



Finding
Mrs. Wright
Sherri L. Lewis

one

“Man, why your boy always gotta be late? We’re gonna miss the tailgate. We should just go ahead and leave and meet him there.”

I looked down at my watch. “Chill, man, it’s only noon. The game doesn’t start until four. He’ll be here.”

A.J. was hyped because of having a rare day out with the boys. He was usually stuck home watching football on Sundays with the TV at high volume trying to drown out his loud kids and nagging wife. For some reason, she picked Sundays to come up with her “honey-do” list and couldn’t understand why A.J. didn’t find it as urgent as she did.

I had to admit I had been looking forward to today myself. First game of the season and we had great tickets. Fifty yard-line, Row 2. We were jerseyed up and ready to go watch the Falcons beat up on the Dolphins.

The doorbell rang. I sprang off the couch to answer it. “See, he’s here. Get the cooler ready and let’s roll out.”

I swung the door open. Instead of my boy Charles standing there, I looked into the face of someone I had once considered to be one of the finest women in the world. I looked down a few

feet into another face. One that looked exactly like mine except it was surrounded by braids and beads.

“Daddy!” My daughter grabbed me around the waist.

“Hey, Bree Bree.” I reached down to pick her up and she threw her arms around my neck in a tight hug. I kissed her cheek. “How’s Daddy’s girl?”

The way she buried her face in my neck let me know she’d had a bad few days with her mother. I looked at Shauntae. She rolled her eyes. She didn’t say anything but I knew she was thinking that our six year-old daughter, Brianna, was too big for me to be picking up. With her long legs hanging down almost to my knees, I would have agreed, except that would force me to admit that Shauntae was right about something. For once.

As I put Brianna down, I noticed her pink book bag on the porch behind her. Shauntae peeped me raising an eyebrow when I saw the bag. She picked it up and shoved it into Brianna’s arms, almost knocking her over. “Take this and go to your room. I need to talk to your Daddy.” Brianna lowered her eyes and started toward the door.

“Ain’t you got no kiss for your Mama?”

I wondered how Shauntae thought Brianna would want to kiss her with the nasty way she demanded it. I knew her request for a kiss was only because I was standing there. Shauntae was the kind of woman who was affectionate only as a prelude to sex. Brianna reluctantly turned and gave her mother a polite peck on the cheek and then ran into the house.

I pulled the door closed and let out a deep breath. The staring match began.

I looked at her. She was fine by any standards with her dark brown skin, big pretty lips, and thick, long hair – without a weave. Her sweet smelling perfume was the same scent she wore that sucked me in the first time I met her. And her body? She must have been the inspiration for

the song, “Brick House”.

But I knew the truth. This dime standing on my front porch was Satan’s little sister, aka Quartisha Shauntae Randall. How a man as intelligent as me ended up with a crazy baby mama was still one of my life’s greatest mysteries.

“What’s going on, Shauntae?” I only ever called her by her middle name. I refused to form my lips to say the word Quartisha.

By the twitchy way she was tapping her foot, I knew she was trying to think of a good enough lie to justify yet another day that she was dropping my daughter off unexpectedly.

“I tried to call you, but you didn’t answer.”

I pulled out my phone and held it up in her face. “No missed calls.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Look, I have an emergency. I need you to watch her for a couple of hours until I take care of some things. I’ll be back in a little while.”

She acted like I hadn’t seen Brianna’s book bag. If Shauntae planned on picking her up, there would have been no reason for her to bring it. It meant that she would call late tonight saying she couldn’t make it back to get Brianna and I would be taking her to school the next morning.

“I know what you thinking. She has homework to finish.”

I crossed my arms. “We finished her homework on Thursday night. They don’t get homework on Fridays.”

If Shauntae was the least bit interested or involved in our daughter’s education, she would have known that lie wouldn’t work. She was the only person I knew who could lie while looking me straight in the eyes.

“Look, I said I’d be back. I told you I have an emergency.”

I looked down at her snug jeans hugging her thick hips. She had on a tight Falcon's t-shirt cut at the neckline to reveal her ample cleavage. The shirt was short and the pants low cut enough for me to see her sculpted abs and silver belly button ring. I couldn't imagine what emergency she could be going to with her breasts almost completely exposed like that. Funny how I thought the way she dressed was sexy until she did it in front of my daughter.

Shauntae started to walk down the steps but turned back around slowly. She put her hand on her hip and tilted her head to the side. Running her tongue over those big lips, she twirled a piece of hair around her finger.

Uh oh. Here it comes. That move was reserved for when she was going to ask me for something when she already knew the answer was no.

"Ummm, do you think you could spot me Brianna's check a little early this month?"

"What?" I tried to keep the heat out my voice. The worst thing I could do was let Shauntae know she'd upset me. "It's the 17th. That's two weeks early."

