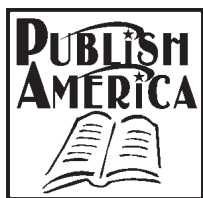


LIVIN' IN THE HOOD

Tracey L. Burton



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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to my husband Arthur L. Burton, III, and my kids Natalie, Arthur, Justina and Freddie. Thank you for standing by me while I wrote this book. I would also like to thank my parents for raising me and showing me the right things to do. To my grandmother who is always there and whom I love very deeply.

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CHAPTER ONE:

LIVING IN THE HOOD

One hot summer day in the month of July, Tanya Jones really began to feel the pressure of living in the hood. She was attending college and working in a supermarket just to pay her bills and pay for her education. She rarely got to hang out in the hood because she was either working or in school. Tanya had a brother named Chris and her brother always hung out in the front of their building with his friends or by the store on the corner. Tanya and Chris went to live with their aunt after their mother died when they were young children because their father could not handle taking care of them. He left them with the aunt and disappeared out of their lives. Now Chris was the type who did not care about anything. He had no plans for his future; he refused to attend school or get a job. Chris made his money by selling drugs and he was satisfied with that lifestyle. This bothered his sister Tanya a lot because she did not want her brother to end up dead or in jail. Chris had a hard head and he refused to listen to her when she tried to get him to see things her way. Tanya was on her way to work one morning when she saw her brother standing outside with Tony, Michael, Jay and some person she did not know. The new person's name was Sean; he lived in one of the other buildings around the way. Tanya thought that the new person was so fine. At work, all she kept thinking about was the new person that was with her brother. Sean liked Chris's sister from the moment he saw her and he could not stop thinking about her either.

Sean smiled at Chris. "Yo that's your sister? Man, she is gorgeous!" Chris laughed.

"I don't think my sister would be interested in you. She doesn't like guys who hang out on the corner with no ambition. She is the type that wants a guy who can give her the world and make her his queen," Sean smiled.

Chris was just trying to protect his sister from him. Everyone started to laugh at the expression on Sean's face while Chris was talking, and he caught himself and began to laugh as well. Tanya was at work and she was already working hard as ever. Tanya was talking to her crazy friend Susan, who was a spoiled rich girl who lived in the Upper East Side of Harlem. Susan always thought that she was better than everyone else. Tanya didn't really pay her any mind though because she knew Susan was full of shit. Tanya was telling her about Sean and how he looked and everything and how she couldn't wait to get home so she could grill Chris about who Sean was. Sean was six-two and 190 pounds. He was a fine black brother. He had all the girls in the hood wanting him but he was looking for a special type of woman and not a thug-out chick. In the projects everybody hung out almost every day, whether it was in front of the buildings or in front of the store; they were just always out there. People always talked about the Saint Nicholas projects because there was always a block party or a barbeque.

There was this girl named Latoya who thought that all the guys wanted her. She was a twenty-two-year-old Hispanic female and she was very attractive with the banging body. She was an assistant manager in Modell's sporting goods. Latoya had a crush on Chris and it showed a lot because she was always running up on him. Chris knew that she did like him but he wasn't really feeling her that way. She liked him so much that she always tried to buy him expensive gifts so he would go out with her. One day on Tanya's day off there was a knock on the door and when Tanya opened it, it was Latoya coming to see if Chris was home. She tried to play it off like she and Tanya were friends but Tanya knew she was looking for Chris and that was the only reason she stopped by. Tanya interrupted Latoya while she was talking and let her know Chris had just left a few minutes ago and he went on an interview so he would be gone awhile. When Latoya heard that Chris was not home she gave Tanya a gift to give to her brother and she waved goodbye and went back downstairs.

As Latoya was leaving the building, she saw Michael, Tony and Jay sitting on the bench. Jay was nineteen years old. He was the youngest of the group. He lived with both his parents and he had a younger sister living with them. He had just graduated from high school getting ready to go to college in September and he planned to go away to college. Jay wanted to get out of the hood and make something of himself. He wanted to make his family proud of him and be able to come back one day and move his family out of Harlem, and buy them a house to live in. His friends still laughed at him because they thought college was a waste of time. Tanya got a call from her boss asking her to come to work

to fill in for the new girl Theresa because she had a doctor's appointment and said she could not come in. Theresa was a short white girl with blonde hair and she was always too afraid to come to work in Harlem when she had to work late. She told her boss that she did not mind filling in for Theresa and that she would be there in fifteen minutes. As she was leaving, her brother Chris was coming in the door. He stopped and looked at her for a minute. "Where are you going?"

"Don't worry about me; worry about your girlfriend," she answered.

Chris looked puzzled. "What?"

"She left a gift for you in the room," Tanya said.

As she walked out of the door Chris just smiled as he watched his sister leave and then he went into his room. When Tanya got to the supermarket Susan was waiting for her to tell her about her date last night. Tanya told her to wait until they finished work and then she could go with her home and chill for a while. After work Tanya and Susan went back to her house. Tanya's aunt Naomi was usually home when she got there but today was different. When Tanya walked in the door the phone rang. She ran and picked it up. "Hello, I am calling from the hospital concerning Mrs. Naomi," the nurse said. "Your aunt had an accident. She slipped and fell down and was brought here to Harlem Hospital by an ambulance, and she asked that I call you."

"My brother and I are on our way! We will be right there," Tanya answered.

Tanya called for Chris and they went to the hospital to see what happened. Naomi worked at the hospital as a nurse for fifteen years. When Tanya and Chris arrived at Harlem Hospital, they were greeted by a friend who worked with Naomi in the emergency room who directed them to what room their aunt was in. When they got into the room Tanya went over to Aunt Naomi and gave her a hug. Naomi was fine; she just had a sprained ankle and a sore wrist so the doctor wanted her to stay overnight for observation. Susan had tagged along but she waited in the family waiting area while Tanya and Chris went to see about their aunt. She watched television in the waiting area for about an hour before Tanya returned and told her that Aunt Naomi was okay. "Susan, it's kind of late for you to be traveling home; why don't you just stay with us tonight," Chris said.

As they got closer to their block Chris saw some of his friends outside so he decided to stay and hang outside for a while. Tony, Michael and Jay were all outside, and Sean was talking loudly. Sean looked up and he saw Tanya; he got a big smile on his face. He waited for her to get close enough to them so that he could say hello to her.

“Hi Tanya,” Sean said with a big smile on his face.

Tanya played it cool though; she smiled and she spoke to all of them. Tanya stood there staring at Sean for a few minutes and then decided that she and Susan should go upstairs. Tanya lived on the tenth floor, and sometimes the elevator was not working and they would have to walk up and down the stairs. The bad thing was that it only seemed to happen when they did the grocery shopping or the laundry. Susan turned to Tanya and smiled.

“How do you like going to college?” Tanya replied.

“Yes, but it’s so much work and sometimes I think I can’t make it. I do love the challenge though.” Susan smiled.

“A challenge is always good. Tell me what’s up with you and the guy outside.” She laughed. Tanya giggled and was about to say something but the phone rang.

“Hello,” she answered.

“Hi, I am calling about your aunt,” he said.

Tanya grabbed her chest. “Is there something wrong?” she said.

“No not at all. She is ready to go home and I wanted to know if you could come and pick her up?” he said.

“Yes of course,” she said. “We were just there but the other doctor said she should stay for observation.”

“I saw him, but she is fine and she wants to go home. Will you come?” he asked.

“Of course; we’ll be right there to pick her up,” she said.

Tanya and Susan grabbed their purses and headed out the door, but before leaving, Tanya figured she should leave a note for Chris. Chris had come into the house after Tanya and Susan left and went directly to take a shower. Chris came out of the shower, walked into the kitchen, and saw a note on the door. He read it and saw it was from Tanya that said his aunt was fine and she went to pick her up to bring her home. Chris got a phone call on his cell phone telling him he got the job working at Modell’s in the sales department. Chris was so excited that he was yelling and screaming for joy. He picked up the phone to call his boys and tell them the good news. After talking to his boys, he called the manager at Modell’s to see what time he was start working tomorrow. After he got the information, Chris got dressed. Tanya, Aunt Naomi and Susan walked in the door. Chris ran and gave his aunt a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Well what is all that for, nephew?” Naomi asked.

“I am just happy to see you. We were worried when we heard that you had gotten hurt,” he said.

"What is this really about?" Naomi asked Chris.

"I got a job at Modell's as a sales associate, and I start tomorrow in the morning," he said, smiling because he was so excited.

"Congratulations, Chris," Tanya and Susan both said together.

They laughed because they had said the same thing at the same time.

"Why don't we invite your friends to celebrate you getting the job?" Tanya asked.

"Okay," he said.

"I hope that means that you will stop selling drugs now that you have a job?" she asked.

Susan interrupted their conversation and said, "You have the opportunity to make your money the right way now; are you not glad?" Tanya smiled at her brother.

"Then I won't have to worry about you so much." She giggled.

Chris looked at the both of them and laughed but he did not answer their question. Chris went to call Michael, Tony, Jay and Sean. Michael was a muscular six-three, 200-pound white boy with a black man's attitude. Michael was in his last year of college and working towards opening his own Gold's Gym. He wanted Tony to come work for him once he got his life together. Tony was a twenty-year-old college dropout. He was five-eleven and 160 pounds. He only thought about partying all the time. Responsibility was not one of his favorite things in life. Chasing girls and selling drugs was his top priority. Michael, Jay, Chris and Sean talked to him all the time about doing the right thing. They kept reminding him that every time he messed up he ended right back in jail. Aunt Naomi decided that she was going to go and relax for a while and get off of her sprained foot. Naomi asked Tanya to come to her room for a few minutes; when Tanya went to her room she gave her so money and asked Tanya to take Chris shopping and buy him something nice for his new job.

"I will be happy to take Chris shopping and buy him some new clothes." Naomi was so glad that gave Tanya a hug. Tanya left out the room and told Susan and Chris to come on. Chris asked Tanya what time where they going out to celebrate.

"It will be about 8:00 p.m." He said okay so that he could let the guys know what time to be ready.

When they were getting off the elevator in the lobby, Latoya was coming in the building. They spoke to her, she asked where they were going and they said, "Out shopping; why, Latoya?"

“I just wanted to know; actually I stopped by to see you, Chris, and say congratulations on your job at Modell’s. We will be working together because I have to train you since I am one of the assistant managers.”

She looked Chris in the eye and gave him a warm smile and then she continued.

“The assistant manager is on vacation. I hope you don’t have a problem being trained by me?” Latoya asked.

“No problem at all. By the way, Latoya,” Chris asked, “would you like to go out with us tonight and celebrate?”

“Yes I would like that very much. I will see you later. What time should I be ready?” Latoya asked.

Chris told her to be ready and at his house by 7:45 p.m. Tanya, Chris and Susan preceded to go shopping for Chris. They bought a lot of stuff for Chris. It was getting to be 5:00 p.m. They decided that they had everything they needed. On the way home they stopped in McDonald’s to buy their aunt something to eat for dinner.

“I am going to go home and shower and get ready. I will be back by 7:00,” Latoya said.

“Okay I see you when you get back,” they both said.

Tanya and Chris went in the house, and Aunt Naomi was coming out of the bathroom. Chris asked her how she was feeling.

“I am fine; you don’t have to worry too much.”

Tanya gave her aunt the McDonald’s food and said, “Let’s sit down so you can eat your food.”

Naomi told her, “Thank you, my sweet niece.” That put a smile on Tanya’s face. It was now 6:30 p.m. Tanya and Chris were ready and just relaxing until the others got there. Susan rang the intercom at exactly 7:00 p.m. She was dressed in a PEPE jean outfit and some Jordans. Tanya was dressed in Sean John outfit. Sean called on the phone and said he had on a nice sky blue bad boy outfit and Jordan sneakers. Tanya could not take her eyes off him. Sean also could not take his eyes off her either. Sean asked where they wanted to go.

“How about Red Lobster?” Everybody said that sounded good. Jay asked how they were getting there.

“I have a SUV Suzuki truck; it fits seven people and I have a CD player in it too,” he said.

Everyone got in the truck. Tanya sat on the passenger side looking out the window and feeling the air. They were all enjoying the music. Sean put Usher

in the CD player. Chris looked up and noticed the television screen, and said, "Oh shit a TV. That's what's up; one day I am going to afford one of these."

Sean told them that the only Red Lobster he knew was in the Bronx in coo-city and asked if they minded going to the Bronx. Everybody was happy to be getting out of the hood for a change and going someplace else. Sean asked them if they had ever been to the Bronx before now. The only people that had been to the Bronx were Latoya and Jay. Latoya had cousins that lived in the Bronx on East Tremont.

"Jay's family lives in riverbank projects. Jay hangs out over there most of the summer sometimes," Latoya said.

"It depends on what part of the Bronx you are in because some parts have the drug dealers and people are always getting killed." Before getting to Red Lobster, Tanya noticed all the stores on Fordham Road.

She wanted to come over here and go shopping one day. Sean told her if she would like, he would bring her whenever she was ready to come. Just let him know, everyone could see that Sean was flirting with Tanya and she was enjoying it. They then began to pull in to Red Lobster. There were many cars but that did not bother them. When they all got of the truck, Michael made a joke about who was paying the check. Everybody started to laugh at what Michael said!

As they went in, they noticed the line. It was not that long so no one complained about it. They finally were seated, and given a menu. Everyone had something different and enjoyed their meal. After they finished eating and Sean paid the check.

"Is there anywhere else you all will like to go?" Sean asked.

Latoya suggested that they maybe take in a movie if it was all right with everyone. Everyone was agreed so they went to the movie theater near Red Lobster.

No one knew what to watch at the movies. It was a toss-up between the movies *The Cookout* and *Anacondas*. They decided that they would go see *The Cookout*. It was a very funny movie and they all enjoyed it. On the way back home everyone was singing R. Kelly's "Happy People." As they got near home Sean asked who lived where. He dropped Susan at her house. Everyone else lived near each other.

"Latoya, thank you for the gift," Chris said.

"You're welcome, Chris," Latoya said.

They all got out of the truck. Chris decided to walk Latoya to her building; she was happy. Jay, Michael and Tony walked home together. Jay and Tony lived in the same building, and Michael lived in the building across from them.

Sean asked Tanya if he could escort her upstairs. She was happy that he asked. Chris and Latoya were nearing her house. Latoya told Chris that she was very grateful for him walking her home. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and he returned it by kissing her on the lips. She liked it so much she just kissed him back and before they knew it, they were enjoying it.

Chris said bye and that he would see her tomorrow at work.

Back at Tanya's house, Sean walked her to her door. She kissed him again and said goodnight. He walked slowly to the elevator and went downstairs. He did not move his truck because he lived in the middle of the projects. As he was walking towards his building, he saw Chris coming back. They both stopped to talk.

"I had a nice time," Chris said.

Sean asked Chris about his sister Tanya. He wanted to know if he thought Tanya would go out with him. Chris told Sean to ask her himself. Sean decided that was what he was going to do. When Chris got upstairs, he told Tanya about what happened with Latoya. Tanya mentioned what happened with Sean. Chris told Tanya that Sean was feeling her and might ask her out.

"Oh yeah, and what else did he say, Chris?" Tanya asked.

"He did not say anything else, Tanya," Chris said. He went in his room to go to bed and Tanya went in hers.

The next day was Friday. Tanya had to work and Chris was starting his new job at Modell's. He was so excited he did not know what to do or wear. He finally decided on what to wear. When it was time to leave Chris and Tanya left out at the same time. Aunt Naomi was still in her bed resting. They both went and said goodbye to her before they left.

"I'll see you two later," Tanya said as she walked into the supermarket to punch in to begin working.

Chris kept walking until he got to Modell's so he could begin his first day at work.

When Tanya got to her cash register in the supermarket, she said good morning to Susan and the new girl Theresa.

Chris got to his new job at Modell's. Latoya was in the back. He asked a person who was working named Steven if he knew where Latoya was. Steven told him to hold on and he would get her. He went in the back to get Latoya and she came out.

"Good morning, Chris," Latoya said with a big smile on her face.

Chris returned the good morning to her and then she showed him around and started training him on what his job was. They both said they had a wonderful time at dinner and at the movies and Latoya as going to make it as easy for him on his first day.

Chris asked Latoya if she would like to go out again sometime. She replied by saying yes, just let her know when. He smiled at her and started to do his work.

Back at the supermarket, Tanya and Susan were ringing up their customers' groceries when Sean walked in. They both jumped when they saw him. He went to go get his groceries he was going to buy. When he finished he went to get in Tanya's line. She started ringing up his items; he asked her out on a date; she could not help but smile.

"I would love to go out with you, Sean," she said.

"How about tomorrow night, or will that be too soon?" Sean asked hoping that she would say it was fine and that she would go out with him tomorrow.

"It's not too soon," Tanya said.

Sean smiled and paid for his groceries and got back his change; he walked out of the store. Susan could not believe that Tanya was finally was going to have a life. Tanya could not believe it either. When it was time for the supermarket to close, Susan told Tanya that she would come by her house tomorrow to help her pick out her outfit for her date.

Tanya told her okay. Chris was getting off at 8:00 p.m. He was enjoying his first day of work and didn't have one complaint. He was glad to be working and also to be working with Latoya because he really liked her.

"Latoya, what time are you getting off?" Chris asked.

"Eight o'clock, the same as you," she answered hoping that he was going to wait for her so that they could leave together.

"Okay, I am going to wait for you," Chris said.

"That would be nice, Chris," she said as she quickly went and got her pocketbook and they left the store. While they were walking Chris asked Latoya if she was hungry.

She said yes and that she wanted to go to Burger King.

Chris was hungry and he liked Burger King better than McDonald's. They went to Burger King and ordered some burgers. Latoya asked Chris if he wouldn't mind going back to her house to eat their Burger King. Chris smiled and said he would like that. They went to Latoya's house to eat and watch some television. Her house was empty because her parents were visiting her grandparents in New Jersey because her grandmother was ill.

Latoya was a little nervous around Chris, and he could tell and he hoped it was because she liked him as much as he liked her. They ate their food and watched a movie on cable. After that it was getting late; Chris knew it was time for him to leave. He had to work tomorrow, so he kissed Latoya and said goodnight to her. She wanted him to stay longer but he said, "Let's take it slow, okay." She agreed and he left. When he got home, Tanya was sitting in her room with the door open thinking about Sean. Chris walked by and asked why she was still up. She told him that she was just thinking. He then told her goodnight and to not stay up too late. He peeked in on his aunt; she was sleeping and he bent down and gave her a kiss. Then he went to his room and took off all of his clothes, and went to bed. He called Latoya to say goodnight to her. Tanya decided to finally go to bed and get some sleep. School was starting next month for her. She was attending her second year at BMCC in Manhattan. She was so excited because she was going to have to start shopping for school soon. It was Saturday morning and it was going to be hot and humid today. Chris had to be at work at 10:00 this morning. Tanya and Susan were both off today. They were just going to chill and relax. Susan called Tanya and asked her what she was going to do today.

"Nothing much, why do you ask?" Tanya asked.

"Maybe we could hang out together, for a while before your date with Sean tonight?" Susan asked.

Tanya and told Susan to come over to her house then. Susan hung up the phone and got dressed to go to Tanya's house. Susan's parents were divorced and she lived with her mom and her two brothers Anthony and Freddie. They both were in high school. Anthony was seventeen in the eleventh grade and Freddie was younger than Susan and Anthony. He was fifteen in the ninth grade. They looked up to Susan because she was older, but if someone bothered her, they always had her back. She told her mom that she was going over to Tanya's house for a while and she walked out of the house.

"Okay, tell Tanya hello," her mother said as Susan walked out.

Aunt Naomi was getting up to go to the bathroom and make some breakfast. Tanya had already beaten her to the coffee and breakfast. Naomi was surprised; that is the type of person Tanya was. She always helped around the house with the chores or cooking. When she finished cooking, she decided to straighten up a little a bit before Susan got there. Back at Modell's, Chris was working very hard and watching Latoya. She knew he was watching her and just kept smiling. It was almost 12:00 noon. Chris was going on his lunch

break. He had an hour for lunch. Latoya's lunch break was a 2:00 because she was assistant manager. She asked Chris about their date and when it was.

"How would you like to go out tonight?" Chris asked.

"No problem," she said.

Meanwhile Tanya was getting ready for her date with Sean. It was almost time for Sean to arrive at the house. Just then the intercom rang; it was Sean. Tanya buzzed him in and he went upstairs. When he rang the bell Tanya let him in. Sean told Tanya that she looked nice and she said thank you. Then Chris came walking out of his room.

Sean said, "What's up," to Chris and he said it back. Sean asked Chris what he was doing tonight.

"I have a date with Latoya tonight." Sean then thought and asked Chris if he wanted to double date. Chris and Tanya both answered, and said that it would be cool to double date. Chris called Latoya and told her that they were going to double date, with Tanya and Sean. Latoya agreed and was ready when they got there. Chris pressed the intercom bell and Latoya said she would be right down. When she got downstairs, Chris was waiting for her by the elevator. They went out to the truck and got in. Sean had decided in the beginning to take Tanya to a nice restaurant. Sean knew about Brooklyn so he had made reservations at Junior's for the four of them. Everyone was surprised when they saw where they were going.

"I can't believe this; I heard so much about this place," Chris said.

Sean said, "The food here is good. My parents had their wedding anniversary here. My parents have been married for thirty-five years. I hope to have that one day." Sean found a parking lot to park his truck. They got out and walked to Junior's. Sean pulled out the chair for Tanya to sit down and Chris did the same for Latoya. They all enjoyed their dinner and dessert. Sean asked if they would like to take a boat ride around Manhattan. He drove to the pier where the circle line was and parked. It was a nice cool night and not too hot. Chris and Latoya walked around the boat, and Sean and Tanya just stood and looked out at the water. Sean was telling Tanya that she looked lovely tonight like always.

"Will you be my girlfriend, Tanya?" he then said.

Tanya answered by saying, "Yes I will," then they kissed. On the other part of the circle line, Chris and Latoya were talking. Latoya was telling Chris that she'd had a crush on him for a long time.

He knew but he wasn't really feeling her at the time, but now things had changed. She wanted to know how he felt now. Chris replied by saying that his attitude about her had changed, and he had feelings for her too. Latoya figured that they should see where this was going.

Chris agreed, and said that he would like Latoya to be his girlfriend and would she accept.

Latoya responded by saying yes to Chris. He hugged and kissed her. Latoya had tears in her eyes because she could not believe that Chris finally liked her. They then decided to find Tanya and Sean and see what they were doing. Latoya and Chris found them. Chris told Sean and Tanya that he and Latoya were going out. Tanya told them the same thing about her and Sean. Each of them were so happy that they wanted to celebrate. Sean went to the snack stand to see what they had. They had some beer to drink. Sean bought the beer and then they made a toast. It was getting to be 11:00 p.m. The circle line was getting ready to dock. All the passengers got off the boat. Sean, Tanya, Latoya and Chris all went back to the truck and drove home. Chris walked Latoya to her door and kissed her goodnight. Sean walked Tanya to her door and did the same. Tanya went in the house and got ready for bed. Chris came in and called Latoya to let her know that he was in the house safely.

The next day Aunt Naomi was feeling better and fixing breakfast. Chris and Tanya were surprised and happy that things were back together. Aunt Naomi had to go back to see her doctor on Monday. Tanya decided to go to church today and she called Susan to see if she wanted to go. Susan was happy that Tanya invited her to go with her to church. Susan met Tanya outside of the church. Tanya went to the church across from the house.

After church was over Tanya invited Susan over for dinner. When they got to the house, Aunt Naomi had prepared a lovely dinner. After dinner was over Susan thanked Aunt Naomi for inviting her. Susan decided to go home early, and get ready for work tomorrow. Tanya had to go register for her classes for school. Chris decided to call Michael, Jay and Tony to see what they were doing. They were going to play some basketball.

"Okay, give me a few minutes to change, and I will meet you guys in the park," Chris said. Chris hung up the phone and changed his clothes. Before he left out he called Latoya to see what she was doing. She was sitting in her house looking at different brochures of schools. She was thinking of going to college to continue her education. She really was thinking about college a lot these days. When the phone rang, she answered it.

"Hi, it's Chris; what are you doing?"

“Just sitting here looking at college brochures. I am thinking about going to college,” Latoya said.

“That sounds wonderful,” he said.

“You really think I can do it?”

“Anything that you want to do I say go for it,” he said.

“Thanks Chris for the encouragement. It means a lot to me,” she said.

“No problem, Latoya. I was just calling to see what you were doing. I am getting ready to go play basketball with the fellows.”

“Okay, call me later or come by,” she said.

“Don’t worry, I plan on coming by to see you,” he said.

Latoya hung up and continued to look at the brochures, especially the one from BMCC in Manhattan. She did not want to travel too far. She called Tanya because she knew Tanya was going there, and she wanted some advice. Tanya picked up and said hello to Latoya.

“Hi, I was just calling because I wanted to ask you something,” she said.

“Sure,” Tanya replied, “what is it?”

“I wanted to know if BMCC is a good school because I am thinking about attending college there.”

“Yes, it is a very good school and you learn a lot. Registration starts tomorrow and enrolling does too. It starts at 9:00 a.m. and ends at 3:00 p.m. If you want you can go with me tomorrow; make sure you have all the things you need,” Tanya said.

“Okay, I will be at your house at 7:30 in the morning,” Latoya replied. “Did Chris leave to go play basketball yet?” Latoya said.

“Yes about five minutes ago,” Tanya said.

“See you tomorrow morning.”

They both hung up the phone and continued what they were doing. Tanya decided to wash the dinner dishes before she went in the room. Sean called her on the phone to say hello and that he missed her. He was out of town visiting some relatives with his parents. He was coming back on Thursday, but he was not sure what time it was going to be. Tanya told him that she missed him too. She asked about his family and what were they like.

They were very smart and enjoyable people to be around and she was going to love them and they would love her, he said. Tanya was telling him that she was getting her papers together for registration at school.

“Good luck and call me on my cell when you get home tomorrow,” Sean said.

“Okay,” Tanya responded.

They hung up at the same time. Tanya then decided it was getting late so she was going to bed.

Chris was over at Latoya's house visiting her. He went after he finished playing basketball. They just sat and talked for a while. Chris knew Latoya had to get up in the morning to go register for school.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FIRST DAY OF COLLEGE

Today it was Monday morning; all the college kids were registering for school, or trying to get the classes they wanted. Latoya called Tanya from the payphone and told her she was downstairs waiting for her. Chris was still sleeping; he did not have to be at work until 10:00 a.m. today. When Tanya got downstairs, Latoya was waiting by the steps. Tanya and Latoya both spoke to each other. As they were walking towards the subway, Tanya stopped in the supermarket to see what time she had to be to work for the rest of the week. While there she saw Susan come in; they each said hello at the same time. Latoya even said hello to Susan. They told Susan they would see her later because they were going to register at BMCC. As they were waiting for the train Tanya asked Latoya what she was interested in. She was interested in taking up nursing because she had always wanted to be nurse.

“That’s cool; my aunt is a nurse at Harlem Hospital,” Tanya said.

“I like helping people and mainly babies. I really would like to work with the babies.”

“I am sure you can do it,” Tanya said. The train was coming; it was crowded. Tanya and Latoya got on instead of waiting for the next one. When they reached their stop, it was just 8:20 a.m. They decided to go get some breakfast at McDonald’s. It was somewhat cool out, being that it was morning time but it was suppose to be warm though. After McDonald’s they walked to the college; they saw that there were many kids. Tanya noticed a few from her classes from last semester. There was this girl name Natasha who lived in Manhattan with her parents and one brother. She was twenty-two years old and living on campus. She did not want to live at home even though it would have been cheaper for her. She had a job working as a manager in a clothing store. She was trying to save her money to get her an apartment. It was her second year at BMCC too.

“Hi Tanya, it is good to see a familiar face,” Natasha said.

“You too,” Tanya replied. “This is my friend Latoya; she is registering for school to take up nursing.”

“That is nice; you are going to like it here. Will you be staying on campus, Latoya?” she said.

“No, I will be traveling,” Latoya said. “I don’t mind the traveling back and forth.”

“Okay so the line you need is over there and just follow what they tell you to do.” Tanya told Latoya that she would meet her right there when they both finished registering.

“Okay girl, wish me luck; you don’t need it,” Latoya said.

Latoya went to register for school and get her classes. Everything went very well; she got the classes that were required for the nursing course. She liked that and when she finished getting her program card with her classes and all the information she needed, Tanya spotted where she was and went over.

“Hey how did it go?” Tanya said.

“It went fine and some of these classes I had in high school. They are like your started classes.”

“Did you get the classes you wanted, Tanya?” she said.

“Most of them, but that’s okay because my major is education and I need most of these classes. This is a big school and campus.”

“It is beautiful. I hope I do not get lost,” Latoya mentioned.

“Just remember most of your classes will be in the nursing building,” Tanya said

Since the two of them were finished with everything they decided to leave and go shop around; they were not ready to go home. Latoya stopped at the bank to check her account to see how much money she had in it. She was not sure if she had enough cash on her credit card. Latoya wanted to buy her a cell phone, the one with the camera.

She thought it was time; then her parents and friends could get in touch with her. Tanya and Latoya went to T-Mobile and Latoya saw the camera flip phone she wanted. When the sales clerk came over, she told her which one she wanted. Latoya pulled out her credit card and got the phone that way. She was surprised because it did have enough for her to pay with the credit card. Tanya had a cell phone before; she was thinking about getting another one. She saw a deal—buy one and get the other one free. She was going to get the other one for her brother Chris. She knew that he needed a cell phone. She mentioned to Latoya about the phone. Latoya asked her what type of phone was she interested in.

"A flip phone; I like those," Tanya said.

"I like the camera phones too," Latoya said. "I should get them now while I am out. I have to go to Sprint because they have the sale, buy one get the other one free," Tanya said.

"Okay, let's go," said Latoya.

They went to the Sprint store and Tanya got the phones she wanted. When they were finished they went home.

Tanya decided to stop in Modell's and give Chris the phone she bought for him. He was in the back when they got there. Steven went in the back to get him. Chris came out behind Steven, and was surprised to see Tanya and Latoya standing there.

"What are you two doing here? I thought you two were registering for school today," he asked.

"We finished and just thought we would stop by to see you," Tanya said.

"I thought you would like this cell phone that I bought for you. It was a sale, buy one get one free," she said.

Chris was so excited and surprised that he did not know what to do. He could not believe his sister bought him a phone.

Latoya asked him when he was getting off.

"I will be finished at 4:00 today and then I am going home to relax for a while, because I am kind of tired," he said.

"I was just asking," Latoya replied to Chris.

"Why don't you stop by about 7:00 tonight after I get some rest?" Chris replied

Latoya agreed and she and Tanya walked out. Reaching the projects there were groups of people outside sitting on the bench. Tanya and Latoya both walked through to get to their buildings.

"Tanya, I will see you later, okay," Latoya said.

"I am going upstairs to try to call Sean on his cell phone," Tanya said. When Tanya walked in the door, there was a message on the phone. Sean had called her and told her to call him back. Tanya picked up the phone and called him back.

"Hey there, my sexy woman," Sean said.

"Hi handsome. I can't stop thinking about you. I got your message, sweetie; what is up with you?" Tanya said.

"Just thought I would call and see how you were doing. I cannot wait to see you when I get back. I will be back on Thursday. As soon as I drop my parents and their bags at the house, I will come and see you."

“That will be very nice of you, Sean,” she said.

Tanya told Sean about registering today at school and that Latoya registered too. She gave Sean her cell phone number.

“Did you get a new cell phone?” he asked.

“Yes and I got one for Chris too. I wanted to be able to call you when I was lonely and missing you. I will talk to you when you return home, baby,” Tanya replied.

“Okay my lovely and sweet baby,” he said.

“Have a good night and dream about missing me and I will do the same.”

“Tell Chris and Latoya I said hello and be good. That goes for you too, Tanya,” he said.

“Do not worry, I am not going to get into trouble. You behave too,” she said.

“Not to worry, I always behave,” he said. “I am going to let you go and get some sleep, because you have to work tomorrow,” he said.

“Bye Sean, sweet dreams.”

Chris came home and decided to take a shower and relax. Aunt Naomi had not gotten home from work yet. She was getting off at 10:00 tonight and was off tomorrow. Chris had tomorrow off too so he was happy. He was about to call Latoya and see what she was doing. She asked him if she could call him back because she was on the other line with her parents. It was okay and he hung up the phone to wait for her to call him back.

She called him back and he picked up the phone because it was in his room. They had a cordless phone that you can carry all over the house. Latoya decided that she would just stay home because her parents were coming back tomorrow. She had the day off tomorrow too, and told Chris she would see him tomorrow some time and explained why. Chris decided to check and see if Tanya was home. She was in her room looking over her schedule for school and playing with her new phone. Chris knocked on her door because it was closed. She told him to come in.

“I didn’t know that you were home because it was quiet in here,” he said.

“Aunt Naomi is working until 10:00. I was somewhat tired so I thought I would take a nap. Where is Latoya at now? I thought she was going to come over for a while,” she said.

“She was but her parents are coming back tomorrow from her grandparents’ house,” Chris said.

“Oh good, you will get to meet her parents and see what they are like,” Tanya said.

“I do not know because what if they do not like me,” Chris mentioned.

"Come on, they will love you and be happy you are dating their daughter," Tanya said.

"Tanya, what was she doing tomorrow?" Chris asked.

"Nothing but going to pick up my check, and do a little shopping for school," she said. "What are you doing tomorrow, Chris?" she said.

"I am going to relax and straighten up my room and maybe play some basketball," he said. "It is almost time for Aunt Naomi to come home from work." The phone rang and it was Aunt Naomi asking what they wanted to eat.

Tanya and Chris both wanted sandwiches to eat because they were not that hungry. She even brought her a sandwich too, and a couple of sodas for them to drink.

When everyone was finished eating it was getting late. It was time to go to bed. They said goodnight and went to bed because they were all tired.

"Today is Tuesday, it is cloudy and cool a little bit."

"It looks like it is going to rain; then again maybe not." Aunt Naomi was getting up to go make some coffee and get ready to go to work. She was only working until 3:00 today. As she was going in the kitchen to make the coffee, Tanya was getting up to go in the bathroom.

"Good morning, Aunt Naomi, how are you this cloudy day?" Tanya said.

Aunt Naomi responded by saying good morning and, "I am fine. My ankle is doing very well; it does not hurt or bother me now." Chris was still in bed sleeping. Tanya was going back to bed and sleep some more because she was tired and was going to enjoy her day off. She told her aunt about the phones that she bought for her and Chris because she knew Chris needed a cell phone.

"That was sweet of you to do that for your brother, and show him that you care about him like that," Aunt Naomi said.

"I know it was because I just want him to be able to get in touch with us in case something happens," Tanya said.

"I never thought about it that way, Tanya. Are you working today?" she said.

"No, Aunt Naomi, I am off today. Is there anything special that you want from the grocery store, because I am going to do grocery shopping?" she said.

"There is nothing I can thank of right now but get what you feel we need. Oh, wait, get some Advil because we do not have any more," she said.

"Okay Aunt Naomi," she said.

"I have to go now. I will see you later when I get home from work. Bye." Tanya went back in her room to rest and lie down and try to go back to sleep

but she could not because she kept thinking about Sean. Her cell phone started to ring. It was Sean calling her early.

"Hello handsome, what makes you call so early in this bright sunny morning," she said.

"Just thought I would catch you before you went to work today," Sean said.

"I am off today so I am just going to relax, pick up my check and do some grocery shopping, and also do more school shopping," she said.

"Two more days and I will be coming back home where I belong with you and I cannot wait," he said.

Tanya asked Sean if he missed her and was ready to come back home.

"Of course I miss you; how could you ask me that crazy question? Don't you trust me and care about me?" he said.

"Yes, I know you care and miss me. I miss you too. Tell your parents I said hello, Sean."

"I will tell them when they get up; my mom and dad cannot wait to meet you."

"What did you tell them about me and what did they say?" she asked.

"They said nice things and can't wait to see you when we get home. They want to invite you over for dinner one day soon when we come back. Maybe we can invite your aunt and Chris too if they would like to come for dinner," Sean said.

"That would be nice and so thoughtful of your parents. I will make sure I do not wear anything too sexy or revealing," Tanya said.

"Stop teasing me or I will have to come home a day early and get you," he said.

"I am hoping for that to happen, but I know I have to wait until Thursday. I can wait; it is only two days away from now. I will keep myself busy until you get back here to me," she said.

"Okay, well, I am going to let you go back to sleep and I will call you later or tomorrow the same time, my sweet. Bye," he said.

Sean and she hung up the phones and she decided to go fix her something to eat. It was 9:00 and she wanted to do what she had to do early; school was starting next week. Latoya had called to talk to Chris before she left for work. Tanya went and knocked on his door. He was just getting up to go to the bathroom. He took the phone and started talking to Latoya and you could tell they both were happy to hear each other's voice. Chris was smiling very much into the phone.

"Hi Chris, how are you this morning and what are you going to do today now that you are off?" Latoya said.

"I am not sure yet because it is early and I am still a little tired and sleepy. Do you have to work this morning and what time do you get off?" he said.

"I have to work until 4:00 and then, by the time I get home my parents should be here or get here after me. I am a little nervous about them being back, because I got used to being in the house by myself," she said.

"Nothing is wrong with that," he said.

"I better get going before I am late for work today and I will talk to you later when I get home, okay," she said.

"Talk to you later, sweetie," Chris said. Chris hung up the phone and went to the bathroom. He saw Tanya in the kitchen making something to eat and asked her what was she doing.

"I am making me something to eat before I go pick up my check and do the grocery shopping for the house," she said.

"Why, would you like something to eat while I am fixing me something?"

"Yes if you do not mind," Chris mentioned to Tanya.

The day was going good. Tanya was doing the grocery shopping for her aunt. Chris decided to clean up the house a little bit. When Tanya returned to the house, Chris was just finishing cleaning the kitchen and Tanya was surprised that her brother was cleaning up.

"I just figure it is time for me to help out around here now and chip in," Chris said. "I know if it was not for Aunt Naomi you and I both would be in foster care, or somewhere else right now. I owe her a lot and I just want her to know that I love and care about her," he said.

"Believe me, Chris. Aunt Naomi knows how much we both care and love her."

"Okay, help me bring the groceries in and put them up before Aunt Naomi gets home so I can start dinner."

"Okay, my dear sister, anything you want. Anything else you need me to do?" The phone rang and it was for Chris; it was his friend Tony calling to see what he was doing.

"Hey Chris, what's up with you today? I see you are not working," Tony said.

"It is my day off today. What are you doing?" Chris said.

"I am outside standing on the corner with some people drinking and smoking my weed as I always do every day. You should come and join us since you are home," Tony said.

"No, thank you, that is not my thing. I want to make something of my life and succeed in whatever it is I want to do. I told you that one day you are either

going to end up in jail, or be shot by another dealer from somewhere else. Hold on, someone is on the other line calling me. Call me back, okay," he said.

"What's up, player?" Michael said.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Michael said.

"Just got off the phone with Tony, and he is doing his usual on the corner drinking and smoking like always. I told him if he does not stop, he is either going to be locked up or shot. I hated to say it but it might happen," Chris said. "We should all get together and talk to him. Do you think that will work?" Michael said.

"He might think that you, Jay and I are ganging up on him. I think that maybe we should ask Sean for some advice and see what he thinks," Chris said.

"I think you are right about that," Michael said.

All of a sudden, there were gunshots and people were running to take cover. Tanya looked out the window and saw two people laid out on the ground. She could not tell who they were so she just kept looking. The intercom bell rang; it was Jay. Tanya buzzed him in. When he reached upstairs he was a little shaken up. Chris and Tanya both asked him what was wrong with him because he didn't seem like himself.

"There was a shooting and two people got shot, one of them was Tony and he looks like he is hurt bad. Can't really tell though. Somebody told me it was him; he got hit in the shoulder," he said.

"I was just talking to him on the telephone a few minutes ago and then all of a sudden boom."

Everything was clear when Latoya and Aunt Naomi came home from work. But the yellow tape was up so they knew something happened. When Aunt Naomi came in she mentioned it to them. Chris told her what happened and she felt bad and said she hoped he would be all right. Everything was as if nothing happened for the next couple of days. Sean was coming back today with his parents. Tanya, Chris and Latoya were all at work today as usually. Susan asked Tanya if she heard what happened the other day.

Tanya mentioned that she did, but she didn't want to talk about it, because she was thinking about Sean and his return today.

"So Sean is coming back today and his parents are coming with him?" Susan asked.

"Yes they are and I can't wait to meet them one of these days. When we all have time to get together," she said.

The days were just coming and going; everyone was getting ready to go back to school. Tomorrow was the big day. School was starting for all college students and they could not wait either. While Tanya was finishing the dinner, the phone rang and it was Sean calling to let her know that he was back at home and could not wait to see her.

"Okay, but it can only be for a while because I start school tomorrow, and I don't want to be too tired in the morning when I get up," she said.

"Okay, it will only be for a little while that I will keep you out. Besides, I do not want you to be tired your first day back to school," Sean said.

"You are so sweet and considerate, Sean; that is why I like you so much and care about you. Tell your mom and dad I said hi and hope they are fine. Meet me downstairs in front of your building in five minutes."

"Okay Tanya," he said. "I will be there in two minutes for you. Anything you want I will get it for you and be there for you too."

"You are my knight in shining armor and I am your queen forever," she said.

"You are so crazy and sweet," he said.

"I know I can be sweet when I want to be and that makes you feel so special and wanted. Hold on, the other line is ringing, okay Sean?" she said.

"Hello, is this the Jones residence?"

"Yes it is, may I ask who is calling?" she said.

"Can I speak to Chris, please?"

"Hold on one second." Tanya switched back to Sean, and told him it was for Chris and she would see him downstairs. Chris came to the phone and it was a nurse calling from the hospital about Tony, because he had Chris's name and number in his wallet.

