he stood for several minutes while his eyes completely adjusted. Reaching down, he ran the tip of his finger along her bare shoulder then leaned over and kissed her there.

She stirred slightly and elicited a soft moan as he continued to softly caress various areas of exposed skin. He placed light kisses to the areas he caressed. Her unconscious responses to his tender ministrations were both sensual and highly erotic. The movements of her body when he feathered kisses along her shoulder, down her arm made his manhood tighten, painfully. God he wanted her. He stood and removed his shirt tossing it to the floor. For several seconds, Elray stood there to compose himself before he leaned back over and nipped at Serena's ear lobe.

Just as her pleasant responses delighted him—her sudden scream before she turned over and started shoving him and began trying to kick him confused him.

“What the hell,” Elray muttered as he tried to get control of Serena without hurting her.

Seconds later the light flashed on, “Is everything okay?” Trent asked from the doorway.

He had managed to sit on the bed and wrap his arms around a sobbing Serena. With the lights on, recognition finally showed on her face and she collapsed into his arms.

“Everything’s fine,” Elray said to Trent as he quietly turned to leave the room closing the door behind him.

Elray smoothed her hair while rocking her gently. Once he felt she was calm, enough he eased back on the bed.

Serena raised her head slightly looking at him and said, “I’m sorry I over reacted— but you scared me.”

“Why—who did you think I was?”

“Nobody. Atlanta is a dangerous city you hear about woman being attacked all the time.”

The look he gave her clearly showed he thought there was more to her outburst, even though he didn’t voice his opinion. Though she was sure that he was studying her, Serena didn’t immediately say anything else either about what had just happened. He was just about to ask her another question when she turned in his arms, crawled up the front of him until she was lying face to face with him and said.

“I missed you,” very seductively, before kissing him passionately.

He felt her tense slightly when his arms went tighter around her, but she caught herself immediately. It bothered him but he was too sexually aroused to question it, at least right at this minute anyway.

As usual making love to Serena was nothing short of spectacular. But she'd been different; no less passionate—but different. She felt reserved to him, as though she'd held back. She was lying on her stomach next to him asleep again. He'd probably worn her out. This was the first, and last time he intended to be away from her longer than three days. From now on if he had to go away on shoots, he was taking Serena with him or sending for her to join him for an extended stay.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard Raiena on the baby monitor. Slipping from the bed, softly so he wouldn't wake Serena, he put on some shorts.

Trent was already in the room when he entered placing a bottle on the nightstand.

“I can get her,” Elray told his brother coming over to stand next to him as he picked the baby up.

Raiena put her arms out for him to take her. Reluctantly, Trent handed her over.

“Well...she's certainly your daughter.”

Laughing Elray asked, “What’s that suppose to mean?”

They both sat down, and Trent handed Elray the baby wipes and a fresh pamper before he responded.

“She’s a fair weather friend. She was fine with me until she saw you.”

“I’m her father, stupid.”

“Whatever. Don’t make excuses. By the way...is Serena okay?”

“Yeah she’s fine. I don’t know what made her freak like that but I don’t buy that load of bull she gave me about Atlanta being a dangerous city.”

“Can’t say I would either; especially from her. I mean she fine and sexy as hell— but she’s tough and I doubt there’s much she’s afraid of.”

Raiena had finished her bottle and fallen back to sleep but Elray kept her in his arms. He and Trent talked for several more minutes before he placed his daughter back in her crib.

“I’ll talk to you in the morning, Trent. I’m tired.”

“Oh I bet,” Trent smirked heading back to the couch.



Lying awake in bed, Serena heard Raiena on the baby monitor. It was now five thirty in the morning, she wasn’t crying but Serena decided to go and check on her anyway. When she walked in the room Raiena was playing happily with her feet and she picked her up. Instead of putting Raiena back in her bed she took her

in the room with her. Placing her in the bed next to her sleeping father, she laid down next to them.

Serena smiled when she saw her baby curl up close to her father and stick her thumb in her mouth; peacefully going back to sleep. Looking at the two people she cared most for in the world, besides her mother and Star, gave her peace and contentment.

No way was she going to let the ugliness of what Jerry tried to do destroy her relationship. She shifted onto her side propping her head up with her hand. Lost in her thoughts she didn't even notice immediately that Elray was awake.

"Good thoughts I hope," he said once she noticed him watching her.

"Yes. How was your shoot?"

"Everything was great. Diddy was there and he has a new line coming out this fall. Kimble and I have been invited to do the shoot and runway show."

"That's great, Elray. You are so lucky."

"I've worked very hard to get where I am. This is a tough business and very competitive—you're lucky if you last. Do you want to go out and get some breakfast?"

"Sure."

"Hop in the shower and I'll watch the baby."

When she came back out the bathroom after taking her shower, neither the baby or Elray were in the room. She took advantage of the time to call her mother to see how she was doing and call Alex. Glad that her sister was already with her mother, she made plans to go over after breakfast with Alex and little Kimble. Alex said she had some news for her—she hoped it was about her father.

Raiena was already dressed when Elray brought her back into the room a short while later. Sitting her on the floor with a few toys, he jumped in the shower. By the time everyone was dressed and ready to go, Trent was gone.

“Where to,” Elray asked her once they were in the car.

“Stop by Alex’s to pick her up before we go by mamas.”



Elray started the car and pulled out of the garage. The swelling on Serena’s lip and the bruising around it and her eye weren’t completely gone. Because she’d been so defensive about it on the phone—he hadn’t brought it up—but it still concerned him.

When they arrived at his sister’s house he couldn’t believe it, Alex was actually ready when they got there. The garage door was up with the car seat sitting there. He blew for her to come out and she appeared within seconds. He got out to put the car seat in and as soon as Alex and the baby were settled in the car, he pulled off.

“You’re getting better little sis. I thought for sure I’d have to wait another hour after getting here before you would be ready to go.”

“Oh, whatever El. I’m not that slow.”

“Ask your husband if he thinks you’re slow? On second thought, never mind cause he’ll lie,” Elray smirked after he’d said it.

Serena must have gotten tired of waiting for him to be quiet, because she asked, “Didn’t you say that you had some news for me, Alex?”

“Uncle Walt says he has a lead on your dad. He wants to talk to you.”

He chuckled as he watched Serena turn around in her seat like an excited two-year-old and ask excitedly, “Really!”

“You didn’t tell me you were looking for your father,” he remarked.

“I know it was kind of a sudden decision. I was going to tell you when you got back. Alex took me to see your uncle. He’s helping us.”

“Why didn’t you just ask your mom?”

“I did. She told me to leave it alone because I’d just get hurt.”

“Did it occur to you that she might be right?”

“Considering his lack of involvement in me and Star’s life, yes, but I want to hear him say it. I want him to look me in my face and tell me why.”

That was a woman's logic. No man would willingly put himself through that kind of possible rejection. Seeing the determination set in Serena's face, Elray decided to leave it alone. If her father hurt her again, she still had him.

When they reached her mother's—Jerry was there when they walked in. He spoke to him like they were best buddies and even had the nerve to shake his hand before introducing himself to Alex. He had a hell of a nerve. It made Elray sick to his stomach to be in the same room with him, but he played right along with him.

Always observant of his surrounding despite the obvious attempt by Starlett and Serena to make everything seem normal as possible, Elray sensed the extra tension between them all. It wasn't like they liked Jerry, but something was different. Then there was Jerry himself—he hadn't made one smart comment since they got there—something was definitely going on. On the upside Lorinda was doing great, she was able to get up alone. She even walked across the room and back albeit with great difficulty—but it was a start.

The nurse was doing a great job with her mother; he would make sure she got a nice bonus because he had no intention of taking her out of the house anytime soon. All in all it was a very pleasant visit—even with the ass hole there. Because Serena's mom tired so easily, everyone with the exception of Jerry left.

“Serena can I get a ride home? My boyfriend dropped me off and he’s going to lunch with a client. If I wait for him, I’ll been here until later in the evening.”

“Why don’t you lovely ladies let me take you all out to lunch?” Elray suggested.

“I’d love to go,” Alex was the first to respond then asked Serena and Star. “I know you guys aren’t going to pass up a free lunch?”

Laughing they all agreed to have lunch together.



Seated at Cracker Barrel waiting to place their orders, Uncle Walt called Alex. She spoke with him briefly before handing the phone to Serena. He asked her a series of questions none of which she knew the answer to. The only person who could answer his questions was her mother and she wouldn’t answer them. The disappointment in her voice had Uncle Walt telling her not to give up hope; he was a man of many resources.

Handing the phone back to Alex, Serena excused herself to go to the bathroom. She never used to cry; now it seemed like she cried all the time.

“Are you okay?” Elray asked from behind her.

Turning around she wiped her eyes, “What are you doing in here. This is the women’s bathroom.”

“Yes, I know. I can read.”

How did she know she could depend on him to make her smile? Reaching over her, he pulled several paper towels from the dispenser—wet them and wiped her face, even telling her to blow when he placed the tissue to her nose. One minute he was treating her like a precious little child, the next he was making her feel like the most desired woman in the world. The kiss he was giving her now set her on fire. Sadly, if he had wanted to make love right there in the bathroom of Cracker Barrel; she would let him.

A knock at the door brought her back to her senses. Holding her hand, Elray removed the foot he had lodged against the door and opened it. As he walked past the three wide-eyed women standing there he said to them, “Sorry my wife was sick and she doesn’t like people to see her at less than her best.”

Serena chuckled, Elray seemed to turn his charm on and off at will. Seated back at the table they ordered. Elray pulled out his credit card paid for lunch and they all left. They dropped Starlett off first.

“Call me later, Star” she said as her sister got out.

“I will. Bye Alex and thanks for lunch, Elray.”

Next, he dropped Alex and Little Kim at her mother in law’s house before they went to look at some more houses.

After having looked at several homes, they stopped at the Mall to pick up a few things. Elray was carrying Raiena when he spotted Renee; he hoped she

wouldn't see him. No such luck. He hadn't told Renee about Serena or the baby—he'd simply broken things off with her. She wasn't his wife or his steady girlfriend, so he didn't owe her any explanation. Most of the women he'd dated didn't expect commitment from him because he made it clear from the get go that he wasn't ready to settle down.

Renee, however, was an exception. He probably never should have gotten involved with her in the first place. If he hadn't been on the rebound from Serena, he most likely would never have given her the time of day. The girl did have skills in the bedroom, but she wasn't his type—she talked too much and she was clingy. Even though he knew she'd seen him—he kept walking.

“What you can't speak?” Renee said stepping into their path.

“Hello.”

Putting her hands on her hip, Renee shook her head, “You can do better than that lover.”

There was no way Serena hadn't heard what she said, but she didn't say anything. Damn he hated women who caused a scene. Why did they make you go there? Did they really think it would make a man like them more? He hadn't said anything more, so Renee said, “Cute baby, I take it she's yours?”

“Thank you. Yes, she's mine. It was good seeing you, bye.”

Why did he know she would say something else?

“So, is she the reason you broke up with me? Did you get back with her mother?”

“We were never a couple, Renee,” Elray responded looking down at Serena.

Serena was looking at Renee and obviously it wasn't easy for him to have this conversation with Renee with her standing there hearing every word. He had to choose his words carefully. Just as he was about to open his mouth, Serena said.

“Let me take the baby, Elray. You go talk with her, I'll meet you in the food court.”

“That isn't necessary—we don't have anything else to talk about,” Elray said to Serena when she reached for the baby.

“Give her the baby, Elray. I think we have lots to talk about.”

That was the last straw. Renee was getting on his nerves. Did she really think just because she'd shared his bed that entitled her to his life? He had never deliberately hurt a woman in his life, but Renee was pushing him.

“Like I said...Renee, we don't have anything to talk about.” He turned his back on her. “Let's go,” he said. Pulling Serena down the aisle towards the door.

He was pleased Serena didn't protest his decision, because what happened wasn't his fault. The last thing he wanted to do was fight with her about Renee or any other woman for that matter. With the amount of women he'd dated, it was actually surprising that this was the first incident.

Neither of them said anything on the ride home.



As they entered the apartment Serena took Raiena. She changed and fed her then put her down for a nap. Elray was in the living room sitting in the recliner. His eyes were closed so she assumed he had fallen asleep. She turned to leave but his voice stopped her, “Don’t go.”

“I understand if you want to be alone.”

“We need to talk, Serena.”

“Alright.”

She sat down on the couch. Getting up from the recliner, he came over to sit next to her.

“I’m sorry about today,” he said leaning back and pulling her into his arms so she could rest her head on his chest.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for. You didn’t do anything wrong. I know you aren’t seeing her now—that’s the only thing that matters to me.”

“Serena, you’re truly a unique woman. No wonder you captured my heart. Most women would have found a way to be mad.”

“I’m not that different from other women. If I believed that you still wanted her, I wouldn’t be this understanding.”

“That’s understandable. Listen, while we’re talking, I’d like you to tell me what really happened to you while I was gone.”

“Elray, I’m telling you the truth—I had a fight.”

“There’s more to it than that Serena. I can feel it.”

“No, there isn’t...I promise.” She hated lying to him but she had no choice for now.



Two days had passed since he had run into Renee at the mall and he wanted to do something special for Serena. His mother had called him earlier that day and he arranged for Raiana to stay with her over night. He wanted a night alone with Serena. He called Darnell, Serena’s friend, finding out when Serena would be home. According to Darnell, she ’d left his house over thirty minutes ago. So he knew she should be arriving soon.

“Hi, baby,” he said when she got home ten minutes later.

“Well hi to you too. Where’s Raiana?”

“At my mother’s.”

He chuckled when she looked up and their eyes met. He would have thought she was used to his lusty nature by now, but she still blushed anytime he made any type of sexual suggestion. Walking over to her, Elray took her hand and they walked together back into the living room. He sat down and pulled her into

his lap. It seemed he wanted her all the time. He'd always enjoyed sex, but it was so much more with Serena. With her he shared a special connection. He shared more than just the physical pleasure that sex provided. He ran his hands along her back and inner thigh as she sat in his lap. He thought of proposing to her right then and there; but didn't.

His parent's annual anniversary party was in two weeks. He planned to propose to her in front of his entire family. Smiling to himself, Elray thought of how he had actually planned every detail in his mind on the flight back home from LA. He even knew what song would be playing. His mother loved Stephanie Mills; her song "The Power of Love" was perfect. Bringing his thoughts back to Serena, he lowered his head to kiss her.

She broke the kiss slipping out of his lap.

"I'll be right back," she said before going into the bedroom.

When she came back into the living room wearing a beautiful sheer gown he'd never seen before; he'd changed too—into nothing. She may be new at all this, but her eyes told him volumes; as his did too. She looked down and saw the size of his erection and knew the deal. He definitely liked what he saw.

"Raise your gown as you walk over here but don't take it all the way off," he said.

She must not have trusted herself to speak so she just nodded and did as he asked. She walked slowly toward him. Once she was within his reach, he said.

“Stop right there and turn around.”

Coming up behind her, he bent to lick a path across her exposed shoulders and down her back. Reaching as far as he could down her exposed back, he knelt down behind her pushing her gown up past her waist. There he continued trailing kisses up and down the backs of her legs gently biting each of her cheeks.

The trembling of Serena’s body told him that she was fighting to remain still under his sensual caress. Still on his knees, he turned her around to face him. The gown slipped some in the process and he pushed it back up to expose her naval then pulled her close to swirl his tongue around it. If he hadn’t been holding her up, Serena would have fallen over. Her legs were shaking and undoubtedly weak. Her breathing was out of control. The way her nails dug into his shoulders were a good indication that she wanted him inside her, now.

“Elray,” she whispered softly.

He knew exactly what she wanted but he wasn’t ready to give it to her just yet. Her body responded to him like no other woman he’d ever been with. She was meant for him to love—he planned to do it right—he wouldn’t be rushed.

“Open your legs for me, baby. I need to taste your sweetness,” he rasped.

Without the slightest hesitation, she widened her stance, until she felt his kiss between her legs. “What are you doing?” She asked as she tried to pull away from him.

His hands were caressing the smoothness of her backside as he kept her in place, to continue his intimate kiss. Serena was only the second woman he’d ever kissed intimately like this. The first was the twenty-year-old woman, who had initiated him into sex when he was fourteen years old. They had a three-year relationship during which time she shared her experience in the art of making love.

He hadn’t answered her question, not verbally anyway and she’d most likely forgotten the question. Her body shuddered as an orgasm ripped through her. Gripping his shoulders her body went limp. Standing up, he scooped her into his arms, and headed for his bedroom. Laying her gently on the bed, he went to join her there when her hand reached out encircling him. Scooting to the edge of the bed, she continued massaging his erection. Leaning forward while still holding him firmly in her hand, she licked the tip.

“Serena,” Elray said shocked.

“I want to taste you too,” she responded just before she swirled her tongue around him again.

Before he lost all logical thought, Elray said, “Are you sure sweetheart? I did what I did because I wanted to, not because I expected anything in return.”

“I know. I want too.”

Nodding, his hands went to her temple as she sucked him back into her mouth. Catching a rhythm, she pleased him until he gently eased her away. Pushing her back, he spread her legs wide and entered her quickly. When she raised her legs to allow him deeper penetration—he hooked his arms behind her legs, grabbed her hips and lifted her to him as he increased the pace. She met him stroke for stroke driving him to the brink of ecstasy. Then it happened—their bodies exploded in simultaneous orgasms. This one so powerful—she screamed his name clawing at his back trying to pull him inside her further. With nothing left to give after hours of making love to the one woman in his life that completely held his heart —exhausted but satisfied—they both fell asleep in each other’s arms.

When Elray woke up hours later, it was completely dark outside. He looked at the beautiful woman sleeping at his side. Tempted to wake her up and show her again just what she did to him. He didn’t get the chance because she opened her eyes and smiled at him. Neither of them had eaten anything since lunch.

“Hey gorgeous, you hungry?”

Rubbing her eyes Serena nodded her head yes.

“Well I guess I should feed you then. Come on let’s get up.”

Getting up together neither of them picked up a robe before going into the bathroom. Elray was surprised because he knew Serena still wasn’t completely comfortably being fully unclothed in front of him.

He went to the tub and turned on the water while Serena stood at the mirror pulling her hair up into a ponytail. After bathing and getting dressed, they were just about to walk out when the phone rang. It was his mother.

“Hey Ma. We were just about to go and get something to eat.”

“Well since I cooked, why don’t you and Serena come by here?”

“Okay. We’ll be there in a few. Bye Mama.”



Walking into the kitchen at his parent’s house, Rayvon and Rayden were there eating.

“Please tell me you two pigs didn’t eat all the food,” Elray said as he sat down.

“There’s plenty left. Mama may not cook all the time, but you know she always makes a lot when she does,” Rayden answered.

“Make me a plate,” Serena told him walking out of the kitchen to go see Raiena before she sat down to eat something.

She wasn’t out of the door two seconds when Rayden said, “Getting a little hen pecked like the old man ain’t you.”

“No, more like getting it on a regular basis like the old man and not from a married woman,” Elray responded.

“Okay, I really need you not to mention my mother and getting some on a regular basis in the same sentence,” Rayvon joined in the conversation and the three brothers all had a good laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Serena asked when she walked back into the kitchen.

“Nothing worth repeating,” Elray responded. “What’s Mom and Dad doing?”

“Your mom is watching TV and your dad is out back in the garage with Trent and Dillon.”

Motioning to the plate of food he’d made for Serena, Elray grabbed his plate and followed his brother’s out the door.

“See you in a while,” he turned at the door to say to Serena who looked up from her plate and waved.

Chapter Ten

The Carter men ended up in the garage for well over an hour secretly discussing the arrangements for the annual anniversary party for their parent's. Pop's was included because he had a surprise for their mother this year and he needed his children to help him pull it off. Dillon informed them all that Alex had talked with Venice earlier that day about the party, but Kimble had come home from a three day photo shoot today and she wanted to spend the evening with him and couldn't make it over.

Raiena was asleep by the time her father came back inside ready to go. Instead of disturbing his daughter's sleep, his mother suggested they leave her overnight and pick her up tomorrow, Elray agreed. He certainly wasn't going to willingly turn down a chance to have Serena to himself for the rest of the night. All the Carter brother's prepared to leave for the evening, with the exception of Trent, who was spending the night.

"Want some company," Rayden teased Elray while they were walking to the car.

"No," Elray glared at him before getting into the car.

“Sometimes you’re as bad as Trent,” Dillon laughed getting into his truck.

“Yeah, Yeah. If you guys are going to complain about who I spend my time with, then maybe you should spend more time with me.”

“Or better yet, you could spend it alone,” Elray said out the open window as he and Serena pulled out the driveway.



By the time Elray finally let her go to sleep, it was five thirty in the morning. He’d told her on a few occasions that he was used to not getting much sleep. When he woke her up at nine, Serena had no problem telling him to go away.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon when she opened her eyes again and found the note on the pillow next to her from Elray. He was so sweet. In the note he’d told her not to worry about getting Raiena, because he’d do it on his way home after he was done running errands. Showering quickly she dressed in her signature jeans and tee shirt. Elray’s Beemer drove like a charm but she missed riding her bike.

She started to stop by Darnell’s, but instead went by her mothers. Using her key, she let herself in. Her mother was in the middle of her therapy when she came in. Taking a seat Serena watched. Her mother had made so much progress since she’d been home. She was so proud of her mom; she was still sober not having had a drink since her stroke.

Seeing that they were almost done she went into the kitchen to get the nurse and her mother a bottled water.

“I was hoping you’d come in here alone,” Jerry said from where he was leaning against the wall.

Serena jumped. She didn’t even know he was there. Closing the refrigerator door she asked, “What do you want?”

“You.”

“If you ever touch me again,” she sneered. “I swear...I’ll kill you.”

“Little girl don’t make threats you can’t back up,” he responded.

“You caught me off guard last time. It won’t happen again.”

“All that mouth is gonna get you in a lot of trouble one day.”

She didn’t respond to his taunt, she just walked out of the kitchen leaving him standing there. Her cell rang and she didn’t recognize the number so she didn’t answer. Five minutes later her mother’s phone rang, she answered it. It was Elray.

“I’m at Dillon and Venice’s dropping off Raiena,” he said. “They are going to watch her for us and bring her home later. Can you meet me at the apartment now so we can go look at a house?”

“Okay give me thirty minutes or so. Traffic was a little heavy when I came by Mama’s earlier.”

Just as she was about to hang up Elray asked, “Who’s there with you besides your mom?”

“Nobody. I mean other than her nurse.”

“You haven’t seen her asshole boyfriend have you?”

“No, look I’m going to talk to Mama a minute and then I’ll be on my way – okay.”

Quickly she hung up the phone before Elray could ask her any more questions. Lying had never been something she was good at and more importantly, it was something she didn’t like doing. Though she’d never admit it to Jerry, he terrified her now that she knew he was capable of acting on his sexual interest in her. His lusty looks may have creeped her out in the past, but she never would have dreamed he would have actually touched her. She was also concerned for the safety of her sister. What she should do is tell her mother, but she just wasn’t sure her mom could handle that right now.

The one thing that eased her mind somewhat was she knew Star was smart. She wouldn’t put herself in a position where Jerry would have a chance to touch her. Now that Star knew what he’d tried to do to her, she would keep her distance.

Turning her attention back to her mother Serena commented, “Mama you look so good. How are you feeling?”

“Better than I have in years,” she said picking up the water and taking a drink. “Why didn’t you bring Raiena?”

“She wasn’t home. If I get a chance, Elray and I will bring her by a little later to see you— if not I’ll bring her tomorrow for sure.”

“Okay. She’s such a precious little angel. I think I’m going to really enjoy being a grandma.”

Serena laughed. “I’m sure you will Mama. I gotta get going Elray wants me to meet him at the apartment.”



The house was everything they wanted. It was close to their families and had a huge back yard for Raiena to play in when she was older. Agreeing that they both liked the house, Elray put it under contract. On the way home, they stopped for Chinese take out. As promised, Dillon and his wife Venice brought Raiena home later that evening.

When they arrived, they weren’t alone. Trent, Rayvon, Rayden Alex, Kimble and their son had come as well.

“So what brings everyone over here tonight?” she heard Elray say when he opened the door to find his siblings standing there.

“We were all at Dillon’s anyway so when he said he was taking Raiena home, we decided you and Serena could use some company,” Trent answered.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe we’d like to spend the evening alone?”

“Of course it did,” Rayden chimed in as he leaned over and hugged her.

Apparently, Elray gave up because he sat down next to her and didn’t say anything else.

“So, how did the house hunting go?” Alex asked.

“I put one under contract today.”

“Really, that’s great. Where is it?”

She saw him look each of his brother’s in the face before he said, “If we hope to have any privacy at all for a couple months, I think I’ll take a page out of you and Kimble’s book and keep it a secret for awhile.”

Kimble busted out laughing and Alex jabbed him in the side while the other brothers all sat there with stupid looks on their faces. She was just about to ask him about it when Rayvon said.

“Now Elray you were the main one who wanted to kill Kim even though it was our own little sis that wouldn’t tell us where they lived. I know you’re not going to be a hypocrite and do the same thing.”

“I might. Besides, looking back I can see why she didn’t tell us. Doesn’t mean I think she was right, but the thought holds merit.”

It was just after nine when all of Elray’s family left. Serena really enjoyed spending time with them and it made her more determined to find her dad. She

missed out on having a close family like Elray's and more than anything she wanted to know why her dad wasn't a part of her and Star's life.



It was three days until the big anniversary party, Alex, Venice, and Serena were at the mall. Alex and Venice were picking up some last minute accessories for their outfits.

“What are you wearing to the party?” Alex asked Serena.

“I’m not sure I’m going.”

“Why not?” Venice questioned.

“Because I don’t feel comfortable being around a bunch of fancy rich people.”

“The only people who count are family, don’t worry about anyone else. You have to come.”

Serena lowered her head before she replied, “Alex, I’m not like all of you. I’m a simple girl. I don’t own any fancy clothes and I seriously doubt I could walk in heels.”

“Is that it? Please—you can buy clothes and when Venice and I finish with you, you’ll be the bell of the ball. Just leave everything to us.”

Over the next few days Alex, Venice and Serena spent all their free time together. Serena tried on over fifty dresses before they found just the right one. Next, with the shoes and all the matching accessories selected they felt they had

completed the perfect ensemble. Once they had her completely outfitted both Alex and Venice stepped back to admire their handy work. Pleased with the outcome they decided that the night of the party they would all get dressed at Venice's and then ride over to the party together. Alex personally wanted to see the look on Elray's face when he got his first look at Serena.

The morning of the party, Alex picked up her mother, Venice and Serena for the salon to have their hair and nails done. After stopping for a light lunch, Alex dropped her mother off at home before going over to Venice's to get dressed.

When she and Serena arrived, Dillon was home.

"Why are you still here?" she asked him.

Leave it to her brother to be a smart ass. Looking around then pointing at himself he asked, "Who me? Last time I checked this is my house. I live here. What are you doing here?"

Before she could answer Venice said, "Baby stop. Alex he was on his way out the door. He just got off the phone with Elray. He's been calling all morning complaining about how we've been monopolizing all of Serena's extra time the last few days."

"Well thank you honey. I'm sure Elray will be so pleased that my wife is telling all his business," Dillon said as he grabbed his Tuxedo bag and headed for the door.

“No problem honey. Next time I ask you to stop using the speaker phone—maybe you’ll listen.”

Alex couldn’t help herself. She burst out laughing. Venice really fit into her family. When she looked over at Serena, who was discreetly trying to hide her amusement —she knew her brother Elray had also chosen well. She was going to fit perfectly into the Carter family.



Dressed in tuxedo’s all the Carter brother’s posed for pictures as they entered the grand ball room of the Ritz Carlton in Buck head; where their parent’s anniversary party was being held. Nearly ten minutes after arriving, the Carter brother’s, along with Kimble, were finally seated at the head table awaiting the arrival of their parent’s. Hearing the rousing cheers, everyone looked toward the entrance where Mr. and Mrs. Carter were now standing talking pictures. It took them nearly thirty minutes to cross the room to the main table where they posed for more pictures with their sons.

Elray was certain that his sister wanted to be fashionably late so she could make a grand entrance. Modesty wasn’t Alex’s strong suit though he was sure she’d disagree. Several minutes passed before she and Venice entered the ballroom. A frown eased across his face—where the hell was Serena.

Even annoyed he noticed how Alex was scanning the room waiting for everyone to notice their arrival. Obviously satisfied that they were now the focus of attention, Alex looked directly at him, smiled and then she and Venice parted like the red sea. Serena stepped forward and the flashing cameras went off as if Halle Berry had just entered the building.

Elray was awestruck. He'd always found Serena attractive—but tonight she out shined every woman in the room. The mauve and silver spaghetti strap gown she wore had a split striking her mid thigh; just enough to drive a man wild wanting to know what was underneath. All her accessories earrings, necklace, shoes and purse matched the silver outline of the dress accenting each area as his eyes slowly took in her appearance from head to toe. He stood ready to cross the room. Dillon stood also upon the arrival of his wife, as did Trent. Elray felt a hand on his shoulder just before Trent leaned over and whispered, "I don't think Mama would approve of what you're thinking of doing."

Turning in his direction Elray frowned, "What?"

"I said I don't think Mama would approve."

"Approve of what—stupid."

"Oh don't you wish I was stupid right about now," Trent laughed.

Alex, Venice and Serena approached the table. Alex stopped by Kimble first before moving to stand next to Elray. He leaned over to her to say, "I was mad at

you for keeping Serena occupied the last couple of days, but seeing the finished product, you're forgiven."

"My pleasure."

Now that the whole family was there, it seemed like the cameras would never stop flashing. Each time Serena tried to move out of the picture, Elray pulled her back in close to him. Several photographers must have noticed and asked, "Elray can we get some pictures of just you and your date?"

Without responding, he gently moved Serena over away from his family and took several shots of just the two of them. He could tell that uncomfortable, seriously, didn't begin to describe how she felt. Now that she was a part of his life—this was something Serena needed to get used to. As soon as the photographers stopped taking pictures for a few minutes he allowed Serena to slip away to calm her nerves.

Several minutes passed and when she still hadn't returned, Elray went to find her to make sure she was okay. He found her outside standing in the cool night breeze. She looked so incredibly beautiful that if Alex and Venice hadn't worked so hard to make her appearance tonight perfect, he would have snatched every pin holding her hair out. He wanted to run his fingers through its silky texture as he made love to her mouth with his own.

She still hadn't noticed that he was there. Taking the opportunity to rein in his raging hormones, he studied her. This wasn't her, fancy clothes, shoes, jewelry, hair, but it suited her well. He'd once told her that she could make a fortune as a model and it was true. Money just didn't impress her. She was smart enough to know she needed money in this world. She just didn't worship it the way a lot of people did.

"Why do you always separate yourself from everybody else?" Elray asked as he walked up beside her.

"I don't." she replied turning so she now faced him. "You look so handsome but I'm sure you know that."

"And I'm sure you don't know that you are by far the most beautiful woman here."

The way she lowered her eyes but smiled, told him even if she didn't believe him he did make her feel that way. Pulling her into his arms, he assaulted her lips with the fierce need that had welled up inside him. Once again, they were in the most inappropriate place but if he wanted to make love, the way her body swayed and clung to his he knew she would have gladly obliged. The sound of someone clearing their throat annoyed him, but it also helped calm his libido.

Reluctantly he released her mouth to growl, "What!"

"It's time for mama's surprise," Trent announced.

“We’ll be there in a minute,” he responded without turning to look at his brother.

“Don’t make me come back out here.”

Trent walked away leaving them alone. It wouldn’t be wise to keep his father waiting. Elray kissed her lightly once more before they went back into the ballroom. He had a surprise of his own.



When Elray and Serena entered the ballroom, Mr. Carter stood and motioned for the music to be turned down. Every eye in the room was now focused on the head table. Easing his wife from her chair, Brandis Carter escorted his wife of over thirty years to the center of the dance floor. As his wife gazed lovingly looking into his face, Brandis Carter could see she was wondering what was going on just seconds before he kneeled down on one knee before her.

“Oh my God, Bran what are you doing?” she gasped.

Putting a seductively wicked grin on his face before he answered first for her ears only, “Making sure my sons aren’t the only ones to get some tonight.” Then for the rest of their audience, “Sherry Carter, will you do me the honor of marrying me, again?”

With tears in her eyes she answered, “Yes Bran...I will.”

Clearly from the tears streaming down his wife's face, she did not realize he meant for them to renew their vows at the moment. She reached out and grabbed his arm for support when their pastor stepped in front of them holding his Bible. Next, their sons joined their father along with Kimble. Then Venice, Alex and Serena joined the wedding party.

Bran knew when his wife saw her grandchildren she was going to completely lose it. He braced for her reaction by putting his arm around her waist just in case. Little Kimble dressed in a tuxedo came out to stand next to his grandfather followed by Sherice and Raiena dressed in matching gowns. Of course, Raiena had to be carried out but the effect was just the same.

Brandis and Sherry Carter once again stood next to each other and repeated the words that had joined them together as man and wife over thirty years ago.



The ceremony was beautiful, Serena cried as much as Mrs. Carter. Her husband must have truly loved her to go to so much trouble to surprise her with renewing their vows. Alex hadn't told her about her parents renewing their vows or that she was to be a bridesmaid until the ride there. She explained that she was nervous enough as it was without knowing that and now that it was over, Serena knew she had been right.

Mr. and Mrs. Carter began the dancing after the ceremony was over; doing the first slow dance in the spotlight. After that the party was on. Serena danced with all Elray's brothers—his uncles, some of his cousins and a few of his close friends who attended. Amazingly, for as nervous as she'd been she was having a great time. She had switched out of the heels into some more comfortable shoes as had Alex and Venice. It was one in the morning and the party was still going full blast when the DJ asked everyone to clear the floor for a special request.

Assuming that Mr. Carter had another surprise, Serena turned around in her chair just as the spot light shined directly on her. Temporarily blinded by the bright light, she didn't see Elray until his hand was extended to her. Placing her hand in his he lead her to the dance floor, just as Stephanie Mills "The Power of Love" began to play. Bodies moving to the music, Elray sang the words of the song softly in her ear. Just as the song was ending, he stepped back and brought her hand up to his lips. Lowering down on one knee in front of her, he placed a soft kiss on her hand.

It was so quit you could hear a pin drop in the room. Elray cleared his throat and looked deeply into her already teary eyes and said, "Serena I chose this song because you are looking at a man who has truly learned to respect the power of love. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Serena James will you marry me?"

Tears were streaming down her face so fast that she couldn't even see his face. A proposal from Elray was the last thing she expected. Suddenly, the room was spinning just as everything went black. It was a good thing that Elray was still down on his knee in front of her, because before anyone knew what was happening Serena slumped forward into his arms. When she came to, Mrs. Carter was the first person she saw standing over her.

"Don't try to get up yet honey. Are you okay?"

Embarrassed beyond belief Serena nodded but his mother made her sit there for a minute to make sure she was steady before allowing Rayvon and Rayden to help her up. Elray stepped forward and put his arms around her, hugging her close, he whispered in her ear, "You scared me to death, don't ever do that again!"

"I'm sorry. I've never fainted before in my life. I think you made me too happy."

Grinning Elray asked her, "Does that mean what I think it does?"

She barely got yes out of her mouth, before he started kissing her. He kissed her so long that his father stepped closer and said, "Son, I think you can save something for the honeymoon."

It wasn't until Elray released her that she noticed the thunderous applause and all the cameras flashing. Serena couldn't believe she had just kissed him like

that in front of his whole family. Not to mention all the prominent society people there.

Finishing what he'd started, Elray pulled a ring box from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

"Open it."

The ring inside was a breath taking princess cut solitaire. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. He took the ring out of the box placing the box in his pocket. He slipped the ring on her finger. The song "I don't wanna be a player no more" by Joe came on and both of them looked over at the DJ area expecting to see Trent. Instead, it was his brother in law Kimble who raised his glass in salute at them smiled then took his own wife's hand and led her onto the dance floor.

After his proposal, the party was back in full swing everyone was dancing and having a good time. All the Carter grandchildren were taken back home by the sitter. Elray rubbed his stomach and asked her, "Will you join me for a walk?"

"Of course. I can't wait to get out of here."

They left the ballroom area. Once he had her out of the ballroom he whispered to her, "Close your eyes because I've got another surprise for you"

At first, she protested because she'd had enough surprises for one night but she gave in when he said, "Please."

She wasn't sure where they were going but she could tell they were in an elevator. It stopped and the doors slid open. He led her off the elevator down a long hallway. Then she heard him put a slag card in the door to open it before he lifted her into his arms. He must have kicked the door close as he walked because he didn't stop until he told her, "Open your eyes."

She did. Looking around she saw that he had the room set up like a fairy tale. There were flowers everywhere— champagne on the table with chocolate dipped strawberries, a bowl of whipped cream and a huge card on the bed. Walking over to the bed Serena picked up the card, then looked at Elray who winked and said, "Go on. Open it."

It read, "To my future wife, tonight begins the first night of our life together. Thanks for making me the happiest man in the world. Love always your future husband."

"What if I'd said no?" she asked.

"Then I would have been up here alone drinking myself into oblivion until I got up the nerve to come after you and try to change your mind."

"Yeah right. Hey aren't your parent's and everybody going to wonder where we disappeared to?"