"It's not two weeks." She stepped closer to me and reached out a finger to trace the Falcon on my jersey. "It's only thirteen days."

I grabbed her wrist to stop her. "Brianna's school is already paid for and I bought her all new school clothes and supplies. So what could you possibly need her check early for? Child support is supposed to be for the child. And for real, Brianna spends more time at my house than she does at yours, so I shouldn't be paying you child support anyway."

She dropped her sexy begging routine and narrowed her eyes into an icy stare. "Here you go with that again. I'm so tired of black men trying to get out of they responsibilities for taking care of they children."

My hands tightened into fists, but I refused to let her make me lose my cool. I had

engaged in enough arguments with her ignorant behind to know that it wasn't worth it. "I have no problem supporting my child. What I'm not going to do is support you."

"Your child lives with me, so supporting me is supporting your child. I would think you wouldn't want your child living in a dump or riding the bus." She looked past me at the front of my house. I followed her eyes to the weathered wood siding that could use a good paint job and the cracked concrete on the porch steps.

Whenever she really wanted to get to me, Shauntae hit me in my soft spots. She knew it wasn't my choice to be living in this older house in this particular neighborhood. Worst part was, I would live in a much better place if I didn't have to finance her designer clothes and shoes habit, under the guise of child support.

"And if you want to use the excuse that she lives here half the time, maybe that needs to change. Maybe Brianna should stay with me all the time and you get visitation every other weekend."

So much for not losing my cool. My voice rose. "I've told you what threatening to keep my child away from me will get you." We both knew Shauntae didn't want Brianna. All she wanted was the check.

Shauntae stepped right up in my face. "What?" She sucked her teeth and sneered at me. "What you gon' do? Take me to court? First of all, you can't afford it. Second of all, ain't nobody gonna give no man custody of no child over her mother. And if you try, I'll pack her up and move her out to California. She should be growing up around her other grandparents anyway."

"Please. Your crazy mother and dirty old man stepfather? You think I want my daughter to turn out like you?"

Her eyes flew open. “What you trying to say?” I had hit her in one of her soft spots. I hated when I let her pull me down to her level. I took a deep breath to calm myself down. “I’m not trying to say anything, Shauntae.”

I had to diffuse this argument. It would only be a matter of minutes before Brianna came out of the house to find me. I made a point of never arguing in front of my child. Which was hard. Because all me and Shauntae ever did was argue.

“Go ahead and take care of your...emergency.” I looked her up and down to let her know I saw straight through her lie. “Don’t worry about coming back to get your daughter. I’ll take her to school in the morning.”

She gave her smug little victory grin.

“And the child support check will come on the first of next month like it’s supposed to.”

She narrowed her eyes like she was trying to figure out if it was worth arguing about.

“You think I got an extra \$600 sitting around in my bank account? I can’t pay you until I get paid. I’m not made of money.”

“You ain’t broke, Negro. You ain’t never been broke. You too smart for that. You always got some money stashed away somewhere.”

“Saved. I have money saved. That’s what smart people do with their money. You wouldn’t know anything about that though, would you? Because if you did, you wouldn’t always be up in my face asking for money.”

She put a hand on her hip and I knew her neck was about to go into action as she prepared her tongue to rip into my manhood in whatever way she thought would hurt the most.

“Shauntae, Shauntae. Girl, you looking better and better every time I see you.” My boy Charles came up the walk, his eyes fastened on Shauntae’s behind. She turned around and his

eyes found their way to her cleavage. He spoke directly into her breasts. “Yeah, girl, you looking real good.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled her body all up close to him and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. “Chuckie,” she sang his name. “How you doin’?”

Charles’ face lit up. He was enjoying her greeting a little too much, benefitting from Shauntae’s need to completely disrespect me. She pulled herself away, wagged her fingers at him and said, “Bye, Chuckie.” She started down the stairs and then turned back to me. “Bye, Devon,” she spat.

Charles was completely mesmerized by Shauntae’s big, juicy booty jiggling down my front walkway. “Umm, um, um, that’s the good stuff right there.”

I frowned at him and shook my head. “That’s how they get you, man. Never trust a big booty and a smile.”

He laughed and we gave each other pounds. “Sorry I’m late. Ready for the game?”

I dropped my head and shoved my hands in my pockets. “I can’t go.”

“What?” He held up the tickets. “You passing up fifty yard-line seats?”

“Shauntae just dropped off Brianna. Said she had an emergency.”

“What kind of emergency she got dressed like that?” He cupped his hands over his chest, forming imaginary breasts. “A hungry baby convention?”

I laughed. That fool always cracked the perfect joke when I needed it.

“Man, why you let her do you like that? You know she ain’t got no emergency. You see the way she was dressed? Her latest sponsor called to let her know he got tickets for today’s game. That’s her emergency.”

“Yeah, I know.” I opened the front door and walked back into the house.

