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Keeping Secrets & Telling Lies

Chapter One

“Listen,” Victoria whispered. “Did you hear that?”

“V, it was nothing,” Ted whispered back in a low moan, breathing hard into his wife’s ear as he pressed his hard body against her soft curves.

“No . . . listen. I think she’s up.”

Knock, knock, knock.

There was no mistaking the faint sound of small knuckles rapping on the door. Victoria quickly adjusted the spaghetti strap of her silk teddy as she sat up in bed. She could still feel Ted’s warm body next to hers as she gathered the sateen sheet around her waist.

“Mommy, Daddy...it’s morning time!” Alexandria called out in a high-pitched squeal, peering into her parents’ bedroom through the crack in the door. “Are you up?”

Ted sat up beside Victoria and sighed. As much as he loved his precious little daughter, he also cherished his alone time with his wife, especially since it was something they seemed to have very little of lately.

Over the last several months he’d been spending extra-long hours at the office in preparation for taking his company public next year. ViaTech had survived the telecom industry’s downturn several years back and was now poised to make a strong initial public offering next spring. And Victoria’s days were just as long and hectic, because her business kept her equally on the go. Divine Occasions, her event-planning and catering company, was in its sixth year of full-time operation and had established her as one of Atlanta’s most sought after event coordinators.

But despite Ted’s and Victoria’s jam-packed work schedules, they always made sure to carve out time for their daughter. She was the single most important part of their lives.

On evenings when Victoria didn't have an event to oversee, she was diligent about spending quality time with Alexandria, making sure that she prepared dinner so they could eat together. And most nights when Ted wasn't out of town on business, he managed to return home from the office just in time to tuck her in and read her a bedtime story. After their professional and parental duties ended for the day, they'd steal a few treasured moments together before falling off to sleep.

"Yes, we're up, sweetie," Victoria answered.

With that, Alexandria came barreling into the room, pony-tails dying and a grin on her face as big as the sky. She ran up to her parents' large four-poster bed, using the antique mahogany footstool as a springboard to hop in between them. She giggled hard as she made an indentation where she landed in the soft jacquard-print comforter. "It's morning time, Mommy and Daddy!" she shouted again, full of all the excitement that a combination of Saturday morning cartoons and the promise of an afternoon playmate could bring to a five-year-old.

Ted put his hand to his chest and fell back onto the bed, pretending to suffer an imaginary attack. "You yelled so loud, I think you gave me a heart attack," he teased.

Alexandria stopped grinning and stared at her father. Her face carried an odd, serious look. "Daddy, are you all right?" she said softly, putting her small hand on his broad chest. "Don't have a heart attack," she whispered, peering into his deep blue eyes.

Ted couldn't help but let out a laugh. Alexandria Elizabeth Thornton was the joy of her parents' hearts and, as they had both come to agree, was one of the most serious five-year-olds to ever own a pack of Crayolas. She was playful and exuberant, yet incredibly mature and cerebral for someone who could claim only graduating from preschool as her highest level of academic achievement to date.

She was what her nana Elizabeth called an old soul." That child has been here before. Any child who has that much common sense has walked this earth and seen things in another lifetime," Victoria's mother often said.

"No, sweetie. Your father's fine," Victoria reassured. "You just startled us. What have I told you about using your inside voice?" she lightly scolded.

Alexandria didn't answer right away. "Daddy, your heart's not right?" she said, tilting her head to the side, making it sound more like a pronouncement than a question.

Victoria didn't know why, but something in her daughter's tone put a chill on her arm.

"Daddy's fine, princess." Ted smiled, grabbing Alexandria and tickling her until she dropped her frown and began smiling along with him.

Victoria tried to smile, too, but she felt unsettled by Alexandria's comment and reaction to what should have been a playful moment. She looked into her daughter's eyes, wanting to reassure her again. "Sweetie, your father's fine. He was just playing around, okay?"

Alexandria nodded in compliance but still didn't look completely convinced. "Can I watch Big Bird?" she asked in her small, high-pitched voice.

"Sure, princess. I'll set it up for you downstairs." Ted reached under the comforter, pulled his pajama bottoms up to his waist, then leaned over and whispered into Victoria's ear. "When I get back, we'll pick up where we left off." He winked, then scooped Alexandria off the bed and headed downstairs.

Victoria watched her husband and daughter as their heads disappeared down the long

hallway. She marveled at the way Alexandria had Ted wrapped around her finger. It reminded her of the relationship she'd shared with her own father when she was growing up. Alexandria was Ted's little princess, just as she'd been her father's little queen.