"No, Dillon and Alex both know. Besides I didn't bring you up here to talk about my family."

He had already taken his jacket and shoes off.

“Then why did you bring me here?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said picking up a strawberry dipping it in the whipped cream and taking a bite. “Come here, Serena.”

Still standing in the same spot, she unzipped the side of her dress. Coming to stand next to her, Elray handed her a glass of champagne as he slipped the dress from her shoulder and they watched it pool at her feet. Intense desire flooded her: he could take it slow later; right now she wanted him too badly. Taking the glass from her with one hand, he unzipped his pants to free his raging hard-on.

Pulling her into his arms, he easily ripped off the skimpy thong she wore. Backing her against the wall, he lifted her, “Wrap your legs around me and hold on baby.”

She felt his entry into her wetness. He was riding her fast, stroking her mouth with his tongue catching each moan of ecstasy she emitted. When Serena’s orgasm broke, she’d never been happier to be kissed than at that moment, because she screamed hard and long in its intensity.

After their frantic lovemaking, Elray took his time loving every inch of her body. Completely sated, Serena didn’t think she’d ever have another orgasm as long as she lived, but she’d certainly enjoyed the multiples tonight.



Elray was still sleeping when Serena quietly slipped out the bed early the next morning. She grabbed the hotel phone and called her sister to tell her the fantastic news. Starlett was ecstatic. They talked for several minutes. Starlett asked, “Are you coming by Mama’s later?”

“I think so but just in case I don’t make it don’t say anything about me getting married. I want to tell her.”

“Okay, I won’t. I love you Serena and I’m so happy for you.”

“I love you too. I’ll talk to you later.”

Leaning over the couch putting the phone down, she didn’t hear Elray come up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and she felt his erection pressing against her. It seemed he made her want him just by touching her.

Putting his hand between her legs, he coaxed her into opening them wider then entered her from behind. Sometime later, while sitting in the tub relaxing with Elray, Serena smiled about the many times she had an orgasm throughout the night and early morning.

Dressing in the same wrinkled clothes from last night, minus the panties he’d ripped off her; they left. Elray could tell Serena looked uncomfortable in their clothing attire and smiled apologizing for not thinking about a change of clothes.

Before going to pick Raiena up at his parents, they stopped by the apartment for a fresh change of clothes. He finished dressing before her so he went into the living room to check his messages. Unbelievable, he thought listening to the five messages Renee left to call her. He needed to set her straight so he picked up the phone and dialed her number.

When she answered he said, "Renee this is Elray. Why do you keep calling me? I thought I made it perfectly clear that it was over between us."

"Oh you did, but I felt you deserved to know that I'm pregnant."

He didn't say anything for several seconds. He knew he'd used protection when he was with her. But, after what happened with Serena, it was possible.

"Did you hear what I said, Elray."

"I heard." He had a million questions. Like how she knew for sure it was his, but with Serena in the next room he wasn't about to ask them now. "I'll call you later so we can meet and talk."

He hung up. Damn, he had always been so careful. Why did this have to happen now. He'd finally found the woman he wanted to spend his life with. How the hell was he going to tell Serena about this? This was one hassle he really didn't need. He decided until he actually talked to Renee, he wasn't going to tell Serena anything. Although she'd been very understanding of things that had gone on during the time they were apart, there was only so much even she could tolerate.

If this baby turned out to be his, there was no question he would step up to the plate and be a man. No child of his whether he wanted it or not, would not be taken care of. Of the many women that he'd been with, he'd never had this problem. Now, in less than two years two different women had gotten pregnant by him; both of which he'd used protection. At least in Serena's case, he wanted the baby as much as he did her, but Renee had been nothing more than a sexual fling.

If they did have a child together he would have to face the woman he loved and tell her that he'd fathered a child by another woman. Not only that, but how would he explain someday to his son or daughter that he didn't love their mother. No child should have to be put in that position. But he had no doubt in his mind after the run in he'd had with Renee, that she would bad mouth him to their child.

"Elray, I'm ready," Serena said to him.

"Alright, do you want to stop by your mother's before we go by my mom's?"

"No, we can go later. I want to take Raiena with us when we go."



Elray was so wrapped up in the whole Renee situation; he barely even heard when Serena's mother and sister congratulated them on getting married. He was glad his sour mood hadn't affected Serena. She was so happy she glowed. The only thing that would have made her happier, would be to have heard from his uncle about her dad.

Later that evening lying on the couch, Elray's cell vibrated in his pocket. While he and Serena were watching TV. Looking at the number, he saw that it was Renee. He'd been in a bad mood all day and talking to her certainly would not improve it, so he switched the phone off.

When Serena fell asleep he turned off the TV. He sat down in the chair across from her to think. He hadn't been tired or sleepy, but he must have dosed off. He was shaken awake by Serena and she said, "Come on let's go to bed."

The next morning wanting to handle the situation with Renee, he called her to make arrangements for them to meet and talk. Unfortunately for him, she must have felt like she was holding all the cards, pretending to be so busy that she couldn't meet him until Saturday afternoon.

Saturday didn't come soon enough for him. He arranged to meet Renee, while Serena was at her mom's. Not wanting to cause a scene in public, he agreed to meet at her place. Standing outside her door, he rang the bell. She opened it immediately and stepped aside for him to enter.

"Would you like something to drink?" She asked.

"Renee, let's cut the bull this isn't a social visit."

"There's no need to be hostile, Elray."

"Look, I want the truth. Are you really pregnant or are you just trying to cause problems for me?"

“Yes, Elray I am pregnant. What would I gain by lying and before you ask—yes I’m certain this baby is yours.”

“What do you want from me, Renee? You can’t expect me to be happy about this.”

“Yes...that’s exactly what I expect. What...I’m good enough to sleep with, but not to be the mother of your child. I saw you and your little girlfriend in the paper. I know you asked her to marry you.”

“If you know that why are you dumping this on me now? I never thought I’d ask a woman in my life to get an abortion, but I’m asking you too. I’ll pay for everything.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. She truly never expected him to say that. Humiliated she slapped him hard.

“You are a cold hearted bastard, Elray. You want me to kill our baby? You know what...just get out of my apartment. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

A small part of him felt sorry for her.

“You know I can’t do that, as long as the issue of your pregnancy is unresolved.”

“I won’t get rid of my baby, Elray. Go back to your girlfriend. I won’t contact you again. I can take care of my baby on my own.”

“I can’t pretend like I don’t know.”

“Why not, Elray? You’ve made it clear you don’t want this baby.”

“I’ll call you in a couple of days,” he said as he walked to the door to leave.

“Don’t bother. I’m not going to change my mind.”

He looked at her once more. He thought to himself that she didn’t look pregnant. He wondered if she was playing a game with him and walked out.

Serena and the baby were still at her mother’s when he called her.

“Are you and the baby going to be there awhile? I can come over there,” he said even though he was hoping she would say no. He needed some time to himself.

“I’m not going to be here that long. Star and I will probably leave in about twenty minutes. I need to stop by Darnell’s, so I’ll meet you at home.”

“Okay, I gotta meet with Parker then I’ll be home.”

It was partially true about meeting with his agent Parker because he had called him about a new job, but he’d already turned it down.

Part of him wanted to talk to his parents about what was going on—but what if it turned out that Renee was lying. It happened all the time—some women telling a man they were pregnant with his baby—only to find out later it wasn’t his. He also wanted to tell Serena. He didn’t want her to hear it from somebody else. One thing he could be grateful for was the fact that he was always discreet with his affairs. So much of his life was public, because of his line of work. So he

made a point of always keeping his private life private. He had avoided scandals for the better part of his life. Why did his first one have to threaten not only him—but his future with the one woman he truly ever loved.

Chapter Eleven

Elray had been home for ten minutes just sitting in his car in the parking deck of his apartment complex, when his cell rang. Serena needed a ride after all. Her sister's boyfriend ended up not being able to bring her home. Driving to her mother's house, he realized that Serena needed a car of her own. Before when she needed to go somewhere, she just took her bike.

Now with her having Raiena, she definitely needed her own car. Not in the best of moods, he was glad that her mom's boyfriend, king ass wipe wasn't there when he picked her and the baby up. After leaving her mother's, Serena asked, "Do you have something to do?"

"No, why," he answered.

"Alex called. She's having some friends over and asked if I'd like to come. I told her I'd check with you."

"No problem, do you need me to keep the baby?"

"No, she told me to bring her since her friends hadn't seen her yet."

"Okay. Drop me by the apartment. I can take the bike."

"Are you sure, because I don't mind being dropped off?"

“No, that’s fine. I was just thinking you need your own car anyway.”

She laughed, “I need to get another job first. If I tried to buy a car now it would use up what’s left of my savings. I’m still paying the hospital bill from when Raiena was born.”

Elray looked over at her before he replied, “Serena, I can buy you a car. I also want you to give me any bills you have and I’ll take care of them.” He could see she was about to protest so he added. “She’s my daughter too. You shouldn’t have to pay the bills for her alone.”

“Alright. I’ve just been independent for so long, it’s going to take time to get used to the fact that I don’t have to be anymore.”

Elray pulled into the parking deck and got out. Before leaving, he leaned in the car to kiss Raiena and her mom. Lifting Serena’s hand, he kissed the finger that had his engagement ring on it. “Serena, I can’t wait for you to be my wife, I love you baby.”

“I love you too,” she whispered before she slide into the driver’s side and pulled off.



Lisa, Trina, Shasta and Mona were crazy, but Serena really liked them a lot. According to Alex, Lisa and Trina had been her best friends since junior high school, but she’d become friends with Shasta and Mona during college. Shasta was

the only other one besides Alex that was married. She was expecting a baby in a few months. The four friends made it a point to have a girl's day every so often. Since they all had seen Serena and Elray's picture in the paper and heard about the baby, they were all dying to meet her. Mona flat out told her she was jealous, because Elray was gorgeous and she wanted him for herself. At first Serena couldn't tell if she was joking or not—but when she added—I bet you hear that a lot; she knew she was.

They all adored Raiena. Mona even asked, “Does she have a godmother?”

“No, she doesn't,” Serena answered.

“She does now. It'll give me an excuse to come around and gawk at that fine ass man—excuse me soon to be husband of yours.”

Alex was laughing so hard at Mona that she had to ask, “Why is that so funny?”

“Are you kidding me? Nobody else would have the nerve to say that to someone that they just met; but her crazy but.”

Shaking her head Serena agreed, “I see your point. That could be taken the wrong way.”

“Oh please I wasn't worried. If Alex likes you then I knew you were cool,” Mona said walking past them to grab a cupcake off the table.

Food was an important part of girl's day. Nobody worried about calories or how much they ate. When the doorbell rang, Trina got up to answer it. It was the pizza and hot wings they ordered. Alex had already taken care of the rest of the snacks with a full array of chips, dips, cakes and pies set up in the kitchen.

Serena spent the afternoon and most of the evening with Alex and her friends. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had so much fun. Kimble called around nine thirty to ask if it was safe yet to come home. Mona snatched the phone and told him, "Hell naw."

Alex took the phone back from Mona and said, "Honey maybe you should go by and keep Elray company. I'll call you later."



Elray picked up his cell when he saw his brother in law's number, "What's up Kim?"

"My house has been taken over by females. Do you want some company?"

"Sure come on over."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

In less than fifteen minutes, Elray watched Kimble pull into the parking deck of his apartment building. Since he and Kimble never missed an opportunity to keep fit, he raced down the stairs to meet him. On the way back up instead of

taking the elevator, they took the stairs two at a time. Elray didn't bother to lock the door and they walked right in.

"What up El," Kimble said tossing his jacket on the chair in the kitchen then taking a seat in the living room.

"There's beer in the fridge if you want one," Elray responded.

"No thanks, but I'll take a soda."

"Help yourself. I take it Serena hit it off with the girls."

"Yep, Mona has appointed herself Raiena's god mother," Kimble laughed.

"You have got to be kidding." Elray smirked. Now more than ever he was glad he never crossed the line with Mona. It wasn't like he couldn't have, she made it clear that she was down for it, but he'd never dated any of his sister's friends. Alex would have given him hell for messing over her friends.

"Kim, can I talk to you about something? But first, I need you to promise you won't say anything to anybody; especially my sister."

Seeing that Elray had suddenly turned very serious, Kimble turned the TV down to listen. "Yeah man what is it?"

"Do you remember that chick Renee I met while Serena was gone?"

"Big booty light skinned Renee. Yeah I remember her, why?"

"Well I hooked up with her a couple times and now she's saying that she is pregnant."

“By you?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Is it possible it’s yours?”

“Unfortunately, yes. If you’d asked me this before I met Serena, I would have said no. But I used protection with her too and she still got pregnant.”

“That doesn’t mean that Renee’s baby is yours; if she’s really even pregnant. Do you think she could be lying just to cause trouble for you?”

Funny how much he and Kimble thought alike. Hadn’t he asked her the very same thing?

“That’s what I thought at first, too. But after talking to her, I do believe she’s pregnant. I’m just not convinced it’s mine.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I asked her to get an abortion and she threw me out of her apartment.”

Kimble wasn’t surprised by his answer, because that’s what he would have done. He was surprised that he was stupid enough to meet with her alone and at her place.

“Why did you go to her place? Man, its bad enough she might be pregnant, but going to her apartment alone—you don’t want Serena to find that out. From now on until we find out if that baby is really yours, use me to contact her.”

As much trouble as he had caused Kimble, it would serve him right for him to turn his back on him. But instead he was offering to help. Not that he was going to accept and put him in the position to have to lie to Alex, but he appreciated the offer.

“No, this is my mess and I’ll deal with it. Besides, Mama would kill me if I caused problems between you and Alex again.”

“Don’t be stupid that’s all in the past. Alex would kill me if I could help and didn’t. She really likes Serena. Besides, I’m not going to do anything that I’d have to lie to her about anyway.”

“Thanks Kim. I’m going to tell Dill as soon as I know more. But I don’t want to get everybody all up in arms if this turns out to be a false alarm.”

“True, but I mean it; call me if you need me.”

It was now one thirty in the morning. Serena hadn’t called him and Alex hadn’t called Kimble. They were watching a classic B ball game. Elray was also checking his e-mails on his Blackberry. Another hour passed before his phone finally rang—the girls had decided to pull an all niter. He told Serena to have a good time then handed the phone to Kimble to talk to Alex.

Since the guest room was now Raiena’s room, Kimble crashed on the couch for the night. Elray stayed up well after Kimble turned in. He and Serena would be closing on their first house together in a few weeks and married by the end of the

year. Having a secret was no way for them to start a new life together. However, wouldn't it be just as hurtful to tell her about a baby that might not even be his? His head started to hurt thinking about the potential disaster this situation could cause. He got up to get a glass of water. Took two Tylenols and went to bed.



Bodies were spread out all over the Brown living room, with the exception of Shasta. She had gone upstairs to go to bed. With just over nine weeks left in her pregnancy, her back wouldn't let her sleep on the floor or couch. Even the kids were stretched out with their mothers asleep. Serena woke up queasy. At first, she just laid there thinking it would go away. But it didn't. Jumping up, she ran into the bathroom and emptied the contents of her stomach in the toilet.

All the junk she'd ate last night certainly didn't agree with her. Cleaning her face, she went back and lay down next to Raiena. Tired from staying up so late, she easily fell back asleep. Lucky for all of them, it was Sunday and nobody had to work. Both Alex and Serena got up around nine. Alex fixed little Kim a bowl of cereal. Serena got Raiena her bottle. They found that trying to sleep with one eye open, to watch the kids, proved difficult. So neither of them got much sleep.

The rest of the crew got up before noon and helped Alex make lunch. They ate then helped put the house back together before going home. Alex elected to

ride with Serena home to surprise Kimble. Elray was sitting in the kitchen eating a bowl of frosted flakes and Kimble was still on the couch.

Seeing his dad little Kim yelled, “Daddy!” then jumped on him.

Serena sat down next to Elray. He took Raiena from her placing her in his lap.

“I can’t wait for her to start walking,” he said, bouncing her on his knee.

“You might not have to wait long. Mama says I started walking when I was nine months old. She’s almost ten months and I’ve seen her take a few steps away from the couch.”

“Really, that’s daddy’s girl.” Elray told his baby girl.

Serena and Alex both shook their heads and laughed. Since learning to crawl, Raiena didn’t like being held for too long. So Elray put her on the floor and watched her crawl around. Alex and Kimble didn’t stay long. Alone now, Serena left Elray and the baby in the kitchen playing on the floor. She went to take a shower and put on something to lounge around the house in. She had already called Star and her mother and told them she wasn’t coming by today.

Since the girls’ night sleepover, Serena continued waking up with an upset stomach. At first, she dismissed it as a bug going around, but now she was also late for her period. She had to consider the possibility that she was pregnant again. How unfair would it be to have gotten pregnant not once; but twice while using

some form of birth control? Try as she might, she didn't remember missing one single pill since starting on birth control after Raiena was born.

Another week went by and nothing changed. She was still having morning sickness. Luckily, she and Elray had been so busy that he hadn't seen her when she was losing her guts in the toilet each morning. Just like with Raiena, she only got sick in the morning and the rest of the day she was fine.

As the wedding plans progressed, Mr. and Mrs. Carter offered to help pay for their wedding. Her mother was in no position to, but she and Elray insisted on paying themselves. Uncle Walt called several times with leads on her dad, but unfortunately, none of them had panned out. Determined to find her dad, Serena did not intend to let this small set back force her to give up.

Sitting on the bed watching Elray get dressed, she fought the nausea that had plagued her each morning for the past couple weeks. Luckily, her cell phone rang.

"Hey Darnell," she said. "What's up?"

"I'm going down to the strip today and I thought I'd call to see if you wanted to go. I'm feeling totally neglected these days by all you guys."

She chuckled before she answered.

"Oh what ever D. I've just been real busy—you know I would never neglect you."

“I take it you don’t want to go then.”

“Sorry Darnell, but I can’t, not today but I promise next time. Okay.”

“I’m holding you to it. Talk to you later.”

Just as she hung up Elray asked, “What was that about?”

“Nothing, Darnell is feeling neglected lately.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to have a talk with him about that.”

Serena got up from the bed, and walked over to the opened window. Trying to calm her stomach down before she threw up in front of Elray.

“Talk to him about what?”

“You.”

“Me? What would you guys be discussing about me?”

He walked over and stood next to her pulling her into his arms. Kissing her lightly on the nose he said, “I’m a jealous man, baby. Now that we are getting married, no wife of mine is going to have a bestfriend of the opposite sex; unless he’s gay.”

Pushing him away, Serena punched Elray playfully in the chest.

“You are so silly. You better not!”

“I’m not. I gotta go though, so I’ll call you later.”

“Okay. Can you drop Raiena off at your Mom’s? I told her I would but it will be awhile before I’m ready to go.”

“No problem,” he replied leaving her standing there by the window. Minutes after she heard the door close, Serena ran in the bathroom just in time. She’d lost her morning nausea battle.



It was going on three weeks now. Serena knew without a doubt that she was pregnant and she just needed it confirmed by a doctor. She arranged for Star to keep Raiena one morning while she went. They confirmed what she suspected; she was pregnant.

Arriving at her mother’s after her appointment, Serena thought to herself that she still couldn’t believe she was pregnant again. Walking into the living room, she saw her mother playing with Raiena. Jerry and Starlett were both sitting off to the side watching. Jerry winked at her when she walked in. God she really hated that man. The nurse recently told them that her mom wouldn’t need her anymore after her next doctor’s appointment. The thought of her mother being left in Jerry’s hands made her ill, but she kept her feelings to herself. Nothing she said would matter. Her mother would have to see for herself—that Jerry was no good.

Starlett left shortly after she arrived. She needed to go into work for a few hours. Luckily, Star had flex hours. As long as she did her forty hours, it didn’t matter when she worked. Serena stayed trying again to get her mother to give her some information on her father. With Jerry upstairs, Serena once again asked her

mother. “Mom, I know you don’t want to discuss my father, but can you just tell me enough to help me find him?”

“Why you would want to find someone that didn’t give a damn about us is beyond me, Serena. No, I will not help you find that man,” Lorinda yelled. Frustrated, she decided to put off telling her mother about the baby until she told Elray.

The fact that her mother wouldn’t tell her about her dad, certainly didn’t help her anxiety level. She was frustrated about that and being pregnant again didn’t help matters any less. Seeing that she wouldn’t get anywhere with her mom, she decided to leave. Serena was already worked up over how to tell Elray they were having another baby. She put Raiena in her car seat in the back of Elray’s Beemer. She was finally getting used to driving the beemer, now that it was hers. Elray had recently bought him a new one. Elray called minutes after she entered the freeway. “Hey, baby. I called your mom’s and she said you were gone already. How long before you get home?”

“Not long. Why, is something wrong?”

“No. I wanted to call it a night early, since we have the closing on the house tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I won’t be long,” she said and hung up. In her eyes until they were actually married, the house belonged to him. She refused to let him put

it in both their names until after the wedding. There was still a chance things might not work out for them. So, this decision would make it easier in that case.

Tomorrow she thought would be a hectic day. She had a dress fitting with Elray's mom, Alex and Venice scheduled in the morning. Then she was accompanying Elray to the closing on the house that afternoon. Now on top of everything else, she had to tell him he was going to be a father again. How would he feel about her being pregnant again? They had never talked about having more children. Would he be happy?

Maneuvering the Beemer into the space next to Elray's, Serena got out then took the baby out. Elray greeted her at the door with a kiss that melted her clean down to her toes.

"What was that for?" She asked once she caught her breathe.

"Nothing. I'm just happy to see my family."

He took Raiena from her, and they continued into the apartment. Boxes were everywhere. The movers would be there on Friday to pick the boxes up. They were planning to move into the house on Saturday. Dinner, which was Chinese was on the table. "Why don't you go freshen up while I get the baby ready to eat," he suggested.

“Thank you. You are so sweet,” Serena responded but caught a glimpse of the seductively wicked grin on his face and added. “Oh I see you have ulterior motives.”

“Who me? What gave you that idea?”

“Oh nothing. Wait, could it be the fact you’re undressing me with your eyes?”

After dinner, together they gave Raiena a bath and put her to bed.

Lying in bed, neither of them was aware that the other had something weighing heavily on their minds. Renee’s pregnancy weighed on Elray’s. Serena’s own pregnancy weighed on hers. With everything they were dealing with separately, making love shut out those problems; even if only for a little while. Bodies sated—sleep overtook them both.



That next day, Dillon picked up Elray and his niece. His wife Venice picked up Serena. Venice’s mother and sister had volunteered for babysitting duty and were staying at Dillon and Venice’s house with Sherice, Little Kim and Raiena. During the dress fitting that morning, Serena became extremely nauseated. Making up the excuse that she had a case of diarrhea, she went into the bathroom to empty her stomach. Putting off telling Elray and his family wouldn’t be an option much longer. His mother was much too observant. If nobody else

guessed...she would. Lucky for her nothing else happened and she made it through the rest of the morning.

They all had lunch together, before she and Elray left for the closing. The family lawyer met them there and reviewed all the papers that Elray had to sign. In Serena's opinion, the closing lasted way to long and she was glad when it was finally over. Keys in hand, they went over to the house to do a final walk through alone, before they officially moved in. Their furniture would start arriving over the weekend. As they pulled into the driveway and parked, Elray leaned over and kissed her and said, "Welcome home."

Tears welled up in Serena's eyes when she walked into the living room and saw the romantic setting Elray had created for her. The room looked similar to the room at the hotel; the night he proposed to her. Coming up behind her, he took the rubber band holding her hair out and ran his fingers through her hair. He moved her hair to one side of her neck, while he kissed the other side softly. She turned in his arms welcoming his sweet kisses as they sank down to their knees on the blanket he had spread out.

Both of them now completely nude, Elray stood and extended his hand and said, "Come on let's christen our home."



Elray made love to Serena in every room of the house, before they made it back to the living room. He could tell that she was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. So he was surprised when she asked, “What time do we have to pick up Raiena?”

“Go to sleep baby. She’s staying at my parent’s tonight.”

Covering her up with a sheet, Elray heard his phone vibrating. Flipping the phone open, he saw that Renee had called him several times. Talking to Renee wasn’t how he wanted to end this day. He closed the phone to lay back down next to Serena. Pulling the covers over himself, he went to sleep.

Sometime during the night, Elray shifted in his sleep reaching for Serena. She scooted closer to allow him to pull her close. The warmth of her body lulling him back into a deep satisfying sleep, until she suddenly jumped up and ran from the room. By the time he composed himself enough to go after her, she was slipping back under the covers with him.

“Is everything okay?” He asked.

“”Yeah, baby, everything is fine. I just had to use the bathroom.”

Accepting her explanation, Elray laid back down pulling her back into his arms and went back to sleep.



While Elray slept—Serena lay awake. If he hadn't been too exhausted to come after her he would have found her upstairs in the bathroom emptying her stomach. She fully intended to tell Elray that he was going to be a father again. She just hoped he would be happy. Although the pregnancy wasn't planned, she had to admit that she was excited about having another baby. Secretly, she hoped it was a boy.

Sunlight streaming in the window caused her to put her arm over her eyes. The prior evening had been so perfect, with the exception of her early morning nausea. Serena was content to stay there all day.

“Well good morning sleeping beauty.”

Turning her head slightly but leaving her arm over her eyes, Serena responded. “Good morning. How long have you been up?”

“Not long.”

“Why didn't you wake me up?”

“Because if I had we would have been doing this a lot sooner and you needed your rest,” he said sliding over her just as he captured her lips in a sensual morning kiss.

An hour later, they got up. Elray had thought of everything this time. There were soap and towels with a change of clothing for them both. He even remembered toiletries. After breakfast at Waffle House, they went to his parent's

to pick up Raiena. They headed over to her mother's next. Some of Lorinda's friends were there visiting. Serena saw the great pride in her mother's eyes, while showing off her grandbaby and introducing Elray as her future son in law.

They stayed a lot longer than originally planned. By the time they made it home it was after nine. Renee had continually called him all day. Instead of trying to call her directly, he called Kimble and asked him to call her on the three way. There wasn't anything he was going to say that his brother in law couldn't hear. But he didn't want Serena to overhear the wrong thing. Once Kimble had Renee on the line, Elray asked, "What do you want."

"Why am I on a three way call?" Renee asked with obvious irritation in her voice.

"I don't have time for this. Did you need something or not."

"I'm having an ultrasound done next week. I called to see if you wanted to come."

"Why would I want to come? Can we have a paternity test done before you have the baby?"

"No." Elray heard her snuffle, indicating she had started to cry. "I'll call you if I find out if the baby is a boy or girl."

"Fine, thanks Kim."

He hung up. Next, he called his mother. “Hi, Ma. I know it’s a lot to ask, but do you think it’s possible for you to have all the wedding plans finalized in thirty days?”

“Why, Elray?”

“Because, I want to move the date up.”

“I figured that much. My question is why?”

“Since it’s going to be a small intimate family wedding, we decided it was stupid to wait six months.”

“Sure, I can have everything done.”

“Thanks, Mama. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Before hanging up she added, “If you need to talk—you know your dad and I will listen.”

“I know. Bye, Mama.”

Serena and the baby were lying across the bed both sound asleep, when he went into the bedroom a short time later. Undressing he took a short shower and lay down with them.

During breakfast the next morning while looking over a new contract, he told Serena that he’d asked his mother to move up the wedding. She seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts, so he repeated. “Honey, I asked my mother to move up the wedding. I hope that’s alright with you.”

“Elray, I’m sorry I wasn’t really listening. Did you say you moved up the wedding?”

He looked up from the contracts he was reading from his agent. It was an ad campaign for a new cologne being launched by Tommy Hilfiger, he responded, “Yeah, baby, I did.”

“Elray, I need to talk to you.”

“Okay,” he said not sure what to make of the seriousness of her features. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Elray, it’s just that this is all happening so fast. Are you sure you really want to get married? I mean, we really haven’t had time to truly really date.”

“I know I love you. I’ve never felt for another woman what I feel for you, Serena. Don’t take this the wrong way, but trust me I’ve known a lot of woman. You are it for me.”

Sitting down in the chair across from him, he saw her look at Raiena in the playpen. She looked as though she were searching for the words to tell him something, before she spoke.

“I love you too, but I just think we are just moving way to fast. I mean the house, getting married, having a baby.”

“Serena, look at me, what’s really bothering you?”

She didn't look at him but she did respond, "You're going to be a father again."

"What?"

"I said... you are going to be a father again."

Wow... that wasn't what he expected to hear her say. Damn, how did she find out anyway?

"I don't know that for sure. Renee said it's mine, but she could be lying."

"Renee, what are you talking about?"

Confused he looked at her, "Isn't that what you were talking about?"

"No."

He saw a tear slide down her face. Then her words registered and he realized she wasn't talking about Renee, "Serena... are you pregnant?"

"Yes. But are you...Renee's baby daddy?"

"I honestly don't know. I won't know until she has the baby and we get a paternity test done."

"How long have you known?"

"Ah...few weeks."

"Were you going to tell me?"

"Not until I found out if the baby is really mine."

"How many months is she?"

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask. But my guess is she has to be at-least four months or so. I haven’t touched another woman since you came home.”

“Not even when you were out of town?”

Pulling her into his arms for the comfort he knew she needed, he responded, “I would never disrespect you like that. No matter where I am, I will always be faithful to you.”

He held her for the longest time. They were having another baby. He felt guilty that he was so excited at the prospect of Serena giving him another child. Sadly, he felt next to nothing about the possibility of Renee having his baby. It wasn’t that he wouldn’t love his child; it would just be complicated because of the situation with Renee.

“How far along are you?”

“Almost two months,” she answered then looked up at him. “Are you mad?”

He couldn’t imagine why she thought he’d be mad.

“Why would I be mad? I want as many children as you want to give me. You know I come from a large family.”

“I know, but it’s not like we discussed having more kids and I was taking the pill.”

“Have you seen a doctor yet —is that going to affect the baby?”

“I did see a doctor and she says it should have no effect on the baby. But I should stop taking them, which I did as soon as I suspected I was pregnant again.”

“Get the baby ready to go. I’m calling my parent’s, so we can tell everybody the good news. I’ll have everybody meet us there so we can tell everybody at the same time.”

She pulled away from him.

“Do we have to tell everybody now?”

Confused he looked down at her, “Why would you want to wait?”

“What is your family going to think? Do they know about Renee?”

“Nobody knows except Kimble. I have no intention of telling my family unless it’s proven that baby is mine.”

“What then?”

“If it’s mine, I’ll take care of him or her. Serena, I’m not the kind of man that would turn his back on his child.”

“I know that, but where does Renee fit in?”

“She doesn’t. I never loved Renee and she knows that. I won’t put my family at risk. But I won’t turn my back on a child, if it’s mine either. I know this is a lot to ask of you. But your feelings will always come first. If I have to, Renee and I will work out some kind of custody agreement. My family will help so that I have as little contact with Renee as possible.”

Serena turned away from him and wrapped her arms around herself. She stood there silently for several seconds before she turned back to him.

“I’d never ask you to turn your back on her. I know what it’s like to be pregnant and alone.”

“You didn’t have to be alone,” he responded. Her words hurt. He knew she hadn’t said them to hurt him—but they did.

“I know. It was my choice and I won’t be the reason she has no choice.”

He rubbed his hand down his face. If this baby turned out to be his, Renee would forever be a part of their lives. Whether he liked it or not the situation with Renee was now out in the open. Even though Serena was putting on a good front, he knew this was hurting her. If nothing else, Elray was more determined than ever to make sure Serena had no reason to doubt his love.

Chapter Twelve

With the news she'd just gotten from Elray, Serena really didn't want to go to his parent's house. They could tell his family about the baby some other day. She wasn't up to dealing with his family.

"Do we really have to go to your parent's house tonight?"

"I've already called everybody, so yeah I'd still like to go."

"Okay then let's go," she said and walked away. She felt like she was on the verge of tears and didn't want him to see her cry.



Serena went straight upstairs to the bathroom when they arrived at his parent's. Her stomach was upset the whole ride there. She hadn't eaten much, but what she did eat she didn't want to lose it right in front of his family. Standing in front of the mirror looking at her reflection, she thought back to when her life had been less complicated. At one point, her biggest worry was preparing for a motorcycle race. Darnell was the only man in her life and she had no interest in dating. She held no regrets for loving Elray, but her life was spiraling out of control.

Her main focus besides Elray and Raiena was supposed to be finding her dad and dealing with that ass hole Jerry. Her mother was making tremendous progress and that made her happy. With the new baby coming and her upcoming marriage, she wanted these details in her life resolved. Her desire was to focus solely on her family. Her family...oh she liked the sound of that. It's all she ever truly wanted; a happy functional family. Now she had to deal with this situation with Renee. She washed her face and prepared to go back downstairs.



Downstairs in the Carter Family room, the family started to assemble. The only ones not in attendance yet were: Rayden, Trent and Alex. Dillon, Rayvon and Mr. Carter had all been at Dillon's shop when they got Elray's call. Closing down for an early lunch they all rushed home. Venice was still home. She hadn't made it to the bakery yet, because she was working on a special order again for Kimble's mother for another one of her church fundraisers. Kimble had been in his car on 285 headed into the office. Pulling off at the next exit, he turned around and was the first to actually arrive. Both Trent and Alex called and said they were on their way, neither said where they were, so it wasn't clear how long it would take. No one had heard from or been able to reach Rayden yet. Elray had a pretty good idea where he was. Messing around with that football player's wife was going to be bad news. Eventually, he hoped he got out of that relationship before it came to that.

It wasn't an emergency, but he wanted him there. Not wanting to call in front of his mother, Elray walked into the kitchen and dialed Mrs. William's cell phone number that Rayden had given him. When she answered, he asked if Rayden was with her; even though he already knew the answer.

"What's up?" Rayden asked when she handed him the phone.

"Why didn't you answer your cell, Rayden?"

"Because, I forgot it in my car, Mr. grumpy."

"I'm not grumpy. How fast can you be at Mamas?"

"I need to grab a quick shower. Maybe an hour to an hour and a half. Why is something wrong?"

"No, since I'm not waiting for you, I'll just tell you. Serena and I are having another baby."

"I'm happy for you man. I know how much you love her. I'll be there as soon as I can. If I miss you, I'll stop by your place later."

"Cool and Ray, be careful man, that woman is bad news; I can feel it."

Rayden didn't respond. He just hung up. Elray went back into the family room and told his parent's Rayden was tied up and he wouldn't make it over. Now he only needed to wait for Trent and Alex. He didn't wait long both of them arrived within fifteen minutes. Once everyone took a seat and he had their attention, he announced.

“I know everyone is curious why I asked you all to come over so I’ll get right to the point. Serena and I are having another baby.”

Everyone crowded around him and Serena to take turns congratulating them on the great news.

“El you are a regular baby making machine,” Trent whispered in his ear when he hugged him.

“You have no idea,” Elray thought to himself, but didn’t say anything. He looked at Kimble and he saw the worried look on his face. Alex was happier than anybody. Both Kimble and Venice had to leave, but the rest of the family stayed for a while longer. After a while, Dillon told his dad to stay, but he and Rayvon needed to get going. Before leaving, he told Serena. “This doesn’t change anything. I still want you to be a part of my pit team.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later to talk about it.”

Once everyone was finally gone, Elray left Serena and the baby in the family room with his mother. Upstairs in his old room he prepared to call Kimble. He was in a meeting, but had instructed his secretary to put Elray through as soon as he called.

“Hey Kim, can we meet later at The Pit?”

“Sure what time?”

“Around six thirty.”

“I’ll be there.”

Serena and his mother were going over some wedding details when he came back downstairs.

“Mama, can I borrow your car?”

“Sure baby the keys are on my dresser.”

Serena looked up from the menu they were going over to ask, “Where are you going? Why don’t you just drop me off at my mother’s?”

“I didn’t want to leave you stranded if I get tied up. I’m meeting Kimble a little later, but right now I have to go over to Parker’s office, he just called.”

“Oh okay, but we’re almost done. You can drop me and the baby off at home, instead of leaving your mother without a car.”

Elray nodded his agreement then took a seat to wait for his mother and Serena to finish. Raena, who was playing on the floor and around the table, pulled herself up again after falling for the third time. Laughing at his daughter’s attempts, he slid down on the floor. He held his arms out to her. Looking at her daddy, she giggled with delight while walking along the edge of the table. When she reached the end of the table, she paused; as if trying to determine whether or not she’d make it to her father.

Inching closer to her, Elray tried again to get her to let go of the table and come to him. Finally, after several seconds, Raiena let go took two steps, wobbled, caught her balance and continued to her dad.

Excited, Elray said to his mother and Serena, “Hey look at the baby!”

Raiena made it to Elray. Both his mother and Serena shouted their excitement at her first successful attempt to walk on her own. The menu they were looking at was quickly forgotten as they all focused on the baby. They stayed another hour or so and left. Elray dropped Serena and the baby at home.



Walking into The Pit later that evening, Elray scanned the room finding Kimble at the pool table. No doubt taking his opponent to the bank. He’d learned his lesson about playing against Kimble and his brother Trent—they were just too good. Taking a seat at the far table, he watched the remainder of the game. Kimble collected his winnings and gave his stick to the next player.

“El,” he said taking the seat in front of him. “How you holding up?”

“I’m straight.”

