



tia kelly

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*Love's*  
Rebound

a *Love* Sessions novella



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For more titles by Tia Kelly or to contact the author, please visit [www.tiawithapen.com](http://www.tiawithapen.com).

*Every story has a past and I wanted to share one of the prequels to The Love Sessions with you. This is the story of Shelby and Eric.*

*In Love's Rebound, Shelby Bryan has finally put her mysterious past behind her until a handsome stranger knocks on her door bringing news that will change both of their lives forever.*

*Enjoy!*

*- tia.*

LOVE'S REBOUND

by  
Tia Kelly

## Chapter One

Shelby Bryan handed two tickets to the suites level attendant. Glancing around nervously, she took in the ambience of Cowboys Stadium. She'd heard about the facility and knew it was an attraction in itself, but in person the place was breathtaking.

"Mom, I'm thirsty," Matt whispered. He sounded equally struck by the magnificence of the Cowboys' new home. Although his eyes moved from one large piece of artwork to the next, he clung to Shelby's hand. Feeling small in the overwhelming structure, Shelby held on just as tight.

"Let's check in with your coach first. I have a feeling they already have something for us to drink." She smiled down at her eight-year-old son, hoping to ease his nervousness. By nature, her son was shy and reserved, just like his father had been, but that was all he'd left their child. She had signed him up for the youth football team hoping it would help her son open up, giving Matthew more options than his father had been given when he was growing up.

The NFL season was well underway, and today the Cowboys were playing their rivals, the Philadelphia Eagles. Matthew's coach had invited his team, along with their parents and guardians, to watch the game in one of the exclusive suites.

Shelby was surprised only half of the team could make it. She couldn't imagine disappointing Matthew by not coming, but she understood some of the parents had to work or had other obligations. Even the games the boys played had poor attendance.

Matthew spotted his coach standing near the suite's entry. Waving, Matthew took off running to greet him, remembering to ask permission once he was several feet away from her. Shelby laughed and shook her head. She knew her son was excited.

"Thank you again, Coach Griffin. Matthew has been looking forward to coming since you invited us. He's been talking my ear off with predictions for the game, and you know how quiet he normally is," Shelby explained.

Coach Griffin agreed with a laugh before introducing Shelby and Matthew to some of the other suite occupants. A banner hung in front of a serving table welcoming the boys, with both the Cowboys and Dallas Mavericks basketball team logos prominently displayed.

The coach added, "My friend Eric works for the Mavericks and was able to get the suite for today's game. He even donated the jerseys and caps for the boys

to wear. He should be around shortly. The Mavericks played the L.A. Lakers last night and went into overtime, so he probably got a late start today.”

Shelby nodded, pretending to take interest in the small talk, although she did appreciate someone’s willingness to make the day special for these children.

Several minutes later, Shelby glanced at her watch. The game was two hours away, but Coach Griffin had asked for the boys to arrive sooner. Looking around the suite, she took in the marble countertops and flooring, plush seating. The aroma of food permeated the air. When she passed the buffet stations, one of the attendants described the appetizer and entrée selections inside and around the chafing dishes.

Unable to resist the magnificent spread, Shelby decided to relax and enjoy the day. Football might not be her sport of choice, but trying new foods would always be a favorite pastime. Seeing Matthew engage in a conversation with his friend Tyler, Shelby grabbed a plate and turned her attention to a pregame show on one of the TVs, hoping to pass time before kickoff.



Eric West entered the room and smiled. The sound of happiness was music to his ears. Hours ago, Eric had to bail the Mavericks’ starting forward out of trouble after he’d gotten into a heated argument with one of his many girlfriends. Fortunately, Eric was able to keep the incident under wraps. He prayed the player and the rest of his teammates could stay out of trouble before the next game on Wednesday. Their extracurricular activities were causing him to be sleep deprived.

As the vice president of marketing and communications for one of the National Basketball Association’s premier teams, Eric believed he was always putting out a fire of sorts.

Glancing around the perimeter of the room, Eric counted only five children. He frowned and hoped more were on the way. Coach Griffin had informed him that there were ten players on the team, but many of the parents showed little interest in their kids’ activities these days. Eric had hoped inviting the team and their parents would be an incentive to get them more involved. He hated when any of his ideas were challenged, even unintentionally.

Coach Griffin spotted Eric and walked over to shake hands. “Is everything acceptable for your boys and chaperones?” Eric asked.

Coach Griffin replied, “More than acceptable. Thanks again, Eric. I wish more families were able to join us, but you know how hard it is to get their commitment.”

Eric nodded. "Perhaps some of them couldn't get off work or didn't want to exclude the rest of their children. I would have loved to open it up to entire families, but the last time we did that some of them attached children that weren't even related. We have limited seating, and I also wanted to give your team the opportunity to bond with a few of my players."

Before the coach could question Eric's last remark, the door opened to the suite and in walked five players from the Mavericks. Standing equally as tall as the men surrounding him, Eric couldn't wait to surprise the youngsters.

"May I have everyone's attention?" Eric announced. The room silenced before several gasps were heard. "My name is Eric West and I thank you for coming out today. Before the game begins, I would like to take the boys down to the locker room so they can meet the Cowboys. I have to ask that you leave all cell phones, cameras, and recording devices behind. Don't worry—there will be a photographer joining us so each child can take home several pictures with some of their favorite athletes.