Victoria stretched her arms high above her head and thought about the busy day that lay before her. First on her list was dropping off Alexandria at her first Jack and Jill playdate, then making a quick trip to her office to go over the remaining details for a large celebrity wedding she was coordinating next weekend. After that, she planned to head back over to pick up Alexandria, drive across town to pick up Ted's dry cleaning, and then swing by the grocery store before she took Alexandria to their neighbor's house for a sleepover.

At times, Victoria felt as though she didn't have time to think, let alone breathe. She always seemed to be going to this, hurrying there, or coming from that. Running her business required her to put on a good face for the public, even when she felt crappy. Motherhood demanded that she appear eager and attentive, even when she felt exhausted. And being a wife meant she had to master the delicate art of compromise, even when she wanted to do her own thing.

But she knew there were worse things than having a busy life, and she knew that a lot of women would gladly trade places with her in a heartbeat. She was blessed to have a happy, healthy daughter who was as smart as a whip, and whose loving spirit made her a joy to raise. And even though she wished her husband spent more time at home and less time away on business, and had fewer late nights at the office, she knew that he loved and adored her. She lived in a custom-built home in an exclusive gated community. Her child care service was reliable and trusted, and she was fortunate to have neighbors and friends who gladly pitched in to help. She had quit her corporate job several years ago to pursue a passion she'd had since childhood, and to top it all off, she was in good physical health. Yes, she knew she was blessed, and she knew there were worse things than busy days.

After Ted secured Alexandria in front of the TV, with her juice box in one hand, the remote control in the other, and her favorite DVD playing, he hurried back upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. When he walked into the bedroom, a smile slid across his face.

Victoria was waiting for him, perched on her knees in the middle of their king-size bed. Her silk teddy and lacy thong had been tossed to the side, and the look on her face said she remembered his parting words. She was ready to pick up exactly where they'd left off.

Ted was struck by the fact that even though he had seen his wife's naked body a million times, her sensuous allure and striking beauty never failed to stir him. He loved the velvety smoothness of her deep chocolate brown skin, which always felt soft to the touch. He took pleasure in running his fingers through the silky thickness of her long black hair, which draped the slender elegance of her neck. And he felt he could lose himself in the gentle curve of her lower back, which gave way to the seductive pull of her soft, round behind. Motherhood had given her slim figure slightly more weight and an added sexiness that he loved.

"Damn, you're beautiful," he said, removing his pajama bottoms. He pulled the door closed behind him and walked toward the bed.

Victoria smiled, enjoying the look that always came over Ted's face when they were about to make love. It let her know that he wanted her. He climbed into bed, covering her

naked body with his. She embraced the feel of her husband's tall, muscular frame as she prepared herself for the pleasure to come.

He kissed her slow and deep, gently tweaking her hardening nipples with his fingers before moving down, alternating between his hands and mouth as he suckled her soft mounds of flesh. He eased his way farther down her body, placing small kisses along a man-made trail, until his head rested between her legs.

"I love it when you're this wet," Ted breathed, gently rolling his tongue over her throbbing tenderness. Victoria threw her head back, digging her heels deep into the mattress as she clenched the bedsheet between her fists. He placed one hand under her hips and the other at the center of her warm middle. He worked with diligence, licking, sucking, and gently kissing her glistening folds. He took his time, devouring every inch of her sweet spot until she shuddered into a creamy orgasm that made her tremble. She released a deep, ecstasy-filled moan that rumbled in the back of her throat.

After a brief moment, Victoria regained her senses, ready to give Ted the same intense pleasure she'd just received. She secured her hands around him, holding him in her firm but gentle grip as she stroked his hardness, massaging him with care. A long, slow "mmm" escaped his lips as Victoria worked her magic. She opened her mouth wide and swallowed him, sucking and licking with controlled precision. When she squeezed the tip of his head deep into her tightening mouth, he could barely hold on any longer.

"Ooh, V," Ted moaned, perspiration dampening his skin. He shifted positions, gently laying Victoria on her back as she wrapped her long legs around his waist, arching her pelvis into the air to meet his. He slipped inside her with smooth, even strokes as they made love. Her body received him as he moved in and out, delighting and electrifying her all at once. Their rhythm was a slow and easy grind that flowed into a growing and heated frenzy as Ted went deeper, increasing the speed of his thrusts. Victoria moaned, clinging to his sex-drenched, sweaty body while she worked her hips at an equally hungry pace. Finally, they both surrendered to a second wave of pleasure.

Victoria reveled in her husband's ability to fulfill her sexual desires. He knew exactly how to please her, anticipating her wants and knowing her most intimate needs. Over the course of their six-year marriage, even though the frequency of their lovemaking had slowed, he had never left her wanting. This was yet another one of her many blessings, and again, she knew there was a multitude of women who would kill to be in her shoes.