“This can’t be easy for you.”

“It’s not. But what can I do? You’d think it would be better now that Serena knows about Renee.”

“How in the heck did that happen? Please tell me you didn’t have a conscious attack and told her.”

“Not exactly. When she said I was going to be a father again, I assumed she was talking about Renee. So I told her that I wasn’t even sure the baby was mine.”

“What did she say?”

“She asked me what I was talking about—just before it hit her that another woman might be pregnant by me.”

“You are too lucky; she seems to be taking it well.”

He put his elbows on the table and lowered his face into his hands. “You don’t think I know that. My own stupidity could very well cost me the one woman I have ever loved. God, I hope Renee’s baby turns out not to be mine.”

Kimble didn’t respond. Elray knew he couldn’t begin to understand what he was going through.

Kimble looked down at his cell. “It’s Rayden,” he said.

“Is El with you? I called his place and Serena said he wasn’t there.”

“Yeah, we’re at The Pit.”

“Cool, I’m only ten minutes from there.”

Exactly ten minutes later, Rayden walked in still smelling of perfume.

“Have you been with Mrs. Williams all day?” Elray and Kimble asked.

“Yep, her hubby is out of town and she hates being alone.”

Annoyed by his attitude, Elray responded, “Has it occurred to you to tell her to go with him.”

“Why on Earth would I want to do that? Please believe me when I tell you that woman ain’t no joke in bed. She put the freak...in freaky.”

“I truly don’t want to hear this,” Kimble said.

Rayden was the last person Elray intended to tell about his situation. He loved his brother, but for him to be older, he certainly wasn’t mature at times. One thing was for sure with all that was happening to him, he planned to sit him down and have a serious heart- to- heart talk about him and his married woman. Nothing good was going to come out of that relationship. Seeing his brother get hurt, wasn’t an option he wanted in the equation.

None of them drank much since they were all driving in separate cars. Elray and Kimble didn’t dance either. Instead, they tried to hold a conversation in between Rayden dancing. His plopping down at the table every time a song ended made it almost impossible. When Alex called Kimble, the threesome called it a night and went home.

While keeping busy with moving into their new home over the next couple of days, Elray tried not to think about Renee. Even though she continued leaving messages on his cell phone. The situation would only get worse if he talked to her. She might get the impression that he was leading her on. He had no intention of

doing that. In his last conversation with her, he'd told her that if the baby was his he had every intention of taking care of it. But he wasn't willing to put unnecessary stress on Serena. Of course Renee was pissed and didn't mind telling him about the stress he was causing her.

What about the stress she was causing him? They were nothing more than occasional bed partners. Neither having expressed anything beyond the physical pleasure shared. Now they might be bound together for life, if this baby turned out to be his. But, she expected him to care about her stress.

The wedding plans were finalized and in just a few short weeks, he and Serena would officially be married. She hadn't said anything else to him about Renee or the possibility that he was her baby's father. He knew if the baby turned out to be his it would hurt her. But he also knew that Serena loved him. She would step up to the plate and be the best stepmother she could be. Wanting to do something special for her, he contacted his Uncle to see what kind of progress he was making with trying to find her father.

"Hello, hi Uncle Walt. I wanted to check in with you to see how things were going with finding Serena's dad."

"Unfortunately, Randy Greene is proving to be a very common name. However, I've made quite a bit of progress. I decided not to call and tell Serena every time a lead didn't pan out. That's why I haven't called lately."

“I agree there’s no reason to call if you really have nothing new. Especially now, with her being pregnant again she doesn’t need the extra stress.”

“Soon as I have a solid lead, I’ll be in touch—but I gotta run. I’m due in court in an hour.”

“Okay. Hey before you hang up would you mind giving me the info you have on prospective leads and your PI’s information.”

“Yeah sure. I’ll have my secretary e-mail it to you. I’ll have her call the PI too and authorize him to give you information.”

Knowing how much it meant to Serena to find her dad, he decided he wanted to meet him first. He wanted to feel him out. She had enough stress having to deal with his mess. If he turned out to be a jerk, she never had to know he’d been found.

Later that day as promised, Uncle Walt’s secretary e-mailed him the information and he called to set up a meeting with the PI. While meeting with the PI, he asked, “I’ve got another situation involving a young woman that is accusing me of fathering her child. I’d like you to investigate whether there are any other men who could potentially be the father of her baby.”

“Wouldn’t it be a lot simpler to just wait and have a paternity test done after the child is born?”

“Yes, but I’m getting ready to get married and if there’s a way to make her come clean now, I’d like to find it.”

“Fair enough. Your uncle has given me a lot of business over the years, so I’ll see what I can find out.”

Personal business aside, they got down to work on the list, as well as the candidates that had already been eliminated. There were two Randy Greene’s on the list that he’d had trouble contacting. But since they both were married, he’d placed them on the back burner. When Elray asked him why, he said it was because one had been married to the same woman for the last twenty-five years and the other was in the service at the time.

Twenty-five years was a long time to be married. His own parents had been married even longer, but he didn’t want to exclude him just on that alone. Infidelity couldn’t be ruled out. Unfortunately, there were plenty of men and women that didn’t think twice about cheating, knowing they had no intention of leaving their spouse. Rayden’s current fling was proof of that. There was no way that woman was leaving her football player husband’s millions. Still that didn’t keep her from jumping in the sack with his brother every chance she got.

All the Carter brothers intentionally stayed away from married women. Engaged women were okay, because they could still change their minds. So far, Rayden was the only one who had broken that unspoken rule. When he first met

Mrs. Williams, he didn't know who she was or that she was married. But when he found out, he should have broken it off with her. However, according to him the sex was the bomb! Besides, he reasoned with his brothers, if she wasn't giving it to him she would just give it to someone else. They all expressed their opinion and told him, "Then let her!"

It was no secret in their family how his mother felt about unfaithful men or women. Marriage was sacred to his parents; neither had ever strayed and raised their children to respect the sanctity of marriage. He wanted a marriage like his parents. One that was filled with—honesty, love, passion, and mutual respect. Dillon had that with Venice and he could also admit now that Alexandra had that with Kimble. Being completely in love with Serena, he now realized when you truly loved someone making them happy was your number one priority. That's what he planned on doing by trying to find her dad. He also needed to do something about Jerry; her mother's boyfriend. Serena and her sister hated him. It's not like he was a likable guy, but for now he was last on his list of things to accomplish. With any luck, maybe bringing her father back into her mother's life would solve his Jerry problem too.



The move had gone smoothly and they were settled into their new house. Serena, however, remained distant. Not hostile and no less passionate, but distant.

She'd also been spending more time with Darnell. Though he wasn't worried there was anything going on between them, Elray didn't like that she was seeking comfort of any kind from another man. In an attempt to make things a little less strained between them, he arranged for Serena, her sister and Alex to have a full day at the spa on him.

He contacted crazy Mona and asked her if she wanted to spend the day with her goddaughter; she did. While his girls were away, he spoke with his agent concerning the upcoming Tommy Hilfiger campaign. He had dinner and dessert brought in and he left a message for the elusive Randy Greene. The PI was right; the man was hard as hell to contact. When all his tasks were completed, he sat down to relax and wait for Serena's return.

The girl's must have gone shopping after leaving the spa. It was after seven and she still wasn't home. Thinking that Serena needed this outing, he didn't begrudge her the extra time. But he would certainly be glad when she got home. Sometime later, he heard the garage door. Getting up from the couch, he went to see if she needed help bringing anything in from the car. Not surprisingly, she only had one bag. Unlike his sister, she wasn't a born shopper. It probably stemmed from not having money growing up. It would take time for her to get used to the fact that she had money now.

Walking up to her, he took her purse and package from her hand before leaning in to kiss her passionately. This forced her to grab the side of the car to keep steady.

“I missed you,” he whispered huskily when he finally released her mouth.

It took several seconds for her to regain her senses enough to reply, “I missed you too.”

He had never made love in a garage. Now, he thought was as good a time as any for his first time. Placing her things on the top of the car, he pulled her back into his arms for another soul-stirring kiss. Serena never wore skirts or dresses. But at this precise moment, he sure wished she had. Not that he couldn’t accomplish his goal; he just had to work harder at it. After removing her shirt and bra, he lowered his head capturing her already pleading nipple in his mouth. Her hands automatically went to his head holding him as he released one plump mound to treat the other to the same delicious torture.

Struggling to gain control of her breathing, Serena slumped back against the car. Her hands went to his backside bringing his rock hard erection in direct contact with the core of her femininity. Surely, if human combustion were possible, they would have gone up in flames. Her movements and heavy breathing told him everything he needed to know. She was so hot and ready to have him inside her. He undid the snap of her jeans then pulled the zipper down. She kicked

off her flip-flops. Never leaving her sensitive breasts, he slid his hands inside the back of her jeans to caress her. Drowning in a haze of intense passion, Elray wanted nothing more than to bury himself deeply inside the woman he loved. He wanted to stroke her until they were both too weak to even stand.

He reluctantly pulled himself from her breast and Serena cried out at the loss of the heat his mouth had created. Instinctively, knowing what the other wanted they each removed the remainder of their clothing. Serena who finished first, leaned forward and began placing playful kisses along his powerful chest. Stopping at each male nipple she licked around it. His body shuddered. Grabbing her by her waist, he placed her against the car hood and lifted her gently. Satisfied with her position he leaned her back pulling her forward to slide easily into her warm wet center.

Moaning loudly, Serena opened her legs to allow him total access to what he wanted. Riding her with the speed and precision of a skilled rider, Serena came apart for the third time since their interlude began and he showed no signs of getting enough of her. Truthfully, he'd noticed her pregnancy made her just as insatiable. He finally let her down off the hood of the car to take her in the house. They didn't make it any further than the kitchen, before he was ready for another exhilarating ride.

Surprise etched on Elray's face when Serena pulled out a kitchen chair. "Have a seat right here," she said then walked over to the counter and turned on the CD player. The Destiny Child song "Soldier" boomed out of the small speaker. He watched as she did her best interpretation of a video hoochie. Damn this was a side of her he'd never seen. Oh, his soldier was definitely at attention.

He attempted to get up from his position several times. Obviously, she wasn't through yet. Keeping him seated using her hands, feet, face and butt; she mounted him just as the song ended.

As usual, Serena was amazing—completely giving herself to him. Exhausted, he took her upstairs where they got into the shower. He thoroughly washed and dried her extraordinary body then placed her in bed. She was so worn out from their marathon that she fell asleep the minute her head hit the pillow. Before getting into bed with her, Elray picked up his cell to call Mona to check on his daughter. Immediately, he saw that he had several missed calls from her. Dialing voice mail, he listened to his messages. The first three or four were asking him what time he wanted her to bring the baby home. The last one made him laugh, but would have embarrassed Serena if she heard it.

"Hey El, since you haven't returned any of my previous messages, I'm sure it's okay to assume that you and Serena are otherwise occupied. So, I'll keep the baby overnight. Call me tomorrow and let me know when it's safe to bring her

home. Oh by the way, Alex told me congratulations were in order. It's a good thing too, because if Serena wasn't pregnant I bet she would be after tonight. Love you both and don't worry about my baby; Aunt Mona is taking good care of her."

Deleting the message, he laughed again. Mona was truly one of a kind. Just as he was about to turn off his cell to put it on charge, it vibrated indicating he had a call. He looked at the number it wasn't one he recognized. At first, he started not to answer, and then something told him to answer it. Flipping the phone open, he pressed the button then said, "Hello."

"Hello, is this Elray Carter?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Randy Greene, apparently you've been looking for me. How can I help you?"

"I'd like to meet with you. It's not something I want to discuss over the phone."

"Can I ask what this is about?"

"I'm looking for someone I knew years ago and I think you may be him," Elray answered even though that was stretching the truth a bit.

"I don't know anyone named Elray."

"I'll explain when we meet."

“Alright. I just got back in town. Let me get settled and I’ll call you and we can arrange to meet in a couple days.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing from you.”



Trying to concentrate over the next couple of days was difficult. Elray really wanted to know if this Randy Greene was Serena’s dad. He wanted so badly to be able to tell her he’d found her father —and just in time to possibly walk her down the aisle. A couple days turned into five before Randy called. They were meeting for lunch on Friday. That didn’t leave much time since he and Serena were getting married the next weekend. The family had just celebrated Raiena’s first birthday. Serena was so happy and surprised to see her mother walk into Elray’s parent’s family room, just as they were singing happy birthday. So far, everything was working out great, even the jerk Jerry hadn’t caused any more problems.

To his dismay, Renee called. He hadn’t heard from her in weeks. This was fine with him. If she was truly pregnant, it would still be a few months yet before she had the baby. He intended to keep his distance until that time so he hadn’t returned her call. Later that evening, he and Kimble were walking down the mall after their final tuxedo fitting, when they ran into the one person he didn’t want to see; Renee.

“Hello...Elray, Kimble.”

Well, the question of her pregnancy was definitely answered, as he took in the obvious roundness of her stomach. Pregnancy agreed with her, she looked great and as usual, dressed to the tee.

“Hi Renee, you look good,” Elray responded. Kimble only nodded his head in her direction.

“Why shouldn’t I look good? What did you think I was just going to let myself go because his highness doesn’t want me?”

“I don’t want to fight...Renee. It was good to see you and contrary to what you believe, I’m glad you are doing well.”

Moving to walk past her, she grabbed his hand to stop him from leaving. The tough exterior she’d just displayed gone. She told him, “Not that you care—but you’re having a son.”

That stopped him dead in his tracks, “Is that what the doctor told you when you had your ultrasound?”

“Yes. If you’d returned my calls, I would have told you sooner. Yes, a son that you don’t want.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“You’re right. I believe your exact words were—get an abortion.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you. But, it’s not like this baby was planned. What do you expect from me? We were never a couple?” He went even further and stated the

obvious. “We hooked up a few times and had mind blowing sex and went our separate ways. Then you tell me you’re having my baby. Now, I’m supposed to drop everything in my life. Like I said, if this baby is mine, I’ll take care of it. I’ll even love him, but that’s all I’m able to offer you.”

Tears now freely ran down her face. He truly felt bad.

“So that’s it? I’m having your son and you still don’t give a damn about me?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Every man wants a son. I’m giving you that. How could you not want to be with me instead of your other baby’s mama?”

“Look Renee, you’re getting yourself all upset for nothing.”

“I’m sorry my hormones are all out of whack. Almost everything makes me cry. I’ll be talking to you soon, okay.”

“Yeah okay,” Elray said hoping Serena wouldn’t go through drastic mood changes during her pregnancy.

Walking away Renee turned and called back to him, “I was wondering Elray, did you want to help me decide on a name for the baby?”

Turning back to her, Elray didn’t want another outburst so he simply said, “We’ll see after you have the baby.”

Nodding, Renee turned around and left. Now in the car driving back to his place, Kimble said, “You better try avoiding Renee at all cost. She still thinks she has a chance with you.”

Elray nodded his agreement, but didn’t say anything. His thoughts were on Renee. She’d told him the baby was a boy. In truth—he did want a son—but with Serena. Again, he found himself hoping that Renee’s baby wasn’t his.

He stayed at his sisters for a while playing a game of chess with Kimble before going home. His house was completely dark when he got there. Serena and the baby must have turned in early. Grabbing bottled water from the fridge, he headed upstairs. His little angel Raiena was sound asleep in her room. Serena, he found in the master bedroom bath relaxing in the tub.

Smiling at her from the door, he started removing his clothes.

“Mind if I join you?”

“I stayed in here hoping you’d get home in time?”

He saw that she was watching as he removed his pants and asked, “What are you thinking about? You look so serious.”

She shrugged her shoulders and responded, “Oh nothing.”

“Serena, your face betrays you. It’s clear you have a lot on your mind.”

“Yeah I guess. I mean I love you so much. But, I was thinking how gorgeous you are. You could have any woman you wanted, why me?”

“Now that’s an odd question. I don’t understand how a woman as beautiful as you are has so much insecurity.”

“I’m not insecure, but I’m not stupid either. Renee is much prettier than I am.”

“Not in my eyes she isn’t. More importantly, I don’t love her. I love you.”

For several seconds she didn’t say anything. Elray finished removing his clothes and got in the tub.

“I feel sorry for her. I know how it feels to be pregnant and alone. No woman should have to go through the labor of bringing a child into the world alone, if she doesn’t choose to.”

“Where is all this coming from? Baby, I’m not even sure it’s my baby.”

“I know. Forget I even brought it up. I guess I’m just moody.”

He didn’t say anything. Hopefully, after meeting with Randy Greene tomorrow he would be able to come home and tell her he’d found her father. It would give her something positive to focus on. Not to mention...get poor Uncle Walt off the hook. He knew that Serena had been calling him for periodic updates. But he had instructed his uncle to tell her—no luck as of yet. He still wanted to be the one to talk with her dad first; he wanted to see how he felt about Serena trying to find him.

Serena's smooth even breathing alerted him to the fact that she was asleep. Shifting her sideways, he rose from the tub cradling her in his arms. Going over to the counter he grabbed the two large towels she had laying there. Sitting on the edge of the tub, he dried her as best he could then carried her into the bedroom and tucked her in. Going back into the bathroom, he dried himself off before getting into bed.

Chapter Thirteen

The next afternoon Elray was sitting in the restaurant waiting for Randy Greene to arrive. He was sipping on his water; the waiter walked up to his table and told him his party had arrived. Standing, he greeted his guest putting out his hand, he said, "Pleased to meet you Randy. Have a seat."

"Thank you," Randy responded taking the seat across from him. "You don't look even vaguely familiar to me. Not to mention, you're young enough to be my son, not a friend of mine. What's this really about?"

"You're right, Randy. You don't mind if I can you Randy do you?"

"No, Randy is fine."

"Thank you. I called you here today not for me, but for my fiancé. I believe you may be her father."

"That's impossible. My wife and I don't have children."

"Your wife isn't her mother. Lorinda James is."

He paused just long enough before saying, "I don't know any Lorinda James," Elray knew he was lying.

"I think you do."

“Does Lorinda know you’re here? She swore she’d never let me see the girls again. I tried for a while to sneak and see them and she had me locked up, saying I was a prowler. I couldn’t very well tell the police officer who picked me up, that I was just trying to see my kids...when I had a wife.”

“Are you saying you wanted to see your kids and their mother wouldn’t let you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I met Lorinda during a time when I thought my marriage was over. So we started seeing each other. I never lied to her about being married. We saw each other for several years before she got pregnant with Starlett. She wanted me to leave my wife and be with her. Part of me wanted to, but my wife’s mental state was very fragile. She suffered three miscarriages by that time and I just couldn’t walk out on her; she needed me. Things were fine for a while after Starlett was born. But after her first birthday, Lorinda started pressuring me again about leaving my wife. The problem was I still loved her. I realized at some point that even if she couldn’t have children, I still wanted to be with her. I finally convinced my wife to see a therapist for her depression. Which was partially caused by her inability to carry a baby to term. We started working on our relationship. I was still seeing Lorinda, mainly because of Starlett, but I still cared about her too. Our sexual relationship started to drop off and Lorinda asked me if I was going back to my wife. I told her yes. She was furious. She told me she

never wanted to see me again and broke off with me. I wanted to tell my wife about Starlett, so I could try and get Lorinda to agree to let her spend time with me and my wife. But I just couldn't bring myself to tell her. For nearly nine months, I only saw Starlett from a distance during which time my wife lost another baby. Lorinda caught me one day talking to Starlett in the park where she took her to play. One thing lead to another and our relationship picked up again. To make a long story short, when Lorinda got pregnant with Serena my wife also got pregnant again. She managed to carry that baby for nearly seven months before he was born prematurely. He lived for almost three weeks before he died. My wife tried to commit suicide after that. I had to have her committed. As badly as I wanted to be with my girls, I couldn't leave my wife. Lorinda, said I had to choose. I begged her to let me see the girls, but when I refused to continue our relationship, she said I could no longer see the girls. I have always loved my girls. I just didn't think my wife could handle knowing I had children with another woman. The one thing she wanted more than anything in the world was for us to have a baby."

Elray had been sitting quietly listening to Serena's dad tell his story. He felt really bad for him. Torn between two women and the love he had for his kids. All these years it was her mom who had been selfish. How was he going to tell her that her mother had deliberately kept her dad from her?

“Randy, once the girls were old enough why didn’t you try and contact them?”

“Lorinda had poisoned them against me. Do you really think they would have believed anything I had to say? Letting my girls go— was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life, besides losing the children my wife and I had together.” Smiling, Randy changed the subject suddenly. “I haven’t asked which of my girls you are marrying.”

“Serena.”

“My baby? I’m surprised I would have thought for sure it was Starlett. Serena has always been more interested in motorcycles than guys.”

“How do you know that if you’ve stayed away from her all these years?”

Randy smiled again before looking directly at Elray, “Just because I stayed away doesn’t mean I haven’t kept tabs on them. It hasn’t been easy staying away. Especially, when I found out that Lorinda had a drinking problem. All the reports I got said the girls were healthy and okay physically. I’ve seen her race. She gets it from me you know. I raced years ago.”

“Did you know that her mother recently had a stroke?”

“No, I didn’t. Is she okay?”

“Yes, she’ll make a full recovery and she’s sober. Look Randy, I called you because Serena wants to see you. And after hearing your story, I think you should tell her everything, too.”

“I’d love to see Serena and Starlett. But Lorinda will be angry. I can’t risk her telling my wife; she isn’t well.”

“She knows who your wife is and how to contact her?” Elray asked clearly surprised the man would be that stupid.

“Yes and she would do it too, just to hurt me. I cared about Lorinda. I still do...but I love my wife. I can’t hurt her like that.”

Suddenly, he realized just how fortunate he was that Serena knew about Renee. He wouldn’t have to keep a secret from her that would eat at him. He strongly felt that Randy should tell his wife everything and told him so.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. My wife had three more miscarriages before we finally stopped trying to have a baby. She has suffered with depression for the better part of our marriage. She still does—she has never been able to get over not having kids. Even now after twenty five years, she thinks I’m going to leave her for a younger woman who can give me children.”

“Maybe, if you tell her about the girls and let her meet them— get to know them. It might help her. Serena and I have a one year old daughter and we are expecting another baby. Maybe having grandchildren to dote on will help.”

“I don’t know. To me, telling her I have children— something she couldn’t give me—will only hurt her.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Elray responded. “I’m not a therapist. But I disagree. It will show her that you wouldn’t leave her, if that’s her biggest fear. You could have done that when your children were born. Will you think about meeting with Serena and Star for now? Lorinda doesn’t have to know about it. I think your daughters deserve to know that their father didn’t willingly leave them.”

Randy didn’t answer him for a long time; he sat with his face in his hands. When he did look at Elray, he had tears in his eyes. It was obvious that Randy Greene had suffered just as much over the years as his daughters had. It was time to heal all the hurt that had come from a relationship —that should have never been in the first place.

“Do you have a picture of my granddaughter?”

Nodding, Elray reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. He took a picture of Raiena out and handed it to him. Randy took the picture from him looking at the beautiful little girl on it. He ran his finger across the picture several times, as if he were trying to etch every detail into his memory.

“She’s beautiful. Do hazel eyes run in your family?”

Elray smiled, “She has my eyes. No one in my family except my grandmother and I have them. She got them from her mother who got them from her mother. I

seem to be the only boy in the family that inherited that feature. Of course, my mother had five boys before my little sister was born. So, I guess the gene got tired of waiting on a girl.”

“Elray, let me think about it. As much as I want to be a part of my daughter’s life, I don’t want to hurt my wife.”

Elray understood, so there was no point in telling him that he and Serena’s wedding was next week. This poor man had enough to deal with. The guilt of missing his daughter’s wedding was something he could spare him. Besides, after everything he just told him, as happy as Serena would be about finding her dad—it was going to hurt her to know that her mother deliberately lied about her father not wanting to be with her or her sister. Her wedding wasn’t the place to have old family wounds reopened. They never did order lunch. Elray offered, but Randy turned him down; neither was in the mood to eat after the emotional roller coaster they had just ridden.



The week leading up to the wedding—thankfully went smoothly. The wedding was going to be a small intimate affair with friends and family. However, the reception would be lavish. Elray didn’t want his wedding to be a circus of media frenzy. For him, this was a sacred moment, something he only wanted to share with those he cherished in life. Serena spent the night at his parent’s

house—as did Raïena—at his mother’s insistence. Kimble, Dillon, Trent and Darnell stayed the night with him.

He spoke with Serena’s dad briefly and he still hadn’t made a decision. Placing him on the back burner, he enjoyed his last night as a bachelor. Rayvon and Rayden stopped by briefly, but neither stayed the night. A limo was picking them up to take them to the church at noon. Though they all stayed up well into the night, he was still the first one up. Alex had breakfast sent over for them—an assortment of fruits, eggs, bacon, sausage, waffles, grits and potatoes, and to wash it all down—milk, orange and apple juice.

Sitting at the kitchen table eating a full breakfast of eggs, bacon, fried potatoes and waffles, Elray wondered what was going on at his mom’s. He knew that his sister had arranged to have their hair done at the house, instead of going to the shop. Venice’s sister was also coming over to do everybody’s make up. But what was going through Serena’s head. He hoped she was as happy as he was. Never had he thought he would be this happy to give up bachelorhood. Even though he had grown up around many happy couples, his parents being his best example. He had always enjoyed the opposite sex entirely too much to think he would be happy with just one. After his brother Dillon married Venice, he tried to tell him. So did Kimble when he fell in love with his sister, Alex.

Kimble was an even bigger player than him, so he should have known if the love bug could straighten him out and make him fly right...it was possible to happen to anybody. Still heavy in thought, Kimble walks in the kitchen.

“El dog I should have known you would be the first one up,” Kimble said taking a plate off the counter and filling it with fruit.

Elray waited until he was done and seated across the table from him before he replied, “Morning, Kim. Before everybody comes down...I just want to tell you thanks.”

“For what?”

“A lot of things, I know I’ve said sorry a million times for how I acted when you married Alex, but I just wanted to tell you again how happy I am you’re part of my family and my friend.”

“Love makes you do crazy things, El. I always understood why you didn’t want me and Alex together. I always knew it wasn’t personal. Hell, I’m glad all her brothers love her so much. It kept her from falling in love with the wrong guy. You know I never told you this before, but Alex told me when she was thirteen that I was going to be her husband one day. I laughed in her face...but truthfully, I can now admit I loved her even then. Oh, I fought it like hell. I am so lucky she was smarter than me.”

Kimble got up from the table taking his plate with him, “I’m going to hit the shower before everybody else gets up and uses all the hot water.”

Elray stood and he and his brother in law embraced. Today was going to prove to be very emotional for him. Taking the stairs two at a time, he went into his room to call Serena. She answered on the first ring, “Morning.”

“Good morning, yourself, Mrs. Carter.”

“Not until three o’clock this afternoon, Mr. Carter.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m still in your old room lying down. Raiona slept in the room with your mom and dad last night.”

“I missed having you here with me.”

“I missed being there. Elray, I don’t know if I’m ready for tonight. Why do we have to have such a large reception?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you; I promise. I felt strongly about keeping our wedding private, but the reception photos are going to be featured in several magazines I’ve done spreads for. And baby I told you—I was featured two years in a row as Atlanta’s top bachelor. They always do a special spread when one gets married. They did the same thing when my sister married Kimble—who was also a featured bachelor.”

“I know. I’m just not comfortable being the center of so much attention.”

“I tell you what, we’ll leave as soon as we can, okay.”

“Okay.”

“I better let you go. My mother and sister will most likely be there any minute to start getting you ready. I can’t wait to see you walking down that aisle. Serena.... just remember no matter what—I love you so much.”

“I know that, I love you too. Bye.”



Elray was right on the money. Not ten minutes later his mother, sister and sister in law went into action. Alex arranged for breakfast to be delivered to her mother’s house, also. While everyone else ate, Serena watched. Her stomach was nervous enough without putting food on it. Her soon to be mother in law; however insisted that for the baby’s sake she at-least eat some fruit and have a cup of juice.

Since her mother wasn’t completely recovered, Elray’s mother insisted on doing everything. Mrs. Carter asked for her input, but refused to actually let her do anything. The limo was scheduled to pick her mother and Starlett up at twelve fifteen. Even though her mother no longer had the nurse coming on a regular basis, Elray had arranged for her to be with Starlett today to assist her. Starlett was her maid of honor. She was so glad Jerry was conveniently out of town for the weekend. Supposedly, he was away on business. She was thrilled, because she didn’t want him at her wedding anyway.

Everything was done; hair, makeup and nails. As she stood in the floor length mirror looking at herself, Serena felt like a princess in a fairy tale. She barely recognized the woman standing before her. She wore an off-white semi cathedral satin gown with a beaded bodice; it was breathtaking. Never in her life had she seen anything so beautiful. In her heart, she knew she would never forget this moment. Tears formed in her eyes as her hands smoothed her dress.

Coming to her side to blot her eyes, Alex said, “Hey none of that. You’re going to ruin your make up before you even get to the church.”

Still crying she responded, “I’m sorry...I’m just so happy and this dress—oh my... this dress is so beautiful.”

“Come on lets go downstairs. The limos are waiting.”

Taking one final look before turning to leave the room, Serena asked, “Where are the kids?”

Alex responded, “Mona and Trina are in charge of making sure none of the kids get dirty and making sure they get to the church.”

“Oh okay good. One less thing for me to worry about,” she said walking down the stairs behind Alex.



Serena couldn’t ever remember being so nervous in her entire life. While sitting in the small room in back of the church that was assigned to the bride and

bridesmaids her heart was beating so rapidly—she actually felt faint. Even racing in motorcycle races had never jumbled her nerves this badly. Being a girly girl was way more work than she felt it was worth. It was much easier being a plain girl with simple needs. Lucky for her, her man liked her just the way she was. After today, she couldn't wait for their lives to get back to normal. She knew she was attractive, but spending overly large amounts of time on her appearance was something she just wasn't into. Applying makeup and styling your hair shouldn't, in her opinion, be a lengthy process. Fifteen, twenty minutes tops. Starlett was the glam queen in her family. She had always considered her amazingly beautiful, but when her sister and mother walked into the room and saw her for the first time in her wedding dress, their expressions made her feel like the most beautiful girl in the world.

Watching Starlett and her mother crying reminded Serena that no matter what may have transpired between them, they were family and they loved each other. She saw everyone as they discreetly left the room to give her some time alone with her mother and sister. Placing a gentle kiss on her cheek, her mother told her just how beautiful she was and how very proud and happy for her she was. Starlett did the same. After a knock on the door, one of the ushers stuck his head in to tell her mother it was time for her to be escorted to her seat.

Hugging her again before leaving the room, her mother said, “I’m glad you found happiness, baby.”

Trying to keep from crying again herself and destroying her makeup, Serena just nodded. Starlett also left to give her a minute alone before her big day.

Star knew her sister so well and understood just how nervous she was. It wasn’t that Serena was shy—this just wasn’t her thing. She wondered if Elray knew and if he appreciated how much Serena had changed for him. Since coming home, the only time she rode her motorcycle was when she rode with him and she hadn’t raced at all. Bikes meant the world to her. Had since they were little kids and she got her first bike; a PK Ripper. Imagine being a girl with the coolest bike around. She was the envy of every kid in the neighborhood.

Even back then, she could do tricks on her bike that some of the boys in the neighborhood couldn’t do. Standing in the rear of the church looking inside, Star remembered when Serena’s bike got stolen from the park. Everybody around there knew her PK Ripper; a boy down the street who had a crush on her told them who stole Serena’s bike. Serena went by herself to get it back. The older boy who’d stolen it, who also happened to be the brother of a local gang member, was so impressed with her courage, that he gave the bike back and put the word out that nobody was to touch her again.

A lot had changed in their lives since then. The one thing that hadn't changed was their desire for happiness. Something Star was glad her baby sister had found.



It was time for the ceremony to begin. Elray stood listening to the music for his queue to enter. In less than an hour, he would be married to the one woman he loved more than anything in the world. After today, their worlds would be forever linked by their marital bonds. Kimble who was standing behind him placed his hand on his shoulder, letting him know that it was time.

Taking a deep breath, he began walking in the direction of the alter, to his destiny, as the music echoed around him. Not that he was nervous, but he chose not to march with the other groomsmen. The wedding procession seemed to take longer in his mind today than it had during the rehearsal. Serena was the person he wanted to see coming down the aisle to him. Finally, the last couple was in place and the door closed while the bride to be was prepared to make her grand entrance.

As the doors opened, the music began when the bride appeared in the door. The microphone was handed to Alex. She began singing as Serena descended down the aisle. Elray's father had offered to escort her; she declined. He was both proud and humbled that she chose to begin her life with him by freely giving

herself since her own father couldn't give her away. It pained him not to be able to tell her about her dad, but he had given Randy his word. Besides he wanted her wedding memories to be happy ones, not ones of her mother and father having a confrontation after all these years.

Breathtaking didn't begin to describe how Serena looked walking down the aisle toward him. Stepping out to meet her so they could make the final approach together, she placed her hand in his outstretched one. Before taking another step, he brought her hand to his lips to place a kiss on her palm. Then she caressed his cheek with the same hand.

Elray had already spoken to the minister about omitting the part where he asked who gives this woman in holy matrimony. Serena handed her sister her bouquet. She and Elray were now turned to face each other holding hands. He heard his daughter Raena, let out a happy laugh and they both turned to look at her sitting with her grandparent's. Turning back the minister started the ceremony.

After all vows had been said, the minister instructed them to light their unity candles before telling Elray he could now kiss his bride. The kiss he bestowed on her this time was special. It was sweet, gentle and full of promise. Not like his usual kisses that were meant to devour and fill her with passion.

Applause resounded in the church as Elray and Serena were presented to family and friends gathered there as Mr. and Mrs. Elray Carter.

Elray knew that the pictures were a bit much but he was extremely proud of how gracious Serena was being as she posed for the cameras. She had whispered to him several times that she had never taken so many pictures in her life. Seeing her mother was visibly tired, he was glad when the photographer said they were done until they went to the reception. Coming out of the minister's office, Serena turned to him and said, "Is there someone standing in the balcony?" He placed his hands over his eyes to get a better look but before he could say anything, Serena said, "Never mind it must be my imagination. There's nothing there now."

Standing beside her, Elray told her, "I'm going to check and make sure all the limo's are outside waiting."

Leaving Serena and the rest of the wedding party, with the exception of Kimble and Dillon, he headed to the door. Outside the door, he looked for Serena's dad. He'd seen him standing in the balcony.

"I'm over here," he heard Randy say as he walked past the rear of the church.

Turning, he saw him leaning against the wall, "What are you doing here? I didn't tell you we were getting married today."

"I'm a very resourceful man when I want to know something. I had you checked out. It wasn't too hard. You're well known, especially here in Atlanta."

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

He heard a sadness in Randy’s voice as he spoke, “Just because I couldn’t be a part of her day doesn’t mean I didn’t want to be here.” Motioning to Kimble and Dillon he asked, “Is it safe to talk in front of them.”

“Yes.”

“I thought about everything you said. I want to talk to my baby. I’m asking you to set it up. After I talk to her and her sister, we’ll decide together how to tell my wife and their mother.”

“I can do that.”

“I want to talk to Serena and Star today.”

“No.”

Elray hadn’t blinked or moved an inch. Randy should be able to tell from his stance and demeanor that he wasn’t a man used to changing his mind. Still he tried, “Please at least let me talk to Serena today. Can you think of a better wedding present for her?”

Playing the emotional card—that was clever of him.

“I’ll see. Where can I reach you?”

Randy handed him his number again, “Take this. I don’t want you to say you couldn’t remember the number. You can text me if I don’t answer. He disappeared

behind the building. Opening the door of the church, Elray, Kimble and Dillon turned as they heard the roar of a motorcycle going down the road.

Inside the church everyone prepared to go to the reception. It wouldn't be hard getting Randy in to the Ritz Carlton in Buckhead with all the guests that would be present. That was the easy part, how would Serena feel about seeing her dad, especially today.

Hoping he was making the right decision, Elray enlisted the help of Kimble and Dillon to facilitate a meeting between his wife and her father. After all, her father was right if everything turned out right this would be the greatest wedding present he could possibly give her. She was the one that had expressed a desire to find and talk with her dad; he was just doing her wishes. Now that they were married her wishes were his to make come true.

Chapter Fourteen

If Serena thought the non-stop flashing of the camera was bad at her wedding, she was in for a major shock. Getting out of the limo at the Ritz Carlton must have been what it was like to show up at the Grammy's or BET awards or something. How did he do it, she hated all this attention. Funny, as much as she hated this media circus she couldn't help admit being proud to be the woman in his life. He was, after all, the object of so many female fantasies. Being voted the most eligible bachelor in Atlanta two years in a row, was a buzz in the news itself.

Dancing with her husband after all the pictures and a brief interview, Serena felt like she was floating on a cloud. Nothing could penetrate her happiness. Well, maybe getting a professional racing contract. Even though she hadn't raced since she came home, she still hoped to return to it one day. She hadn't said anything to Elray, mainly because she didn't want him to feel that she wasn't content with her life with him. She knew he wouldn't be happy if she did return to racing. Especially, now with them having another baby.

"I hope you're thinking about later tonight," Elray whispered in her ear when he walked past her.