"Before I forget, I'd like for you to meet a few friends of mine." Eric paused to individually introduce the men. "I'm going to ask each one of the boys to pair up with one of the players. They will be your buddy for the day."

"Cool!" Matthew said, along with a chorus of "awesomes" and "wows" from his peers.

As the boys scurried toward the athletes, Eric noticed a young woman that had smiled proudly at one of the smaller boys in the group. The moment she locked eyes with him, a brick dropped to the pit of his stomach.

Eric shook his head in disbelief at the sight of her. Her auburn hair was longer now, and layered just past her shoulders. She wore a fitted long-sleeved Cowboys t-shirt, probably hoping to blend in with everyone else. He knew she hated football, so why would she even bother pretending? Her lower legs were covered with snug jeans and a pair of those ridiculously ugly snow boots he was tired of seeing females wearing these days. Her ears were bare, but he could see the holes where they had been pierced. Eric recalled a time when he'd adorned those ears with the first pair of diamonds he ever bought a woman. Although she had minimal makeup on and her nails were short and clean, he wasn't fooled by her act.

How dare she show up here today of all days, when he was trying to secure a permanent sponsorship for his friend's football team? Trying to refocus, Eric resolved that he would deal with her later. Eric was never shaken off his game, but there was always a first time for everything.

Shelby noticed Eric as soon as he entered the room. What woman wouldn't? The man was tall, gorgeous, and gainfully employed. Wanting to chuckle at her thoughts, Shelby knew that good men were hard to find. Even her son's father was a man she'd simply accepted, despite longing for more. Shelby didn't want to knock the man James had tried to be, but his stupidity got him killed, and she still hated him for it. He'd promised to get them out of the 'hood, and never made good on the one thing he swore he could handle. After James died, she had to manage to do that by herself.

Instead of the usual knuckleheads she grew up with in Fort Worth or the clowns she worked with at the law firm, Shelby could tell this man had a distinctive air about him. For him, his attire might have been casual, but there was nothing simple about it. Eric West walked into the room with a crisp white button-down shirt, dark blazer, and jeans. She couldn't see his shoes because all the boys blocked her view, but Shelby knew they were expensive. This man obviously took an interest in his appearance.

As he spoke, Shelby tried not to stare at his seductive light gray eyes for fear their mysterious color could cast a spell on her. Instead she focused on his close-cropped haircut, well-groomed beard, and the diamond stud in his ear that matched his megawatt smile. Suddenly she wished she could kiss his full lips to see if they were as soft as they appeared.

Her reverie was broken the moment he scowled at her. His intense gaze was definitely directed toward Shelby, as she was the only one sitting in the corner of the room, and for the life of her she could not figure out why. Shelby quickly swiped the corners of her lips to make sure she was not drooling, and glanced down at her shirt to check for food stains. Since she didn't appear to look disheveled, perhaps there was something wrong with him.

*Yes, that's it. His ass is conceited,* she mused.

Realizing men like him were arrogant and always expected to get what they wanted, Shelby turned away to ignore him. Perhaps she didn't measure up to Mr. *GQ's* standards. It didn't matter, because she was here solely for Matthew. When the game was over, she would never see Eric West again.

"Sabrina." His one-word command should have gotten her attention, but it hadn't. The petite woman that had stolen from him, broken his heart, and disappeared without a trace was now standing on front of him at the dessert table after vanishing eleven years ago.

The game was well into the third quarter, and the close score held everyone's attention, except for his. It was time Eric put this mystery to an end. Tapping her on the shoulder, he waited for the woman to turn around and face him.



“Hello, Mr. West.” Shelby tried to recall the chapter about facing handsome men in the Emily Post *Etiquette* book she kept her nose in these days. The day she’d purchased the heavy volume, Shelby decided she wanted to improve everything she knew about manners, social settings, and corresponding with others. Her reasoning was that it was never too late to improve oneself, even if she was turning thirty-one on Christmas Day. Anything to keep her from going back to the hellhole she’d escaped. “Thank you for inviting all of us. My son Matthew is having the time of his life.”

Eric refused to let her saccharine smile and kind words steer him off course. Narrowing his eyes at her, he replied, “May I speak to you outside, Sabrina?”

Shelby was taken back suddenly. *Sabrina*? She wondered if he’d referred to her as Sabrina by mistake. People often made the mistake of calling her Michelle or Shelly, but never had she been called Sabrina. Either way, he looked angry, and she hoped her son hadn’t caused any trouble that she was unaware of.



In a quiet vestibule outside of the suite, Eric paced before turning to look at her. He towered over her, but she stood her ground with a stance that let him know she was ready to challenge his every word. Finally, throwing his hands up in the air, he asked, “Why did you do it, Sabrina?”

Shelby stared back at the man, realizing he was not mentally stable. An initial moment of panic gripped her until she recognized a security guard nearby. Cocking her head to the side, she said, “I’m sorry, but you keep calling me Sabrina. My name is Shelby.”

“Is that what you’re using these days? What’s with the getup? The low-key look is a nice touch, but take heed to my warning. I don’t know what man you’re trying to rip off these days or what you did with the money you stole from me, but you better tread lightly. I’m going to expose you for the lying snake you are *and* get back what you took from me. Understand?”

His last word was more of a confirmation than a question, leaving Shelby even more confused on how to respond. Before she could question his antics, he stalked away, leaving her confused about the threat he’d promised to make good on.



