

Excerpt from **The Love We Had**, by Natalie Dunbar

“Imani,” a deep, provocative voice challenged her from behind. “We’ve been too much to each other for you to see me and run the other way.”

At the sound of Perry’s voice she took a calming breath and curved her lips into her trademark smile. He knew how easily she used that technique to hide her emotions, but she didn’t care. When she turned, Perry Bonds stood there with the baby in his long arms.

The force of his bold, black brows emphasized the contours of his leaf brown eyes. The light in the supermarket played with the complex angles created by his jutting cheekbones, full cheeks and square chin to give him an attractiveness normally seen only on male models. He’d been working out again too, by the looks of the sculpted muscles shaping his arms and rise of milk chocolate skin peeking out of the open vee of his expensive sport short. There was a hungry look in his eyes that drew her and made her body tingle all over. Imani’s mouth watered.

“Apparently I don’t agree,” she said, straightening her shoulders and lifting her head. “Seeing you brought back a lot of memories that I’m better off forgetting. How have you been?”

“Miserable. You’re hard to replace and then there’s the fact that I didn’t want to.”

At that she looked straight into his eyes and saw past his cocky expression. There was an inexplicable hint of sadness there. His words did not make sense, she reasoned, because if he were married to the starlet-harlot Rasheeda, he’d already replaced her, hadn’t he? Perry had never been a cruel or vicious person, so why was he interested in seeing her now? Had his starlet proved to be less than wonderful?

“And how have you been?” he asked, obviously ignoring the fact that she’d failed to react to his statement.

“It took months for me to climb out of depression,” she admitted frankly. “I had to see a doctor about it, but I’m a lot better now.”

“I’m glad that you’ve recovered,” he said with a warm sincerity that brought back memories of their past. He moved closer and she caught herself inhaling his fresh, familiar scent.

Seeing him standing in front her and hearing him talk of how irreplaceable she was, she thought of the pictures of the pretty starlet in the gossip magazines and the baby in his arms. The man had more balls than a bubblegum machine to be standing in her face trying remind her of their past when he’d obviously been seeing someone else at the same time. Going for the jugular, Imani asked politely, “How’s your wife?”

Giving her a strange look, Perry shook his head negatively. “I’m not married. You know it’s only been a year since you broke our engagement.”

The news hit her with the force of an earthquake. Imani swallowed hard and struggled for words to justify what she’d done when her world crumbled, leaving her helpless to cope. “It...it seemed right at the time.”

Perry shot her a disbelieving look. “No, it was never right. It was just easier than dealing with the pain.” The baby strained forward, his busy little fingers just managing to touch an apple. Sighing, Perry shifted the baby to his other hip.

Imani grabbed the handle of her grocery cart and held on. “What’s your baby’s name?”

Lifting him, Perry smiled and kissed the top of the baby’s head. “This is my nephew Jimmy. Want to hold him?”

Imani stared, speechless. She could have fainted right there. She moved only when Perry dropped the squirming baby into her arms. Shifting him, with one hand supporting his bottom and the other his head, she felt his little knees grip her hip.

Perry shook his head in disgust. “You thought he was mine! Imani, you should know me better than that. I know there was talk in the gossip magazines about me and Rasheeda, but we were just friends. You can’t believe everything you read and you know as well as I do that when you’re in the limelight, people have plenty to say. They made up stuff about us. When there’s no real news, they make it up.”

At Perry’s revelation, Imani felt as if a load had been lifted from her chest. She breathed a sigh of relief and then caught herself. What did it matter now? Her relationship with Perry was in the past. Cooing, the baby grabbed at her earring. “No, Jimmy,” she said softly, catching the little hand and kissing it.

She glanced back at Perry and caught him watching her and the baby, hope and tenderness coloring his expression. “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions,” she told him.

“If you’re really sorry, you can make it up to me,” he said folding his arms. “I’ll make it easy.”

She considered his statement. “What do you have in mind?”

“Have dinner with me.” He watched her intently.

“I don’t think so!” she said quickly. She likened the thought to jumping off a cliff. She had no control where Perry was concerned.

“Why not?” he asked, challenging her with his eyes.

“Because it won’t do any good.” She met his gaze. “It’s over. It’s been over for months.”

“Then why do I still think about you?” he asked in a low tone.

Imani nuzzled the baby's soft cheek with her own, fear growing within her as their encounter spun out of her control. In her secret heart she rejoiced at his words. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. But no one had ever hurt her as Perry had.

"Are you going to answer my question? If you really think it's over between us, then why do I still think about you?" he asked, repeating his question as he watched Jimmy play with her fingers and try to put them in his mouth.

"Maybe it's just force of habit." she answered.

"You know better than that," Perry touched her arm and she felt sensual heat radiating from his fingers to spread throughout her body. "If you won't have dinner with me, you could at least give me your phone number."

"Why?" she asked, throwing him a challenging look.

"So that I can stay in touch with you and see how you are. So that I can call you when nothing else gives me the peace I need to sleep at night. Can I do that?"

"Yes," Imani said, touched by something in his words and unable to deny the sincerity and need in his tone. She knew she shouldn't care, but she did. She gently placed Jimmy back into his arms and fished into her purse for one of her cards. With a gold pen, she wrote a number on the back. "I'll be at this number for a while," she explained.

"Thanks," Perry said, accepting the card.

Before either could say anything further, a couple of fans walked up and asked for Perry's autograph.