She had heard more than a few of her friends and clients complain about their dead sex lives, citing disgruntled husbands, overactive children, and underactive libidos as major culprits. One of her best friends, Debbie Long, who was like the sister she'd never had, had recently confided that since the birth of her son seven years ago, her love life with her husband had dwindled to a state of near nonexistence.

"We're like roommates," Debbie had told Victoria a few months ago. "We love each other, but the passion is gone. We're just going through the motions. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time Rob and I made love," she'd complained.

Victoria had been shocked to learn that Debbie and Rob's marriage had shriveled into the dull, sexless picture her friend had painted, especially since she and Rob had always been romantic and affectionate with each other. Aside from her parents' strong and lasting union, Victoria had regarded Debbie and Rob's relationship as the gold standard by which marriage could be measured.

But as Victoria would soon come to learn in the weeks ahead, time and circumstances

were instruments that could change the tune of one's life in shocking and unexpected ways.

Looking at her own relationship made Victoria feel grateful that she and Ted were still going strong. She knew their marriage wasn't perfect, but they had love and trust as their anchors. The sex was hot, and he made sure that he pleased her. He was in excellent physical health, and his age-defying good looks made him appear a decade younger than his fifty-two years. His vanilla-hued skin had a hint of olive and was taut and supple, with hardly a trace of wrinkles, and the subtle hints of gray that now peppered his thick black hair added to his outrageous sex appeal. He kept his muscles strong and well toned with regular workouts and jogged several times a week to round out his physical fitness regimen. Having a mate like Ted was what Victoria had always dreamed of, and again, she knew she was blessed.

After making love, Victoria lay next to her husband, running her fingers across the faint dark hairs on his broad chest. "Alexandria's movie is probably half over by now," she said.

"Uh-huh," Ted answered in a dreamy, after-sex voice.

"I'm gonna take a shower and go downstairs to make Alexandria's breakfast. We have a busy day ahead, and I need to run a few errands before I drop her off at Susan's later this afternoon."

"Another sleepover?"

"Yep."

Ted pulled Victoria on top of him and grinned. "That means we'll have tonight all to ourselves."

"Mmmm, we sure will." She nodded.

They enjoyed another long kiss before Victoria rolled out of bed.

That Thing . . .

Fresh from the shower, Victoria headed downstairs. She walked into her large family room, adjacent to the gourmet kitchen, and found Alexandria engrossed in the classic *Big Bird's Big Adventure*. The movie held her complete attention. It was a treat for Alexandria, because Victoria and Ted didn't allow her to watch television on weekdays unless it was educational programming. Weekends were her time to "veg out," as they liked to say.

Victoria poured Alexandria's Cheerios into her cereal bowl and sat it on the breakfast table, along with a glass of orange juice. "Alexandria, come and eat your breakfast, sweetie," she called out.

Alexandria walked slowly toward the breakfast table, pulling out the chair closest to the family room, angling it so she could see the large-screen TV from where she sat.

"Wash your hands before you eat, young lady," Victoria said as she split a bagel and popped it into the toaster.

"Yes, ma'am." Alexandria made her way over to her step stool by the sink, singing along with the song that Big Bird was belting out.

A few minutes later Ted walked into the kitchen, still wearing his pajama bottoms and T-shirt. He came up behind Victoria at the large granite island and rubbed his pelvis

against her curvy backside. He lifted her heavy mass of hair to the side and kissed the crook of her neck.

“Ted, your daughter’s right over there,” Victoria playfully cautioned, tilting her head to where Alexandria was sitting at the breakfast table.

“She’s so into that DVD, she doesn’t even know we’re here.”

“You’re probably right,” she laughed. “Didn’t you get enough this morning?”

“Not hardly.” Ted held Victoria close and kissed the side of her neck again. She was his second wife, but his first and only love.

After being trapped in a miserable marriage by a conniving, gold-digging wife for more than twenty years, Ted had given up on the possibility of emotional happiness, let alone the idea of love. Instead, he had concentrated on his career, successfully achieving the professional goals he’d set for himself by following in his father’s giant footsteps. But after moving from Los Angeles to Atlanta seven years ago to assume the position of CEO and part owner of ViaTech, one of the Southeast region’s leading telecommunication companies, his plans all changed the day he met Victoria Small.