Shelby pulled her Saturn into the first available parking space near her apartment. After shutting down the engine, she turned around to see her son had fallen asleep in the back seat.

The content smile on his face made her heart melt. Matthew had asked if he could wear the autographed jersey the next day and take the pictures he'd taken with the players to school. Excited for him, she'd obliged. Now she had to get inside and make their lunches while shuttling him into the bathroom for a shower.

Although Matthew had another hour before his bedtime, she hoped he wouldn't put up a fight going to bed. As soon as he was asleep, Shelby planned to research Eric West and find out what mental institution he'd escaped from.

## Chapter Two

“Man, I’m telling you, I saw Sabrina Johnson at the game today. Her hair is longer and she is a little fuller in the hips now, but that was *her*.” Eric paced the bedroom of his Dallas penthouse. His long strides took him from one end of the room to the other quickly as he gripped the cordless handset. He finally stopped long enough to stare out aimlessly at the city skyline through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

On the other end of the line, his cousin Darius interrupted him. “It couldn’t have been Sabrina.”

“What do you mean? I saw her with my own two eyes.” Eric thought about her fake dialect, the easy Texas drawl. He dismissed it, knowing Sabrina was a con artist.

Sighing heavily, Darius said, “Sabrina Johnson was killed by a drunk driver a few months after the two of you broke up. That was not Sabrina that you met earlier today.”

Eric stumbled back toward his bed and fell onto its custom-made mattress, designed to fit his six-four frame comfortably.

He knew Darius was wrong about Sabrina, but nonetheless the possibility shook him. The last time he’d spoken to her, Eric told Sabrina he loved her and would forgive her if she returned what was his. Sabrina hung up after a tearful goodbye, telling him she needed to make things right before they could speak again. Sabrina hadn’t gotten a chance to fix anything if she was gone.

Interrupting his thoughts, Darius continued, “About a year after she disappeared, I bumped into her friend Rachael. She told me what happened and I looked it up. It’s true.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? What if Rachael was lying just to cover for Sabrina?”

“I didn’t tell you because you would never let me breathe a word about her, and I thought some things were better when left alone. You changed after her and I didn’t want to risk another episode like that again. It damn near killed you.”

Eric agreed—he had changed, but it was for the better, despite a momentary relapse. No one understood how driven he was to prove the naysayers wrong. Eric had finished college a year early and completed grad school in record time. Once he’d landed a position with his first NBA franchise, he turned the team’s fate around. Within three years he was the most sought after marketing executive in the league, and the Mavericks were willing to pay whatever it took to secure him for their team. Eric knew he owed his success to the pain Sabrina

had caused him. Without her, he wouldn't have pushed himself beyond the limit to erase her memory.

"Are you sure she's dead?"

"Positive."

Eric hung up and knew he needed to find out who the woman that shook his world that day was.



After contacting his friend Bernard Griffin, Eric explained that he promised Matthew Bryan a signed basketball. Since Eric had several autographed balls at his disposal, it wasn't a blatant lie. The coach openly shared Shelby's home address and telephone number with Eric.

Eric pulled up his calendar and informed his assistant not to schedule anything else that day. Once he finished his meetings with his staff and upper management and oversaw a few press interviews, Eric made one last call before he left for the day.

He was patched through to his lawyer and best friend Donovan, and Eric hoped his friend was able to share some news.

"The preliminary check shows she is pretty clean. Her name is Shelby Rose Bryan. No criminal record or citations. She received her AAS in Paralegal Studies at Tarrant County three years ago. She has a son that is eight years old named Matthew James Bryan. His father unknowingly was riding in a stolen vehicle that was shot at by police during a chase. He died from a gunshot wound two months before she gave birth."

Eric listened to the rest of the details Donovan revealed about Shelby Bryan. Once his friend promised more information in a few more days, Eric ended the call.



Shelby reached for the printout of everything she could find on Eric West, including what little she found on a legal database her firm often used to help build cases. Nothing indicated an unsavory past. Staring at each page in disbelief, Shelby was no closer to finding out why the sexy stranger was a lunatic.

Noticing the time, she folded the papers and placed them in her bag. Then she logged off her computer and bid the remaining coworkers goodbye. She

didn't want Matthew to stay at the afterschool program longer than necessary, and hoped to beat traffic along the way.

Once Shelby and Matthew made it home, she quickly changed out of her navy two-button jacket and matching pencil skirt with ivory blouse, opting for black yoga pants and a tank top.

Fortunately she had little to do to prepare dinner, as she had a pot roast simmering in the Crock-Pot. Shelby cut the ingredients for a salad and boiled some potatoes. Periodically she looked over Matthew's shoulder, checking his homework as he completed it.

## Chapter Three

Hearing the doorbell, Shelby stopped working on the mashed potatoes to answer the door. Seeing Eric West through the peephole, Shelby quickly reached for a can of mace out of her purse and told Matthew to wait in the bedroom.

Shelby called through the door, "Look, I don't know what your problem is, but I don't know a Sabrina. I never knew you before yesterday and I don't know what you think I stole from you! If you don't go away, I will call the police."

Shelby reached for the telephone and pressed the nine and then one. She waited before hitting the final digit.

"Shelby, you're right. You are not Sabrina. I stopped by to apologize for my atrocious behavior. I mistook you for someone else."