"Yes I am a friend of his; can I help you and how is he doing?" he said.

"He is doing fine and is stable right now but his shoulder's messed up. I am sorry I forgot to give you my name; it is Ms. Thompson. I am the nurse that is taking care of him. The reason I was calling is because I was wondering about his parents and how could I get in touch with them."

"If you hold on I will get his house number for you, but I am not sure if they are home because they were going away," he said.

"I can still try; if I don't get them at least I know that I will be able to reach you if I need too," Ms. Thompson said.

"That will be fine with me. Just let me give you my cell number just in case something happens and I am not at home when you call. Thank you for calling, Ms. Thompson, to let me know how Tony is doing. When can I come to see him?" Chris said.

“Any day you would like; visiting hours are from 2:00 to 8:00 p.m.”

Chris hung up the phone and called Michael and Jay to tell them how Tony was, and that they could go see him in the hospital. They all planned to go together to see him at the hospital tomorrow after Chris got off work. He would see them tomorrow at 3:00 and would meet them in front of his building.

Just then, his cell phone was ringing and it was Latoya letting him know she was home from work and her parents were there. He told her about the nurse calling and everything she said. Latoya asked him to come over and met her parents now.

“Okay, I will be there in a few as soon as I put on my shoes and grab my keys. Would you like me to bring anything for you or just bring myself to you?”

“How was work today without me being there with you today?” he said.

“I thought about you all day today while I was working and eating lunch, also about starting college tomorrow. I cannot wait to be going to school and continuing my education for once in my life,” she said.

“I am very proud of you, that you want to continue your education and get a better job. I never asked you what it was you want to be,” Chris asked.

“I want to be a registered nurse and work in pediatrics with the babies. I have always wanted to work with kids. Are you coming now or do I have to beg you to come over?” Latoya said.

“Please do not beg, I am coming now as soon as you hang up so I can leave my house,” he said. Chris told Tanya that he was going to go over to Latoya’s house.

“Okay, ’cause I am going to meet Sean right now. I was supposed to be downstairs in five minutes. I am going to leave out with you. Let’s go tell Aunt Naomi that we will be back in a little while.

“Chris and I are going out for a while, and we won’t be gone too long,” she said.

“Okay, because I know that school starts, and you Chris have to work. Tell Sean and Latoya I said hello,” Aunt Naomi said.

“We will tell them you said hello, Aunt Naomi. Go get some rest and just lie down and watch television,” Chris and Tanya said.

They closed the door and went downstairs to go their separate ways. When they walked out the door, Sean was standing there waiting for Tanya. She gave him a big hug and kiss and he did the same to her. Chris left them standing there kissing and hugging each other. When Chris got to Latoya’s house she was happy to see him. As he walked in her parents were in their room unpacking. She called for them to come out and met Chris, her boyfriend. When they came

out they looked at him for a while then Latoya introduced him. Her parents said hello and that it was nice to meet Chris, and that they had heard so much about him from Latoya. Chris was very pleased that her parents were nice and liked him a lot.

Latoya's father asked Chris what was his future plans were and what was he doing with his life. Chris told him that he was working at Modell's for now until something better came along. He was also thinking about maybe going to college, to take a few classes but he was not sure what he wanted to take up.

"That happens to a lot of people not sure what they want to do. Do not rush what it is you want to do; just take your time," Latoya's father Mr. Johnson said.

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson. No one has ever said that to me before, especially another adult," Chris mentioned.

CHAPTER THREE: HOSPITAL VISIT

On the way back to his building, Chris saw Tanya and Sean standing in front of the building. Tanya was kissing Sean goodnight. Sean told Chris to see to it that Tanya got upstairs safely for him, and they all started laughing because Sean made a joke. Sean left and Tanya and Chris walked in the building and got on the elevator. They took the elevator to the seventh floor and got off. Their aunt had lived there for ten years. Tanya went in her room and went to bed and Chris went in his. Chris had to be to work from 10:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m.

The next morning everyone was up in the house. Aunt Naomi had to be to work at 8:00 a.m. Tanya was starting school today and her first class was 9:30 this morning. The phone was ringing; it was Latoya calling to see if Tanya left for school yet. Chris told her no and wanted to know why.

“My first class is at 10:00 and I wanted to know if I could ride the train with her,” Latoya said.

“Hold on for a minute.”

He asked Tanya if Latoya could leave with her when she left. Tanya agreed and told Chris to tell her to be in front of the building in five minutes. Latoya replied and told Chris to enjoy his day at work and she would talk to him later when she got from school.

Chris answered her and said, “Okay, I will see you when you get home from school; enjoy your day today too, sweetie.”

“You are so good to me and I mean that, so what do you have planned for today?” she said.

“After work the guys are going to meet me, and we are going to the hospital to see how Tony is doing. In addition, when he will be able to come home from the hospital and see if his parents have been to see Tony,” Chris said.

"You know you are a good friend, and I am sure Tony is lucky to have a friend like you," she said. "Maybe after this he will finally do the right thing and stop hanging on the corner. Tell Tanya I am on my way now; I am getting on the elevator," she said.

"Okay, I will tell her; bye," he said.

When Tanya got downstairs it looked like it might rain, but it did not call for rain. Right then Latoya was coming around the corner of the building to where Tanya was standing. They both said good morning to each other and started walking towards the train station. When they reached their stop it was now 9:00 so they decided to go eat breakfast in the school cafeteria until their classes started. Tanya's class started first so she was not that far from where she had to go.

Latoya had to go across campus for her classes in the nursing building. Tanya left and Latoya decided to leave too and walk towards where she had to go. Tanya's last class ended at 3:00 and Latoya ended at 3:30 because of what she was taking.

The day went fine for both Latoya and Tanya at school. Back near the projects Chris was at work and Jay was getting ready for his classes to start tomorrow. Michael was at home thinking about starting his business in his own gym as a personal trainer. It was now 2:30 and Chris had called Michael to see if they were still going with him to the hospital to see Tony. Michael put Chris on three-way with Jay; they all said that they were going and would meet him in front of his building at 4:15.

Chris called Sean to see if he wanted to go with them to visit Tony at the hospital. Sean told Chris that he would meet them there at the hospital, because he was doing something for his parents.

"Okay, the rest of us are meeting in front of my building at 4:15 when I get off from work," he said.

"That is fine; I should be finished before then," Sean said, "'cause I am not doing that much anyway. I am just moving some things for my mom and dad."

"All right, see you later, Sean, and do not worry; you will be back in time to see my sister. I want to see Latoya and find out how was her first day of class," Chris said.

Back at school, Tanya was finishing her last class, and was going to wait for Latoya to finish class and then they could come home together. Tanya left Latoya a message on her cell phone to tell her that she would be waiting for her by the entrance of where the coffee shop was. When Latoya finished her class, she went to the entrance to meet Tanya so they could go home together.

They got home at 4:30 and went their separate ways, Tanya went upstairs to relax and call Sean to see what he was doing. Latoya went upstairs to start her homework and relax before she talked to Chris. When they got to the hospital to see Tony, he was sitting up watching television and on the phone talking to his mom.

She was telling him that she missed and loved him very much and that she was coming to visit him tomorrow. He told her that Chris, Michael, Jay and Sean had just walked in to visit him, and he would talk to her tomorrow in the morning. They asked Tony what really happened because Chris said, "I was just talking to you and told you to call me back and then we heard the shots."

"Well I sort of took some of his dope, and sold it for myself and didn't give him his money that I owed him. He told me last week that if I did not pay him, there would be trouble and I guess I should have given him his money. I do not think they caught him yet because no one is talking, and I do not want anything else to happen to my family or to me," Tony said. "Then again maybe he might decided to finish what he started, or get someone to finish it for him."

Sean asked him if he knew who did this to him and did he tell the police who shot him. He said, "I really couldn't see because he had on a mask, but like I mentioned, it could be the person whose drugs I took and didn't give them their money," he said.

"I am going to say this to you only once; I am going to say it. You need to get your life together and stop dealing drugs and partying so much because the next time you might not be so lucky," Michael said.

"We agree with Michael; you better straighten up and do the right thing from now on and make it soon. I told you to get yourself together and come work for me. I am getting ready to buy that building; I want to open up my gym. It is going to be for both men and women; the women will be on one floor and the men will be on the other. All you have to do is let me know what you want to do and I will help you out," Michael said.

"I have been thinking about that for a few days, and I think you are right, and I would like to take you up on your offer and come and work for you," Tony said. "Everybody else is doing something with their life so why not me, and now is the best time to start, especially after being shot," he said.

The guys stayed at the hospital with Tony for an hour and a half then they left and went home. Sean decided to go see Tanya so he went upstairs with Chris. Michael and Jay went home to do some work. Jay was getting his stuff together for school tomorrow. When Chris and Sean reached upstairs, Tanya was finishing some homework she had to do. Aunt Naomi was in the kitchen

cooking dinner for them, and talking on the phone to her sister Nancy who lived in New Jersey by Hoboken.

Sean and Chris both spoke to Aunt Naomi and gave her a hug. Chris went to Tanya's room to tell her that Sean was here. She was happy and had just finished her homework. She told Chris to tell him she was coming. Aunt Naomi asked Sean if he would like to stay for dinner. Chris came back and gave Sean the message.

Aunt Naomi said, "Chris, why don't you invite Latoya over for dinner with us." Chris agreed and went to call Latoya to see if she wanted to come over for dinner. Latoya picked up the phone and said hello to Chris.

"Would you like to come over to my house for dinner? Aunt Naomi asked me to invite you," he said.

"Yes I would like to come over for dinner, and I will be there in a few minutes," she said. Chris hung up the phone and went and told Aunt Naomi that she was coming for dinner.

Back at the supermarket, the manager was wondering what he was going to do, because Tanya could only work on the weekends because she was in school. Susan was working and the new girl Theresa was there once in a while because she was pregnant, and always had to go to the doctor. She did not really want to be working so far away from where she lived. She needed the money so she just dealt with it and the owner of the supermarket wanted her to do the hours that Tanya had. Mr. Smith, the owner of the supermarket, called Tanya to see if she was still going to work at the supermarket.

"Hi, Mr. Smith, how are you? I will be able to work every day from 3:00 to 8:00 for you except Monday because it is my late day," she said.

"That will be fine because Theresa does not really want to be here; she feels it is too much for her and she is too far from home," he said.

"Okay Mr. Smith, I will see you tomorrow, and enjoy the rest of your evening," Tanya said.

"Thank you, Tanya, and you enjoy the rest of your evening," he said.

Tanya hung up the phone and helped Aunt Naomi by setting the table. Latoya rang the bell to the house, and Chris went to the door to let her in. She gave Chris a hug and a kiss and walked in.

She spoke to Sean, and then went in the kitchen to speak to Aunt Naomi and Tanya. Everybody said hello. When Tanya finished setting the table they sat down to eat dinner. "Dinner was very good," Sean replied to Aunt Naomi, "and I am stuffed."

“Thank you,” Aunt Naomi said. “If you would like to take some home be my guest because there is enough left over. I have some for lunch and we can finish the rest for dinner tomorrow,” she said. Latoya and Sean both took some home to eat later or for tomorrow.

Aunt Naomi went in her room to relax, and Tanya and Sean decided to do the dishes, while Chris and Latoya sat in the living room.” When Sean and Tanya finished the dishes, they went to sit in the living room too. They were all sitting there watching the television and kissing and talking. Then it was getting to be 11:30 so Sean and Latoya both decided to leave, because Chris had to work in the morning and Tanya and Latoya both had school and work tomorrow. Sean was going to sign the lease for the building he was buying for his dad. Sean walked Latoya half way because he got to his building before she did. She lived in the same building as Jay. Jay was coming from the store when she was reaching the building to go inside to her house.

“Hi Jay, what are you doing outside at this time?” she said.

“I just went to the store for my mom to get her some aspirin; she is not feeling so good,” Jay said.

“Okay, see you later; have school tomorrow,” Latoya said.

“I am starting school tomorrow too and I cannot wait; just tired of hanging out all the time not doing anything. I do not want to be like Tony ’cause that is not cool and it is just a waste. I want to make something of my life and be able to move my family out of here one day,” he said.

“I hear that,” Latoya said. She got off the elevator on the fourth floor where she lived and walked down the hall.

Jay lived on the ninth floor. When Latoya got in, she called Chris to let him know she was in the house. They hung up and said goodnight to each other. Tanya was in bed and watching the news on the television when she heard Chris going into his room.

It was a new day and close to the weekend for everybody. Tanya was up getting ready for school and Chris was still asleep. Aunt Naomi was off. Latoya was getting ready for school at home. Jay was getting ready for his first day at school at Pace University for law. Tanya called Latoya to see if she was up and going to be ready to go to school.

“I will be ready in five minutes and downstairs in front of your building waiting for you. Is Chris sleeping or is he up?” she said.

“He is still sleeping as far as I know, Latoya.”

“Okay Tanya, see you in five.” Latoya was waiting for the elevator to go down when it stopped. Jay was on it, on his way to school; he had a 9:00 class

this morning. Latoya spoke to him when she got on the elevator and asked why he was up so early in the morning.

Jay told her why he was up so early. They both walked towards Tanya's building to take the shortcut. When they got there, Tanya was down there waiting for Latoya. She saw Jay and said hello to him. He decided to walk to the train station with them, because they were going in the same direction. School went well today for Tanya and Latoya, and Jay even had a good day in school on his first day. Michael was going to sign the lease for the building and get the key today.

It took a while but it finally happened for him. It was now 9:00 and Chris was getting up to go to work and Aunt Naomi was off today. Chris had a busy day at work today; the store was crowded, because of a sale going on. He was happy about the sale because it was a good commission for him. He had decided not to take a lunch break today because a couple of the workers were not working today, and they needed all the help they could get at the store.

Michael was on his way to see Chris and tell him the good news, and see if he wanted to celebrate with him tonight. Chris did not pick up his cell phone so Michael left a message for him to call him back. Jay was on his way home from school because he only had class until 1:00. When he got home from school, Michael had left him a message, asking him if he wanted to hang out and celebrate. Tanya was finishing her last class and called Latoya to see what time she would be finished with classes. Latoya told Tanya not to wait for her because she had one more class.

"Okay, because I have to go to work so I am leaving now."

"I will see you later then," she said.

Latoya responded by saying "later" and hung up her cell phone. When Tanya reached the supermarket, everyone was glad to see her, especially Susan whom she had not seen in a while. Everybody asked how was school and did she meet any new people. Theresa did not feel like socializing with anyone that much; she stayed to herself most of the time. Tanya tried to talk to her and get her to relax a little bit but it did not help. Theresa had a lot on her mind being pregnant and the fact that the baby's father was married and she didn't tell him that she was pregnant yet.

"Theresa, when you are ready to talk to someone you can talk to me. I will listen and see if I can help you with your problem or give you some advice," Tanya said. Everybody went back to work. Chris was getting off in the next twenty minutes so he finished his last little bit of work and then he clocked out. On his way home, he listened to his messages and heard the one from Michael.

He called Michael back, and wanted to know what time and who else was coming.

“Well I invited you, Jay and if Sean wants to come that’s fine. Ask your sister and your girlfriend Latoya to come too. Who is that girl that works with your sister that comes over sometimes to see her?” he said.

“I think her name is Susan, why?” he said.

“I think she is cute and I wouldn’t mind talking to her,” Michael said.

“I’ll call you back; let me see if I can reach Tanya and Sean and Latoya, then I will get back to you.”

“Okay,” Michael said to Chris. Chris hung up the phone and called Tanya first to see if she and Susan wanted to go out and celebrate with Michael.

Chris told Tanya that Michael liked Susan and wanted her to go out with us tonight. “I will ask her and see what she says and get back to you in a few minutes,” she said.

“I have to call Sean and see if he wants to go with us, and call Michael back and let him know who is going.”

“Hold on then, and I will tell you right now if Susan wants to go.”

Tanya asked Susan if she wanted to go out with them and celebrate Michael signing the lease for his gym he was opening up. Tanya also told her that Michael liked her and said that she was cute. Susan could not do anything but smile and blush and agreed to go out with them.

“Okay, tell Michael that she will be glad to go out with us and help him celebrate the opening of his new fitness gym for men and women,” she said. Michael had already called Sean and asked him to go and he agreed, and asked what time and who was going to drive.

“I’ll drive, just tell me where you want to go and that’s where we will go,” Sean said.

Latoya got Chris’s message and called him back, and told him that she was down and would see him when she got home. She was on her way home from school. Everybody was off and at home getting ready to go out. It was Friday night and the weekend was coming. No one had to work on Saturday or go to school so they were happy to be doing something to have some fun. Around 7:00 p.m., everybody was ready to go out. They all met in front of Chris’s building because Sean’s truck was there all the time. Anyway they got in and then they were on their way.

No one knew where they really wanted to go so Sean suggested someplace that they have not been before. He decided to drive out to New Jersey to see what was out there. He also asked if they had ever been to Six Flags Great

Adventure, the amusement park. Everyone except for Jay said no; he went there when he was about eleven years old with his cousins.

"We should go one day, have some fun and win some stuffed animals. That would be nice." Everyone agreed it would be a change. Still driving around trying to find somewhere to eat, finally they found somewhere. The food in the restaurant was okay but it was not as good as Junior's restaurant. They got in the truck and decided to go to the movies to see *Johnson Family Vacation*. The movie was funny and they enjoyed every minute of it. After the movie, they all decided to take a drive because no one was in a rush to go home. When they got home, everybody went their separate ways to their houses because it was late and they were tired.

The next day was Saturday and everybody was enjoying their day off from work and school. Tanya was getting ready to go do a little shopping for more clothes and shoes. Sean was going to take her into the Bronx on Fordham Road.

"If you don't find anything over there, I will take you to coop-city to those stores," he said.

He told her to invite Chris and Latoya if they wanted to go.

"Let me ask Chris and Latoya and I will call you back in a few minutes."

Tanya called Latoya and asked her if she wanted to go shopping in the Bronx with her and Sean and Chris.

"Yes, I would love to go with you all shopping in the Bronx. I can buy some things that I want too," Latoya said. "I hear they have nice sales in the Bronx and very nice things to choose from."

Tanya called Sean back and told him that Chris and Latoya both said that they would like to go. They met Sean downstairs by his truck. When he got to his truck, they were already standing there waiting for him. Back in the projects, everybody was outside sitting and standing around just hanging out. Jay was finishing his homework so that he could sit, relax, and play some ball. Michael was getting ready to go to his gym to try to help the delivery people put the stuff where he wanted it. He called Susan to see what she was doing and if she would go with him and help.

"Hi Susan, this is Michael. I was wondering if you are not busy if you would come with me to my gym and help supervise the work."

"I would love to help you organize your new place of business, Mr. Manager," Susan said.

"I will pick you up in five minutes," Michael said.

"Okay I will be in front of my building waiting for you," she said.

The other people standing outside in front of the building were talking when this person walked up looking for Tony. Most of the people said that they had not seen Tony or knew where he was. The person and a couple of friends said okay and then they left. One of the people that were standing there recognized one of the people who were there when Tony was shot, but he did not say anything because he did not want a problem. As he kept looking and thinking, he realized that it was all three of them that were there shooting at Tony. He just could not believe that they were looking for him. John could not think of what to do so he decided to go see if Jay was home. When he got to Jay's house and knocked on the door, Jay was straightening up his room. John told Jay what happened outside, and then he said that he was not going to say anything to anybody else.

"Okay, just keep it to yourself; when I see Chris and them I am going to tell them what happened," Jay said.

"As long as no one tells that Tony is in the hospital, right now everything is cool. The cops are still looking for the people anyway, and I am sure they are watching anybody who is selling drugs out on the street." The cops had been watching quite a few of the people, but they were not sure who the head drug dealer in charge of everything was. They were still going around asking questions about the shooting. They were also doing a stakeout because a couple of people told them what the person looked like that shot Tony.

Back in the Bronx on Fordham Road, Chris, Latoya and Tanya and Sean were shopping enjoying their Saturday out. No one had any worries or anything bothering them. Tanya saw something that she might want as Sean decided that he would buy it for her from all of them.

"Thank you, Sean," and she gave him a kiss to show her appreciation for what he did.

They spent almost half the day on Fordham Road, and still went to coo-city to shop. They really had a ball just shopping and being out of Harlem for the day with no problems or anything happening. Michael and Susan were getting things organized at the gym for the grand opening next week. Michael wanted everything to be perfect when people came to see the gym and join. Susan was happy because she was even thinking about joining the gym. Michael was pleased that she would join his gym and support him that way.

Jay was talking to Tony on the phone and told him about the people asking about him. Jay told him not to worry because no one said where he was, and that the cops were watching the people that did that to him. Tony had to think about what he was going to do when he got out of the hospital. Tony told Jay

that his parents were thinking about sending him to his aunt's house down south in North Carolina.

"I think that would be a good idea for you to go and start fresh someplace where it is safe, and your parents won't have to worry about you getting hurt again up here," Jay said. "When are you getting out of the hospital?"

Tony replied, "I am not sure; they are still taking tests for my shoulder. It's still messed up and I am still weak. They want to keep me here until I am a little better and I am able to leave from here," Tony said.

"No one really knows where you are but us," Jay said.

"And the cops; that is it."

"I am going to let you go now. I just wanted to call and see how you were doing, and I will let the rest of the gang know that you are doing fine," Jay said.

"Okay man, you are a good friend; bye," Tony said.

Jay hung up and turned on the television to see what was on and finish what he was doing. His parents were sitting in the living room watching the news. His baby sister was in her room in her crib. She was waking up because Jay heard her crying, so he went in the room to see what was wrong. He picked her up and carried her in his room to play with her. He loved his baby sister very much. He did everything for her and bought her many toys. His parents were proud that he cared so much for his baby sister.

Chris and Latoya, and Tanya and Sean were on their back to Harlem from shopping all day. They figured they would see what was going on in the hood. Chris got a call from Michael asking them to stop by the gym where he was with Susan. Chris agreed, and said that they would be there soon. Jay was going after he finished playing with his baby sister. He played with her for a long time, and then he gave her dinner and her bottle and put her down in the crib. He told his parents that he would not be out too late because he had a lot of stuff he wanted to do tomorrow when he got up.

His parents asked about Tony; how he was doing. He told them that Tony was doing fine, and should be coming home soon.

As Jay was leaving his building he saw a couple of those same guys walking by that asked him if they'd seen Tony. He took his time coming out of the building because he didn't want them to ask him anything else.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE GRAND OPENING

It was the grand opening of the gym. Michael was so excited that he did not know what to do. He had been calling Susan all day to make sure she was coming when she got off work. He wanted her to stand by him and help celebrate.

“I will be there right after work, and don’t be nervous; everything is going to be fine tonight. All of your friends are going to be there, to support you and enjoy the party. I am proud of you. You did what you wanted to do and it is going to be a huge success,” Susan said. She asked him if his parents were coming to support him tonight at the gym.

“Yes they are going to be there too. I want to make them proud of me by letting them see that I have always wanted this,” he said.

Chris and Tanya were at home getting ready and waiting for Latoya and Sean to come so they could leave. Jay was on the elevator going downstairs and the elevator stopped on Latoya’s floor so she got on. They spoke to each other and decided to walk towards Chris’s building together. They ran into Sean so they all walked together. Chris and Tanya met them downstairs in front of the building. They all got in the truck including Jay and he told them what had happened today, and that he had talked to Tony to see how he was doing.

“Tony isn’t sure when he will be getting out of the hospital,” Jay said. As Sean was pulling out Jay looked and saw those people again.

He told them not to stare too hard, but the people that were walking by were the ones that were looking and asking about Tony.

“Are you sure it was them?”

“Yes, ’cause one of them I saw running away the day Tony got shot. He didn’t have on a mask,” he said.

“You had better be careful, Jay,” Sean said.

"Do not worry, I am being careful, even though somebody else told the cops who it was; they are watching them. I cannot believe they are still walking around here like that," he said.

"I heard the cops are waiting for them to be dealing drugs or do something else out of the ordinary. I just hope they get them soon before someone else gets hurt," Latoya said.

"You are not the only one, because those assholes might decide to go either after his family or after his friends," Jay said.

"I do not think they would be that stupid."

"What does Tony plan on doing when he gets out of the hospital?" Sean said.

"His parents want him to go down south to North Carolina to stay with his aunt, and try to get his life together and do the right thing." They all said that would be the best thing for him to do.

"He needs to get out of the hood and make a better life for his self, so his parents won't worry so much."

As they drove into the parking lot of the gym, they noticed many of the cars in the lot. They all got out and went inside to see how the place looked and saw Susan being a good host. When she turned around, she saw Tanya, Sean, Jay, Chris and Latoya come through the door. She was happy to see them and knew Michael would be too. She walked over to them and said, "I am glad to see all of you. Michael thought that you all were not coming."

"We would not let or friend down like that; besides, we are boys." Everybody followed Susan over to Michael, and said hello and that the place looked very good. They were thinking about joining the gym to relax and do some exercise.

"That would be nice of all of you if you wanted to do that. I knew I could count on my friends," Michael said.

"There are some refreshments over there, even some wine if you want some." Tanya and Sean went over to get some of the wine and whatever else was over there. Jay, Chris and Latoya were walking around looking at the equipment. They were pleased at what Michael had accomplished because he did what he wanted to do. His parents were proud of him too; his mother kept telling him that she was proud of him, and he was going to do very well. When everybody settled just standing there, Sean decided to make a toast in Michael's honor for his success. Everybody clapped and congratulated Michael. He was so pleased at the turnout of the grand opening. When

everything was over Susan helped Michael clean up. The rest of the gang decided to help so they could be finished faster. Michael's parents took a cab home because it was not that far and they were tired.

"Thank you to everyone for helping me clean up and being there for moral support," Michael said. The gym was opening tomorrow in the morning so Michael was going home to get some sleep so he could be fresh and ready to work tomorrow. Michael got in his car with Susan to take her home, and the rest of the gang got in Sean's truck to go home and get some sleep.

When they got home, they all said goodnight. Chris and Tanya went upstairs after saying goodnight to Sean and Latoya with a kiss. Then Sean, Latoya and Jay walked to their buildings. When Sean got to his building, he went in and got on the elevator. Latoya and Jay kept walking until they got to their building and got on the elevator to their floor. Sean called Tanya when he got in the house to say goodnight and sweet dreams. Chris called Latoya and told her the same thing, and that he would dream about her.

The next morning Aunt Naomi decided that she was going to church. Tanya called Sean and asked him to go with her to church. Chris decided that he would go too and see if Latoya wanted to go.

They all went to church and had a very nice service. Some of the people remembered Chris because his Aunt Naomi used to take him there all the time. After church service was over Sean decided to take everyone out to dinner. He took them to Junior's for dinner because they liked the food there and the dessert. All of them had been there before except Aunt Naomi; she was pleased with the restaurant because it was clean and very comfortable. Everybody ordered something different along with dessert.

"This was very nice of you, Sean, to invite me out to dinner with you all," Aunt Naomi said.

"It was my pleasure because you did invite me over to your house for dinner; no one has ever done anything like that for me before. My family is different; they are all about themselves and their money. When my family gets together, they usually have a shouting match about who has the most money. I stay away from that by myself; my parents stay away sometimes when they are tired of my family complaining," Sean said.

"Okay now that we have eaten and our bellies are full from enjoying dessert, is there anything special anyone wants to do?" he said.

"Let's take Aunt Naomi to see the Bronx over there by coop-city with all the nice stores," Tanya said.

"I have nothing else to do today but just relax and enjoy the company of all of you," Sean said.

"That is so nice of you," Aunt Naomi replied.

"Tanya, I hope you keep him and don't let him out of your sight. That goes for you too, Chris; the two of you have very special people that care about you very much. Do not let them get away because the two of you deserve to be very happy," Aunt Naomi said.

When they got to the Bronx, Aunt Naomi was surprised at how beautiful that part of the Bronx was looking. They were nearing coop-city when they all said that it was nice and quiet there, and it looked like a nice place to live.

Sean decided to find a parking space and park so they could get out and look at the little shops that were there. They saw everything that was in the sections of coop-city. When they got back in the truck, Sean decided to drive over to the mall and walk around over there. Some of the stores they went in were very crowded and no one bought anything. Aunt Naomi bought a few things out of the supermarket.

Sean decided that he wanted the new Jordan's that came out this month. Chris decided he would look too and see what they had in case they had something he wanted. They all went in and looked around to see what the store had. Chris, Sean and Latoya bought some Jordans. Tanya did not buy any but Sean told her to pick out a pair that she liked and he would buy them for her. After they finished paying for everything, they left and went into the store that Aunt Naomi was in to see how she was doing. She was looking at televisions; she wanted another one for her room. The one she had was old she'd had it for about ten years, and it was time to get another one for her and one that was cable ready.

"I see that you are looking at those televisions; do you see one that you like in here that you may want to buy?" Sean said.

She pointed at the twenty-five-inch television that was cable ready. Aunt Naomi couldn't believe the television was cable ready. "I will come back to get it another day when I am out this way with all of you," Aunt Naomi said.

When everyone was finished shopping, they left to go back to the hood. It was quiet in the hood but the cops were around still looking for the people that shot Tony and that other kid who did not make it. They got out; Aunt Naomi went upstairs to change and relax. Chris and all of them waited a few minutes.

Sean mentioned the television and said that he was going to buy the television for their aunt. Tanya and Chris did not know what to say but thank you.

"I am going home to change and go back and get the television," he said

"Okay, we will all go back with you for the ride," they all said.

"Be ready in like fifteen to twenty minutes and meet me by the truck," Sean said.

"Okay, we will," everybody agreed. Chris and Tanya went upstairs and Latoya and Sean walked towards their house. Chris and Tanya were waiting downstairs for Sean and Latoya to come. Sean and Latoya were coming around the corner when Chris came from the store buying gum and candy. They all went back to the mall in coop-city to get the television for Aunt Naomi.

"I am going to have to thank you for buying that for my aunt. She is going to be so happy and like this so much. It is going to make her cry happy tears," Tanya said. They all climbed back in the truck to go back to coop-city, laughing and talking about living in the hood, and all of the struggles that they had gone through over the years. When they reached coop-city and parked the truck, they all got out to go get the television for Aunt Naomi.

They went in the store to purchase the television set that Aunt Naomi wanted. They paid for the television set, headed for the car, and got in. On their way back home, Tanya saw a hotel on the right side. When they got back to the hood, they took the television upstairs to give it to Aunt Naomi. She saw it, cried, and told Sean, "Thank you very much."

Chris and Sean set the television up for her and took the other one to the garbage. When they finished they just hung out for a while until it was time to go home. It was back to school tomorrow for Latoya and Tanya. Chris had to work and Sean was going to work out at the gym. Tanya wanted so bad to tell him what she was thinking but she did not. School was going good and the summer was over so now it was wintertime. It was getting close to Tanya's birthday; it was in one month and she could not wait.

She had not decided what she wanted to do for her birthday. She started thinking that it was time for her and Sean to take their relationship to a new level.

Latoya was sick so she was not going to school today. Tanya went to school and one of her teachers was not there so the class had a substitute. Tomorrow they were going to have an exam so she was going to have to go home and study. Tanya figured that before she and Sean took the next step she should go see her doctor. When she got home, she made an appointment with her doctor for a physical to get birth control pills. Her appointment was for tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. That was good because she only had one class and that was in the morning. She was off work so that was good for her, because she

did not have anything else to do. Aunt Naomi came in from work and was tired so Tanya told her that she would cook.

"Thank you, Tanya, it is just that I am tired and need to go rest for a while," she said.

"You do not have to ask or thank me, Auntie, because I love helping you out," she said.

"Is Chris here yet? I did not hear him getting up this morning to leave," Aunt Naomi said.

"I have not seen him since I have been here," Tanya said.

All of a sudden, Chris came in the door from work, happy because he got his paycheck today. "Did you speak to Latoya at all today?"

"She is sick and didn't go to school today because of the way that she is feeling. You should call or go over there to see how she is doing. I am sure she would be glad to hear from you; it will probably make her feel a little better," Tanya said.

"I am going to go call her right now and see if she needs anything," he said.

"Chris, I see you really care about her by the smile on your face," she said.

"I do; I have never felt this way about anybody before," he said. "Do you think that something is wrong with me?"

"No, you are a very handsome guy and any girl would be honored to be your girlfriend," she said.

"Chris, there is a whole lot of things about you that some guys don't have."

"Thanks Tanya," he said.

The next day after Tanya's class she had her doctor's appointment. She was a little nervous about it. Latoya was feeling better so she decided to go to school that day. Tanya told Latoya that after her class she had an appointment at the doctor's office. Latoya asked if it was something wrong with her and did she want her to go with her.

"No, I just want to go on birth control pills because one day I might decide to go all the way with Sean," she said.

"You know I was thinking about that too 'cause Chris and I have been together for almost six months now. I do not want him to think that I do not want to have sex."

"Chris will not think that; he knows that when you are ready then it will be special."

"I need to make me an appointment at the clinic that I go to. I will call them right now and see when I can go in. I will talk to you later, Tanya, and let me know how it was."

Everything went all right at the doctor's office with Tanya. The doctor explained the process about the pills to her. After Tanya left the doctor's office, she went to have the prescription filled and then she went home to see if Aunt Naomi needed her to cook dinner or what. Aunt Naomi brought dinner from outside. Therefore, Tanya went in her room to do her homework and call Latoya to let her know what happened.

"It's okay, nothing to be alarmed about. If you want, when you go I will go with you for moral support; it is just a physical exam," she said.

"That would be nice, Tanya; my appointment is next Tuesday at 1:00," Latoya said.

"That is okay. I do not have class or have to work so I can go with you. Chris is here; would you like to talk to him?" Tanya said.

"If you do not mind, Tanya. I just want to say hello and see what he is doing," she said.

"No problem, Latoya. hold on a minute." Tanya started calling Chris to come to the phone to talk to Latoya. When he got to the phone he asked her how was she feeling and what was she doing.

"I am fine; just relaxing and trying to get ready for school tomorrow. How is work going, and what is going on?" Latoya said.

"Nothing much is happening and Steven is still acting crazy as ever. He is filling in for you while you are in school," Chris said.

"You know I was thinking about that and I am going to work after school. I miss working and seeing you while we work. I am going to call the boss tomorrow and ask him about letting me come back," she said.

"That will be nice; then I can see you more often," he said.

"You are so crazy, Chris, and that's why I care about you so much. You are so cute and handsome and all mine," she said.

Susan was getting off work soon and was going to call Michael to see what he was doing while he was at work. Michael picked up his phone and said hello and Susan responded by saying, "Hello, how are you, my man?"

Michael smiled and started to laugh, and said, "What are up to, my sexy thing you?"

"I was just thinking about you and thought I would call and check on you. I am getting ready to get off soon and thought I would come by there when I get off," Susan said.

"That would be nice. I want to see you and kiss you I have missed you," he said.

“Okay, so I will be there in about fifteen minutes to come see you,” she said.

As Susan was getting ready to get off, Theresa was feeling bad because she was still having morning sickness and she was three months pregnant. Her boss told her to go home and get some rest. There were two other girls coming in to work anyway.

Jay had school today and was on his way home from school when it started to rain. It did not last long because when he got off the train where he lived it was not raining. As he was walking towards his building, he saw those people again but the only thing was that the cops were watching the people. They were dealing drugs and trying to sell some to an undercover cop. Then all of a sudden the cop pulled out his badge; then the other two guys tried to run, but they were caught by the other policemen that were there. Everybody was standing outside watching when the people were being arrested, and some of them were happy. Jay was going upstairs to call everybody, tell them what happened, and also call and check on Tony.

When Jay called to check on Tony the nurse said that he was in surgery because his shoulder was still hurting him. Also one of his tests came back and a piece of the bullet hit his lung, and they had to try and see if they could get it out before it became serious.

Jay thanked the nurse and called the gang back to tell them what was going on with Tony. Everybody told Jay thank you for letting them know what happened and what was going on with Tony. Tony's parents were upset because he had to go to surgery again and wasn't sure if he was going to make it. Jay told Tony's parents that the cops had arrested the guys that shot Tony. His parents were happy but still worried about Tony and what was going to happen.

When the cops took the guys back to the jail they asked them all kinds of questions about the shooting. Each of them claimed that they had nothing to do with the shooting. They put one in each interrogation room to see who would rat on the other one. No one was talking because they claimed that they weren't there the day the shooting occurred. After the guys wouldn't talk they had the witnesses come and ID them. They put the guys in a line-up to see if everybody that saw what happened would say that they were the ones that were shooting.

All of the witnesses ID'ed them and then they left the jail. The cops booked the guys and put them behind bars for a long time. They had to wait until tomorrow to see the judge and then they were going to be transferred to Riker's Island.

Back at the hospital Tony was still in surgery and his parents didn't know anything right now. A couple of the cops that were on the case went to the hospital to see how he was doing and to tell his parents that they caught the guys. When the parents told them that Tony was in surgery and what was going on, they figured they would hang around in case Tony didn't make it. Jay decided that he was going to go to the hospital to wait with Tony's parents so that they wouldn't be alone. When he reached the hospital and the floor that Tony's parents were on he saw the police standing there too.

He didn't know what to think at first until Tony's mom told him why the police were there. The hours were getting longer for the doctor to see if he could get the piece of the bullet out that hit his lung. Jay decided to go to the chapel and say a prayer for Tony and ask God to forgive him, for the bad things that he did that put him in the hospital. Tony's mother decided to call his aunt in North Carolina to let her know what was going on and that they got the guys that shot him. She was happy about them catching the guys but not the fact that he was back in the operating room. Jay came out of the chapel to see if anything happened or if there was any word. Tony's mom got off the phone and told her sister that she would call her back.

Dr. Harris came out and told the parents that he made it through surgery and they got the bullet, but he was critical and they were going to have to keep a close eye on him. His mother asked what Dr. Harris meant.

"Well, the next forty-eight hours are critical so we really don't know anything right now. All we can do is hope and pray that he pulls through this," Dr. Harris said.

"Thank you Dr. Harris," Tony's mother said.

They decided to leave and go home and get some rest. Jay left too and also the police left to go back to the police station. Jay called everybody and told all of them that Tony was in critical condition and it would depend on what happened in forty-eight hours.

The next day was some kind of holiday and nobody had school. Tanya went into work Chris and Latoya also went to work. Susan had the day off so she went to help Michael at the gym. Sean went to work out at the gym early so that he could see Tanya later. Jay was just going to stay home and relax and check on Tony's condition to see if there were any changes. He heard his little sister so he went to see if she was all right. His little baby sister was playing in the crib with the mobile toy that was on the top of the crib. He liked watching his baby sister playing. His mother came in the room.

CHAPTER FIVE: TONY'S FUNERAL

Dr. Harris called Tony's parents and told them he didn't make it through the night, because his lung gave out on him. Tony's mother dropped the phone and screamed; her husband came and wanted to know what was wrong. When she told him he just paused and couldn't move. The doctor asked if they could come to the hospital and identify the body of their son Tony. Mr. Stevens took the phone and said that they would be right there. Before they left to go to the hospital, Mr. Smith called the police station, and asked for the police that were handling the shooting, to tell them that Tony died early this morning. When they got to the hospital to identify the body of Tony, Mr. Stevens called Jay to let him know that Tony didn't make it.

After they called Jay, Mr. Stevens called his wife's sister to let her know also. Jay was so upset that he could barely speak to tell his parents that Tony didn't make it. Jay called Michael and told him about Tony and said that he had to call the rest of the guys. He called Chris.

"Hey it's me. I just thought I would tell you that Tony didn't make it. He died sometime this morning," Jay said.

"Oh my God!" Chris said. "I can't believe this shit; that was my boy and he is gone. I'll talk to you later; going to try and get my work done." Chris called Latoya and left her a message on her cell phone and he called Tanya too. When he hung up from leaving a message on Tanya's phone he called Sean to tell him.

Sean couldn't believe it and just couldn't finish his workout. When Tanya, Latoya and Chris got off of work they planned to go over to Tony's parents' house. Michael and Susan were going to go too. They all met at 4:00 to go over. Aunt Naomi decided to go too. Even Jay's parents went to let Tony's parents know that they would be there for them and help with whatever they needed.

Mr. Stevens had to call the rest of the family to let them know about Tony. They had to make funeral arrangements but couldn't think about that right now. Their house was full of people in the building and friends of Tony's.

At the police station the cops were charging the guys that shot Tony with first degree murder and manslaughter. Everyone was glad that those three were off the streets and hoped they would be for a long time. Tony's parents finally made the funeral arrangements, they had his wake for two days and the funeral the next day. Monday and Tuesday was the wake from 4:00 to 8:00 and the funeral was Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. Tony's parents were happy that he had a lot of friends that cared about him including their parents. All of his parents' family came down to be there.

The two days of the wake were very upsetting for Tony's mom; she couldn't believe her son was gone and was never coming back. On the day of the funeral everybody was getting ready to go to the funeral. The funeral was at the church across the street so most of the family and friends walked to the church. The church was packed with family and friends and even people that weren't that close to Tony. Everybody shed tears that day because it was a very sad day for all of them. After the lovely service they all went to where Tony's parents were going to bury him someplace in New Jersey. The dinner was at the parents' house. Some of the family stayed at the house to get everything together before they got back. When everyone returned to the house they all started thing about the good times with Tony and how much he meant to them. Sean went over to Tony's parents and sat down next to them.

"Hi. Tony was a wonderful person and friend to all of us and we are going to miss him very much. He was like a brother to me," Sean said.

"Thank you Sean. Tony talked about you a lot and said that you were one of his best friends," Tony's father said.

Tony's mother was laughing and remembering the good things about her son with the rest of the family and friends that were at the house. People started to leave about 8:00 so that Mr. and Mrs. Stevens could try and get some rest. Some of the family stayed at the house with them while the others went to a hotel. They didn't mind because they were going to hang around for a while and be there for Tony's parents. They thanked everybody for coming and hoped to see them again one day.