At the time, she worked in ViaTech’s human resources department. When he first met her, it was literally love at first sight. She was tall, elegant, and startlingly beautiful. Everything about her had captivated him. She had earned an MBA from Wharton, which told him she was smart, and in a few short years she had risen to become one of the company’s youngest senior directors, which meant she was ambitious and business savvy. They were qualities he admired, and she ignited a fire in him that wouldn’t go away until he had her.

He had spent months trying to get close to her under the guise of developing a professional working relationship, and his plan to woo her would have succeeded much sooner had it not been for Parker Brightwood. Parker had come into Victoria’s life one weekend and had swept her off her feet. Ted cursed himself for not acting sooner or telling Victoria exactly how he felt about her from the beginning. But he had been caught in a delicate situation. He was her boss, and at the time he was still married.

He removed the largest obstacle by filing for divorce, ending the paper-thin facade he had called a marriage. But there was still the sticky proposition of having an office romance, so he used discretion in his pursuit. Then there were the other issues: age and race. He was twelve years Victoria’s senior. It wasn’t a significant age gap and didn’t seem to bother Victoria in the least. But what Ted soon discovered was that the larger issue at hand was his race. He was white, she was black, and she’d made it clear that the two didn’t mix in her romantic dealings.

Initially, Ted was disappointed to learn she felt that way. And to compound matters, his mother and Victoria’s father had both expressed contrary views on the subject. He almost felt defeated because Parker had an automatic leg up by consequence of birth. His ethnic heritage guaranteed him a seat at the table. But after nearly a year of quiet, yet patient pursuit, Ted finally won Victoria’s heart. He knew the love they shared was real, and it conquered a world of challenges.

Victoria and Ted joined their daughter at the breakfast table, and soon each of them was immersed in their own world: Alexandria chomping down on her cereal in between songs and giggles with Big Bird, Ted reading the *Wall Street Journal* while trying to balance his bagel and coffee, and Victoria checking her BlackBerry in between sips of her peppermint tea.

After a few minutes, Ted lowered his paper and turned his attention to Victoria. "What time does that thing start today?"

Victoria stopped in mid text and stared at him. She knew exactly what he was talking about, and she didn't like the way he had just referred to Alexandria's first Jack and Jill playdate as "that thing." She knew that Ted was still uncomfortable about their daughter's membership in the elite social organization for African American children. It had taken several discussions on the matter before she finally convinced him to let Alexandria join.

They'd gone round and round about the issue. "Ted, growing up, I was a member of Jack and Jill, and it was a wonderful experience," Victoria had told him several months ago, when she filled out Alexandria's legacy membership application. "This will give Alexandria a chance to interact with kids who look like her, and it'll expose her to social and cultural experiences that I know you'll appreciate once you give it a chance."

For Victoria, their daughter's membership in the organization wasn't an issue that was up for debate. Alexandria was one of only a handful of black children in the exclusive neighborhood where they lived, as well as at the preschool she had been attending for the last two years. And while Ted was as white as any white man could be, thanks to Victoria, Alexandria's complexion clearly provoked questions about her racial background. She was a lightly toasted cream color, and she stood out in the sea of white faces that surrounded her every day.

"It's not a *thing*. It's a playdate," Victoria said with slight irritation, "and it starts at eleven. They'll have games and lunch for the kids, and then I'll pick her up around two this afternoon."

When Alexandria heard the word *playdate*, she turned her attention from her movie to her parents. "Will there be lots of kids for me to play with?" She brightened.

"Yes, sweetie." Victoria smiled. "There will be lots of kids there."

"Yea!" Alexandria cheered. She was an only child, and she eagerly jumped at any opportunity to be around other children.

Ted shifted his weight in his chair. "Will there be other kids there like her?" he asked, this time with a little irritation in his voice, too.

Again, Victoria knew exactly what he was hinting at. "Certainly, all the children attending today will be in her age group, and from what I've been told, there's almost an even number of girls and boys. She'll have a ball." Victoria smiled, leaning over and tickling Alexandria on her side.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know exactly what you meant," Victoria responded in a sugary sweet voice, cutting Ted a look that contradicted her tone. She was happy that for once, her naturally intuitive daughter was so caught up in the excitement of her pending playdate that she hadn't picked up on the tension that had just blanketed the room. She pushed Alexandria's empty cereal bowl to the side. "Sweetie, why don't you go upstairs and start brushing your teeth. I'll be up in a minute to help you pick out a nice outfit for today, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy." Alexandria obeyed. She hopped down from her chair and headed upstairs.

Victoria and Ted sat in silence until they were sure their daughter was out of earshot.

"What's wrong with you?" Victoria asked, peering into Ted's deep ocean-blue eyes. "How could you ask a question like that in front of Alexandria?"