"You apologized, now go."

"Shelby, your neighbors are starting to look out their windows and doors. Can you please let me in so I stop making a spectacle of myself?"

"You're twenty-four hours too late for that."

Eric dropped his head and debated leaving. Shelby was right. He'd made a fool of himself at the game yesterday, but he couldn't help that she looked like his ex. Just as he was about to walk away, the door slowly opened, but the security chain remained.

"Why are you here?" Shelby asked.

He could see the worry in her eyes and knew she was questioning her first mind. Holding up the basketball and a pair of tickets, he smiled. "I came to apologize for messing up your day yesterday. May I come in? You can even call Bernard Griffin and ask him about me. I made a very bad mistake and I just want to make it right. I also found out why you favor my ex, Sabrina."

She judged him cautiously before saying, "Give me a minute."

She closed the door, and he heard movement on the other side of it. After several minutes, the door opened again and she was standing with her mace prominently on display.

"You have five minutes. Any funny business and it's on," Shelby warned. His smirk almost threw her confidence off.

Before Eric could speak, Matthew walked into the room and took in the scene. "Mom?"

"Baby, I told you to stay in your room."

Matthew looked between the two adults before recognizing Eric. "Hi, Mr. West."

Eric smiled back at the boy and for the first time noticed how much he favored his mother. "Hey, sport, I brought you something. Catch."

Matthew caught the basketball Eric tossed his way. Matthew turned the ball around several times, reading aloud all of the autographs scrawled across it.

"Awesome!"

"Matt, that's not how we show our appreciation," Shelby said.

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome. I hope you had fun yesterday," Eric said. He moved to sit on the sofa alongside Matthew, who was now parked in between the adults.

Matthew replied, "I did. That was the first time I ever saw a football game. Actually, it was my first time seeing any kind of game."

"Really?" Eric asked. "We can't have that. I happen to have courtside tickets for Wednesday night's Mavericks game against the Heat."

Matthew's eyes bulged and the ball dropped from his grasp.

Shelby took in her son's excitement and feared accepting anything from the delusional man. *The one you that is now sitting on my couch in my apartment*, she chided herself. Holding the mace can tightly, she said, "Matt, honey, can you give us a moment and go to your room? I will call you when it's time for dinner."

Watching the boy leave the room, Eric commented, "Something smells wonderful. Are you making a roast?"

"Yes." She avoided his hint for an invitation. "Your diversion tactic didn't buy you any extra time. So please tell me, why are you here?"

"Do you have a sister?"

Shelby scrunched her face and shook her head. "I'm an only child."

Eric leaned forward and tried to choose his words carefully. He finally said, "Yesterday, when I saw you, you reminded me of someone I once knew. Her name was Sabrina Johnson."

"The woman that stole from you."

"Yes. She took a family heirloom that was valued to be around \$25,000 and forged one of my personal checks for ten thousand."

"I'm sorry to hear that, and even sorrier that I resemble a crook."

Shelby moved to sit down in a chair across from him.

"I became curious about you, because obviously for a moment there, I thought you were her. I asked a friend of mine to check into your background and hers, hoping they would eventually become one and the same. They didn't, but your paths did cross many years ago."

"What are you saying? Did this woman steal my identity or something?"

The panicked look in Shelby's eyes made Eric want to get up and comfort her. Instead, he instinctively reached for her hand and rubbed it within his.

"No. I have reason to believe she was your sister, and your reaction when I mentioned her name makes me believe you didn't know she existed."

Shelby pulled her hand from his and stared at him. "What are you talking about? I don't have a family. What's wrong with you? Do you run around making ridiculous accusations all the time?"

Eric realized he had to sound crazy. He barely knew this woman, but something about her was drawing him in and he felt like he needed to tell her. As if this was a missing puzzle piece she craved.

"Sabrina was raised in Georgia by her grandmother. Apparently her grandmother obtained custody of her when she was an infant after Sabrina's mother perished in a fire. The fire happened thirty years ago in Fort Worth. Her mother managed to get both of her twin daughters out, but she succumbed to smoke inhalation immediately."

*Twins? Fort Worth? Thirty years ago?*

Eric reached for her hand when he noticed she was trembling. He stroked her face with his free one. "Sweetheart, how old are you?"

He already knew the answer, but he was trying to help her put the pieces together on her own. Eric did not want to play the role of investigator and counselor, but something about Shelby was making the need to help her too hard to resist.

"Thirty." Her answer was calm and eerie. With unshed tears in her eyes, Shelby wasn't ready to reopen this wound. Not when she'd promised to keep it sealed forever.

"You inquired about your birth mother a couple of times, but the state didn't have any information to give you," he continued. When he noticed her puzzled expression, Eric added, "It came up when we probed deeper. My lawyer and I have reason to believe you are Sabrina's twin."

Shelby stood up to move around the room. Trying to keep calm, she returned to the kitchen, where she finished making the mashed potatoes. Years ago she would have done cartwheels hearing an ounce of this information verifying that she was not a motherless child, but right now she felt even more alone.

Hearing Eric enter the small space, she caught a glimpse of him out the corner of her eye. "Eric, why are you telling me this now? Do you think I have your property? How do you think I feel knowing you hit a button and found out more about me than I would ever know?"