“I am,” she lied. Well it was a partial lie. While she wasn’t thinking about later, she certainly was anticipating it.

Talking to Mrs. Carter and Alex, Serena met Elray’s gaze across the room. He was talking with Darnell and some other people she didn’t know. He winked at her just as Kimble handed him something. He looked at it and then the two of them left together. “Wow Serena, you and El really got a lot of gifts,” Alex commented.

“They must have come from friends of Elray’s, because I seriously doubt I know that many people.”

Alex laughed. “Whatever. Kimble and I will take everything to my parent’s house. I think that’s where El said the gift opening will be.”

“It is,” Serena said scanning the room. Alex must have noticed because she asked, “Who are you looking for?”

“I haven’t seen my mother in awhile.”

“I think Starlett took your mother home. When I was talking to them earlier, your mom was saying how tired she was.”

Serena nodded. Why would her mom leave without saying goodnight first? When she located Starlett across the room, she excused herself to go talk with her sister.

“Hey Star. Alex said you took Mama home.”

“Oh yeah I did. She was tired, but she didn’t want you to worry about her on your wedding day. She told me to tell you she loves you and she’ll see us at the gift opening.”

“Was Jerry there or did you leave her there by herself?”

Starlett shook her head. “See that’s exactly why Mama didn’t want you to know she was leaving. The nurse is staying the night with her. Stop worrying about Mama. This is your night. Jerry is the last person you should be thinking about,” Starlett responded then walked off with her boyfriend when he asked her to dance.

Watching the two of them dance together; Serena hoped her sister was happy. She and her boyfriend had been together for a few years now, but there was no mention of marriage. She knew that Star originally started dating him for his money. However, she really felt that over the years, she had come to care for him. He was one of the few guys Star had dated over the years that she actually liked.

Now her new husband’s brothers were something else. None of the Carter brothers brought dates. Women of all ages were flocking around them like bees to honey in hopes of becoming the newest Carter bride. Kimble’s brothers also were stirring quite a bit of interest, although it was plain to see that his older brother Keith wasn’t interested. Serena remembered Alex telling her that Keith had a

thing for one of the writers at his father's publishing company. A woman named, Miracle.

One thing was certain her life wouldn't be dull being a part of this family. She could amuse herself for hours just watching silly women throw themselves at the unmarried male members of the family. It wasn't that she didn't understand. It was rare to find a family that had absolutely no men that were not downright gorgeous. Mona said it best, "There should be a law against that many fine brothers in one family."

It was a good thing both Alex and Venice were secure in their husbands love, because women were also throwing themselves at their husbands. All she knew was, those hoochie's better not try that with Elray. She had never fought over a man in her life, but it wasn't beneath her to give out an old fashioned but kicking. It was the principle of the thing. Now that Elray was her husband that changed things. Legally, he was hers. She had papers on him and vice versa. Oh well, for now she planned on having a good time just as her sister suggested. Locating her husband across the room, she made her way over to him.

Serena was still talking with Elray and some of his family members, when someone started the electric slide. Trent grabbed her hand and headed for the dance floor. Elray joined her minutes later. Even Mr. and Mrs. Carter joined in. She was having such a good time that all the people there she didn't know, were

forgotten for now. It had been a long day and she was actually getting tired. She didn't say anything to Elray. Instead, she missed a step on purpose so she could go sit down.

Starlett appeared at her side. "Hey you. Are you okay?"

Nodding, she replied, "I'm fine just tired."

"Are you sure? Should I go get Elray?"

Looking at her sister Serena saw the genuine concern. Placing her hand on her arm she tried again to give her assurance, "Now whose being a mother hen? Star, I'm fine."

"Okay. I'm going to run to the bathroom and check my makeup," Starlett said leaning over to give her a hug. "I love you."

"I love you too. Now stop before you make me cry."



Outside in the hall, Starlett was making her way toward the ladies room when she heard someone say hello. Turning in the direction of the voice, she said, "Hello." There was obvious confusion in her face when she added, "Do I know you?"

"No reason you should. We've never met before."

"Are you sure—you look so familiar to me."

Randy wanted to say of course I look familiar; I'm your daddy but he didn't instead he answered, "Yeah, I'm sure. You look real nice. Are you out on a date?"

Shaking her head Starlett said, "No, my sister just got married."

"Oh. Well I won't keep you. I just wanted to say hello."

"Okay, by the way my names Starlett, Starlett James."

"Nice to meet you, Starlett James. I hope to see you again."

Before Starlett could tell him he didn't give his name, he had already begun walking away. Deciding to drop it, she went ahead into the ladies room. After checking her hair and makeup she returned to the reception. She was just in time, Elray was just about to remove Serena's garter belt.



Even though Elray's brother Dillon was his best man Serena was seated in Darnell's lap for the removal of her garter belt, because he was her best friend. She laughed as Elray's head disappeared underneath her dress in search of her garter belt. It was all she could do to remain seated as he licked her leg just above her garter before pulling it off with his teeth. Why couldn't he have just removed it with his hands? It would have been more appropriate. He should be ashamed of himself doing that in front of his parents. But it was obvious from the wicked little grin on his face, as he swung the garter around on his finger, that he wasn't the least bit ashamed of what he'd done.

Now it was time for her to toss the bouquet and him to toss her garter. First, all the eligible woman lined up to try and catch her bouquet. After tossing the bouquet over her head, she turned to see who would catch it. To her surprise, Heather stepped out of the crowd of women and caught her bouquet. Heather was her roommate from when she lived in Arizona. She couldn't believe she was there. She was so happy to see her. She had talked to her by phone several times since returning to Atlanta, but she didn't think she would see her in person anytime soon.

"Heather," was all she was able to say before they embraced. Tears of joy were streaming down her face now. Today couldn't be more perfect, at least that's what she thought before she heard another, "Hello, Serena." She couldn't believe it. Heather's boyfriend, Jordan was also there. The three of them stood there holding each other like long lost siblings that had just been reunited.

When she, Heather and Jordan finally parted, Elray stepped up and shook hands with Jordan and hugged Heather. "It's great to finally meet you both."

Confused Serena asked, "What do you mean I never talked about Heather or Jordan."

"Uncle Walt. When you gave me your hospital bills for Raiena, I had Uncle Walt do some checking."

"Why would you do that, Elray?"

“Because, I wanted to know who to thank for helping you and Raiena out and keeping you safe.”

Once again, as the tears rolled down her face, Serena thought to herself she never cried before meeting Elray. Not that it mattered, because she loved him. He always went out of his way to make her happy. Giving up racing seemed like such a small thing to do to make him happy when he did so much for her.

Thanks to Elray’s generosity, Heather and Jordan would be in town until the end of the week. They made plans to get together after the gift opening. Serena didn’t want to go anywhere right away for their honeymoon. But Elray had booked the same room in the Ritz Carlton that they stayed in the night he proposed. Serena was more than a little embarrassed about leaving since most of the guests were still in attendance. Everybody knew why they were leaving.



Elray was nibbling on her ear in the elevator going up to the room.

“Serena,” he said, “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Most of them are going to go home and do the same thing.”

“How can I think straight with you doing that.”

“You don’t need to think, just enjoy.”

Swinging her easily into his arms as he stepped out of the elevator, Elray walked the short distance to the room with Serena nibbling his ear. Kissing her soundly

and thoroughly he asked before opening the room to the suite, “How can I think straight with you doing that?”

Returning his grin, she whispered, “Don’t think, just enjoy.”

Entering the suite and kicking the door shut, Elray crossed the room heading straight for the bedroom. Randy cleared his throat to make his presence known before things got embarrassing. Because from what he’d just witnessed they would not have been coming back out of that room again anytime tonight.

“What are you doing here? I told you I’d call you.”

“I know—but you were taking too long.”

Serena slid down into a standing position beside Elray before she asked, “Who are you?”

Before Randy could answer, Elray asked, “Can I get a moment alone with my wife?”

Nodding, Randy walked into the bedroom leaving a confused Serena to talk with her new husband. Now more than ever he wished he’d dealt with Randy sooner. He hadn’t called Randy because he decided he didn’t want to overwhelm Serena with too many surprises. Heather and Jordan were a good wedding gift, but her dad was here as well. Due to her condition, getting her overly upset wasn’t something he wanted to risk. However, not telling her who Randy was would probably upset her more now since she seen him.

“Serena, you might want to sit down. I’ll get you some water before we talk.”

“You’re scaring me, Elray, what’s wrong?”

Walking over to the sink, he filled a glass with water and handed it to her when he sat down.

“Nothing is wrong. Actually, I think you are going to be very happy. But I need to call Star—wait here okay.”

“Okay.”

Walking into the bedroom where Randy was waiting, Elray shot a malevolent glance his way. He wasn’t too pleased with him; he had specifically asked him to wait until he contacted him. Did he do that? No, he just shows up.

“I thought I told you I’d call.”

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention to contact you. I just wanted to see her. But then I talked to Starlett and I knew I had to tell them tonight.”

“You talked to Star already?”

“Relax, she doesn’t know who I am. I saw her in the hall downstairs. Lorinda was already gone, so I felt it was safe to say hello.”

Pulling out his cell phone, Elray called his brother Trent and asked if Starlett was still down stairs. “I’m not sure let me look for her and I’ll call you right back.”

A few seconds later, Trent called back, “Yes, she’s here.”

“Good. Can you bring her up to our suite without alarming her? Make sure you tell her boyfriend that you will bring her home later.”

As instructed, Trent delivered Starlett to Elray and Serena’s bridal suite. As soon as Trent closed the door, Star asked Serena, “What was going on?”

To which Serena replied, “I don’t have a clue.”

Elray asked Randy to join them. He sat next to Serena and Star, while Randy stood nervously in front of them. This wasn’t exactly how he envisioned spending his wedding night, but he did have the rest of his life with Serena. One night of sacrifice wasn’t the end of the world.

Starlett smiled at Randy recognizing him from earlier, “Hi.”

“You know him, Star?” Serena asked.

“Not really we met downstairs earlier this evening. I thought he looked familiar to me—but we’d never met.”

The way Randy was fidgeting it was obvious he didn’t know where to begin. He stood there for a moment longer then said, “You both have so much of your mother in you when she was younger.”

“You know our mother,” they both asked.

“Very well. We haven’t seen each other in a long time though.”

Serena and Star looked at each other. Serena asked the question her facial expression told him she already knew the answer too, “What’s your name?”

“Randy.”

Neither Serena nor Star breathed for several seconds. Did he say Randy as in Randy Greene their father? No, he couldn't be that Randy. Could this really be their dad? Had all their prayers to find him finally come true? This was too much. Serena's world was spinning around as she looked at him for signs of herself and Star. It was a good thing she was already sitting down. For the second time in her life, Serena fainted.

Since Elray was seated next to her watching her; he was prepared. When she slumped forward he caught her laying her back against the couch they were seated on. Starlett was still sitting there staring at Randy.

“Starlett are you alright?” Elray asked her.

She didn't answer verbally but she did nod. She was looking down at Serena. She had confided to him that finding their father was more important to Serena than it was to her. It wasn't that she didn't want to know him. She just didn't handle rejection well. It would have been too painful to find him and be rejected; than not find him and never know for sure how he felt.

Elray understood how they both felt and hoped he was doing the right thing for both his wife and his new sister-in-law.



Slowly coming to, Serena's eyes began to focus on the face in front of her, she realized it was her father. Having dreamed of this moment for so long she would have thought that questions would be pouring from her mouth, yet she couldn't think of one single word to say.

Tears began streaming down her face. Gently, she laid her hand on her father's face. Touching the face of the man she dreamed of finding. The man she had wanted a part of her life, since she was a small child. Just as quickly, she pulled her hand away. This was also the man that had abandoned her and her sister.

"Why?"

Her father looked puzzled for a moment. Then she saw a light of recognition in his eyes and she knew he sensed exactly what she was asking. The unspoken question of why he hadn't been a father to his children?

"Starlett, Serena no matter what, I want you both to know I have always loved you. I stayed away because that's what was best."

"Best for who—certainly not us," her sister spoke without looking directly at him.

"There's a lot you girls don't know. Things were very complicated with your mother and I. She asked me to stay away and I respected her wishes."

“I don’t believe you,” Serena said. “Why would Mama ask you to stay away from us? Mama loved you. You broke her heart when you left us. This doesn’t make sense.”

“I was married. I still am.”

“In other words, our mother was nothing to you but your piece on the side.”

“No, I cared about your mother. I still do, but like I said things were complicated.”

Elray picked up her hand, “Baby, I think you should hear your dad out. Don’t judge him. Just listen. I truly believe he has suffered just as much as all of you.”

Snatching her hand from his, Serena turned to him, “Suffered! He’s gone on with his happy life with his other family. He hasn’t had to watch someone he loves drink themselves into a stupor almost every day, because of a broken heart. He hasn’t had to wonder what it was about yourself that was so bad—that your own daddy didn’t want you.”

By now, Serena was up pacing back and forth. All this time he was married living happily with another family, while she and her sister struggled. Her mother had been right all along. She tried to protect her from this. But she wouldn’t listen. God she was feeling so stupid. There wasn’t anything he could say that she wanted to hear.

“You know what; I don’t want to hear it. You can just leave. This is my wedding night and I don’t want to deal with this.”

Having said everything she planned to, Serena stormed past Randy into the bedroom slamming the door.



Starlett hadn’t said anything else. She was still sitting on the couch stunned that her father was even there. Elray stood to go after Serena, but Starlett stopped him.

“Let me talk to her El. She’s so upset. I’ve never seen her like this. This isn’t what she expected,” turning to her father she said, “Don’t leave. You really hurt her. But I know my sister; she won’t be able to sleep until she talks to you. She just needs some time to calm down.”

Randy nodded, “Okay this wasn’t what I wanted either. It wasn’t my intention to upset either of my girls. But after seeing you again after all these years, I couldn’t walk away again. Not until you both knew just how much I love you.”

“I’m not the one you’ll have to convince. I’ll be back,” she responded walking off toward the bedroom.

Starlett entered the room without knocking.

“Are you okay, Serena?”

This was new for Starlett. Serena had always been the strong one. Now she was falling apart. She was really taking this hard. Sitting on the bed next to her, Star asked again, “Are you okay?”

Shaking her head Serena replied, “No, Star I’m not. I just can’t believe that Dad has been living all this time happily with another family. Apparently, not giving us a second thought.”

“Serena you were the one who needed to find answers. Maybe you should come back out with me and talk to Daddy. I mean it must have taken a lot for him to come here.”

“Don’t be a fool Star. He’s only here because I was looking for him and he probably didn’t want to chance his other family finding out about us.”

“If you really believe that’s true, shouldn’t we talk to him so he can leave?”

Star hoped that Serena would see that she was right. She should talk to him. “Hell Serena, you’ve waited your whole life for Daddy to explain why he wasn’t there for us. You may as well listen. Will it even matter that everything that come’s out of his mouth will probably be a lie, just to keep us away from his precious family?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Good. Now let’s go back in there before Daddy either leaves or your husband throws him out for upsetting you.”

“Ok, but let me wash my face.”

When they walked back into the other room, Randy was still there as Star requested. He and Elray were talking when Serena and Starlett approached them. She noted that Elray moved back. He wasn't a fool. He knew his wife well enough by now to know—Randy wasn't going to have an easy time. Starlett couldn't help but think. No matter what transpired here tonight, someone would be hurt.

“I'm ready to talk now,” her sister said.

Randy began to speak.

“Girls, maybe it would be better if we talked again in a few days.”

“You came here saying how you love us. And you seem to have convinced my new husband that you've suffered, too. I want to hear how. Because from where I'm standing, I don't see it.”

“Serena, you are so much like your mother used to be. But it's obvious that you are not going to accept anything I say.”

“Fine, then answer my questions. Why are you really here?”

“Because...I really wanted to see you.”

“Really, was that before or after I started looking for you?”

“Both.”

“Honesty. Let's see how honest you really are. How could you walk out on your own flesh and blood?”

Starlett wasn't participating in the conversation, but she was listening very intensely.

Her dad rubbed his hands down his face before answering, "It wasn't easy, but my wife needed me."

"Oh yes your wife. I suppose you love her."

"Yes."

"If that's true, why were you with my mother? More importantly, is it really that easy for you to just spread babies around—then walk out on them?"

"You and your sister are the only children I have."

That wasn't the answer either of them expected. Starlett were amazed to learn that their father never had other kids—not even with his wife. And she was sure her sister was as well.

"What," came from both Serena and Star?

"I don't have other children, just the two of you."



Elray saw the single tear that slide down Randy's face. He hoped that his wife and sister in law would let go of their anger long enough to hear what their father had to say. His revelation clearly took some of the steam out of them, but he wasn't sure it was enough.

“Randy, I can’t do this. Not now...not tonight. Can we meet in a couple of days”, Serena asked.

“Can I ask you to do something for me?”

“What is it?”

“Don’t tell your mother about me until after we talk. She won’t be happy about this. And I’d like you both to hear what I have to say before your mother finds out I’m back in the picture.”

Serena and Starlett looked at each other both nodding, “Sure. How do we contact you?”

“Your husband knows how to contact me. If I don’t hear from you in a few days, then I’ll be contacting you.”

“We’ll call,” Starlett assured him.

Chapter Fifteen

After Randy left and Trent came back for Starlett to take her home, Elray undressed his wife and put her to bed. Emotionally, she was drained. Finding her father hadn't been the happy reunion he'd hoped for. Going through their suite, Elray turned off all the lights. He undressed and laid down next to Serena, gently pulling her into his arms.

Coming from a close loving family and understanding how his wife was feeling wasn't easy. The one thing he did understand was he loved her. When she hurt; he hurt. Originally, he set out to find her dad to make her happy. Now he wasn't sure that would ever happen. Finding out that he was married and had been this entire time, hurt more than finding him should have made her happy.

She looked up into his eyes. Knowing what she wanted, Elray lowered his head to kiss her. It wasn't an impassioned kiss, it was a kiss meant to sooth her and let her know he was there for her. Even though it was his wedding night, he could wait to make love. He had the rest of his life with her.

"Are you okay?"

“No, I don’t think I am, Elray. My mother tried to tell me and I wouldn’t listen. She told me finding my father would only hurt me.”

“Baby, that’s because you don’t know everything. Wait and talk to your father. I believe once you hear what he has to say, you’ll at-least understand. Even, if you don’t forgive him.”

“Why don’t you tell me? It’s obvious you already know?”

“It isn’t my place to tell you. You, your sister and your father need to work this out. I’ll help you through all this no matter what.”

“I know. How did I get so lucky to have a man in my life as wonderful as you for a husband?” she asked.

“I guess you got it like that. Though, I feel like the lucky one to have a woman as beautiful and humble in my life as you. I know you’re with me because you love me. Not because of how I look or how much money I have.”

Serena didn’t say anything and he silently wondered what she was thinking. Several minutes passed while they continued to hold each other before he felt her tears drop on his chest.

“What is it sweetheart?”

“There are so many questions with answers that will hurt so many people. Why did my mom and dad have to be so selfish?”

“Baby, I can’t answer that for you but I still believe once you talk to your dad things will be a little clearer.”

Lifting her head and looking at her husband she said, “I never used to cry.”

Elray’s heart went out to her. Gently he placed a kiss on her forehead and replied, “Its okay, baby. Then you’re long overdue.”



Serena finally fell into an exhausted sleep. When she woke the next morning, she was alone. Slipping from the bed, she walked into the other room of the suite where she found Elray standing looking out the window. Walking up behind him, she slipped her arms around his waist pulling herself up against him laying her head on his back.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You needed the sleep. How are you feeling? Are you hungry?”

“I’m starving.”

“I’ll order room service.”

As Elray turned from gazing out the window, Serena walked over to the sofa and sat down. Room service arrived and he sat and watched as Serena devoured her breakfast, then started in on his. Her mood had improved greatly from the night before.

“I’m glad you haven’t lost your appetite.”

“I hate eating so much, but I can’t help it.”

“I’m enjoying watching you. It’s not like I had the opportunity during your first pregnancy,” he said reaching over and placing his hand on her stomach. “I also love seeing all the changes your body is going through.”

“That’s because I’m not really showing much. Other than the slight pucker in my stomach no one would know.”

Serena smiled at Elray while sipping her juice. He probably meant every word he’d just said. Even though he really had no clue what he was in for with her weight. Her appetite was continuing to increase each day. With Raiena, she ate enough to feed two grown men. But luckily she’d lost all the weight she gained during that pregnancy.

After breakfast she sat in her husband’s lap placing kisses along his bare chest. Their wedding night hadn’t exactly turned out the way either of them had expected. And quite frankly, she was feeling extremely sexually charged or in plain terms - horny. Within seconds, she felt the proof of her husband’s desire for her. This made her smile.

Without disturbing her position, Elray leaned back to grab the phone. She listened as he called downstairs. He then informed the hotel that they wouldn’t be checking out until much later and they did not want to be disturbed. Next, he called his parents to let them know he and Serena wouldn’t be by until it was time

for their gift opening later that evening. Placing the phone back in the cradle, he picked her up and took her back into the bedroom of the suite.

She and Elray spent the rest of the day exploring each other at their leisure. By the time Serena got into the car that evening to go to his parent's house for their gift opening, she was so tired all she really wanted to do was crawl in bed and sleep for a week. Driving down I-75, she kept dosing off so she asked, "Can you just wake me up when we get there?"

Glancing in her direction, he responded, "I'm sorry. If you want, I'll call Mama and say we can't make it."

"No, I'll be okay. I can always sneak up to your old room and lay down after all the gifts are open."

"That might not be such a good idea."

"Why?"

"Cause I might be inclined to join you and we won't be sleeping."

She shook her head and smiled before closing her eyes. Sometime later Serena felt someone gently shaking her. Opening her eyes, she stretched.

"That was too fast."

"I promise we will leave as soon as we can so you can get some sleep."

Leaning over in the seat she kissed her husband and said, "I've had enough sleep—what I want is you."

The fire she saw leap into his eyes didn't surprise her. Her words had done exactly what she'd meant them to do—make it as hard for him to be here as it was for her.

Walking into the family room, the first two people she noticed were her mom and her sister sitting talking with Mrs. Carter, and her new sister in law Venice. Her heart ached for her mom as she thought of her father again for the first time since last night.

This was a happy time so she didn't want to deal with thoughts of her dad; not now—not today. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply before starting across the room to get her baby, who was playing with her cousins Sherice and Kimble Jr. on the floor next to Alex. Raiena giggled with delight then held her arms up for her to pick her up.

Within an hour of their arrival, the last of the guests invited had arrived and the happy couple began opening their gifts. After all the gifts were opened, Serena couldn't believe all the things they received; especially the large amount of money. She began to feel tired again and asked Elray, "Would it be rude if we left before the guests."

"Not at all," he said.

Serena sat on the love seat next to the door. She waited for Elray while he told his mother that she wasn't feeling well. Star walked over to her and sat down.

“Hey, you guys got a lot of really nice stuff.”

Glancing over at her sister Serena responded, “Yeah we did.” She could always tell when something was bothering Star so she asked, “Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?”

“When are you going to go have your name changed?”

“The only thing I have to do really is go to the DNV to get a new drivers license. Uncle Walt is handling everything else for me. Now do you want to tell me what you really want to talk about? Wait let me guess...daddy.”

“Don’t get mad Serena please. Dad called me to see how you were.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. I told him I hadn’t talked to you. So how long are you going to wait before you call him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe tomorrow I’ll call him.”

Starlett hugged her and left. Leaning back into the softness of the seat, Serena closed her eyes. When she opened them again she saw that Elray was watching her from across the room. There was obvious concern in his eyes. She needed to talk with her dad and stop stressing herself out. His mistakes were just that, his mistakes, but she wasn’t going to allow them to keep upsetting her. A few minutes later, Elray came over and they left to go home.



As soon as he had her tucked into bed, Elray went downstairs to his office and called her dad. He answered right away.

“Randy, this is Elray. Can you talk?”

“Yeah is there something wrong?”

“Not really but I’m worried about Serena.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you where ever you want just tell me when and where.”

“I can’t get away until Friday. How is seven o’clock at Mandy’s?”

“I’ll be there. Call me if she needs anything okay.”

Before getting ready to go back upstairs, Elray checked his e-mail and returned any calls that he didn’t feel could wait. Slipping in bed beside Serena, he pulled her into his arms before falling asleep. When he awoke the next morning, he smelled breakfast. Walking into the kitchen his wife presented a very tantalizing site. Standing beside the stove, she wore a very revealing gown with a pair of sexy slip on shoes. He was fairly certain his sister had probably helped her pick them out. Making a mental note to thank Alex and Venice for helping his new wife shop; he leaned over her placing a kiss on her neck.

She must have been deep in thought and didn’t hear Elray coming up behind her. When he placed a kiss on her neck, it scared her causing her to react by hitting him with the spoon in her hand. Stepping back, surprised by Serena’s reaction, Elray looked at her seeing that he had truly frightened her. This was the

second time that Serena had shown fear that wasn't logical and this concerned him.

"Serena, I want you to tell me what's wrong with you. That's the second time you've freaked out on me when I touched you."

"You scared me that's all."

"That's obvious; the question is why when there isn't anybody here but you and me."

"Baby, I think you're reading too much into this," Serena said as she turned the stove off and led Elray over to the table. Pulling out a chair, she sat him down. She went back over to the stove and made a plate. Straddling him, she proceeded to feed him the breakfast she'd made.

For now his concerns were forgotten. He just wanted to enjoy their alone time. He still planned to get the questions answered that she thought she was cleverly dodging; just not at the expense of ruining a chance of having a wonderfully romantic breakfast, with his new wife. Raiena was spending the rest of the week with her cousins Kimble Jr. and Sherice at her Uncle Dillon's. Venice and Dillon had volunteered so Serena and Elray could have this first week as man and wife alone. Elray wanted to wait until Serena had the baby before they went on an official honeymoon. They were spending time doing everything from riding the bike to hanging out in the mall.

After having spent the better part of the day at the mall, Serena was extremely tired. Shopping had never really been her thing, where as Elray could live in the mall. As badly as she wanted to just go home and put her feet on the couch, when Elray asked if she wanted to go riding; all her energy seemed to return with a vengeance. As they rode along I-20, she realized just how much she missed riding on a regular basis. She also knew it would upset both her new husband and his family if she continued to ride, especially now in her condition.

Returning home late, well after ten, Serena told Elray, “Why don’t you go on up and start a bath while I make us something light to eat, before we go to bed.”

“Not to sleep I hope,” Elray teased as he walked up the stairs.

Shaking her head, she wondered if the man thought of anything else. As though he’d read her thoughts he answered, “Not when you’re around I don’t.”

Placing the sandwiches and iced tea on a tray, Serena made her way upstairs. Entering their bedroom, Elray took the tray from her and placed it on the dresser. Next, he proceeded to help her remove the sweater and jeans she was wearing before removing his own. Lying across their bed, they began eating the light dinner. Later, they went into the bathroom for their bath.

Bright and early the next morning Starlett called. “Are you ready to have a talk with Daddy? We can’t just keep putting it off, Serena.”

“I’m not putting it off. I just want to enjoy this week alone with Elray. I can deal with all that drama after this week.”

“Well I guess I can understand that, so enjoy your week. And don’t worry about Mama, I’ve got it covered.”

“Star, where are you? You aren’t at Mama’s alone are you?”

“No, Elray had the nurse come back for this week. I guess he knew you’d worry if you thought I was trying to take care of Mama by myself.”

“Star, don’t forget what I told you.”

“I didn’t. But even Jerry isn’t stupid enough to cross Elray and his brothers.”

“How can you say that after what he tried to do to me?”

She hadn’t heard Elray come in the house and dropped the phone when she heard him ask, “Who did what to you, baby?”

Nervously, she picked the phone up and told Starlett, “I’ll call you back.” She then turned her attention back to Elray, “Hey baby how long have you been standing there?”

“Not long—now who did what to you.”

“Nobody, we were just talking about my father,” she lied.

“Oh well get dressed.”

“Why. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise so get dressed now.”

Running up the stairs she thought to herself, thank God he had other things on his mind. It wouldn't have been so easy to get him off the subject if he hadn't been so preoccupied. Serena quickly dressed then met Elray back downstairs in the garage. For the second time that week, they took the motorcycle instead of one of the cars. Elray stopped the bike outside Dillon's shop. She couldn't help wonder what they were doing there. All her questions were answered when they entered to find Dillon, Rayvon, Rayden and Mr. Carter standing there with a cake and a banner that read, "Welcome back Serena."

Confused Serena asked, "Welcome back?"

"Elray said you wanted to come back to the team," Dillon explained.

She hadn't told her husband any such thing. But Lord knows it was the truth. She gave Elray the biggest hug whispering in his ear, "Thank you, baby."

Later that night Serena showed him just how grateful she was. Over the next few days, before she'd officially started back working at the shop, she spent time getting ready. She went by Darnell's to get her tools. She needed to get some overalls, too, that would expand with her as her pregnancy progressed.



After their week together, life began to get back to normal. Elray made arrangements with his mother and various family members to watch Raiena whenever he wasn't available. They visited as much as possible with Serena's

mother who was getting stronger by the day. Even though Serena had promised both Elray and Starlett that she would call her dad, she still hadn't done so. She was just too happy. Right now, talking to her dad wasn't going to do anything but upset her. Unbeknown to her, Elray had spoken to her father several times since their initial confrontation. Elray had offered to help Randy any way he could. He also made it very clear that he didn't want Serena upset.

Sunday after church the entire family went to the Carter's for dinner. She was still in awe with his family and their huge family gatherings. The subject of conversation that night seemed to revolve around the fact that she and Elray were having another baby. Sadly, she found herself wondering how many of his family members really knew about Renee. Elray had said he hadn't told anyone—but Kimble. But as close as these brothers were, it wouldn't surprise her if his other brothers knew too.

Wanting to see her mother, Serena asked Elray if he wouldn't mind leaving early so they could stop by her house. While Elray talked with his family, she got Raiena ready to leave. Pulling up in front of her mother's house, Elray's phone rang. "It's your dad," he told her.

"I don't want to talk to him right now."

"Okay. You get the baby and go on in the house. I'll talk to him."

As soon as Serena had gotten Raiena out of the car, Elray reached for his phone to call Randy back. He answered after two rings. She continued on into the house but he remained by the car to talk with her dad.

“What can I do for you, Randy?”

“I talked to Starlett earlier today and she told me that Serena had gotten into a **fight** some weeks ago. What can you tell me about it?”

“Nothing really. Serena won’t tell me anything, other than she got into it with some girl that’s she’s had some beef with before.”

“I think Starlett knows more than she’s telling. Truthfully, I think Starlett wants someone to make her tell what she knows.”

“Why do you think that?” Elray asked because he’d also gotten the impression that Starlett had been wanting to tell him something. He’d been preoccupied with his wedding and Renee to give it much thought.

“A gut feeling. Can you arrange for all of us to coincidentally run into each other?”

“I can do that. Give me a couple days and I’ll call you with all the details.”

Serena had left the door open, so he just walked into her mother’s house. Everyone, including Jerry was in the living room talking. Serena, her mother and Starlett were on the couch. Jerry was sitting in the chair next to the stairs and

Raiena was on the floor standing by the table. Looking up from the toy she'd been playing with, Raiena toddled over to her father to be picked up.

After picking up his daughter, Elray went to sit down on the couch next to his wife, briefly speaking to his mother in law and Starlett. Once he was seated, he looked in Jerry's direction, but didn't bother to acknowledge him. Jerry got up and went upstairs. His mother-in-law watched him leave then enjoyed the visit from her daughters as he sat quietly observing.

Serena and Starlett were so happy when their mom shared the news that she was going back to work part time. Each of the sisters beamed with pride for their mom. It was getting late and Serena wanted to get home to get a good night sleep. She wanted to be ready for her first day at the shop tomorrow. Since Starlett's boyfriend had dropped her off, Elray offered her a ride home as they left, she accepted.

On the way to Starlett's apartment, she and Elray chatted away about Jerry, but it didn't escape his notice that Serena never joined in. Once they were home, Elray gave Raiena her bath while Serena lay down on the couch to watch the news. The baby fell asleep in her dad's lap as he read her *The Three Little Bears*. Getting up from the rocking chair, Elray placed her in her crib and went downstairs to finish watching the news with Serena.

Entering the family room, he saw that she had fallen asleep herself. He decided to leave her there long enough to go upstairs and turn the bed down. Scooping her up in his arms, he took her upstairs and undressed her then placed her in bed. He tucked her in and headed to his office to check his e-mails and messages.



Serena woke up bright and early the next morning and made breakfast. She and Elray enjoyed their food in bed, before getting the baby up and dressed. Driving over to Elray's parents she kept thinking how she'd rather be on her bike.

Her first day back on the job and Dillon already had to make her stop and break for lunch. She was really into the job she was working on. Making her way upstairs to Dillon's office, she dialed Elray to see where he was.

"Hey baby, how's it feel being back at work?" Elray asked when he answered.

"Oh Elray I can't thank you enough; I really needed this. Where are you?"

"I've got a meeting in thirty minutes with Parker. Then I'm going to meet Kim for a late lunch."

"Do you think you'll be done in time for dinner? I'd like to treat you for a change?"

"No problem. I'll meet you at home and I'll get the baby on my way there."

As she hung up from Elray, she thought she heard a woman's voice but to her knowledge there wasn't anybody there but Dillon, Rayden and herself. Opening the door to Dillon's office, she quickly discovered she was wrong. Even though she'd closed the door quickly, she'd still seen plenty. Rayden was in Dillon's office and needless to say he wasn't conducting business.

Halfway down the stairs, she heard the door open and close. Rayden appeared at the top of the stairs tucking his shirt into his pants. He didn't catch her until she was outside sitting on the bench in front of the shop. Walking over to her, he sat down.

"I'm sorry; I forgot you were going to be here."

"It's okay, Rayden. You're a grown man. What you do is your business."

She could tell by the way Rayden looked at her that he sensed that something else besides seeing him with Mrs. Williams was bothering her, but he didn't pry. "I know that but it doesn't mean you shouldn't be comfortable at work."

"It's not that. It's just that...well doesn't it bother you guys to be laying up with this woman and that woman."

Considering she had never seen him with a woman period, he probably wasn't sure what to make of her statement. Before he could voice what he was thinking, Connie was standing before him. He introduced them then left her

sitting on the bench while he walked Connie to her car. She overheard them make plans to get together later. Now he focused his attention back on her. Rayden walked over and asked, “Can I take you to lunch so we can talk?”

“I’d love to have lunch with you Rayden but you don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“Okay then we’ll just have a nice lunch together.”

Dillon joined them at the Atlanta Bread Company for lunch. While eating, Serena saw the young woman that Elray had words with at the mall. She was seated a couple of tables over with two friends. While she remembered the young woman’s face; she didn’t remember her name. As luck would have it, the woman and her party finished their lunch first. As she stood, Serena took in her protruding belly and remembered her name instantly...Renee. This was the woman supposedly having her husband’s baby.

She didn’t realize that she’d been staring until Renee’s eye’s met hers. Smirking, Renee ran her hand over her stomach. Obviously, she also recognized Serena as well. Damn, both Dillon and Rayden turned to see what she was staring at. Turning back to her Rayden asked, “Do you know her?”

Never taking her eyes off Renee, Serena shook her head and replied, “Not really.”

Before she could elaborate on her answer, Renee was walking in their direction. Serena felt ready to faint. Ignoring Rayden and Dillon all together, Renee stopped in front of her.

“You’re Elray’s wife right?”

“I am. You’re...Renee?”

“So you remember me?”

“Yes.”

“Did Elray tell you about me?”

“He did.”

Resting her hand on her stomach Renee asked, “Let me guess, you don’t believe it’s his baby. It doesn’t matter; because once his son is born the truth will be known.”

“Then I guess we will deal with it at that time; won’t we.”

“No, Elray and I will,” Renee said, as she walked away leaving not only her, but Dillon and Rayden speechless as well. No one said a word for several minutes after Renee left. Finally, Serena asked Rayden and Dillon to take her back to her car. On the ride back to the shop, no one said anything. Once there Serena went inside only long enough to grab her things then left. Pulling into the garage of their home, Serena was glad to see that Elray wasn’t home. Going straight to the bedroom, she stripped off all her clothing and got into the shower. This is where

she finally let loose the tears she hadn't wanted to shed in front of her brother in laws.



Elray had been sitting in his car outside Renee's apartment for twenty minutes, before she finally arrived. Getting out, he noticed how much bigger her stomach was from the last time he'd seen her. He also noticed that she looked extremely happy. She was smiling when she reached the spot where he was now standing.

"I hope you weren't waiting long."

Shaking his head he replied, "I haven't been here that long."

Taking the bags she was carrying, he followed her up to the apartment. Putting the bags on the table in the dining room, he took a seat on the couch. He saw her going in the direction of her bedroom. He did not intend to follow her. A couple minutes later, Renee returned wearing only a large tee shirt that showed off her belly even more. He also noticed that her feet appeared to be very swollen, as did her hands.

Renee asked, "Would you like anything to drink." As she got herself bottled water.

"Look Renee, I can't stay. You said you wanted to talk and that it was important; so I'm here."

“It is important. I need to know if you plan to be there when your son is born.”

“You mean in the delivery room.”

“Of course...I mean in the delivery room. My mother wants to be with me, but I'd rather have his father. Plus, we still haven't discussed any names.”