Chris, Latoya, Michael, Susan, Jay, Sean and Tanya all decided to go to a club for a little while and try to relax. When they got to the club there was a booth in the corner that they all sat at. They each had at least three drinks apiece. Sean didn't have too much to drink, because he was driving and didn't

want to get in a accident, or get pulled over by the police. When they decided to call it a night and go home they got up and walked towards the door. All of them got in the truck and just sat there and listened to the music that was playing on the radio.

When they got home Latoya, Jay and Sean walked towards their buildings while Tanya and Chris went in their building and went upstairs. Tanya went in her room and pulled off her clothes and then she went to the bathroom. When she came out she went to check on Aunt Naomi. Aunt Naomi was sleeping with the television on. Tanya closed the door and went in her room and got in the bed. She set her alarm for 9:00 a.m. because she had a class at 10:00 a.m. She checked to see if all her homework was done and it was.

Chris was in his room trying to get some sleep because he had to work in the morning. He just couldn't bring himself to close his eyes and go to sleep, because he just kept thinking about Tony and everything that they had gone through. He had tears in his eyes a little bit and then he just decided that being sad wasn't the way to go. Tony would always be a part of him and he would never forget about their friendship.

The next morning everyone was up getting themselves together for work or school. Tanya, Latoya and Jay were getting ready for their classes at school. Michael was getting ready to go to work at the gym and Susan was going to work at the supermarket. Chris was getting ready to go to work at Modell's. When Susan got to the supermarket everybody was talking about Theresa and the fact that she went into labor last night. She was taken to Harlem Hospital at about 10:00 p.m. She had a baby girl; six pounds, thirteen ounces. Her parents were there at the hospital with her and they were happy that mom and baby were doing okay. Susan called the hospital to see what time were visiting hours. She thought she would go visit Theresa and be a friend to her, so she would know that someone besides her parents would be there for her. Susan called Tanya's cell phone and left her a message about Theresa. Tanya called Susan back when she had a break from classes.

"Hello," Susan said.

"Hi it's me Tanya. I got your message about Theresa having a baby girl. I am sure she is relieved that she finally had her baby," Tanya said. "What time is visiting hours; maybe I will stop by after I come from school today," Tanya said.

"I will call you back and let you know because I was thinking about going too," Susan said.

“Maybe we can go visit her together at the hospital,” Tanya said. “Just call me and let me know. If I don’t answer leave a message on my cell phone and I will get it, Susan,” she said.

“I will do that if you don’t pick up. What time is your last class so I will know?” Susan said.

“My last class is over at 3:30 p.m. I will be home at least by 4:30 hopefully,” Tanya said.

“Okay Tanya, I will talk to you later on when you get home so we can go visit Theresa.”

At the hospital Theresa’s parents were looking at the little baby through the glass window of the nursery where all the other babies were. They were wondering if Theresa had given the baby a name already. When they went into Theresa’s room her mom had asked her what was the baby’s name.

“Mom, the baby’s name is Alicia Jasmine Brown. She is named after dad’s mother and grandmother,” Theresa said. Her stepfather was so happy that she named his granddaughter after his mom and grandmother. The nurse brought Alicia into the room for Theresa to breast-feed her now. Before Theresa could feed the baby her mother grabbed her so she could hold her granddaughter. Her mom was sitting there with a big smile on her face and so was her father.

Chris was trying to get some of his work done, but people just kept asking him to help them like if there was no one else working in the store.

Chris called for Steven to come from out the back and help him out there. Steven came out to help in the front, because it seemed that most of the people that worked in the front were either out to lunch or out sick. Latoya was coming to work after school. Chris couldn’t wait for her to get there.

Sean decided not to go work out today he was going to surprise Tanya and pick her up from school. Tanya was surprised to see Sean’s truck at the entrance when she and Latoya were coming out of the school. Sean told both of them to get in and he would take them home.

“You two are not going to believe this but, remember the girl Theresa that works with me at the supermarket?” Tanya said.

Sean and Latoya both replied, and said yes to Tanya.

“Well she had her baby last night at Harlem Hospital. The ambulance took her there about 10:00 last night. From what Susan was saying she had a baby girl and her parents are happy. Susan and I are going to visit her today at the hospital. I hope you don’t mind, Sean.”

“No, we can meet up after if you want to, Tanya,” Sean said.

“You know, Sean, I don’t know what I would do without you,” Tanya said.

"I hope nothing because I am not going to be able to do anything if you are not by my side," he said.

"That is so sweet how you two care about each other like that," Latoya said.

"Oh Sean, if you don't mind can you drop me by Modell's? I have to go to work now for a couple of hours and earn some money," she said.

"Latoya, I don't mind dropping you by your job; after all we are friends and friends look out for each other."

When Latoya got out of the truck in front of the store she could tell it was kind of crowded. Chris was so happy to see her he didn't know what to do. Latoya took her books to the back and put them in her locker. When she finished she came out and asked Chris what was there to do and where did he want her. He asked her to go to one of the cash registers so maybe the lines would move a little faster.

At the gym it was crowded today with both men and women. Michael was in his office doing paperwork and talking to one of his employees. Michael's phone was ringing and it was Susan calling to tell him she was stopping at the hospital to see Theresa and the baby. She would see him after she left from there and said that she missed him.

Michael hung up the phone and continued his meeting with his employee that was in his office. When the meeting was over he went out in the gym part to walk around and see how everyone was doing. There was one person working out that seemed like they needed some help. Even though there were trainers there this one person working out wanted Michael to help her.

She was a tall female with long hair. She came every day to work out so she could check out Michael all the time. Michael didn't know that she was watching him all the time that she was there. He went over to her to see if she needed any help with anything.

"Yes I just need you to help me pick up these two weights and put them on the bar," she said.

Michael helped her do that and he couldn't help notice how well her body was shaped. He tried not to look so much but he just couldn't resist. She gave him a smile and said thank you and told him her name.

"My name is Keisha Benton and this is my third week here working out in the gym. Do you work out here and work here too?" Keisha said.

"My name is Michael and I am the owner of this establishment. I hope you have been enjoying yourself working out here," Michael said.

"I have no complaints; everything is just fine and I hope to be doing a lot more here," she said.

Michael went back into his office to finish his work and make some calls. He could see Keisha doing her aerobics with the other ladies out his office window. He just kept looking at the ladies and didn't see Susan when she walked in his office. Susan came in the office and said hi. Michael jumped because he didn't see her come in.

"Did I scare you, Michael? I am sorry; you look like you were in deep thought a minute ago," Susan said. "Is there anything that you would like for me to do for you while I am here, Michael, so you can take a break or go for a walk and get you something to eat, because you look like you need a break, my sweetheart?" she said.

"I think I will take you up on your offer and go get something to eat for lunch," Michael said. "Would you like for me to bring you something back to eat, Susan, or drink?" he said.

"No, thank you, Michael. I am fine, not hungry right now. Just go and get you something and hurry back," Susan said.

Keisha saw Michael coming out of his office and decided to walk over to where he was standing, also looking to see if Susan was watching or paying attention to her.

Keisha winked at Michael as he was going out the door and smiled. Michael smiled back at her. Keisha decided to go get in the sauna for a while and relax. The sauna was a few doors down from Michael's office. About 8:00 p.m. everyone was starting to leave the gym. Susan was getting ready to leave to because she had to work in the morning and she had to be there at 8:00 a.m.

Michael wanted to take Susan home but he knew he couldn't really leave because he didn't trust anyone that well to lock up. He put Susan in a cab and gave her a kiss goodbye and told her he would call her when he got home. Michael went back inside to see who was still in the gym working out in there. Some of the people working in there started getting ready to leave because it was about 8:30 at night. Michael decided to walk around the gym to see how many people were still in there.

As he was checking all the rooms and showers he almost forgot the sauna. Then he noticed that everyone was leaving so he figured he better go and lock the door before he went to check in the back because he didn't want anyone to come in there and try to rob him or steal the equipment. After he locked the door he went back towards the sauna as he opened the door he noticed that someone was still in here getting dress.

"Hello, is anyone in here?" he said.

Keisha answered, "Yes, I just got out of the sauna and now I am getting dressed."

“Okay because everyone else has left,” Michael said. When she came around the corner the only thing she had on was her bra and a thong. Michael tried not to look but he couldn’t help it. Keisha was practically throwing herself at him. She walked up to him and touched him on the arm and Michael felt a chill. He tried not to look and was going to walk out so she could finish getting dressed. Keisha grabbed his arm and told him not to leave.

“I’m sorry but I have a girlfriend and I care about her very much,” he said.

“If she cared she would be here with you right now but she is not. What’s the matter; are you afraid to be alone with me here while I am half dressed?” she said. “Don’t worry; I will not bite you or try anything.”

Michael thought she was serious when she said she wouldn’t try anything. He stood there thinking that she was going to finish getting dressed. Michael decided to sit on the bench and wait. She picked up her sweats and shirt and walked over to the bench. She put her clothes on the weight bench. She thought she would see how much Michael cared about Susan.

She went and sat next to him and started rubbing his leg Michael tried to get up but he couldn’t; she had a good grip on his leg. She then decided to stand in front of him and touch his groin. When she did that he moved her hand away but it wasn’t working at all. Michael was going to just grab her arm and make her leave by taking her to the door. She beat him to the door and locked it and wouldn’t let him out. She told him that the only way he was leaving was if he could unlock the door without looking at her up and down.

Michael walked to the door without looking at her but after he unlocked the door she grabbed his hand and put it on her breast. She then grabbed his groin and wouldn’t let it go Michael couldn’t move. Keisha had unzipped his pants and started playing with his dick. The next thing Michael knew she had it in her mouth. Michael couldn’t believe that was happening.

“Look Keisha, I told you I have a girlfriend, and I am not going to cheat on her,” he said.

It was too late, because she was really doing him and doing it good because he just kept moaning and groaning like he was in heaven. Keisha knew what she was doing and wasn’t going to stop either.

Michael then started to lick and kiss her breast and make her feel good. It was getting good to her because then she started calling his name Michael so many times, telling him not to stop. Michael just went along with it because he couldn’t make her stop. She then pulled a condom out her purse and gave it to him and told him to fuck her and do it rough.

Michael put the condom on, and did what she asked. He couldn't believe the things that she was doing to him and making him do to her. She told him that she had wanted him since she had started there at the gym but didn't know how to do it until now.

Michael was out of breath and felt ashamed and unfaithful to Susan. He went and took a shower and made sure Keisha left so he could lock up the place. Michael couldn't think straight all the way home because he had just cheated on Susan. When Michael got home he called Susan and told her he was home.

"Okay Michael, have a goodnight sleep and I will talk to you in the morning," Susan said. Michael hung up the phone and went to bed. Michael tossed and turned all night long thinking about what he did and how he was going to handle it.

The next morning Tanya didn't have any classes so she decided to go to work at the supermarket. Theresa was at home with her baby and taking it easy because of her long labor. Chris was off today and Latoya had three classes, and then she was going in to work. Jay was not feeling well so he stayed home.

Michael was up getting ready for work and thinking about Susan and what happened at the gym. Michael called Susan this morning to see what she was doing today. The phone rang and Susan picked up.

"Good morning, my sweet thing, and what are you doing this morning?" Michael said.

Susan told Michael that she was off today and she was going to clean up a little. When she finished she was going to come over to the gym and help him out.

Michael was quick to say, "No, that's okay, you don't have to help me today."

Susan wanted to know why but didn't push the issue any more. Susan and Michael said goodbye and hung up. Michael grabbed his keys and briefcase and left for the gym.

Susan called Tanya to see what she was doing today.

"I am working today since I don't have any classes," Tanya said.

Susan told her that she was going to straighten up in her room, and then go by the gym to help Michael. Everybody had plans today to do some things that were important to each of them.

Sean called Tanya to say hello and that he missed her. He wanted to go out tonight after she got off from work, if she wasn't tired.

Tanya agreed, and said that would be fine because she hadn't seen him in a few days, because they both had been busy. It was now 11:00 a.m. and Susan was just about finished her cleaning.

Michael was at the gym in his office and noticed that the gym was kind of empty at the moment. There weren't too many people there at that time. As he looked again he saw Sean coming through the door. There was no sign of Keisha as of yet.

Michael went to say what's up to Sean and see what he was up to. Michael asked Sean if he could talk to him for a few minutes before he did his workout. Sean told him it was no problem because they were friends.

Michael started explaining to Sean about what happened with Keisha, and said he knew it was wrong but he didn't know what to do because he really cared about Susan. As the two of them were talking they heard the doors open; when they turned around it was Keisha coming through the doors.

Michael tried not to look but he couldn't help it. He told Sean to look because that was she that just came through the door.

Keisha waved at Michael but he didn't wave back at her.

Michael and Sean went into the office to discuss Michael's problem some more and to see if he could tell him what to do. Susan was coming in the door while Michael and Sean were still in the office. Keisha was watching Susan's every move she was making.

Susan went behind the desk for the receptionist and started answering the phones. Keisha walked over to the desk as Susan was calling Michael's office to let him know she was there. Michael picked up and was surprised to hear Susan's voice on the other end of the phone.

"Hey handsome, it's your girl Susan and I just wanted you to know that I am here in the gym doing my secretary job for you," she said

Michael looked out his window and saw Susan behind the desk and Keisha standing there too. Michael got scared so he asked Sean to go out there with him. Sean and Michael walked out of his office and walked over to Susan.

"Hello, Susan," and gave her a big long kiss in front of Keisha.

"Hey Susan, how are you doing today and you look good," Sean said. Susan answered Sean back and said thank you and that she talked to Tanya this morning.

Keisha was still standing there watching them, especially Michael. Susan asked her if she needed help with something and could she help her. At that point Michael and Sean both had a weird expression on their faces as if to say "oh shit!"

“You know what, you can’t help me, but Michael can and he knows how he can help me,” Keisha said.

By then Sean was trying to get Michael to leave and go get some air with him before all Hell broke loose. Michael could barely move from where he was standing, because he knew it was about to be a big fight up in the gym.

“Michael, what is she talking about that you can help her and I can’t?” Susan said.

Michael couldn’t answer Susan at that moment. Sean told Michael to take Susan in his office and talk to her instead of out where everyone could see and hear.

Keisha replied and said, “Why don’t you just come out and tell your girl Susan that you and I had sex in the sauna last night after everybody left.”

Susan turned around and smacked Michael and then she punched Keisha in the face. Keisha reacted back and the next thing you know she and Susan were fighting and everybody was watching all of this.

Sean pulled Susan off of Keisha and took her back to the office, while the security guard grabbed Keisha and told her to leave.

Michael was so embarrassed he didn’t know what to say or do. He went into his office to see if he could talk to Susan but it didn’t work, because she didn’t want to talk to him. Sean offered to take Susan home and try to get here to calm down a little.

Sean called Tanya on her cell phone to see what time she was getting off.

“Hey babe, what’s up, and what time do you get off?” Sean said.

Tanya responded and said, “I will be finished in about twenty minutes; why?”

Sean told Tanya what was going on and said he had Susan in the truck with him.

“Stop by here and come and pick me up; maybe I can talk to her and calm her down before she does something drastic and stupid,” she said.

Tanya and Susan reached the supermarket about 1:30 and pulled up in front. Tanya came out and got in the truck. Sean decided that he would drive out to Pennsylvania to give Tanya some time to talk to Susan and for her to calm down. Tanya asked Sean if he knew about this.

“No, when I got to the gym Michael asked me if he could talk to me; that’s when I found out,” he said. “While we were standing there talking she came in the gym. She waved at Michael but he didn’t wave back.”

Susan was saying how she was hanging around the desk and just kept looking around and looking at her. “Then she said I couldn’t help her but

Michael could. That's when I just slapped Michael and punched her then we just started fighting and everybody in the gym was watching. If it wasn't for Sean I think I would have killed the two of them," Susan said.

Susan was crying and very upset because she couldn't believe what Michael had done; neither could Tanya and Sean.

Susan's cell phone was vibrating. When she looked at it to see who was calling her it was Michael so she didn't pick it up. She let her voice mail pick it up and she would listen to it later. She was enjoying herself with Tanya and Sean. Michael kept calling her but she would not pick up her phone.

Chris was in the house just relaxing and watching the television and trying to call Latoya to see what time she got off. Latoya answered her cell and told Chris that she was getting off in an hour.

"Okay, I will come pick you up so we can go out to eat and maybe a movie or just hang out," he said.

Jay was sitting in his house listening to music and playing games on his Xbox. He thought about calling Chris to see what he was doing. He called Chris and asked him what he was up to today.

"I am waiting for Latoya to get off and then we are going to go get something to eat and go to the movies," Chris said.

Jay responded, "Okay, I'll talk to you later," then Jay hung up.

Sean was driving and then he thought, "Why don't we call the guys and see if they want to hang with us. Maybe the more friends around Susan the better she will be."

Susan agreed with Sean and said that would be fine because she needed all the friends she could get. Tanya called Chris and told him to ask Latoya and then call Jay too.

"I'll call you back in five minutes," Chris said. Chris hung up and called Latoya and Jay. They both agreed, and then Chris called Tanya back and told her that everybody said okay. Sean went to pick everybody up.

When they got in the truck, Jay asked about Michael. No one said anything until, "I don't want to see Michael; he is a fucking dog," Susan said. Then Susan started telling Chris, Latoya and Jay what happened at the gym and they were all upset and angry at Michael for cheating on Susan.

They rode out to Pennsylvania and went shopping, out to eat and enjoyed a movie. Susan was happy that they all went with her to have fun and make her feel better.

When they got back to the hood, Tanya asked Susan if she wanted to stay at her house for the night.

“That will be nice; at least I will be around a friend,” she said.

After Sean dropped Tanya, Susan and Latoya off he decided that he was going to talk to Michael.

Tanya told Latoya that she could spend the night, too, if she wanted to stay. The girls went upstairs to Tanya’s house and had a nice time laughing, talking and doing each other’s hair.

Michael was still at the gym doing last-minute work and thinking about Susan. Somehow he didn’t see that Keisha was still there and so were a couple other people. He walked out of his office to go to the bathroom.

Keisha spotted him and walked over to the bathroom. She listened to see if there was anyone else in there with him. Michael didn’t see or hear her until he finished his business and looked up. Keisha cornered Michael in the bathroom and started touching all over him and pulling at his pants.

Sean was parking the truck in a spot. Sean, Jay and Chris got out of the truck and went inside but they didn’t see Michael anywhere. They started walking towards his office to see if he was in there. Chris heard some noise coming from the bathroom, and asked Sean and Jay if they heard that. They both said yes, and opened the door to the bathroom.

When Sean pushed the door Michael was standing there with his pants down and his dick in Keisha’s mouth. The guys were shocked at what they saw. Sean closed the door and they all walked away and went into Michael’s office.

When Michael came out of the bathroom and Keisha was behind him, she left and went home. Michael walked into his office and to his surprise, Sean, Chris and Jay were sitting in his office. Michael thought they had left after what they saw. Chris and Jay really didn’t say anything to him. Sean cursed and said he couldn’t believe what he just saw.

“I can’t believe you would do this to Susan; she is a nice female and you really fucked that up by having sex with that girl Keisha and then doing it again.”

Back at Tanya’s house, as they were talking, Susan asked if anyone knew anybody that knew that girl named Keisha.

“I don’t know her or anybody that does,” Tanya said.

Latoya then replied by saying that she lived in her building on the third floor and she had a bad reputation of sleeping with everybody’s boyfriend or husband.

“I don’t like her because she thinks she is all that and all of the other girls are supposed to kiss her ass and be happy,” Latoya said.

“What it is to her is she feels by sleeping with Michael, you get to find out that he is a cheating asshole and dog,” Tanya said.

“I am going to be honest with you and you have to decide what you want to do. She is not going to stop what she is doing, especially with Michael. I know her cousin because we went to school together, and I used to date her brother before he moved away to California,” Latoya said.

“If I were you I would have kicked her ass,” Tanya said.

Sean was calling Tanya to see how Susan was doing and to tell her what happened at the gym.

“I can’t believe that shit; he did it again and you three saw this,” Sean said.

“What does he have to say this time?” Latoya said.

Tanya told Sean to find out more and call her tomorrow.

“Goodnight, my sweet boo, and I will dream about you all night,” she said.

Tanya told Susan and Latoya what happened again at the gym tonight. Susan was real pissed off. Tanya and Latoya told her she should just forget about Michael and move on. Susan agreed, and decided that she needed to move on and just forget about Michael all together. She knew it was going to take her a while to forget about him. The girls decided that tomorrow they were going to all go out and get their nails done and maybe their hair. It was going to be a girls’ day tomorrow.

“If I see her on the street or anywhere near the supermarket I am going to kick her ass,” Susan said.

The next day when the girls got up, Aunt Naomi was fixing breakfast for everyone. Chris was just getting up and heard them laughing and carrying on. He went to the bathroom to wash up and then went to sit down for breakfast. He was surprised to see that Latoya had stayed over. The girls finished eating and did the dishes and cleaned up for Aunt Naomi. Aunt Naomi was happy that they wanted to help her so then she could relax. When Susan turned on her cell, the voice mail came on and told her that she had ten messages from Michael.

“I think it is time for me to call Michael and tell him how I feel,” she said.

“Are you sure that is what you want to do right now?” Tanya said.

Tanya gave her the telephone and watched her dial Michael’s number to the gym. Michael picked up and said hello and then said hello to Susan.

“Look Michael, this is not a social call or a nice one. I am just calling to tell you that we are finished and I don’t want you calling me anymore. I don’t want to be with someone who cheats not once but twice,” she said.

Michael was shocked that she knew about what happened in the bathroom. Susan told him goodbye and hung up.

Tanya, Susan and Latoya grabbed their purses and went shopping for the day. As they were walking Latoya noticed that Keisha was coming towards them. At first Susan and Tanya didn't see her. Keisha spotted them and walked up to them and had the nerve to say what's up to Latoya. When she looked at Susan and rolled her eyes, Susan punched her in the face again and started fighting. People on the street were stopping to see what was going on. Susan was kicking her ass so bad that nobody wanted to break it up. These two guys decided to break up the fight because it was enough.

Susan didn't have any scratches on her face or anywhere else on her body. Susan really kicked her ass in the street and embarrassed her in front of people. Nobody could believe what happened in the street and what they saw and Susan felt good that she whipped Keisha's butt real bad. Susan felt good about what she did and didn't have any worries at all. The girls went to do their shopping and have a good time while shopping.

Latoya spotted Keisha's cousin Tina walking down the block to go see Keisha.

"Oh shit! There goes Keisha's cousin Tina. I guess she is going to see Keisha," Latoya said.

"Hey Latoya," Tina said.

"What's up, Tina; what brings you through the hood today?" Latoya said.

"Keisha called and said that she just got into a fight with some girl. I am not going to fight with anybody, because I know how she is and if I know her, she probably fucked with some female's boyfriend," Tina said.

"You said that right."

"Tina, this is Susan and she is the one that was fighting with your cousin," Latoya said.

"How did this happen? Tell me, then that way I will have both sides of the story," she said.

Susan told Tina what happened both times and just said that she couldn't take it. It was just that she really cared about Michael, and he fucked that up by sleeping with Keisha in the gym he worked at and owned. Tina couldn't believe it; especially the two of them getting caught in the bathroom by his friends.

"Okay, thanks for your side of the story; now I can go talk to her. I keep telling her to stop messing around with guys that have wives or girlfriends before she gets hurt bad," Tina said.

They left Tina and continued on their way.

When Tina got to Keisha's building there were some guys standing in front of the building talking to Keisha's brother.

"I am going to find out what happened to my sister," Paul said. When he turned around he saw Tina standing there getting ready to go to his house.

While Tina and Paul were waiting for the elevator, Tina told Paul what Keisha told her and also what Susan said. Tina told Paul that she talked to Keisha so many times, and told her to leave other females' guys alone before she got hurt. When the elevator came they got on it. When it reached the floor they got off and went in the apartment.

Keisha was still upset and crying about what happened. She told Tina that she wanted her to fight Susan and whip her ass.

"You are my cousin and I love you, but I am not getting in the middle of your shit with another girl over their guy. It's not that he approached you but you threw yourself at him. Then you followed him in the bathroom and cornered him so that he couldn't leave out of there. His friends caught him in the bathroom with you with his pants down and his dick in your mouth," Tina said.

Paul couldn't believe what he was hearing from Tina.

"How I know all of this is because the girl who's boyfriend you fucked with and whipped your ass is a friend of Latoya's," she said. "I ran into her on my way here and I asked Latoya if she knew anything, and she introduced me to the girl whose name is Susan. She works in the supermarket because I remember seeing her the last time I was here."

Tanya, Latoya and Susan were almost finished shopping and enjoying themselves. Susan's cell phone rang; she looked at it and it was Michael calling her. She just let her voice mail pick it up and kept talking to Tanya and Latoya.

When they got back in the hood no one was actually standing in front of the building or by the store. Tanya couldn't believe that no one was outside at that time of day. They went back to Tanya's house to chill for a while and listen to music. Aunt Naomi was still at work. She had to do a double so she called Tanya and left a message on the house phone.

Chris and Jay came upstairs from playing basketball in the park. When they saw Susan they mentioned how everybody was talking about how she beat up that girl named Keisha. Susan's cell phone rang again. She looked at it to see who it was. This time it was Theresa calling her to see how everything was going at the supermarket since she wasn't back yet.

"I will probably be back next week because my mom is going to watch the baby for me, so I can come back to work and make some money," Theresa said. "It's hard not working and no one to help with the baby."

"Okay, I will talk to you later and hope you will bring the baby so we can see her," Susan said. "Tanya and Latoya said to tell you hello."

Tanya, Susan and Latoya tried on their clothes that they bought from the stores. Tanya even bought a couple pairs of shoes and a few pocketbooks to go with her outfits. Sean called Tanya to see what she was up to today and if she had any plans for later. He wanted to go to the movies and get something to eat.

“I would like that because I need a break from all of this drama that is going on with Susan and Michael,” she said.

CHAPTER SIX: HURTING THE ONE YOU LOVE

Michael was at the gym trying to get some work done in his office. He kept thinking about Susan and how he had hurt her like that. He knew that what he did was wrong and it was too late to fix it. Susan was never going to forgive him again or even take him back. He called Sean to see what he was doing today or tonight. He picked up his phone to call Sean at home. Sean's mother answered, and told Michael to hold on. Sean came to the phone and said what's up to him.

"I was just wondering what you were up to today or maybe later," Michael said.

"I am going out to the movies and dinner with Tanya for some time alone," Sean said. "Did you call Chris and Jay to see what they were doing tonight and if they want to hang out?" he said.

"No, I did not try to call them and see what is up. I really want to talk to Susan but she will not answer her phone," he said

"Do you blame her?" Sean said. "You really fucked up and hurt her bad, man. She may never forgive you or want anything to do with you anymore. She is really hurt and trying not to think about what happened. Right now she is hanging out with Tanya and Latoya to get her mind off of you. The best thing for you to do is let it go and give her some time; maybe she will forgive you eventually. Just don't keep trying to force her to talk to you and forgive you right now," Sean said.

"I know you are right but I am in love with her so bad, and I know that I messed that up. Believe me that it's all I keep thinking about every day. How much I have hurt her and miss her being in my life for now. I am just going to have to back off and just wait to see what happens," Michael said.

“That’s all you can do right now is just wait and see what happens between the two of you. Well I will talk to you later, man; have to go and pick up Tanya now at her house,” he said.

Tanya was getting ready for her date with Sean. Susan and Latoya were getting ready to leave and go home. Chris and Jay walked in and said what’s up to the girls.

“Sean and I have a date tonight, and he will be here soon,” Tanya said.

Jay asked Susan and Latoya what they were up to. Both of them said, “Nothing, just going to go home and relax for work and school tomorrow.”

Sean called Tanya to see if she was ready and that he was downstairs waiting for her. Jay offered to walk Susan home so she wouldn’t be alone. Chris asked Latoya to stay for a while so they could talk and hang out.

Jay was walking Susan home when they passed the gym where Michael worked and saw him inside working out on the weight bench. They just kept walking, but first Susan looked to see if maybe Keisha had found her way into the gym after her beat-down today. Jay was laughing when Susan told him what she did to her when they were going shopping. Jay couldn’t believe his ears.

When they got to Susan’s block and in front of her house, Susan noticed that her parents’ car wasn’t there. Susan invited Jay in for a while to hang out with her.

“Okay, just for a while because I have school in the morning and I am a little tired,” Jay said. Susan and Jay listened to music and watched a couple of movies. Susan talked to Jay and asked him how long had he known Michael, and had he also cheated on other girls. Jay told her that Michael hadn’t really had a steady girlfriend in a long time.

“I still care about him but I don’t know if I can just up and forgive what he did. It’s not like he did it once but he did it twice. I am going to talk to him eventually but I can’t right now because I am still upset with him,” she said.

“I know that it is going to take a while for you to get over what he did, and I understand. No one is pushing you to talk to him; when you are ready then you do it. Well I should be going now because I do have school tomorrow and my first class is at 9:00 a.m.,” Jay said.

“Okay Jay. I will be seeing you around.” She closed the door and locked it when Jay left. Susan went into her room to get ready for bed, and was thinking how she was going to handle the situation with Michael one of these days.

Tanya’s alarm clock went off at 7:00 a.m. Friday morning. It was hot today but soon it was going to be fall, and it was going to get cold. She only had two

classes this morning and she liked only having two on Friday; then she could start her weekend off early. She called Sean this morning to wake him up and to see what he was doing today. He answered the phone still half a sleep this morning.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hey babe, it's me Tanya; did I wake you up? I am sorry, I just wanted to hear your voice and say good morning to you and that I was thinking about you."

"That was so nice of you, sweetheart."

"Oh by the way, don't make any plans for tonight because I have something planned for us," she said.

"Okay," Sean said. "Can I have a hint about what it is you have planned?"

"No then it won't be a surprise and I like giving surprises."

He said, "I will talk to you later. I have to get up. My first class is at 9:00 this morning." Sean told her he will see her later but first he asked her if she wanted him to pick her up.

"That will be nice." She wanted him to take her somewhere before she went home. They both said goodbye. Then Tanya called Latoya to see what time was her first class.

When Latoya answered the phone, she was up and getting ready because her first class was at 9:00 a.m.

"Hello this is Latoya," she said.

"Hey girl, I was just calling to see what time is your first class today," Tanya said.

Latoya replied, "It is at nine. I am getting ready now."

"Okay then we can leave together because my class is at nine too. Besides I need to ask your advice about something and see what you think."

"Okay no problem. That's what friends are for and we are friends, and I hope I can help you with whatever it is," Latoya said.

Chris was still sleeping because he didn't have to be to work until 10:00 today. Aunt Naomi was off today and was going to enjoy her day off. Jay was getting ready for school too. Michael was already on his way to work and hoping today would be a better day for him. Sean decided to go work out at the gym for a little while before he had to go meet Tanya after her classes.

Latoya met Tanya in front of her building so they could leave together. Tanya told Latoya that she was thinking about having sex with Sean, but she was a little nervous and wanted some advice or what she thought.

"If I was you and that's what you want to do then go for it. You and Sean have been together for almost a year now and he is still with you after all this time," Latoya said.

"Thanks Latoya, for giving me advice and being a friend to me. My brother is lucky to have you in his life, and when are you and Chris going to take that step and have sex?" she said.

"I really don't know because neither one of us have talked about it yet. Why are you asking, Tanya?" Latoya said.

"I am asking because I know that Chris really cares about you, and he probably feels that he wants to but he doesn't want to push you into anything," she said.

"I have been thinking about that a lot lately, Tanya, but I just haven't brought it up to him," Latoya said.

"Would you like for me to find out and talk to him about it, Latoya?" Tanya said.

"That would be nice of you, Tanya; after all, you are his sister," she said. "I appreciate that we both can talk about stuff like this to each other. Besides, you are like a sister to me, Tanya," she said. "I am the only child and I need someone to look up to and talk to," she said.

When they got to school they each went to the building their classes were in. Latoya was enjoying her nursing classes; she was going to be going into the hospital soon to be doing an internship.

Sean parked his truck outside of the gym and got out and grabbed his bag and went in. Michael was in his office on the phone talking to one of his brothers about what he did to Susan. His brother Jeff was shocked that he did that and asked him if he was still seeing Keisha.

"I haven't seen her since the night that Susan stopped by," Michael said. "Susan won't even except my phone calls. Besides, Jay told me that Susan whipped her ass in the street when she saw her."

"Do you blame her for what she did, Michael?" his brother said.

"No I don't blame her because. I would have done the same thing she did."

"Okay well I have to go now and try to do some work."

"Oh yeah! When are you coming to visit Mom and Dad," Michael said.

Jeff replied, "I was thinking about that; my vacation starts next week so maybe I'll come up. Denise is off too and maybe we will bring the kids so they can see grandma and grandpa and their uncle."

Jay was just finishing up his last class and was happy that it was Friday. Sean walked in and started to do his workout and lift some weights. There wasn't too many people in the gym this early.

Michael hung up from talking to his brother, and looked out his office window and spotted Sean working out. Michael got up from his desk and went out to the gym part to say what's up to Sean. Sean stopped working out for a few minutes to talk to Michael.

"What's up, man? Haven't seen you for a while. I thought that you were avoiding me, too, because of what happened," Michael said.

"No, I just thought I would relax for a while because I had been working out every day. Before you ask, Susan is doing all right and trying to get her life together and maybe try to talk to you," Sean said. "Tanya told me that Susan was doing all right and working and keeping busy. She just isn't ready to talk to you yet. You have to give her some time and don't push," he said.

"You're right, I can't push her because then she may never forgive me and talk to me ever again. How are things with you and Tanya?" Michael said.

"We're fine. She wants us to go out tonight; she has a surprise for me," he said.

Tanya had already made the reservations for the hotel room for tonight and tomorrow. She even had her nice outfit for the occasion. Sean had no idea what he was in store for, but he hoped it would be fun.

Latoya was having a quiz in her class and thinking about Chris at the same time.

Sean and Michael were still talking about Susan and Tanya. Someone came through the door at the gym. Michael and Sean were not paying attention. It was Susan coming to talk to Michael. She walked over to them and said hello to both of them. Michael was surprised to see her and he didn't want to say the wrong thing. Susan asked him if she could talk to him.

"Yes, we can go in my office and talk," he said.

As they were leaving Sean went back to his workout before he had to shower and leave to pick up Tanya. Susan told Sean to tell Tanya that she said hello and will talk to her or see her at work. Susan followed Michael into his office and took a seat on the couch in his office. Susan started by telling him that she was very upset and hurt that he did that to her. She asked him if he was still seeing her and what his feelings were towards Keisha. She needed to know before she decided to take him back or forgive him for what happened.

"I have no feelings for her and I don't want to be with her because I am in love with you. I am not just saying that to make you forgive me or take me back. I have been feeling this way for the past five days since the thing with Keisha happened," he said. "They say you always lose the best thing and may never get it back. You were the second girlfriend that I had and was with for

a long time. My first girlfriend left me for her baby's daddy because he wanted her back, and bought a house for them and asked her to marry him. That hurt me and I promised that I would be careful with my next girlfriend but I fucked that one up. I just don't know what to do but say I am very sorry to you, and I don't blame you if you never want to see me again, Susan," Michael said.

"I have been doing some thinking and I talked to Jay. He told me that if I care about you and have feelings for you, then I should try to work this out with you. I am willing to try to work things out with you, but you have to promise that you will not cheat on me again," Susan said.

Back out in the gym Sean was in the locker room taking his shower so that he could go pick up Tanya at school. He finished his shower and got dressed checked his cell phone messages to see if Tanya had called. She hadn't called yet so he figured she was still in class. As soon as Sean picked up his bag to walk out of the gym, Tanya was calling him to see where he was. Sean picked up his cell phone and said, "Hey babe, what's up and what are you up to?"

"Nothing, just waiting for you."

"I am leaving now. I will be there soon. Meet me by the front gate, okay," he said.

"I will be there waiting for you, my sweet thing," Tanya said.

Tanya had to go home first and get her stuff so she told Latoya to just wait with her and get a ride from Sean. Then she would not have to ride the train by herself.

Latoya called Chris to see what he was doing at work. Chris told her that it was going slow and that he was just doing some inventory for the new stuff that came in. Latoya asked Chris what he was doing later after work.

"As of right now I don't know because I haven't thought about it. Is there something you have in mind or want to do tonight since it is Friday and neither one of us have to work tomorrow or Sunday?" Chris said.

"I will let you know so don't worry and enjoy the rest of your day," Latoya said. When Sean drove up Tanya and Latoya walked towards the truck. Tanya opened the door and told Latoya to get in. She told Sean that she needed to go home first, and while they were going there she told Latoya that she could catch a ride home.

"No problem, I don't mind dropping Latoya off. Oh! By the way, I saw Susan. She stopped by the gym to talk to Michael. She told me to tell you hello and she will be talking to you," he said.

"I wonder how that conversation is going with those two."

"I am sure we will find out soon what happened."

As Sean was getting closer to Latoya's building she told him that he could drop her off on the corner because her building was in the middle. Latoya got out and told Tanya she would talk to her later and said bye to Sean.

He pulled off and drove to Tanya's building. When he pulled up she told him not to turn the engine off, because she was coming right back down; she just needed to run upstairs to get something.

"I will be right here waiting for you, boo," he said.

Tanya leaned over and gave him a kiss and opened the door to get out. She went in the building and got on the elevator to her floor. Aunt Naomi was inside watching her stories and fixing dinner. Tanya spoke to Aunt Naomi and told her that she was spending tonight and Saturday night out, if that was okay. Aunt Naomi told her that it was okay and to just be careful.

"I will be careful. Don't worry, I will call and let you know everything is okay," Tanya said.

She went in her room and picked up her duffle bag from off her bed. She walked out her room and went to give Aunt Naomi a kiss and said, "See you Sunday sometime and I love you."

Tanya closed and locked the door behind her. When the elevator came she got on and went downstairs to go get in the truck with Sean. When she reached the truck Jay was standing there talking to Sean telling him about his conversation with Susan that he had about Michael. Sean told him that Susan came to the gym today to talk to Michael so he left them getting ready to talk. Tanya reached the truck, and Jay spoke to her and asked how she was doing.

"Okay, I will talk to you two later; have to go do some homework and study for a test on Monday," Jay said. They both said bye to Jay and pulled off. Sean asked Tanya where they were going and how far was it.

"We are going to go out to the Bronx and go the Red Lobster to eat and then someplace else."

Sean drove to the Bronx and he enjoyed the ride with Tanya because they talked and listened to music. He was just happy to be with her by himself.

When they got to Red Lobster it wasn't that crowded because it was kind of early but that didn't bother the two of them. The waiter came to seat them and he gave them a few minutes before he came to take their order.

Tanya was looking at the menu to see what she wanted and so was Sean. Tanya ordered the seafood with the shrimps and Sean ordered the steak and some wine.

Sean and Tanya had a nice quiet dinner and listened to the music and danced. When they finished eating Sean asked Tanya what they were going to do now.

“Well we are going to go to my surprise so let’s go.” They got in the truck and drove to the ECONO Lodge motel. Sean was surprised that they were going to a hotel. Tanya told Sean that it was time for them to take their relationship to another level, because it had been almost a year and she was ready to move forward.

Sean was in shock because he thought he would be the first to make that move. It didn’t bother him that Tanya took charge and did everything. Tanya sent Sean into the office of the motel to get the key. The reservations were under Tanya’s name. The clerk gave Sean the key with the room number on it.

Tanya got out of the truck with her duffle bag and followed Sean to the room. When Sean opened the door they both walked in and closed the door.

Tanya grabbed Sean and kissed him for a long time. They stayed like that for a while and then finally broke apart from each other. Sean checked the room out and couldn’t believe his eyes that this was finally happening. Tanya told Sean that she would be right out; she was going to slip into something more comfortable.

“Okay baby, I will be right here waiting for you,” he said.

Tanya closed the bathroom door and changed into her sexy Victoria’s Secret lingerie. When she opened the door Sean turned around and was speechless and he nearly dropped the wine that he was trying to open for the two of them.

“Damn babe, you look so hot in that you are making me sweat all over,” he said.

Tanya responded by saying, “I hope you like part of your surprise so far and hope you enjoy the rest.”

Michael and Susan were still talking to each other in his office. Susan decided that she would give Michael a second chance. Michael asked her to go out to dinner and a movie with him.

“That will be fine; what time would you like to go?” she said.

Michael told her, “I am free now because one of the other guys can lock up for me tonight.”

Susan and Michael left out of his office to go to his car. On the way out Michael told one of the guys named Shawn to lock up for him tonight.

“Okay no problem, Michael; you don’t have to worry about anything,” Shawn said. Shawn was a guy that also grew up with Michael and the rest of the gang.

Michael opened the car door for Susan, and waited for her to get in before he closed the door. Michael got in and they drove off to go get something to eat.

Chris came home and Aunt Naomi had just finished cooking dinner. Chris asked Aunt Naomi how was her day and what did she do all day on her day off.

Back at the hotel Sean and Tanya were sitting on the bed watching pay-per-view movies. Tanya was rubbing Sean's back and kissing it. Sean was enjoying every bit of the treatment that he was getting from Tanya. She licked him all over his body and did even more to him. Sean couldn't believe what was happening at that moment. Sean decided to give Tanya the same treatment that she was giving him, because this was a special night for the two of them and they both wanted to make their first time a special one.

Chris called Latoya to see what she was doing at home. Chris picked up the phone to call Latoya and went in his room. The phone was ringing and then Latoya picked up.

"Hello Chris, what's up and what are you doing?" she said.

"Nothing, just thought I would call and see what you are doing now."

"Nothing, just relaxing because my parents had to go out of town to my grandmother's house again, because she slipped and fell on something and hurt her ankle."

"Sorry to hear that about your grandmother. I know how it feels when someone you love has an accident. Your parents really are very special to care about your grandmother," Chris said.

"That's my dad's mother and he cares about her a lot and will do anything for her," Latoya said.

"So, you are in the house by yourself with nothing to do," he said.