Charles followed me. “So if you know, why you let her get away with it? Bust up her lie and make her stick to her responsibilities.”

“That only works if you’re dealing with a responsible person. Last time I refused to keep Brianna, my child called me at midnight saying she woke up in the house alone. The only thing that kept me from sending Shauntae to jail is that I don’t want my daughter visiting her mom in a orange jumpsuit.”

“Man, that’s foul. You’s a good one. I would have sent her butt to jail.”

I nodded. “I know, man.” I’d come to regret that decision. The best thing that could happen was for Shauntae to “go away” and me have my daughter full time.

AJ walked in from the kitchen with a beer in hand. “Yo, man. What’s Brianna doing here? You taking her to the game with us?”

“Naw, man. I can’t go. Y’all go ‘head. You don’t want to miss the tailgate.”

They both looked at me with a mixture of disappointment and understanding. It wasn’t the first time our plans had been jacked up because of Shauntae. And we all knew it wouldn’t be the last.

After I helped them get the cooler into AJ’s truck, I went back into the house to Brianna’s bedroom. Brianna was sitting on her bed playing with her Bratz dolls. Her room was a little girl’s paradise. The walls were pale pink with a huge Disney princess mural painted on the wall across from her bed. Thanks to my parents, she had every toy a little girl could want, including a girl-sized castle with all the furniture. She also had a huge book collection that I had made bookcases to hold. There was hardly any room to walk around.

“What’s up, baby girl?”

She looked up into my eyes. “Hey, Daddy.” She looked back down at her dolls. “Sorry I

messed up your football game day.”

I sat down on the bed next to her and pulled her and the dolls into my lap. “What you talking ‘bout, girl? You didn’t mess up my day.” I kissed both her cheeks. Their chubbiness was fading, and she was starting to look like a big girl.

“Yes, I did. Uncle AJ and Uncle Charles were here and you guys were supposed to go to the football game. And I messed –”

I silenced her with a massive tickle attack. I didn’t stop until her giggles turned into laughing screams. “Stop, Daddy, stop.”

“What was that you were saying?”

“I was saying I was sorry –”

I lifted my fingers to threaten another tickle attack. She screamed. “Wait, Daddy!”

“Who’s the most important person in Daddy’s world? Is it Uncle Charles or Uncle AJ?” I tickled her in her most ticklish spot on her left side.

“No.” She screamed and laughed. “Stop, Daddy. You’re gonna make me pee on myself.”

“Then tell me.” I stopped tickling Brianna and scooped her up in my arms. “Who’s the most important person in Daddy’s world?”

She looked into my eyes and stole my heart all over again. “Me.”

I hugged her tight against my chest. “That’s right. Don’t you ever forget it.” I kissed her cheek and ran my fingers over her fresh braids. They were too tight and gave her eyes a Chinese slant. “What you got going on here? Who did your hair?”

“Miss Sherece did it. We was up all last night until she finished.”

“We *were*, Bree. We were up all night.”

“You was up all night too, Daddy?”

“No Brianna. You said, ‘we was’. It’s ‘we were’.” I tried not to let her see the frustration in my eyes. Seemed like I was correcting her more and more lately. I constantly fussed at Shauntae about using bad English around our daughter. She said it wasn’t that serious and she didn’t want our child being all uppity and proper like me and my family. And she knew I hated Brianna being around Sherece. Or any of her ghettofabulous friends for that matter. They were probably up all night drinking and smoking and talking about all sorts of grown-up stuff while putting the tiny, intricate braids in Brianna’s head.

“It’s pretty, baby. Real pretty.” I was glad for the hairstyle, though. God knows I couldn’t do my little girl’s hair to save my life. When she didn’t have braids, I had to take her by my mom’s house on the way to school to get her hair done. When I was running late, I’d enlist the pity of her homeroom teacher by walking in with her hairbrush and a helpless father look on my face.

“What you got to eat, Daddy?”

“You want to make some pizza?” One of our favorite things to do was make homemade pizza together.

She shook her head. “Takes too long. I’m hungry.”

“You haven’t eaten today?”

“I had pop tarts.” Brianna must have seen the anger in my eyes. “It’s okay, Daddy. I didn’t want Mama to cook me nothing.”

“Anything. You didn’t want Mama to cook you anything.”

“Yeah, anything. What you got to eat?”

“What do you *have* to eat.” I frowned at her. “Brianna, you know better.”

“Yes, Daddy. Sorry, Daddy.” Her face looked sad, so I bent down and gave her a big

kiss. I hated fussing at her and correcting her but I wasn't willing to let her keep talking bad English.

I led Brianna out to the kitchen to heat up some leftover spaghetti. As I watched her shovel in mouthful after mouthful like she hadn't eaten in days, I had to fight back anger.

Something had to give.

I had to do something to get my daughter away from her crazy mother.