Eric hung his head in shame, scolding himself for not thinking this through. His keen business sense and instinct hadn't prepared him for the tears he saw streaming down her cheeks. However, it was instinct that made him tell her. Someone had to. Reading how hard this woman had tried to put the pieces of her life puzzle together and no one else would help her. Until now.

"Shelby, I'd like to help you."

"Why?"

"I was once in your shoes, too. For a long time, before I met my birth parents, I wanted to feel like I belonged."

He told her more about Sabrina and her tragic death. Shelby did not take the news well.

Shelby left the room briefly, hoping to pull herself together. Eric appreciated the moment alone so he could also get his thoughts in order. It was not like Eric to second-guess himself, but her raw emotions stirred something deep within him.

A vanilla candle burned in the middle of her coffee table while the food she had been preparing continued to permeate the air. The heavy aromas around him didn't mask the woman's scent that was now embedded in his clothes, and that was the one scent that started to arouse his body into attention, clouding his brain.

The moment her discreet tears turned into an open cry, Eric pulled her into his arms. He held her close until the last tear fell. Without words being spoken, he tilted Shelby's chin upward so he could look into her eyes and read her. The brown depths told him that inside the independent woman was a little girl with plenty of questions about her past.

When Donovan had called him while he was en route to Shelby's apartment, the news tapped into something deep inside of Eric. He was being honest when he told Shelby about his own personal struggles, but Eric couldn't tell her what led him to finding out about his own difficult history. Eric hoped no one would ever have to suffer to find out the truth like he had.

Shelby wiped her face, but she needed to change clothes and shower if she wanted to wash his scent away. Something inside her stirred, and she wanted to be in his arms, where his hard chest and warm scent comforted her. The musky fragrance with a hint of citrus stimulated her senses. Her body reacting to his nearness crashed violently against the emotions about her past.

In twenty-four hours, a gorgeous stranger had walked into her life and accused her of being someone else, only to reveal information Shelby had spent years searching for.

Shelby shook her thoughts from her mind and worked to clean up her face so she could once again be presentable.



“Would you like to stay for dinner?” Shelby asked when she returned to the living room. She walked in on him as he stood staring at the photographs covering the wall.

Eric turned toward her and shook his head. “I need to get back to Dallas, but thank you. Perhaps another time?”

“Sure.”

Eric walked to the door with Shelby by his side. Once he reached it, he stopped to pull a business card out of a small case. Handing her the card, Eric said, “I apologize for catching you off guard tonight. I meant it when I said I wanted to help you learn more about your family. I feel like I’m the one responsible for unlocking the door to your past. I’m giving you my private numbers so you can reach me at any time, even if it’s just to talk. In the meantime, I look forward to seeing you on Wednesday night at the game. Lock up and be safe.”

He leaned down and kissed her softly on the cheek before walking out the door. Shelby let herself fall back on the closed door while trying to reel herself in.



Eric descended the staircase outside of Shelby’s apartment wondering what had come over him. He never gave out his private numbers, except to select family and friends. It wasn’t an issue changing the numbers if Shelby proved to be a problem, but he seriously doubted she would. Even without the background check, his gut told him Shelby was a woman he could trust, a rarity in his social circle.

He also couldn’t help feeling like he’d known her much longer than a couple of days. Every time he looked at Shelby he saw similarities to Sabrina’s face, but she was nothing like the girl from his past.

Eric pressed a button inside his Fisker Karma, and the eco-friendly luxury sports car purred to life. He followed the navigation system until he was on Interstate 30 heading east toward Dallas. The satellite radio station played the remainder of the Spurs game, but his thoughts weren’t on scores. He couldn’t shake the feeling of her soft skin or the way Shelby’s body molded to his when

he held her. It made him wonder what her shapely legs would feel like wrapped around his waist.

First, he had to help her connect with her family before he even considered bedding her. Knowing Shelby had a son, Eric was a firm believer that every person should have a full understanding about his or her genetic past. He wanted to make sure Matthew was not an exception. Eric was fortunate to find his biological family in time, but not everyone else he encountered along that path was that lucky. While helping her, he hoped to find his great-grandmother's pendant. Once both tasks were accomplished, he could focus on getting Shelby Bryan in bed.

## Chapter Four

Shelby parked in an arena lot reserved for VIP guests. She appreciated that Eric had included a parking pass in the envelope with the tickets, because funds were tight and the regular lot was blocks away.

After getting out of her car, Shelby and Matthew merged with the rest of the pedestrians wearing Mavericks jerseys, and a few in similar Heat apparel. Once she found their seats located across from the Mavericks bench, Shelby and Matthew took in all of the excitement.

"I'm glad you both made it," Eric said from behind them. Making his way around the seats, he sat down next to them.

Both Shelby and Matthew thanked him. Shelby commented, "It's pretty noisy already. The fans are really pumped up."

At that moment, players from both teams made their way out to the court to warm up.

"It can get really loud courtside. If it's too much for you, I can take you up to the suite."

"Let's see how Matthew does, but I have a feeling we wouldn't be able to pry him out that seat regardless."

Both adults laughed as they watched the boy focus all of his attention on the dance team's performance. The Mavericks mascot walked up to Matthew and pulled him up to dance when a Rihanna song blared from the speakers.

While Matthew was preoccupied, Eric moved closer to Shelby so they could talk. "My lawyer got back to me with more information. Are you free around lunchtime tomorrow so we can discuss?"

