

## FROM CHAPTER ONE

Sherise Robinson couldn't believe she had let herself run behind today of all days. Her first day back at work from maternity leave and she was going to show up late if she didn't speed things up. That was not the message she wanted to send.

As she rushed around the master bedroom of her elegant Georgetown townhouse on Washington, DC's northwest side, Sherise felt panic start to set in. A lot was riding on how today went, no matter how much her husband, Justin, tried to tell her otherwise. The power hungry, manipulative bitch, as her co-workers had secretly named her, was coming back and if she showed any signs of softening, weakening, she was dead. The barracuda was now a mama and she could just imagine what they were all thinking. She's vulnerable.

She was going to show them they were wrong and as she stopped to look in the full-length mirror that covered her walk-in closet door, her confidence was lifted. Finally she had found her missing Missoni stacked pumps and her outfit was complete. She looked sharp and sexy, and at 27, Sherise felt certain she showed no signs of having just given birth six months ago. That was thanks to very expensive underwear that tucked everything in, but also to the fact that she made sure not to gain more than the 25 lbs her doctor told her was the minimum amount healthy during her pregnancy. While there was still a stubborn pound or two hanging around, everything was tightening up nicely.

From head-to-toe, Sherise checked every inch. Her shoulder-length hair, just done yesterday was placed nicely in a sharp "don't fuck with me" bun with

just a few “I might be flirting with you” dark brown tendrils falling down. She liked to keep the men confused. It gave her an advantage and Sherise was all about getting the advantage. Her makeup was flawless, highlighting her high cheekbones and dark green eyes. It was spring, so her lipstick was a soft, flirtatious pink. Her golden caramel skin was glowing and it would wow when she took off the jacket of her black and white striped Nipon wide-legged pantsuit to reveal her white sleeveless Marc Jacobs business shirt. No one who saw her at the Executive Office Building today would forget.

“I’m back,” she said in that sexy, raspy voice of hers. “Bitches better step aside.”

“You’re late,” were the first words Justin Robinson said to his wife as she entered the European style contemporary designed kitchen only seconds later.

“I’m fine,” Sherise answered as she rushed for the refrigerator. “I’m taking a cab.”

“Ah! Ah!”

Sherise quickly closed the refrigerator door and rushed over to the little monster emitting those sounds. Her six month old baby girl, Cady, was the love of her life. She sat in her baby chair, her hands reaching out for her mommy with evidence of her breakfast all over her face, not to mention her bib. She was an adorable baby with soft, chocolate skin; nice and chunky with fat cheeks that Sherise couldn’t get enough of.

“Sorry, baby!” Sherise leaned in for a quick kiss, but didn’t trust herself for more. She knew leaving Cady today would be hard enough. “Mama has to go.”

“You should eat something.” Justin put down the baby spoon and leaned back in his chair. He was looking at his wife with concern. “You don’t want to go in there without your fuel.”

“I’m grabbing something on the way.” Sherise appreciated her husband’s concern, but there was a part of her that was still a little angry with him for trying to pressure her to stay home for good.

Justin, 30, was old fashioned and his upbringing had been very different from hers. Because Sherise grew up poor as dirt on the hard streets in Southeast D.C. with no father to be found and a mother who couldn’t give a damn, she only knew how to fight. Justin was a lover, not a fighter. From Chicago, he grew up in a traditional middle-class black family with a stay-at-home mother, a doctor for a father, and all the safety cushions that came with such an upbringing. He was stable and reliable and represented what Sherise wanted to be, which was why she decided she was going to marry him the same night she met him four years ago when he was just a recent Georgetown Law grad. A reliable wage earner who was hot enough to be attracted to, but not so hot that every other woman would want him too. He was the kind of guy that would come home every night. Most of all, Justin, a six-figured salaried lobbyist on Capitol Hill, had the connections that Sherise’s never-ending ambition could use to get ahead.

But Justin put a wrench in her ambition game when he suggested Sherise be a stay-at-home mom after Cady was born. They had agreed to a regular 12-week maternity leave, knowing that Sherise had plans of moving beyond her position as Assistant Director of Communications for the White House’s

Domestic Policy Council. She was hungry for power and her ultimate dream was to make it from the Executive Office Building across the street to the West Wing of the White House. After endless fighting, Sherise went the route that had always served her well; refusing affection until she got her way. While she loved Justin, he did not overwhelm her, which made him a good husband candidate for her. She could control the way her body reacted to him, thus control the power he had over her.

It wasn't as if he wasn't attractive. He was six feet tall and while he had an extra 10 lbs, he wore it well. He was a sexy dark brown with beautiful light brown eyes and a sturdy face. He wore preppie boardroom glasses that made him look distinguished and was always looking sharp in his expensive business suits. The point was, while she found him perfect husband and father material, Justin had never gotten Sherise to lose control of herself. She could resist him, but he couldn't resist her. She played her games and made certain he couldn't resist, which resulted in a quick marriage proposal. This control over him was why her compromise of a six-month leave was quickly accepted and rewarded with access to affection again.

Sherise felt a pull in her gut as Cady called for her again, but she fought it and went to check her briefcase. It made her want to cry, but she wasn't a stay-at-home mom type. She was too ambitious; too greedy. Did that make her a bad mother? She didn't know. She only knew that she would be miserable without the challenge of a career. It made her feel strong; safe and allowed her to do what she did best; power play and win.

“I filled up her bag.” Sherise’s back was to her husband and child as she organized the items in her briefcase on the French villa designed dining room table. “So all you have to do is grab it and walk her over to the daycare center.”

Sherise almost jumped when she felt Justin’s hand on her shoulder. She turned to face him and was comforted by the compassion in his eyes.

“I know this is hard for you, baby.” He leaned forward and kissed her on her forehead. “You don’t have to pretend.”

“Please,” she begged. “Don’t do that. You’ll make me cry. I can’t walk in there with red eyes.”

“You know that you’ll be back in the swing of things before noon,” he said. “Don’t sweat it, baby. Cady will be fine at daycare. I’ll drop her off on my way to work and you can pick her up on your way home.”

“And you don’t hate me?” she asked.

Justin smiled his usual charming smile. “I couldn’t if I tried.”

She knew that. She could always rely on Justin to be a supportive husband and a fully involved father. Which made her feel all the worse knowing that Cady might not even be his child.