"Yea I am just trying to straighten up a little bit and relax. If you want you can come by and visit for a while with me," she said.

"Maybe I will just do that," Chris said. "I will call and let you know in a while, okay. Now I need to go and eat something first and find out where Tanya is 'cause I haven't seen her," he said.

"Okay, then I will let you go eat something and get back to me. Bye handsome," she said.

"Bye, my sexy thing; you are my cute teddy bear," he said. Chris hung up the phone.

Back at the hotel Sean was still massaging Tanya's back and the rest of her body. Sean put some type of massage oil on Tanya to make her feel good.

Tanya was moaning because it was feeling good. She turned around so that Sean could massage the front of her and have fun with her. Sean kissed her neck and went down to her toes. Tanya was starting to moan more and more every minute.

Sean decided to lick and suck her nipples and Tanya couldn't believe what was happening and told Sean not to stop. Sean went down on Tanya and stopped at her vagina. She was so excited that she was calling Sean's name. He couldn't believe that he was finally going to make love to his girlfriend, and he wanted it to last and be a special night that neither one of them would forget.

Tanya wanted to do something that she had heard other girls talk about or that she read. Tanya started rubbing Sean's dick and making him harder than he was, and that really made him hot and hard.

"Lay down, Sean, and let me take care of you for a few minutes," Tanya said.

Sean switched places with Tanya and she licked his dick and held it in her hand. She was so surprised at what she was doing. She put it in her mouth again and then Sean started to moan and he was enjoying every bit of it. Tanya sucked and sucked until Sean was so hard.

Sean told her to stop because he wanted to make love to her. Sean pulled a condom out of his wallet and was getting ready to put it on.

"No, I want to feel you, not the rubber. Besides, I am on the pill so nothing is going to happen unless I forget to take a pill. I have thought about everything already so just make love to me, baby, now," Tanya said.

Sean started making love to Tanya and they were in another world all by themselves.

Michael and Susan finished eating at the restaurant they were at; then Susan told Michael to take her to his house so they can just relax and talk some more.

Chris decided that he wasn't going to call Latoya back; he was just going to pop up. Chris told Aunt Naomi that he was going to go over to Latoya's house for a while and visit.

"Okay Chris, have fun and tell Latoya I said hello and hope to see her again soon," Aunt Naomi said. "She is a nice young lady and I see that she makes you happy, and your sister is happy with Sean. I hope she is having fun and enjoying herself," she said.

"She went somewhere, Aunt Naomi?" Chris said.

"Yes, her and Sean went away for the weekend and will be back on Sunday," she said.

“Okay, I am leaving now. Don’t stay up too long, Aunt Naomi, because I know that you need your rest because you are working tomorrow and doing a double,” Chris said.

“Thanks Chris, for caring so much about your aunt,” she said.

Chris closed the door behind him and locked it. Chris got on the elevator to go down and saw his aunt’s friend from church on the elevator. Chris spoke to her and she said hello and asked about Aunt Naomi.

“Aunt Naomi is fine; she is upstairs watching the television and relaxing because she has to work tomorrow and she is doing a double,” he said.

Jay was upstairs in his house studying for his test he had on Monday in one of his classes. His baby sister was starting to crawl and stand up a little bit. She crawled into Jay’s room and he was watching her because she tried to stand up. He picked her up and started to play with her for a little while because he needed a break.

His mother came to see where the baby was and when she looked she was surprised to see Jay holding her and playing with her. She always smiled at him when he played with her. Jay played with his sister for almost an hour until she got tired and was ready for a bottle to go to bed. Jay decided that he wanted to feed her and put her in the bed. His parents were happy that he wanted to help with his sister. After Jay fed her and changed her diaper and put her in the crib to go to sleep, he went back to his studying.

Chris reached Latoya’s building and rung the intercom buzzer. Latoya went to the bell and said, “Who is it?”

“It’s me; can I come up to see you?” Chris said.

Latoya buzzed Chris in and waited for him to ring her bell. She had on her robe with a sexy gown. She had forgotten that Chris was coming because after he didn’t call her. She thought he wasn’t coming to see her.

Chris got off the elevator and rang the doorbell so Latoya went to open it and didn’t bother to put her clothes back on.

When she opened the door Chris looked and said, “If you are getting ready to go to bed I can see you tomorrow then.”

“No! Don’t go. After you didn’t call I thought that you weren’t coming so I put my nightie on to be comfortable. If my outfit is bothering you I will go put my clothes back on, Chris.”

“No it is not bothering me. You look sexy and very attractive in that,” he said.

“Thanks for the compliment,” Latoya told Chris. “My parents aren’t here so I can dress and walk around any way I want to,” Latoya said.

At the hotel Sean and Tanya had finished the first round and were going to go for round two. They were drinking some more wine and watching a porno movie this time. Then Tanya was ready to go again while watching the porno.

Sean was surprised that he wasn't tired and was getting ready to go again for round two. He had to go to the bathroom before he continued; the wine was getting to him. Tanya was just in a daze because she couldn't believe that she finally was going to the next level and it was good.

Chris and Latoya were watching DVD movies and eating popcorn and laughing. Latoya was going to try and make the first move with Chris but she didn't want him to think that she was a fast-ass female.

Chris bent over and kissed Latoya and then things just started to heat up. Chris and Latoya finally took their relationship to the next level. It was a great experience for the two of them. Chris couldn't believe what had just happened with him and Latoya.

"I am sorry; I didn't mean to rush you in any way," Chris said.

"Don't apologize. I wanted it to happen just as much as you did," Latoya said.

Chris kissed Latoya and then he knew it was getting late so he decided to leave and told her he would see her tomorrow.

Michael and Susan were still relaxing and it was getting late, so Michael said, "I know it is getting late so if you are ready for me to take you home I will.

"I am not ready to go home yet so I guess I will be staying here with you tonight if that is all right with you," she said.

"I have no problem with you staying with me overnight."

Jay was still playing with his little baby sister.

Chris was leaving Latoya's building when he ran into Tony's parents, and he asked them how they were doing, and if they needed anything to just let him know. They told him that they didn't need anything right now but if they do they will call him.

"Okay, I will be waiting for your call because you are like my family too." Chris went upstairs and called Latoya to let her know that he was in his house.

Aunt Naomi was in her room watching her television. Chris turned on his radio to listen to some music.

Sean and Tanya had finally gone to sleep after the wonderful night that they were having.

It was Saturday morning and it was raining out today, but it was going to clear up later in the afternoon. No one had anywhere to go today but Michael, since he owned his own business. He decided to go in a little late and spend

more time with Susan before he took her home. Sean woke up early and went out to buy some breakfast for him and Tanya before she woke up. Sean ran out the door and drove to McDonald's to get something to eat.

Tanya heard the door close and look to see Sean leaving. She got up and went to the bathroom and then came back to get in the bed. Tanya turned on the television to see what was on the movie channels. She called the house to see if everything was all right. Chris picked up the phone and said hello to her. He asked her if she was enjoying herself and having fun.

"I am having the time of my life and I feel like I am in heaven," Tanya said.

Chris then told her what happened between him and Latoya and that he couldn't believe that it was the best thing that could have happened in a long time.

Tanya told Chris that she was happy for him because it had been a long time since he had been with a female or wanted a serious relationship.

Tanya asked Chris where was Aunt Naomi and if she was all right.

Chris told her that Aunt Naomi was still sleeping and he was going to let her sleep as long as she wanted to.

Jay was up getting him some cereal for breakfast so he could try to study some more. His parents were still sleeping and so was his baby sister.

Susan tried to call Tanya on her cell to see what she was doing and how things were going. Tanya answered her cell phone and told Susan that everything was fine and that she and Sean were having a good time together. Sean still hadn't come back from McDonald's yet getting breakfast.

Susan told Tanya that she had spent the night with Michael at his house. Things were starting to get back to normal with her and Michael. Michael was coming back in the room from the bathroom while Susan was talking to Tanya.

"Okay Susan, I will call you tomorrow when I get home," Tanya said. Just as Tanya was saying goodbye and hanging up Sean was coming through the door with the food from McDonald's.

Sean responded, "I see you finally woke up, sleepyhead. Now you can have some food to eat, and then we can have some fun entertaining each other all day if there is no place you want to go."

"You know that I can stay in this hotel room all day and all night and not move. As long as you are by my side and in bed with me I don't have anything to worry about," Tanya said.

"I am not going anywhere, baby. I am yours forever and ever. Now hand me my food. I am starving over here," Sean said.

Michael drove Susan home on his way to work and told her he would see her later on after he got off of work.

Jay's parents were finally getting up out of bed. His mother was going to go fix some breakfast and then going to go grocery shopping. His father was going to take her to another supermarket that he passed by one day, because they had the meat plans that he liked. He just felt like he wanted to take her out for the day and let her enjoy herself.

Jay was just going to stay home and relax today. He asked if he could watch his baby sister so that they could be alone for once by themselves. He didn't mind watching his baby sister. He was always going to look out for his little sister. That's why he wanted to hurry up and get his education so that one day he could get a good job and move his parents and his little sister out of the hood. He knew that the hood was not a nice place to live. There were too many gangs, drug dealers and a lot of people being robbed and especially their apartments being robbed.

One of his friends was caught up in all of that drama; that's why he is dead now, so he doesn't want to see that happen to him or anything happen to his parents or his little sister.

Theresa decided to call into work and ask the boss if she could come back starting tomorrow because she needed the money. Her mom was going to watch the baby for her while she worked. The boss told her that he would be delighted to have her come back to work.

Meanwhile the guy named Steven was trying to get the assistant manager's position, because he felt he was there all the time and he knew what he was doing. He forgot that Latoya was also assistant manager for the store.

Latoya was just off today; she was not leaving the store, and Chris was off today too, so he was just taking care of the store.

Back in the neighborhood Keisha's brother Paul was coming out of the building and he saw a couple of his boys he hung out with shooting dice. He walked up to them and said, "Is this all you guys do all day? You need to do something with your life; can't hang out forever. It is not cool. After all, look what happened to Tony after all the stuff that he did. I am going to do something with my life and hopefully everything will make me a better person out with you all but not all the time," Paul said.

Just then Tina was coming up the ramp of the building to go visit Keisha and she saw Paul and asked was she upstairs.

"Yes, she is upstairs and being a pain in the ass because she wants to go back to that gym where that guy works, and I don't think that is a good idea," Paul said.

“Like I told her, I am not going to be fighting because she is messing around with some other female’s guy,” Tina said.

“You should go upstairs and talk to her; maybe she will listen to you,” Paul said.

“She is not going to listen to me because we already had this conversation,” Tina said.

Tina went into the building to wait for the elevator to go to Keisha’s house. When the elevator came Tina got on and went to the third floor. She rang the bell and Keisha came to the door to see who it was. When she saw that it was Tina she let her in. They went into Keisha’s room. Her mom wasn’t there because she had gone shopping to buy some things for her. Tina told Keisha that she didn’t think it was a good idea for her to go back to that gym where that guy named Michael worked because she would be creating another problem.

“What is this; no one wants me to be happy and have fun. I need a man just like everybody else does to make me feel good and buy me things,” Keisha said.

“Yes but you don’t have to have a man that belongs to someone else. That causes too many problems and a bunch of headaches,” Tina said.

“I guess you are right, Tina. I need to find my own man, and not worry if I am going to get hurt if he has a girl or had one that wants him back,” Keisha said.

Back at the hotel Sean and Tanya decided to go and do some shopping and pick up a few things that they wanted. They bought some jewelry and an outfit alike. Then they went to get some lunch at Red Lobster and maybe go to the movies. Then they wouldn’t be in the hotel all day.

Theresa went to work at the supermarket and couldn’t believe the way everybody was treating her when she walked in. They were happy to see her back and couldn’t stop asking about the baby and how big she was. Lucky for them Theresa had some pictures with her to show everybody how beautiful she was.

Susan was at home straightening the house up a little bit while she was just sitting around relaxing. Michael called her to see what she was doing and if she missed him.

“Yes, I miss you, Michael, and I am sitting here thinking about you while I am cleaning the house a little bit.”

He asked her if she had talked to Tanya at all this weekend while she was away.

“I spoke to her this morning while you were in the bathroom, and her and Sean was having a good time and will be back tomorrow some time,” Susan said.

It was starting to get dark soon and cool outside and it looked like rain. Aunt Naomi had finished the dishes and was going to watch television in her room when the phone rang. It was a friend of hers from work inviting her to come to her church on Sunday. When Aunt Naomi picked up she said hello to her friend Ms. Simpson and asked what was she doing.

“I just called to invite you to my church tomorrow since you said that you were looking for a church to call home,” Ms Simpson said.

Aunt Naomi told Ms. Simpson that she would be glad to come to her church tomorrow. Then when she hung up the phone Tanya was calling her to see how she was doing and to let her know she will be back tomorrow.

Sunday morning came and Aunt Naomi got up and cooked breakfast for her and Chris. Then she went to get dressed to go to church. The church that she was going to was called Greater Zion Hill Baptist Church. It was located in Harlem, New York, on 127th Street and Frederick Douglas Boulevard.

Aunt Naomi left to go to church and noticed that it was a very beautiful building on the outside. When she stepped inside she couldn’t believe her eyes how beautiful and nice the inside was. She saw her friend Ms. Simpson and went to seat next to her.

Aunt Naomi felt like she was at home at that church and couldn’t believe how friendly everybody was. When they asked for all visitors to stand she stood up and told them her name and that she was looking for a church. Everyone in the church welcomed her and made her feel very comfortable.

She enjoyed all of the singing from the choir and also the scriptures that were read and even the prayers. What she liked the most was the sermon that the pastor gave.

The pastor of the church was Rev. Dr. Frank J. Blackshear. After his sermon and the doors of the church were opened Aunt Naomi got up and joined the church. Her friend was so happy that she had finally found a church to call home. After the service was over Ms. Simpson introduced Aunt Naomi to Pastor Blackshear and his wife Mrs. Blackshear. Aunt Naomi and Ms. Simpson decided to go to eat some dinner out.

Chris was sitting in his room watching sports while he was talking to Latoya on the phone. Sean and Tanya were on their way back so that they could get themselves ready for tomorrow.

Ms. Simpson was telling Aunt Naomi about the church and how long some of the members have been there. Aunt Naomi and Ms. Simpson finished eating and they both went home to relax and get ready for work tomorrow.

Michael and Susan had dinner together and decided to make the night short because they both had to get up early.

Sean brought Tanya home and they said goodnight at her door. Tanya went upstairs and put her bag away and then gave Aunt Naomi a kiss and hug, and also spoke to Chris.

"I had a nice time and it was relaxing and how was your weekend, Chris and Aunt Naomi?" Tanya said.

"Well I worked Friday and then I spent some time with Latoya and that was nice," Chris said.

Aunt Naomi told them that she went to a nice church this morning and enjoyed everything and that she also joined the church. She told both of them that they should go one Sunday and see for themselves. Aunt Naomi decided to go take a bath and relax because she had to do a double tomorrow.

It had started to rain and it was coming down hard. Tanya was glad that she and Sean came back early and were not getting caught in the rain. It had even started lightning and everybody was just relaxing and turning off their televisions and lights.

The next day was as if it didn't rain at all last night. You didn't see a drop of rain anywhere around the neighborhood. It was almost time for Thanksgiving and all that good food everybody cooks. Aunt Naomi decided that she was going to have Thanksgiving at her house.

"I am cooking for Thanksgiving so invite all your friends and their parents if they would like to come," Aunt Naomi said.

Chris and Tanya both agreed and decided to go call and see who could come. Sean and his parents were coming. Latoya's parents and Jay's parents were also coming. Michael's parents were going away and Susan's parents were out of town anyway.

Tanya, Latoya and Susan were going to help Aunt Naomi cook on that day. They had to start getting the things they needed for Thanksgiving and make sure they had all that they needed.

Aunt Naomi liked to cook for a lot of people whenever she could get the chance. She called her sister Nancy to see if she would like to come for Thanksgiving and the rest of the family. After everyone confirmed about Thanksgiving, Aunt Naomi and Chris left for work. Tanya's class wasn't until 11:00, so she was leaving home at 10:00 a.m.

Theresa came to work today with the baby because her mom had an appointment to go to. She started not to go to work and just call in and say she can't make it, but she knew it was too late to call.

When she got to work Mr. Smith said, "Hello Theresa, how are you today and that is a beautiful baby girl you have there." Theresa told Mr. Smith that she didn't have anyone to watch the baby today because her mother had an appointment, so she had to bring her because it was too late for her to call and say she can't make it.

Latoya received a phone call from the boss of Modell's asking her to come in to work. Latoya told him that she would be there in ten minutes. She didn't know what he wanted because actually today was her day off and she didn't have any classes either.

Everybody was talking about dinner at Aunt Naomi's house on Thanksgiving, and they knew it was going to be a very nice day. There was no more rain for the rest of the day so everybody was happy that it had stopped after all that thunder and lightning last night.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THANKSGIVING DAY

Sean went to the gym to work out and wash the truck since it was nice out. He hadn't gotten a chance to go and do that. Michael was taking the day off to get ready for his brother and his family to come down. Even though they were coming for a visit, Aunt Naomi told him that it was okay if they came for Thanksgiving dinner. That whole week everyone was shopping and preparing things for Thanksgiving.

Chris and Tanya were straightening up every day to have things looking nice. The week before Thanksgiving Michael had to take his parents to the airport, so that they could go where they were going. His brother and family were going to be here on Saturday and he was getting ready for that.

"By now Aunt Naomi has everything that is needed for Thanksgiving and maybe more," Chris said.

"Aunt Naomi, if you don't mind I would like to invite Mr. and Mrs. Stevens for Thanksgiving, because I know that they probably are not going to want to really do anything because Tony is gone. I really think that they need to be around people that will be there for them, and know how they are feeling and show that we want to help them," Chris said.

"Chris, that will be fine. I don't have a problem with you inviting them for Thanksgiving dinner," Aunt Naomi said.

The week of Thanksgiving everybody was doing their last-minute shopping and making sure things were together and ready. Chris and Tanya decided to fix up the house for Thanksgiving with decorations before Aunt Naomi came from work. She had to work that Wednesday for a few hours. Tanya started mixing some of the stuff for the food together. Susan was coming over later to help her and so was Latoya. That night everything was ready except for the macaroni and cheese, yams, stuffing, and they didn't have dessert yet. Latoya

told Tanya that her mother was going to make a sweet potato pie and pumpkin pie. Tanya was going to the supermarket to see if she could get a Dutch crumb apple pie and some ice cream. All they needed was some sodas and some liquor. She and Sean were going to the soda and liquor warehouse to pick that up when he called to see if she was ready.

After everything was together and it was getting late everyone was home getting ready for tomorrow. The day of Thanksgiving Aunt Naomi was up early putting the turkey in the oven and starting everything else. Dinner was to start between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. At 2:30 everybody was there. All the women were in the kitchen and the men were in the living room watching a football game until it was time to eat. When the food was ready it was put on the table and they all gathered around and blessed the food. Aunt Naomi couldn't believe that everyone was having a good time including Tony's parents. When they finished eating everything was cleared up from the table.

Aunt Naomi asked all of them to take as much food as they wanted, so they wouldn't have to cook for a couple of days.

When everyone finished taking food Aunt Naomi still had some food for them to eat. Some of that was going to be her lunch and dinner, especially Sunday after church. No one had to work on Friday and also the weekend.

On Sunday Aunt Naomi got up to go to church and enjoy another one of those good services at the church. She made it there early for Sunday school to see what that was like. When Sunday school was over she told one of the ladies that it was a very good learning experience to learn about the Bible. Then it was time for praise and worship before the actual church service. The praise and worship part of the church service was over at 11:00 then the start of the service with the choir marching in and all the reverends behind them and the one minister too.

Aunt Naomi got to hear the other choir sing this Sunday, and she was so amazed at the fact that there were many different choirs at the church. Even the little kids sang a few songs today.

Pastor didn't preach today; there was another reverend that brought the word to the people of the church today. The people couldn't believe that a young preacher could get up there and preach the way that he did. Everyone liked what he preached about and couldn't believe that it hit home to some people.

When church was over people were standing and talking to each other, talking about the sermon that was preached today. One of the members was talking to some people about one of the ministers of the church, because they

were involved and he seemed to associate with all the women in the church. That bothered her and made her upset.

Ms. Simpson knew everything that was going on in the church and sometimes she couldn't keep quiet. The woman who was having problems with the man couldn't understand why things were not working out.

He sometimes didn't speak to her or would be talking to her and stop to talk to other women. Most of the time he would just walk past her and not say anything. That really pissed her off all the time and made her mad.

She had friends to talk to and they were noticing how he was acting towards her all the time. They gave her advice or tried to get her to talk to him, but he always seemed like he couldn't talk right then. No matter when she tried to call him and talk to him he was never there or he was going to call her back. She really cared for him and didn't know what to do, but she found out about other women that he was dealing with. Ms. Simpson told Aunt Naomi that sometimes he would sneak out of the church to go see another woman, and then come back, especially if there was an afternoon service.

"I can't believe there is a minister at the church who is doing such things as this and she hasn't said anything to him. It seems to me that he doesn't give a damn about this woman and he is just leading her on. She needs to just let him go and find someone else to make her happy and be there for her. Can't hold on to someone that doesn't want to be with you, or doesn't have any time for you," Aunt Naomi said.

Aunt Naomi asked Ms. Simpson about the different choirs, the ushers, and the nurses of the church, to try and get off the subject of the minister and the lady in the church. Aunt Naomi felt bad for the lady though, and wanted so much to meet the young lady who was having a problem.

Most of the members were leaving the church to go home to relax and get ready for work tomorrow. Aunt Naomi was going to go home to get ready for work tomorrow.

When Aunt Naomi got home Chris and Tanya were in their rooms getting their stuff ready for tomorrow. The phone was ringing and Chris picked it up, to see who it was that was calling. It was Latoya calling to talk to him and see what time was Tanya leaving tomorrow.

"Hey babe, what's up with you and what are you doing?" Chris said.

"I am trying to finish up some of my homework for tomorrow. You won't believe this. I made manager of the store because the other manager is leaving and you and Steven are the assistant managers," Tanya said.

Chris couldn't believe that he made assistant manager. Latoya told him that the boss said that he was doing a good job and never had a complaint about anything. He also mentioned that he never had a problem with filling in at work for anybody. Latoya told Chris that she would call him later after she finished her work. Chris ran in the kitchen and told Aunt Naomi and Tanya his good news. They were so happy and very proud of him that they both hugged him at the same time.

Susan had taken her brothers Anthony and Freddie to the movies today to give her parents some quiet time. They enjoyed themselves at the movies, especially being out with their sister. Susan liked to take her brothers out when they wanted to do something or go shopping. She was going to buy them some things when she got paid.

Michael went to work early to see what needed to be done before everybody came in, including the people that work.

Aunt Naomi went to work and saw Ms. Simpson with one of the patients. She was taking the patient's temperature and her blood pressure. She said good morning to the patient and Ms. Simpson, and walked down the hall to the nurses station to see what was there for her to do today.

She was a registered nurse and worked in the pediatrics part with the babies, Aunt Naomi saw a lot of babies being born and helped bring some of them into the world. Aunt Naomi never had any kids of her own because her husband said he couldn't have any. Later on Aunt Naomi noticed that he was staying out late and sometimes not coming home for three days. One time he came home and picked a fight with her so that she would call the cops on him so he would leave. He thought he would do that so that he wouldn't have to hurt her by saying that he was leaving her for another woman and his baby.

Eventually Aunt Naomi found out because the other woman started calling her house and harassing her. She had an idea that he might have been cheating on her because of the way he acted when he came home, or her assumptions that she made towards him. Her husband was like the minister at the church; he liked the women because he wasn't satisfied with just one woman. He had to spread the love that he had.

Aunt Naomi sat there and looked at the babies and thought about her life back then. It was time for some of the mothers to feed their babies so Aunt Naomi started to take some of the babies to their moms to be fed.

Theresa had to take the baby for her physical today so she didn't go in to work today. Chris was on his way to work to start his role as assistant manager with Steven. Steven was there when Chris got there and so was the boss Mr. Green to tell them what he expected of them as assistant managers.

Latoya had class and then she was going to work later and to see what was going on and how was everybody doing their job.

Jay didn't have class today so he was just going to do some things around the house and take care of his little sister. Tomorrow was her birthday and his mom wanted to go buy a few things for her. She was going to be a year tomorrow and his mother wanted to have a little celebration for her.

"When you come back, Mom, I will go out and get something for my sister Michelle, for her birthday," Jay said.

"Okay Jay, I will be back in a little while and then you can go out," his mother said.

Susan called Michael to see what he was doing and he said that he was trying to do some work.

While everybody was at work there was some commotion in the projects because the cops were all over the place. Luckily everybody was at work and not around to see what was going on.

There was a drug raid going on and there were even hostages being held. The cops had to have everyone near the floor. Then the captain and the other head bosses, SWAT and the emergency vehicles were there waiting to see what was going to have to be done.

Jay was coming out of the train station and walked through the projects. When he turned to go towards his building he saw all of the cops, and the people standing outside far from the building or across the street. Jay decided to go to Modell's to see if Chris was working or go see Michael at the gym. Chris was coming out of Modell's to go to lunch when he saw Jay walking towards the store to see him. "Hey Chris," Jay said.

"Hey are you going home now?" Jay said.

"No I am on my lunch break right now and then I have to go back to work. I have to work until 5:00 p.m.," Chris said.

"There is something going on in the projects either in my building or the one across from me," Jay said.

"What do you mean; something is going on over there where we live, and no one can get to their building or actually come out?" Chris said.

"There a lot of cops and SWAT teams over there trying to get in somebody's apartment," Jay said.

Jay saw Paul coming past them and he said what's up to them. They both said what's up back to him. Jay asked him if he knew what was going on and he said yes; this guy was talking to somebody and he happened to hear what he said.

“It seems that the guys that were arrested for shooting Tony were dealing drugs out of the apartment that belonged to one of the guy’s parents. They also had girls working out of there to make them more money. While they were locked up some other guys were staying there and trying to deal the drugs for them and make that money. One of the neighbors called the cops because people were coming in and out of there, and so was the guys with a lot of girls,” Paul said. “It seems this neighborhood is full of drugs and a bunch of drug addicts,” Paul said.

“That’s why I want to get away from here. I know that I am not perfect but I am trying to do the right thing, especially after what happened to Tony,” Jay said.

Paul told them he would check them later and he went to his building. Chris and Jay decided to go get something to eat, and then go visit Michael at work and bother him. When they got there Sean was also there working out and talking to Michael.

Ms. Simpson came and asked Aunt Naomi if she was not busy on Wednesday, would she like to come to Bible Study and see what they do there.

“I would be glad to come to Bible study Wednesday night. I really feel like home at Greater Zion Hill Baptist Church even though there is drama there. You know the stuff with that young lady reminds me of me when I was with my husband. I felt like she feels, but the only thing is, I decided to just let him go and not worry about him because I know that there is someone out there for me somewhere,” Aunt Naomi said.

“You know you are right because that should not be happening in the church. Even though I know what is going on I try not to get involved in anybody’s madness. I have my own things to worry about and life to lead,” Ms Simpson said.

Tanya and Latoya were getting off the train to go home and when they were coming out of the train station and looked across the street they saw the police and everything. Not all of the police were in the building across from where Jay stayed. His mom and dad were outside with his sister, Michelle, trying to go see about a cake for her birthday tomorrow.

Tanya and Latoya saw them and said hello. They couldn’t believe that Jay’s sister was getting so big and that she was so cute.

By then Jay and Chris and Sean were coming through the projects. Chris and Sean said hello to Jay’s parents and his little sister. Sean kissed Tanya and Chris kissed Latoya. Jay’s mom was smiling because how they were with each other. Jay’s mom asked him when he was going to find a nice girl to have as a girlfriend.

There was still police activity going on and people still couldn't get in the building because someone started shooting. They just didn't want any of the hostages to get hurt. Everything was back to normal at 10:00 p.m. All of the drug dealers and suppliers that were in the apartment were arrested. As they walked more into the apartment and came to one of the rooms, the cops opened the door and saw a lot of females and some guys having sex. They were arrested too and charged with prostitution. When they were bringing the girls and the guys out of the building someone noticed that one of the girls was Keisha. Her brother Paul happened to be walking up towards the building and saw her in the handcuffs.

"Excuse me, why is my sister in those handcuffs?" Paul said.

The cop told him that she was in the apartment where they just raided with the drug dealers and suppliers and a lot of drugs. He also said that she was being arrested because she was in there having sex as part of their prostitution ring.

Paul couldn't believe his eyes; he knew his sister had been missing for a few days but he didn't know that's where she was. Paul knew he had to tell his parents what was going on and he didn't know how so he went to call his cousin, Tina, and ask her to come to his house.

When Tina wasn't home he left a message and told her to call him on his cell or at home because it was important. When Tina got home from her job she heard the message from Paul and called him back to tell him she would be right over. When Tina arrived at the house Paul opened the door for her. His parents weren't home from work yet.

"I have something to tell my parents and I don't know how to tell them and I need your help," Paul said.

"What's wrong, Paul; is it Keisha?"

"Yes it is her. I know where she is right now but I don't know where she was before," Paul said.

"Paul, what is going on? Tell me; you are scaring me," Tina said.

"You know that Keisha had been missing for a couple of days. Well it seems that she was in that apartment that the cops just raided with the drugs in it. There were drug dealers and suppliers in there, but the worst part is Keisha was a part of the prostitution ring that was going on in the apartment."

"What do you mean, Paul?" Tina said.

"I mean your cousin was having sex with guys for money and now she is in jail until someone comes to get her out or she makes bail," Paul said.

"What are we going to do about her? How are we going to tell my parents something bad like this?" Tina said.

“We just have to try and break it to them gently without upsetting them,” Paul said.

While they were sitting there talking and trying to figure out what to do the phone rang. It was Keisha calling from jail, asking Paul to come and get her out of there because she didn’t do anything wrong. Paul told her there was nothing he could do right now, but he would come down there and see what he needed to do. He hung up and asked Tina to go with him down there.

Tina and Paul were leaving out of the building and walking towards Chris’s building. Chris, Latoya, and Tanya and Sean were sitting on the bench when they walked by. They all spoke to each other and asked Paul if the cops were still over there.

“Only a few of them are still there trying to finish up and take pictures,” Paul said. He told them what was going on and told them about his sister. Everybody couldn’t believe their ears but knew that one day she would get in some kind of trouble. No one said that to Paul and Tina, but deep inside they knew that she would get into some trouble one day.

Chris and them decided it was getting late so they better go home. Chris, Latoya, Tanya and Sean all said goodnight to each other.

Sean walked Latoya towards her building since he lived that way.

Chris and Tanya went upstairs and Aunt Naomi was coming out of the kitchen from making her plate. She spoke to them and asked did they know what happened and they said yes. Tanya told her what happened and she was surprised that things like that could happen in the projects or even in Harlem.

“It’s time to move out of the hood, because no matter what, you could get killed or anything could happen. It is like all people want to do is make the neighborhood a bad place to live for others,” Chris said.

“That’s why I am glad I decided to go out and do something with my life, and not hang out in front of the building or on the corner by the store. Sometimes I look at these guys and I wonder if they know what they are doing or do they even care about their life at all,” Chris said.

The week had been going slow for Aunt Naomi because she enjoyed church every Sunday. She was telling Chris and Tanya that they should come and go with her to church on Sunday if they weren’t busy.

“I will be glad to go with you to church, Aunt Naomi, on Sunday,” Tanya said. Chris agreed to go with them because he had the day off. Tanya was saying that she was thinking about finding a church to go to and so was Chris.

Aunt Naomi’s sister Nancy called on the telephone to tell her that she was coming for a visit to see her. Aunt Naomi was happy and told Nancy that she

would be happy to see her. Aunt Naomi hung up the phone from talking to her sister and told Tanya and Chris that their aunt Nancy was coming for a visit to New York.

When Friday came Aunt Naomi was cleaning up and preparing food so when Nancy got there she would have something to eat. Tanya and Chris were helping her clean and make the house look nice.

When Nancy rang the bell, Chris let her in and waited for her by the elevator. When she got off the elevator she couldn't believe that standing there was her nephew, so tall and handsome. Chris took her suitcase from her and went inside to the house. When Nancy walked inside Aunt Naomi gave her a big hug and kisses and told her she was happy to see her.

"Hi Aunt Nancy, how are you and how was the drive down?" Tanya said.

Nancy told her that the drive down was all right, except for the traffic because people were either going away or coming from work. Aunt Naomi told Chris to take Aunt Nancy's suitcase and put it in her room since she had double beds in there.

It was getting late so Tanya and Chris went to bed and left Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy up talking about the family and what they had been up too. Aunt Naomi asked Nancy if she had brought some clothes for church on Sunday before she went back.

"Yes I have some church clothes with me. You know I wouldn't come and visit you without going to church before I go back," Nancy said.

They finally went to bed at 2:00 in the morning but they didn't realize that they stayed up that long talking.

The next morning Aunt Nancy was up with Aunt Naomi fixing some breakfast for them to eat. Tanya was getting up and on her way to the bathroom she smelt the breakfast coming out of the kitchen. Chris could smell the food, too, coming out of the kitchen. Tanya went to take a shower and get dressed, because she was going out shopping with Sean this morning. When she came out of the bathroom, Chris went in there to wash up so he could eat some breakfast.

He called his job to see if he had to work today and see if Latoya was there at work. Steven answered, and told him that he was off today and tomorrow and that Latoya was off today too. Chris told Steven thank you and he might stop by later.

"I will be looking for you to stop by to check and see how things are going," Steven said.

When Chris finished in the bathroom and went into the kitchen they all sat down to eat breakfast. Chris and Tanya told them that the breakfast was delicious.

Sean was ringing the intercom bell downstairs to come upstairs to get Tanya. Tanya buzzed him in and he came up. Tanya went to the door to let him in. When he came in he kissed her.

Aunt Nancy and Aunt Naomi were coming out of the kitchen to sit in the living room. Tanya introduced Sean to her Aunt Nancy and told him that she was Aunt Naomi's sister.

"It's nice to meet you, Sean, and you are a handsome young man," Aunt Nancy said. Nancy told Sean to take care of her niece and treat her right.

"I plan on treating her like a queen for as long as I can and she lets me," Sean said.

"That is so sweet," Aunt Nancy told Sean. "I can't believe my niece has a handsome fellow who cares about her the way that you do."

"Thank you," Sean said to Aunt Nancy. Tanya asked Sean if he was ready to go shopping and asked Chris what was he doing today.

"I don't know as of right now," Chris said.

Sean told Chris, "Why don't you and Latoya come and hang out with us today if the two of you are not busy." Chris agreed and told them to let him call Latoya and see what she was doing. Chris called Latoya and asked her if she wanted to go shopping and hang out with Tanya and Sean and she said yes. Chris asked her how long it would take her to be ready.

"I will be there in five minutes. Where do you want me to meet you?" Latoya said. Chris told her to come upstairs so that she could meet his Aunt Nancy while she was here in town for the weekend. When Latoya got there she met Chris's Aunt Nancy and Aunt Nancy told Chris to be good to her.

Aunt Naomi decided to ask Sean and Latoya to join them at church tomorrow. Sean and Latoya said that they would be glad to go to church tomorrow. They asked her what time; she said it started at 11:00 a.m. They could meet them in front of the church. She told them what church it was and told them they wouldn't miss it. Chris, Latoya, Tanya and Sean left to go shopping and said they would be back later.

Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy both told them to enjoy themselves today and to not spend all of their money buying everything that they saw. They told them goodbye and headed out the door to go downstairs. Chris pushed for the elevator to come up to their floor.

"Your Aunt Nancy seems like a nice and sincere person who cares about her family very much," Latoya said.

Tanya replied, "She is and she is the only sister that Aunt Naomi has. They are very close and have always been that way since we were growing up. We usually go to her house on Christmas and stay for about a week and then come back. She has a very nice house in New Jersey."

The elevator came and they all got on to go to the lobby. When the elevator reached the lobby they got off of it and walked out the door. Tanya told them that she was going to the store to buy a soda and asked if anybody else wanted anything.

"I think I want something but I will go with you," Latoya said. Sean and Chris both told them to bring them a soda back and maybe some candy. Tanya and Latoya went to the store while Sean and Chris waited by the truck for them to come back. Paul walked by and said what's up to Chris and gave him a five. Paul asked Chris about his sister Tanya, because he used to like her.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A DAY OF HANGING OUT

Chris told Paul that Tanya was doing just fine and she had just gone to the store.

“Paul, this is Tanya’s boyfriend Sean, and Sean, this is Paul,” Chris said.

They both said what’s up to each other and then Paul said, “No disrespect, I didn’t know that you were Tanya’s boyfriend.”

Sean told Paul, “No disrespect intended.” Tanya and Latoya were making their way back to Sean and Chris when she saw Paul standing there. When they reached them Paul said hello to Tanya and Latoya and they both said hello back.

Paul left and went where he was going. As they were getting ready to get in the truck they saw Jay coming with his little sister. Jay spoke to all of them and asked what they were up to today. They told him that they were going shopping and probably to the movies.

“That is the same thing I am going to do with my little sister today. I am taking her to see *Shark Tale* and give my parents some time so they can relax,” Jay said.

Sean told Jay, “Since we are going shopping would you and your little sister like to go with us?”

“I would like that very much but I don’t have her car seat for her to sit in,” Jay said. Sean told Jay that he would drive him to his building so he could go get her car seat. Jay responded, “You sure it won’t be a problem?”

“No,” Sean said. “You know that we are boys and I don’t mind because we don’t get to hang out that much,” Sean said. Sean stopped across the street from his building and Jay got out, going upstairs to go get his car seat. He left his sister in the car with them. When he got upstairs and went in the house his mother asked him where his sister was. He told her that she was okay and that

Tanya had her; he just came to get her car seat because he was going shopping with the gang.

His mother said okay and for him to have fun shopping and at the movies. Jay went back downstairs and got in the truck. He put the car seat in the seat next to him and put his sister in it and buckled her up. Sean drove off and went past the gym where Michael worked and looked to see if Michael's car was there. He couldn't really see if his car was there or not because of all the cars that were in the parking lot. Sean got on the highway and went across the George Washington Bridge to go to the mall in New Jersey. When they reached their exit for the mall Tanya gave Sean the money for the toll. As they were coming off the exit and driving into the mall they noticed that not too many people were there. Sean found a parking space and they all got out. Jay opened the stroller to put his sister in and started to push her.

"I will take your little sister off your hands and let her hang out with the girls today and do some shopping," Tanya said. As they walked towards the mall entrance Tanya and Latoya started towards the baby store and told the guys that they would meet them back there in two hours. Sean asked Chris and Jay if they would go with him to the jewelry store and Chris asked him what he was looking for.

"The reason why I asked is because I am thinking about buying an engagement ring for your sister, Chris. I love her and we have been together for a year now and I believe it is time to take that next step," Sean said. Chris told Sean that he could not believe he was going to ask his sister to marry him. Sean asked Chris if he knew what Tanya's ring finger size was and he told him yes. When they reached the jewelry store they went in and looked at a lot of the engagement rings. After all the looking and asking the sales clerk to try them on, they finally saw one that would fit Tanya's taste as beautiful as she was.

Sean paid for the ring and then they left out to go do some more shopping. Chris asked Sean when he was planning on asking Tanya to marry him.

"I was thinking about doing it Christmas Eve since that is her birthday. That way it will be her Christmas present too," Sean said.

"I can't believe that you are going to be my brother-in-law. I am so happy and can't wait for the day to come when you ask her to be your wife," Chris said.

"You know something, I can't wait for that day to come and we are husband and wife and will spend the rest of our lives together," Sean said.

The guys did a lot of shopping for themselves. They couldn't believe how much stuff they bought in the mall. Latoya, Tanya and Jay's little sister did a lot of shopping too. It was time for them to meet the guys near the entrance so that's where they headed.

When they all got there they decided to take the bags and put them in the truck and figure out what time they were going to see *Shark Tale*. They all took the bags to the truck. Jay couldn't believe that his sister was having such a good time with Tanya and Latoya.

"While we are deciding about what time to go see *Shark Tale* why don't we go and get something to eat from one of the places in the food court," Sean said. They decided to eat some Chinese food from the Chinese place in the mall. After everyone finished eating, including Michelle, Jay's sister, they went to the bathroom and also changed Michelle's diaper.

They walked over to the movie theater and looked to see what time the next movie was starting. It was already like two o'clock and the next movie was starting at 3:00 p.m. Sean suggested that they buy the tickets for the next movie and either do some more shopping or go play some games in the arcade that was there.

They were having fun playing the games and winning some prizes. They even won some for Jay's little sister, Michelle. She enjoyed watching them playing the games and acting silly. When it was time to go to the movies they all stopped playing the games and headed to the movie theater.

Sean bought popcorn, candy and soda for him and Tanya. Chris bought the same thing for him and Latoya, and Jay bought a soda for him and his sister. Plus, candy for her to eat that she couldn't choke on. The movie was funny and very good because they enjoyed it a lot. When the movie was over they headed out the movie theater and decided to go to the truck.

"It is still early; is there someplace else that you all want to go?" Sean said.

Tanya said, "If no one is in a hurry to go home let's ride out to Pennsylvania to enjoy the sights."

Sean told them that it didn't make any difference with him; they could ride out there. Everyone agreed and said, "Let's have some more fun 'cause we are not ready to go home yet." Sean drove to the highway to head to Pennsylvania. They were enjoying the sights and looking at all of the stores and homes that were there.

"I wouldn't mind living out here because it is so quiet and peaceful here. It is just that you have to have a car to get around. There is not that many cabs or the bus doesn't run that long," Tanya said.

Latoya told Tanya that if she moved out her what about school and her job in Manhattan for now.

"I am not talking about now but when I graduate from college and earn enough money to get out of the hood and the bad things that go in the hood," Tanya said.