“V, you said that you wanted her to join this organization so she can be around kids like her. Well, she’s not just African American, you know.” Ted folded his newspaper, placing it to the side. “Will there be any white kids or biracial kids there?”

Victoria let out a huff. “We’ve been through this before. You know full well that it’s a black organization.”

“My point exactly. I don’t understand the necessity of her joining Jack and Jill. She’s already in a playgroup at her school,” Ted pointed out. “I thought we decided a long time ago that we weren’t going to expose Alexandria to anything that was exclusionary.”

Victoria threw up her hands, taking a deep breath as she looked out their large bay window. “Well, we better put the house up for sale. Take a good look around you.”

“This neighborhood isn’t exclusively white, but Jack and Jill *is* exclusively black,” Ted responded.

“Other than the two black families in this neighborhood— whose children are in high school, by the way—and half a handful at her school, Alexandria’s always in the minority in her everyday environment. I know what that’s like, Ted . . . but you don’t. And even though Alexandria just turned five, she sees the difference, too.”

“What do you mean, she sees the difference?”

“You know that she’s always been inquisitive and is a bit more knowing than the average child her age . . .”

“Yes, I know, but what are you saying?”

Victoria put down her BlackBerry, locking eyes with her husband. “The other day Alexandria asked me, ‘Mommy, if you’re black and Daddy’s white . . . what am I?’ ”

They sat in silence again, staring at each other. Ted was at a temporary loss for words. He had been warned by his mother that this day would come, and logically, he knew this was a natural question for Alexandria to ask. But he hadn’t anticipated it to come so soon. His little princess was still so young.

“What did you tell her?” he asked.

“I told her the truth. That yes . . . Mommy is black and Daddy is white, and that she’s the best of both of us,” Victoria said, leaning back in her chair. “It seemed to satisfy her, but, Ted, whether you want to face it or not, society has already labeled our child. There will be times when she *will* have to identify.”

“Why do you always think she’s going to have to choose one over the other?”

“Why do you think she’ll never have to?” Victoria countered, shaking her head.

This was an issue that sometimes left them at odds, the struggle over their daughter’s racial identity. Victoria knew that the discord would only grow as Alexandria matured in age, and the thought of having to constantly fight to infuse her African American roots into her daughter’s life was something that she knew would wear thin.

“Because we live in a global world,” Ted continued. “Things have changed since we were Alexandria’s age. You act like we’re living in the Jim Crow era.”

Victoria smirked. “Ha, Jim Crow was blatant. What I’m talking about is the subtlety of twenty-first century racism. It’s cloaked so well that you don’t even see it. Hell, it’s got you drinking the Kool-Aid. You haven’t been ostracized in your social circle for being married to me, but it’s only because of *who* you are and the economic status you hold. But trust me, they’ve talked about us under their breaths.”

Ted shook his head, turning his eyes away from his wife, knowing she was right.

“As much as you love Alexandria and me, and as open-minded as you are, you still

have a blind spot when it comes to race. Are you just that oblivious, or do you purposely choose to ignore it?"

The air between them became thick with discomfort.

"I'm not oblivious about how things work," Ted answered. "I'm immersed in corporate America, remember? I understood the prejudice we were going to face long before we got married," he said, squaring his shoulders. "We simply have different views on the subject. Alexandria's just five years old, V...five years old," he stressed. "I don't want her to feel like she has to choose anything right now."

"But, Ted, we've been teaching her how to make choices since she was old enough to speak her first words. Please, let's be clear about this." Victoria paused. "You don't want her to have to make choices when it involves race."

"V—"

Victoria interrupted him. "Before we got married, I told you my concerns about us raising children and the struggles we would face, and you were the one who said you were ready to deal with anything that came our way, remember? Well, it's time to start dealing."

Ted let out a deep breath filled with frustration. He didn't want to argue so early in the morning, especially after they had gotten the day off to such a good start. He decided that it wasn't the time to tackle such a delicate debate, so he reached over and put his hand on top of Victoria's. "I love my family, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect you and Alexandria. I'm not oblivious, and I won't make blind decisions that will hurt us. This is just something I feel strongly about."

"And so do I."

Ted leaned in close, prepared to give in, but only for the moment. "I hope Alexandria has a good time today." He smiled. "I really do."

Although Victoria knew that he meant every word coming from his mouth, what he just said didn't arrest her worries, because she knew what her husband didn't—that this was just the beginning. She wished she could wave a magic wand and change the last three hundred fifty years of American history. This was a war she had been suited up to fight all her life, but it was a new battle for Ted, and she knew that he would never fully understand the complexities of what it meant to be black in America.