“Renee, I don't think it's a good idea for me to be with you, since there's no proof this baby is even mine. I already told you we'd discuss names if he's proven mine.”

“Fine, but you are going to hate yourself for missing your son's birth.”

Before Elray could answer, his cell rang. It was Dillon telling him he needed to see him, now! Getting up, he told Renee, “I'll be in contact soon.”

Then left to see what was so important.

Chapter Sixteen

Walking into Dillon's shop a short time later, the first thing Elray noticed was Serena wasn't there. "Where's Serena?" He asked as he also noted that neither of his brothers looked to happy with him.

"I have a more important question for you," Dillon growled. "Who the hell is Renee?"

"Nobody, why?"

"Really, well I'd say she feels differently. Serena, Rayden and I ran into her at lunch today."

"What happened?" Elray asked not sure he wanted to hear this.

"Oh...nothing much she just through her pregnancy in your wife's face. Damn Elray, is she really pregnant by you?" Dillon demanded to know.

Slumping down in a chair, Elray hunched his shoulders and said, "I honestly don't know. I mean she says it's mine."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Dillon and Rayden said as they sat down next to him.

“I’m not sure it’s even mine. It’s possible, but I didn’t see any reason to get everybody all upset. Especially, if it turns out to be a false alarm. Truthfully, I’m so scared...I just don’t know how Serena is going to react– if this baby is mine. I mean, she knows I haven’t touched Renee since she came home. But it’s a lot to ask your wife...to accept that you have a baby with another woman.”

From the way his brothers looked at him, for the first time, Elray felt they must have realized what he was going through. He went from being a first class playboy to falling head over heels in love. Finding out that he fathered a child by the woman who’d stolen his heart; getting married to that same woman all within two years. Now it seemed during the brief time he and his now wife were separated, he’d also possibly fathered another child. This damn sure wasn’t easy for him.

“Go find Serena El,” Rayden told him. “We can all talk later.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“Actually, she didn’t say anything. She just left.”

“Thanks Dill, I’ll call you later.”

Elray stopped when he reached the door. He’d forgotten for a moment that he was suppose to pick up Raiena. “Dillon, would it be okay if Raiena spent the night with you?”

“I’ll have Venice go by Mama’s and pick her up.”

Taking care of that, he made a beeline for home hoping that Serena was there since she wasn't picking up her cell phone. Even though Serena knew about Renee, he couldn't imagine how she was feeling after having come face to face with her. Knowing that Renee had confronted his wife and then met with him like nothing happened—had him mad as hell. Oh he would definitely deal with Renee once he knew Serena was okay.

Well he knew Serena was home because both her car and the bike were in the garage when he pulled in. Hearing the shower when he opened the door, Elray headed upstairs to his room. When he entered the room, he immediately heard Serena crying. Taking his clothes off, he opened the shower door and stepped in pulling Serena into his arms.

“My brothers told me what happened today. Baby, I'm sorry.”

“I wanted to hit her so bad but I had to just sit there. I think that hurt the most,” she sobbed into Elray's chest.

For the longest time, Elray just stood there holding Serena. What else could he say; this couldn't be easy for a woman who had as much pride as her. Instinctively, he knew if Renee had confronted his wife and neither woman was pregnant, Renee would have gotten a good old-fashioned beat down. Where words might not be adequate—actions could speak volumes. Serena was the love of his life and he didn't want her to doubt that for even a single second.

Reaching behind her, Elray turned off the water in the shower. He opened the shower door for them to get out. He reached for the towel that he left on the counter and wrapped Serena in it. Lifting her off her feet into his arms, he took her into their bedroom where he laid her on the bed. He took his time as he let his gaze roam over her body. He wanted her to see the power she held over him.

Reaching down he caressed her breasts placing gentle kisses on each, before licking a path down to her naval. Lifting his head, he told her, “Don’t ever doubt my love for you. No matter what...I love you and only you.” Lowering his head, he continued licking a path down to her hidden treasure.

Using his hands to part her, Elray feasted on his wife’s sweetness until she cried out her pleasure. Even then, he was reluctant to leave her. Standing just long enough to adjust her position on the king size bed, he joined his body to hers and she cried out as another explosion of pleasure overtook her. Elray held his release for as long as he could. He wanted Serena to see and feel just how much she affected him. And the depth of love he felt for her.

As they lay together afterwards, Elray continued to shower kisses along Serena’s face, neck and breasts. Never in his life had any woman affected him the way his wife did. Yes, the physical sex between them was the bomb, but it wasn’t just that—he loved everything about her. Just knowing that he’d caused her pain, hurt tremendously. Hadn’t she said before she met him, she never used to cry?

That in itself hurt deeply. He was supposed to bring her nothing but joy, like she'd done for him.

"Serena?"

"Yes."

"I know saying I'm sorry doesn't take away what you're feeling, but I hope you know I truly mean it from my heart."

"I know you mean it; can I ask you to do something for me?"

"Of course."

"I'd like for both of us to talk to Renee. Whether I like it or not, if this baby is yours; she will always be a part of our lives. I would never ask you to turn your back on your child. I want to know that I can trust you and that you aren't telling me one thing and Renee something else. I want to know what she expects from you. She needs to know I'm your wife and she can't change that. I don't want this to turn out like the situation with my dad."

"If that's what you want, I'll set it up. Where do you want to meet?"

"I'm not going to lie; I'm not ready to have her in my home. I don't know if I'll ever be ready for that. One more thing...does Renee know I'm pregnant?"

"No."

"Have you had contact with her?"

“We’ve talked a couple times,” he wasn’t sure he liked where this was going. To his surprise, Serena didn’t ask any more questions. But she did tell him she wanted to talk to Renee as soon as it could be arranged.

Turning over, she placed her back to him; but he could tell by the gentle shakes of her body that she was crying again. He slipped out of the bed,—bent down to retrieve the towel from the end of the bed, wrapping it around his waist and headed downstairs.



Going into his office Elray first called his brother Dillon’s house. His sister-in-law Venice answered. “Hi El. Dillon isn’t home if you’re looking for him.”

He chuckled. “No I wasn’t necessarily just looking for Dillon. I wanted to know if one of you could take Raiena over to Mama’s?”

“Why?”

“I wanted to spend some more time with Serena.”

“She can stay here with us silly. It’s no problem at all. I enjoy having her.”

“Thanks Venice. I appreciate it.”

Before he could hang up Dillon walked in and wanted to speak to him.

“How’s Serena doing?”

“Good. She’s upset. That’s why I want to spend a little extra time alone with her.”

“Take care of her El. You’ve got yourself a great woman. Don’t F it up.”

“I know that. Let’s have lunch tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you later,” his brother said before hanging up.

He made a few more calls before he heard his stomach rumble. He was hungry and Serena needed to eat. He didn’t feel like making anything, so he went into the washroom to put on some clothes. He called in an order of Chinese and left to go pick it up. Once he was safely out of their subdivision he dialed Renee. He was mad and he wanted to let her know that his family, specifically his wife, was off limits. Unfortunately, he got her answering machine. He left a message. “Renee it’s me. We need to talk. Call me when you get this message.”



A week later he still hadn’t heard from Renee. One big relief was that all his brothers were aware of the situation with her. Reluctantly, he also had Kimble tell his sister who wasted no time berating him for the position he’d placed his wife in. Because he still wasn’t one hundred percent sure the baby was his, for now they all agreed that not telling their parents was probably best.

On top of everything else, Randy was hounding him about speaking to Serena again. Finally, when he’d run out of excuses he called Randy to talk. “Look there are some personal issues going on between me and Serena and I’m not going to push her right now about seeing you.”

“What kind of personal issues?” Randy questioned.

Elray held firm. “This is between Serena and I. It’s not something I’m willing to discuss at this time.”

“I’ll accept that for now—but I won’t wait forever.”

“I’m not asking you too. Thank you.”

Serena returned to work putting her emotions into her work, instead of talking to him. Each evening since the incident with Renee, Dillon informed him that he almost had to make her go home.

It bothered Elray greatly that his brother had to inform him of his wife’s behavior. He was mostly unhappy because he knew her behavior stemmed from the incident with Renee. It didn’t help that Serena thought he was deliberately trying to put off the meeting with Renee. She’d asked him several times if he’d spoken to her, he hadn’t. In all fairness to Renee, he didn’t feel it was fair for him and Serena to just show up at her apartment, so he continued unsuccessfully to try and reach her over the next couple weeks. Serena’s mood during these weeks remained solemn and she remained distant.

Frustrated, he finally gave in and went by her mother’s looking for her. While he didn’t get a chance to talk with Renee’s mother, he did find out from a neighbor— who’d seen him come by twice, that there was a death in the family. No wonder she hadn’t called. According to the neighbor, her grandmother passed

away after a long illness. The neighbor told him that the family had gone to Macon because of the grandmother's illness, and she died while they were there.

Later that evening, he took Serena and the baby to visit her mother. Finding out the news about Renee's grandmother had really shaken him. This could have easily been Serena after what happened to her mother. Happy to see that his mother-in-law was doing well, they left and met his parent's for dinner. While sitting in the family room talking with Kimble and his father, his cell vibrated. Seeing it was Renee, he got up to go upstairs to answer it.

"Renee, why haven't you returned my calls?" He asked.

"This isn't Renee, this is her mother."

"Excuse me Mrs. Jones, I left several messages for Renee to call me and she hadn't returned any of them."

"I know that's why I'm calling you. We left rather suddenly to come see about my mother- unfortunately she passed."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Jones."

"Thank you. Look, I'll get to why I called you- Renee was extremely close to her grandmother and she's taken her death very hard...she's in the hospital."

Alarmed he asked, "Is she okay...the baby."

"They're both fine. She wasn't eating and at the funeral she collapsed. The doctors wanted to keep her because she was dehydrated and for further

observation. Renee hasn't told me much about you- but I know my daughter...she's crazy about you. Frankly, I'm very worried about her. Can you come to Macon?"

Without hesitation he responded, "I'll be there tomorrow."

They talked for several more minutes so he could get all the necessary information from her. When he walked back into the family room, he went straight to Dillon who he talked to for several minutes before they got up and went into another room. At dinner Elray was rather quiet. He spoke only when someone asked a question directly to him. As soon as dinner was over, they went home.



"Elray is there something wrong?" Serena asked as they walked into the house.

He'd been considering all evening if he should tell Serena about him going to Macon to see about Renee. He and Dillon had discussed it. While Dillon thought honesty was usually best, they both felt telling her was a mistake. She already had so many insecurities where Renee was concerned. Neither he nor Dillon could see a reason to tell her and make things worse.

"No, baby every things fine. I don't feel so good and Dillon and I have to drive down to Macon tomorrow."

“Oh okay, will you be home tomorrow night?”

Shaking his head he replied, “Probably, but I’ll call you and let you know for sure.” Taking the baby from her, he told her. “Why don’t you go on up and run us a bath? I’ll wash Raiena up and put her to bed.”

When he entered their room a short time later, Elray found his wife packing him an overnight bag instead of running a bath for them.

Looking up at him as he came in the room, she said. “Go jump in the shower and get some sleep. I’m almost finish packing your bag, just in case you have to stay overnight.”

Feeling guilty for lying to his wife, Elray stripped down and got in the shower. Although he didn’t love Renee and he wasn’t even sure her baby was his...he still felt the desire to help her. He just hoped his wife didn’t discover his deception.



Elray was already dressed and ready to go when Dillon showed up the next morning to pick him up. Even though Dillon had told her she didn’t have to go into the shop today, Serena decided to go anyway. Besides Raiena enjoyed the time she spent with her grandparents and it would give her time to go visit with her mom who wasn’t working today, because of a doctor’s appointment.

Both Rayden and Rayvon were at the shop when she arrived. Rayden was sitting with Mrs. Williams in her car and Rayvon was working on his motorcycle for an upcoming race he had in Daytona. A short time later, she heard the car pulling away and then saw Rayden enter the door. Briefly, she looked in his direction then turned back to what she was doing.

“Good morning Serena,” Rayden said as he came up beside her. “What are you working on?”

“Hi Rayden. I’m working on adjusting the gears on Darnell’s bike. He’s had some problems switching gears during his last couple races.”

“Want some help?”

“Sure, but I’m doing it for free.”

“Okay. Can I ask you something?”

Looking up at him she responded, “What Rayden?”

“You don’t like Connie much do you?”

“I don’t know Connie— so I don’t like or dislike her. I don’t respect women like her if that’s what you mean—she’s married. She needs to be at home with her husband.”

“So how do you feel about me?”

That question caught her a little off guard but she responded truthfully, “I think you need to find a single woman and leave her alone.”

Rayvon started laughing then said to his brother, “Out of the mouths of babes. Serena, we’ve been telling him that since he first started messing with that woman.”

“Shut up Rayvon.”

“Why should I have to shut up? You started this conversation.”

“I was talking to my beautiful sister-in-law, not you.”

Standing up Serena spoke next. “Well as you can see. I happen to agree with the rest of your family. Leave that woman alone. You deserve better than some woman who cheats on her husband.”

“What if I told you that she was going to leave her husband for me?”

“I’d say why would you want her? Obviously, she isn’t a trustworthy person. What makes you think she won’t do the same thing to you?”

They both turned when Rayvon started laughing. Rayden didn’t say anything so they all went back to work now that the tension in the room was gone. Just before eleven, Serena quit what she was doing to get ready to go over to her mother’s.



Dillon and Elray made it to Macon in less than two hours going straight to Medical Center of Georgia– the hospital where Renee was. Her mother met them in

the lobby. Taking some time to talk with her mother first to get an idea what to expect before seeing her, Elray then left Dillon with her and he went to see Renee.

At first, Renee must have thought she was dreaming when he walked into her room from the expression on her face. Apparently, realizing it wasn't a dream, the most beautiful smile came to her face. "Elray, I'm glad you're here," she said as she motioned for him to come sit next to her.

Walking over he sat on the side of the bed.

"I'm sorry about your grandmother," he told her.

"Thank you, my nana meant the world to me. I could always go to her about anything." Renee started to cry before she added, "She'll never get to see my baby."

Leaning over he wrapped his arms around her and just let her cry. When Dillon and her mother came in a short while later with the doctor– he was still sitting there holding her. The doctor informed them all that it would be okay to take her back to Atlanta– but because she was so close to delivery he advised she follow up with her obstetrician immediately.

He also indicated that she should rest as much as possible and drink plenty of fluids. Within two hours, Dillon and Elray were headed back to Atlanta with Renee and her mother. Dillon drove Renee's mother's car and Elray drove Renee and her mother in Dillon's truck. Elray gave Dillon directions to her mother's

house while they stopped at Renee's apartment to get some things for her; so she could stay with her mom until she had the baby.

When they arrived at her parent's house Dillon was standing out front talking with Renee's father. He'd been away on a business trip. As Elray helped Renee up the driveway, her father gave him such a contemptuous look he was fairly certain the man didn't like him. Once he helped get Renee settled, he told her. "I'll be in touch. Don't overdo it and rest like the doctor asked you too."

"I will. My mother is going to make me an appointment with my doctor. Would you like to come?"

Not wanting to upset her, he replied. "Call me."

He walked out and met Dillon outside. Renee's father was still talking to his brother. As he saw him approach he asked, "Can I have a word with you?"

"Dillon, I'll be there in a minute," he told his brother then turned back to face Mr. Jones.

"I understand you are a married man—is that right?"

"Yes sir it is."

"Does your wife know that my daughter is having your baby?"

"My wife knows that it's possible that baby is mine— but she also knows that she and I were not together when that baby was conceived."

“I see. And if this baby turns out to be yours—what do you plan to do about it?”

“Look Mr. Jones, Renee and I have already discussed this. If this is my baby, I’m going to be a man and handle my business. My baby will be taken care of.”

“In other words, financially the baby will be supported– but won’t have a father in his life.”

“No sir, we haven’t worked all that out yet. But if this is my son, there is no way I won’t be a part of his life.”

“How will your wife feel about that?”

“My wife and I love each other and we’ll work it out.” Since he really didn’t want to be having this conversation in the first place he added, “My brother is waiting for me.” Then he walked off without giving Renee’s father a chance to say anything further.

Dillon glanced at him as he got in the truck. He decided after seeing the serious look on Elray’s face, not to ask him what that was all about. “Where to?” He did say.

“I think Serena is at her moms. You can drop me off there.”



Within forty minutes, Elray was walking up to his mother- in -laws door. Serena’s car was parked out front. As he got closer he heard arguing, at first he

thought it was the TV. Just as he was reaching for the doorbell he heard Serena say, “Don’t touch me!”

Grabbing the doorknob, he twisted and to his relief the door opened, he rushed inside where he saw Jerry holding onto Serena’s arm. Raiana was in her playpen looking at her mother. Not sure what to make of seeing his wife in tears he asked, “What the hell is going on?”

Jerry answered, “Serena was trying to do too much around here and when I told her about it she got angry. I noticed she looked like she was about to pass out so I grabbed her arm to steady her.”

Since Serena hadn’t had any problems with her pregnancy, Elray wasn’t sure he was buying Jerry’s story. Besides if that’s all that happened, why was Serena crying and where was her mother? He posed those questions and surprisingly, Serena supported what Jerry had just told him.

She walked over and stood next to him. “Baby I’m sorry, when I got here, Mama had already gone shopping with a friend. I just wanted to straighten up some before she got back. I haven’t eaten much today and that’s probably why I got a little light headed.”

Putting his arm around her, he felt her trembling. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Can we just go home now?”

Wanting to get the hell away from Jerry, Elray certainly didn't argue. He got his daughter out of her playpen, grabbed her diaper bag and Serena's purse. Without acknowledging Jerry at all, he walked out the front door to put her in the car. Serena hadn't come out of the house yet so he started back up the sidewalk. Just as he entered the house he saw Jerry grab Serena's arm again.

Rushing over he was just about to punch him when Serena stepped in the way.

"Look you're really pushing your luck. I've already told you once to stay away from my wife. For your sake, you had better pray the story you told me doesn't change. I fully intend to get more answers from my wife and if I'm not satisfied—I'll kick your ass first and ask questions later."

"I'm about sick of your threats. If you really think I'm afraid of you—then we can take this outside right now."

He felt Serena place her hand on his arm and he looked down at her. "Elray, please. Let's just leave. He's not worth it and I wouldn't lie to you."

He saw the flicker of fear in Jerry's eyes, but he also saw the raw hatred there as well.

Taking a minute to reign in his anger, Elray grabbed Serena by the hand and walked out. He felt immense pleasure seeing a stunned Jerry standing there staring at them. Of course, he would have felt even better if he had just kicked his

ass but for now this would do. He opened the door for Serena before walking around to the driver's side. Once they were both seated and buckled in, he watched as she turned around in the seat and handed Raiena her toy.

Even though Elray didn't want to upset Serena he would have loved to go back up to the house and kill Jerry. The ass hole was actually standing there looking out the window at them. He doubted Serena had even noticed. His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by his phone vibrating. He looked down to see that it was Renee.

What could she possibly want? He'd just left her. Whatever it was it would have to wait. Ten minutes later, his phone vibrated again. Thinking it was Renee again, he didn't even look at the display. Part of him wanted to come clean and tell Serena the truth about where he went today—but he didn't—instead he asked Serena. “Do you want to stop somewhere and eat?”

“Can we just grab some take out? I just want to go home.”

“Sure what do you want?”

“Fish, I've had a taste for fish for three days.”

Reaching over he rubbed her stomach, “What kinds of food did you crave with Raiena?” He asked.

“A little of everything I guess.”

Pulling into Captain D's they ordered. The smell of the food filled the car and Serena's stomach growled. He realized just how hungry she really was. While riding home she unconsciously kept eating fries out of the bag. Elray smiled because he knew she hated to eat a lot in front of him. When they got out of the car, he really looked at Serena. She was five months now and even though she was showing—for this to be her second baby, he would have expected her to be bigger. Renee he'd learned was eight months and she was huge. Damn, why was he comparing his wife to Renee? Pushing her out of his thoughts—he pulled into the garage.



After dinner, he and Serena were sitting on the couch watching TV when Randy called. Picking up he pretended Randy was his agent and told him he'd meet him tomorrow for lunch.

The first thing he noticed when he walked into the restaurant the next day was that Starlett was with Randy. Over lunch Randy confided to him that even though Serena had kept her promise to call, she still hadn't committed to getting together so they could all talk. While he was listening to Randy, he just had too much to deal with to want to deal with this right now and he told him so. "Look, Randy I feel you— but Serena isn't ready... give her some time. I already told you that we have some personal issues going on too."

“I know. That’s all the more reason I should talk with her. Maybe now she’ll understand with her dealing with a similar situation. I know about Renee. And before you get mad at Star, she didn’t tell me anything. I’ve told you I’m a very resourceful man when I want to know something.”

Now he was pissed. He felt like Randy was using his situation to get what he wanted. “Serena knows about Renee. You can’t hold that over my head.”

“I wasn’t planning to; I only meant that she might be more sympathetic to me now that’s all. I want my daughter in my life, Elray. Starlett and I have made real progress. I want the same chance with Serena.”

“I’ll talk to her, but I won’t pressure her. She has enough to deal with. I won’t add to her stress by taking your side—because that’s exactly how she’ll see it.”

“Do you want me to talk to her, El?” Star asked.

“No, but why don’t you come over to the house Saturday. Serena is hosting her first girl’s night —and my sister, her friends and my sister-in-law will all be there.”

“Oh yeah, she mentioned it to me and asked if I’d like to come. I’ll try to make it.”

“Good it’ll be good for her. Maybe we can talk to her together after everyone else leaves.”

Chapter Seventeen

Serena was so nervous about her first girl's night; she'd never been into a bunch of girly stuff, so she hoped she would be a good host. Starlett and Alex were coming by in about an hour to help get everything set up and Elray was going to sleep at Kimble's tonight. When everyone arrived, she actually found out that all the Carter brothers were staying at Kimble and Alex's place. She was pleased to learn that they had also invited Darnell. Since Darnell was her best friend, she was glad that her husband was making an effort to include him in their lives.

Girl's night was going great. She managed to have a great time, despite having thoughts about Renee. Shasta brought her new son with her. He was so cute. Everyone laughed when Mona said her husband always bragged his baby was a product of good genes. Serena assumed he must look like his father, because he didn't resemble Shasta at all. They laughed and talked about baby names for her and Elray's new baby. Mona suggested her name for a girl, and of course, it was a unanimous decision that if it were a boy, it would be Elray Jr.

Sadly, that might not be the case because what they didn't know was if Renee presented him with a boy –she may decide to name her baby Elray Jr. As

usual, her sister Starlett was very observant. Seeing the play of emotions on her face, she changed the subject. As was custom, everyone slept spread out over the living room, except the hostess this time. Everyone agreed that due to her condition, it would be better for her to go up and sleep in the comfort of her bed. She hated being treated like a baby. Once the party finally started to die down, and the ladies began falling off to sleep, Serena made her way upstairs to bed.

Early the next morning she was, awoken by a soft knock on her door.

“Hey can we talk?” Star asked poking her head through the door.

“Come on in.”

“Is everything okay, you seem so distracted lately?”

“I’m fine; it’s just that my life has changed so much.”

Starlett laughed before saying, “Tell me about it. I would have never thought you’d give up biking. The wife and mother thing agrees with you though.”

“Don’t get me wrong Star, I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my whole life—but I’m also more confused. What am I going to do if this baby turns out to be Elray’s; I’d never ask him to turn his back on his baby like dad did us.”

Starlett wrapped her arms around her and held her. It wasn’t like she knew what to say. Serena knew that she of all people certainly wouldn’t tell her to leave Elray...if the baby was his. Starlett had been the main one pushing for her to have a relationship with Elray in the first place. She’d find a way to deal with her

insecurities concerning Renee. Both sisters laid back and before long, they were sound asleep.

In her dream, Serena went back to her childhood. Even as child, she always knew she would make something of herself. Everyone had always told her she was the prettiest girl in their neighborhood, but because she could out ride and whip more than half the boys they grew up with, she was just one of the boys for years.

Now, she was married to one of Atlanta's most eligible bachelors. She could still race with the best of them if she chose too, and she worked with two of the hottest racers on the stock car circuit. Everything Serena ever wanted for herself she'd accomplished. She was so proud of that fact. Crying in her dream, she sent up a heart-felt prayer– that even if Renee's baby was Elray's; that their relationship would not suffer because of it.

The smell of breakfast finally woke her up. She left Starlett sleeping. When she went downstairs, everyone else was already eating and Mona got up to fix her a plate. Taking the plate from Mona, Serena sat down next to Alex. By noon, the house was cleaned back up and everyone except Alex and Starlett had gone home. Kimble would pick Alex up when he brought Elray home. Starlett stayed to keep them company since her boyfriend was out of town and she'd be going home to an empty house anyway.

Serena had tried calling her mom several times and gotten no answer. She wasn't too worried— because lately her mom had been spending time with some of her old friends from work. Anybody was better than Jerry. If she was lucky, her mother would dump Jerry for good. In the event that happened, she certainly planned to make sure he got his. But if she had her way, he would get it so much worse if she didn't have her mother's feeling to consider. She already knew she'd never tell her mother or Elray what had happened between them.

Lost in her thoughts, Serena realized that Starlett and Alex were carrying on a conversation without the benefit of any input from her. A short while later Kimble, Elray and the kids came in. Starlett left as planned while the two couples settled in to spend a quiet night watching movies.



Later that night, while watching the second movie Elray excused himself from the room to take a call. At first, he started not to answer. But with Renee being so close to delivery— he didn't want to upset her unnecessarily and decided to take the call.

“Hello,” he said into the phone as soon as he was out of hearing range.

“It's me Elray, my parents went out for the evening and I'm here alone. I was calling to see if you wanted to come by and keep me company for awhile?”

“I can’t tonight, Renee. If something happens, call 911 and then call me back. Otherwise, I’ll stop by tomorrow.”

Returning to the living room, he took a seat next to Serena. His thoughts, however; were still on Renee. As bad as he didn’t want her baby to be his, deep in his heart he knew it was. Thinking back on the one time they had sex. He remembered clearly that the condom broke and they made love anyway. He pulled out, but evidently not in time. Besides, he just couldn’t see her still claiming him to be the father if it wasn’t true. Placing his hand on Serena’s stomach, he slid his hand back and forth over her swollen belly and leaned forward kissing Raiena—whose head was lying in her mother’s lap. God he loved his family so much. The thought of losing them scared him more than a little.

The couples called it a night shortly after one in the morning; Serena saw Alex and Kimble to the door, while Elray put Raiena to bed. Exhausted, Serena passed on taking a shower with him and went straight to bed.

Over the next week, Elray brought up meeting and talking with Randy to Serena several times— but she remained resistant to the idea. She did agree to talk on the phone with him, which she had done twice. Each conversation had left her so emotionally drained. Elray finally told Randy, “I can’t ask her to do this again for awhile. I’m worried about her so I’ll be in touch.”



Two weeks later while everyone was gathered at The Carter's for the monthly family get together, Renee's mother showed up. Alex answered the door. She had no idea who Mrs. Jones was so when she asked for Elray, Alex invited her in. Dillon froze the minute he saw her walk in, as did Elray. Things were just starting to get back to normal between him and Serena. The last thing he needed was drama with Renee and her family. Getting up he walked over to Mrs. Jones. As bad as he wanted to go into the hall to talk, he didn't want to give Serena the impression that he was hiding something from her. Thank God his parent's weren't in the room because they still didn't know about the Renee situation.

"Good evening, Mrs. Jones. Is there something wrong?" He asked.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Elray, but I've been trying to reach you for over two hours and you haven't answered your phone."

Looking down at his cell phone he noticed for the first time that it must have been accidentally turned off, "Did something happen", he asked knowing it must be important if she'd tracked him down at his parents.

"Renee is in the hospital having the baby and she wants you to be there."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Mrs. Jones. I don't mean any disrespect, but it is possible that I'm not the father."

"Elray, do you really believe that my daughter is lying?"

He didn't have the heart to lie to her, "No, but there is still that chance."

“Look, you seem like a decent guy– but my loyalty is to my daughter. All I know, is she is in pain trying to bring a child into this world that may or may not be yours, and she wants you with her. As her mother, if I have to, I’ll beg– but don’t make her go through this alone.”

Neither of them knew that Serena was standing directly behind him until she spoke, “It’s okay—Elray go.”

Both of them turned to see Serena standing there with Dillon and Alex behind her for support. Damn he hated this. He could see the hurt on her face, “I’ll go if you come with me.”

She wanted so desperately to say no, but she didn’t, “Let’s go then.”

After Elray and Serena left to go to Northside hospital where Renee was having the baby, the other Carter sibling decided they needed to be there as well. Not just to support their brother but also his wife. Making up a plausible lie wasn’t too difficult because Mrs. Carter didn’t need much of a reason to have all her grandchildren to herself. Alex and Venice considered not going but figured Serena needed some female support. It couldn’t be easy for her to just sit there waiting to find out if another woman was delivering a baby that might turn out to be her husband’s.



All of Elray's family were seated in the waiting area eager to hear any news. They had been there for several hours now and Elray had only come out once. Apparently, Renee was having a difficult time. Dillon offered twice to take Serena home, but she refused.

This was extremely difficult for Elray. He'd never been with a woman during labor. Renee had chosen natural childbirth without the aid of any drugs to help relieve some of the pain. With each contraction, she held onto Elray and her mother's hand for dear life. In a way he felt guilty, because while he was physically here for Renee— his mind wondered to Serena. Had she suffered this much bringing their daughter into the world? Would she again when she had this baby? He hoped not. He didn't even love Renee. Yet watching her in pain trying to bring what was possibly his child, hurt him deeply.

Renee's mother voiced her concerned obviously as affected as he. She kept saying, "How much longer?"

She even begged her daughter to let the doctors give her something for the pain. Just when Elray thought her mother was going to try to force the doctors to give her something, they said she was fully dilated and ready to push. It was still another hour and a half before Renee's son made his appearance into the world. Exhausted, Renee could barely hold her head up. Once the nurses cleaned the baby up and brought him to her—her strength seemed to renew.

Gazing lovingly at her son then at him, Renee asked, “Would you like to hold your son, Elray?”

Coming over and taking a seat on the bed beside her, Elray pulled the blanket back to get a better look at the baby. He’d still ask for a paternity test, but looking at this baby there was no doubt in his mind that this was indeed his son. Renee handed the baby to him. Taking his son, he kissed him lightly on the cheek. He held him for several minutes before asking, “What name have you decided on?”

“I told you I wanted us to name him together.”

Without taking his eyes off his son he asked, “What’s your father’s name?”

“Tyrell.”

“Brandis Tyrell,” He looked up before finishing his statement. “After my father and yours.”

“What about his last name?” Renee wanted to know.

“I don’t have the right to insist that he carry my name, so it’s up to you.”

“Brandis Tyrell Carter.”

Renee’s mother had left to go get her father. He couldn’t take his daughter’s screams of pain and had left long before the baby was born. They were now coming back into the room and Elray could hear her telling Renee’s dad about the baby.

“They’re fine, the baby is so cute. He weighs eight pounds five ounces and he’s twenty inches long.” She told him.

Upon entering the room and seeing Elray sitting on the bed holding his grandchild, her father sat down quietly in the chair opposite him. Elray locked gazes with him seeing the hatred in his eyes. For the sake of his son—he’d be the bigger man.

He didn’t want his son to be in the middle of a feud between his father and grandfather. Standing up, he walked over to Mr. Jones and handed the baby to him. Renee looked radiant when she held her arms out to him. He went into her embrace kissing her lightly on the cheek, as he’d done his son —before going out to talk with his family.

The Carter brothers stood as they saw him coming. Alex and Venice remained seated with Serena. The moment was awkward for everyone. He wanted to show pride in his son, but didn’t want to hurt his wife. He was sure his brothers wanted to congratulate their brother if the baby was his, but didn’t want to in front of their sister-in-law. Going over to his wife first, Elray knelt down beside her placing his head in her lap.

“I’m sorry baby, there’s no easy way to say this. I’ll ask for a paternity test, but I already know what the outcome will be.”

He saw a tear slide down her face.. He wiped the tear and held her. “I am so sorry, Serena. “ He knew then how she felt. It couldn’t be worse than he did. It killed him to put the woman he loved in this position. It nearly broke his heart when she placed her hand on the back of his head, leaned down and whispered in his ear, “We’ll get through this— but for now go be with your son.”

A tear slipped down his cheek. What had he done to deserve such a loving woman? He knew somehow—some way he was going to make this moment up to her. Her unwavering support was more than any man could hope for under these circumstances. After several minutes, Elray stood and pulled Serena up with him. As badly as he wanted to show his son to her, he could see in her face that she wasn’t ready to see the baby he’d fathered.

Turning to his sister Alex he asked, “Can you take Serena home?”

“Why, aren’t you leaving too?”

“Not yet. There’s a few things I need to take care of first. And I’m sure she’s probably very tired.”

“I can take her,” Venice said.

He didn’t miss the disapproving look Alex gave him before she spoke. “We can both take her home and stay until you get there.”

“Thank you. Baby, I’ll walk out with you,” he said to Serena.

”That’s okay. We’ll be fine. I’ll see you at home.”

Leaning down he hugged her and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she responded before walking away with Alex and Venice.



After they left, Elray turned to his brothers. He already knew he was in for a lecture. Of course, big brother Dillon was the first to speak.

“Do you think it’s wise to stay here tonight?”

“I’m not staying the night. I wanted you all to see the baby, but I could tell doing it in front of Serena was a bad idea. Now wait here while I make sure Renee doesn’t mind if you guys see the baby tonight.”

No one protested and a few minutes later, he returned to take them in to see his son. When he entered the room with his brothers and Kimble, Renee’s dad once again, openly showed his contempt.

Seeing how her dad was treating him, Renee came to his defense, “Daddy, Elray is welcome here– as is his family; this is his son.”

Her father didn’t say anything. He kissed his daughter and grandson, shook Elray’s hand and left. His brothers watched her father leave; their collective expressions showed they understood how he must feel even if their loyalty was with him.

“I’m sorry about my father. I’ll always be his little girl,” Renee said then added. “Please have a seat. Here Elray take the baby so your brothers can get a better look at him”

Elray took their son from her and proudly showed his brothers. Each of them took turns holding their new nephew.

“Oh this boy is differently a Carter,” his brother Rayden commented and Elray knew there wasn’t a doubt in any of their minds that he was his son. As much as the baby looked like him, he didn’t have his eyes.

Kimble, the last to hold the baby took him and Trent looked over at Elray who was sitting next to Renee and asked, “What’s his name?”

“Brandis,” Renee answered.

“We named him after our fathers, his whole name is Brandis Tyrell,” Elray elaborated.

Not wanting to tire Renee out after what she’d been through, Elray told his family, “I think it’s time we all leave.”

“Okay. We’ll wait for you in the car,” Dillon responded as they all got up to leave.

After his brothers and her mother left, Elray sat on the side of the bed watching as Renee put the baby to her breast to nurse. Once the baby was done nursing, Renee changed him before calling for a nurse to take him to the nursery.

“You’re not going to keep him in the room with you?” He asked.

“No. I wanted to get some sleep before it’s time for him to nurse again.”

Elray could see just how much the birth had taken out of Renee. He hated to bring up the paternity test right now, but he didn’t want to mislead her either. After he had her settled in bed, he leaned over her kissing her lightly before saying, “Thank you for my son.”

“I’m glad you believe me now. I’d never lie about something like that.”

“I still want to establish legal paternity; my uncle is a lawyer so I’ll have him file everything so that I can start making child support payments and I’ll have him added to my insurance.”

“Thank you,” Renee responded. It was obvious she didn’t want to push for too much right away.

Very good at reading a woman’s body language, Elray saw in Renee’s eyes that she viewed tonight as a major victory for her. He was fairly certain she probably felt she had the upper hand. She had given him his first-born son. That was special to a man, and every woman knew that. Yawning, she closed her eyes—truly exhausted. She was asleep in seconds and he left the room.



After leaving Renee’s room, Elray stopped by the nursery to have another look at his son. Standing there, his thoughts drifted once again to his wife, and

how this would complicate their lives. Some men would walk away from their son without a second thought, especially considering he wasn't with his mother. For him this wasn't an option. Like Serena said, they would get through this. He had more than enough room in his heart to share his love for his wife, with Brandis and their children. He'd make it work.

Walking out to the car, where his brother's was waiting he called home to check on Serena and got no answer. Maybe Alex and Venice had taken her home with them. He dialed Alex's number. When she answered he asked, "Where are you guys? I just called my house and didn't get an answer."

"I'm at Dillon's. Venice and I dropped Serena off, but she said she wanted to be alone. Oh and I think you should know, Mama is on the war path. I had to tell her what was going on when we went back for the kids."

"How long ago did you drop her off?"

"I don't know. We were at Mama's awhile listening to her go off about how stupid and irresponsible you are, so I'm sure it was some time ago."

"I'm sure you tried real hard to defend me," He replied getting annoyed with his sister's attitude.

"You know what El? I could care less that you're getting mad. You should have left when your wife left instead of staying with your little hoe. I hope Mama rips you a new one."

“Alex, Renee is not a hoe and what happened between us happened when Serena was gone....” Before he could say anything else Alex interrupted him.