"I am, but I only have an hour for lunch. It would take me that long to reach Dallas."

"I will pick you up. Just tell me what time."

"What about your schedule? I'm sure you are very busy with your position." Shelby hoped he was available. She was anxious to find her family.

"I will make time for you," he told her. After they agreed on a time and she told him her work address, Eric left to greet the press.



Eric handed Shelby the documents Donovan had delivered via messenger to him. Due to the sensitive nature of the documents, Donovan didn't want anything to fall into the wrong hands.

Shelby stared at the manila envelope nervously.

She asked him, "Do you know what's inside?" After he nodded, she continued, "I don't know if I'm ready to open it."

"Take it with you and read it at home. I have to fly out tonight with the team, but you can always reach me on my cell. In the meantime, I located Sabrina's grandmother. I plan to go visit her, and think you should come along."

If he was seeing Sabrina's grandmother, then he was seeing *her* grandmother. Shelby wasn't sure if she was ready for a family reunion.

Eric held out his hand across the table, and Shelby placed hers within it. He said, "I know it is a lot all at once, but I will be there to help you get through it."

Shelby nodded and replied, "I'll consider it."

The server returned with their food, and once he left, Eric started to bless the meal. None of the men she dated took the time to pray, at least not aloud with her.

"Eric, you mentioned you were adopted. Did you always know?"

He contemplated his answer. "I used to wonder why I was the only one in my family with eyes this color. I know it happens, but something felt off. I later found out that my mother and father fell on hard times. Wanting to give me a better life, they placed me in my adopted parents' care. At first it was meant to be temporary, but when they saw how I adjusted, they allowed my parents to adopt me."

"You seem okay with it."

"I admit I was confused for a while and not sure what to feel. That was until I had to be hospitalized several years ago. The doctors had a hard time figuring out what was wrong. My adopted parents contacted my biological parents for genetic screening. It probably saved my life, because I ended up needing a kidney transplant. My biological father gave me one of his."

Shelby placed her fork on the plate and looked up at him, uncertain of what she should say. "Are you okay?"

He smiled. "Every year since then, my doctor tells me I am."

Shelby picked up the envelope and pulled out the contents. In it was an original copy of what she assumed was her birth certificate, and one for her sister. Her birth name was Shelby Rose Johnson, but her last name was changed to Bryan while she was shuffled around the foster system. One of the families she was placed with had adopted her, but a divorce and their neglect prompted

them to return her to foster care. Shelby was too young to remember the Bryans when it happened.

A copy of her file from the Department of Family and Protective Services was in there, and Shelby was pretty sure it was not obtained legally.

"How did you get this?"

"I have a few friends here and there. Fortunately, one of them has access to archived records."

"You have original photographs?"

"They were in the file. There was no point in the state of Texas holding on to what is yours."

Shelby quickly and carefully placed everything back in the envelope. She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling.

"I thought I could be brave and just look at what was inside there." Her silence that followed spoke volumes.

Eric signaled for the check. Once they were outside, he walked her to the passenger side of his car. Before opening the door, Eric pulled Shelby into his arms.

"You're braver than you know."

"I appreciate what you've done. Please don't misinterpret my emotions for being ungrateful."

"I never thought that," he told her. Staring into her upturned face, Eric covered her lips with his. She slowly parted her lips, inviting his tongue inside. As their tongues mated, he felt her body respond when her hardened nipples could be felt through the silk of her blouse.

Pulling away slowly, Eric hated to break the kiss. "I need to get you back to the office, which is probably a good thing. I'm sure you don't want me to take you right here in this parking lot."

Shelby blushed under the heat from his intense gaze. "You're right."

"I will be back late Friday night. Will you and Matthew have breakfast with me on Saturday? I can send a car for you and we can spend the day out with Matt."

"We'd love that."

Hours after Shelby returned to work, left for the day, and tucked her son in, she was staring at all the documents Eric had given her. They were all spread out across her bed, and she realized there was probably only one person that could help put the pieces together. Her grandmother.

## Chapter Five

Several weeks after she'd started seeing Eric, the two of them were seated on a private plane headed for Macon, Georgia. Uncertain about how Clarisse Johnson would receive their surprise visit, Shelby had made arrangements for Matthew to spend the weekend at a friend's house.

Now, as the plane started to descend, her stomach started twisting and turning from nervousness. Meanwhile, Eric appeared just as distracted, as he spent his time staring out the aircraft's window.



Clarisse Johnson recognized Eric and her granddaughter immediately. Inviting them inside her home, the elderly woman returned to her favorite chair in her sitting room. Despite more than a decade passing since Eric had seen the woman, he surmised that she had not changed one bit.

After brief pleasantries, Eric explained the nature of their visit.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Clarisse said to Shelby. "You were so bad off in the hospital, but you fought your way through."

Both Shelby and Eric asked, "Bad off in the hospital?"

"After the fire, your lungs filled up with all of that smoke. It was real touch and go for a while."

"And my sister?"

"A neighbor said your mama ran out the house with Sabrina in her arms first. Rose had to go back inside to get you out the crib. Once she made it outside, she handed you to the neighbor before she collapsed."

"How did you end up with Sabrina and why was I in foster care?"

Clarisse was quiet for a moment before solemnly responding, "I wanted to take you, but my husband didn't care for my Rose. She defied him every chance she could. So when Rose ran off to Texas, she wasn't allowed back here no mo'. When I heard about the fire, I caught the first Greyhound to Texas. That's when I saw my grandbabies for the first time.