"I'm heading upstairs because we've got to leave soon," Victoria said. She grabbed her BlackBerry and rose from the table. She leaned over and kissed Ted lightly on the lips. "We'll work through this, together."

Ted kissed her back and nodded his head. He watched his wife as she walked out of the room, and thought about the question his daughter had asked. *What I am?*

He's Quite a Catch. . . .

Victoria's stomach was a bundle of squiggly lines and nervous jitters. It had been that way since she had arrived at Hilda Barrett's house a half hour ago. She looked down at her watch. *Damn! Thirty minutes to go.* That was how long it would be before she could get the hell out of there!

She couldn't wait to make a beeline out the door and head straight to her car. Even though she would have to return in a few hours to pick up Alexandria from her first Jack and Jill playdate, she knew that she needed to leave now, before her temples throbbed

any harder.

She was sitting on a large paisley-print sofa with her legs crossed, trying to concentrate on the information that Hilda, the current chapter president, was delivering to the parents of the newly minted crop of young Jack and Jill darlings. Even though Victoria knew the information like she had written it herself, she tried to focus hard on the words coming out of Hilda's mouth. Focusing would help take her mind off the man sitting across the room. The one causing her nerves to fray at the edges.

She'd spotted him as soon as she and Alexandria had arrived. He'd been bent down on one knee, whispering something to an adorable little boy who looked like his "mini me." He rubbed his hands over his perfectly shaven bald head, then over the child's thick mass of black curls, which mimicked the ones he had briefly sported several years ago. When he stood, he looked as handsome and sexy as she remembered. His neatly creased trousers and white polo shirt hung well on his tall frame. She couldn't help but notice and admire the fact that his golden colored skin was still smooth and his dimples were still alluring. His brown eyes were still piercing, and his muscular body was still in tip-top condition.

He had looked at her, then down at Alexandria, before focusing his enticing baby browns back on her again. He stared for a few uncomfortable moments before Victoria finally looked away. His gaze made her feel flushed and nervous.

"Mommy, what's wrong?" Alexandria had asked, tugging at the lightweight material of Victoria's sundress, sensing the change in her mother's mood.

"Nothing's wrong, sweetie," Victoria softly reassured her. When she looked in his direction again, she saw that one of the other parents had just come up and engaged him in what looked like a deep conversation, taking his attention off of her.

After one of the parent volunteers escorted Alexandria and the rest of the children back to the sunroom, Victoria had tried to make casual conversation with two other mothers in attendance. They were standing in the large living room, nibbling on fruit, waiting for Hilda to start the welcome meeting.

Victoria zoned in and out of the ladies' mindless Q&A. "Where do you live?" "What do you do?" "What sorority did you pledge?" "Are you a legacy?" All the typical questions in that type of circle, which usually bored her to tears. It wasn't until she caught the tail end of what one of the women was saying that she realized that the conversation had shifted to *him*.

"He's the top gun in charge at the Carlyle Fraser Heart Center at Emory," the chatty woman said. Her name was Roberta Stevens. She was short and superthin with a whiny voice, the kind that was primed for nagging. "He's one of my husband's top clients . . . with Merck, you know." She smiled with a wave of her fragile-looking hand. "He's also president of the Association of Black Cardiologists, on the board of the Boys and Girls Club, and he's very involved with his son. He's quite a catch."

Tasha, the other woman who rounded out their group, looked across the room at him with hungry eyes. "So, he's single?"

Victoria quickly glanced down at Tasha's bare ring finger. There was something about her that was off-putting, a crooked line in her otherwise well-put-together countenance. She was attractive, and her style of dress was hip and sophisticated, masking the ugliness that lay beneath. Victoria had known women like Tasha—ruthless! The cunning type who would stop at nothing to get what she wanted.

“Oh, yes,” Roberta answered with a quick nod. “He’s single and very much available.”

“*Really?*” Tasha said, peppering up, looking around the huge living room full of parents. “He’s one of the few fathers who showed up here today, and probably the only single man in this entire room,” she added, calculating. “But I bet he won’t be single for long . . . if I can help it.” She grinned and gave a seductive purr. “So, what’s the story on his son’s mother?”

Victoria could see that Tasha was probing hard, probably already thinking of ways to make dinner plans with her intended prey.

Roberta shook her head. “They never married, but they share custody. She’s general counsel for a huge lobbying firm downtown . . . a real workaholic, if you ask me. That’s why she’s not here today. She’s out of the country on business. The two of them used to fight like cats and dogs, but lately they’ve been getting along, which is a blessing for their son’s sake. Poor little guy.” Roberta sighed, shaking her head again. “What could be more important than spending time with your only child?”