“Talk to your wife not me. She’s the one whose home alone probably crying her eyes out. I love you—but I’m real disappointed in you right now,” She said then hung up on him before he could respond.

None of his brother’s said anything to him as they rode to his house. No doubt they’d all heard what Alex had said, she’d said it loud enough. Didn’t any of them realize none of them could make him feel worse than he already did? He called his house again, no answer. Thinking maybe she’d gone to her mother’s or her sister’s, he called them both. Neither had seen or talked to her.

As much as he hated the thought that she might be with Darnell, he dialed his number. Even Darnell hadn’t talked to her. Real fear gripped him as he opened the garage to find Serena’s bike gone. Dear God she had taken off on her bike. While he knew that being on her bike was soothing for her. That’s the last thing she needed to be doing in her condition. If something happened to her or the baby, he didn’t know how he would handle it.

“El I’m sure she’s fine,” He heard his brother Dillon say as he jumped out the car. Heading for the door his cell vibrated, please let it be Serena he thought as he answered. It was her dad, “Star says Serena is missing have you found her yet?”

“No. I’m at the house and her bike is gone. I’m about to go look for her now.”

“I’ll look too. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?” Her father wanted to know.

“If I knew that she wouldn’t be missing!”

Pausing....Randy responded, “We’ll find her. Does she have her cell phone with her?”

“If she does she isn’t answering.”

“I’ll call you if I find her first. Star is on her way to your place in case she comes home; so leave the door unlocked.”

Both men hung up. All his brothers and his brother-in-law, Kimble had showed up and were at his side. They followed him into the house. He went upstairs leaving them downstairs alone.

He returned in jeans and tennis shoes.

“Where are you going?” Rayden asked.

“I’m not about to just sit here and my wife is missing. I’m going to look for her!”

“You’re in no condition to drive El,” He responded. “We can look for her. You stay here in case she comes home.”

“Rayden, I’m a grown ass man. I’m not staying here. Now, if you wanna come with me you can.”

“That’s a good idea,” Dillon said. “Rayden you go with him. The rest of us will go and get our cars from Mama’s and we’ll help look too.”

His brothers left out the front door leaving it unlocked– as Randy had requested. He and Rayden got into his car. He didn’t realize that he had tears in his eyes, until he looked into the rear view mirror when he backed out of the garage.

He’d been driving around for over an hour and he still hadn’t found her. It wasn’t real late, but it was dark. His mind began to think of all the things that could happen to her. Pulling over to the side of the road, he again called everyone and still no one had heard from her and she hadn’t gone home.

His family suggested they all meet him back at his house.



Pulling into his garage, Elray saw that even his parents were there. He tried to pull himself together before walking into the house. He didn’t want his daughter to see him upset with her mom not there to comfort her. Dillon and Kimble were both on their cell phones when he came in the door. His mother and Alex both immediately came to him giving him a hug.

Trent was on the floor with Raiena and little Kim keeping them busy with some toys. His father thought they should call the police if she didn’t come home soon, just in case. He needed to be alone. He went upstairs to lay down across the

bed he shared with his wife; taking in her scent when he breathed deeply. Tears flowed easily down his face onto the comforter—now that he was alone. He loved Serena so much and the thought of her not being with him terrified him.

Hearing a soft knock on the door he looked at the clock on the nightstand it was ten thirty. Certain he looked a mess he shouted, “Just a minute,” Then went into the bathroom to wash his face. Opening the door to his room— his father was standing there.

Elray knew his dad. Seeing his son this way was killing him, Brandis Carter could deal with a lot of things, but anything that hurt one of his children—hurt him. Elray’s eyes were completely red. It was obvious to anyone that he was in no condition to talk with anybody. His father handed him the cup of hot tea his mother had made for him.

“We’ve already called the police, and they said unless she is missing for twenty-four hours there isn’t anything they can do.”

“Thanks dad.”

“I don’t know Serena that well, but I’m sure she just needed to clear her head some,” His dad told him as he followed him back in the room closing the door. “Your brother’s told me everything about Renee and your son. Son, this is a lot for us to take in, so imagine how Serena must be feeling right now.”

“I know pop. I’ve tried to reassure her that I never loved Renee and I still don’t.” Elray said as he sat on the bed and his father stopped in front of him.

“She knows that—but she also knows that Renee will always be a part of your life now. I’m proud of you for being a man and accepting your responsibility towards this girl and your son. We’ll all be here to help you both get through this.”

Another knock on the door came and his father turned around and walked back to answer the door.

“I’m sorry to intrude Mr. Carter, but I wanted to let you know that I’ve talked to my friend Cole at the Atlanta Police department—he’s going to put the word out about Serena with a description of her bike. He’ll let me know if he turns up anything.”

“Thanks Kim,” Mr. Carter replied.

When his father closed the door and returned to his side, Elray tried again to reach Serena’s dad. He hoped he’d had some luck, he hadn’t. He talked with his father for several minutes then his dad left him and went back downstairs.

It was close to three in the morning when his cell vibrated. Half asleep, Elray answered, “Hello Serena!”

“No, Elray this is Randy. Serena is fine...she’s with me.”

“Let me speak to her.”

“She’s very upset right now. She wanted me to tell you that she’s sorry she scared everybody. She said she wasn’t thinking and just got on her bike intending to take a ride to clear her head and time just slipped away.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s here at my house. I’d given Star the address and number here in case of an emergency. Apparently, she’d given it to Serena as well. When I got home from looking for her she was sitting in front of my house crying. I brought her in and gave her a hot cup of soup. She’s lying down now asleep.”

“Where’s your wife? I thought she didn’t know about your daughters.”

“She doesn’t. She’s asleep too and she doesn’t know Serena is here. I’m going to tell her everything, as soon as I hang up from you. Don’t worry about Serena. I’ll bring her home tomorrow okay.”

“I don’t know. I mean...your wife isn’t going to freak out on Serena or anything is she?”

“I wouldn’t put my daughter or grandchild in jeopardy. If I thought there was any danger, I wouldn’t have her here. She needs me right now, so let me take care of her. She came to me; let me be the father I’ve never had the chance to be for her. I know better than anybody—what’s she’s going through right now. We’ll call you tomorrow.”

Before he could respond, Randy hung up. Although not happy that Serena wasn't there with him, he was grateful that she was safe. Maybe some good would come out of this situation after all. If Serena and her dad were able to repair their broken relationship that would make one of her lifetime wishes come true.

Wasting no time, Elray ran down stairs. "Serena is safe with her father," He informed his family.

It came as no surprise that his mom, Alex and Venice were all still up. He saw his mother close her eyes and drop her head, and he knew she was telling God thank you for answering her prayers.

Picking up his sleeping daughter from the couch next to his brother Trent, Elray took her upstairs with him wanting her close while they waited for Serena to come home. Now that the crisis was over, Mr. and Mrs. Carter, Alex, Kimble, Dillon and Venice all took one of the spare bedrooms; leaving Rayvon, Rayden and Trent sprawled out in the living room.

Chapter Eighteen

After hanging up from Elray, Randy immediately went upstairs to wake his wife, while Serena slept in the downstairs guest room. There wasn't going to be any easy way to tell his wife about his daughters—so waiting until morning seemed pointless. Opening the door to his bedroom, he stood there gazing at her before walking over and gently shaking her awake.

“What’s wrong?” Tandie Greene asked sleepily.

“I need to talk to you honey—it’s important.”

Sitting up in bed she asked, “Do you want me to make us some coffee?”

“No, we have company in the guest room and I don’t want to wake her up.”

“Wake who up?” Tandie asked clearly more awake.

“That’s what I need to talk to you about baby. I need you to just listen to what I have to say, okay?”

“Randy, you’re scaring me. What are you talking about and who’s downstairs?”

“Tandie, I love you. I always have.”

“I know that.”

Hanging his head before he continued, Randy said without looking at her, “My daughter is downstairs.”

“Your daughter! What are you talking about Randy. I don’t understand.”

“Baby, I have two daughters: Serena and Starlett. Serena is downstairs and I’d like you to meet her.”

Moving away from him, Tandie began crying and rocking back and forth, shaking her head clearly hoping she hadn’t just heard what her husband said. When she sat still and looked directly into his eyes—he saw the pleading there. It spoke to his soul. Her expression said—please don’t let this be true.

“That can’t be. You said you’d never hurt me. You promised Randy! You promised! No, I don’t believe you. You wouldn’t do that to me...you couldn’t.”

Moving to comfort his wife, Randy asked, “Baby, are you okay?”

Through her tears, Tandie replied, “That depends...please tell me you’re not cheating on me.”

“Oh God no. Baby this happened a long time ago. My daughters are grown.”

“No, I don’t want to hear this and I don’t want whoever she is in my house.”

“Tandie she needs me. I’ve never been a father to her. I can’t turn her away—not when she’s going through so much.”

Before he knew what she was going to do, Tandie had jumped off the bed running out the room. She was half way downstairs before Randy caught up to

her. There was no reasoning with her and he suddenly found himself wishing he hadn't put her in this situation. This was the main reason he had never told her about his daughters. He didn't think she would be able to handle it. Knowing he'd promised Elray that his wife wasn't in any danger—he tried to calm her down.

"Tandie, please don't do this," he pleaded with her.

"Me—you did this. How dare you bring some girl in this house claiming she's your daughter. Who is she really Randy? Are you sleeping with the little hussy?" She screamed at him as she continued toward the guest room.

Grabbing his wife, Randy spun her around to face him, "Tandie you're being ridiculous. Serena is my daughter and she's been through hell tonight. I won't turn her away. Can we please go back upstairs and just talk about this?"

"Hell no. Whoever she is...she isn't staying in my house another minute."

Turning to go downstairs, Tandie heard the guest door opening as she made it to the bottom of the stairs. Serena appeared in the doorway. Turning to face him, Tandie slapped Randy across the face before screaming, "You got your hoe pregnant—then think you can pass her off as your daughter!"

"Tandie, that's enough!"

"I'm sorry. I never should have come here," Serena said. She appeared on the verge of tears as he watched her move toward the door.

He stopped her. "Serena, please don't go."

“No, let her go, Randy!”

Frustrated he still couldn't get through to his wife Randy pleaded. “Baby, if you would just calm down and really look at her—you'd see I'm telling the truth...this is my daughter.”

He wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing or not—when he left his wife standing at the bottom of the stairs; while he took his daughter into the kitchen. They were sitting at the kitchen table talking, when his wife walked in a short time later.

“I want to know everything. Tell me the whole story,” Tandie said taking a seat across from him.

Clearing his throat, Randy began talking. Over the next hour and a half telling his wife and daughter the entire story of how his two daughters came to be— including why he'd never been a part of their lives until now. By the time he finished, both his daughter and his wife were crying—no doubt from the realization of just how much they were loved by the same man. Each woman now had a clear understanding of the difficult decisions that he'd been forced to make all those years ago, as well as the ones he was making at that moment.

He'd taken an incredible risk tonight, first, with his daughter —now with his wife. He risked losing not one of them, but both. He knew his wife loved him. However, her inability to have children had always been an issue in their marriage.

He hoped now that she knew about his children, she could accept them. Serena only knew what her mother had told her. She'd lived her life believing that he didn't want to be a father to her or her sister.

Emotionally, he was drained after telling them everything. He sat there like a man on death row awaiting his execution. Now that they both knew everything it was up to them to accept all he'd said and the love he desperately wanted to give them both.

Both of them were still sitting there crying. Neither had spoken a word. Without saying anything else, Randy leaned over and wrapped his arms around his daughter. While holding her, he watched his wife crying across from them and felt joy in his heart. He knew her so well; and he knew that the tears she was shedding were tears of joy. Tears of the togetherness they would now share as a family. He had no doubt that Tandie would welcome his daughters.



As much as Serena never wanted to let go of her dad, she also knew his wife probably needed to hold him just as much. Moving aside, she watched as Randy got up to gather his wife in his arms. Watching them she understood the love he had for her —yet a small part of her wished it could have been her mother. It wasn't fair to compare, especially, knowing her dad never truly belonged to her

mother. In all fairness, her mother put herself in the position she was in—by not only dating—but having children with a man she knew was married.

Not that it let her dad off the hook—because he should have tried harder to work out his problems at home instead of seeking comfort in another woman's bed. Seeing the pain infidelity had in her life, she planned to have a serious heart-to-heart talk with her brother in law Rayden. The relationship he had with Connie Williams was bad news. Someone was eventually going to end up hurt.

Her father turned to her and said, "I talked with Elray and told him you were okay. He isn't expecting you until later today. Why don't you try and get some sleep."

Looking at her watch, Serena saw that it was five forty five in the morning. Shaking her head she told her dad, "No, I should probably be getting home. I've already worried everybody too much."

Reaching out touching her hand, Tandie said, "Please, we'd like you to stay and have breakfast with us. I'd like to get to know you."

"Okay, let me call my husband and check on my daughter."

"Why don't you invite him over and tell him to bring your daughter too."

"Tell him to bring Star too—but after you both get some sleep. It's been a long night," Randy added.

Tandie helped get her settled in the guest room again—before she and Randy went back upstairs. It was thoughtful of her dad to insist they get some rest, but she already knew she wasn't going to get any more sleep. Lying in bed Serena thought of her husband. She wondered if he was getting any sleep. For the first time in years, she felt almost completely at peace. The only thing left that she needed to handle was that jerk Jerry. He wasn't going to get away with what he'd done.



At eight o'clock, Tandie left her still sleeping husband to start breakfast for her newly enlarged family. Stopping briefly to look in on Serena, she found that she too was still sleeping soundly. Closing the door, she entered the kitchen actually looking forward to meeting her other stepdaughter and her new grandbaby. She giggled...a little grandbaby —she smiled happily; she was actually a grandmother now. Briefly, she wondered about Serena's mother. Was she close to her? What would happen now that everything was out in the open? These were all questions that could wait at-least for now.

Her thoughts were interrupted a short time later when Serena walked into the kitchen.

“Hi Serena.”

“Good morning. I thought my dad was in here,” She said and turned to go back in the guest room.

“Please...don’t leave,” Tandie said. “Sit down. Can we talk?”

Sitting down at the table, Serena still looked very uncomfortable. Tandie didn’t know what to say to her or how to start a conversation so she asked, “Would you like some juice or something? There’s bacon and pancakes ready if you want some.”

“Uh, no thank you. I’ll just have some water. My sister said they would be here around nine. I can wait.”

“Okay. I know this feels funny; I want you to know that I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I didn’t mean to call you out of your name. Well that’s not true, but I am sorry.”

Serena laughed. And that made Tandie feel better. At least she’d gotten her to smile.

“That’s okay. I’d be pissed to if I were in your shoes. If men thought with their heads instead of another part of their anatomy, none of us would be in this position.”

“You sound like you know from more than just this experience. You can tell me none of my business, but your dad mentioned that you were going through a lot right now. I’m a good listener.”

“My husband just had a baby yesterday.”

“I’m sorry; you’re so young to be going through a divorce.”

“It’s not like that. He and I weren’t married when he met this girl. He didn’t even know she was pregnant, until right before we got married and even then he didn’t know for sure if the baby was his. My husband’s not the kind of man that is going to walk away from his baby.”

“Don’t be hard on your father, Serena. We both know he had to make a very hard decision in walking away from you and your sister. Truthfully, I don’t know if I would have been able to do the same for him. I mean I love him—but all I’ve ever wanted was a baby of my own. I don’t know if I could have given that up.”

Tandie could tell her words surprised Serena by the way she looked at her. But they also helped her to better understand just how powerful love is.



Randy had been standing at the top of the stairs listening. Although his wife’s words hurt, he knew that his daughter needed to hear them. God, he wished he’d been able to go to Tandie all those years ago, and tell her about his children. Yet, somehow he felt even though he’d sacrificed being a part of their lives then—that now was a better time for them all to handle this.

He waited at the top of the stairs while they got to know each other better, before coming down. Just as he entered the kitchen, the door bell rung.

“I’ll get it,” He said walking back out the kitchen. When he returned, Star and Elray came in with him. Elray was carrying Raiena when he walked into the kitchen. Randy made the introductions.

“Tandie honey, this is my daughter Starlett. My beautiful grandbaby Raiena and her father, Elray.”

He watched as his wife graciously stood and greeted them all. Randy also couldn’t help but smile at the double take Tandie had done after getting a closer look at Elray. It seemed not even his own wife was immune to how handsome he was. Randy imagined he just had that effect on woman.

After saying a polite hello they all sat down. Randy could tell by the way Elray’s eyes swept over his wife that he was happy to see her.

“Serena would you and Elray mind going upstairs and getting some blankets out of the hall closet?”

“Honey, I can do it. They’re our guest,” Tandie said.

“That’s okay. We wouldn’t mind at all. Come on Serena,” Elray replied and grabbed Serena’s hand leading her out the kitchen.

Randy had to put his hand up to cover his smile. Elray was in such a hurry to get Serena alone, he didn’t even realize he was going the wrong way. He’d left the kitchen from the same door he’d come in which lead to the living room, not upstairs.



Once they were alone Elray pulled Serena into his arms. “Don’t ever do that to me again. I went crazy when I got home and you weren’t there.”

“I’m sorry...”

He didn’t give her a chance to finish. Capturing her face on both sides with his hands, Elray lowered his head and kissed her passionately. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to lay her down, remove her clothes and make love to her. Since that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon he’d have to be content with stolen kisses of promises of what was to come.

Releasing her he said, “Baby, if I stay here much longer, your dad will undoubtedly be extremely upset with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to make love to you so bad that I’d risk trying to sneak you upstairs.”

“No you wouldn’t. You’re so bad. Come on let’s go back in the kitchen.”

Holding her but not moving, he responded. “Okay but I’m not going upstairs with you because I am bad and you should know me well enough by now to know I’m not lying.”

As he followed Serena back into the kitchen, he saw that Renee had called him twice. He wanted to give Serena some bonding time with her family anyway,

so he could deal with whatever Renee wanted. After they entered the room, instead of sitting down—Elray told her, “I drove your car so give me the keys to your bike. I can use that while you’re here. Stay as long as you like. I’ll be at the shop...if you need me.”

“You’re welcome to stay, Mr. Carter,” Randy’s wife told him.

“Thank you, Mrs. Greene.”

“Tandie,” She corrected him.

“Okay, Tandie– but I have some things I need to take care of anyway.”

He saw the glances exchanged between Tandie and Randy and the look on Serena’s face. They were all probably wondering if that something had to do with his newborn. It was obvious that they wouldn’t ask– but Serena did get up to walk him to the door.

No longer under the scrutiny of her father and his wife, Elray kissed Serena again. “I love you. I’ll have my cell with me. Call if you need anything. If you don’t get an answer then call the shop.”

“I love you too. And, just so you know, I trust you. I’m not going to be checking up on you.”



After leaving the subdivision, he pulled over to call Renee back. While he didn't want to mislead her—he also didn't want something to be wrong and he hadn't called her back. “Hey you called me this morning. Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. I called to let you know they are circumcising your son this morning. I didn't know if you wanted to be here.”

“Thank you. Yes, I'll be there within the hour. Please have the doctors wait.”

“I will.”

Little Brandis screamed terribly after his circumcision. Renee couldn't stand it and started to cry as well. After the doctors finished with him, they handed his son to him. They also advised Renee to nurse him as soon as possible to help comfort him. Going back to her room, she did as suggested and the baby went back to sleep. Placing him in the hospital baby bed, Elray asked, “My parent's want to come see him. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes of course. They're his grandparent's. Elray, I'd never try to keep you or your family away from Brandis. I'm just so happy you and your family are accepting him.”

“I'd never turn my back on my son.”

“You say that now. What if your wife decides I'm too much competition? It's not like I planned to get pregnant, but I do love you and our son. I'd be lying if I told you that I don't want you to leave her and be with us.”

“Renee, this isn’t a competition. I love my wife, but I also love my son. He’s not at fault for the circumstances of his birth.”

“I gave you a son doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“If it didn’t—I wouldn’t be here. But that has nothing to do with us having a relationship. Please don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be. I want to be a part of my son’s life.”

“How do you think your son is going to feel about you when he’s old enough to see that you treat his mother like shit?”

“First of all, I don’t treat you badly. I’d never bad mouth you to our son and I hope you’ll be mature enough to do the same.”

“I won’t have to bad mouth you. He’ll see that you don’t want us to be a family.”

Not wanting to have this conversation right now, he felt it would just be easier to leave. “Thank you for including me today. But I really have to go.”

When he said that—her attitude immediately changed and she responded, “The baby and I are being released tomorrow. Can you pick us up and take us home?”

“What time?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Okay. Well call me with the information,” He said. Without leaving the door open for further conversation, he walked over to the crib and picked up his son. He held him for several seconds, kissed him then placed him back in the crib.

Leaving the hospital, he called Serena; she was still with her sister at her fathers. Since he hadn’t talked to Parker, his agent, in a couple days—he checked in with him to find out that the next shoot he was scheduled to do had been moved up two weeks. Physically exhausted from all the events of the last couple days, he went home to get some much-needed rest.



Serena spent the entire day with her dad, Starlett and his wife. She had a great time getting to know them better. It had been such an enjoyable day that she hadn’t given any thought to her problems at home or how to tell her mother that she’d found her dad. She knew that she and Elray would need to deal with the whole Renee situation—instead of her just ignoring it. There was no way she intended to let this ruin her marriage. She loved her husband too much for that to ever happen.

Dropping Raiena off at her grandparent’s house, she went into the shop to get some work done before going home. Pulling up in front of Dillon’s, she noticed immediately that Connie Williams was there. Spending time with her husband

obviously wasn't a priority considering how much time she spent with Rayden. Just as she was walking in, Connie was walking out.

"Hello," Connie said as she breezed past her reapplying her lipstick.

Serena didn't even bother to respond, not that she would have heard her anyway. Continuing into the building, Serena saw Dillon, Rayvon and Rayden talking. Acknowledging them, she went upstairs to change into her coveralls. She was fixing her ponytail when Dillon came in.

"You gave us quite a scare young lady."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry everybody."

"I know. I talked to Elray and I'm glad to hear about your dad."

"Thanks."

Dillon followed her as she went downstairs. She wasn't sure—but it seemed every time she looked up she caught him looking at her. Being the oldest, Dillon always tried to help where he felt there was a need. Sensing that her brother in law wanted to talk, Serena looked up from the transmission she had started working on and asked.

"Did you want to talk to me about something, Dillon?"

"Yes, I want to talk to you about what's going on with you and Elray."

Turning back to what she was doing she said, "Look, Dillon I'm fine. I really don't want to think about this now."

“That’s why I want to talk to you. Elray loves you. Don’t let this situation come between you. Talk to him and let him know how you feel. If you’re mad...tell him. Yell at him—do what you have to, but don’t just let the situation fester until the two of you can’t get past it.”

“Okay, I promise when I get home tonight we’ll talk—but I’ve got to be honest, I’m not ready to see his baby. And I think that’s going to be a problem, because I’d never ask him to stay away from his son. But at the same time, I don’t want him to have to spend extra time with Renee.”

“That’s another reason why you two need to talk. I know my brother—he will respect your wishes.”

She sighed. “I know, that’s kinda why I don’t want to talk now—because I’m feeling selfish. I don’t want to be the cause of him not being with his son.” Changing subjects completely, Serena asked, “I know this is none of my business, but why aren’t you saying more to Rayden about his relationship with Mrs. Williams?”

Dillon laughed and replied, “Believe me, I’ve said plenty—but Rayden’s a grown man...there’s only so much we can say.”

“I’d hate to see him in a similar situation.”

“Well that’s at-least one thing we don’t have to worry about. Her husband had a vasectomy after his first marriage and I’m positive that Rayden’s not stupid enough not to use protection.”

“Elray and I used protection.”

She had a point. What could he say to that? Nothing and he knew it.

“Just talk to El, okay?”

“I will. Thanks for caring, Dillon.”

Finishing up at the shop, Serena left to go pick up Raiena. When she arrived, there wasn’t anyone home. Usually, she called to say she was on her way. Elray’s parents had given her a key and the security code—but she didn’t feel comfortable just going into their home. Instead, she decided to go see her mother.



She, her dad and Starlett had already decided that they were going to tell her mother about him together. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t go by and check on her. Since leaving the hospital, her mother hadn’t taken one drink; even when she went out with her friends. She was so proud of her. Jerry still kept beer in the house—but even that had not tempted her.

Lately since the last run in with Jerry, she’d been careful to make sure that he wasn’t around whenever she visited. Tonight was no exception. She called her mom and told her she’d be over in a few minutes. She never had to ask if Jerry was

home. It was like her mother knew she didn't want to see him, because if he were there her mom would say so. Pulling up in front of her mom's house, she saw Darnell coming down the street.

Darnell waited for her to get out and hugged her.

"Darnell, I left a couple messages for you. Why didn't you call me back?"

"I've been out of town. I went to see my sister."

"How is Alexis?"

"She's fine. You know since she had to give up modeling after her accident, she started her own agency. She just booked her third client. I'm proud of her."

"I'm glad to hear that. Can you stay awhile?"

"Yeah, sure. I wasn't about to get into anything anyway."

Darnell disliked Jerry just as much as she did, so when he came home she and Darnell called it a night.



Elray's parent's still were not home, so she opted to go home. They'd either keep Raena overnight or Elray would go with her to pick her up when they did get home. Elray's car was in the garage when she got home, but all the lights were out in the house.

That was strange—because Elray always turned on the lights when he was home. She was the one who sat in the dark all the time. Walking into her bedroom,

she discovered why—Elray was sprawled across the bed asleep. Not wanting to wake him up, she turned off the room light and went into the bathroom to take a long leisurely bath.

While undressing, she heard Elray's phone vibrate on the dresser. He must really be tired because he hadn't moved. After hearing the phone vibrate three more times, she went to pick it up to make sure it wasn't something important. Looking at the screen, it showed four missed calls; all from Renee. Just as she was about to put the phone back down it vibrated again, it was Renee.

"Hello," She said answering the call.

"Who is this?" Renee asked upon hearing her voice instead of Elray's.

"This is Serena. Is there something wrong, Renee? Is the baby okay?"

"He's fine. Where is Elray?"

"Sleep. I'll have him call you when he gets up."

"Do that," Renee said then hung up.

Placing the phone back on the dresser, Serena took her bath then tried calling Elray's parents one more time. Mr. Carter answered telling her that Raiena could stay the night with them. Getting in bed with Elray, she pulled the covers over them both and went to sleep.

When she woke up the next morning, she was alone. Glancing at the dresser, she saw that his phone was also gone. Putting on her robe, she went downstairs looking for her husband.

“Good morning, baby,” Elray said to her as she entered the kitchen. “I made you breakfast. Are you hungry?”

Sitting down across the table from him she asked, “What did Renee want?”

He didn’t even try and pretend he didn’t know what she was talking about, “She’s being released from the hospital today, and she wanted to know if I’d pick her and the baby up.”

“Are you going to?”

“No, I told her that you had a doctor’s appointment today and I couldn’t”

That’s sad she had totally forgotten she had an appointment today. Taking the plate he handed her, she asked, “How is she going to get home then?”

“Her parents are going to pick her up.”

“What’s your son’s name?”

“Brandis Tyrell.”

She didn’t say anything else. After finishing her breakfast, she went upstairs to get ready. They picked Raiena up on the way to the doctor’s office. Other than the doctor saying he wished she’d gained a little more weight, she was right on schedule and doing fine.

Chapter Nineteen

Serena kept herself busy at work over the next week. They were going to tell her mother about her dad this weekend and she was getting increasingly nervous. She and Starlett had gotten to know Tandie quite well and they liked her a lot. This wasn't going to be easy, but it needed to be done. It wasn't fair to keep their mom in the dark about finding their dad.

Her dad had made sure to express to her and Starlett that he didn't want them to be angry with their mom. Of course she and Starlett agreed that they wouldn't—but she wasn't so sure it was true. It hurt that her mother had deliberately lied to her.

Elray sat on the bed with Raiena watching her get ready. She was going to have dinner with her mom and dad—for the first time in her life. She'd never been so nervous. After the seventh outfit, he told her. “Baby, you look great in them all. Can you please just pick one so we can go?”

She settled on the sky blue maternity jogging suit. She put the finishing touches on her hair and they left.



The restaurant was crowded, but she spotted her mom and Starlett right away. Elray carried Raiena as they made their way over to the table. As planned, once everyone was seated, Randy came into the restaurant. Stopping at their table he said, "Hello Lorinda?"

"Randy! What are you doing here?"

"You look good. Can I have a seat?"

"Uh, sure."

Her mother looked extremely uncomfortable, but didn't say anything. It had to be obvious that they already knew who he was, so she just waited to hear what they all had to say.

Serena started, "As you can see mom, we found daddy. We wanted to tell you together."

"I see," Lorinda said as she stood to leave.

"Please, Lorinda, don't leave. Can we talk to our girls together?" Randy pleaded with her.

"I told you years ago Randy, that I wouldn't share my girls with you. You made your choice and it wasn't us."

"Lorinda, I've told the girls all this. They've forgiven me. I want to be close to my daughters, but I don't want it to affect their relationship with you. Please don't make them choose between me and you."

“They did that when they decided to find you against my wishes.”

Serena was extremely disappointed when her mother left the restaurant without looking back. This was the day she’d dreaded, since she found out what her mother had done. Seeing her dad, hurt her mother more than she ever thought it would. She had seen it on her face. There was no need to ask if she still had feelings for him. Serena had also seen her mother look at the wedding ring still on his finger.

“I’m sorry Daddy,” Starlett said.

“I knew this would happen. Lorinda said she’d never forgive me.”

“Mama will be alright,” Serena cut in. But the sigh her dad emitted let her know he had his doubts. Of course she knew just how stubborn her mama could be; she was hurt and it wouldn’t be easy to get her to see reason. Everyone had pretty much agreed they didn’t want anything to eat so they left.



On the ride home, Serena told Elray. “Baby, I think we really need to resolve the situation with Renee. After seeing what happened with my parents tonight, I don’t want to put this off any longer.”

“Serena, I think it’s fair to say that our situation is completely different.”

“In some ways yes, but ultimately someone is going to be hurt and we need to establish limits and boundaries now.”

She knew that Uncle Walt was handling all the legal aspects such as—establishing paternity, setting up child support and insurance, but Elray hadn't mentioned anything about custody or visitation.

“Are you going to ask for joint custody? Or have you and Renee discussed visitation.”

“We haven't talked about it.”

“Oh, does the fact that I said I wasn't ready to see your son have anything to do with that?”

“Yes. I was going to talk to my family to see if they would be willing to allow Renee and me to set it up so that she can drop the baby off and pick him up at one of their houses. I'd never insist that you allow her to come to our home.”

“Thank you. But it isn't fair to put your family in the middle either. Let's give Renee and the baby a couple weeks—then bring the baby by the house.”

“Thank you...that means a lot to me.”

Still early, they decided to stop by blockbusters and grab a movie. After watching Shark Tales and Toy Story 2, Raiena finally fell asleep. While Elray put her to bed, Serena set up a little surprise for her husband. She put on the fire engine red sexy negligee with matching thong and slipped on heels then positioned herself on the bed to await his entrance.

Turning on the night light before leaving his daughters room, Elray pulled the door halfway closed. He walked down the hall to his room. The lights were dimmed so he assumed Serena was in the bathroom. Entering their room, he reached for the switch to turn the lights up. That wasn't the only thing to rise when he saw her laying across the bed.

Damn this had to be a record. He'd never gotten so hard so fast in his life. Did Serena know what she did to him—how she affected him? Of course she did, why else would she have displayed herself so provocatively before him. Walking over to the bed, he dropped down on it placing his hand between her thighs that were spread in an invitation he couldn't resist.

A soft moan escaped her, as his hand stroked her in the same rhythm as his tongue on her already hardened nipples. Pulling away, Elray untied the three bows that held the gown together then watched as it fell away from her body. Sitting up, she helped him remove his clothing so she could run her hands over the smoothness of his finely chiseled chest.

Her hands were driving him mad. Unsatisfied with just exposing his chest, he moved her hand lower, guiding it to the zipper of his jeans. Unzipping the jeans he wore, she helped push them down his long lean legs. Now looking at the enormous erection in her face Serena giggled, "My, my, my what a huge weapon you have there."

“All the better to love you with,” He replied as he rejoined her on the bed.

He took his time kissing every each of her lush body; it was obvious that he found nothing repulsive about her pregnant form. In fact, he paid special attention to her stomach area as though he were trying to convey to his unborn child his love for them both. Lying back, he pulled Serena on top of him letting her slide down his manhood until he was completely sheathed within her.

Elray had lost count of how many orgasms they'd shared. Serena was insatiable and they tried several new positions each giving more pleasure than the last. He had never had an unquenchable desire for any woman the way he had for his wife. It was as though her body were made just for his pleasure, and his alone. While the thought of making love to her once more made him hard as a steel battering ram. The fact that she could barely keep her eyes open made it possible for him to allow her to finally go to sleep.



The next day when Serena woke up, Elray and Raiena were already gone. He had left a note saying he was taking the baby to his parents, so she could sleep in. Per the note, he had a last minute photo shoot to do for Kimble's dad. Getting out of bed, she took a quick shower and headed for the shop. Her day was going great. She felt good and she finished two bikes that she'd started two weeks earlier. Elray

stopped by just after one, and for the first time she realized she hadn't ate lunch yet.

Elray apparently knew her too well—because he'd brought lunch with him. Going upstairs to Dillon's office, he laid out all the food he brought. Sitting her down in the chair—he placed samples of everything in front of her. While she sampled the food, he sampled her.

“What are you doing?” She asked as he licked around her ear.

“I'm hungry...just not for food.”

“You are so silly—Stop...what if Dillon or somebody comes up here?”

“Don't worry they won't—they know I'm up here with you.”

“And that means what?”

There was no need for him to answer. The wicked grin on his face told her exactly what he was thinking. What was it with the Carter brothers? Did they all score that much?

The lunch was delicious. Lately it seemed she wanted seafood all the time. As she pushed away from the table, Elray pulled her into his arms for a good-bye kiss. The kissed lingered. At this point, she wasn't sure she wanted him to leave. Backing her against the door, he unzipped her coveralls so he could move aside her blouse and feast off her fruit.

With all the effort she could muster, Serena tried gently to remove him from her breast. It was a good thing she didn't plan to breast feed—because he certainly wasn't going to leave anything for the baby. Reluctantly, he released her and fixed her clothes before opening the door for her. She asked, "Are you coming?"

"Not now. I'm going to clean up then I'll be down."

She hoped that something else would go down before he came downstairs. She'd hate for her brother-in-laws to think they were doing anything besides having lunch. She was sitting next to Rayden when he came down. He stopped briefly to talk with Rayden. He kissed her again, then left. Serena took the opportunity to talk with Rayden about his relationship with Connie Williams.

Though she could tell Rayden didn't want to have this conversation, he listened to everything she had to say. Unfortunately, they agreed to disagree on the subject. A short while later she left to meet her sister at their mothers. They purposely hadn't told their mother they were coming over. After waiting for nearly two hours—when their mom didn't show, she and Starlett went to see their dad.

Arriving at their dad's house, he welcomed them in with kisses on their cheeks. "Dad, I'm really worried," Starlett said. "I mean Mama's been mad at us before and she's even stopped talking to us for a few days. But, I think she's really hurt."

“Star, I love Mama, but I think she’s using emotional black mail on us. I mean she lied to us.” Serena said. Their dad listened to the conversation and finally made a comment.

“Serena, Starlett give your mom some time. She’s just hurt. Until now, I was the bad guy. I can’t imagine how she must be feeling now that you girls know the truth.”

“Daddy, I don’t understand how you can be so understanding.”

“There was a time Serena when I couldn’t have been, but it’s time to let go of all the hurt and pain and close all these open wounds.”

“That’s right. It’s time we bury the past and move on with the future as a family,” Tandie Greene interjected causing her, Starlett and Randy to notice that she had come into the room.

Serena watched as her dad stood and crossed the room. Taking his wife’s hand, her dad then turned to her and Starlett. “This amazing woman is the main reason I can say you girls have to give your mom some time and why I’m able to forgive her for all the lies she told you girls about me. She has not only forgiven me for my past indiscretions, but she’s made it possible for me to be a part of your lives by welcoming you into our home.”

Serena was on the verge of tears as was her sister. Before she could say anything Tandie said, “I’d like to have a get together here so we all can get to know

one another. Serena, please bring your husband and his family. Starlett, we'd love to meet the special someone in your life as well."

She and Starlett stayed awhile longer to discuss the get together before leaving.



The week leading up to the get together at her father's house was stressful at best. Renee called several times for Elray to come by and each time she'd told Elray she was okay with his going. It wasn't true. It was obvious to her that Renee planned to milk the situation so that she spent time with Elray. Well it was time she had a talk with her. While she would never try to keep Elray from his son, she had no problems with letting Renee know how she felt.

The only problem—she didn't know Renee's number. She'd never sneak and get it from Elray's cell phone, and there was no way in hell she'd ask him for it. She didn't want him to feel caught in the middle of the battle that was brewing between her and Renee.

She'd considered enlisting one of her brother-in-laws help but decided against it. That's when she came up with the idea of getting the number from Elray's parent's. Well she wasn't actually going to ask them for the number. Since Renee called them sometimes, she'd look on the caller ID and get the number.