"You were about six months old, and a little bitty thing. I suspect Sabrina was the dominant one since before she left the womb, just by your sizes in comparison. I had to get back home and you were still in the hospital recovering. My husband fought me on bringing your sister back. He forbade me from going back for you."

“So you left me?”

Her grandmother looked away. “I went against his wishes and went back for you, but by the time I got there you had another kin ready to take you in. Your daddy’s people were also notified about Rose’s death. Turns out he had a sister that wanted you, and with all of the problems here, I let them keep you.”

Narrowing her eyes, Shelby asked, “Who were they?”

“Marva and Charles Bryan. Marva is your father’s older sister.”

Shelby gasped upon hearing the couple that she ultimately had to be taken away from was related to her by blood. Covering her mouth with trembling hands, she shook her head.

Sensing her pain, Eric pulled her closer into his arms and rubbed her back. He kissed the top of her head and whispered, “I’m right here, baby. It’s okay.”

However, Shelby knew it was not okay. After reading her file, she’d discovered the family that gave her their name neglected and physically abused her. She was often left alone as a toddler and went days without a decent meal. A divorce broke up the couple, but the state of Texas stepped in to prevent any more mistreatment before the divorce decree was finalized.

After uncovering Shelby’s past, Eric had learned that the state did not thoroughly investigate Marva and Charles Bryan once they came forward as Shelby’s relatives. More than likely pleased to have one less child placed in the foster care system with a shortage of homes available for them to go to, the state unknowingly put the child in harm’s way.

“Do you know what those people did to me?” Shelby asked with disgust.

Her grandmother nodded slowly. “I heard about it years later when Sabrina told me. She tried to find you when I told her she had a sister. Sabrina was able to find Marva before Sabrina died, and that’s how we found out.”

Eric could see fury in Shelby’s eyes. Reaching for her hand, he squeezed it to reassure her.

Before Shelby could speak, her grandmother added, “Marva turned her life over to Jesus. She’s saved now and regrets her past. Marva told me she tried looking for you, too, but you were so far in the system that they couldn’t locate you.”

Exasperated, Shelby shouted, “I still have her last name, for crying out loud! How hard is it to pull out a phone book and look under the Bs? It’s a good thing Marva Bryan didn’t find me, because I probably would have killed her if I found out who she was and what she did to me.”

“When Sabrina moved back home, she spent a lot of time on her computer in the backroom. That’s how she found Marva in Seguin, Texas. When she came back from visiting Marva, Sabrina told me it wouldn’t be long before she



discovered your whereabouts, too," said Mrs. Johnson. "Then one day, she said she found you. Eric, Sabrina was also excited because she didn't even have to use any of the money you loaned her to help find her twin."

"She said I what?" Eric said, but Shelby elbowed him to silence his questioning.

The older woman continued speaking without noticing his interruption. "Sabrina was on her way back to Texas to see Shelby when that car hit her. She didn't even make it out of Georgia. I do know when she left, Sabrina was happy that she found Shelby without hiring that detective after all. She didn't think she could do it by herself."

Shelby swallowed back tears before looking away. Also surprised by the news, Eric didn't know what to say.

The woman finally broke her silence. "I'm at the end of my days, so I don't know what you want from me or what I can do to change the past. You're more than welcome to go to your sister's room and help yourself to her belongings. I haven't touched a thing since she left."



In the corner of Shelby's hotel room was a box holding Sabrina's personal memorabilia. Shelby had been staring at it for the past hour, debating when would be a good time to sort through it.

Eric had helped her pack the box with photo albums, documents, and her sister's journals. She could tell Eric was anxious to search Sabrina's room, hoping he could find his grandmother's pendant, but he'd waited patiently for Shelby to decide when she was ready. After a quick once-over of the bedroom Shelby had lived in until the day she died, both of them decided the pendant was not there. Eric reasoned it was possible Shelby either sold it or had it in her possession the day she died.

He had already hired someone skilled with buyers--legal and black market--to try to recover the jewelry in case she had sold it. So far, none of the investigators were successful locating it, or any clues. During the ride to the hotel, Eric had revealed the pendant was the only memento he had left from his biological family after his birth parents passed away. His mother regretted never selling it to help them afford keeping him, but she hadn't realized the value until after she placed him for adoption.

Now Shelby wondered if Eric cared about her or only needed her to find the pendant.

A knock on Shelby's door got her attention. They were staying in adjoining hotel rooms until Sunday. Then they would visit her grandmother once more before flying back to Texas. If it weren't for the nature of her visit, Shelby would have taken the time to relax.

"Come in," Shelby called out and let her eyes close once more. She was too emotionally drained to move.

She felt the mattress shift once Eric sat down beside her. Both of them leaned back against the headboard. He rubbed his hand along her thigh. "Let's go get something to eat."

Shelby shook her head. "You can go. I'm going to stay in tonight."

Eric gently turned her face toward his. "You haven't said much since we got back. What's on your mind?"

"So much is happening and I'm just trying to grasp it all."

Eric nodded in understanding. "I'm not going to let anything or anyone hurt you, Shel."

She smiled at him weakly, appreciating his patience. Eric kissed her tenderly at first, but Shelby responded with a yearning for more. Eric sensed it and pulled her body close to his. Lowering her to the bed, Eric moved his body over hers. Their lips mingled in desperation until he released them.