Tasha nodded in agreement, but Victoria was motionless as Roberta went on. “She used to try to use the boy as leverage to get a ring . . . like that would ever happen.”

“I thought you said they were getting along now,” Tasha remarked with raised brows. “You don’t think there’s a chance of reconciliation?”

Victoria could see that Tasha was hoping there wasn’t.

“Maybe when hell freezes over.” Roberta smirked. “They’re being civil for their son’s sake. Besides, he’s kind of, um . . . What’s the word?” She scratched her head. “Commitment phobic, that’s it. I don’t think he’s the marrying type, if you know what I mean. In the years I’ve known him, I can’t recall him ever dating anyone for longer than a couple months at a time.”

Victoria remained silent, as though the details of his life were of no concern to her.

“You seem to know a lot about him,” Tasha said, still keeping her eyes on the handsome man.

“Yes, Parker and my husband, Alvin, are quite close, and our sons used to attend the same preschool. We do playdates and sleepovers all the time,” Roberta responded.

“That’s his name by the way. Parker . . . Dr. Parker Brightwood.”

Tasha grinned. “That’s good information to know.”

“Looks like someone’s got their eye on the good doctor,” Roberta giggled.

Tasha flashed a smile in Parker’s direction, which he seemed to return. “You could say that.”

“Well, just be forewarned,” Roberta advised. “He’s a hard nut to crack, so good luck.”

Back in the present, the other dozen or so parents looked on, actively engaged in Hilda’s presentation. But Victoria felt as though she was sinking in her seat. She wanted so badly to get up and leave, to walk outside into the late morning sun to clear her mind. But she knew it would be rude to interrupt the session, and she certainly didn’t want to draw any attention to herself.

She focused on Hilda’s speech so she wouldn’t be tempted to look at Parker’s sexy, soft-looking lips. She glanced up at the lovely silk taffeta drapes hanging above his head so her eyes wouldn’t accidentally land on one of his deliciously inviting dimples. It had been six years since the last time she had seen him, and she still remembered his words

from that day. "I'm gonna fight for you," he'd told her. "I'm not giving up on us."

He had devastated her with a betrayal that had hurt worse than her first broken heart. She uncrossed her legs at the thought, then nervously recrossed them, realizing that she was slowly melting away. She wondered if Parker was as uncomfortable as she was, if he was sitting across from her, thinking the same thoughts that were running through her mind. She almost smiled to herself, remembering what a smooth operator he was. He could be sweating bullets, and one would never know; that was how cool and controlled his outward appearance always seemed to be.

She wanted to steal a glance to see if she could discern his mood, but she was afraid he'd catch her in the act. Unlike him, nearly every move she made was obvious, because she wore her feelings on her face. It made her think back to the night they first met. They'd been at one of her favorite restaurants, The Cheesecake Factory. She'd been alone, and he'd been on a blind date. The entire evening he had stolen glances at her. Remembering that night made the smile she'd been trying to hide slip out before she could catch it. *Why am I thinking about this?*

But the truth was that she knew exactly why those thoughts, along with others, were floating through her head, and it frightened her. It brought back to mind the recurring dream that invaded her sleep every so often, and the disturbing knowledge that she had never quite gotten over him. *I've got to get out of here right now!*

Just as she was about to rise from her seat, Hilda concluded her presentation. Victoria was relieved and tried to make a dash for the door, but just as she was heading out, Roberta stopped her.

"Victoria," Roberta said, smiling. "We should get together for lunch sometime. Do you have a card?" she asked, handing over one of her own.

"Oh, sure." Victoria tried to smile back as she fished through her overstuffed handbag for her silver-plated business card holder. She panicked when she looked up and saw that Parker was approaching. His eyes were fixed on her, as if he was taking inventory of her thoughts. Victoria quickly handed Roberta her card. "Call me, and we'll get together," she said in a hurry.

Instead of thanking the hostess for her time and hospitality, or standing around and mingling with the other parents, Victoria headed straight for the front door.

Part of the Package...

Ted looked at his watch and rubbed his tired eyes. It was late afternoon, and he'd been in his office since he left the house that morning. He was sitting at his desk, reviewing projection reports for an upcoming strategy meeting. He pulled off his reading glasses and leaned forward in his high-back leather chair, tapping his signature engraved Montblanc against a small stack of papers.

He was still thinking about the conversation he'd had with Victoria over breakfast. He didn't like arguing with his wife, but he knew the topic they'd discussed was one that would most certainly come up again, especially as their daughter grew in age. He hated the thought of Alexandria having to face the ugly prejudice of the world. She was his only child, and he wanted to protect her.