Back in the hood Paul was still trying to figure out how to tell his parents because he and Tina didn't get a chance to tell them last night. Paul went back upstairs from playing basketball and took his shower, and then he went into the living room where his parents were and asked them if he could talk to them. His parents told him yes and what did he want. He told them that he didn't want anything, but what he had to say was about Keisha.

His mother started to cry and think the worst. He said that it wasn't that bad but that she was in jail because she was in that apartment that the cops raided with all the drugs in it. He told them that she was arrested for prostitution, and that she had been in that apartment since she was missing from there. Paul's parents couldn't believe what Paul was telling them. Paul took them to the precinct where she was being held. When they got to the precinct to see her they had to wait a few minutes because they had to get her from downstairs in lockup. When she came upstairs her mother grabbed her and started to cry, but her father just looked because he couldn't believe that his daughter had been arrested. Her father asked her how she could disgrace the family the way that she did.

"I am very upset with you and don't understand how you could do this to your mother and me. We have given you everything possible to make you happy. Right now I don't want to talk to you. I will be over here," Keisha's father said.

Keisha's father went to find out how much was her bail and when would she be getting out. The desk sergeant told her father that there was nothing that he could do tonight, because she had to wait and go in front of the judge tomorrow morning.

Her father replied, "Thank you, Officer. I will be back in the morning." He went back over there to where they were standing. He told Keisha that she had to stay there for tonight and he would be back tomorrow, because she had to wait to see the judge to find out how much her bail was going to be. Keisha couldn't believe what she was hearing but her father said that it was nothing he could do. They kissed and hugged Keisha and walked out of the precinct to go home.

Sean and the rest of them were in Pennsylvania having fun and spending more money in the stores. Jay's sister was getting tired and sleepy so they decided that it was time to head on back home. When they got back in Harlem it was kind of cold out and they couldn't believe that it felt like that. Chris was going to walk Latoya to her building but Jay said since he was going that way he would see to it that she got home.

Sean kissed Tanya goodnight and told her he would see her tomorrow for church. Tanya and Chris went into their building to go upstairs, and when they reached their apartment they heard Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy laughing and having fun. Chris opened the door and he and Tanya went in and Aunt Naomi asked if they had fun shopping today.

"Can't you tell that they did? Do you see all of those bags that they are holding in their hands?" Aunt Nancy said. Chris and Tanya both laughed at what she said to them. Chris and Tanya kissed both of them goodnight and went to bed.

Finally Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy went to bed to get some sleep. It was Sunday again and Aunt Naomi couldn't wait to get up and get ready for church. They all washed up and went to eat breakfast before getting dressed for church. They all got dress for church and left the apartment and went to the church.

Sean and Latoya were their waiting for them when they got there. They went inside and sat down all together in the pew. When the church service started and they were standing to watch the choir come in Tanya said that the church was beautiful. When the church asked for all visitors to stand, Chris, Tanya, Latoya, Sean and Aunt Nancy stood up and told them their names and that they were there with Aunt Naomi. The members of the church welcomed them and then they got up to welcome them by singing the welcome song and giving them a hug.

They couldn't believe how friendly and nice the members of the church were. When the choir got up to sing, Tanya and Latoya couldn't believe how well that the choir was singing. When it was time for the sermon Aunt Naomi told them who the pastor was and that there were some more of them sitting on the pulpit. The sermon today came from Pastor Blackshear and it was a good sermon today because it brought tears to Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy, because it made them think about their parents and how they died when they were in their twenties. When one of the other reverends opened the doors of the church, he asked if there was anyone who wanted to give their life to God come and give their life to him. Tanya, Latoya, Chris and Sean got up and decided to give their lives to God by Baptism.

Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy could not believe what they were seeing. The church members were pleased and Ms. Simpson couldn't believe it. When church was over one of the deacons went to talk to them about the orientation class that they give Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. They all said that they would be there next Sunday for the class. Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy gave each of them a hug and said that they were proud of them. Ms. Simpson came over to congratulate them and tell them that she was happy.

A couple of the members came over to see if they could sing and if so they would like to join the choir. The minister that was having problems with his lady friend was avoiding her and trying to leave the church before she could get a hold of him. She spotted him still on the pulpit and told him not to go anywhere because they needed to talk, and most of the members were watching and making little remarks because every Sunday they had some drama going on in the church.

"I can't talk to you right now because I am trying to leave because I have another appointment someplace else and I don't want to be late," the minister said. He left her standing there and told her that he would call her, but she knew that he wasn't going to call her because he always tells her that he is going to call her. One of the members felt bad for her because he left her standing on the pulpit.

"Would you all like to go out to eat dinner my treat? I know you have to leave, Aunt Nancy; is it okay if I call you that? I don't want to be rude to you or anything," Sean said.

"That is fine, Sean, you can call me Aunt Nancy. It is no problem at all," Aunt Nancy said. They went to Sean's truck and they all got in and he took them to have dinner at Junior's in Brooklyn.

When they finished eating Sean asked Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy if they liked cheesecake. They both told him yes so he bought a small one for each of them and then they said thank you. Sean told them that they were welcome and Aunt Nancy told Tanya that she better keep Sean and don't let him out of her sight. They all laughed at that.

Tanya replied, "Don't worry, I am not letting him go." Aunt Nancy asked what everybody was doing for Christmas this year.

"I am coming to your house for Christmas like I do every Christmas," Aunt Naomi said. Tanya and Chris both said that they were going to come to her house too.

"That will be very nice, and Sean and Latoya, you are welcome, too, at my house for Christmas," Aunt Nancy said.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” Tanya said.

“We are just talking about the games that will be on the television on Christmas day,” they both said.

“Okay, thought the two of you were up to something,” she said. Everybody got back in the truck to go home and make sure Aunt Nancy got off safely and wouldn’t get home too late. When Sean pulled up in front of Tanya’s building, he was lucky because there was a parking space. He liked parking his truck in front of Tanya’s building. They all got out of the truck and went upstairs to Tanya’s house and relaxed for a while. Aunt Nancy was getting her suitcase and some food that Aunt Naomi was giving her together when Aunt Naomi reached out to hug and kiss her goodbye.

“I enjoyed the visit with you, Nancy, and hope that you come back again real soon to visit again,” Aunt Naomi said.

“You are my sister and I love you,” Aunt Nancy said. Aunt Nancy gave her a kiss and hug, and told her that she enjoyed herself and will come back again soon. Aunt Nancy was on her way to say goodbye to Chris and Tanya, and Sean and Latoya before she walked out the door. She told all of them to be good and keep in touch with her. Sean gave her a kiss and said thank you for the invitation to her house for Christmas.

“I want to say that it was nice meeting you and talking to you and I also want to thank you for inviting me for Christmas,” Latoya said.

They walked Aunt Nancy downstairs to her car and watched her drive off. Latoya called her house to tell her parents that she was over at Tanya and Chris’s house but she didn’t get an answer. Her cell phone started to ring and it was her mother calling to tell her that they were still at her uncle’s house and that they decided to stay until tomorrow.

“Okay, I will see you and Dad when I get home from school and work tomorrow,” she said. Then she told her mom to tell her dad and uncle and his family hello. Latoya hung up and was happy because she was going to be home by herself.

Chris asked her what that was all about and she told him that her mom was just calling to tell that they were going to stay at her uncle’s house until tomorrow.

“Hey, would you all like to come and chill at my house for a while? No one is going to be there so you can do whatever you want,” she said.

Tanya replied, “I don’t mind coming to hang out at your house for a while. Sean, are you coming with me so we can spend some time together?” Tanya said.

"You don't have to ask me twice," Sean said. Chris went too because he wanted to be with Latoya. Tanya called Aunt Naomi to let her know that they were going over to Latoya's for a little while and for her not to worry.

"I am not going to worry as long as I know where you and Chris are. Besides, I am going to get comfortable and watch some television before I go to sleep," she said.

"Goodnight, Aunt Naomi, and we won't be too long." Aunt Naomi hung up and turned on her television set and started watching it.

They walked to Latoya's building and saw Paul standing outside with one of his friends. They all said what's up to him and went in the building. When they reached Latoya's floor she opened the door and they went in. She told them to make themselves comfortable. They all went to sit on the couch and love seat and Latoya turned on the radio. She asked them if they wanted something to drink and they said yes.

They were enjoying the music and having fun. They watched movies and danced, and then Latoya told Chris to come and go to her room, and left Tanya and Sean in the living room. She told them that they could do whatever they wanted.

Michael had stopped by the gym to see if there were any problems because he didn't go in today. He was going to see Susan and what she was up to. Susan had just come out of the supermarket and was crossing the street when Michael was turning the corner in his car.

Latoya and Chris were sitting on her bed kissing and getting ready to have sex. Tanya and Sean were still watching a movie when Sean moved over and kissed her. He started feeling all over her and kissing her on the neck. Tanya always felt goose bumps whenever Sean kissed her on the neck or anywhere else. Latoya told Chris that she wanted him to make love to her all night long.

"Latoya, are you sure you want me to make love to you all night until tomorrow morning?" Chris said.

Sean was trying to unbutton Tanya's bra but he was having trouble so Tanya did it for him. Sean did what he wanted to do to her and made passionate love to her, and Tanya told him that it was as good as the night in the hotel when they spent the weekend together.

"Chris, I am falling in love with you, and I have never felt this way about anybody before. I mean I have always had a crush on you, but it hasn't made me feel foolish or just shy," Latoya said.

Chris told her that was the sweetest thing she had ever said to him and he was falling in love with her. They kissed again and made love until they both were tired and fell asleep.

Tanya and Sean just kept trying so many ways and went in different areas of the living room to do another position. Tanya couldn't believe all the different ways they were making love.

It was early morning when Chris, Latoya, Tanya and Sean woke up. Tanya and Chris knew that they needed to go home before Aunt Naomi woke up even though they knew she wouldn't be worried. Sean had to go home to get ready for his workout at the gym even though he knew he just worked out with Tanya. They all told Latoya that they would see her later, and they knew she was going to go back to sleep.

Michael was up and ready to go to work for another day, but he had to call Susan to see what she was doing today. When he got Susan she told him that she was off today and probably was going to relax. Michael told her that he wanted her to come to the gym and help him today if she didn't mind.

At the supermarket no one had heard anything from Theresa in a couple of days including the boss. He was hoping that she was all right because she hadn't been to work lately. When he said that, the phone rang and he answered it. It was Theresa calling to let him know that she had been sick with the flu and would be back to work tomorrow if that was okay.

"That is fine; we were just worried about you and didn't know what happened," Mr. Smith said.

When Tanya and Chris reached the house, Aunt Naomi was still sleeping so they went in and went in their rooms to lie down. Chris didn't have to go to work until 12:00 today. Tanya didn't have any classes at all today but she had to go to work later.

Aunt Naomi got up an hour later and went to see if they were in their rooms. She peeped in their rooms and they were in their beds asleep. She went in the bathroom to wash up, and get ready to go to work and take care of the babies at the hospital.

Keisha's parents were up getting ready to go to the police station, to see how much her bail was going to be so they could get her out of there. Paul didn't go with them, because he was already ashamed of his sister's behavior and the things that she was doing.

Sean reached the gym to work out and he saw Michael and Susan talking. He walked over to them and said hello. Susan asked him how he was doing and what he was up to because she hadn't seen him or any of the other guys for a while.

"I haven't been up to anything lately; just trying to take it easy and enjoy life as it is," Sean said.

Susan laughed and said, "You know that is true. We do have to enjoy life as it is given to us. Live one day at a time and take it slow."

Sean went to do his workout and Susan and Michael went into his office to do some work that needed to be finished.

At the police station the desk clerk showed Keisha's parents where she was. She was happy to see that they came to be with her and get her out of there. When the judge came in everyone had to stand up until he sat down. Keisha had a smile on her face because she figured she wouldn't have to really do anything. Keisha's parents put some rules down and told her that she was going to have to do what the judge said. The judge gave her community service for six months.

Chris finally got up to get himself together for work. He let Tanya know that he was leaving to go to work.

"Okay, I'll see you later. I have to be at work at 1:00 today," Tanya said. Tanya started to get up and go to the bathroom to wash up. Chris left and closed and locked the door. Tanya turned on the radio to listen to some music while she got herself together.

Sean took a break and called her to see what she was doing. She picked up and said, "Hi babe, what's up and what are you doing?"

He told her that he was at the gym, but he was taking a rest because he wanted to call her and see if she was up and getting ready to go to work. He told her that he saw Michael and Susan there at the gym.

"I am going to come and join the gym one day so that I can work out in there," she said. Sean told her that would be good and that she was going to like it. Tanya told Sean that she would talk to him later, after she got off, for him to come and meet her at the supermarket. He told her if he was back in time because he had to take his parents to the airport so that they could catch their plane. They were leaving again going to his grandparents' house again to be with his grandmother.

"Okay, then if you are not back by 6:00 call me, and let me know and I will just go home," she said.

Sean told her not to worry, that he would make sure he was there when she got off of work. Tanya told him bye and said that she loved him. That caught Sean by surprise and he said it back. He could not wait until her birthday so that he could ask her to marry him and be his wife. He also wanted to ask Aunt Naomi if it was all right with her. He decided that after he left the gym he would stop by Harlem Hospital and talk to Aunt Naomi.

When Sean finished at the gym, he got in his truck and went to the hospital to see Aunt Naomi. He walked inside and went upstairs to the pediatrics part. He asked the nurse at the desk for Aunt Naomi. The nurse paged her to come to the desk.

When Aunt Naomi came to the desk, she asked the nurse who wanted her. The nurse pointed to where Sean was sitting and Aunt Naomi walked over to him.

“Hi Aunt Naomi, I don’t mean to bother you at work, but I wanted to ask you something since you are Tanya’s guardian,” Sean said. “Her birthday is coming up soon and I am sure you know how I feel about her. What I am trying to say is, may I have your blessing in asking you for her hand in marriage?”

Aunt Naomi was so surprised she did not know what to say at first. Then she was still in shock but she finally said something to Chris to see if he was sure.

“Are you going to ask Tanya to marry you on her birthday next month, which is a couple of weeks away?” Aunt Naomi said.

“Yes I thought I would give her a nice Christmas present for herself. I mean after all her birthday is Christmas Eve,” he said.

Aunt Naomi told Sean of course he had her blessing, and that she was happy Tanya had a man that loved and cared for her so much. She gave Sean a hug and said welcome to the family. Sean told her thank you and that he was going to let her get back to work.

Aunt Naomi went to go back to work and kept thinking about what Sean asked her. Sean went home to help his parents put their bags in the truck to go the airport. Sean made it back from the airport to pick up Tanya from work. She was surprised to see Sean waiting for her outside the store.

Chris was about to get off when Latoya walked in to start her shift for three hours. Chris told her he would talk to her later, maybe even come and pick her up from work. Ms. Simpson saw Aunt Naomi and asked how she was doing today.

Aunt Naomi wanted to tell her about Sean proposing to Tanya, but she knew that she could not keep a secret to save her life. Aunt Naomi decided not to mention it at all. Aunt Naomi could not wait to go home and relax, because she was real busy today with all the babies that were born today. She was hoping that one day Tanya and Chris might have a few kids.

Chris went home to relax for a while and straighten up his room.

Sean asked Tanya to go to his house for a little while and hang out with him. She agreed because she had only been to his house once since they were

together. Michael and Susan were having lunch while they were doing work. Michael kept looking at Susan in a sexy way and she kept telling him to stop that.

"I want you right here and right now in my office on this table," Michael said.

"Michael, we cannot do that here; people will see us," Susan said.

"No they won't because we can close the blinds and lock the door." Michael went to close the blinds and locked the door. Besides, most of the workers thought that him and Susan left anyway when they went to get lunch. Michael moved everything off his desk and put it on the floor.

"See Susan, you have to learn how to take some risk sometimes in your life," he said.

Susan laughed and said, "Is that so, Michael."

Sean decided to cook dinner for him and Tanya while she relaxed in the living room. She called the house to tell whoever answered that she was at Sean's house and would not stay out too late. When she called the house, she did not think anyone was going to pick up the phone, so she was going to leave a message but Chris picked up the phone. She told him that she was at Sean's house and to tell Aunt Naomi where she was so that she wouldn't worry even though she knew she would not.

"Okay, I will tell her, and don't do anything I wouldn't do," he said.

Tanya laughed and said, "Well it is too late because we both have already done that." They hung up and Chris continued to straighten up his room. He called Latoya to see what time she was going to get off work. She told him that she was getting off at 8:30 tonight. Chris told her okay and that he will be there to pick her up.

Jay was coming home from school. It was his late day and he could not wait to get home to see his sister Michelle and play with her. She always waited for Jay to come home so that he could play with her and read to her.

When Jay got to his building he saw a couple of guys he knew being searched by the police, because it was Tuesday and it was sweep day which meant the cops picked you up if you were standing on the corner or just hanging out. That happened on Thursday too. Most of the people knew when the cops were coming and they would leave from where they were standing.

When Jay reached upstairs to his house and opened the door his little sister Michelle ran to him and made him pick her up. He dropped his bag with his books in it, picked her up, and swung her around. She liked when he did that to her. He held on to her, picked up his book bag, and went in to his room. Jay

put his sister on his bed and played with her some more. He played with her until she got tired and wanted her bottle. Then he did his homework he had to do for class.

Not everybody could wait for Christmas vacation to be over for the long break.

Theresa was at home taking care of the baby and deciding to do more with her life. She was also thinking about going back to school. Her mom was a junior high school teacher and her father left her and her mom when she was eight years old. The baby's father lived in the Bronx, and he would call about the baby but he never came by to see her.

Sean finished cooking and he and Tanya ate until they couldn't eat any more.

"Sean, you ready for your dessert right now?" she said.

Sean told her not right this minute and went to put the dishes in the sink to be washed later. They just sat for a while listening to music and dancing. Sean asked Tanya if she had classes or had to work tomorrow because he wanted her to stay over his house.

"I am off and don't have any classes tomorrow, and I will be with you all day and all night, baby. You are not getting rid of me that easily," she said.

Latoya was talking to Chris about plans for the weekend, because she wanted to go to a club and have some fun. Chris agreed and said he would like to go to a club and have some fun. "Maybe we can invite Tanya and Sean, and Michael and Susan, if they are not busy this weekend."

Aunt Naomi found out that she had to do a double but she was going to be off for two days. She liked the fact that she was going to have a couple of days off. She called the house to let Chris and Tanya know that she had to do a double. Chris told her okay and that he would see her tomorrow when she got in.

The weekend was approaching and everybody was trying to see who was doing what. Chris asked Sean and Michael if they wanted to go to the movies with the girls.

"Hell yeah! Let's go to the movies 'cause we don't hang out anymore together," Michael said.

"Okay then," Chris replied. "There is some commotion outside of my window. It seems somebody tried to rob the store and the people called the cops. The cops came, and the people were arrested and taken to jail. Damn shit always happens in the hood and people just do not want to give up and leave people alone."

The days went by after the attempted robbery at the store. It was Friday, and everybody was looking forward to going out having fun. Tanya had to go pick up her paycheck and so did Latoya and Chris so they could cash them to go out tonight. They all walked to go get them together and then went to the bank.

The bank was crowded because everybody was trying to cash a check or deposit money. When they had finished cashing their checks Tanya called Sean to see what time he was going, and to tell him that she missed him bad and could not wait to see him. They decided to all meet at Sean's house at 7:00 to see what movie to go see and what time. Around 6:30, Tanya and Chris met Latoya downstairs to go to Sean's house.

Michael and Susan were pulling up into one of the parking spots when Michael was parking his car. When they were getting out of the car they said hello to Chris, Latoya and Tanya and they said hi back to each other. They walked to Sean's building to go to his house. When they reached the building, they had to wait for the elevator to go to his house. The elevator finally came, they got on to go to Sean's house, and they reached his floor.

Sean opened the door when Tanya rang the bell and they all walked in his house. Everybody sat down in the living room and started talking about what they wanted to see at the movies. They were talking about the Ray Charles movie seemed like it was good. They all agreed and went to see that movie and then maybe go to the club to have fun.

"We should wait and go to the club tomorrow and go out to eat tonight after the movie," Latoya said.

"That does make more sense," Tanya mentioned, "so where are we going to eat after the movie?"

Sean told them that it did not make any sense to drive two cars, so everybody could ride with him in the truck.

They decided to catch the 9:00 p.m. show in the Bronx the movie theater in coop-city. They were going to leave Sean's house at 7:15 to get there in time to get their tickets.

Jay was in his room just studying for some tests he had on Monday for his classes. His little sister was playing in the playpen in the living room while his mom and dad were watching a movie on the television.

Aunt Naomi was taking a dinner break because she was doing a double and she was hungry. Ms. Simpson was getting ready to home because she was off now and didn't have to work tomorrow.

“Hope to see you in church on Sunday, Naomi, because there is going to be an afternoon service and those are very enjoyable,” she said. “We have dinner in between the services. I believe this one is for all the ministers’ wives.” Aunt Naomi went back to work and Ms. Simpson left to go home.

They finally got to coop-city and had to find a place to park. There was a little traffic because of an accident on the cross Bronx expressway. When they got out of the truck to go stand in line there was a bit of a commotion; some people were arguing about who was on the line first.

Sean and the gang decided to go buy their tickets first, then go into the mall and look around before the movie started. This way they had their tickets so they would not have to wait in line for anything.

The girls were doing some window-shopping while the fellows were just sitting and talking to each other. Chris asked Sean if he was still excited about proposing to Tanya on her birthday.

“Yes, I can’t wait for that day to get here next month,” Sean said.

Michael asked what they were talking about and Chris told him about Sean going to ask Tanya to marry him on Christmas Eve because that was her birthday. Michael told him, “Congratulations, you deserve to be happy. Tanya is a very beautiful person, and you belong together.”

The girls were coming out of one of the stores and Chris spotted them so they stopped talking about the engagement and started discussing something else. The girls reached them and asked them what they were talking about and Sean said, “We were just saying every time you all go somewhere, near a mall, you have to go in the stores and either spend money or look.”

Tanya and them laughed and said, “You are right because we like to shop.”

Michael asked if they wanted to eat first and then go to the movies or after the movie.

“We can eat now, then movie, and then go to my house and hang out. Unless you all have to work tomorrow and need to get some sleep,” Sean said.

Chris, Latoya and Tanya all said that they were off tomorrow. Susan and Michael said they had to work but they could still hang out.

They went to eat at Red Lobster. When they got there, it was not crowded as usual. When they finished eating, it was now 8:45 so they headed to the movie theater to go see the movie. They all bought popcorn, candy and soda to enjoy while they watched the movie. Sean and Tanya shared the soda and the popcorn. They liked doing that. Chris and Latoya decided to do that too.

Michael bought some for him and Susan. They liked to sit in the balcony so then that way they could make out too. The back was their favorite place to

sit in the theater. The movie was good and they really enjoyed it. Leaving the theater they got in the truck and talked about the movie.

"Jamie Foxx is a good actor, especially playing in the movie *Ray*," Susan said.

Michael mentioned that some of the females in the movie were cute and if he was a star he would date one. Everybody started laughing because they knew it was going to bother Susan.

"If you want to be with one of them, then why don't you see if you can get with them, you fucking asshole," Susan said. Michael knew that he shouldn't have said anything.

He started to laugh and said, "I knew that you were going to get upset; that's why I said that. You know that I care about nobody but you, because I do not want you to kick my ass, like you did that girl Keisha."

"I wonder if her parents got her out of jail," Latoya said.

"What, she is in jail; why?" Susan asked, and Latoya told them that she was arrested for prostitution.

"She was in that apartment that the cops raided with the drug dealers, suppliers and a whole lot of drugs. I heard some people talking about it."

"Oh yeah, that is right. We were coming home that day but I did not know she was involved with that. I know her parents are pissed the fuck off."

Tanya's song came on the radio and she started singing. It was the Alicia Keys and Usher song "My Boo." It seemed that Latoya and Susan liked it too. They started singing it along with Tanya and the people liked the fact that the girls were singing to them.

When they got back in the hood, it seemed pretty dead outside because no one was around in front of the buildings. Sean found a spot right next to where Michael had parked his car. They got out of the truck and walked through the courtyard to Sean's building. When they reached his house, he opened the door and they all went in.

Sean checked the messages on the phone, and he had one from his parents asking how he was doing, and if there was any important mail that they had and needed.

"That was my parents leaving a message asking how I was doing and if they got any mail. My grandmother is fine and driving them crazy. Does anybody want anything to drink while I am in the kitchen?" he said. "Then again, I am going to make some margaritas and turn on some music so you all just relax and enjoy yourselves."

Tanya got comfortable, took off her shoes, and started dancing to the music. Latoya and Chris started dancing and Susan and Michael joined in on the fun too.

“The margaritas are ready; who would like to try one and tell me what you think.” Everybody tried one and said that they liked it and would probably want more.

Tanya, Latoya and Susan were getting a little tipsy and the guys were enjoying it. The girls started dancing and acting like they were working at a club. Sean told Tanya to go in his parents’ room and wait for him, and told Chris to go in his room. He told Michael to use his brother’s room and enjoy himself, because he knew that he was going to enjoy himself.

Everybody was in a room, the girls started stripping for the guys, and giving them lap dances. Chris could not believe that Latoya was doing that. Everybody was so drunk that they all did what they wanted and then they passed out until the next morning.

Sean woke up the next morning and went to wash up, and make some coffee for them to drink in case of a hangover. He also decided to make some breakfast for them to eat. Everybody started getting up one by one because they smelled the coffee and the breakfast that Sean was cooking in the kitchen. Sean went to his parents’ room to wake up Tanya because it seemed everyone was up except for her. He went and kissed her and started to kiss her neck. She then woke up and asked him what he was doing.

“Trying to get my baby to wake up and come eat some breakfast and drink some coffee.” She got up, went into the bathroom, and got herself together to join the others.

They all enjoyed the breakfast and the coffee. They talked about what time to meet up again to go to the club tonight. Everybody left to go home and figure out what they were going to wear to the club later. Chris and Tanya were sitting around in the house for a while talking to Aunt Naomi before going to take a shower and change their clothes. Tanya was thinking about going to buy an outfit for tonight.

“Maybe I will go buy me an outfit, too. I am going to call you, Tanya, after I take a shower and change,” Latoya said.

“Okay,” Tanya replied, and Tanya asked Susan if she wanted to go shopping with them, to buy new outfits for the club tonight. She told them no because she had stuff in her closet that she hadn’t had on yet.

“I am going to go home, take a shower, and try to take a nap for a while.”

CHAPTER NINE: A NIGHT AT THE CLUB

Latoya reached her building and went upstairs, and Chris, Tanya, and Susan and Michael kept walking. Then Chris and Tanya went upstairs to their house and Michael and Susan got in his car. Everybody was getting ready for the club tonight. Tanya and Latoya had bought nice outfits for tonight. The club that they were going to was free for women up until 11:00 p.m.

Sean drove his truck again and they listened to music and promised not to get too drunk and act crazy in the club.

When they got to the club, it was packed and people were still trying to get in. The line was moving fast though. When they finally got in the club, they found a table that was not that far from the bar or the bathrooms. Everybody was dancing and having a good time there and drinking. Everybody was having the time of their life and then a fight started to break out between couple of people.

People started to move to the sides when the bouncers were coming to see what the problem was. They tried to throw the people out but the fight just got bigger and people started running out, because one of the people that were fighting pulled out a gun and started aiming it in the crowd. The bartender picked up the phone and called the police.

“Is there anywhere else you all would like to go?” Sean said.

“Let us go to the Rumba Club up in the Bronx. I heard that is a nice place.”

They got back in the truck and drove to the Bronx. When they got there, there really was not any place to park. Sean wanted to go somewhere that had a parking lot so he would not have to park so far away from the place. Then again, Michael remembered about the party boat that goes around Manhattan and you could drink and dance. They decided that would be a good thing to do and it was something new for a change. Sean drove to the Westside highway

near the place where the people go to look at the Navy planes at the Intrepid. Sean was glad that they had a place for you to park and then you could just get on the boat. When they reached the booth to pay they noticed the sign that said you could rent for parties or special occasions.

"They have a sign that actually tells you when the party boat goes out around Manhattan," Tanya said. "It usually goes out on Fridays but it a special outing for tonight."

They went to find some seats and the fellows went to get them something to drink. Sean had an idea and mentioned it to Chris and Michael about having a surprise birthday party for Tanya on the boat. Chris agreed, and told him to do it but he needed to find out how much it was going to cost. Sean asked the bartender whom did he have to speak to book the boat for a party. The bartender told him to call the office tomorrow and they would give him all the details and the price. He told the bartender thank you and then they went to sit with the girls.

"Susan, would you like to dance with me and have fun too?" Michael said.

Susan got up and went to dance with Michael then Chris and Latoya followed them Tanya was not ready to dance yet. They had a good time on the party boat and drank a lot of liquor.

Sean did not drink that much because he knew that he had to drive everybody home. The party boat was pulling into the dock, and everybody was waiting to get off and go to his or her cars, catch a cab or even go to the train station. Sean opened the doors to the truck and everybody got in. Everybody was tired when they got back into the hood.

Michael and Susan said goodnight to everyone and got into the car. Sean told Michael to drive safely and to not drive too fast. Sean kissed Tanya goodnight and Chris did the same to Latoya. Sean walked Latoya to her building and made sure she got home and then he went home. When Sean got in the house, he called Tanya to tell her goodnight and that he loved her. She told him that she loved him too and that she will see him tomorrow for church.

"Okay, I will be ready and meet you in front of the church," and then she told Chris to call and remind Latoya about church tomorrow.

Chris yelled and told her that he would remind her when he called in a few minutes. Aunt Naomi was in her room watching the news when Tanya peeked in on her and told her goodnight. She went and gave Aunt Naomi a kiss and told her not to stay up too late because church was tomorrow. Tanya went in her room to pull off her shoes and get comfortable but she had to go to the bathroom first. Chris was on the phone with Latoya and reminding her about church tomorrow.

“Okay, I will see you tomorrow in the church. I will meet you all there,” Latoya said.

“Goodnight, my sweet thing you, Latoya, and have plenty of dreams about me,” Chris said.

Latoya hung up and went to the kitchen to get some water and then go to bed.

Chris woke up in the middle of the night and went to the bathroom and then in the kitchen to get something to drink. When he finished with the drink, he went back to bed to get some sleep.

It was Sunday morning and everybody was getting ready to get up for church. Latoya was up and in the bathroom taking a shower to get ready for church. Aunt Naomi had finished in the bathroom and now she was in the kitchen trying to fix some breakfast for them.

Sean had been up a long time getting ready and he called to see if Tanya was up and ready. She told him that she was up and almost ready.

“I will meet you in front of the church like I said, and don’t keep me waiting,” he said. They hung up and it was almost time for them to go to church.

Chris pushed for the elevator and it came fast so they got on and pushed the first floor. The elevator went down but stopped on a couple of the floors before it reached the first floor.

They were walking through the projects to get to the church and ran into Mr. and Mrs. Stevens on their way to the church that they went to. Everybody said good morning to each other and kept walking to go to church.

When they reached the church Latoya was there waiting for them. Sean was not there yet. Tanya and Latoya went to the store and Chris and Aunt Naomi went in, but when they came out of the store, they ran into Sean. Then they crossed the street and went into the church.

The church was very crowded today and they had chairs in the aisles. The choirs joined today and people were dancing, shouting and singing along. This time Pastor Blackshear did not preach; it was another reverend preaching this morning. The members were shouting, saying, “Thank you, Jesus,” and, “Hallelujah,” and it was just a lovely service. No one joined the church today and they reminded the members about the afternoon service.

“I am going to stay for the afternoon service. If you all don’t want to stay then you can leave,” Naomi said. They all decided to stay for the afternoon service. Aunt Naomi and them went to get something to eat and could not believe how much the members cared about each other.

Ms. Simpson came and sat at the table with them to eat and chitchat a little bit and Tanya said, "Aunt Naomi! Who sits at that big table, up there?"

Aunt Naomi told her she did not know but Ms. Simpson told her that that table was for the reverends and their wives. Only for today, it was for the wives because the afternoon service was for them and the men would be sitting at the other table.

"That is so nice and the table looks beautiful."

When they were finished eating they went back out to the sanctuary to have a seat.

A couple of the members in the choir asked Chris, Sean, Tanya and Latoya if they would like to join the choir. If so to see one of them so they can tell them on what day the choir rehearsal is. They all said okay and they would be sure to see one of them.

It was almost time for the afternoon service to start but before it started, they had the devotional part of the service. When it was time for the service to start the choir marched in first and the ministers' wives marched in with their escorts. They pinned a corsage on them and then they sat down.

"It was a very beautiful service," Tanya told Aunt Naomi, "and especially to see all the wives dressed in white and sitting in the front."

In addition, making remarks were the wives and the ministers.

When the service was over everybody went home to relax and prepare for tomorrow. Chris walked Latoya home and stayed for a while. Tanya and Sean went to his house to just chill, and Aunt Naomi went home to warm up some food from last night.

The month of November was almost over before December and Tanya's birthday was getting here. The weeks were going fast. Before Christmas was coming everyone was doing their shopping.

Aunt Naomi was packing for the trip to her sister's house. Tanya and everybody could not wait to go, too.

School was closing on that Friday for all college students and Tanya, Latoya and Jay could not wait for it to end.

Michael did not know if he was going to keep the gym open for the holiday because he wanted to be with his family. He invited Susan to go with him to his brother's house so she wouldn't be home alone.

"Sean, did you pack your clothes for my aunt's house for Christmas yet? On the other hand, did you change your mind and decide not to go?" Tanya said.

"I have not changed my mind. I cannot wait to go to your aunt's house in New Jersey. I have always wanted to buy a house out there and live. Just

haven't been out there to look yet and see what I wanted and where," he said. "I hate for you to leave but it is getting late and you do have school tomorrow. I am going to walk you home to make sure you get there safely," he said.

"That will be nice of you, Sean, and sweet too, and then nothing will happen to me," she said.

Therefore, Sean walked Tanya to her building and kissed her goodnight. He then went back home and went to bed so he could get up early and go do his workout at the gym. Michael had just dropped Susan off at her house from the gym.

Theresa was going with her parents to spend Christmas with her grandparents so they could meet their great-granddaughter.

Jay was just going to stay in the hood with his parents and his little sister. Some of his relatives were coming over for Christmas dinner.

The next day was somewhat nice but cold outside and people bundled up. It looked like it was going to snow and it was going to be a bad one. Most people were trying to finish their Christmas shopping and last-minute food shopping.

Sean decided to call Chris and find out if Tanya had been asking him if he knew what Sean was getting her for her birthday and Christmas. Chris said, "She hasn't asked me anything about her birthday or Christmas. She is just happy to be getting out of the hood for the holidays. Come to think about it, I am happy that I will get away from here too. "

Sean asked Chris while they were at his aunt's house would he go out house hunting with him because he knew that he had an idea about what Tanya liked. Chris told him that he would be glad to go house shopping with him. Chris and Sean both hung up the phone. Chris had to be at work at 10:00. Latoya was also working today but she had to be there at 10:30. Everybody was excited about school closing on Friday. Aunt Naomi was off today and she called her sister Nancy to see if she was doing all right and if she had everything she needed for her Christmas dinner.

"I have almost everything that I need. The only thing that is missing is your sweet potato pie and your pumpkin pie," Aunt Nancy said.

"I will make those pies for you when I come up there because I want them to be perfect and not fall apart by traveling."

"Okay, I will see you when you get here on that Saturday the week before Christmas." Aunt Naomi hung up the phone and went into the kitchen to fix her some breakfast along with some coffee. She was just going to straighten up the house and put up her Christmas tree like the one she did every year. She usually put it up the weekend of Thanksgiving but she did not this time. She

wanted her house to look good even though she was not going to be here. Chris came out of his room and went into the kitchen to get a bowl of cereal before going to work. He saw Aunt Naomi in the kitchen, told her good morning, and gave her a hug and kiss.

“Are you ready for Christmas at your Aunt Nancy’s house this year?” Aunt Naomi said.

Chris told her that he could not wait especially to see the look in Tanya’s face when Sean asked her to marry him on her birthday, Christmas Eve. Chris finished his cereal and washed his bowl and then he left for work. On his way to work, he saw Susan going into the supermarket and he spoke to her.

“Hi Chris, how are you doing and where are you on your way to this morning?” Susan said.

Chris told her that he was on his way to work and he would talk to her later. She told him to tell Tanya that she said hello and to call her when she got a chance before they left town. Chris replied, “I will give her the message when she comes home from school.” Susan went into the supermarket, punched her time card, and went to her register. Theresa was already there and working and laughing with one of the customers.

Susan said, “Good morning, Theresa, how are you today on this beautiful day?”

“I am fine and doing better now that I have been able to get my life together for my baby and me,” Theresa answered. “Do not have to think about her no good father and beg him to buy anything for her. I am not interested in trying to date right now or anything else. I want to go back to school and continue my education to make my daughter proud of me.”

“Your daughter is going to be proud of you no matter what,” the customer said to Theresa. He then told her to enjoy the rest of her day and take care of that beautiful baby that she has.

“I think that guy was flirting with you and trying to ask you out but he didn’t know how to ask you,” Susan said.

“Do you really think that is what he was trying to do?” Theresa said to Susan.

“Yes but you could tell by the big smile on his face and also how he was looking at you up and down. I am sure he will be back in here before closing time tonight. What are you doing for Christmas and will you be in the hood?” Susan said.

“No, I am going with my parents to my grandparents’ house for the holidays,” Theresa said.

"That sounds like a nice plan for you," Susan said.

"It is because they haven't seen Alicia at all yet; they have only seen pictures of her that my mom has sent to them. What about you, Susan; are you going away for Christmas? On the other hand, are you going to be here?" Theresa asked.

"I am going to go with Michael to his brother's house for Christmas to meet his family," Susan said.

"We had better get back to work before Mr. Smith comes out here yelling because we are clowning around and making the lines move slowly. I wonder what he is doing for Christmas once he closes the store early and goes home."

CHAPTER TEN: ON THE WAY TO AUNT NANCY'S HOUSE

It was now Friday and everybody was getting out of school for the holidays and ready to go away. Latoya and Tanya met at the school gate to go home together, relax, and make sure they had everything before they left in the morning. Sean was driving all of them to Tanya's aunt's house in New Jersey. They all decided not to hang out to late tonight so that they could get plenty of sleep before leaving in the morning. Aunt Naomi wanted to leave early because she knew that it was going to be a lot of traffic from people leaving and coming into New York.

"Latoya, you should just spend the night at my house then that way you will be here," Tanya said. "Ask Chris to go with you to your house to help you get your things." When they reached Tanya's house Aunt Naomi was putting her bags by the door so that they would be there in the morning. Chris was getting ready to do the same thing.

"Hi Aunt Naomi, how are you doing today, and do you need any help bringing your things to the door?" Latoya said.

"No, I have everything there already, and where is your bags, Latoya?" she said.

"My things are still at my house. I was going to ask Chris to come and help me bring them over here, because Tanya said it would be better if I just stayed here tonight. Tanya has a good idea and I believe that Sean should just stay here too. Then all we have to do is just get up in the morning and leave." The phone rang and it was Sean calling to talk to Tanya.

"Hello Sean, what are you doing right now?" Tanya said.

"I am packing the last little bit of my stuff and my gifts; why do you ask?" he said.

“Well Aunt Naomi told me to tell you that you should stay here tonight and then we could just leave from here before all the traffic in the morning.”

“Tell Aunt Naomi I said I would love to and that is a good idea to leave before everybody else decides to leave early. I will be over as soon as I have everything together, baby.”

Chris and Latoya went to her house to get her things and came back. Just as they were coming in the building, Sean was coming behind them. They all rode up together and then got off and went inside the apartment. Aunt Naomi spoke to Sean and told him to put his things in Chris’s room and Latoya to put her things in Tanya’s room.

“If you all are hungry there is some lasagna in the refrigerator; all you have to do is warm it up,” Aunt Naomi said.

They all told her thank you and to go relax. Tanya went into the kitchen to warm up the lasagna, and asked them what they wanted to drink. When the lasagna was warm enough she took it out of the microwave and put it on the table and told them to come and eat.

“This is what we have to drink in the refrigerator; there is Kool-Aid, soda and iced tea,” Tanya said. Sean and Chris wanted soda and Latoya and Tanya decided on iced tea. Sean and Latoya both said that the lasagna was very good. When everyone finished eating Latoya and Tanya did the dishes while Chris and Sean went to watch the television. When they were finished with the dishes, they joined the fellows for a little while and then everyone went to bed.

It was the next morning and it was around 7:30 and Aunt Naomi was waking up to go to the bathroom. On her way to the bathroom, she heard someone in the kitchen. She walked towards the kitchen to see who was in there.

“Good morning, Sean. I see you are up early and fixing breakfast; you didn’t have to do that,” Aunt Naomi said.

“I know, I just thought I would fix some breakfast for us before we left this morning, then the only thing we would have to stop for would be to go to the bathroom,” he said.

“That is true,” Aunt Naomi told him. “Besides, it is not going to take that long to get to my sister’s house. She is like in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.”

“That is a nice place. I hear one of my mom’s friends live out there. I am thinking about purchasing a house or apartment out there on Jersey somewhere. Chris is going to go out looking with me but I am not going to tell Tanya what I am doing. The only thing that I ever mentioned to her was that I would like to live in Jersey.”

Everybody was getting up going into the bathroom. When they finished they all came to the table to eat breakfast. When everyone was finished, Aunt Naomi washed the dishes so that they would be in there while they were away. Sean and Chris started taking the bags to the elevator while the women were doing last-minute primping. Sean and Chris put their entire luggage on the elevator and then went down. After they loaded all the bags in the truck, Aunt Naomi, Tanya and Latoya came downstairs.

“Okay, is there anything that anyone wants to keep on the seat with them before the trunk is closed?” Sean said. The women all kept a small bag with them.

“If that is all let’s get in the truck and hit the road,” he said. They all got in and sat down to get comfortable.

“Aunt Naomi, did you call Aunt Nancy to let her know that we were leaving so that she would be up and waiting for us?” Tanya said.