Elray had given Renee the number in case of an emergency when she couldn't reach him.

Because Elray would be leaving on a three day photo shoot the weekend following the get together, everyone had been so busy that she'd forgotten to get the number the last two times they'd gone by his parent's. It didn't matter—with Elray gone for three days, it would give her plenty of time to confront Renee.

Both She and Starlett had offered to help Tandie get ready, but she wouldn't let them—they were the guests of honor. In honor of her big night with her dad, Elray bought her a new gown to wear even though the occasion was casual. Standing in the mirror looking at herself, she felt as beautiful as she did the day they got married.

Getting dressed in fancy clothes had never been her thing. She was just as happy in a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. Seeing the look on her husband's face whenever she did dress up was worth it, she felt like the most desired woman on the planet when he gave her that look.

"I like," Elray told her coming up behind her.

"You have great taste in women's clothes. Did you dress all your other women?"

"No, only you."

"Why, because I need it the most?"

“No...because I love you. Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Put yourself down for no reason.”

“I don’t—but I know I’m not a glamour girl like most of the women you’ve dated.”

Lifting her chin and looking deeply into her eyes, Elray said, “Serena, I married you...I love you. Don’t compare yourself to women in my past. Obviously, you’re who I wanted.”

Turning, he walked toward the door telling her, “I’ll get the baby and meet you in the car.”

On the ride to her dad’s, she thought about her mom. She still wasn’t talking to her and Starlett. It wasn’t fair that she was being forced to trade one parent for the other. She could love both. Her mom was being unfair. Renee was working her nerves. And she still intended to make sure Jerry get his. How much could one person deal with?



The Carter brothers as usual made quite an impression. Even Serena’s new step mom was taken aback by all the handsome men in the Carter family; including their father. Everyone was having a great time listening to oldies,

dancing, eating and just getting to know one another. Kimble and Alex were the first to leave, because he had an early flight the next morning.

Serena had seen Rayden looking at his watch several times and she could tell he wanted to leave. Walking over to him she asked, “What’s wrong Rayden? Are we keeping you from other plans tonight?”

“No...why do you ask?”

“I’ve seen you looking at your watch several times.”

“You’re very observant.”

Shaking her head, she replied, “Not really, I just happened to notice. You really don’t have to stay if you have other plans.”

“The only plan I have at this moment, is to ask my delightful sister-in-law for this dance.”

Moving to the center of the room, Serena danced with Rayden. She was surprised to find that for a man of his size, he moved so well. Elray danced well—but Rayden was much bulkier than her husband. Finishing their dance, Rayden asked her, “Would you like something to drink?”

“I am a little thirsty, thanks.”

He handed her the bottled water and they talked for a long time. When she saw Dillon leaving with his family, Rayden excused himself to talk with him.

Not surprisingly, Trent, Rayden and Rayvon all left a short time later. Trent took Raiena with him when he left; since he was staying at her and Elray's house tonight. He and Elray had plans the next day. Her dad and Tandie were talking with Elray and his parent's in the family room, Serena decided to get a head start on helping Tandie clean up.

Starlett helped her take everything into the kitchen. She knew Star had to work the next day, so she told her, "Why don't you go on home."

"That's okay, I'll stay and help."

"Star, you have to punch a clock. I don't. Go, I can finish this up. Besides as soon as Tandie realizes I'm in here she'll put me out anyway."

After Star told everyone good night, Serena walked her to the car. Everyone was still in the family room talking, so she went into the kitchen to begin cleaning up. She was lost—deep in thought when her dad snuck up behind her scaring her half to death. Unconsciously, she swung around with a large kitchen knife in her hand stabbing her father in the arm. He pulled back—but not fast enough to keep the knife from entering his arm deeply. Her screaming brought Elray, his parent's and Tandie into the kitchen.

Bleeding profusely, Randy was trying to calm her down while tying a towel around his arm. He didn't pull the knife out. Pulling it out might cause more damage to the nerves than the actual entry. Tandie had already picked up the

phone and dialed 911. Within ten minutes, the paramedics and the police were there trying to find out what happened. Serena was still hysterical. Not even Elray understood her.

She heard her dad telling the paramedics and the police that it was an accident. “My daughter accidentally stabbed me,” he said for the third time. This time to the officer standing between him, Serena and Elray.

After the paramedics assessed the injury, they also decided to leave the knife in, since it was helping to control the bleeding. Randy was transported to the hospital. Tandie rode in the ambulance. Elray, Serena and Elray’s parents followed behind them.



X-ray’s were taken and once the doctors determined that no major arteries had been severed, they removed the knife and stitched his arm up. Now that the doctors were done with him—Randy had some questions for his new son in law. He didn’t blame his daughter; he’d seen the fear in her eyes just before she’d stabbed him. Right now—he blamed Elray. He knew that look. Was his daughter being abused? Since Serena was so upset, she’d been put in another room to lie down. Mrs. Carter stayed with her.

Heading straight for Elray as soon as he walked out of the exam room, Randy didn’t beat around the bush, “Are you abusing my daughter?”

“What?” Elray asked clearly confused by his question.

“It’s a simple question— not that I expect you to be honest, if you were. If I find out you’re abusing my daughter—you’ll answer to me.”

“Randy, what’s wrong with you—why are you attacking him?” Tandie asked just as confused by his behavior as Elray.

“Baby, you didn’t see the look of sheer terror in Serena’s eyes right before she stabbed me. Someone has abused her.”

“Mr. Greene, I think you have my son all wrong. He’d never hit a woman, especially not his own wife. There has to be some other explanation,” Brandis Carter stepped in to say.

“My father is right. I would never hurt Serena. But if someone has hurt her—I intend to get to the bottom of it.”

“I’m usually a pretty good judge of character and I want to believe you Elray. However, if you didn’t hurt her, who did?”

“I don’t know. But I do think that some of Serena’s strange behavior is starting to make sense. She’s done the same thing to me. I mean she just freaked out for no apparent reason. I blew it off, because she said it was nothing. All this started after her supposed fight when I was out of town.”

“Then we need to get to the bottom of this fight.”

“I agree.”

They were all concerned. Whatever happened to Serena; she obviously didn't want any of them to know. Randy saw his wife coming with Serena and her mother in law behind her. He asked Elray, "Can you and your dad meet me at my house later this evening, so we can talk?"

"Yes," Both Elray and Mr. Carter responded.

Serena came to him, "Daddy, I am so sorry. It was an accident. You scared me and I didn't realize the knife was in my hand."

"I know that sweetheart. It's okay. Elray's gonna take you home now so you can rest."



Serena went straight to bed when they got home. Trent and Elray stayed up talking for quite some time after she'd gone to bed, he told him everything that happened. Trent was surprised that her father would think that Elray could hurt her after seeing them together. A blind man could see just how much in love he was with her. The thought that someone may have hurt his sister-in-law infuriated him more than anything. Once Elray was sure Serena was asleep for the night, he left to meet Randy.

The next morning he and Trent decided to cancel the meeting they were scheduled to attend and meet their brothers at Kimble and Alex's house. Right now besides the situation with his son, finding out what Serena was hiding was at

the top of his priority list. Everyone agreed that whatever happened to her it had to be directly related to the mysterious fight she'd had. Since he had never really gotten a straight answer from her about whom the fight was with and what it was about—that's where he intended to start.

He couldn't just ask her, so he planned to see if Alex could get the information without actually asking. He also intended to talk to Star and Darnell just in case they knew something they weren't telling him. It was Alex that remembered that she'd gone to her mothers and that just maybe her mom knew something as well.

Even though Elray was meeting with his dad and Randy later, he felt better knowing that his brothers and Alex were helping him. The Carter siblings always stuck together and whoever messed with one of them—messed with all of them. Serena was a Carter now, so there would be hell to pay.

When Elray left the room, Alex was the first to express her concern for her brother, "I don't know about the rest of you—but I think El is too wired. We better find out who Serena had it out with before he does—because he just might kill him."

"So you think it was a man?" Trent asked.

“Of course I do. I also think it’s somebody she knows. One thing is for sure— whoever he is; he did a number on her if she’s afraid to say who it is.”

“Maybe she’s trying to protect somebody else,” Dillon offered.

“Like who, the only people she’s close to are her mother, her sister and Darnell.”

“Think about it Trent...does Serena strike you as being the scary type?” Alex asked.

“Maybe it has something to do with the time when she was in Arizona?” Rayvon suggested.

“Look we could sit here all day coming up with different scenarios. Why don’t we just do what Elray asked? Because I agree with Alex, Elray might just hurt somebody. My guess is that’s the real reason Serena isn’t saying anything about what happened,” Kimble remarked as he got up to leave for work.



Elray, Randy and Mr. Greene met again to discuss Serena. After Elray told them about how evasive she’d been when he first questioned her, they agreed that she probably wasn’t going to give them any information either. Elray didn’t know who was angrier—him or her father. He for one was surprised. Serena wasn’t the type of woman that was easily frightened. He felt there was way more to whatever was going on.

Another thing they all agreed on, was until they got to the bottom of whatever happened to her, she wasn't to be left alone. Over the next several days, he barely let her go to the bathroom alone. If he wasn't with her one of his family members or hers was.

Chapter Twenty

Over a month had passed since the accident at her father's. Little Brandis was two months old now. Elray and Renee had been to court to establish paternity—as well as set up his child support payments. Serena still hadn't seen him yet. Now in the eighth month of her own pregnancy, her weight had increased considerably. Her mom still wasn't really talking to her or her sister. She did call to make sure they were okay. To top everything off, just a couple days earlier, she had another run in with Jerry.

After that, Serena stayed pretty close to home. She'd deal with him once and for all—after she had her baby. Elray was leaving to go to New York for two days leaving Mona and Trent to stay with her while he was gone. Dillon barely let her anywhere near the shop and she was going crazy of boredom. Even Elray was treating her like a baby. When she wanted to make love last night, he'd expressed his concern for hurting her or the baby. She managed to convince him that they both were fine. Even now riding to the airport, her body tingled from the exquisite loving Elray had given her.

Mona went to the airport with her to drop Elray off. He hadn't really wanted to go—but it was for a charity event for children. Something he never turned down and she wasn't about to have him do so now. Even though the event itself lasted a week, he was only staying for the two days he was scheduled to help host the model auctions. Security at the airport was on orange alert, so she and Mona let Elray out at curbside check in, instead of going inside with him. Mona had not even made it out of the airport, and she already had tears in her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. Almost everything makes me cry these days.”

Laughing Mona responded, “Crying is pretty common during pregnancy.”

“It wasn't during my first pregnancy.”

Mona shrugged her shoulders. “Every pregnancy is different. Do you want me to stop and get some lunch on the way home?”

“No. I'd rather you dropped me off. You can take Raiena and go have lunch.”

“Okay,” Mona agreed.

Good she was finally going to get some time to herself. To her surprise, Trent was actually standing in the driveway on the phone when Mona arrived. While she went on in the house, Trent stayed outside to talk with Mona. Slightly annoyed, she decided to stand by the open window and listen to their conversation.

“How is she doing?” Trent asked.

“She cried most of the way here, but I think she’s okay. My sister cried a lot during her last pregnancy—it drove us all crazy.”

Taking some money out of his wallet, he tried handing it to Mona. “What’s that for?” she asked.

“Serena didn’t eat much this morning, so stop and get something for both of us. You know Elray will kill us both if we don’t make sure she eats.”

She laughed but told him, “I got it. I’ll call you when I get to a restaurant. I need to stop by my office too.”

“Okay, do you need to leave Raiena here with me?”

“No I’ll take her, call me if I take too long.”

When she saw him coming toward the house, Serena quickly laid on the couch and grabbed a book. She didn’t want to be bothered. So she ignored Trent and he went into the den to watch TV. A short while later, Mona called to see what they wanted to eat. When he came to ask her, she pretended to be asleep. Everybody knew how much she loved seafood, so she heard him tell Mona to bring back some kind of fish. Trent covered her up then went back into the den to wait for Mona.

The next two days went by uneventful. Both her mom and dad called to check on her; as did Elray. Starlett—Mona, Trent, Dillon and Venice— were all at

the house keeping her company. Alex and Kimble were picking Elray up from the airport then everyone was having dinner with them.

For the first time in weeks, Serena was laughing and talking with her family not worrying about her mom—her dad, Jerry, Renee or Elray’s son. The one thing that was constantly on her mind lately was—if she and Elray were having another girl or their first son together. With Raiena she didn’t want to be told what the baby was. Mona and Starlett were rubbing her stomach when the door opened and Elray, Kimble and Alex walked in.

Raiena squealed with delight when she saw her daddy. Elray’s eyes told Serena he wanted nothing more than for everybody to get out of his house. He wanted his wife alone so they could have some much needed alone time. Dropping his luggage by the door, he picked up his daughter and sat down next to her planting a soft kiss on her lips. He leaned down kissing her stomach. Venice and Starlett had dinner all ready so everyone went into the dining room; except her and Elray.

“Did you miss me?” He asked her.

“You know I did. I can’t wait to have this baby so everybody can stop treating me like a baby.”

“No one is doing that. We all care about you that’s all.”

“I know—I’m just not used to all this attention.”

“Well get used to it. How many times do I have to tell you that you don’t have to deal with things by yourself anymore?” Seeing how she was struggling to get up from the couch, he pulled her up and they walked into the dining room with everyone else.

Dinner was great and since everyone knew that smothered pork chops was Rayden’s favorite, Serena insisted that Trent take a plate for him before he left. Trent said, “I’ll take it —but I most likely won’t see Rayden before tomorrow evening.”

“Can I trust you to make sure he gets his plate?”

Smirking he replied, “Probably not.”

Smiling at her brother in law, Serena told him. “Never mind. I’ll call Rayden and tell him to pick it up.”

Elray handed her his cell phone, “I already dialed the number.” She was no dummy that—meant he was likely with Mrs. Williams. He answered on the second ring, “Hi Rayden. I just called to tell you I have a plate for you. Smothered pork chops your favorite.”

“I’ll be right over,” He responded.

Since Rayden was on his way, Serena suggested to her husband that he call Rayvon. She figured they might as well make it a Carter family get together. Within an hour, both Rayden and Rayvon had arrived. After dinner —Venice,

Alex, Starlett and Mona went into the kitchen to clean up. When Serena tried to follow, the women stood their ground and told her no. Frustrated with an aching back, she went upstairs to change clothes to be more comfortable.



Elray was just about to go upstairs to check on Serena when he heard her scream. Racing up the stairs with his brother's right behind him, he found her sitting on the bed when he entered the room.

"Baby, what happened?" He asked as he rushed over to her.

"I'm bleeding."

"Okay...okay stay calm. I'll call your doctor."

"I'll call her doctor El. Kimble and Dillon are already getting the car. Venice and I will help her get dressed," Alex said, but he wasn't leaving her.

His sister knew him well enough to know that he'd put up a fight if they tried to get him to leave, so instead she put him to work. After he got her clothes—Alex, Venice and Starlett helped him get her dressed He carried her down to the car. Trent and Mona volunteered to stay behind to take care of Raiena, Little Kim and Sherice.

Serena's doctor met them at the emergency room. On the way there, Elray had Starlett call her parent's. He had Venice called his parent's to let them know

that Serena was on the way to the hospital. To his relief, the doctor announced that Serena was in labor.

When her parents and his arrived, they joined the rest of the family in the waiting area. Tandie had come with Randy and this was the first time that Tandie had come face to face with Serena's mother. To make matters worse, Jerry had shown up with Lorinda. Tension between the two couples was more than obvious.

Neither couple acknowledged the other.

Elray was relieved to learn that her bleeding wasn't anything to worry about. Her labor was progressing nicely. With each contraction, she closed her eyes to concentrate on getting through the pain.

"Serena, are you sure you don't want something for the pain?" Elray asked her after the last contraction.

"I'm sure—I've done this before, remember. I know what to expect now. I thought Raiana was going to split me in two. Trust me, the pain this time is bad, but nothing compared to her birth."

Why didn't he feel any better having heard that? His face must have shown it, because Serena told him, "Why don't you go out and check on everybody. Let them know everything is okay."

"Okay, but I'll be right back."

"Can you see if my mother is here?"

Leaning down, he kissed her on the forehead, “Sure baby.” He said before turning to leave.

As he was walking out the door, a nurse was coming in. He recognized her and he was sure she recognized him as well. She was one of the nurses that had attended Renee when she’d given birth to his son. He didn’t miss the look she gave him as she checked on Serena’s progress. He waited for her to complete the exam and they walked out together. Turning to her, he felt the need to explain. He didn’t want his wife being the talk of the hospital.

“Look miss...it’s not what you think,” He said to her once the door closed.

“Mr. Carter, I’m not here to judge you or anybody else. I’ve seen it all. I’ve seen the same man here with two different women giving birth on the same day. Trust me when I say—I truly don’t care.”

Well that certainly wasn’t the impression he wanted anyone to have of him. That he just knocked up two different women. Continuing he told her, “I was involved with Ms. Jones during a brief separation from my wife—who at that time was my girlfriend. After my wife and I got back together, we found out just before we got married that Ms. Jones was pregnant. My wife knows about that baby and she supports my decision not to turn my back on my son.”

Elray could see that even though the nurse said she didn’t care, she was impressed that he’d man’d up to his responsibility.

“You didn’t have to tell me that, Mr. Carter.”

“I know. But I didn’t want my wife to be the talk of the maternity ward. She doesn’t deserve that. She’s just supporting her husband. I love my wife and I would never cheat on her.”

Placing her hand on his, the nurse said to him, “I’m not a gossip. Good luck Mr. Carter. I wish there were more men like you out there.”

“Thank you,” He said as they both walked off in different directions.

When his family saw him coming down the hall, they stood to greet him along with everyone else that was gathered there. Taking a few minutes, he briefed everybody on her condition. Turning to Serena’s mom he said, “Serena wants to talk to you.”

When her mother disappeared down the hall, Elray sat down next to his brother’s Rayden and Dillon. Several minutes pasted before Rayden whispered, “Have either of you noticed how nervous the jerk wife seems?”

“I did,” Dillon responded.

“I try real hard not to notice him,” Elray said before turning his gaze in his direction. A few seconds later he commented, “After seeing Serena and Starlett’s father he probably thinks his days are numbered. Obviously, their mom is capable of so much better than him.”

Rayden and Dillon chuckled causing Jerry to look in their direction. Nothing his brothers did should surprise Elray anymore. But leave it to Rayden to do just that. He took his hand and made a slicing motion from one side of his neck to the other then pointed directly at Jerry. Before he could react, Serena's mother came back. She sat down next to Jerry and stared at Serena's dad before she said, "Serena wants to see you now."

Elray knew that Lorinda hadn't wanted to tell her dad that. Randy stood to go see his daughter then turned when Lorinda said, "She wants to see you both."

"What?" He asked her.

"She wants you to bring your....wife."

Elray saw the heated stare that Lorinda shot in Tandie's direction. He was sure she didn't want to cause friction between Serena and her mother. She told Randy, "That's okay, I can wait here. Go on...go see Serena."

Nodding, Randy went to see his daughter. Elray followed. When they entered the room, Serena immediately asked, "Where's Tandie?"

"She didn't want to upset your mother."

"Dad, mom is okay. I didn't want Tandie to feel left out."

"Thanks honey. I appreciate that."

Just as he said that, another contraction came on. Serena closed her eyes and held onto Elray's hand. A small moan escaped her anyway. That was it for her dad.

He couldn't stay in the room. After her contraction was over, he kissed her gently on the cheek before rejoining his wife in the waiting area.

Everyone took turns going in to see Serena, except Jerry and Tandie. Three hours later, Serena and Elray welcomed their second child together. Another beautiful little girl they named Sherinda Tandie Carter. The latest addition to their family carried the name of all three of her grandmothers. Just like her older sister, she too had her father's hazel eyes. All the family members were allowed a few minutes with the baby before leaving the hospital.

Serena tried to gauge her mother's reaction to the baby having her dad's wife name. If Lorinda was upset; she hid it well. Their relationship hadn't fully recovered from her and her sister establishing a relationship with their dad. As much as she loved her mother dearly—they weren't close. This was something Serena wanted to change. The closeness she'd been exposed to as a result of being a part of the Carter family, was something she wanted for—herself, Starlett and their mom. She and Star had always had it, but it had never really extended to their mother.

Elray was going to stay at the hospital with her over night. Trent and Mona had volunteered to stay at her house overnight with Raiena. Serena couldn't help but smile when she thought of the look that Elray's sister Alex had given Trent when that announcement was made. His sister deplored the idea of any of her

brother's messing over her friends. Surely, if she had picked up on the vibe that something was going on between Mona and Trent – Alex had as well.

Since her husband was staying the night, Serena consented to rooming in with the baby. Within minutes, after everyone had left she was quietly watching Elray feed the baby when she fell asleep.

The soft cries of her daughter woke Serena up and it took her a few seconds to determine where she was. Just as she was about to get out of bed, Elray's voice stopped her.

“I got her. Go back to sleep.”

Closing her eyes she did just that. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, but it didn't feel like it had been nearly long enough when a nurse came in to check on her. Disturbed from her sleep, she sat and watched her husband and daughter sleep peacefully. When Elray opened his eyes and looked at her she asked, “Wouldn't you be more comfortable over here with me than in that chair?”

He nodded getting up and coming over to the bed. Serena scooted over some so he could join her. Cuddling her gently in his arms, they both happily went back to sleep.



Serena and the baby went home two days later. Raiena was overjoyed to see her new little sister. Over the next week, Elray's extended family of aunts, uncles,

cousins and great grandparents came by to see the baby. During his grandmother's visit, Serena wondered to herself if they had all gone to see Elray's son as well. She found herself thinking she wanted that for him. She wanted him to have the love of his father's family—just as her daughters did.

The circumstances of Brandis's birth were not his fault. One evening she approached the subject with Elray.

"Has everyone in your family seen Little Bran?" She asked.

Looking up from checking his e-mails on the computer, Serena could see the apprehension in his eyes. He probably wasn't sure where she was going with this, but she believed he responded truthfully when he said, "Only my brothers—Alex, mom and dad have seen him. Why?"

"I was thinking that we could have everybody over here and they could get a chance to see all the kids together."

"When did you want to have the get together?"

Hunching her shoulders she replied, "How about after my six week check up?"

"Okay, I'll see if I can arrange to have the baby then."

"You know I'd still like for us to talk to Renee together."

A weary look came over him before he responded, "Baby I've brought the subject up to Renee several times."

“I take it she isn’t very receptive to the idea.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Well I hope she realizes that eventually she won’t have a choice. She’ll have to talk to me. I’m a part of her son’s life—whether she likes it or not. Just as I have to accept she’ll always be a part of our lives.”

Her tone must have been a bit more heated than she realized because Elray asked her, “Are you okay?”

Looking over at the clock on the wall she responded, “Yeah I’m fine. I’d be lying if I said this whole situation is easy for me; because it isn’t.”

Coming over to her, Elray pulled her up and wrapped his arms around her.

“I know. And I love you so much for even trying to be understanding. I promise I’ll do everything I can to make this better.”

“I know. You better get going if you plan on meeting Dillon and Rayden for lunch.”

“Oh shoot. I almost forgot about that. Do you want my mother or Alex to come over to help you while I’m gone?”

“Elray, I’m fine. I’ve been taking care of myself my whole life.”

“Okay. I love you. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will,” she said to him as he walked out the kitchen door into the garage.



Thirty minutes later Elray pulled into the parking lot of Joe's Crab Shack. Dillon and Rayden were already there. They wanted to talk to him. Arriving after his brothers, he was surprised to see Trent and Kimble there as well. He soon found out why Trent and Kimble were there when Rayvon walked in minutes later.

After ordering, Trent told them, "I ran into the nurse that we hired to care for Serena's mother. While we were talking, she casually mentioned that she'd gone to the pharmacy one day and left Serena to watch her mother. When she returned, Serena's lip was busted and there was broken glass on the floor."

"Did she ask Serena what happened?" Dillon asked.

"Yeah she said Serena told her some story about an accident, which she didn't believe but she didn't feel it was her business. So she didn't question it any further."

"Did she see anyone else?" Elray asked.

"No. She said when she went into the kitchen no one was there but Serena."

Rayden jumped in at that point, "I think we should talk to her again."

Shaking his head, Elray said, "No, we need to talk to Starlett. Whatever happened—I'd bet money Serena told her sister. Especially— if that asshole— Jerry was involved."

Dillon disagreed with him.

“Not this time El, if Serena didn’t want you to find out she wouldn’t have told her sister for fear that she would tell you.”

“Serena and her sister are very close. She’d trust Starlett not to tell me anything she didn’t want me to know.”

“It pains me to agree with Dillon. But this time I think he’s right,” Rayden said. “Wasn’t it Starlett that told you Serena was coming home? She might feel that if it’s for her good that Starlett would come to you.”

“El they have a point,” Kimble said. “Everybody knows what a hot head you can be. If something did happen between Serena and her stepdad, I don’t believe she would have told anyone. Much less her sister, who hates him as much as you do.”

“That’s true. She knows you’d go after him. Haven’t you threatened to kick his ass more than once?” Rayvon asked.

Kimble and Rayden must have seen the rage in his face. “See that’s exactly what we mean,” Rayden said. “You’re not even sure of what happened and you’re about ready to explode.”

“You’re damn right! Cause if I find out that asshole laid one finger on my wife, I’m not asking questions. I’m a whip his ass!”

“And that’s probably why Serena is keeping this to herself. The last thing she wants or needs—is to have her husband in jail for battery,” Dillon said.

“Okay so what’s your suggestion then,” Elray growled.

“Kimble have Alex call Star and ask her to come over. Don’t tell her what it’s about. While I doubt she knows anything—but if she does—then maybe we’ll be able to convince her to tell us what she knows,” Dillon answered.

Sometime later, everyone was seated in Kimble and Alex’s living room looking at at Starlett. She looked nervous.

Elray started, “Starlett, I believe you know what happened to Serena at your mothers. I want to know now—what happened.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Elray.”

“I think you do. Your dad thinks I’ve been abusing Serena.”

“Thanks crazy—any fool can see how much you love her.”

“True, but if Serena is being abused by anyone, I want to know who it is.”

“Honestly, you all know my sister—do you really think anybody is capable of bullying her around?”

At that moment, Elray was glad that he hadn’t been able to get his sister to leave. Apparently, she saw right through Starlett’s attempt to turn the conversation around, when she stated, “She would if she was trying to protect someone else.”

“Like who?”

Shrugging her shoulders Alex replied, “Who knows? Maybe you or your mom.”

“Like I said. I have no idea what you’re talking about. Elray, I’m sorry that my dad thinks you’ve hurt Serena. I’ll talk to him. Listen, I really have to go.”

Elray didn’t want to push her. After saying goodbye, Alex walked her to the door. When she came back in the room, she told him.

“I’d bet everything I own, before she makes it to the corner, she’ll be on the phone calling Serena. Elray, is Serena home alone?”

“Yes, I think so. Unless her dad or mom stopped by.”

“Damn, I wish we knew for sure if Star calls her. That would give us our answer that she’s hiding something.”

Trent had an idea. He called Mona and asked her to call Serena on the three-way. Just as Alex had suspected—when Mona called—Serena told her she’d call her right back. She was talking to her sister on the other line.

That was it. Elray planned to get to the bottom of this—and he planned on doing it today. If he had to go over to her mother’s house and beat the hell out of Jerry to do it, he would.

Hell he didn’t like him anyway. Even if he wasn’t involved, he probably deserved a good old fashioned but kicking for something else he’s done. Ready to leave, Elray said his goodbyes. Only to find out that his brothers planned on being

his shadow today. It wasn't likely that he was going to talk them out of tagging along, so he didn't even try.

Making a beeline for Serena's mother's house, he wasted no time planting his fist in Jerry's face—when he opened the door. Thank God, his brothers had the good sense to tag along. As they held him and Jerry away from each other, Jerry demanded to know what the hell was going on.

“You tell me!” Elray shouted right back.

“You show up here and punch me in the face....I'm supposed to know what's up.”

All the shouting brought Lorinda to the door.

“Elray, what are you doing here? And why the hell are you and Jerry fighting?”

As usual, Elray didn't mince words or sugar coat what he had to say. “I have reason to believe that this asshole has been abusing my wife.”

Visibly shaken, Lorinda turned to Jerry then back to Elray before asking him, “I know the girls have never gotten along with Jerry, but I didn't think it had ever gotten physical.”

Trent spoke up, “Ms. James, I ran into the nurse that Elray hired to help with your care and she told me that she found Serena in the kitchen crying with a busted lip and broken glass on the floor.”

At that point, Lorinda spun around and slapped Jerry so hard—that it was a good thing Rayden was still holding him, because he would have surely fallen over.

“You son-of-a-bitch! I remember that day. Serena left when I asked her what happened to her. She said she’d been in a fight.”

“Let him go, Rayden.” Elray told his brother after seeing Serena’s mother’s reaction. His brother must have felt Jerry deserved to get his ass whipped—because he let him go and they all stepped back.

The fight was on, Elray lit into Jerry full force. Though Jerry proved to be no punk, Elray whipped his ass. Hearing sirens, Elray told his brothers and Kimble to leave. He should have known they wouldn’t desert him. Minutes after the police pulled up, they were coming up the driveway. It was more than obvious who the two combatants were due to the torn clothing and facial bruises.

“Who wants to tell me what’s going on here?” the first officer asked.

“A slight family misunderstanding,” Dillon responded.

“So you’re all related?” The second officer asked.

“This is my son in law,” Lorinda said motioning to Elray. Glaring at Jerry, she said, “And this is my ex-boyfriend.”

“I take it no one wants to press charges?” This from the second officer again.

Everyone said no. Jerry obviously didn’t want to discuss what happened between him and Serena with the police. Elray wanted to deal with Jerry himself.

The police instructed the Carter brothers to leave the premises. They complied. Then at the request of Lorinda James, they escorted Jerry into the house to pack some clothes. They made sure he left the premises as well before they left.

Chapter Twenty One

When Elray and his brothers reached his home, he wasn't surprised in the least that his father-in-law was there. Serena immediately wanted to know what happened to him when he walked in. Her father provided the answer for her.

"He just had a fight with Jerry."

Everybody looked at Randy. Their expressions saying—how the heck did he know that?

Serena looked at him and asked, "Baby, why were you fighting with Jerry?"

"Serena, I know Jerry is the one you had a fight with. What I don't know is why. Why did you lie about it?"

"I'd like to know that too, baby?" Her dad said.

At first Elray wasn't even sure that Serena was going to answer. She just stood there with a blank stare on her face. Apparently, she thought getting angry was the best approach.

"I don't appreciate all of you coming in here accusing me of lying. I haven't lied about anything. It's no secret that I don't like Jerry, but nothing happened between us. Damn why can't you all just leave me alone? Ya'll act like I'm the only

person in the world that has ever had a damn fight!” Serena shouted before leaving the room.

The doorbell rang at that time. Trent went to answer it. Tandie Greene was standing at the door. Even Randy was surprised to see his wife, so he asked, “What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“Lorinda called looking for you,” She told him. “She tried your cell and you didn’t answer. She told me what happened between Elray and her boyfriend. I figured this is where you were.”

Elray wanted to follow Serena, but Dillon stopped him, “Give her some time. If you keep after her—she’ll never tell you what happened.”

Tandie asked, “Is Serena okay?”

Elray answered, “Yes.”

“Would it be okay if I went up to talk with her?”

Not seeing the harm in it, Elray took her upstairs where they found Serena sitting in the baby’s room. Elray took Raiena and Sherinda back downstairs with him leaving Tandie alone with Serena.



Not saying a word, Tandie went over to Serena and just held her. They sat that way for a long time before Serena said anything.

“You know I never used to cry before I met my husband.”

“Crying can be good for you. I’ve told you before, I’m a great listener if you want to talk.”

“I’m just so used to dealing with my own problems. I’ve never needed anybody to fight my battles for me.”

“Then don’t look at it that way. You have a lot of people around you that love you. There’s nothing wrong with that. I love you too. I’d like to help; if you let me.”

Looking into her stepmother’s eyes, Serena truly did feel her love and she knew without a doubt that she could trust her. Clearing her throat, she started telling her everything that happened between her and Jerry, “So now do you see why I can’t tell Elray?”

Shaking her head Tandie replied, “No... I don’t. You have nothing to be ashamed of! What that asshole tried to do to you wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes it was. Don’t you see? I couldn’t stop him! If Mama’s nurse hadn’t come back when she did, he could have raped me and I couldn’t have done a damn thing about it,” Serena sobbed even harder.

“Oh sweetheart, no one would expect you to be able to defend yourself from a man twice your size. There was nothing you could have done to prevent that monster from hurting you. Do you understand me?” Tandie said sobbing just as hard as she was. “I just thank God that nurse came back when she did.”

“I should have been able to protect myself! I can’t tell Elray. He’ll kill him and it will kill me to see him go to jail. All because I was too weak to fight him off.”

“Serena, you have tell him—or at least tell your dad. Don’t keep this bottled inside you.”

Shaking her head no and wiping her tears away, Serena pleaded with Tandie. “I can’t and you have to promise me you won’t either. I couldn’t protect myself— but I can protect those I love. I won’t let my husband or my father go to jail for killing him. Besides, if they don’t kill him—he might go after my sister.”

“I promise. I’ll never betray you Serena. You have my word.”

Emotionally drained, Serena allowed Tandie to take her into her bedroom and put her to bed. Tandie sat next to her bed and didn’t say anything. When she was assured that she had fallen asleep, she left.

Serena was grateful that Tandie hadn’t closed the door. Getting up from the bed, she moved closer to the door so she could hear what was being said downstairs.

“How is she, did she tell you anything?” Her father asked when Tandie entered the room.

“She’s fine. She’s sleeping now. You just need to give her some time. I’m sure she’ll talk to you all when she’s ready.”

“What did she tell you?” Elray wanted to know.

“Elray, even if Serena did tell me anything, I wouldn’t break her confidence. She’ll talk when she’s ready.”

At that moment, Serena knew that her stepmother would forever hold a special place in her heart. Knowing she could trust her, she went back over to the bed and laid down.



Randy walked Tandie to her car. Going back inside, he asked if anybody was hungry because he was going to order food. Everybody that wanted food gave an order. After Randy left to go pick up the food for everyone, Kimble called Alex. Dillon called Venice. Rayden called Connie because he’d had plans to go by her place later, but with everything going on—he wasn’t leaving his brother.

As Randy was coming in with the food, Venice and Alex were also pulling up and they helped him bring the food in the house. Elray voiced his displeasure; he didn’t need or want a baby sitter. His family, of course, told him his displeasure was duly noted and they didn’t care what he wanted.

Elray was becoming more and more irritated. He wanted his family to leave. So he said, “Look if I promise not to leave this house, will you all please get out?”

“By any stretch of your imagination— do any of us look stupid?” Trent asked. “Do you really think that we believe for one minute that you aren’t going to go after Jerry again?”

Unfortunately, his family knew him too well. Hell would freeze over before they left him alone to get into trouble. Sitting down in a chair, he fumed but didn’t say anything else. He knew they wanted Jerry to pay just as much as he did. Unlike him, they were willing to wait until they had concrete evidence in hand that he’d done anything.

As it turned out, no one would get the chance to gather concrete evidence. Shortly after twelve thirty, the police woke up those that had fallen asleep. Both Lorinda James and Tandie Greene had been arrested. Jerry Smith was in the hospital having sustained a pretty severe beating. According to the police—so severe in fact he might die.

Alex and Venice stayed with a still sleeping Serena while everybody else left to go to the police station. Only Randy and Elray were allowed in to see either of them. They were both granted fifteen minutes to speak to them.

“Tandie, what happened,” Randy asked when he and Elray walked into the room.

“I’m fine. Lorinda needs you both more than I do. She’ll tell you everything.”

Leaving the room, the officers took them to see Serena’s mother next.

The one thing that struck Elray as odd when they walked in to see her mom, was that neither Lorinda or Tandie were crying. They didn't appear the least bit upset, as he would have expected considering they were in jail. The officers had already told them the charges were aggravated battery. If Jerry didn't make it, then the charges would change to first-degree manslaughter.

Again, Elray didn't say anything. He allowed Randy to take the lead.

"What happened Lorinda?" Randy asked her taking a seat next to her.

"Your wife came to see me. She told me everything Serena told her about what Jerry did to her. I knew where Jerry was. We went there—waited for him to come out, and beat the shit out of him. I'm not sorry for what I did. And I'd do it again."

"We know what you did. What we don't know is why."

Lorinda looked up first to Elray then to Randy before replying, "He tried to rape my baby."

It was Elray this time who yelled, "What?"

"Serena told Tandie that he found her alone in the kitchen. She tried to fight him but he was too strong for her and if the nurse hadn't come in, he would have raped her."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

“She has it in her head that she should have been able to stop him. When she couldn’t protect herself, she decided she’d protect you because she knew you’d try to kill him. According to Tandie, she said she couldn’t live with the fact you were in jail because she had become so weak that she couldn’t protect herself.”

“That’s crazy! How could she think she could defend herself from a grown man?”

“Elray, my baby has always taken care of herself. As a kid, she could whip half the boys in the neighborhood.”

“She’s not a kid anymore!”

“This is very hard for her, Elray. Don’t make it worse by going at her. Try to understand how she feels,” Lorinda pleaded with him.