He let out a heavy sigh, pushing his papers to the side of his desk. This was what Victoria, and even his own mother, had warned him about; it was part of the package that

came along with being married to a black woman and raising a biracial child. When he and Victoria had first learned they were expecting a baby just a month after they married, he'd been elated. He couldn't wait to see a miniature version of the two of them running around the house.

But during Victoria's sixth month of pregnancy, she began to verbalize her concerns more and more. "Ted, you're fooling yourself if you think that our child won't be treated differently," she had told him.

Victoria had been speaking from a foreign place that he knew nothing about, and it had scared the shit out of him. He knew how racist the world could be; he'd worked in corporate America long enough to see it firsthand. And he had witnessed it up close and personal in his own family when he learned about some of his Back Bay relatives' reactions to him marrying Victoria. But he had convinced himself that they were in the minority, and that things would be different for *his* child. His station in life had afforded him certain privileges that he intended to pass along to his son or daughter.

Ted had always prided himself on being a man of great will and prodigious determination. He was the son of Charles Thornton, legendary Boston businessman and real estate developer. He was a man's man, strong and immune to weakness, and like his father, he was always cool under pressure and calm in the face of adversity. But the thought of his child having to endure discrimination and cruelty simply because of the color of her skin was something he was ill prepared for.

Ted leaned back in his chair and looked at the two pictures on the edge of his desk. One was a photo of Victoria, Alexandria, and himself, taken last Christmas, all smiles and cheer. The other was his favorite picture of all they had ever taken as a family. He and Victoria were smiling as they held their tiny daughter in their arms, joy and gratitude spread over both their faces. It had been a tender moment his mother-in-law had captured with her digital camera shortly after Victoria and Alexandria arrived home from the hospital, two weeks after Alexandria was born. They were all smiles and cheer in this photo, too, but instead of celebrating the holidays and the miracle birth of Christ, they had been celebrating the miracle that both mother and daughter were alive.

Ted rested his chin in his hand as he thought back to those days. They had been the roughest weeks of his life, each day presenting the possibility that he might lose the two people who mattered most in his life. Victoria had suffered complications from an emergency cesarean, and Alexandria had been born with health problems. That had been a bleak time, and it was only after his wife and child were safe at home, both out of danger, that Ted got a good night's sleep—his first in fourteen long days.

As Ted reminisced over those events, a thought sprang into his mind. It was something he'd heard one of the ladies say when he'd passed the nurses' station in the neonatal unit on his way to Victoria's room. "That Thornton baby is so beautiful, like a little black baby doll," the sixty-something, mocha-colored nurse had said to one of her coworkers. Then his mind took him back to small things he'd brushed off when he'd been out with Alexandria, taking her to the park or out for ice cream when Victoria had weekend events to oversee for Divine Occasions. He thought about the quizzical stares that people had given him when they saw him with his daughter.

It was something that used to irritate him, and he had attributed their behavior to plain ignorance, like the time, a few months ago, when a blonde haired woman who was sitting across from them in Baskin-Robbins leaned over, looked at Alexandria, and told him that

she thought adoption was a great thing.

Which dress to wear? Which boy's offer to accept to the prom? Which college to attend? Which academic major to pursue? Those were the kinds of decisions he saw in Alexandria's future. Not what race she would claim. The thought pissed him off, and the fact that he knew there was little he could do frustrated him.

Right then and there, Ted made up his mind. Up to this point he had been largely silent and ambivalent about the issue whenever Victoria brought it up. But now he was going to have to face the cold, hard truth that he realized he'd been avoiding. He knew that his daughter would need support and reassurance in ways that her everyday environment couldn't adequately afford her. He decided that when he returned home tonight, he would talk to Victoria and let her know that Alexandria's membership in Jack and Jill was just fine with him.

Dear Reader,

Thanks so very much, for taking time to read the first chapter of, *Keeping Secrets & Telling Lies!* I hope you enjoyed the characters and that you will follow their journey by getting a copy of the novel!

As you may know, this book is the sequel to my debut novel, *Unexpected Interruptions*, so if you haven't read it, I encourage you to get the book so you'll have the full background on all the characters...you'll fasten your seatbelt because they're going to take you on a ride!

I love connecting with readers, so please visit my website, www.tricehickman.com, and join my mailing list so I can keep you in the loop with my upcoming projects, book promotions and giveaways, book recommendations, advice on writing, and my scheduled events and appearances.

Again, thank you for reading the first chapter of, *Keeping Secrets & Telling Lies!* Please help me spread the word by telling at least 10 of your friends about the book!

Blessings,



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