“No, I forgot to call her and tell her that we were on our way there,” she said.

“Then use my phone so that she will be up when we get there,” Tanya said. Aunt Naomi took Tanya’s cell phone to call her sister.

“Hello Nancy, it is me Naomi; just calling to let you know that we are on our way over to your house,” Aunt Naomi said. “We wanted to leave early before other people decided to go out of town.”

“No problem, I was getting up anyway to try and straighten up a little bit. I have to also run to the store and pick up a few things for us to eat before Christmas comes. I will see you all when you get here,” Aunt Nancy said. Nancy asked Aunt Naomi if she remembered how to get there.

“I remember how to get to your house; if not I will be calling you back again,” Naomi said.

“Okay, just checking because I know that you are coming with Chris. Tanya, Latoya and Sean this time,” she said.

“Well we are riding with Sean so it will be all right. I am going to get off this phone so I can go to the store do some shopping.”

“Tell the kids hello for me and I cannot wait to see them too.” Aunt Naomi and Nancy hung up the phones. Aunt Naomi gave Tanya back her cell phone and told them what Nancy had said. Sean looked and realized that he needed gas so he was going to pull over at the first rest stop on the turnpike. Everybody got out of the truck to go to the bathroom and maybe buy something to snack on or to drink. When they got back in the truck Sean drove to the pumps to get some gas. Then after he pumped the gas and paid, they were back on the turnpike on their way.

Jay was playing with his little sister and she was having so much fun. His parents were still sleeping in their room. Jay's little sister always woke him up to play with her. He did not mind because he enjoyed being there for her and he cared and loved her very much. She was getting hungry so they both went into the kitchen to get something to eat. By the time they were finished his mother was getting up.

Over at Keisha's house she was sitting in her room getting ready to go do her community service cleaning up in the parks. Her father made sure that she was up and getting ready to leave.

"I am up, Daddy, and I will be leaving in a few minutes. Don't worry, I am not going to mess up," Keisha said.

"I hope doing this will teach you a lesson not to do the wrong thing again, especially while you are living in this house," Keisha's father said.

"All right, Daddy!" in a yelling voice Keisha answered him. "You do not have to keep telling me the same thing!" Her father walked out of the room.

"Damn, he is getting on my last nerve about this stupid shit," she said to Paul when he came in her room. "I know that I literally messed up and had sex for money but he does not have to remind me every day about it. I wish that I could go and stay with Tina and them, or someone else in the family because I feel that I am in jail still."

"Don't think like that; just do what you have to do so that it will be over soon," Paul said. "Come on, sis, you have to hang in there, because if you don't they are going to put you back in jail, and this time you are going to have to go where all the other women are. From what I hear, the women jail is not a nice place."

"Damn, is any jail a nice place to be? I know that and believe me I do not want to go back. Let me go before Dad comes back again."

"I will see you later if you are in the house. I might be outside playing ball with who knows." Paul went back in his room and listened to his music.

Sean was nearing the exit to get off to go to Aunt Nancy's house. He got off the exit and made a left turn. Aunt Naomi told Sean to go six more blocks and then make a left. Nancy's house would be the fourth house on the right. When they pulled up in the driveway Aunt Nancy came out to meet them. She was so happy to see them, that she hugged everybody and told them to come in. Sean and Chris started taking the bags out of the truck. When they went inside, Aunt Nancy's husband was sitting in the living room watching the news. They had been married for almost twenty-five years and were very happy. They had two kids, a boy and girl, who were each married and living in New

Jersey. Aunt Nancy asked her husband John to go and help Sean and Chris with the bags. He went to help them bring the bags in the house while Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy talked for a while. Aunt Nancy decided that instead of cooking tonight they would go out to eat at a restaurant.

She told them where to put their bags. Sean and Chris were going to sleep in her son's room. Tanya and Latoya were going to sleep in the daughter's room and Aunt Naomi slept in the guest bedroom. She showed them around the house and they all liked it a lot. Sean really liked it because that was what he was looking for. When they finished admiring the house, they left and went out to eat dinner. Aunt Nancy and her husband treated them to dinner and a nice night out. They drove around in Hoboken so that they could see what it looked like out there. Sean could not believe his eyes at the beautiful houses.

"It is very beautiful out here, and quiet here too," Sean said. John mentioned that it was not too expensive to live out here in New Jersey. As they were driving, they passed a house that was for sale that Sean spotted. When they got back to the house, he told Chris that he wanted him to go with him tomorrow to check out that house.

Back in the hood, it was peaceful and everybody was either working or doing some shopping and then again maybe relaxing. Many of the apartments looked nice with the Christmas decorations up in the windows. Tony's parents were not really into the Christmas spirit because their only son was gone. They thought they should go away for the holidays. Mrs. Stevens called her sister to see what she was doing for the holidays. Her sister invited them to her house so that they would be around family and not be too depressed because Tony was not here. They accepted the invitation and were going to leave tonight. They were going to Virginia for Christmas by the airplane. They would be there much faster by plane. Jay was helping his mom put up the Christmas tree with his little sister. She was so happy and excited about Christmas coming.

Theresa and her parents were leaving tonight to go to her grandparents' house and she could not wait. She wanted them to meet their great-granddaughter and see that she was a beautiful little girl.

Michael and Susan left in the morning go to his brother's. Susan was a little nervous about going to a place she had never been before. The stores were packed and there were many sales. People were really doing their shopping.

"Sean, what time do you want to go and look at the house in the morning?" Chris said.

"It will be after we get up and get ourselves together," Sean said.

"I will just say that you and I are going to finish doing some shopping and will be back later," he said.

“That is exactly what we will be doing, shopping. I have to buy a gift for your Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy and your Uncle John,” Sean said. “That was nice of them to let Latoya and I come and spend Christmas with you all here in New Jersey.”

“They have always been friendly and loving like that to people; that is why Tanya and I care about them so much,” Chris said. “So are you getting nervous about asking Tanya to marry you? It will be her birthday soon and I know she is dying to find out what you are giving her for her birthday and Christmas,” he said.

“Well we had better get some sleep and rest for tomorrow.” Chris turned out the light and closed his eyes to go to sleep and Sean did the same thing. The next morning everybody was awakened by the smell of the coffee and the wonderful breakfast that Aunt Nancy was making. Aunt Naomi was in the kitchen with her but she was sitting at the table drinking some coffee. Uncle John was in the bedroom making up the bed and getting ready to go to work for a couple of hours. Everybody washed up and went into the kitchen to sit down to breakfast.

“How did all of you sleep last night in the rooms and were you comfortable?” Aunt Naomi said.

“Yes, I was very comfortable last night and slept like a baby,” Tanya said.

“I was very comfortable,” Latoya, Chris and Sean told her, too.

“I am glad that you all were very comfortable and I hope you enjoy the day, but I have to work, but I will see all of you when I come home tonight,” Uncle John said. After Uncle John finished eating, he gave Aunt Nancy a hug and a kiss and left out the door to go to work. Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy finished eating and went into the family room to relax and talk.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: BUYING THE PERFECT HOUSE

Tanya and Latoya washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. Sean and Chris went to go get their jackets to go do more shopping. Chris and Sean stopped in the kitchen to tell the girls that they would be back in a while because they had to do a little bit more shopping.

“Okay we will see the two of you when you get back,” Tanya and Latoya both said. They also told Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy that they would be back in a while. Sean and Chris left out of the house and got in the truck. Sean backed the truck back and proceeded in the direction of the house that was for sale. When they got to the house there were some people there also looking at the beautiful house. The real estate woman was showing the other people the living room. She told Sean and Chris to give her a few minutes. When she finished with the other couple, she showed Sean and Chris around the house.

“I really like this house and what is it that I have to do to buy it?” Sean said. The woman gave him all the information and told him what he needed, and how much he needed for a credit check. After Sean gave her all the stuff she asked for, she told him that she would be giving him a call. He gave her his cell number and said that she could reach him that way. When they finished at the house, they got back in the truck and went shopping for some more Christmas presents.

“I am going to call and see how Jay and Michael are going to spend their Christmas this year,” Sean said.

Sean dialed Jay on his cell phone. Jay’s mother picked up the phone and said hello to Sean then she called Jay to the phone.

“Hey Sean, what’s up and are you having fun in Hoboken, New Jersey?” Jay said. Sean told him that they all were having a nice time there and he had just gone to look at a house for him and Tanya to live in. “Hey, that is cool and I am glad that you and Tanya are going to be happy.”

Sean said, "Tell your parents and your little sister I said hello and have a merry Christmas." Chris was saying hello in the background and Jay told Sean to tell him hello back. Sean and Jay both said goodbye and hung up. Then Chris decided that he was going to call Michael and see what he was doing. The phone rang and Michael picked up.

"What's up; just thought I would call and see what you were up to and where were you spending your Christmas," Chris said.

"I am spending it with my brother and his family and Susan is here also," Michael said.

Chris told him to tell Susan hello and merry Christmas and that Sean said hello too. Chris hung up and looked out the window trying to figure out what to get Latoya for Christmas. When they got to the mall, they had to drive around to find a parking space until finally someone was coming out. Sean parked the truck and he and Chris got out and went into the mall. They shopped for a long time, almost about four hours. Tanya called Sean to see if he and Chris had gotten lost because she had not heard from them at all.

"No, we did not get lost. We are leaving out of the mall now and on our way back to the house," Sean said.

"Okay," and then she hung up the phone from talking to Sean. Aunt Nancy told Tanya to stop worrying.

"They are just fine driving around, and doing some last-minute Christmas shopping."

"You are right, Aunt Nancy. They can take care of their self, and besides, they are having fun out here," she said.

"Tanya, why don't you and Latoya borrow my car take a drive and get some air," Aunt Nancy said.

Tanya replied by saying, "That will be a lovely idea to go get some air and enjoy the atmosphere out here." Aunt Nancy went to get her car keys to give to Tanya.

"Thank you, Aunt Nancy, and if Sean and Chris come back before we get here tell them we went out for some air."

"I will do that and you just enjoy yourselves driving around." They left out the house and Naomi and Nancy were talking about Sean, what he had planned for Tanya on Christmas Eve. Nancy was so happy for the two of them that she wanted to plan a special dinner for that night. Naomi agreed with her about the dinner. Sean and Chris decided to drive into Irvington, New Jersey, to see what it was like there, and if there were any houses for sale out there. There were a few that Sean saw and looked at but nothing like the one in Hoboken. On the

drive back to Nancy's house Sean called to see if it was anything that she needed from the store. He would pick it up and bring it to the house.

"You could bring me a loaf of bread, eggs, bacon, and bring some juice and soda if you don't mind," Aunt Nancy said.

"I do not mind at all," he said.

"Tanya and Latoya went out for a drive to get some air and to stop worrying about you and Chris."

"Okay," he said. "Aunt Nancy said that Tanya and Latoya went out for a drive to get some air. We have to stop at the store and pick a few things for her," Sean said.

"That's cool because I want to see if they have some barbeque Fritos. I can't seem to find them out there anywhere," Chris said. They pulled into the parking lot of the supermarket to park. They both got out and went inside the store to pick up the things Aunt Nancy asked for. When they reached inside, they noticed that the supermarket was real big. They could not believe how big it was in there. It did not only have groceries and food but it had household things and some more stuff.

"This is a big supermarket compared to the ones in the hood where we live," Sean said.

"It sure is, and has many different things," Chris said.

"I hope that there is a lot of barbeque Fritos so I can have some for here and when we go back to the hood," he said. "I wonder what is going on in the hood now, and if there is any trouble. I meant to call the Stevens to see what they were doing for Christmas. I hope that Tony's parents went to a relative's house or something so they won't be in the house," Chris said.

"Let's go look over here to see what they have and how much it is. I still need to get my parents something for Christmas," Sean said.

"I still haven't found anything for Latoya yet for Christmas, and then again I don't know what to get her," Chris said.

Back at Aunt Nancy's house, Tanya and Latoya had come back from driving around from getting some air.

"Did Sean and Chris get back from shopping yet?" Tanya said.

"No, they have not come back yet," Aunt Naomi said. "They stopped at the supermarket for Aunt Nancy to pick up a few things that she asked for," she said.

"Okay I have to go put the bags upstairs and try to wrap a little bit before Sean and Chris both come back," Tanya said.

As Tanya and Latoya headed upstairs, Uncle John came in the house and said hello to everybody. Tanya and Latoya both spoke to him and asked how his day at work was. Uncle John went in the kitchen where Aunt Nancy and Aunt Naomi were.

"Hi there, I see the two of you are in the same room I left you in this morning," and then he kissed Aunt Nancy. They both laughed at him and continued to fix some dinner. Uncle John came back in the kitchen to get some water to drink. As he was leaving out of the kitchen to go upstairs to change his clothes, Sean and Chris were ringing the bell. Uncle John opened the door.

"Hi, I see the two of you have been gone all day and it looks like the two of you had fun," Uncle John said.

"Yes, we did have fun shopping," Chris said. "I had to pick up a few more things that I hadn't gotten yet and also some barbeque Fritos. I cannot find them in the hood where we live," he said.

"I will be back down in a few minutes; just want to change my clothes," Uncle John said.

"Okay, Uncle John," Chris said.

Sean and Chris went into the kitchen to give Aunt Nancy the stuff from the store. "Thank you, Sean and Chris, and I see you two did a lot of shopping today. Did you get everything that you wanted to get while you were shopping?" she said.

"I have almost everything that I want and hopefully the other thing will come through and then everything will be complete," Sean said.

"Did Tanya and Latoya come back from driving around getting some air?" Chris said.

"They are upstairs and do not want to be interrupted because they are wrapping some gifts, I believe."

"Okay," he said.

"I have some to wrap too, so I am going to do that now if anyone asks for me," Sean said.

"I should wrap my gifts that I have to just in case people decide to go in my bags."

"Okay," Aunt Naomi said. "When dinner is ready I will come and get you all to come and eat." Sean and Chris both told her okay and that she was a special and loving person.

"I can't believe how much Chris has grown and has turned out to be a very handsome gentleman," Aunt Nancy said. Uncle John came back down and went into the family room to watch the news. Sean and Chris had finished

wrapping their gifts and went back downstairs. They went and sat in the family room with Uncle John. He asked them what did they do today that they were gone half the day.

"We went to the mall, the supermarket and looked at a few houses that were for sale out here in Hoboken and Irvington," Sean said.

"Did you see any houses that you like out here?" Uncle John said.

"Yes, there is the one that we passed when we were going out to dinner last night that I liked. I gave the realtor all of my information and everything," Sean said.

"I hope everything turns out all right for you, Sean," Uncle John said.

"I hope so too," Sean said.

As soon as Sean was getting ready to say something else Tanya and Latoya came down the stairs and into the family room.

"What have you two guys been up to today and where did you go?" Tanya said.

"I would like to know that, too, and also what did you buy or didn't buy?" Latoya said.

"All I bought was some barbeque Fritos that I can't get back home in the hood," Chris said. Latoya told Chris that she liked them too and wanted a bag.

"Okay I will give you a couple of bags. I have some for here and to take back home," he said. "Hopefully before I leave I will buy some more to take back," Chris said.

Aunt Naomi came in the family room and told them that it was time to come and eat dinner. Everyone got up and headed for the dining room to eat.

"Aunt Nancy, is there anything that I can help you with or do for you?" Tanya said.

"You can take the rolls and the butter and put them on the table," she said. Everyone sat down while Aunt Nancy and Tanya were bringing the food to the table.

"Can we bow our head to bless the food on this table," Uncle John said. Everybody bowed their heads and blessed the table. Then they passed the food around to each other and started to eat.

"This is a lovely meal that you have prepared, Aunt Nancy, and you are the third cook in the family," Sean said. After dinner everyone was full and couldn't eat dessert right then. Uncle John, Chris and Sean went into the family room to see what was on the television. All of a sudden Sean's cell phone rang. It was the realtor calling him back asking him to come back to the house.

"I will be right there," and then he hung up the phone. Sean asked Chris and also Uncle John to ride with him.

"I will be delighted to ride with you to the house and see how it looks. Besides, you are getting it for my niece," Uncle John said. They all told the women that they were going out for a spin and would be back. Sean opened the doors to the truck and they got in. Chris let Uncle John sit up front and he sat in the back.

"Sean, this is a very nice truck and it drives nice and is also roomy too," Uncle John said.

"Thank you, I have always liked the SUV trucks," Sean said. When they got to the house the realtor was standing outside waiting for them. Uncle John knew her because she was the one that showed him and Aunt Nancy their house.

"Hello Carla. It's nice to see you again and I see you are still working at the real estate place," John said.

"Yes I am. Haven't decided to leave yet but I am going to as soon as I get enough of my commission," Carla said.

"This here is my nephew Chris and his friend Sean. Sean is going to be asking my niece Tanya to marry him on Christmas Eve which is her birthday."

"That is so nice and sweet, especially on a very nice holiday," she said. Then she said, "The reason why I called you to come back is because all of your paperwork and everything went through so if you want the house it is all yours. All we need is the down payment and for you to sign the lease." She gave Sean the lease to look over and read to make sure that everything was to his liking.

"Everything seems to be in order and there is no problem with the lease at all that I can see," Sean said.

"How much of a down payment do you need and when do you need it?" Uncle John said.

"The down payment is 3,000 and as soon as he can get it to me he can have the lease and the keys to the house," she said.

"We will call you tomorrow so that you can pick up the money and Sean can have the lease," Uncle John said.

"That will be fine and I will be waiting for your call any time tomorrow." They went back to the truck and got in to go back to the house.

Uncle John said, "I am going to discuss this with Aunt Nancy and let her know that I am going to give you the money for the down payment."

"I don't know how I am going to repay you, Uncle John, for all that you have done for me," Sean said.

"Just make my niece happy and treat her with the love and respect that she deserves," Uncle John said.

“You don’t have to worry because I plan on treating her like the queen that she is,” he said.

“Uncle John, how are you going to tell Aunt Nancy about the 3,000 dollars for the house?” Chris said.

“I am just going to tell her and she is going to understand and say that it is okay,” he said.

When they got back to the house the kitchen was cleaned and the women were watching some movie on DVD. They were so busy laughing that they didn’t hear the guys come in the house until they reached the family room.

“Nancy, can I talk to you for a minute and then you can finish the movie. If not, then I will just wait until we go to bed,” Uncle John said.

“You can speak to me right now. I can see this again some other time,” Aunt Nancy said. Aunt Nancy and Uncle John went into the kitchen to talk. Uncle John told Aunt Nancy about the house that Sean was buying for Tanya and how much the deposit was and that he offered to give it to them.

“It is fine with me, John. You didn’t have to ask me if you could give Sean the money because he will be a part of this family soon,” Aunt Nancy said.

“You won’t believe who showed Sean the house either.”

“Who was it and do I know them?” she said.

“Yes you do, it was Carla, the same women who showed us this house,” he said.

“I can’t believe that she is still working at the real estate office,” she said. They finished talking and went back into the family room with the rest of them.

“Sean, can you come and help me do something real fast please?” Uncle John said.

“Yes, I will help you with whatever you need, Uncle John.” They both walked into the kitchen and Uncle John told him that Aunt Nancy said it was okay to give them the money for the down payment for the house.

“Thank you, and I will never forget this as long as I live,” Sean said. They walked back into the family room and sat down.

“Is everything all right, Sean and Uncle John, with the two of you, and why are you being so secretive?” Tanya said.

“No one is being secretive,” he said.

“Your uncle and I are just getting to know each other and I am just trying to help him out with a few things, okay Tanya,” Sean said.

“There is no problem. I just thought I would ask because you two seem like something is wrong,” she said.

"Tanya, please stop harassing that boy and just relax and finish watching the movie," Uncle John said. They continued to watch the movie and figure out what else they were going to watch. Aunt Nancy and Aunt Naomi wanted to see the movie *Ray* after they finished watching taxi. Uncle John asked Sean if he knew how to shoot pool.

"Yes I do but I haven't done it in a while because I can't really find anybody to play with me," Sean said.

"Sean, would you and Chris likes to go out and shoot some pool with me for a little while?" Uncle John said.

"I would like to go and learn how to shoot pool with you, Uncle John," Chris said.

"Okay let's go out for a while and leave the ladies watching these movies," he said. Uncle John kissed Aunt Nancy, Sean kissed Tanya and Chris kissed Latoya and Aunt Naomi and told them they would see them later. They walked out of the house and Uncle John asked Sean if he could drive his truck.

"I would be delighted if you drove my truck so you can see how it drives and that it is manageable," he said. Uncle John got in on the driver's side, Chris got in the back and Sean got in on the passenger's side.

"This is a very smooth ride and it is not at all that big. I have to say that I can handle this truck. Maybe one day I will get me one," Uncle John said.

"If you want I would be glad to go out with you tomorrow to look at some, if you would like, Uncle John," Sean replied.

"I would like that very much and we can do that tomorrow after we give Carla the down payment for the house," he said. When they reached the pool hall Uncle John parked and they all got out and went inside to play pool. Uncle John noticed a few of his friends in there. They played pool for over three hours and then headed back to the house.

Jay was at home wrapping Christmas presents to put under the tree and his little sister had just gone to sleep. Jay's parents were in the living room watching the news. His mom was watching the news and finishing the Christmas tree. Keisha was just getting in at 9:00 p.m. from doing community service work. Her father started screaming at her because he thought she was in the street doing something bad.

"Dad, chill the fuck out. I just came in from doing my community service work." He still continued to yell because he didn't believe her. That made her mom come out of the bedroom and see what the problem was.

"It is 9:00 and she has been hanging out all night instead of coming home like she was supposed to," her father said.

“She had to work until 7:00 tonight because I have her schedule because she gave it to me. Now you need to just calm down and relax,” her mom said.

“Forget it, Mom, he still is not going to believe me anyway,” she said. “Dad is never going to forget what I did and move on and leave it alone. I can’t keep saying that I am sorry and trying to make up for it.” Keisha was leaving and going into her room when her father grabbed her and slapped her in the face.

“You fucking asshole, what is your god damn problem, you bastard!” she said. She was so upset that she stormed out of the house. When she got downstairs she ran into her brother who was sitting on the bench with a couple of his friends. He saw her crying and asked her what happened. “That stupid-ass father of yours slapped me because I just got home and he thought I was hanging out somewhere. I had to work until 7:00 tonight and Mom knew and she tried to tell him but he wouldn’t listen to her,” Keisha said. “So I was just going to go in my room and he grabbed me by the arm and slapped me. I just started cursing at him,” she said.

“I will talk to Dad and tell him to chill and give you a break,” Paul said.

“Trust me, it is not going to make a big difference. He is still going to act like that,” she said. Michael and Susan were sitting in his brother’s living room talking to them and playing with the kids. The kids were glad to see their uncle Michael and liked to play with him. They liked Susan and said that she was a very beautiful person and it seemed she made their uncle happy. Jeff’s wife Denise enjoyed having people come over for the holidays because she liked to cook. Susan and she got along fine and they talked for a long time.

“Okay kids, it is time for you to go to bed now and you can play with Uncle Michael again tomorrow,” Denise said. “It is the grown-ups’ time to talk and have some fun.” The kids kissed them goodnight and went to bed. Denise and Jeff had a boy and girl; they both were the same age because they were twins.

CHAPTER TWELVE: DECORATING FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Michael and Jeff decided to go downstairs in the garage that Jeff had made into a playroom for the kids and him. He had a pool table and some more things that he liked to do down there. Denise and Susan stayed upstairs to talk.

“So how long have you and Michael been together and is everything okay with the two of you now?” Denise said.

“We have been together for eight months now except for the brief time that we broke up because of that girl.”

“Jeff was telling me about that. He said that he talked to Michael and told him that he was being a jerk, and if he continued to do what he was doing he was going to lose you.”

“You know when we finally decided to sit down and talk he mentioned that his brother said some things to him that got him to thinking.”

Theresa and her parents were laughing and talking to her grandparents, because the baby was making them laugh and cry all at the same time. Even though they couldn’t understand how Theresa was raising the baby by herself, they left it alone and just enjoyed their granddaughter.

Back at Aunt Nancy’s house Aunt Naomi wondered how everything was going back home at work. Tanya told her not to worry about things at work and just relax and enjoy being away from the hood. Aunt Nancy noticed the fellows weren’t there to try and put up the Christmas tree.

“Latoya and Tanya, would you do me a favor go downstairs in the garage, and bring up the Christmas tree and the decorations for me please?” Aunt Nancy said.

“Yes I will be glad to go get the Christmas tree and also put it up for you too,” Latoya replied.

“Why don’t you just let Latoya and me put up the tree while you and Aunt Naomi relax and get ready to watch the movie *Ray*,” Tanya said.

“You sure you don’t mind?” Aunt Nancy said.

“We don’t mind at all,” Tanya and Latoya said. They went downstairs to get the tree and the decorations and all the stuff that went in the window. When they came back up Tanya asked Aunt Nancy where she wanted them to put the tree.

“I have always put the tree in front of the window for everyone to see how beautiful it looks,” she said.

“Okay, Aunt Nancy, that’s where we will put it. Just let us know what goes on the tree first,” Tanya said.

“Before you do those, put Mr. and Mrs. Claus in the window and some of the Christmas lights,” Aunt Nancy said. After Tanya and Latoya put the lights and Mr. and Mrs. Claus in the window, they took the pieces of the tree out of the box. “Put the stand up first and then stick the tree piece in, and make sure it would stand up straight.” Then they started putting the pieces in by the color. When they finished it was a very nice tree. As they were putting the lights on the tree they were having fun. Latoya started talking about Christmas at her house and what they do. When they finished putting the lights on, they put on the bulbs, other ornaments, and the tinsel too. After all of that was on the tree they put the angel on it. Aunt Naomi, Tanya and Latoya couldn’t believe how beautiful the tree looked, especially when it was lit. Tanya and Latoya took the boxes back downstairs to the garage.

“That was so much fun and enjoyable to do. Is there anything else you would like for us to do for you, Aunt Nancy?” Latoya said.

“If you want you can put the Christmas presents under the tree that you brought. It will make the tree even more beautiful because there will be something under there,” Aunt Nancy said. Tanya and Latoya went to get their presents and put them under the tree. Aunt Naomi couldn’t believe all the gifts that they were bringing down. She asked Tanya to go in her room and get the gifts that she had on the chair in the room and put them under there too. Aunt Nancy went to get hers out of the closet in the hallway to put too. They all just stood and looked at the tree with all of the present that were there. Uncle John, Sean and Chris pulled up in the driveway and saw the Christmas tree.

“That looks so beautiful and very decorative from the outside,” Sean said. When they got out of the truck and went inside they couldn’t believe how many

gifts were under the tree. Sean and Chris went upstairs to get the gifts that they had to put under the tree. When they came down with the gifts, the women couldn't believe their eyes. The box with the engagement ring was in Sean's suitcase inside a hidden pocket, in case Tanya wanted to search his bag. When they finished they sat down and relaxed. Aunt Nancy asked them if they wanted any dessert to eat.

"I would like some dessert but I will get up and get it myself because you have done enough for me," Sean said. "You have invited me into your home for the holidays and that is all anyone can ask for," he said.

"Does anyone else want some dessert while I am going into the kitchen to get some for me?" Tanya said.

"I am coming behind you because I want some but I don't know what I want though," Latoya said.

"What is with all of those gifts that you put under the tree and who are they for besides me?" Sean said.

"You are just going to have to wait until Christmas Day to see whom the gifts are for and what is for you," she said.

"You are very anxious for Christmas to get here."

"It's just that this is my favorite holiday because my birthday is on Christmas Eve. Just think, I will be twenty-four years old this year. At least some of the things that I wanted in my life are happening. I have two more years in college and a job that I hope soon something else will come along," she said.

"Tanya, you can't rush things. You have to take it one day at a time and just enjoy things as they are now. Just think, you have a good man that is always there for you," he said. "Now let's go back out here and watch the movies."

"I love you, Sean. You are everything that I have been dreaming for," she said. When they got back in the living room everybody was laughing and enjoying the movie *Ray*. After the movie and it was late, Aunt Naomi, Aunt Nancy and Uncle John decided that they were going to go to bed. They all said goodnight and went to bed. Tanya and Latoya, and Sean and Chris decided that they were going to bed to because it was getting late.

"Did you see all the gifts that Sean and Chris put under the Christmas tree when they came in the house?" Latoya said.

"I know they had a lot of gifts in their hands when they came downstairs. I really would like to know what Sean is giving me for my birthday and Christmas."

"I would like to know what your brother is giving me for Christmas but we are just going to have to wait," Latoya said.

"That's true," Tanya said.

"I am just going to have to be patient and wait four more days," Latoya said.

"That's a good girl. Now let's get some sleep for tomorrow and dream about something good and everlasting."

"Good night," Latoya said.

Tanya told her good night back and then her phone was ringing. It was Sean saying goodnight and that he loved her. "Oh yeah, give this message to Latoya. Tell Latoya Chris said goodnight and will see her tomorrow."

The next morning Tanya and Latoya decided to get up and fix breakfast for everyone. It was 8:30 and Aunt Naomi was getting up to go to the bathroom. She smelled the coffee on her way to the bathroom to wash up. When she finished she went back in the room to get dressed. On her way to the room she ran into Nancy coming out of the room. She had a bathroom in her bedroom. She was going to make some coffee and breakfast but she smelled it like Aunt Naomi. Nancy went in the room to wake up Uncle John and to tell him to get up. Chris and Sean were getting up also. Chris went in the bathroom first and took a shower and got dressed. When he finished Sean went in to take his shower and get dressed. They all met in the hallway and said good morning. They couldn't believe the smell coming out of the kitchen. Latoya was setting the table in the dining room for breakfast. When she looked up she noticed everybody walking towards the dining room.

"Good morning everyone, have a seat and breakfast will be ready in a minute," she said. She went back in the kitchen and told Tanya that everyone was up and sitting at the table. They finished bringing out the food and then they sat down.

"Is it okay if I say grace this morning and bless the food that we are about to eat here today?" Sean said.

"It would be a pleasure and great for me to see someone else bless the table," Uncle John said. Sean said the grace and then they ate breakfast. When they were finished eating they all got up from the table.

"Sean and Chris, are you ready to go and help me finish doing some shopping?" Uncle John said.

"I am ready when you are and you can drive my truck if you like," Sean said. Sean and Chris went upstairs to get their jackets and Uncle John took his out of the closet in the hallway.

"You girls can put the dishes in the dishwasher and then get your jackets and pocketbooks," Aunt Nancy said. "We are going out for a while to enjoy ourselves. I don't want you all to come here and don't get a chance to see the

biggest mall before you go back to New York,” she said. Tanya and Latoya put the dishes in the dishwasher and cleaned off the counter.

“Tanya, I am going upstairs. Would you like for me to bring your pocketbook and jacket, so that you won’t have to go upstairs?” Latoya said.

“If you don’t mind and it is no problem for you,” she said.

“It is no problem at all. It is no need for both of us to go upstairs to get our coats,” she said. When she came back down they were ready to go. Uncle John went to the bank to see how much money was in the bank before going to see Carla at the real estate place. When he came back out he gave the money to Sean in an envelope.

“I can’t say it enough; thank you so very much. I will never forget how nice you have been to me,” Sean said. When they got to the realtor’s office Carla was just pulling up. They all got out of the cars at the same time. They went inside to sign the lease and give her the money. When they finished there Uncle John wanted to take them by his job and introduce them to his co-workers. Sean and Chris couldn’t believe how big the place was where Uncle John worked at. Aunt Nancy and they were having fun driving to the mall.

“It is very beautiful in all parts of New Jersey and especially the neighborhoods,” Latoya said.

“Sean has always wanted to live out here since he was little. Maybe one day he will still get to move out here and enjoy the atmosphere.” When they got to the mall and parked the car Aunt Nancy asked them were there any specific stores that they wanted to go in.

“I would like to go in that big shoe store if they have it here,” Tanya said. “It’s called DSW.”

Aunt Nancy said, “Yes we have that shoe store here and a lot of other stores that you have in New York and maybe more.” When they got inside the mall the first store they were looking for was the shoe store for Tanya. DSW was on the bottom floor because it was big. On the same floor were Toys-R-Us and McDonald’s. When Tanya got in the shoe store she just couldn’t stop shaking her head.

“This is the biggest store I have ever seen,” she said.

“I am with you, Tanya, because this is a very big store and it has a lot of shoes and boots to choose from,” Latoya said

“Just take your time and look around and Aunt Naomi and I are going to be on the second level in JCPenney’s,” Aunt Nancy said. They left out the store and got on the escalator to go to the second level. Tanya and Latoya walked from aisle to aisle.

"I have seen at least four pair of shoes, and six pairs of boots." Latoya found almost the same amount of boots and shoes. "I am glad I brought my credit card with me so I can use it to buy a lot of stuff for me."

"Oh shit, I forgot I need another gift for Chris," she said.

"How many gifts are you going to give my brother? You are going to end up spoiling him and he is never going to let you go," Tanya said. "Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy must be doing a lot of shopping too because they haven't come back down here yet," Tanya said.

Tanya and Latoya bought so much out of DSW they didn't know how they were going to get it all back to New York. Uncle John and the guys decided to go to the barbershop and get their hair cut.

"I don't need a haircut right now; all I need is a shape up. My hair doesn't grow back that fast anyway," Chris said.

"I have to cut mine every two weeks because it grows fast," Sean said. As they walked in the barbershop most of the men in there knew Uncle John. They all said hello to him and he introduced them to Chris and Sean. Chris was very happy because his uncle was like a father to him, because his father wasn't there for him when he was growing up. When they finished getting their haircuts at the barbershop it was time to go.

"Uncle John, thank you so much for being here for me. You are like a father to me because you know that my dad was never around at all."

Uncle John said, "Chris, you don't have to thank me. You are my family and family means everything to your aunt and me," he said. Chris hugged Uncle John and that made him so happy that his nephew felt that way. Now they were going to go and help Uncle John find a gift for Aunt Nancy for Christmas.

"Do you have any idea what she would like for a gift?" Sean said.

"I can't really say because to me she has everything that she needs for the house," John said.

"What about something for her instead of the house," Chris said. "When she came to visit us she said that she would like to have some jewelry like some earrings, a bracelet or a chain."

"I never thought of any of that stuff because I didn't think she would wear it," Uncle John said.

"Okay we are going to go to the jewelry stores and see what they have. You want her to be happy and love you forever and always," Sean said. At the big mall Aunt Naomi was buying a few outfits for her to wear. She bought a few pantsuits, skirts and dresses.

"Now you need some shoes that will go with the outfits so let's go to DSW and look around," Aunt Nancy said.

“Okay and let’s see what is taking Tanya and Latoya so long ’cause they haven’t come from there yet,” Aunt Naomi said. Just as Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy were coming in the store Tanya and Latoya were in the line paying for their shoes and boots.

“What happened? You two bought out the whole store and didn’t save any for anybody else?” Aunt Naomi said.

“No! Latoya said. “There is just a lot of nice boots and shoes and I know that I couldn’t resist,” Latoya said.

“That goes for me too,” Tanya said.

They got out the line and asked Aunt Naomi what she bought for herself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SHOPPING IN NEW JERSEY

“I bought some pantsuits, skirts and dresses now I am looking for some shoes to match,” Aunt Naomi said.

“Would you like for us to help you look for shoes, Aunt Naomi?” Tanya and Latoya said.

“No you two just go do some more shopping,” she said.

“The two of you should go to the second level and check out those stores up there,” Aunt Nancy said.

“Okay we will go look in those stores and see what they have and what we like,” Tanya said. Tanya and Latoya left out of DSW and went up the escalator to the second level. They went in all of the stores on the second level but didn’t buy anything. When they were coming out of the last store Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy were coming up the escalators.

“Did you two buy anything?” Aunt Nancy asked.

“We didn’t see anything that we like so we were going to go on the first level and see what was up there,” Tanya said.

“Oh no, they have an Old Navy, Burlington and Target here. Now those are the stores that I want to go in and buy some things,” Tanya said.

“I am going into Burlington first and see if they have this coat that I want. Then after the coat I am going to buy some clothes,” Latoya said.

“I have to buy me a coat, too. Maybe I will get a coat and a jacket; can never be to sure about things,” Tanya said. Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy went on the other side of Burlington. They went looking for the clothes in their size. Tanya’s cell phone was ringing and it was Uncle John calling to see where they were and what they were doing.

“Hello Uncle John, what can I do for you?”

"I was just calling to see where you all were and to make sure nothing was wrong."

"No we are at the big mall shopping and spending all our money. Would you like to talk to Aunt Nancy?" she said.

"If it is all right with you and I am not keeping you from shopping," Uncle John said.

"Aunt Nancy, it is Uncle John on the phone for you," Tanya said.

"Hey babe, what are you and the guys getting into now?" she said. "We are doing some last-minute shopping and then we will be heading back to the house."

"I love you and I will see you soon. The guys said to tell Tanya and Latoya hello," he said.

"Okay I will give them the message; bye," she said. Aunt Nancy hung up the phone and gave it back to Tanya.

"Sean and Chris said to tell you two hello and don't shop too much," she said.

Back in the hood there was a lot of commotion going on. There was a fire in the building that Keisha lived in. She was at work doing her community service and Paul was coming from the store. When the fire department got there they had to evacuate the building before there was more danger. People were walking by looking and trying to figure out whose apartment the fire was coming from. The fire department did all they could to try and get the father to wake up. They had to carry him out of the house because he had passed out because of all the smoke. When they brought him downstairs the EMTs put him in the ambulance. Paul had gone to the supermarket to help his mother with the groceries. When they came out of the supermarket they saw the fire trucks. Coming through the projects to get to their building, Paul's mom saw the next door neighbor.

"Hi Janice, what happened in the building that the fire department is here?" Paul's mother said.

"Your apartment is on fire and they just brought your husband out and put him in the ambulance," Janice said.

"Oh my God," Paul's mother said. She walked over to the ambulance to see if her husband was all right. The EMTs were working on him. They decided to take him to the hospital.

"What are we going to do with the groceries now; our apartment is no longer livable," she said.

“You bring them to my house and put your meats in my deep freezer if you like,” Janice said.

“That will be nice of you,” Paul’s mother said.

“As soon as the firemen are finished and we can go back inside you can take that to Janice and then try to find your sister and tell her what happened.” The fire chief came over to where Paul and his mother were.

“Are you the people that live in that apartment that the fire was in?” the fireman said.

“Yes that is our apartment, sir,” Paul said. “This is my mother and that is my father. Can you tell me how that happened?” he said.

“It was caused by a cigarette your husband was smoking and fell asleep with the cigarette in his hand. That’s how we found him with the cigarette and he was passed out.”

“I can’t believe this shit; how could he lay down and fall asleep with a cigarette in his hand? Now what are we going to do?” she said.

“Or better yet where we are going to stay?” Paul said.

“When this happens we send you to Red Cross and you stay there until we find you some place,” the fire chief said.

“Thank you,” Paul’s mom said. “I am going to ride to the hospital with my husband.” The fire chief gave her the address and the information for the Red Cross and then he left. Jay was going to the store and saw Paul standing there staring into the sky.

“What’s up, Paul; what is going on with all the fire trucks out here?” Jay said.

“My apartment was on fire because my dad was smoking and fell asleep so now everything is gone,” Paul said. “Now my mom, Keisha and I have to spend Christmas at Red Cross. This not the way I wanted to spend my Christmas,” he said.

“I am sorry to hear about your apartment and everything, but things are going to work out for all of you,” Jay said. “I have to go and take my mother’s stuff upstairs to her. I’ll talk to you later,” he said.

“Okay,” Paul said. “Tell your mom and dad I said hello and to have a nice Christmas,” he said.

“I will, and you try and do the same,” but Jay knew that it was going to be hard for Paul because he had just lost everything. Paul left and took his mom’s groceries to Janice’s house to put up, especially the meats so that they wouldn’t spoil.

In two days it was going to be Christmas Eve and Michael and Susan and his brother's family were getting things together for Christmas. They all went out to buy a Christmas tree. Denise liked the real Christmas trees because she liked the smell of them. They had been to a lot of places until Denise spotted the perfect tree.

"I found it right here, Jeff. I want this one; it's so beautiful," she said. Jeff asked the guy how much and to tie it up. The guy told him fifteen dollars and tied it up. Jeff and Michael put it on the roof of the car and tied it so that it wouldn't fall off. They got in the car and went home so that they could decorate the Christmas tree. The kids were happy and very excited.

Aunt Naomi, Aunt Nancy and Tanya and Latoya had finally finished shopping and were on their way home. Uncle John and the guys were already back at the house, and had the rest of their gifts ready and under the tree before Aunt Nancy and the rest got back. They went down in Uncle John's playroom to relax and play some pool. "I am going to have some beer; do you fellows want one?" Uncle John said. "I won't say anything to your aunts, and not even to the girls about you having a beer." Uncle John came back with the beers in his hand that he had in the little refrigerator downstairs.

"Hey that's nice a refrigerator downstairs in the playroom," Sean said. They heard the front door open and Aunt Nancy, Aunt Naomi and Tanya and Latoya come in.

"John, is you and the boys downstairs relaxing?" Aunt Nancy said.

"Yes, dear, we are down here relaxing and having a man-to-man discussion," Uncle John said.

"All right, we are going to be up here if you need us for anything, sweetie," she said.

"We don't need anything right now," he said. "They probably have more gifts and need to wrap them and don't want us to come upstairs and interrupt them."

"I am fine just sitting right here," Chris said. Chris's cell phone rang and it was Jay calling to see how things were going.

"Hey man, what's up. I was just calling to say to enjoy your Christmas, and to tell you what happened to Paul and his family," Jay said.

"What is going on in the hood now and what happened to Paul's family?" Chris said.

"Their apartment caught on fire because his dad fell asleep with a cigarette in his hand."

"I am so sorry to hear that," he said. "What are they going to do, and right around Christmas too," Chris said.

"I just wanted to call and tell you guys that, so tell Sean, Tanya and Latoya that I said have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year."