Dropping his forehead against hers, he whispered hoarsely, "I want you so bad that it aches, but I know you're not ready for this."

Shelby looked into his eyes, feeling their connection, and asked, "What makes you think I'm not ready? I want you, Eric. Now."

Her one-word command was all he needed to hear. Moving swiftly and precisely, he undressed her and replaced each item of clothing with a trail of seductive kisses. She writhed beneath him when she felt his fingers spread her soft opening, slipping his fingers deep inside of her. Eric knew it had been a long time, as her body's tightness worked against him.

Shelby reached for his shirt and slid it over his head while Eric positioned himself between her thighs. Before she could protest, Eric lowered his head and kissed the inside of her legs. She felt his tongue circling her pulsing sex and tried to pull away. No man had ever made love to her body like this.

Eric refused to let her go, and held on to her until he felt her relax beneath him. Her body suddenly tightened at the moment she cried out his name. If he hadn't locked his arms around her legs, Shelby would have either strangled him with her thighs or jerked them both into the air the moment the first climax wave hit her. Instead her cries of passion filled the room.

Feeling her breathing had returned to normal, Eric rose to stand and finished undressing himself. Shelby turned her eyes lazily toward his nude form and

admired his body. Jutting ahead of him was a prominent erection, thick and long. He started to place a condom at the tip. Shelby shivered in anticipation, wondering if she would be able to take all of him inside of her.

"Let me," she whispered. Shelby took the condom from his hand and lowered her lips to his shaft, choosing to cover his penis with her mouth instead of the condom.

Eric moaned. Rolling his head back with appreciation, he placed his hand behind her head and moved his hips with her. "Baby, I can't take this much longer. Please open your legs before I explode."

Quickly he sheathed himself with the prophylactic he took from her hand, moved her body to the edge of the bed, and leaned forward to plunge deep within her.

Shelby's gasp as he filled her was soon followed by moans of gratification. Within minutes, Shelby felt another orgasm ripping through her as moved against her womb. Eric lifted her body into the air with his as he continued to thrust in and out of her before repositioning their bodies in the center of the bed. Shelby wrapped her legs around his lean waist and held on to his broad shoulders as their lovemaking continued well into the night.

Hours later, with plans for dinner long forgotten, Eric held Shelby in his arms while they spooned. He didn't want to pull out of her, as his last release had been the most powerful. Shelby had cried out, declaring her love for him when they made love, causing a rippling sensation to intensify until he climaxed with her.

Eric heard her breathing was becoming steady, and noticed she was now fast asleep. He kissed the woman sleeping peacefully against him and whispered against her forehead, "I love you, too."

Slipping free from their embrace, Eric stepped into the shower. He knew he was falling fast for Shelby, but he never wanted to fall in love again.



The following Monday, Eric's assistant announced he had a visitor. When he saw Shelby inside his office door, the right corner of his lip curved upward. He stood from his desk to greet her with a hug, but she quickly dismissed it.

He didn't blame her. It had been eight days since he'd talked to her, but he needed time away to think.

Leaning against the edge of his desk, Eric invited her to sit in one of the visitors' chairs. "I know I should have called you, but we had a few situations to deal with around here. I just got back into town this morning."

Shelby held her hand to silence him. Placing her hand inside her bag, she said, "I just stopped by to give you this."

Reaching for both of her hands, Eric shook his head. "Before we discuss anything else, I need to tell you something. I never imagined having feelings for anyone ever again, but I realize I've done more than that. I'm falling in love with you."

"I really don't have—" Shelby said. "Wait, did you say you love me?"

Eric smiled. "Yes. I love you, I love Matthew, and I want us to make this work."

"You do?"

Eric got up briefly and retrieved a small box from a drawer. He returned to kneel in front of her. "I know it seems like we only met yesterday, but there is one thing I trust, and that's my gut. It tells me you're the one for me, now and forever. I don't want to waste another minute being without you. Will you marry me?"

Shelby's eyes doubled in size as he slipped the flawless five-carat solitaire diamond set in a platinum band on her finger. Unable to speak, all Shelby could do was nod while wiping the tears from her eyes.

"So that's a yes?"

"Yes!"

Wrapping her arms around him, Shelby kissed her man.

"What did you want to tell me?" Eric teased. He expected she'd planned to stop seeing him when she entered the office.

She pulled a velvet pouch out of her purse and handed it to him. "Sabrina mentioned in her last journal the pendant was in a safe deposit box until she could find a buyer for it. Grandma Clarisse sent the contents of the box to me, and the pendant was still there. My grandmother was right. Sabrina did try to find me. She even wrote about lying to our grandmother about the money so she wouldn't question where it came from. Sabrina really did want the money so she could hire someone to help her after initially running into so many dead ends before she found Marva. That's why she stole from you, to pay whatever they were charging her."

Eric pulled the handcrafted locket out of the pouch. He admired the beautiful image of two women embracing with a dove flying above them carved in mother-of-pearl and set in gold. He suddenly recognized the irony of the situation.

"Although what she did was wrong, her intentions weren't meant to be bad," Shelby reasoned. "The day before she died, she wrote in her journal that she

regretted not telling you why she'd pursued you and robbed you. She just hoped your finances could help lead her to me."

"Instead she led me to you."

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