

IN THE
MIDST
OF
FIRE



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
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In The Midst of Fire

A Novel by Sierra Kay

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Sierra Kay

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Cover by Art on the Loose, Chicago

Since my friend told me that I can't dedicate this book to Diet Dr. Pepper® (even though without that sweet elixir this book wouldn't have been possible), I will dedicate it to a few of the grinders that keep me on my toes.

Chris P., my dear friend and #1 dynamo. She packs more work into 24-hours than most pack into 24 days. You conquered 2016 like a champ.

Naleighna Kai, fellow author and editor. I'd run out of space adding all the roles she plays. Plus, every time I sneeze, she has a new book. Motivation.

Erika P., the event designing guru. One morning, I opened my eyes, and she was on a major network in Chicago. Round of applause.

Chelle, the boss lady. I don't know how she does all that she does, but she makes it work.

Ms. Gail, my line editor. Any mistakes that appear are mine, and it means I was working without the benefit of you-know-what. If I could make eye drops to see all that she does, I'd be rich.

To the other tremendous women, I've been fortunate enough to walk beside. A few have made their transition. Some I talk with often. While others, I talk with rarely. But I could call any one of them (the live ones) day or night, and the only question is, "What do you need?" That means something.

And, that includes the wee ones. For the record, this is still grown folks business, but you know I love you.

Thank you for your love, friendship and inspiration.

Book One

CHAPTER 1

March 2009

Greenview Avenue

Chicago, Illinois

Seraphina Brooks Glen bit her lip, trying to ignore the stab of uncertainty that filled her as she looked up at the four-story brick structure in the affluent area of Lincoln Park. Chase Glen, her new husband, was paying the cab driver, which gave her scant seconds to view her new home. Husband. The taste of the word was foreign on her tongue. But a quick glance at her left hand confirmed everything that had transpired within the last three days.

That, plus the frenetic energy sparking through her system, pushing her to smile, skip, dance; might this be happiness?

The cars on the tree-lined street were parked tighter than a 60-year-old virgin. Each tree had a small fence keeping the flowers from flowing onto the sidewalk. By far, the well-manicured yard in front of Chase's house was the most impressive that she'd seen. The plants and flowers flourished in a riot of

color that was unlike where she'd been born. In her neighborhood, the dry, cracked dirt couldn't sustain a worm, much less a flower.

Seraphina took deep breaths to calm her nerves, while whispering to herself that she belonged.

Chase opened the black wrought-iron gate and placed his hand on the small of her back as he guided her up the stairs. "Welcome home, my angel."

He opened a wooden door with a glass-etched oval in the center, which led into a small foyer. A gasp echoed throughout the space as she turned to the spacious living and dining room areas. Seconds later, she realized that gasp had escaped from her own lips.

Chase virtually beamed.

Get it together, Seraphina.

"Be right back."

Seraphina turned, focused on the way she had just come from, only to find that the bulk of their luggage was still on the sidewalk. Her new husband felt safe enough to leave their luggage on the curb? That, in itself, spoke volumes. Try that in the hood and your polka dot bra would be a new hat for some homeless dude.

Seraphina's legs moved her into the living room on their own volition. Her whole apartment could fit in this living and dining room. She was sure of it.

Turning to her right, she glanced down the hallway that led to the kitchen. Well, damn. This is some HGTV stuff, for real. She spun around as her heart pounded harder than a House music baseline. This was arriving. This was a home, something her bastard of an ex-boyfriend had told her she'd never have. Six months ago, Michael McNair told her she wasn't good enough, right before he beat her so badly that she lost consciousness and five hours of her life.

Seraphina closed her eyes, fighting that soul-crushing memory; but the tentacles of pain wrapped around her mind once again. Six months ago, she woke up in the John H. Stroger Hospital with a dry, scratchy throat and the desperate need to cough. Even in a semidelirious state, she realized coughing was a bad idea. The incessant beeping from a heart monitor was so irritating that if she had more strength she'd stretch out her hand and yank the cord from the wall.

As she drifted in and out of consciousness, voices belonging to people she couldn't identify floated in and out of existence. She refused to acknowledge them, refused to open her eyes, refused to face this new reality.

She knew as sure as that beeping monitor that the soul that she'd been nurturing in her womb for the past four months was gone. So what was the point of opening her eyes?

That's what loving the wrong man could do. The wrong man could suck all semblance of hope like the devil yanking your wretched soul into hell. And Michael McNair had been the wrong man. Yes, he was fine. Yes, he had swag. Yes, he was the shit in the neighborhood gang, the Kingdom Knights. Yes, all the women in the hood had been jealous of her.

But then, they had always been jealous of Seraphina, starting with her hair—long, thick, and straight with no need for chemical enhancements. It ended with her deep dimples that only required her to compress her red lips for them to appear. She'd had many fights growing up, most of them to protect herself, others to protect her virtue.

Ever since she'd left her mother's womb, it seemed she was always fighting someone for something.

She scanned the Lincoln Park home that would be her saving grace and her first thought was ...”

Finally, peace.

CHAPTER

2

Seraphina had progressed from fighting with fists to fighting with weapons a long time ago. When someone came for Seraphina, they'd better be ready to kill her. So far, no one had been ready—except Michael.