He left the room without saying anything. He couldn’t believe what Serena’s mom had said. How could Serena keep something like that from him? He walked straight past his brothers and out of the police station. The man in him wanted to hurt something—anything. How could he have been so stupid? He didn’t understand how he hadn’t picked up on the signs. He was pacing back and forth around the parking lot completely unaware of his surroundings.

Minutes later, Randy and his brothers approached him.

“Elray, are you okay?” Dillon asked him.

“Hell no I’m not okay! I know Randy told you what happened to Serena.”

“Yes.”

Looking directly at his brothers—not caring in the least that tears were streaming down his face, he said. “If he doesn’t die—I’m going to kill him. He’ll never hurt her again.”

“Take him home,” He heard Serena’s dad say. “I’m going to stay here awhile longer to see what I can do about Tandie and Lorinda.”

“Okay. Call as soon as you know anything or if you need help with bail money or anything.” Rayden replied.



Serena awoke to find Elray standing there watching her. Looking at the clock on the nightstand she saw that it was nearly three in the morning.

“I’m sorry I yelled at everybody,” She said swinging her legs off the side of the bed to sit up.

“Your mom and Tandie are in jail,” Elray told her.

Jumping up Serena asked. “Why? What happened?”

“They nearly beat Jerry to death.”

He had to reach out to keep her steady.

“What do you mean they nearly beat him to death?”

“It seems your stepmother told your mom what he tried to do to you and they surprised him coming out of a club. They worked him over real good with a bat.”

“How much did she tell you?”

“How much is there to tell?”

He wasn't fast enough this time as Serena sank to the floor emitting a loud wail of despair. Kneeling beside her, he gathered her gently in his arms.

“Baby it doesn't matter. I love you. What happened isn't your fault.”

Serena couldn't say anything. This was exactly what she hadn't wanted to happen. It was bad enough she had to live with the shame of what happened. The only thing that provided her with even a semblance of comfort was knowing Elray wouldn't go to jail. The joy she felt temporarily overshadowed by the fact that her mother and stepmother were there instead.

“Why didn't you tell me, Serena?”

Sobbing she lifted her head and looked at him. “I couldn't. I didn't think I could bare the look in your eyes or the thought that I would be the cause of you going to jail.”

Gently, he placed his hands on each side of her face. For several long minutes, he stared into her eyes and they cried together. Leaning forward he kissed

both her closed eyelids, and then her forehead before he asked; “When you look in my eyes do you see any less love than there was before?”

“No.”

“And you never will. I want you to promise me that you’ll never keep anything else from me. And I’ll make that same promise to you.”

Sniffling she said, “I promise.”

Emotionally drained, she and Elray crawled into bed and pulled the covers up around them falling asleep.

Early the next morning, a soft knock on the door woke her up. Slipping quietly from the bed so as not to awaken Elray, Serena went to the door. Trent was standing there with the phone.

“It’s your sister. Do you want to speak to her? I can always just take a message, but she asked me to check.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll talk to her,” She took the phone and went into Raiena’s room.

“Star, where are you?”

“Daddy and I stayed at the police station all night.”

“How’s Mama and Tandie?”

“They’re fine. I was worried about you and Elray. Daddy says he was pretty upset when he left here last night.”

“I didn’t see him then. When I woke up, he was standing in the room. I actually didn’t even know anything was wrong until he told me that Mama and Tandie were in jail.”

“How was he with you, Serena? Are you guys gonna be okay?”

“Yeah...I guess so. As long as we never actually have to discuss all the details, we’ll be fine.”

“Serena haven’t you learned anything about keeping secrets? Tell your husband everything.”

“I can’t. You have no idea how humiliating it was to have that pigs hands on me. Touching me in places... Star I can’t tell Elray those things. It’s hard for me to even think about them.”

“I think you should face it together. Listen, I gotta go. I’ll stop by later. I love you.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

She placed the phone on the floor next to the chair. Maybe Starlett was right. Elray already knew the worst part, she’d almost been raped. Hearing the details from her couldn’t be any worse than what he was probably already imagining. She’d wait to see what happened to her mother and Tandie, then give serious thought to telling her husband everything.

Later that day her father called. Her mother and Tandie were going to be arraigned the next day. Elray's family finally went home after dinner. His parent's had taken both the girls to allow them some time alone. Amazingly, Elray hadn't brought up the situation concerning—Jerry, her mom or Tandie. After watching a couple of movies, they cuddled together on the couch and finally went to bed.



In court, Lorinda James nor Tandie Greene had a record. So they were not considered a flight risk. Bail was set relatively low considering the charges. The Carter foundation put up the money and they were released until their trial date. Serena still couldn't believe the turn of events. Truthfully, she couldn't care less if Jerry died. For her mother and Tandie's sake, she found herself praying that he didn't. She just wanted her life back to normal.

Elray hadn't seen Little Brandis in a week. Serena could sense that he missed him terribly. It hadn't escaped her notice that he hadn't left her side in over a week. Picking up the phone, she called her mother in law to ask for a favor.

"Mrs. Carter, hi it's Serena."

"Hello Serena. How many times do I have to tell you not to call me Mrs. Carter."

"I'm sorry. I have a lot on my mind."

"It's okay. What can I do for you?"

“Well, I know Elray hasn’t seen his son in over a week, because of my situation. So, I wanted to know if you would go and pick him up and bring him to our house.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? You’ve got enough to deal with right now.”

“Please, Mom. Elray has been so supportive of me. This is the least I can do for him.”

“I’ll be happy to help. I’ll call you when I’m on my way with the kids.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s no problem. Serena, I hope you know; we all love you.”

“Yes Ma’am, I do and I love all of you too.”

Later that evening when Mr. and Mrs. Carter came to the house with Little Brandis and the girls, it gave her a good feeling. It was obvious how happy Elray was by their visit.

“Mom, Dad, I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“Well thank your beautiful wife. She called me earlier and asked that I go pick up Brandis. I’m keeping him until tomorrow evening, so you have the whole night with him,” His mother responded.

His parent's only stayed long enough to drop off the kids then left. After they were gone Elray turned to her and asked, "Are you sure you're okay with this, baby?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have asked your mother to bring your son here if I wasn't ready. I had to see him eventually and this way I get to do it on my terms, without dealing with his mother."

"Thank you baby," He said kissing her gently and handing her his son.

This was in fact Serena's first time seeing her husband's son. He was an incredibly handsome boy, like his father. She fell in love with him immediately. She could see how easy it was to love a child whether it was yours or not.

Both the girls and his son slept in their room. She made a pallet on the floor for her, Elray and Raiena. She put Sherinda and Brandis in the bed. Serena could see how happy it made Elray having his son there with them. If only it could be a permanent situation. To her knowledge, Renee was a good mother and she doubted that Elray would want to take him from his mother. He wasn't that type of guy. The next day when it came time for Little Brandis to go home, Serena knew she'd miss him as much as his father would.



A few weeks after the beating, they received word that Jerry would live, but he would be paralyzed for the rest of his life. None of his family members spoke

about what happened to Jerry though he'd bet nobody felt sorry for him Now the family just needed to get through the trial. At the insistence of Elray and Serena's parents, Serena was seeing a therapist, Dr. Sahara Cain. She still hadn't open up to him about all the details of what had actually happened, but life was finally getting back to normal. He was glad that she had even started going back to the shop twice a week.

Plans for the family get together so his family could see his son, had been placed on the back burner for now. Sherinda had her first check up that he and his dad took her to. Elray marveled at how much his kids looked alike. If you didn't know it, there was no way to tell, other than the fact, they were only two months apart; that they had different mothers.

He continued to show his loving support for Serena, her mom and Tandie. He tried to be a model husband. He didn't even pressure her intimately. At first, it concerned him about her recent lack of interest in their sex life. So much so, that he asked her therapist, Dr. Cain, about it when she called to confirm her appointment.

"I'm a little worried about Serena. We've always been so passionate with each other. Lately, she hasn't shown much interest in sex since this episode with her mom."

“I can’t discuss Serena with you, Mr. Carter. But I can make a suggestion in my professional opinion. Make sure your wife knows how much you desire her. Even though she wasn’t physically raped, mentally the damage is done,” She told him. “Before you knew about the attempted rape there was nothing for her to feel ashamed of. Now there is.”

“Thank you, Dr. Cain.”

“You’re very welcome. Your wife is a remarkable woman. I admire her strength.”

“Yeah, I think she’s pretty amazing myself.”

“Best of luck to you, Mr. Carter. From what your wife tells me, you’re a pretty amazing guy yourself. I’d say she’s a very lucky woman to have you as a husband—if even half of what she says is true.”

Wow, that made him feel great. With everything his Serena was going through, she had taken the time to talk about him to Dr. Cain. Just knowing that his wife regarded him so highly, made him love her just that much more. He’d gone through a lot of woman over the years, but he was so happy his heart settled on the right one.

The sound of the doorbell ringing brought him out of his thoughts. Going to the door he found Serena’s mom there.

“Lorinda, Serena isn’t here.”

“Good, I wanted to speak to you privately first anyway.”

Well that certainly had him curious. While his mother-in-law took a seat in the living room, he got them each a glass of lemonade.

“So what is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Jerry talked to the police.”

“If he told them what actually happened, I doubt any jury will convict you or Tandie, after all the facts are brought out in court.”

“That’s just it—he says he doesn’t want to press charges. In fact he asked his lawyer to set up a meeting with all of us.”

“All of us as in who? I know that man doesn’t think I can be in the same room with him after what he did to my wife!”

“Honestly, I don’t know what this is about. According to my lawyer, he also asked that a prosecutor be in attendance.”

“Are they going to honor his request?”

“It looks like it. Due to the nature of his injuries, the judge presiding over the case has granted special permission for Jerry’s request to be honored.”

“When is this supposed to take place?”

“Not until Jerry is transferred to the rehabilitation facility next month.”

“Well, that gives me some time to get Serena prepared for this. She’s doing so well with her therapy. I hate to put her through any unnecessary drama.”

“I know and so do I, but it may actually be good for her. He’s paralyzed. She’ll see for herself that he can never hurt her again. It may give her some closure.”

“I hope you’re right.”

They talked for several more minutes before Lorinda left. A short while later Serena returned home and he sat her down to talk.

The next few weeks flew by. They didn’t talk anymore about Jerry or the scheduled meeting. He was happy to see that their sex life was getting back to normal. His parent’s had also continued to pick up his son so that he and Serena could spend time with him as a family. That arrangement was working well, until one weekend Renee showed up, unexpectedly, at his parent’s to pick him up early.

She insisted that Elray’s mother call him immediately; when she called his cell phone and got no answer. He was now listening to her scream into the phone.

“Renee, if you’d just calm down we can talk about this.”

“Calm down my ass! If you don’t have my baby here within ten minutes... I’m calling the police.”

“Renee, I am entitled to visitation as agreed upon in the court order.”

Well that just made her even madder. He glanced over at Serena who was sitting on the couch with Sherinda, Little Brandis and Raiena. He was just about to say something to Renee—when he heard the dial tone. She’d hung up on him.

“How mad is she?”

“You don’t want to know. I’d better take him to her. Now is not the time to wage a war with her,” Elray said.

Shaking her head Serena got up, “No, it’s time we all sat down and talked. Let me pack a bag for the kids real quick.”

Twenty minutes later, they were pulling into his parent’s driveway, thankful they hadn’t been pulled over for speeding. Renee came charging out the door the minute the car doors slam. Luckily, his mom was right behind her.

Renee took her baby from him and headed back in the house. Seconds later, he entered with Serena and their girls. Before anyone got a chance to go off the deep end, his mom and father took the kids upstairs.

“If you can’t be civilized about this discussion, then I’ll ask you not to have it in my house,” his mother said from the top of the stairs.

“Renee this is so unnecessary. I’m his father. Did you really think that I wasn’t taking him around my wife?”

“That’s not the point Elray and you know it. I should have been told.”

“Why...I don’t question who you take him around, do I?”

“I’m your son’s mother, Elray, not her. I won’t have her acting like she is.”

Now he was mad. She ought to be glad his wife wasn’t the type of woman that didn’t want him anywhere near his son. “Look Renee, I know you are his

mother and Serena isn't trying to take your place. There's no reason we all can't love him and take care of him."

"Oh please, what do you take me for—a fool? She knows if she doesn't allow you to spend time with your son—that you'll sneak and do it anyway. She doesn't want that cause that means you'll be spending time with me. And we both know she doesn't want that."

He was about to say something, but Serena stopped him, "I hate to break it to you Ms. Thang, but I'm not in the least bit worried about you. If my husband wanted you, he could have stayed with you. Truthfully, we all know if he wanted you now—your stupid little ass would give him anything he wanted. Get over yourself. You were nothing more than a booty call that went bad. I was hoping we could resolve this like adults, so when you're done acting like a child—let us know."

Elray stunned by his wife's comments, watched as his wife turned and walked up the stairs.

"Will you please go and get my son since you're more interested in playing house with her than being with your son. Don't bother to call us. Oh and don't worry, I'll find someone who really wants to be a part of his life and a father to him."

Elray snatched Renee by the arm, “Don’t play games with me. This doesn’t have to be ugly.”

Renee snatched her arm away and walked to the door. “Have him home by noon tomorrow and be prepared to talk— just you and me.” Without waiting for his reply, she walked out.

Tomorrow couldn’t get there soon enough. He planned on having it out with Renee once and for all. They couldn’t continue like this. Everyone in this equation had to make concessions. Renee had to accept that Serena was number one in his life, but that didn’t diminish his love for his son.

Looking up he saw Serena walking back down the stairs, “She gone?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think she’s ever going to let up?”

“One can only hope, but until she moves on with her life...I doubt it. You know how you women are?”

Raising a brow at him Serena replied, “No Elray, I don’t know how we women are. Why don’t you explain it to me?”

“Son, I wouldn’t touch that with a ten foot pole. And if you’re smart neither will you.” His dad said as he walked past them into the kitchen.

Taking his father’s advice, Elray went upstairs to get his children. As expected, his mother didn’t want her grandchildren to leave. You would think

after raising six kids his mother would be sick of children. It was extremely hard for him to deny his mom anything. They ended up staying until after eleven, before packing up their kids and going home.



The first to get up the following morning, Elray let Serena sleep in while he made breakfast. One by one the kids started waking up. First Sherinda, Raiena and then Brandis commanded their father's attention. When Serena finally wandered into the kitchen, he smiled up at her. They all sat at the table like a family and that made him happy. The role of husband and father really suit him. He felt so peaceful and content.

After eating their breakfast, Serena got up to leave. With so much on his mind, he'd forgotten that Serena had another session scheduled with her therapist, Dr. Cain. It would actually be the last one before the scheduled meeting with Jerry. He hadn't brought the subject up again, but he could hardly think of anything else. How was what that asshole had to say going to affect their life? Would his wife be able to handle seeing him again? Was his mother-in-law right about this providing some closure for Serena? He didn't have the answers, but no matter what he'd support his wife no matter the outcome.

Serena took the girls and left to go to her mother's. She was meeting Starlett there before going over to her dad's house. Tandie was keeping the girls while she

went to her therapy session. Surprisingly, Tandie and her mother, while they would never be best friends, were getting along. Tandie absolutely adored her granddaughters.

Starlett was going to stay with Tandie to help with the girls, even though she said she didn't need help. The drive to Dr. Cain's office must have taken longer than usual, because he was already there when Serena arrived. Elray thought for sure since he had to drop Brandis off at Renee's that Serena would have gotten there first.

Walking into Dr. Cain's office, Serena looked more peaceful than ever. He liked Dr. Cain. She had a very warm and pleasant personality, which he was sure made it easier for Serena to open up to her.

Taking a seat across from Dr. Cain, he and Serena waited while she finished up something she was typing on her computer.

"Good afternoon, Serena," She said as she closed the laptop and gave them her full attention.

"Hi, Dr. Cain."

"So tell me...are you ready to face your mother's boyfriend and deal with this situation?"

Serena hesitated for several minutes before replying, “I’ve never been afraid of anything or anybody my entire life, but I’m afraid today. That’s why I have my husband here with me. He wants to be my rock and I want him to be.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that Serena. I’ve never seen a man more in love than your husband. What happened wasn’t your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Serena didn’t reply and Elray knew it was because she did still blame herself for not being able to prevent Jerry from attacking her. She’d always been tough and able to take care of herself, yet when she needed to be tough the most, she felt she hadn’t. He wanted to say something, but he had agreed to be there only as an observer and for her support; should she need it. So he sat quietly holding her hand as she and Dr. Cain finished the session.

After the session was over, he took her to lunch at her favorite Chinese food restaurant, Chop Stixs. When they were done, he tried calling her sister, but didn’t get an answer. When Serena checked her voice mail, she discovered that Starlett and Tandie had taken the girls to the mall. Knowing how much her sister loved to shop, they decided to go over to her mom’s for a while before going home. Starlett and Tandie would drop the kids off after their shopping excursion.

Chapter Twenty Two

Elray had already called Renee to let her know he was on his way. She met him at the door taking the baby from him. Closing the door, Elray followed her further into the apartment, placing his son's diaper bag on a nearby table. He watched as Renee smothered their son's face with kisses. There was no denying she loved him completely.

"Renee we need to talk," he interrupted her kissing tirade.

Taking a seat on the couch, she looked at him.

"Yes we do. I know you love Brandis, but we can't always be second in your life, we deserve better."

"He isn't second in my life. I love him just as much as I do my girls. All my children are equal in my heart."

"I'm your son's mother. Where do I fit in your life?"

"Look Renee, I'll always have a special place in my heart for you. Like you said, you are my son's mother. I'm not going to lie and say I love you. You know that isn't true."

“How can you want to be with her, and not us? What kind of man doesn’t want to be with his son and make a good home life for him?”

“Renee, there are a lot of blended families. Serena loves Brandis as much as we do. He will never feel left out or unwanted.”

Renee began to cry.

“I can’t be around you anymore, Elray. I love you. I was so sure you’d choose us after your wife had another girl. I think it’s best if you just stay away from me and the baby. I’m going to file for sole custody of Bran.”

“You won’t win. I’m a good father and I want to be a part of my son’s life. If you really love him, don’t try to deny him his father. You’re a beautiful woman and some man is going to love you like the queen you are. But he can’t do that if you don’t get out there and find him.” He walked over to the couch and sat down next to her, putting his arms around them both.

Brandis had fallen asleep, so Elray took him from Renee and went into his room to put him to bed. Renee was still sitting on the couch when he sat down next to her. Elray looked into her face—at the tears. She deserved to be happy, but would she allow herself to find happiness, he wondered silently? Feeling his phone vibrate, out of respect for Renee’s feelings, he didn’t look at it.

“Renee, please don’t try to keep my son away from me.”

“I think it’s time you left.”

He didn't move. "No, I think it's time we come to an understanding."

"I understand you perfectly, Elray. I'm not stupid. Can you please just go now?"

Standing, he walked over to the door. Turning back to her he said, "I'll call you."

When she didn't answer, he left. After leaving the apartment, he looked at his cell phone to see who had called him. Seeing it was Serena, he dialed the number to see what was up.

"Hey baby, I just wanted to let you know I'm going over to Mama's. I'll see you at home later." Serena told him.

That would work out good since he needed to meet with Parker, his agent, anyway, for a new Tommy ad campaign. That photo shoot was scheduled to be shot next month. Hurrying through the rest of his day, Elray couldn't wait to get home. He was hoping, seriously, to get some quality alone time before the girls got home.

Pulling into the garage, he saw that Serena was already there. Opening the kitchen door, he smelled cinnamon but didn't see any sign of his lovely wife. Tossing his keys on the table, he continued on through the family room. Again, no Serena. He called her name, no answer. Checking the rest of the rooms downstairs, he began to wonder if maybe she'd dropped her car off and left with Starlett.

Deciding to catch a quick shower and change before Serena got home, he headed upstairs. Pausing outside the girl's room, Elray let his mind think back to a time when it was just him— no kids, no wife, and no responsibility. Leaning against the door, he traced the outlines of his daughter's names. Two years ago, he never would he have thought he would be so content being with one woman, a husband and father. Serena and the girls made his life complete. But he wanted his son to be a permanent fixture in his home.

Renee was a good mother. She loved Brandis. No matter how much he wanted his son with him, Elray knew in his heart he wouldn't try to take him from his mother. He knew right then and there he had to find a way to make things work out for all of them. He continued on to his bedroom. Tilting his head, he noticed that the smell of cinnamon seemed to get stronger. Looking around there wasn't any sign that anybody was home. He concluded it had to be his imagination.

Opening the bedroom door, he found his beautiful wife standing there holding his favorite cinnamon rolls dripping in icing—wearing nothing but a smile. There couldn't have been a better homecoming in the history of man— coming home to something like this. She smiled and he returned her smile. Crossing the room, he took the tray of still warm cinnamon rolls from her. Placing

the tray on the nearby dresser, he took one and pulled his finger across the icing. He applied it to Serena's lips, like lip stick.

Before she could lick away any icing, he leaned forward using his tongue. He removed the icing completely. The kiss he gave her was meant to melt her clean down to her toes. So sexually aroused, he vaguely remembered picking her up and placing her in the center of their king-sized bed. She closed her eyes as he caressed her gently. Stepping away from the bed just long enough to remove his clothing, he rejoined his wife.

So impatient to have her, he apologized. "Oh God baby I'm sorry," he said as he slide his body into hers. "I promise to go slow after this first time baby, but right now I can't."

Coming home finding his wife this way had him so fueled up that even after three consecutive orgasms, he was still just as fueled as when he'd first walked into the room. Nothing in Elray's life compared to the love he felt for this woman. Finally, too exhausted to do anything but lay in each other's arms, Serena asked, "Baby do we have to go to this meeting that Jerry has asked for?"

"No, but don't you want to hear what he has to say so that you can put some closure to this once and for all."

She laid there silently before she replied, "I'm afraid. I don't know if I want to hear what he has to say anymore."

“Why?”

Again, she appeared to be carefully choosing her words. He wanted her to be truthful and fully open up to him, like Dr. Cain suggested. Serena’s next words proved she was doing just that. “Because I’m afraid nothing between us will ever be the same again.”

“Baby, nothing that asshole says will ever change what I feel for you.” Tears were in his eyes when he added, “I just hate I wasn’t there to protect you.”

Reaching up she wiped a tear from his face. “Sweetheart, I never want you to blame yourself for what had happened.”

Seeing her cry did something to him. His own tears continued to flow freely. For nearly an hour neither said anything. They just held each other and provided comfort for one another. Emotionally drained—they both fell asleep not waking up again until almost midnight.

Serena jumped up from the bed. She couldn’t believe she had slept this long. Tandie and Starlett were supposed to bring the girls home. She hoped they hadn’t come by and were not able to get in. Stumbling in the bathroom in the dark, so as not to wake Elray up, she turned on the shower. A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened.

“Mind if I join you?” Elray asked as he got into the shower.

“I’ve got to hurry up baby. Tandie and Star were supposed to have brought the girls home.”

Grinning, he took the soapy towel and turned her around. He began washing her back before his hand dipped lower to the shapely derriere, paying his tribute to the glorious mounds.

“Don’t worry the girls are staying with your dad and Tandie tonight.”

“How do you know that?”

“Tandie left a message on my cell phone. I’m sure she probably left you one too.”

Not about to let the night alone go to waste, the loving twosome made quick work of their shower before going back to bed to enjoy the rest of the childfree night.



The last two days before D-day, as Serena had come to refer to the dreaded meeting, went by agonizingly slow. No matter what Elray said, Serena still wasn’t sure she was ready to hear this. Part of her did want to put closure once and for all to this nightmare. Jerry had violated her, but she didn’t necessarily want to relive it in front of her mother, father and husband.

Mona and Trent volunteered to come over to the house to watch the girls while they went to the meeting. As a bonus, Trent brought Little Bran with him.

Dr. Cain had offered to come for support, but Serena turned her down. There would be enough people in there as it was. She did promise to call Dr. Cain as soon as the meeting was over, if she needed to talk.

Standing outside of Jerry's room in the rehabilitation center, Serena looked at Elray, Lorinda and Randy before they joined hands to say a prayer. Her father lead the prayer, asking God for the strength to deal with whatever was said in this room. Serena opened her eyes slightly and peered at her mom and dad. It was the first time her parent's had done anything together. All her life it had been just her mom. Now that Randy was a part of her life, Serena felt completed.

The amen's resounded throughout the group, as the prayer ended. Serena realized at that time that her husband was right. No matter what Jerry said today, it couldn't take away the happiness she now had. With her husband and parents by her side, Serena stepped into the room to face whatever would happen.

Jerry sat propped up in the bed with a nurse, lawyer and police detective already inside. Her mom and dad stood on one side of the bed, she and Elray on the other.

"Thank you for coming," Jerry finally said.

No one responded, so he continued. "Lorinda, I want you to know that no charges will be filed against you or the other woman responsible for my being here

due to my full confession. Serena, I know this doesn't make up for what I put you through, but I sincerely hope it helps."

"How could you do this to my baby, Jerry? Did I not mean anything to you?" her mother asked.

"Lorinda, I had feelings for you, and I'm ashamed to admit this, but I've always been obsessed with Serena. I pretended to hate her because it made it easier to control my feelings, but as you started drinking more, so did I."

Serena saw the look in her mother's eyes. She hoped Jerry wasn't going to try and make her mother feel any worse that she probably already did. She also saw her dad put a protective arm around her mom. For the first time in Serena's life, there was hope that her parent's would at least get along—even if they wouldn't ever be a couple.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to imply that anybody is to blame for my actions."

"Then what are you implying?" Serena asked to bring the focus back to why they were there in the first place.

"I'd been drinking more than usual, because now that your mother was trying to get herself together, it seemed that she was drifting away from me. When I walked in and saw you and you got up to leave, it was like you didn't even think I

was good enough to be in the same room with you. Something inside me just snapped.”

“I wanted to leave the room, because I wasn’t in the mood to get into an argument with you. It’s not like we ever got along.”

“I know, but it was just something about the way you looked at me that day. A voice inside me said: bring her down a peg or two. So, I didn’t let you pass.”

“Why would you want to hurt my baby like that? I know you didn’t think that would bring us closer together?” Lorinda asked.

“I truly had no intentions of doing anything, but giving her a piece of my mind. Things just got out of hand. I tried to kiss her. The next thing I knew we were in the washroom. I could tell your hatred was greater than any fear you had. I didn’t see any real fear in your eyes until,” he stopped and looked around the room at all of them.

Whatever his next words would be could affect each of those she loved in a different way. She was almost tempted to leave. Of all the despicable things Jerry had probably done in his life, she truly hoped had never felt lower than at this moment.

At this point, his feelings where unimportant, she deserved to put him and what he’d done behind her and move on with her life. His eyes locked with Elray’s, it was plain to see that he still hated him. Nevertheless, he had a hint of weariness

that had never been there before. Did he perhaps see that no matter what he said, this man loved her, and nothing could or would change that?

Never taking his eyes off her husband, Jerry continued speaking. "I'm not going to give unnecessary details. I wanted you to know that even if the nurse hadn't come back when she did, I wouldn't have raped you. When it came down to it I realized I couldn't hurt you or your mother that way."

"You are such a liar! I remember everything! The way you touched me. Where you touched me! You had no right! I never did anything to lead you on," She cried out turning to Elray and burying her face in his shoulder.

"I'm truly sorry, Serena."

Lifting her head, she looked at him. Hatred like she had never known shined brightly in her eyes. "I don't give a damn about your apology. I'm glad your life is over and that it was my mother that ended it!"

With her eyes closed, Serena tried to calm down. Feeling the warmth of the man who loved her, she said, "I've heard enough. Elray, I want to go home."

Without saying another word, Serena walked toward the door, opened it and walked out. As far as she was concerned, this chapter in her life was over. From this day forward, her focus would be to enjoy the life that God provided. After all, she had a wonderful husband, two beautiful kids and a loving family. What more could any woman ask for? Jerry wasn't worth any additional thought,

he was suffering plenty. Because of his actions—he would never walk again. Her mother hated him for what he did to her— and for her, justice had been served.



Without a word to anyone, Elray followed his wife from the room. He had come here prepared for the worst, hoping for the best. Lorinda and Randy remained. Ashamed of what he'd just admitted, Jerry waited for Serena's parents to say something. Nothing he could say would take away the hurt look on Lorinda's face. For the first time, he realized just how much she trusted him.

"I won't say I'm sorry for what I did to you, because you deserved worse. What I will say is, thank you for not hurting my baby anymore than you did."

Jerry and Serena's dad now faced each other. Here stood the man that had prevented Lorinda from ever really being completely his. There had never been a day during their relationship that Jerry wasn't aware that her children's father could have walked in, and she would have dropped him like a bad habit. Actually, he was the one person in this situation that he truly didn't give a rats behind about. Lorinda and Serena, maybe even Serena's husband deserved to have him make retribution, but as far as he was concerned, Randy Greene could go straight to hell.

Jerry also knew without a doubt, as he looked into her dad's face that they held a mutual hatred for one another. Even though the hatred stemmed from

different sources, it was no less intense for either man. It was clear that nothing would have made Randy happier than to be able to kick the shit out of him. Thanks to Lorinda, he would never get the chance. It actually gave him pleasure to know that he been deprived of that.

He was just as happy that Lorinda would rest easy knowing he was no longer a threat to her baby girl. Without so much as a word, Randy left the room.

“Lorinda, I hope that someday you’ll be able to forgive me but if you don’t, just know that I did care about you.”

“Those are just words. There’s no way you ever really cared for me. If you did you never would have put a finger on my child. I may have not been the best mother in the world, but I have always loved my daughters!”

She too walked out of the room, leaving him to whatever fate would befall him. After she left, he cried. “Do you have enough on tape to clear her and her friend of all the charges,” Randy asked.

“Yes. Based off what I’ve heard here today I doubt any prosecutor would elect to try this case.”

“Thank you. What will happen to me now?”

“At this point I don’t know. While you definitely committed a crime by attacking this young woman, I’d say that you’ve paid for it. It will be up to the judge to determine if any further punishment is warranted.”

Elray and Serena were waiting downstairs in the lobby, when her parent's came down.

"Thanks for being here today, daddy."

"I love you baby girl, there's no other place I want to be now, than a permanent part of your life." Randy said to her holding his arms wide to embrace her.

Her dad provided that last missing piece required to make her life complete. Now if she and Elray could just work this thing out with Renee, then the Carter family could finally be free of drama. Unfortunately, that was something that likely would not happen anytime soon. However, she was secure in her husband's love. This too she was sure would eventually work itself out. Holding her husband's hand, Serena walked out the hospital never looking back. Her parent's behind them.

Epilogue

More than a month had passed. Serena continued her therapy sessions with Dr. Cain to help put her life into perspective. In fact, she credited those sessions for giving her the strength for what she was about to tell her husband. He definitely wasn't going to be happy about her decision to race again, even if she was doing it legally. There was also the matter of the package that had arrived from Renee's lawyer. Unfortunately, her gut told her that whatever it contained would change their lives forever. Serena just wished she knew if that change was going to be for the good. Both the girls were at her dad's. Elray's favorite meal, fried chicken, homemade mashed potatoes with gravy, fried corn, yeast rolls with honey butter and red kool-aid awaited his arrival.

Because the night had to be perfect, Starlett had done the cooking, because cooking still wasn't her forte. While she could cook good enough to keep them from starving or eating out everyday, she was by no means a great cook. Tonight demanded a great cook. Taking one final look around to make sure everything was just the way she wanted it, Serena made her way upstairs to shower and change.

Elray couldn't wait to get home. This trip could not have come at a worse time. He had never turned down work for benefit shows that helped needy children. It helped that both his sister Alex, and her husband Kimble were there to keep him company, but he missed his family. Both his daughters had ear infections and Serena did not want to leave the girls, so she hadn't come. Also, since her return to work at Dillon's shop one of her clients had commissioned her to customize a bike for her son who was graduating from med school. He completely understood her dedication to completing it on time.

As soon as they got the luggage loaded into Alex and Kimble's SUV, Elray jumped behind the wheel.

"Get in. I'm driving cause both of you drive too damn slow!"

Elray saw his brother-in-law about to protest. Silently he laughed to himself when he saw his sister lean over and say something in his ear that had him yanking open the door and shoving her inside.

When he pulled into the driveway, he saw Serena waiting on the porch and before he put the SUV in park good, he was out the door walking briskly up the walkway. Since he didn't see the girls he wondered if they were asleep. If so, he planned to use the time to properly greet his wife.

"Hey baby," he said as he pounced up the porch into her waiting arms. "Did you miss me?"

“Elray, you’ve only been gone a week and I talked to you everyday.”

He was about to say something, but her inability to maintain a straight face made him grin before pulling her back into his embrace.

“I hate to interrupt, but since you left all your bags in the car and my wife insisted I bring them too you. Where do you want them?” Kimble joked.

“Sorry Kim. You can leave them right there. I’ll take them on inside.”

“Hi Kim.”

“Hi Serena. Well I better be going. Alex will be blowing the horn any minute because she told me to hurry up.”

Going back down the stairs Elray grabbed his luggage and he and Serena went on into the house.

“Wow it smells so good in here.”

“It’s all your favorites.” Raising an eyebrow, he responded.

“Really. And what exactly did I do to deserve all my favorites?”

Serena’s soft laughter filled the foyer.

“You’re the greatest husband in the world. I love you and I just wanted to do a little something to show you just how much I appreciate you.”

“Oh baby, trust me, I can think of some more interesting ways for you to show me how much you appreciate your wonderful husband.”

Pulling his wife back into his arms Elray showered sweet little kisses across her face and down her neck. He wanted nothing more at this moment than to take her upstairs and reacquaint himself with her body. A week wasn't long but it was longer than he liked to be without her. The delicious smell of the meal waiting for him again assaulted his senses and he reluctantly pulled away.

"But since you've gone to so much trouble to fix me all my favorites, let's have dinner first."

It took several seconds before his wife responded.

"Okay. You go wash up while I finish setting the table."

A few minutes later Elray joined her in the dining room. Since tonight was his night, Serena slid a chair out and motioned for him to sit.

"Why thank you."

"You're very welcome," she replied as she went about fixing his plate. She sat down next to him and they had playful banter as they enjoyed the meal. Clearing the dishes from the table, Serena decided it was time to tell Elray about the envelope from Renee's lawyer and her decision to return to racing.

Walking up and standing directly in front of him, she handed Elray the large brown envelope.

"This package from Renee's lawyers came the day after you left."

She watched him as he took the package, opened it and began to scan the pages. Several minutes past and still Elray hadn't said anything. He just continued reading one page after another. Quietly, Serena sat down next to him to wait patiently.

When he looked up at her, the emotion shown on his face surprised her.

"These are papers granting us joint custody of Brandis along with a letter from Renee. In the letter she says that even though she wishes we could be a family, it's no longer about her. She says that she realizes that you would never harm Brandis. Apparently, she saw you with him and the girls in the park and could see the love in your eyes when you looked at him.

She finishes the letter with, "You see—I'm not as selfish as I'm sure you both believe I am. I love my son and I know you love him too Elray. This isn't an idea situation for any of us but I'm willing to try and make things work so that Brandis can be with us both. Take care of my baby and remember I'm doing this because I love him."

Renee

"Wow. I'm so happy for you baby. I know this is what you wanted."

"It is but I didn't want Renee to feel like I was trying to take Brandis away from her. According to this, she has agreed to continue letting him spend every other weekend with us as well as the entire summer. Baby, I know this is a lot to

ask of you. Weekends are one thing, but the whole summer. I can hire help for you so you won't have the burden of caring for an extra kid."

Shaking her head, Serena got down on her knees in front of her husband and wrapped her arms around him.

"You will not! I'll love having little Brandis here as much as you will. Oh Elray, I didn't think I could ever be this happy. I can still remember a time when nothing in my life was more important than racing a bike. Now because of you and the love you've given me, there's nothing more important to me than this family."

She allowed Elray to gently move her back from his embrace. He then placed the papers on the table, slid down to the floor with her and pulled her back into his arms. In the hours that followed, they made love right there on the floor of their dining room and reaffirmed the love they shared for each other.

As Serena lay in her husband's arms and listened to his smooth even breathing, she realized that everything she said was true. Returning to racing was now the farthest thing from her mind. She had the one thing she had always wanted more than anything, happiness. It's just now she knew that racing wasn't the only way to achieve that happiness. Until the kids were older, her husband would never know of her desire to return to racing.

The End

Author Bio:

Born and raised in the chilly Midwest, Tiffany spent much of her childhood and adolescences with her head stuck in a book. Reading has always been one of her favorite past times. The only thing more pleasurable than reading a book is spinning her own tales of intricate, sensual and erotic romance. She made the decision to write romance and relationship very early in her career because; she has always found intrigue in the completed world of relationships.

Tiffany adopted the persona of the, the Urban Romance Author, because she feels her romances deal with real life and real issues prevalent in today's relationships. She writes the sweet and good relationship sagas as well as the gritty, complicated, and yes, sometimes-hurtful relationships.

She herself met and married her husband Laville at a very early age. They have spent twenty-five years together and now reside in Atlanta, GA., with their children.

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He Isn't Mine

My Best Friend's Sister-Forbidden Love Series Book 1

Serena-Forbidden ove Series Book 2

In Hot Pursuit

A House Is Not A Home