"Okay Jay, you do the same and tell your parents and little sister merry Christmas and happy New Year too; bye." They both hung up and then Chris started to tell Sean about what happened and he couldn't believe it.

"I hope your friend will be all right because when something like that happens they send you to the Red Cross and then they have you go stay someplace," Uncle John said.

Theresa was helping her grandmother prepare some of the dishes early for Christmas. Her grandmother always liked to cook certain things early. The baby was taking a nap and her great-grandfather couldn't keep his eyes off of the baby. Theresa was so happy that she couldn't stop crying in the kitchen. Her grandmother asked her what was wrong.

"I am just so happy that all of you love me and love my little girl too," she said.

"Child, we would never stop loving you no matter what we think about anything."

"Thank you, Grandma," Theresa said.

She continued to cut up the onions and everything else, while her grandmother told her stories about her mom and dad when they were growing up. Theresa couldn't stop laughing because the stories were funny.

Jeff and Michael were trying to put the tree in the stand so that it would stand up. It took a while but they finally got it in. The kids were so busy running and jumping around that they fell asleep on the floor. Denise and Susan picked them up and took them to the room and laid them on the bed. Then they went back downstairs.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: EATING OUT

Tanya, Latoya and Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy had finally finished wrapping the gifts that they wanted to wrap. Aunt Nancy yelled downstairs and asked Uncle John, Chris and Sean to come upstairs so that they could decide on what they wanted to eat. Aunt Nancy felt like going out to eat somewhere. Uncle John, Chris and Sean went upstairs to see what was going on.

“Aunt Nancy called all of you because we are getting hungry, and we wanted to know where you all would like to go out to eat because Aunt Nancy and the rest of us don’t feel like cooking,” Tanya said.

“Tanya, didn’t you say that Sean knows how to burn in the kitchen? Maybe Aunt Nancy wouldn’t mind if Sean cooked dinner for us tonight,” Latoya said.

“I think we should just go out to eat tonight, because Sean has already said when he wanted to cook, so how about some Italian, Chinese or whatever.”

“It really doesn’t matter to us,” the guys said. “We will go wherever you ladies want to go.” They decided what they wanted and they walked out to Sean’s truck.

“Uncle John, as my guest, you can drive the truck all you want,” Sean said.

“John, have you decided to buy an SUV now for you?” Aunt Nancy said.

“Yes, wait till you see how comfortable this is and how smooth it drives,” he said. “There is plenty of room too; it seats seven people.” Aunt Nancy got in on the passenger’s side, Aunt Naomi and Tanya and Sean sat in the second row seats. Then Latoya and Chris sat behind them. As Uncle John pulled out of the driveway and started driving, Aunt Nancy couldn’t believe how smooth the ride was and how much room there was.

“John, you should buy one of these trucks then that can be our relaxing and traveling truck,” Aunt Nancy said. “You know that you are going to drive it no matter what.”

“That is true ’cause it is easy to handle and very comfortable.” They reached a few restaurants near the huge mall there was Applebee’s, Red Lobster and a restaurant called Buttercup. It was like a soul food restaurant.

Aunt Nancy said, “How about some soul food?”

“I don’t mind eating that because I like soul food,” Aunt Naomi said.

Everybody else agreed with her. Uncle John drove into the parking lot of the Buttercup and parked. They all got out and went inside to be seated. Aunt Nancy was surprised that there weren’t that many people in there tonight. The waitress came and asked them how many and took them to a booth to sit down. When they sat down the waitress gave them each a menu so that they could decide on what to eat.

At Jeff’s house they were drinking wine and putting the Christmas ornaments and everything on the tree while the kids were still taking a nap. Michael was having the time of his life being there at his brother’s and out of the hood. Susan felt like she was at home with no worries or anything bothering her. At the restaurant they all were seated. Everyone started to look at the menu, to see what they wanted to eat and drink. The waitress came back to see what they wanted to order. Everyone ordered something different to eat and a glass of wine or beer.

“I will have a glass of wine with my dinner and that will be all for me,” Chris said. The waitress came and brought them their food. Everybody enjoyed the meal and the wine, and were ready for dessert now. Tanya and Latoya ordered strawberry shortcake, Sean and Chris had chocolate and Aunt Naomi, Aunt Nancy and Uncle John had some cheesecake. When they were finished eating they sat there for a minute.

“Do not worry; this is our treat and I don’t want any of you to think that you are taking advantage of us,” Uncle John said. “Because you are not; we are family and we all looking out for each other.” After Uncle John paid the check they got in the truck and pulled off. Uncle John decided to drive to the mall and see what was playing at the movie theater.

John told her that he thought it would be nice if they went to see a movie and have some popcorn. They went to see the movie *The Cookout*. Even though it was out on DVD they went to the movies to see it and enjoyed it.

Back at Denise’s house they were almost finished with the tree when the kids woke up and came running into the living room. They were running so fast that they ran into Susan and she started laughing because the way that they ran.

“Slow down before you hurt yourself. You have two more days even though tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” Susan said. “That reminds me, Michael, don’t let me forget to call Tanya and wish her happy birthday.”

"I won't let you forget because she is your friend." The kids asked Denise if they could help put the gifts under the tree.

"Sit over there and don't get in the way and then you can help me," Denise said. So they finished with the tree and then Denise went to get the gifts and the kids helped her put them under the tree.

Jay was at home putting his gifts that he had under the tree. His sister was in her room playing in her playpen and having fun. It was time for her to come out of there and just play on the floor. Jay's mother was in the kitchen preparing her potatoes and eggs for her potatoes salad. She also was going to make some cakes and a few pies. His father had to go to work for a little while.

Paul's mom was still at the hospital with his father trying to find out how he was doing. Paul was in the hood waiting for Keisha so that he could tell her what happened. As Paul was talking to a few of his friends he saw her coming towards the building to go upstairs.

"Keisha, come here for a minute before you go upstairs," Paul said. She went over to her brother to see what he wanted.

"What did I do now and why does it smell like smoke around here?" she said.

"Our apartment caught on fire and we lost everything."

"What the hell happened here today and I wasn't here to try and save some of my things," she said.

"Dad was laying down smoking and he fell asleep with the cigarette in his hand," he said. She started to cry and get upset but then she just stayed calm.

"Where are Mom and Dad at now and are they all right?" she said. "Where are we going to stay now that all our stuff is gone, and we can't get it back, never ever," she said.

"Mom is at the hospital with Dad because he passed out in the house with the fire. Mom told me to wait until you got here, and bring you to the hospital so that we can go to the Red Cross," he said.

"What are we going there for and what can they do for us?" she said.

"The fire chief told Mommy that's where you go when your house has a fire."

"Okay let's go and check on Mom and Dad. Even though he got mad at me I do care about him and don't want to see him hurt," she said. Paul and Keisha left the hood and started walking to Harlem Hospital to be with her mom. When they reached the hospital they went into the emergency room to find their mother. When they saw her Keisha called out to her, and she turned around and hugged them both and started to cry.

“Mommy, how is Daddy doing? First, are you okay, and do you need anything right now?” Keisha said.

“I just want to know what is going on with your father and how is he,” she said.

“Maybe the nurse will come and tell us something because we have to find the Red Cross and go there.” As soon as Paul said that the doctor came out of the room and walked over to them.

“Mrs. Young, your husband will be fine. He didn’t get burned that much, only on the right leg. He is very lucky to only have inhaled the smoke from the fire. I want to keep him here for a few days to run more tests and keep an eye on his leg. Mrs. Young, Keisha.”

“Thank you, Doctor, and please let us know if anything happens. We will be staying at the Red Cross that I know of right now,” Paul said. They left out of the hospital and went to catch a cab to go to Red Cross and see what was in store for them. When the cab stopped they gave the driver the address and he took them there. They got out of the cab and walked inside to the reception desk.

“We are here because we had a fire in our apartment and we don’t have anywhere else to go,” Paul said.

“You must be the Young family. The fire chief came here and told us to be expecting you,” the receptionist said. “Have a seat and give me a minute I just need some information so that I can help you.” She went to get some papers for Paul’s mother to fill out. She came back with them and told Paul that he could fill them out for his mother because she looked a little beat.

“Thank you for what you are doing for us,” he said.

The receptionist responded, “We are here to help people when something bad or good happens.” Paul finished filling out the papers and gave them to her. She took them and went to give them to the person in charge. When she came out she told Paul and them to follow her. She took them to an office and told them to wait there. When the gentleman came in the room he explained to them what was going to happen. Mrs. Young, Keisha and Paul agreed and the man asked one of the guys who drove the people around to take them to the Salvation Army building in Harlem that had the apartments. He gave them one with two bedrooms. Paul didn’t mind if he had to sleep in the living room because he had someplace to lay his head. They all said thank you to the man and walked out the door.

At the movies everybody was having a good time laughing, eating junk and drinking soda. The movie was almost over and they started putting on their

jackets. When the movie was over everybody started leaving out and walking down the stairs to leave the movie theater.

"That was a very good movie and Cedric the Entertainer is so funny," Sean said. At the truck everyone was getting in to go back to Aunt Nancy's house.

"Okay, now it is time to go home because we have a lot to do tomorrow before Christmas," Aunt Nancy said.

"Okay my love, whatever you want I will do for you," Uncle John said. Everyone got in the truck and Uncle John drove back to his house. They all got out and went into the house and sat down to relax for a minute. It was still early so Uncle John, Chris and Sean decided to go play a game of pool first. Tanya and Latoya went into the room to get themselves together for bed because they were tired.

"I am going to bed because I have a lot of things to do and things to prepare, too," Aunt Nancy said.

Aunt Naomi told her, "I am right behind you; need all the sleep I am going to get for tomorrow."

"Sean, so tomorrow is the big day. So when are you going to pop the question?" Uncle John said.

"I am going to do it during dinner. I asked Aunt Nancy if I could cook for all of us tomorrow," Sean said. "While we are all sitting down eating I am going to get down on one knee and propose to her."

"That is so romantic," Chris mentioned. "One day that is going to be me getting down on one knee asking Latoya to marry me for the rest of her life," Chris said. "Sometimes I wonder if I am going to make a good husband to her," he said.

"We all wonder if we are going to," Uncle John said. "The way you will know is if you get to a year together. The rest of the years will just follow." Chris was playing pool against Sean and he was winning. He couldn't believe that he had just learned a few days ago and he was good.

"Chris, don't gamble playing pool until you get real good at it. Then you will be able to hustle people at their own game. I know that it is all they do in New York is hustle, steal and kill people, including their own family. I told your Aunt Nancy that I wish your Aunt Naomi would move from there and come stay out here with us. That is not a nice neighborhood that you all live in; too many things happen out there. Aunt Nancy told me what happened to your friend Tony, and now look; your other friend lost his apartment, because of his father smoking and falling asleep. I thought those apartments were supposed to have smoke detectors."

“Uncle John, it is not all that bad over there. I am enjoying my job at Modell’s. Tanya is working at the supermarket across the street and Aunt Naomi is at the hospital. We all stay busy and I stay away from the trouble.”

“I am glad that you and your sister are working and don’t have time to be in trouble,” Uncle John said.

Tanya and Latoya were upstairs talking about the day that Susan kicked Keisha’s butt the second time. They couldn’t stop laughing so much that Latoya started to cry because she was laughing so hard.

“I am going to go to sleep now because I am so tired I actually can’t keep my eyes open,” Tanya said.

“I feel like that, too, so I am going to say goodnight to you, Tanya,” Latoya said.

“Good night to you, too, Latoya, and don’t dream about Chris too much ’cause you are going to see him in a few hours,” Tanya said.

Jeff and Michael were drinking beer and the women were putting the kids in the bed, because they had a full day today and couldn’t keep their eyes opened. When they finished they went downstairs with the guys to hang out with them and drink some wine. Jeff got up and turned on the stereo to play some music in case they wanted to dance. Denise liked to dance whenever she got the chance to. Susan’s song was coming on and she looked at Michael.

“Michael, come over here and dance with me. This is my song; it reminds me of you,” Susan said. Michael got up and went over to Susan and grabbed her and started to dance. They were having so much fun that they didn’t notice the time at all. Around 2:00.

“Good night, Michael and Susan, we will see you two later in the morning,” Jeff and Denise said. In the morning they were still having fun talking and laughing and also still drinking.

He said, “Oh no, I didn’t know that it was this late because we were having so much fun dancing and talking.” They got up and started cleaning up and taking everything upstairs and into the kitchen. When they got upstairs they put the dishes in the sink.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: TANYA'S BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Michael and Susan went in the room to go to bed. They kissed each other and said goodnight.

Aunt Naomi was the first one to get up this morning and made breakfast. Aunt Nancy and Uncle John came in the kitchen and sat down. "Good morning, Naomi," John and Nancy said to her.

"Good morning to you two, and how did you sleep?" she said.

"We slept like babies; what about you, Naomi?"

"I slept okay too," she said. Chris and Sean were up and just watching the television.

"Do you want to go take your shower first?" Chris said.

"I can wait for you to finish taking yours. I am not in any rush at this moment," Sean said. Chris went and took his shower and got dressed. When he came out Sean was ready to go in and take his shower. He went back in the room and sat on the bed, but he and Chris decided to go play some pool. When they walked in the kitchen they spoke to Aunt Naomi, Aunt Nancy and Uncle John.

"What are you two getting ready to get into this fine morning?" Uncle John said.

"It is going to be a beautiful day today and I am going to enjoy it," Chris said. Chris and Sean went downstairs to play some pool. Latoya had come out the bathroom from taking her shower and getting dressed.

"I didn't see the guys in the room. I wonder where they are now," Latoya said.

"I am sure they didn't go far," Tanya said. "Let me go take my shower and get dressed before my aunts think something is wrong," Tanya said.

"Happy birthday to you and many more, Tanya," Latoya said.

“Thank you, Latoya, and I don’t feel any different,” she said. “It just feels the same, not any change at all.” Tanya left out the room to go take her shower and get dressed.

When she was finished and coming out of the bathroom Aunt Naomi said, “Good morning, birthday girl, how are you feeling?”

Tanya said, “I am feeling fine, Aunt Naomi, and thank you.”

“You and Latoya hurry up and come to the table for breakfast,” Aunt Naomi said.

“Chris, you and Sean come upstairs now and get some breakfast,” Uncle John said. They put the pool sticks down and went upstairs to sit at the table. As they were getting ready to sit down Tanya and Latoya were coming to sit down for breakfast.

“Good morning and happy birthday,” everybody said to Tanya.

“Thank you and I love all of you,” she said.

“I have something for you. It is nothing special but I hope you like it,” Sean said. Tanya took the box and opened it. It was a name chain with her name and the bracelet to match. She was so happy that she started crying and Sean asked her what was wrong.

“I am just so happy that I found someone that loves me and is there for me,” she said. Chris went to get his gift that he had for her from him and Latoya. She couldn’t believe all the gifts that she was getting on her birthday and it wasn’t even Christmas. Aunt Nancy’s phone rang and she picked it up. It was her daughter calling to let her know that she and her family would be there tomorrow.

“Okay, your aunt Naomi and cousin Tanya is here with her boyfriend and Chris is here with his girlfriend,” Aunt Nancy said.

“Tell everybody I said hello and I will see them tomorrow,” Aunt Nancy’s daughter said.

“Have you talked to your brother lately because I haven’t talked to him at all,” Aunt Nancy said.

“I spoke to him last night. He will be there with his family tomorrow too,” she said.

“I can’t believe all my family will be right here in one place.”

“Okay Mom, I will see you tomorrow and kiss Dad for me please.”

“I will do that right now for you,” and she did it, too, in front of everyone. She hung up the phone and they all laughed because Uncle John was shy and didn’t want Aunt Nancy to kiss him. This time Chris blessed the food and then they ate. After they finished eating Tanya and Latoya put the dishes in the

dishwasher. Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy and Uncle John went to sit in the family room. Sean and Chris followed.

"I need to get her out of the house today so that I can get everything together for dinner tonight," Sean said. "I want it to be perfect and a night she won't forget."

"If I know her she will never forget this as long as she lives," Aunt Naomi said.

"You are absolutely right about that because I remember when John proposed to me it was so special," Aunt Nancy said. Right then Tanya and Latoya came in the room.

"What is everyone going to be doing today on Christmas Eve?" Latoya said. Uncle John mentioned that he had to stop at the hardware store and pick something up.

"I thought that maybe we could all go and get our hair and nails done for tomorrow; my treat," Aunt Nancy said. "It is going to be fine and a change from any other Christmas Eve."

"I would like to be all dolled up for Christmas. Maybe I will meet a man while I am out here in New Jersey," Aunt Naomi said. "They do have some fine men out here, and they dress nice too."

"Aunt Naomi, you should be ashamed of yourself," Tanya said.

Tanya tried to find out what Sean had planned for the two of them tonight. When she and Latoya went upstairs to get their jackets and pocketbooks, Tanya said, "Has my brother mentioned anything to you about what Sean has planned for my birthday tonight and what I need to wear?"

"No he hasn't said anything to me but I will try and find something out for you," Latoya said. Latoya and Tanya went back downstairs to wait for Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy. They were in the kitchen talking to Sean. When they came out of the kitchen Sean followed them.

"Tanya, I have something very special planned for you tonight so dress very nice," Sean said.

"Okay Sean, but where are we going so I will know what I need to wear?" she said.

"Remember this, I like you in either blue or red; that's all I am going to say," he said. "Now go out with your aunts and Latoya and have fun." When they walked out the door Uncle John, Chris and Sean started straightening up and fixing the dining room the way Sean wanted it. When they finished, Sean went in the kitchen and started cutting up onions, green peppers and everything else. He was making a good dish, one that he hadn't made for Tanya already. Chris

and Uncle John had gone out to get some wine and a cake that Sean had ordered for the special occasion. The women were at the shopping mall but not the big one this time around. Uncle John and Chris had returned and asked Sean did he need any help with anything. They helped Sean set the table, put the wine on ice and had to get dressed themselves. It was almost time for the women to come back. Aunt Nancy called the house and Uncle John picked up the phone. She asked him if everything was ready and how much longer.

“Everything is almost ready but you two need to get here and get dressed and make sure that Tanya has on either blue or red,” Uncle John said. Latoya and Tanya each bought a dress at the mall and put them on. Aunt Nancy hung up and told Aunt Naomi that it was time to head back home.

“Oh no, Tanya, can you and Latoya do me a favor and go to the flower shop and get two dozen roses? I forgot to pick them up,” Aunt Nancy said.

“Okay Aunt Nancy, we will be right back as soon as we get the flowers,” Tanya said. “What kind of flowers would you like, Aunt Nancy, from the flower shop?” she said.

“You can get some one dozen roses and a dozen of carnations for me,” she said.

“We will be right back so don’t go anywhere.” Aunt Nancy and Aunt Naomi went into the house and changed their clothes before Tanya and Latoya returned and came into the family room. Everybody was waiting there until Tanya and Latoya came back. When they got back and went into the house music was playing and Sean went and took Tanya by the hand and escorted her into the dining room. When she walked in there she was surprised to see how beautiful the table looked and to see the food on the table. She couldn’t believe that Aunt Naomi, Aunt Nancy and Uncle John, Chris and Latoya were dressed up too. Sean pulled the chair out for her to sit down and then he went to get the main course and put it on the table. When Sean came back and sat at the table next to her he took her hand and said, “Happy birthday, Tanya, this is for you.”

Uncle John said, “I am going to say the grace tonight and I am really going to give thanks to my family that is here with me and those that are coming tomorrow.” While everybody was eating and drinking some wine Sean pushed his chair back and stood up.

“Tanya, you are a very special person and the love of my life. No one has ever made me feel the way that you have these long months that we have been together,” Sean said. Sean got down on one knee and said, “Tanya, in front of your family and your friend Latoya, I want to ask you for your hand in

marriage.” Sean took the box with the ring out of his pants pocket and opened it up. “Tanya Jones, would you do me the honor and be my wife...will you marry me?” Sean said. Tanya was so surprised and in shock she couldn’t speak at first.

Then Latoya touched her and she said, “Yes Sean, I will marry you.” Tanya and Sean then kissed each other. Everybody was clapping and saying congratulations to them. Aunt Naomi and Chris were happy for Tanya. They both hugged her, including Latoya and Aunt Nancy and Uncle John. After all of the excitement and everyone saying congratulations, Chris went to go get the cake they had for Tanya.

“I will cut the cake for this special occasion and engagement,” Aunt Naomi said. Everybody took their cake and wine and went into the family room to watch the television to see what movies were on.

“Sean, why don’t you and Tanya take a drive somewhere, or go out dancing for a while,” Uncle John said.

“I just want to say that I love all of you very much.” Sean went and grabbed his jacket and Tanya’s jacket.

“Take my keys so that you will be able to get back in the house tonight,” Uncle John said.

“We will see you all later if not tomorrow then,” Sean said.

“Chris and Latoya, get your coats and come and hang out with us and have some fun.” They grabbed their coats and they left too. They went and got in the truck and pulled off in the direction of that club that Uncle John had showed them today. Tanya took Sean’s hand and kissed it and told him that she loved him very much. They pulled up to the club and stopped. They got out and the valet took Sean’s keys to his truck and got in to go park it for them. They went inside and the club was jumping and not too crowded.

“Let’s go and find somewhere to sit first and then we will get something to drink,” Sean said. They found a booth to sit at and Tanya and Latoya sat down, while Chris and Sean went to get them something to drink. Tanya told Sean to bring her a strawberry daiquiri.

“I want a Long Island iced tea,” Latoya said.

“I will decide when I get up there,” Chris and Sean mentioned. When they came back with the drinks they sat down and listened to the music. When Tanya’s song came on she asked Sean to dance with her. Sean got up and took her hand and they went out on the dance floor. They danced for a few songs and then they sat down to finish their drinks. Then Chris and Latoya went to go do some dancing. After they finished they went to the bar to get some more

drinks. They brought the drinks back to the table and talked while they listened to the DJ play the music. It was getting late and the club was closing so everybody started leaving out the club. When they got back to Aunt Nancy's house, they each said goodnight and went to their separate rooms to go to bed. Tanya and Sean gave each other a long goodnight kiss. Chris and Latoya kissed each other too.

It was Christmas Day but it wasn't time to get up yet though. They wanted to lie down for a little while before opening their gifts. Around 10:00 everybody was getting up and Aunt Nancy and Aunt Naomi were cooking breakfast. Uncle John was downstairs in the playroom just relaxing until the food was ready. They all washed up, changed their clothes and went downstairs. Sean and Chris said good morning to Aunt Nancy and Aunt Naomi and went downstairs where Uncle John was. Tanya and Latoya stayed in the kitchen with them and said Merry Christmas also. Downstairs Chris and Sean told Uncle John merry Christmas.

"Merry Christmas and may today bring you peace and joy all at the same time," Uncle John said. Aunt Nancy called them and told them to come and eat some breakfast. They came back up and went to the table to sit down. Chris and Sean both said good morning and merry Christmas to Tanya and Latoya. They almost forgot to say merry Christmas to Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy.

"May we bless this delicious breakfast and give thanks to those that we love and care so deeply about," Sean said.

"Have you to decided on a date for the wedding and what month?"

"No we haven't talked about that yet but we will discuss it soon," Aunt Nancy said.

"When Tanya is ready to talk and decided on a date then it will be fine with me," Sean said. They enjoyed the breakfast and everybody cleaned off the table.

"Why don't we open up our Christmas presents before we start doing other things?" Tanya said.

Everybody opened up their gifts and they were very happy with what they got. Tanya loved everything that she got from Sean and he did the same. Latoya and Chris liked their gifts too, and so did Aunt Nancy, Aunt Naomi and Uncle John. When they were opening the last few gifts the doorbell rang and Aunt Nancy went to open it. When she opened the front door, there stood her daughter and her family.

"I can't believe this! My baby is here and she is early, and so is my son-in-law and grandkids," Aunt Nancy said. They went in a said hello and hugged

everybody. Aunt Nancy and Uncle John's grandkids sat on the floor to open up their Christmas presents that they had there. Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy went into the kitchen to finish cooking the Christmas dinner. Uncle John, Chris and Sean and Uncle John's son-in-law Eric went downstairs in the family room to relax and stay out of the way. Tanya, Latoya and Aunt Nancy's daughter Justina sat in the family room with the kids.

"I heard that you live in Pennsylvania where it is nice and quiet. I have only been out there once to go to the mall," Tanya said.

"The only thing is that we don't have that many cabs and the buses stop running at a certain time," Justina said.

Christmas Day in the hood was like any other day. Guys were hanging out in front of the store. People were trying to go to the supermarket and pick up last-minute things. Jay was still sleeping until his little sister came to wake him up, because she wanted to see what Santa had brought her for Christmas. After she woke up Jay she went in her parents' room to wake them up. Jay got up and went into the bathroom to put some water on his face. He then went into the living room with his little sister to see what Santa had brought her for Christmas. She was so excited about all the toys Santa had brought her and the clothes she got. Jay's parents came and went in the living room to open up their gifts also. When they finished opening the last bit of gifts Jay's father had a gift for all of them. He went in the room in his closet and pulled out an envelope, and in that envelope was a deed to a house that he had bought to move them out of the hood. When he came back into the living room he gave the envelope to Jay's mother and said, "Merry Christmas, baby." Jay's mother opened the envelope and was in shock, and started to cry.

"Mom, why are you crying; this is supposed to be a happy day," Jay said.

"I am crying happy tears," his mom said. "Look, this a deed for a house. We are moving out of the hood finally." Jay couldn't believe that his dream finally came through.

"Dad, where is the house that you bought us?" Jay said. His father told him that it was in Mount Vernon, and later if they wanted to after eating dinner, or maybe tomorrow he would take them and let them see the house.

At the Salvation Army even though everybody had a kitchen, the people decided to cook Christmas dinner for them. Paul and Keisha woke up and noticed a few gifts for them that their mother had bought. They opened them and then gave her a kiss. "I am going to go to the hospital and check and see how your father is doing and when can he leave," Keisha's mom said. She left and told them that she would be back later. Denise and Jeff were up early

preparing the food for dinner. The kids had just gotten up and were screaming that Santa had been there and they wanted to open up their gifts.

"You can go in the living room to see what Santa brought you," Denise said. "Your dad and I will be there in a few minutes." As the kids were leaving out of the kitchen, Michael and Susan were coming downstairs.

"Hi Uncle Michael and Susan, Merry Christmas," the kids said. "We are going to go and see what Santa brought for us this year." Michael and Susan went into the kitchen to say good morning to Jeff and Denise.

"Good morning and merry Christmas to you two."

"And the same to you two," they said. The kids were calling them to come and open up their gifts. All of them left out of the kitchen and went into the living room to sit down. Everybody was happy with the gifts that were given.

Back at Aunt Nancy's house the food smelled so good and everybody was keeping themselves busy. The guys were downstairs playing pool and enjoying themselves. The doorbell rang again and this time it was Justina's brother and his family coming for dinner. They lived in Paterson, New Jersey, another part where it was peaceful and quiet. Carl walked in and gave his sister a big hug and kiss. His wife Brittney and the kids gave her a kiss too. The kids ran into the kitchen to see their grandmother and to say hello. When they reached the kitchen they hugged their grandmother, like there was no tomorrow. Brittney and Carl went in the kitchen behind them and told them merry Christmas.

"Dad must be downstairs in the playroom like always," Carl said. He bent down and gave Aunt Naomi a hug and kiss to and so did Brittney and the kids. Carl and the kids went downstairs to say hi to Grandpa and Cousin Chris and Uncle Eric. When they got down there the kids ran over to Grandpa John and gave him a kiss. They kissed Uncle Eric and Chris too. Uncle John introduced Sean to Carl and told him that he was Tanya's fiancé as of yesterday.

"As of yesterday, what do you mean by that, Dad?" Carl said.

"He proposed to her on her birthday yesterday, and it was a lovely way that it was done," John said. "He cooked dinner for all of us so that he could ask her in front of us." Chris and Sean had just finished their pool game and Chris was waiting for his next victim.

"I will play a game with you and don't beat me too bad because I haven't played in a while," Eric said. Aunt Nancy was so proud to have her favorite gift of all, the whole family together. The grandkids were playing with their toys and doing it so quietly that everybody forgot that they were there. Aunt Nancy realized that she didn't have any eggnog to drink and she really wanted some. The thing was whom was she going to ask to go to the store.

"Mom, is there something wrong?" Justina said. "You look like you forgot something and don't know what to do."

"It is just that I always have some eggnog for Christmas and I thought that I had some."

"Would you like for me to go and get some for you?" Justina said.

"If you don't mind, and it is no bother. I know that you just got here and probably want to relax."

"If you want, Justina, Latoya and I will ride with you because I was thinking about stopping at the mall," Tanya said.

"I see that my mom has got the two of you hooked on the mall," Justina said. "I am going to go see if Brittney would like to go with us." She went downstairs in the playroom to ask Brittney if she wanted to ride with them.

"Brittney, would you like to take a ride with Tanya, Latoya and I to the mall for a while and then I have to stop at the store to get my mom some eggnog," she said.

"That sounds like a good idea because it seems that your mom has everything under control," Brittney said. They went back upstairs and got their jackets and were getting ready to leave when Tanya went to ask Sean for the keys to the truck.

"Sean, can I have the keys to the truck, and I will bring it right back before nightfall," Tanya said.

Everybody started laughing and they kissed each other goodbye. They girls left and got in the truck to go to the shopping mall.

"Okay, which mall is it that we want to go to?" Tanya said.

"I want to go to the big one because it has more stores in it," Justina said. "Besides, my favorite shoe store is in there."

"Let me guess the shoe store you are talking about," Latoya mentioned. "Could it be DSW, the biggest shoe store around, everywhere?"

"How did you know that it was DSW and have you been there?" Justina said.

"This is the mall that your mom brought us to and I bought about six pairs of shoes and boots in there," she said. Driving along talking and listening to music was relaxing.

"Tanya, I hear that you got engaged on your birthday and it was done in front of everyone," Brittney said. "How you felt about that?" Justina said.

"It was a surprise to me and it felt kind of embarrassing to be asked in front of family," Tanya said.

"It seems that they were all involved in the whole thing but me," she said. "Oh man, I like this song and it makes you think about a lot of things," Brittney mentioned. Tanya was getting ready to turn into the mall when her cell phone rang. It was Susan calling to tell her and Latoya merry Christmas.

"Merry Christmas to you, too, Susan, and tell Michael the same," Tanya said. "Are you enjoying yourself at his brother's house?" she said. "Oh yeah; I got engaged last night at my aunt's house. Then you probably knew that Sean was going to ask me," Tanya said.

The girls finished their shopping, left the mall and went to the store to pick up the eggnog for Justina's mom. When they got back into the house everything was ready and they were ready to eat. Sitting at the table eating and stuffing their faces no one could really move. The men went back downstairs and the ladies cleaned up and put the dishes in the dishwasher and washed the pots and pans. Everybody all over the place enjoyed their Christmas. Aunt Nancy's son and his wife went back home, but Justina and her family spent the night. The next couple of days went by very fast; before they knew it New Year's Eve was here. Aunt Naomi and everyone were packed and ready to go back to New York. They were going to leave out early to beat the traffic. It was 6:00 in the morning and everybody was getting ready to leave. Aunt Nancy and Uncle John were up so that they could say goodbye to them. On the drive back to the hood Sean only made two stops for gas and to go to the bathroom.

"Aunt Naomi, you have a very nice and loving family and I am glad that I will be a part of it," Sean said.

"I am glad you will be a part of it, too, because Tanya is very happy," Aunt Naomi said. Sean turned around and Tanya, Chris and Latoya were all sleeping soundly. When they finally got back in the hood it was peaceful because it was still early. Sean found a spot to park right in front of Tanya's building; he liked parking in front of her building. They all carried some bags to the elevator until they were all out of the truck. When they reached Aunt Naomi's door they started taking the bags out of the elevator. Inside they just left the bags next to the door and went to sit down.

"I guess I will get going to my house and see if my parents are back," Latoya said.

"No need to hurry off, you can stay here for a while and relax," Tanya said. "I have a double bed in my room," she said.

"You might as well stay for a while, too, Sean, because you drove and I know that you are a little tired," Chris said. They went to lie back down while Aunt Naomi called her sister Nancy to let her know that she was home.

Michael and Susan had been back for two days now and were together at his house.

Jay's father was getting up to go to the bathroom when Jay came out the room and scared him.

"Dad, didn't mean to scare you but I was going in the kitchen to make some coffee," Jay said. His dad asked if he was excited about going to see his new house. Jay told his dad that he was and he needed to look into colleges over there. They went to see the house and figure out what they were going to put where.

Weeks had gone by and everybody was back in school.

Tanya told all her friends that she was engaged and that Sean proposed to her on Christmas Eve. Her friends were so happy for her and so jealous that they couldn't stop congratulating her. The months were going by so fast that everybody was just busy doing their own thing. Sean and Tanya had decided to get married in the summer after she finished school. Tanya wanted to have a big wedding, and wanted it to be a day that they wouldn't forget. Sean and Tanya sat down with Aunt Naomi and Sean's parents and told them when they wanted to get married.

Everybody was happy with the month and the date that they had set. Aunt Naomi called her sister Nancy that night and told her when the wedding was, and that soon they would be getting everything together and sending out invitations.

"Hello Nancy, how is you and John doing?" Naomi said. "I was calling mainly to let you know that Tanya and Sean have picked a month and a wedding date. The wedding will be in June, the second Saturday of the month."

"That is so nice and I can't wait for the big day," Nancy and John said.

Jay had been looking into colleges in Mount Vernon. The college that he was going to was also in Mount Vernon so it was going to be hard for him to switch schools. Jay's father was hoping to move the first part of the summer. Sean called Jay to see how he was doing and what he was up to these days.

"Hey Jay, thought I would give you a call since I haven't talk to you lately," Sean said. "There is something I would like to ask you if you don't mind. You know that I am getting married and I was wondering if you would be a groomsman in my wedding," Sean said.

"Sean, I would be delighted to be in your wedding and I am happy for you and Tanya," Jay said. "I don't think I mentioned this to you but my family and I are moving to Mount Vernon this summer," he said. "My father bought a house out there."

“That is so nice, you finally are getting out of the hood after all the times. I am very happy for you. Tell your parents and your little sister I said hello,” he said. They hung up and Sean decided to call Michael and ask him to be one of his groomsmen.

“I would love to be a groomsman in your wedding. You are my friend and hangout partner,” Michael said.

“Okay, I will talk to you soon.” They hung up. Tanya wanted to have a bridal party of six or seven. She had called and asked everybody and told Sean to ask his sister to be one of her bridesmaids. When they had all of that straightened out Tanya and Sean asked Aunt Naomi if she would ask Pastor Blackshear if they could get married at his church. The days and weeks were going by.

On Sunday morning they all went to church after being away for the holidays. When church service was over Aunt Naomi asked the pastor if she could speak to him for a few minutes. Aunt Naomi followed the pastor in his office and talked to him about Tanya and Sean.

“Tanya and Sean is a very nice and beautiful couple and I am happy for them. They will have to make an appointment with me for a counseling session and then let me know what they want,” the pastor said.

“I can have them come in here with you right now to make an appointment if that is okay with you,” Aunt Naomi said.

“That will be fine with me; tell them to come here,” the pastor said. Aunt Naomi went out into the sanctuary to get Tanya and Sean. They went back in the office and talked to the pastor. He told them to come on Tuesday and have their counseling session with him at 6:00.

They both said, “Okay and we will see you then,” and they walked out. One of the reverends and a minister went in the office. The pastor was telling the other reverend about Tanya and Sean, and told him that he wanted him to be there at that counseling session too.

“Okay what time on Tuesday shall I be here and what do you want me to do?” the reverend said.

The next week was Tanya and Sean’s counseling session. When they got there the pastor and one of the reverends were there waiting. Sean knocked on the door and the reverend told them to come in and sit down. Tanya was a little nervous when she went in. The pastor talked to them and asked them a lot of questions for over an hour. When they were finished, the pastor and the reverend both told them congratulations, and ask them when they wanted to get married.

"We want to do it the second Saturday in June if it is no problem," Tanya said. The pastor checked his appointment book and noticed that there was nothing planned, and he wasn't going to be out of town. Tanya and Sean told the two of them thank you and then they left.

"There goes two very in love people who care about each other very dearly," the pastor said. They stayed at the church for a while and then they left.

"I will see you tomorrow for Bible Study," both of them said.

The next few weeks were going fast and everybody was staying busy. Michael was busy at the gym, Chris at work and so was Latoya. Susan was working at the supermarket with Theresa trying to train two more girls.

Jay was packing his stuff up in his room that he wouldn't be using right now because the months were going kind of fast.

Tanya had bought a couple of bride books to look through for her wedding dress, and bridesmaid dresses, and she couldn't forget the maid of honor. The hood was still the same; people getting robbed, shot and raped. Tanya was thinking to herself that Sean didn't say anything about where they were going to live but she wasn't going to bring it up. Sean picked up his cell phone to call her to see what she was doing. The phone rang and aunt Naomi picked it up. "Hi Sean, how are you?" she said.

"I am fine, Aunt Naomi. Is Tanya there and may I speak to her please?" Sean said. Aunt Naomi told him to hold on and took the phone to Tanya's room to give to her.

"Thank you Aunt Naomi," Tanya said.

"Hey babe, what are you doing?" she said.

"I am sitting here trying to figure out if I want to wear a suit or a tux," Sean said. "You never told me the color scheme that you would like," he said.

"I was thinking that you and I could wear white and my maid of honor and bridesmaids will wear navy blue. The only thing is that the maid of honor's dress is going to be a light blue," Tanya said.

"That is beautiful, baby, and I am the luckiest man in the world, to have a beautiful woman like you in my life," Sean said.

"That is the most beautiful thing that you have ever said to me," she said.

"I am going to let you go and finish doing the bride thing that you have to do," he said.

Everybody was looking forward to this wedding and everything. Sean's parent decided to give them an engagement party because the summer was just around the corner. Sean's parents didn't tell Sean that they were going to

give them an engagement party. They called Tanya's aunt Naomi to tell her and she said, "But where can we have it?"

"I have a friend who I work with that owns a hall and I will ask him if it will be all right," Sean's father said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: SETTLING IN THE NEW APARTMENT

At the Salvation Army, Paul's mother had gone to the hospital to pick up his dad and bring him there. Keisha had to go and do her community service like she did every day. After leaving the hospital with Paul's father, his mother decided to catch a cab back to the Salvation Army. Paul was trying to straighten the place up before his mom came back with his dad. When they reached the building, Paul's mom paid the cab driver and she and her husband went in. They took the elevator to the third floor. She knocked on the door, instead of using her key. Paul opened the door and was surprised to see that his father wasn't badly burned. His dad came in and sat down on the couch and so did his mother.

"Dad, it is good to see that you are fine and are home with us," Paul said. "We have missed you around here I know Mom has missed you a lot.

"I have missed all of you too. How come your sister isn't her welcoming me back home?" he said.

"She had to go and do her community service today, Dad," Paul said.

Jay's parents were trying to do a little packing so that most of the stuff will be packed and out of the way. They were packing their summer clothes and the baby's clothes too. They had planned to move the first week in June if there were no problems or anything.

"I am going to go to the store and check the mail; do you want anything?" he asked his parents. Jay left and went to the store to buy something for him and his sister. When he got back in his building he checked the mail. There was a letter from the college in Mount Vernon that he had sent away to. He didn't open it until he got in the house.

“Was there any mail in the box for your father and me?” Jay’s mother said.

“Yes here is the mail for you and Dad and I received a letter from the college in Mount Vernon,” he said.

“Open it and let us know what it says so then we will know when we can exactly move out of the hood,” Jay’s father said.

“Okay,” and he opened the letter it said that he could come for an open house the first week in June, if he would like, and they told him to call and let them know. His parents were happy that they could still move from there when they wanted to.

Aunt Naomi had called her sister Nancy to tell her about the engagement party that Sean’s parents were going to through for them, and that she would get back to her with all the information. School was becoming long for Tanya because she knew that after it was over she was getting married, but she needed all her family here in the same town. People were making reservations and everything early at hotels and plane reservations so that they would be here for that day. Tanya was also in her room looking at a picture of her mom and saying that she missed her so much. Aunt Naomi knocked on her door and asked her if she wanted anything to eat.

“Not right now, Aunt Naomi, ’cause I am trying to get the guest list on our side of the family together,” Tanya said.

“You don’t have to sit here and do that by yourself. I will help you with that,” Aunt Naomi said.

“Thank you, Aunt Naomi,” Tanya said to her. “It is just that I am so excited about getting married and spending my life with Sean,” she said.

“I know you are happy. I can see it in your face,” Aunt Naomi said.

“I am just worried that we are going to have to live with his parents because we haven’t talked about where we are going to live,” Tanya said.

“I am sure Sean has thought about that so try not to worry about anything,” she said. “Have you gone to look at any wedding dress or bridesmaids’ dresses yet?” Aunt Naomi mentioned.

“I haven’t thought about that yet. I need to get everybody’s size first,” Tanya said.

“I am going to start calling everybody tomorrow and ask for their sizes, and then I am going to get Latoya to go with me to the bridal shop and look at the different dresses,” she said. Aunt Naomi told her that it would be fine and not to worry too much. Sean was getting excited himself because he was getting married in two months. It was now the middle of April and everybody was getting things together. Sean’s father had the hall all ready for the engagement

party and everything. It was going to be the first Saturday in May. He told everybody that he knew was involved and invited to the wedding.

Aunt Naomi called her sister Nancy to give her the news, so that she could let Justina and Brittney know because they needed to be here. They actually had to come one weekend to go and try their dresses on, to make sure that they were the right size and fit.

The weekend came for Justina and Brittney to come down for their fitting and to hang out with their cousin. When they got to Tanya's neighborhood they couldn't believe the change from where they lived to where she lived. Justina parked the car and they got out and went into the building to ring the buzzer. Chris asked who it was.

