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CHAPTER ONE

Jaris!” Sereeta screamed, rushing to Jaris’s side. Jaris was standing at Harriet Tubman’s statue in front of the high school. “Jaris! He’s coming!” Sereeta grabbed her boyfriend’s hand. “Sunday, he’ll be here Sunday!”

Jaris Spain and Sereeta Prince were a couple; both were seventeen-year-old seniors at Tubman.

“Take it easy, babe!” Jaris chuckled. The stream of students going into Harriet Tubman High School barely noticed the excited girl jumping up and down. “What’re you saying? Who’s coming?”

“My father, Jaris!” Sereeta cried. “Oh, I’m so excited! I haven’t seen him since

I was fourteen years old! I've talked to him on the phone, and he e-mails me, but I haven't *seen* him, Jaris, in *three* years!"

"Sereeta," Jaris responded, giving the girl a hug. "I'm so glad for you. That's great!" Jaris knew how hurt Sereeta was when her parents divorced and both of them quickly remarried. They had taken new spouses and made new families, excluding Sereeta from their lives. Sereeta's father had married a woman with two children. He bonded so soon with the little boys that he seemed to have forgotten his daughter.

"Jaris, he's coming on Sunday morning," Sereeta squealed. "He's gonna stay at Grandma's house. He's gonna stay for several days. He called me last night. Oh, Jaris! He wondered if somebody could pick him up. Grandma doesn't like to drive in the heavy traffic around the airport, and her old Volvo has been acting up and ..." Sereeta was talking so fast she barely took time for a breath. "Jaris, do you think—"

“Absolutely, babe,” Jaris interrupted. “I’ll pick him up at the airport. I’ll shine up my Ford Focus and pick you up at your grandma’s house bright and early. Then we’ll go right to the airport and bring your father to your grandma’s house.”

“Oh, Jaris!” Sereeta cried, hugging him. “I knew you would. I just knew you would. You’re amazing, Jare. You’re always there for me. Oh, I’m so excited and so nervous. And you should see Grandma! She’s beside herself with happiness. She hasn’t seen her son in three years either! Jaris, Dad remembers me as a little middle schooler, and now I’m a senior in high school! I hope he even recognizes me!”

“Maybe name tags would be a good idea,” Jaris joked, to ease her anxiety.

“Jaris, you wouldn’t believe how Grandma’s acting,” Sereeta confided. “Last night, she was laughing and crying. We were hugging each other and laughing and the tears ran down our faces. Grandma’s busy looking up all the foods Dad used to

like, the stuff she made for him before he got married. She wants to make his favorite oatmeal bread and those special corn cakes he used to love. She remembers everything, even how he liked his eggs!”

Sami Archer came along. She was a beautiful full-figured girl who was a good friend to Jaris and Sereeta and all their friends. “Hey, look like a party goin’ on here, girl,” she noted. “What’s the scoop, you guys? Somebody win the lottery or somethin’?”

“Oh, Sami,” Sereeta cried, “my father is coming on Sunday to visit me and Grandma. We haven’t seen him in three years. I’m so excited. Dad sounded as happy to be coming as we’re happy to see him. I just can’t believe he’s finally coming!”

“He say why he’s comin’ now after all this time?” Sami asked.

“He just said he got to thinking that he needed to come,” Sereeta answered. “He said he’s been away too long. He’s staying for at least three days at Grandma’s house.

Oh, Grandma is cleaning like crazy, making everything fresh and nice. She's going after every little cobweb. I remember Dad never cared about the house being perfect. I told Grandma not to worry, but she wants it to look beautiful for him. Grandma said, 'My baby's coming' home, and everything gotta shine!' ” Sereeta laughed.

Sereeta had mourned the divorce of her parents when she was in Marian Anderson Middle School. Jaris remembered her spending many lunch hours sitting by herself crying. When Sereeta's father moved away right after the divorce, Sereeta was brokenhearted. Then her mother married Perry Manley, who wasn't happy about having a teenaged girl in the house.