"It is your cousin and Brittney down here," Justina said. Chris buzzed them in and they got on the elevator. When they reached Aunt Naomi's floor Chris was standing there with the door open. They went inside and saw Aunt Naomi and Tanya in the kitchen.

"Hi Tanya and Aunt Naomi, it is nice to see you again, especially now that there is a wedding soon," Brittney said. Tanya started to smile and blush. Chris took their bags into Tanya's room and put them down.

"How was the drive down and did you run into any traffic?" Aunt Naomi said.

"There was no traffic at all on the road with us. We only stopped like three times and that was it," Brittney said.

"Chris, where is your girlfriend Latoya at? She seems like a nice female," Justina said.

"She is very nice and cares for Chris a lot," Tanya mentioned. "She will be here because we are going to go and hang out tonight and tomorrow we will be going to get fitted for our dresses."

"That sounds like a plan to me. I have never been to Harlem or in the projects," Brittney said.

"You are not missing anything around here at all. I would rather be where you are any day," Tanya said.

"It is not bothering me right now, because I go to work and come home and then on Sunday go to church," Aunt Naomi said.

Latoya was ringing the doorbell so Chris went to answer it and before she could say anything he grabbed her and gave her a big kiss. His cousins were smiling because they knew that she made him happy.

“Hi everybody, how are you? It is nice to see you again, Justina and Brittney,” Latoya said.

“The same here,” Justina told her, “and what do you have planned for us to do tonight?”

“Do not worry, it’s nothing that is going to get you into trouble,” Latoya said. They all told Aunt Naomi that they will see her in the morning because they knew she would be sleep when they came in.

They left out of the house and got on the elevator to go to the car. Tanya and Latoya decided that they would take them to a club out in the Bronx. When they got to the club they couldn’t believe how crowded it was and how nice it looked inside.

“I have never been to a place like this before and it is nice and seems like a nice hangout,” Justina said. Brittney agreed with her because she knew that being married women they barely got out.

“Let’s go and get something to drink and find a table to sit at,” Latoya said. They all walked towards the bar and then went to find a place to sit down. Everything was going fine until they heard someone arguing and then a fight broke out. Everybody in the club started running towards the door and screaming.

“This just like in the hood; you can’t go anywhere to have fun without someone wanting to start a fight,” Tanya said. When they were all outside trying to leave and not get hurt, the fight continued outside. Some of the people got hurt in the midst of all the commotion. One of the guys that were fighting went to his car and came back with a gun. He started shooting at the guys he was arguing with. That made people more scared and nervous. Everybody was running and you couldn’t even get to your car or anything. Tanya, Latoya and Justina and Brittney were trying to get to the car to leave. Before they could get in to leave the cops were there and trying to surround the club.

“This is the first time I have been around stuff like this and actually witnessed someone getting shot,” Justina said. The guy was gone when the cops got there and people were talking to each other about what happened. Everybody there were witnesses and had to tell what they saw. Brittney was a little nervous when they asked her did she see anything.

“I didn’t see that much but they were arguing in the club and I was trying to ignore it,” Brittney said. “I am not from here; I am just visiting my cousin for a few days.”

“Thank you, ladies, you all can go now, and be careful around here,” the cop said.

“Thank you,” they all said to the cop and then they got in the car. As Justina was driving she wanted to know where they were going now. Latoya asked if they wanted to go see a movie or go get something to eat.

“I would like to go see a movie and get something to eat if that is all right with the rest of you,” Brittney said.

“I don’t have a problem; that would be fine with me,” Tanya said. “I can be relaxed and calm now,” she said. They all laughed and agreed with Tanya. Driving and talking, Tanya’s song came on and she started singing, and the next thing you knew they all were doing the same thing.

“We can either go to the movie theater in coop-city or in Brooklyn; they both have a mall,” Tanya said.

“The one in Brooklyn is far from the mall,” Latoya said. “Coop-city’s movie theater is together with the mall. Then we can get something to eat at one of the restaurants over there.” When they got to coop-city they wanted to see what was playing and the time that it started. They settled on a movie and the time but decided to go get something to eat first. It was 10:30 so they didn’t want to be out too late because they had an appointment to be fitted for their gowns tomorrow. They went to get something to eat at Popeye’s so they could sit down and wouldn’t be that far from the movie theater. When all of them finished eating it was time to go catch the movie. Brittney couldn’t believe how big the movie theater was and how many they had in one theater. They enjoyed the movie so much that they couldn’t stop talking about it. They walked back to the car, got in and went back to Tanya’s house to go to bed and get ready for tomorrow.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY

As soon as they walked in the door and went in the room they all put on their pajamas and got in the bed. Tanya gave Latoya a gown to sleep in.

Jay was getting up to go in the kitchen to get him something to drink so that he could go back to bed. He was up watching the television and thinking about how he wanted to decorate his room when they moved in a couple of weeks. His parents were happy that they could move their family out of the hood. Jay came back and got in the bed and turned off the television and went to sleep.

Susan stayed at her own house tonight because her brothers missed her when she wasn't home with them.

Theresa was up giving the baby her feeding and listening to the radio.

After so many months and staying at the Salvation Army, Paul and his parents were finally leaving and moving into their own apartment. It wasn't in the hood but it was decent to them. Paul's father decided to stop being so hard on Keisha and try to be understanding and patient with her.

The next morning everybody was up and Aunt Naomi was cooking breakfast. When Chris came out the room he was surprised to see Latoya there. Chris said good morning to everybody and kissed Latoya and gave her a hug.

"That is so sweet when a man hugs and kisses his woman in the morning no matter who is around them," Brittney said. They ate breakfast and then went to finish getting ready so that they could go be fitted. Chris and Aunt Naomi had to work today and it was going to be late for Aunt Naomi, she thought, so she told Tanya to cook something or order out.

"Okay Aunt Naomi, and I will see you later maybe; if not, tomorrow morning," Tanya said.

“Justina and Brittney, did you bring anything to wear to church because I would like for you to go since you are here,” Aunt Naomi said. Before Aunt Naomi left out of the house she got a phone call from Sean’s mother letting her know when the engagement party was going to be and where.

“Thank you for calling and giving me that information and I will tell Tanya’s family so they will be able to make it for the engagement party,” Aunt Naomi said. Aunt Naomi and Sean’s mother hung up and then Aunt Naomi left for work. When she got to work Ms. Simpson was sitting behind the desk trying to do some paperwork.

“Good morning Naomi, how are you this morning?” Ms. Simpson said.

“I am fine; just trying to get everything ready for the wedding and the reception with Sean’s parents,” Aunt Naomi said.

“That is nice that his parents want to help pay half for the wedding and reception.”

The weeks were winding down and everyone was in town for the engagement party. Chris and Latoya had to keep Tanya and Sean busy, and then bring them to the hall where the engagement party was being held. Tanya and Sean thought that they were going to a party that Chris and Latoya’s job was doing. When they got there and parked the truck they sat there for a few minutes before getting out. Chris called inside to ask for Sean’s father to let him know that they were there. When he made the call he had stepped out of the truck. They all got out and went inside to the hall Chris and Latoya let them go in first so everybody could say surprise. They were really surprised when they went inside and found out it was for them. Tanya was so surprised that she had tears in her eyes and couldn’t believe it. It was just a happy feeling that came over her to see that people cared about her and Sean. Everybody that they knew was there from family, friends and co-workers to celebrate the happy occasion with them. They all partied until the wee hours of the morning and had a good time. When the party was over and they finished cleaning it was 3:00 in the morning. Sean’s parents were happy that it turned out to be a lovely engagement party.

The next morning was Sunday and it was time to get up and go to church. Aunt Naomi was up and getting ready. Chris and Tanya were tired but they got up to go to church with her. Sean was up and getting ready for church and so was Latoya. They went to church every Sunday and didn’t want to miss today because it was their Sunday to sing. They met at the church and Aunt

Naomi went to sit down. They had to go in the back to put on their robes and practice for a few minutes. Church service was always good and so was the choir. One of the members got up to make the announcements of the month and also made the announcement about Tanya and Sean's wedding. Everybody was happy and they were clapping to congratulate the two of them. When service was over most of the members went to congratulate Tanya and Sean. They both said thank you and went in the back to take off their robes. Sean decided to go out to eat with Tanya after church.

"Chris and Latoya, Aunt Naomi, would you like to go with us to get something to eat?" Sean said. Chris and Latoya told Sean yes.

"I'll take a rain check because I am tired and I am just going to go home and relax and get a little sleep," Aunt Naomi said. They walked back towards the building with Aunt Naomi and then they got in the truck to go get something to eat.

"I am treating all of you to Junior's for a nice meal and we will bring Aunt Naomi something back," Sean said. They went to Junior's to eat and enjoy themselves. When they finished eating Sean decided to not rush back to the hood and just drive around. He started to take Tanya to see where they were going to be living but he decided to wait until their honeymoon. They reached back in the hood about 9:00 that night. Sean parked the truck and then they got out.

"I will talk to all of you tomorrow because I am tired and I have to get up and go to work tomorrow," Latoya said. Chris kissed and hugged her goodnight and Sean did the same to Tanya. Sean and Latoya walked together and Tanya and Chris went in the building to go upstairs. When Sean got upstairs he called Tanya to say goodnight, and that he loved her and she said the same thing. Latoya went upstairs and called Chris to let him know that she was upstairs and also to say goodnight.

"I will see you tomorrow at work when you get there and you have a week left before school is out right," Chris said.

"Yea we get out of school in two weeks and I can't wait. We have so far gone to school for a week," she said.

"Well let me go so that I can get some sleep and you get some, too, my sweet baby," Chris said. They hung up and then Chris lay down and went to sleep. Tanya was still talking to Sean on the phone and telling him that she loved him with all her heart. Then as the time was going by because they had been on the phone for two hours now, they both said goodnight and hung up. Then Tanya got up off her bed to get her clothes for tomorrow.

The next day it was raining and it was coming down hard, and Tanya and Latoya decided to take a cab to school because it was raining so hard. Tanya called Sean on her break to see what he was doing and he told her that he had just left the gym from working out.

"Susan told me to tell you hello and there is one month to go until that big day," Sean said.

"Susan is crazy but she is my girl and my friend," Tanya said. "Well it is all most time for me to go back to class so I will talk to you later, honey," she said.

"Okay babe, would you and Latoya like for me to come pick the two of you up?" he said. "So that you won't have to spend money to come home in a cab or take the train."

"That would be nice of you, sweetie. That's why I love you so much, because you take care of me so good," Tanya said. "I will talk to you later and my last class is at 1:00 and so is Latoya's," Tanya said.

"I will meet you two in front of the gate, okay, and don't be late," he said. Tanya and Sean hung up and then she went back to her class. She had that class for two hours, and it was boring to her because you really couldn't understand what the professor was saying.

Jay went to his classes that day and told his professors that he was moving in June and wouldn't be returning. One of his professors told him that he had to go to the registrar's office and admissions office to do the withdrawing process. He went and they told him to come back next week before school was over.

"I will be attending the college in Mount Vernon. I will need my transcripts and everything transferred over," Jay said. After he finished all of that he went to get something to eat in the cafeteria. When he finished there he went to his last class and couldn't wait to get home and finish his packing that was almost done.

Theresa was at work at the supermarket still trying to train one of the girls for the register. She was going to start next week because she was going to take Tanya's place.

Tanya's uncle John called to tell Sean that the furniture had been delivered, and Aunt Nancy and he and their family fixed up the house for them.

"Thank you so much, Uncle John. You and Aunt Nancy have done a lot for me." Uncle John told Sean not to worry; everything would be together before the wedding and after the honeymoon.

Sean told him that he would tell everybody that he said hello to all of them. Sean and Uncle John hung up and Sean finished doing some last-minute things before going to pick up Tanya and Latoya.

It was almost 1:00 and Sean was three blocks away from the school. He was at the traffic light waiting for the light to change so he could be in front by the gate. When Tanya was coming out of the building she had a class in she saw Latoya coming.

“Come on, we are getting a ride home with Sean. I called him so that we wouldn’t have to take the train or take a cab back home,” Tanya said.

“Nothing wrong with that, your man does anything for you and that is nice,” Latoya said.

“My brother does all he can for you and even more,” Tanya said. They walked towards the gate and Sean was waiting in the truck for them.

Michael called Sean to see what time was the tux fitting on Saturday. Sean answered, “What’s up, man?”

“I was just calling to see what time was our fitting.”

“It is at 11:00 in the morning. If you want I will come and pick you up because Chris and my brother are riding with me,” Sean said. Sean’s brother lived far away and had a family of his own. Sean was the middle child because he had a sister too.

“Okay then Saturday it is.” Then he hung up from talking. By then Tanya and Latoya had reached the truck and got in.

“Hey babe, you look like you are tired and drained out,” Sean said.

“Too many things are going on and too much to do for the next three weeks.” The invitations had been out and only a few had come back RSVP. Aunt Naomi had called Tanya on her cell phone to let her know that people were still sending wedding gifts and some were at the house. They got a lot at the engagement party and Aunt Naomi told Sean’s parents to take all of them. They took the gifts to the house that Sean bought for him and Tanya. Everybody got together and did a good job of making sure everything was ready when they came back from their honeymoon. Sean knew what everybody was doing for him but Tanya didn’t have a clue to what was going on. She still didn’t know where they were going to be living. When they got back in the hood it had stopped raining and they couldn’t believe it. They got out of the car and Latoya forgot that she had to go to work so she couldn’t go home.

"I will see the two of you later and maybe we can do something for a little while before it gets late. I am only working until 5:00 today. Chris and I get off at the same time and we can walk home together," Latoya said.

Aunt Naomi was still at work until 8:00 that night. Tanya and Sean went upstairs to her house to chill for a while and watch some movies. When they walked in the door Sean sat on the couch and relaxed with Tanya.

"Come here, babe, and sit next to me and let me massage your shoulders and rub your feet," Sean said. Tanya sat down and tried to find something on to watch. She and Sean started kissing and then one thing led to another and then they went into Tanya's room.

"I love you so much and don't ever want to lose you," Tanya said. "You will never lose me and I am not going anywhere. You are stuck with me for the rest of your life," he said. They finished watching the movie and then Chris and Latoya came in. They sat down to watch the movie with them and to eat something.

"I will go in the kitchen to fix all of you something to eat," Sean said. Sean got up and went to the kitchen to fix everybody something to eat for dinner. He asked Tanya to come in the kitchen to help him find something to fix. They found some steaks and made some broccoli and baked potatoes for them to eat. He also made enough for Aunt Naomi to eat when she came in. They stayed in the same spot after they ate for several hours. They were even there when Aunt Naomi came home.

Tanya told Sean that dinner was very good and filling. They washed the dishes and then finished watching movies and listening to music.

"I see that there is a very good dinner in the kitchen and the kitchen is clean too," Aunt Naomi said.

"I hope you don't mind that I cooked for everybody tonight and even made some for you," Sean said.

"I have no problem with anyone in my kitchen cooking," she said. Sean went in the kitchen to get the food for Aunt Naomi so that she could relax. After Aunt Naomi finished eating she took her plate in the kitchen. She told Sean thank you for the lovely dinner. She then went into her room to pull off her work clothes and get comfortable.

"This is a lot of fun, the four of us sitting here watching movies and everything," Tanya said. Latoya got up to go to the bathroom and get something else to drink. When she came back the movie was ending.

“What should we do now; it is still early,” Tanya said. Sean decided that they should go hang out at his house because his parents were not home. They were out of town at his grandmother’s because they wanted her to come to the wedding. Tanya told Aunt Naomi that they were going out for a while and they would be back.

“Have fun and don’t stay out too late because you still have school,” Aunt Naomi said.

“Chris and I won’t stay out too late, Aunt Naomi,” she said. Then she went back into the living room and grabbed her jacket and they left. While waiting for the elevator Tanya kissed Sean on the cheek and pinched his butt. The elevator came and they got on and went downstairs to go to Sean’s house. On the way to Sean’s house there was something going on because they heard something like gunshots and people were screaming and yelling and running to get out of the way.

“Wait, because those were gunshots and people are running this way,” Sean said. They walked on the outside of the hood instead of walking in the courtyard.

It was two buildings away from Sean’s. It was a drug dealer and a gang going at it. Gang members were coming from all directions and Sean, Tanya and Chris and Latoya were trying to get to Sean’s building fast. When they finally reached the building the cops were arriving to the scene to see what was going on. Somebody had called the police because of all the commotion in the courtyard.

All the noise woke up Jay’s little sister so he went to check on her and put her back to sleep. When he finally got her back to sleep he tried to look out the window to see if he could see anything that was going on out there. People were afraid to go out sometimes at night, because of the things that go on in the hood. The police have tried to do something with the gangs but it is not enough. When they got upstairs to Sean’s house they all sat on the couch.

“Chris, I know that you are not going to just sit on the couch, so you can go use my brother’s room and I will be in my room,” Sean said. Tanya got up and followed Sean into his room.

“Okay Sean, because I didn’t really want to sit on the couch,” Chris said. Latoya and Chris got up and went into Sean’s brother’s room and sat on the bed. They started kissing and kissing and then the next thing you know they were doing the nasty. Sean and Tanya did not waste any time doing what they wanted to do, because she knew that she had to get up in the morning. A couple

of hours went by and they all realized that it was late so they had to go. Chris, Tanya and Latoya told Sean goodnight and they would talk to him tomorrow. Chris and Tanya walked Latoya to her building and Chris kissed her goodnight.

“Goodnight Tanya, and I will see you tomorrow in front of your building to go to school,” Latoya said. Chris and Tanya left and went home to go to bed and get ready for tomorrow. When they got upstairs Tanya called Sean to let him know she made it upstairs safely and Chris did the same when he called Latoya to let her know he was home safely. Tanya went to bed after she got her clothes out for school tomorrow. Chris had to be to work at 9:30 tomorrow, and he didn’t want to be tired when he went in. Chris went to the bathroom and then he lay down and went to bed. The cops were still checking and talking to people to see if they saw anything.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: JAY'S AND FAMILY MOVING OUT OF THE HOOD

The weeks were going fast and the wedding was just around the corner. Michael, Chris and Jay decided to give Sean a bachelor party, but they had to get all the guys that came to the engagement party together. Sean's father told Chris that they could have the bachelor party at the hall where they had the engagement party.

"Thank you for letting us have it at your friend's hall. I hope that you will be there to help your son celebrate his last night of bachelorhood," Chris said.

"I wouldn't miss this for anything in the world. My son is getting married to a wonderful and beautiful young lady," Sean's father said.

"Okay I will talk to you on Friday before the bachelor party," Chris said. Chris and Sean's father hung up and then he called the place to make sure that everything was either ready or will be ready for the bachelor party. Michael called Chris to let him know that everything was ready on his end. Latoya called Aunt Naomi to see if she got in touch with everybody who was going to be at the bridal shower for Tanya.

"I have called everyone and they said that they will be here, and not to worry, everything is going to be all right," Aunt Naomi said.

"We have everything that we asked for including the stripper that will be there," Latoya said. Latoya told her that she was glad that Tanya had an aunt like her to be there when things were tough. Latoya didn't think she could do it by herself so she asked Aunt Naomi to help her.

Today was Paul's birthday and his mother made him a big birthday cake.

"Thanks Mom, for the cake and the gift. I love you very much, and I don't want you to ever forget how I feel about you," Paul said. Keisha came in from

work and brought Paul a gift and gave it to him. Paul was surprised that she gave him a gift for his birthday.

Theresa was on the phone talking to her grandmother because she wanted to come back out there to stay with the baby.

"You can come any time you want to, but when you are ready to leave and go back home you can," her grandmother said.

"Thank you, Grandma, it is just not a nice place for me to raise my child, because even though I don't live in the hood it is too many things going on," Theresa said. "I work in the hood and it is too much killing and everything around here." Theresa was going to stay with her grandmother in a few weeks.

Jay's parents had finished all of the packing, and there was nothing else for them to do now but move. The moving truck was going to come early and take their stuff. Jay's father was going with the truck to make sure everything was in the house.

"Dad, can I go with you to the house help unpack?" Jay said. His dad told him that he could go with him and fix his room the way he wanted it.

Susan was at work as usual while people were at school or someplace else. Michael was at work at the gym doing what he did best. Sean decided to go work out today and then maybe do some other things.

The days were winding down and everyone was excited about the big day. The bachelor party and the bridal party were two days away and then the wedding. The dresses were ready and needed to be picked up. Tanya and Latoya were going to pick up the dresses after they finished school today.

School was coming to an end for the summer and the kids were excited about being out for the summer. Most of them had jobs to go to and the others had to look for jobs. After school and everybody's last class everyone said goodbye and got address and phone numbers of their friends. Tanya was waiting for Latoya to meet up with her. Latoya was walking with a couple of the kids from her class talking about the Christmas break and what she was going to do.

As they approached Tanya, she was on her cell phone talking to Justina and Brittney about going to pick up their dresses.

"I am going to go get them as soon as Latoya gets here. She is going with me to pick them up along with the shoes and everything," Tanya said.

"I am sorry I took so long but we were exchanging phone numbers and everything," Latoya said. One of the girls that were with Latoya said congratulations to Tanya on her upcoming marriage.

“Thank you very much. If you would like you can come to the wedding. Latoya will give you all the information so that you can come,” Tanya said.

“I will call you tomorrow with all of the information, and also about the bridal shower too,” Latoya said. Tanya didn’t hear that because she was walking away still talking to Justina on the phone. Latoya said bye to her friends and caught up with Tanya. Tanya and Latoya left the school on a happy note that it was their last time in school until the New Year.

Christmas was coming and they couldn’t wait. Tanya and Latoya walked to the train station talking about the wedding and how everything was going to be beautiful. When they got to the place to pick up the dresses Tanya decided to call Sean to see if he would come pick them up, so they wouldn’t have to bring the dresses on the train. Tanya called Sean on her cell phone before going into the bridal shop.

“Hi babe, what’s up and what can I do for you?” he said.

“I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind coming to pick Latoya and I up from the bridal shop with the gowns if that isn’t a problem,” Tanya said. Sean told her that he would be glad to come and pick up his wife-to-be and her friend. Tanya told Sean to give her a half-an-hour before he got there. Sean told her no problem and he would see her in a while. When they got in the bridal shop and spoke to the lady, she told them that the gowns were all ready and in black clothes bags so no one would see what they were. Tanya checked them to make sure they were right and the right color. When she finished she gave the lady her credit card and everything. She wanted everyone to keep their dresses and remember them as a happy and beautiful occasion. When Sean pulled up in front of the shop Latoya told Tanya that Sean was here. They grabbed the dresses and walked out the door. They put the dresses in the back with Latoya and they got in the truck.

“Okay now where else would you ladies like to go?” Sean said.

“I can’t think of anywhere,” Latoya said.

“First we should take the dresses to my house and then we can decide on what we want to do to celebrate our last day of classes,” Tanya said.

“Okay first place to go is to your house and drop off the dresses, and then maybe Chris will be there and we can discuss what to do,” Latoya said. Driving they were talking and listening to music on the way back to the hood. As they were approaching the hood they notice something going on but couldn’t tell what it was. It happened on the corner and there were a lot of people standing around.

"It never fails, something is always going on in the hood," Latoya said. When Sean parked the truck in his favorite spot they got out and grabbed the dresses and took them upstairs. Getting on the elevator to go to her house, she started thinking that maybe something happened to Chris or Aunt Naomi. Sean could tell that there was something wrong. He asked her what was wrong and she told him. He told her not to worry because if something had happened someone would have called her. When she opened the door, Aunt Naomi was in the kitchen fixing her some tea because she didn't feel well.

"Aunt Naomi, how are you; is your cold getting better?" Tanya said. "We can't have you sick at my wedding and not able to be there."

"I am fine, just drinking a little tea and going to relax," Aunt Naomi said. As Tanya and Latoya were hanging the dresses in the hallway closet Chris came in the door. Tanya grabbed him and gave him a big hug.

"I saw all the people standing on the corner and I thought something happened to you or Aunt Naomi," she said.

Chris told her, "Thank you for caring but I am fine." He told them that there was a car accident and two people got hurt. "I couldn't tell if it was anybody that I know," Chris said. As they were all listening, the phone rang. Aunt Naomi picked it up. It was Michael calling to talk to Chris and to see what he was up to.

"Hey Michael, what's up, man? Haven't talked to you or seen you in a while," Chris said.

"I was calling to see what you and Latoya were up to today or tonight," Michael said. "I thought that maybe we could go hang out somewhere," he said.

"I am not sure but let me ask her and I will call you back," Chris said.

"Okay," Michael replied. Chris hung up and told them that it was Michael calling to find out what he and Latoya were doing today.

"That's exactly what we were talking about," Sean said. "We should celebrate the girls' last day of classes and whatever else come natural. I am going to call Michael and see if he and Susan want to hang out with us today," Sean said. Sean opened his cell phone to call Michael.

"Hey Sean, what's happening? I haven't spoken to you in a while," Michael said.

"I know, I was calling to see if you and Susan wanted to hang out with us," he said. "We are going to celebrate Tanya and Latoya's last day of classes and it being Christmas vacation."

"We would love to hang out with all of you," Michael said.

"I am going to call Jay and see if he wants to go out with us too," Sean said. Sean called Jay's house but Jay wasn't there. Jay's mom told Sean that he went with his dad to the new house to unpack and fix up his room. Sean told her thank you and hung up. Michael and Susan were meeting them at Tanya's house. They had decided to go out to Pennsylvania and hang out there. When Michael and Susan arrived they pressed the bell.

"We are coming downstairs right now," Tanya said. Michael told them okay and waited for them outside. While waiting for the elevator Sean and Tanya were holding hands. When the elevator came up and stopped on their floor someone got off. It was the lady that lived two doors away from Tanya and them. She was the noisy neighbor on that floor. When they reached the lobby, Michael and Susan were sitting on the bench waiting for them. They all said hello to each other and walked to Sean's truck. They got in the truck and closed the doors.

"We are out to Pennsylvania to hang out and probably do a little shopping, movie and get something to eat," Sean said. Michael asked what happened to Jay and why he didn't come with them.

"His mom told us that he went with his dad to the new house to unpack and fix up his room the way he wanted it," Chris said.

Out there in Pennsylvania they had so much fun driving around looking at the houses out there. Sean took them to the different cities of Pennsylvania that they hadn't seen. Everybody enjoyed the sightseeing and couldn't believe how quiet and nice it was out there. They finally decided on where to go and eat and a movie they wanted to see. They spent all day and half of the night in Pennsylvania. No one was rushing to go home because they didn't have to go to school or work tomorrow. They walked through the mall hand in hand like the lovely couples that they were. They always liked hanging out together.

"I am really enjoying myself being with all of you today," Susan said. "It has been a while since we have all got together and did something."

"I feel that way too, and hope things will never change between us no matter what," Latoya said. Chris gave her a kiss and told her not to worry because she will always have him. They all laughed and made a pact that they would always be together forever. Tanya saw something that she wanted to buy Aunt Naomi just to show her how much she loved and cared about her. They all went in the store to look at it.

"I don't see it and it is in the window," Tanya said. Latoya told her to ask one of the sales clerks if they had any more; if not, look and see what else she

liked for Aunt Naomi. When the sales clerk came over she looked at Sean, Chris and Michael, not noticing the girls.

"Excuse me, but I like the crystal house in the window; do you have any more?" Tanya said. "By the way, all the guys are taken."

"I am sorry about that. No problem, I will go in the back to see if we have any more and will come right back," the clerk said. Latoya noticed a few of the other girls working in the store looking at the guys.

"Why does it seem like the girls in this store can't keep their eyes off the fellows?" Latoya said. When the sales clerk came back that was helping Tanya, Latoya asked her.

"It's just that we don't get that many fine guys coming in the store with other females," she said. "We don't mean to make them uncomfortable it just isn't any cute guys in this town really." The guys told the sales clerk thank you and they walked out of the store.

The bachelor party and bridal shower were going to be tomorrow so everyone was coming into town tomorrow.

The wedding was next Saturday and everyone was hoping that it was going to be a beautiful day for a wedding.

It was 2:00 in the morning and they were driving back to the hood. They couldn't believe that they had been out all day, but it didn't matter because no one had anywhere to go except for the bachelor party and bridal shower tomorrow. When they reached back in the hood it was 3:00 in the morning. Sean kissed Tanya goodnight and told her he would talk to her tomorrow. Chris did the same to Latoya, and Michael and Susan told them goodnight and got in the car to leave. Sean and Latoya left to go home and Tanya and Chris went upstairs. When Tanya reached upstairs and went in her room she had a couple of messages that Aunt Naomi had taken for her. Tanya knew she couldn't call anybody back now so she went to bed. Chris hit the bed as soon as he went in his room. Jay and his pop had just come into the house because they had been at the new place all day getting it together.

Paul's family was sleeping but he was up thinking about his life and what he wanted. He was praying to God about what he wanted to do with his life. He was just glad that he wasn't in the projects getting into trouble now that he was where he was. He finished praying and then he went to sleep.

It was light outside and Aunt Naomi was up trying to straighten up before some of the family started to arrive for the bridal shower and bachelor party tonight. Most of the family was going to stay in hotels and the other ones were going to go back home. The majority of Tanya's relatives lived far away and

the others didn't live that far. Sean's family was going to be here to and they were staying in hotels. His brother and his family were going to stay at the house. His sister and his niece were going to stay there too. Sean called Tanya to wish her a good morning and to say that he loved her. He still hadn't told her about the house in New Jersey. Aunt Naomi was making coffee and cooking breakfast.

"Good morning, Aunt Naomi," Tanya said while she was talking to Sean on her cell phone. Aunt Naomi told Tanya to tell Sean good morning. Tanya told Sean and he told her to tell Aunt Naomi hello back. Tanya went back into her room to sit on the bed and figure out what she was going to wear tonight.

"You know that whatever you wear is beautiful and so are you," Sean said. Most of the family had arrived and was relaxing in the hotels waiting until it was time for the parties to start. Tanya's family was so excited; they couldn't wait to see the ring that Sean had given to her. Everybody was keeping busy and getting their outfits together for the evening. Latoya called Tanya to see if she needed anything for her to do.

"Can you come over about 5:30 and help me do my hair and get together because even though this is just the bridal shower I am a little nervous," Tanya said.

"I will help you with whatever you need, so I will see you later," Latoya said. She also told her to tell Chris good morning and she would see him later. They both hung up and Tanya went in the kitchen to get a cup of coffee and to try and calm down a little. When she reached the kitchen Aunt Naomi had finished cooking breakfast. Tanya grabbed a plate and got something to eat. Chris also came to get something to eat and went back into his room to watch the television. Aunt Naomi sat at the kitchen table to eat her breakfast and drink her coffee. She couldn't believe that this day was finally here and her niece was getting married. She knew that it was still a week away from now. She was sitting at the table smiling because she was so happy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE BACHELORETTE AND BACHELOR PARTIES

It was time for the bachelor party to start everybody was waiting for Sean to arrive so they could get the party going. The bridal shower had all ready started and everyone was having fun. Tanya couldn't believe that everyone had gone all out for her. There was more to come because Susan and Latoya had hired a few strippers for the party. Chris and Michael had strippers coming for Sean's bachelor party too. Everyone was having so much fun that no one was thinking about anything. The strippers were entertaining Sean and them at the bachelor party. Even Uncle John was enjoying himself and having a few drinks. All of the family and friends on both sides were at the bachelor party and bridal party. It was time for Tanya to sit in the bridal chair with her hat and open the gifts from her guests. Tanya got a lot of nice things. She received some things for the house and the best gifts of all were the lingerie that she was getting. She couldn't believe all the sexy lingerie that they gave her. Back at the bachelor party everyone was getting drunk and dancing with the strippers. No one was going overboard or flirting with the strippers. They were giving them dollar bills for dancing. At the bridal party after the gifts it was time for the strippers to come.

The doorbell rang and Susan went to open it. Standing there was a policeman and a firefighter. They asked for Tanya to come to the door. She walked over to the door and then they turned the music on and started stripping. All the women were getting excited that they couldn't stop screaming. They all started pulling out money out of their pocketbooks. Aunt Naomi and Aunt Nancy were speechless. Everybody was having fun at both parties.

It was getting late and people started to leave and either go home or to the hotel. The waiters had to clean up and get the place ready for tomorrow. When Sean got home he called Tanya to see if she had a good night and was it fun.

"I had a nice time and spent some money on the strippers," Tanya said. Sean told her that he did the same thing but she was still his best girl. They both told each other goodnight and hung up.

Aunt Naomi was tired but she wanted to go to church. Tanya and all of them decided to go with her. Service at church today was wonderful because the choir sang their hearts out and the sermon was one of a kind. When church was over everyone was talking to Tanya about her wedding on Saturday.

"I am a little nervous and have butterflies but Aunt Naomi told me that is natural," Tanya said. She wanted the choir to sing at her wedding but she wasn't sure of the song yet. They told her that they would like that very much. When they got home Aunt Naomi invited Sean and Latoya to stay for dinner and they both agreed and told her thank you. While Aunt Naomi was warming up the food they sat in the living room and tried to find something on cable to watch. When the food was ready they went to the table to eat. When they finished eating Tanya and Sean decided to clear off the table. They put the dishes in the dishwasher. Chris and Latoya were sitting in the living room. Aunt Naomi decided to go in her room and relax. When Tanya and Sean finished cleaning up everything, they sat down to watch television.

The days were going fast and everyone was getting prepared. All of Jay's stuff had been moved to the new house and was already unpacked.

Two more days to go and the wedding would be here. Chris had taken the next few days off to get himself together. They decided to hang out one last time before the big day; they weren't sure what they wanted to do. Sean just drove and decided that wherever they ended up would be fine.

"We should go bowling and have some fun because I want to learn how to bowl," Chris said.

"I have no problem with that because I like to bowl and play the games," Sean said. Tanya and Latoya agreed to go bowling and enjoy being together with their men. When they reached the bowling alley Sean found a place to park his truck. They all climbed out and went inside and inside Sean told them that it was his treat. Everybody said thank you. Sean paid and they got their shoes and went to find a table to sit at and bowl. It was the girls against the guys in a competition.

"I am going to enjoy this because we are going to whip your butts." The girls won three games against the guys.

"I guess what Latoya said was true; we were going to whip your butts and that's what we did," Tanya said.

"I am not going to give up. How about another game, or are you too scared to try your luck again?" Chris said.

"Bring it on, and if we win the two of you have to take us out to eat when we leave from here," Tanya said.

"You have a deal, and believe me we are not going to lose this time," Sean said. Sean told them that if he and Chris win they would have to pay for the food and the drinks. They ended up playing three games and the guys won all three. They teased the girls and did a little dance to rub it in. As they were taking off their shoes to give them back Sean and Chris were telling them where they wanted to go eat and drink.

"Okay, you two want to rub it in and make fun, then maybe you two should pay for your own meals," Tanya said. Latoya started to laugh at what Tanya was saying to Sean and Chris.

"What is so funny, Latoya? You are having fun with this, aren't you; also enjoying it very much," Chris said. They left out of the bowling alley and got in the truck to go get something to eat. The guys wanted some tacos from Taco Bell and that's where they went.

"I was only kidding. I am going to pay for the food," Sean said.

They found a Taco Bell and went to the drive thru window. They each ordered and then Sean pulled off to one of the spots so that they could eat. When they finished Sean got out of the truck to put the garbage in the trash can. He got back in his truck and they headed home because it was late and they were tired.

On them way home they were singing songs, and talking about when they all first started going out with each other. When they reached the hood it was quiet and no one was outside. They were all surprised that the hood was empty. Sean parked the truck and they all got out.

"I will see you tomorrow, baby, and you be sweet and good until then," Sean said. Chris said the same to Latoya.

CHAPTER TWENTY: A VERY SPECIAL DAY THE WEDDING DAY

The only thing that was going on today was Tanya and her bridesmaids had hair appointments and nails to do. The groom and his groomsmen had haircuts and everything else. The rehearsal and dinner was at 7:00 tonight and everyone was getting prepared for that. Tanya and the girls were finished at the hairdresser by 3:00 p.m.

They decided to just chill at her house until it was time to go to rehearsal. When it was time for rehearsal everyone was there waiting. The pastor and one of the reverends were there with their wives. The rehearsal and the rehearsal dinner went very well. Sean told his parents that he was the happiest man in the world, and he thanked them for being his parents and showing him how to treat a lady. Everyone left the church and went back to the hotels. Aunt Naomi and her sister and brother-in-law went to her house. Sean, Tanya, and Chris and Latoya walked slower than the rest of them. Everybody went upstairs to shower and get some sleep for the big day tomorrow.

Sean called Tanya on the telephone and told her that he loved her and can't wait for her to be his wife.

"I love you, too, and I can't wait for you to be my husband," Tanya said. They both hung up and then Sean went in the living room to talk to his brother and his family. Everybody was actually too excited and happy to go to sleep. Sean and his family stayed up kind of late and so did Tanya and her family.

Jay was at home in his new house enjoying how quiet it was and thinking about his friend getting married. He was also happy that he was really out of the hood with his family.

"I would love to stay up with all of you, but I am getting married tomorrow so I need all my sleep and my rest," Tanya said. Tanya went to her room to go to bed after she kissed everybody goodnight. Chris was already in his room in bed. Michael had just dropped Susan at her house so that they could go to sleep and get ready for tomorrow. It was now 6:00 in the morning and Tanya really couldn't sleep so she went into the kitchen to make some tea to drink. Aunt Naomi heard her stirring around and went to see what was wrong.

"Nothing is wrong, Aunt Naomi. I just can't sleep because I am nervous about the wedding," she said.

"Everything is going to be all right and you are going to be a beautiful and lovely bride," Aunt Naomi said.

The sun started to come up and Aunt Naomi decided to make some coffee and some breakfast for everyone. One at a time they started to get up to go to the bathroom and wash up. The same thing was going on at Sean's house with his family. His mom was in the kitchen cooking breakfast and crying because her other son was getting married and moving away. Sean walked in the kitchen and kissed his mom and told her good morning. She turned around and looked at Sean with tears in her eyes.

"Mom, please try not to cry; you are supposed to be happy today," Sean said. She told him that she was crying happy tears.

Everybody was getting themselves together for the wedding. Tanya and the girls had to get dressed at the church because she didn't want to walk through the hood with her wedding dress on. The girls were getting ready at the church and the guys were there too, getting ready.

People started pulling up at the church and going inside. The church was packed with family and friend coming to see Tanya and Sean getting married. It was now 1:50 and Tanya and her bridesmaids were dressed and ready. The guys were ready too, and just sitting and talking.

"Sean, you seem a little nervous and you are sweating. Take it easy; it is going to be all right and everything is going to go smooth," Michael said.

"You know you are right. Why am I so nervous and sitting here sweating?" Sean said.

Jay had gone to the bathroom and came back in.

"It seems that everyone is here and looking very nice," Jay said. "Sean, your parents are sitting in the first row and Tanya's aunt Naomi and her other aunt and uncle are sitting on the other side in the first row."

The wedding was getting ready to start. The pastor and the reverend came out along with Sean. The organist started the music and the choir started to sing. The groomsmen and the bridesmaids walked in first. Then the flower girl and the ring bearer came next. Then the big moment was about to start for the bride but before the bride came in. The best man and maid of honor walked down the aisle. The people stood up and watched as Tanya and her uncle walked down the aisle. Aunt Naomi started to cry because she was happy for Tanya. When they reached the altar everyone sat down. The pastor asked, "Who gives this woman away?"

"Her aunts and I give this beautiful lady away," Uncle John said, then he kissed her and went to sit down.

The pastor continued on with the wedding. No one objected to them getting married and then each of them said their wedding vows. The pastor continued the ceremony of their marriage. It was time for the vows and Tanya and Sean decided to recite their own. Aunt Naomi was sitting there crying because the wedding was so beautiful. When they finished saying their vows, then it was time for the rings to be blessed and placed in their fingers. Sean took his ring for Tanya and repeated what the pastor was saying while sliding the ring on her finger. Tanya did the same thing to Sean's finger and then the pastor finished up, and announced them as man and wife and told Sean that he could kiss his bride.

Everyone clapped and hugged someone else. Mr. & Mrs. Sean Taylor were now finally husband and wife. They walked down the aisle and out of the church with the rest of the wedding party to go take some pictures. All of the other guests went to the hall for the reception where they had the engagement party. When they reached the hall everybody was inside sitting down at a table. When the bridal party started to come in someone introduced them. They all stood in the middle of the floor and waited for Tanya and Sean to come in and announce them. Everybody stood up and clapped for Mr. & Mrs. Sean Taylor. The bridal party went to sit at their table and get settled in. The DJ was playing the music and wishing Tanya and Sean a happy marriage. The waiters brought the food out to everybody.

Sean's brother who was the best man made a toast to him and Tanya. Then it was time for the first dance by the bride and groom. Tanya and Sean took the floor for the first dance. After the first dance Sean danced with his mother and Tanya danced with her uncle.

Everyone started to get up and dance and they had a good time. The bride threw her bouquet and Sean threw the garter that Tanya had on. The bride and

groom snuck off to go change their clothes for the honeymoon. They were not going to be away that long. When they came back out they started saying goodbye to everyone. Tanya went and gave Aunt Naomi a big hug and kisses and told her that she loved her. Sean did the same to his mom and she cried. They left for the airport in the limousine. Everybody threw rice on them and waved goodbye.

Tanya and Sean enjoyed their honeymoon and sent post cards and pictures to the family.

Chris and everybody were fixing up the house for them. The week went by fast; it was time for them to come back

Tanya was surprised that Sean told the limousine driver to take them to Hoboken, New Jersey. When they pulled up in the driveway and got out Tanya couldn't believe her eyes.

"Sean, what are we doing here and who lives here?" Tanya said. Sean told her to close her eyes and she did. Sean opened the door to the house, picked Tanya up and carried her inside. Once inside he put her down and told her to open her eyes. She was so happy she kissed Sean all over his face.

"This is my wedding gift to you and I hope you like it," Sean said.

"I love you, Sean," and grabbed him and gave him a big hug and kiss. They lived happily ever after in their new home and out of the hood.