Soon, Sereeta felt as though she had no family at all. Her father had vanished into a new marriage with two stepchildren. Mom was Perry Manley's wife and soon the mother of a baby boy. Sereeta felt like the fifth wheel on the wagon. Her grandmother took Sereeta in to live with her.

“I don’t know how I’ll concentrate on anything at school, Jaris,” Sereeta fretted. “When I think that in three days my father will be here. It’s only Thursday, and I gotta go through classes today and tomorrow! Oh, Jaris, I wonder how he’ll look. He sent some pictures on the computer, but they weren’t good ones. I just can’t believe that on Sunday ...”

“Just take a deep breath, babe,” Jaris instructed her. “Take things an hour at a time. Before you know it, it’ll be Sunday morning, and you’ll see him coming out of the terminal. It’s gonna be great.”

A little later, before the first class of the day, Jaris ran into Trevor Jenkins, his best friend. Jaris told him about Sereeta’s father coming and how thrilled she was.

“Trevor,” Jaris said, “Sereeta’s walking on air. She couldn’t be happier if she won a million dollars.”

Trevor shook his head. “She’s not mad at him or anything for staying away so long?” he asked.

“Doesn’t seem to be,” Jaris replied. “She’s just in a state of pure joy.”

Two more of Jaris’s friends, Kevin Walker and Oliver Randall, got in on the conversation. “Man,” Kevin commented, “I wouldn’t be so forgiving. I’d hafta say, ‘Hey, dude, so you finally decided to drop in and say hello after three years. I’ll see if I got time to see you while you’re here, but I’m pretty busy. Y’hear what I’m sayin’?’”

Oliver looked thoughtful. His father was a college professor, and his mother was an opera singer. They had an unusual relationship, with his mom traveling a lot. Oliver lived most of the time with his father, but the family always spent summers together. Oliver couldn’t imagine not seeing one of his parents for three whole years.

“I kinda agree with Kevin,” Oliver noted. “It’s kinda bad for a father to not want to see his own daughter for all that time and then to just come popping in. I’m not sure I could just forgive and forget. I sure wouldn’t be jumping for joy, I’ll tell

you that. I gotta admire Sereeta, though. She's a bighearted girl, and she's all ready to welcome the guy with open arms."

"I can't even imagine a dad like that," Jaris agreed. "When I think of my own pop, man, he'd give up his life for Mom and me and Chelsea. I remember when I was in middle school with Sereeta and her father moved away, she was so crushed. I almost hated her father myself for being so cold. But she's so happy right now that I'm glad for her. If she can forgive him and be so happy, I'm gonna do all I can to make it good for her. I'm gonna be at the airport with her to pick the guy up. I want this to be as good as Sereeta thinks it'll be."

On Sunday morning, Jaris got out of bed at four thirty. Mr. Prince's plane was coming in at seven. Jaris had to pick up Sereeta and then make the forty-five-minute drive to the airport. Pop was waiting in the living room when Jaris grabbed his car keys. "Give the little girl a good luck hug for me,

Jaris,” Pop told him. “She’s gotta be nervous seeing her father after all this time.”

“Yeah, Pop, thanks. I will,” Jaris responded. It was still dark when Jaris backed out of the driveway. As he drove to Sereeta’s house, he thought back to when her father was still around. All he knew about the man was from the few times he’d seen him at Anderson Middle School. Mr. Prince was a big sports fan, and Jaris remembered he was disappointed big-time that Sereeta didn’t go out for soccer or volleyball. From what Sereeta told Jaris, Mr. Prince’s two boys were very athletic. He was now deeply involved in Little League and other youth sports. Mr. Prince had always wanted sons, and now he had them. He had never seemed comfortable with his little girl.

Jaris rang the doorbell at Sereeta’s grandmother’s house. Sereeta came to the door, beautiful in a blue pullover and jeans. Jaris kissed her and gave her Pop’s good wishes. Grandma Prince was coming down the hall. “I got the guest bedroom all ready,”