She had witnessed firsthand the violence that he inflicted on other people. His temper was quick and violent. Once, he had punched a man, who had accidentally stepped on his kicks, so hard that he'd broken the man's jaw in two places. At the time, she stood by so amazed and proud that this was her man. He knew how to handle his business. She had gotten used to the blood oozing from his victims.

That's why her preferred weapon was a knife. Something about blood called to her, seduced her like Michael's slow, baritone whisper.

However, when Michael had turned on her, kicking her repeatedly in the abdomen, she realized that it was *other people's blood* that enticed her. Her blood, her baby's blood running down her legs, hadn't brought on the usual shiver of excitement. Instead, the sight broke her down to the same whimpering mess she saw in her victims. While on his apartment floor, Seraphina had tried to tighten her legs, compress the flow with her hands—all to no avail.

Her baby must have known that this world wasn't for her. Or was it Michael? The baby realized that Michael would not be the type of father with a soft voice or a soothing hand when it cried. No matter. Her baby was now back in heaven waiting on a mother who could protect it, waiting for a mother who didn't love a death dealer, waiting for a mother who deserved the blessing a baby could bring.

The hospital door opened again, and this time the steps were slower, heavier. The cadence was one she recognized. She had known Vincent Curtis since kindergarten. He was her best friend, her protector. He loved her even when no one else did. Her mother apparently had a one-hour limitation on love, if the men going in and out of her bedroom were any indication. Never any love for the little girl she'd given birth to. Two years ago, when Seraphina was twenty-three, her mother up and left. Whether the egg donor that gave birth to her was dead or alive wasn't something Seraphina lost any sleep over— it or her. That's how close they were.

Vincent was different. He wanted to be her everything, but so had Michael at some point. She'd seen the violence in Vincent too.

The kind of depraved acts required to keep on this side of the grave, broke something inside of them, allowing them to kill without thought and yet sleep well through the night. Allowing them to understand that their forest was full of different kinds of demons than were told in the fairy tales.

Not being able to hold it any longer, Seraphina coughed. *Oh, hot shit and damn.* The pain that spiked her skull and shot through her body was like someone had split her in two. The searing burn through her abdomen was sudden and intense. Tears gathered in her dark brown eyes as she gasped trying to fight for air.

“Sera?”

Vincent's voice was tentative, cracking.

All she could do was moan a reply.

She heard him, felt him shift his weight. “Do you want me to call someone?”

Seraphina let out a breath and croaked, “No.” Taking another deep breath, she was able to put some strength into her efforts this time, “No.”

The crunch of a 6-feet 3-inch, 300-pound man landing on an old vinyl chair was unmistakable. She blinked her eyes open, startled by the onslaught of light. Finally, she managed to ask him to turn the main light off.

The swish of clothing signaled that he had complied. Soon, she opened her eyes again to a much softer glow from her bedside lamp.

After playing possum for the better part of the day, she was going to have to face how wrong her choice of man was. Laughter from doctors and nurses in the hallway didn’t seem to fit with the somberness that being in the hospital required.

Turning her head toward Vincent, she whispered, “My baby’s gone.” She wanted to be more emotionless about it; but the current situation, and everything that had led up to it, had stolen every ounce of bravado. Her eyes betrayed her with every tear streaking down her face.

Vincent’s gaze searched the floor as if the answers to all of life’s problems were etched into the white-and-black-speckled design.

Sera’s eyes narrowed on him. A woman didn’t know someone for this long and not know when they were hiding something.

She swallowed another cough. “What do you know?”

Vincent drew his hands through those shoulder-length dreads. “The doctor was talking to the nurses. Your insides ...”

Gritting her teeth, she demanded, “Say it.”

“You should know,” he ground out, dark brown eyes flashing with a recognizable kind of anger. “Michael won’t make it through the night.”

“You’ll be the first person they look at, V. It’s too soon.”

Vincent finally met her eyes and smirked, “It won’t be me. Remember that genius kid, Ninja.”

Ninja was never in the game. The Kingdom Knights used him every now and then, but he had been smart enough to secure a college scholarship. Everyone knew that was his path, until his brother started selling and using. Then Ninja came back a year ago with a wealth of knowledge about science and police procedure. He was the reason most of the Knights were out of jail. He used his brilliance to cover up a multitude of crimes. Hell, he had cursed her out for leaving fingerprints in the blood of every violent episode she’d had. And it took balls to curse out a woman who was holding a knife dripping with someone else’s blood.

“Vincent.”

Vincent snapped to attention, then barreled ahead with his story. “Michael killed his lying, stealing brother. He’s the man Ninja’s looking for. One call and he’s all taken care of. It’s a brilliant plan, Ninja—”

“Vincent!” Seraphina clamped her teeth and tried to breathe through the pain. She didn’t want to hear about Michael, Vincent, or the dead brother. She wanted to know what Vincent knew about her insides.

“Chère, I’m sure the doctor will be here soon.” Vincent turned towards the door as if willing the doctor to appear.

Sera banged her hand on the mattress, cutting off a pain-generated curse word. Vincent was as frustrating as a dripping faucet. “If I told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, we’re not French. Tell me what the hell you know!” Her pillow was already soaked. She wanted to roll on her side, but the strain on her abdomen was a perfect reminder of why she shouldn’t.

She turned her head towards him. This wasn’t her Vincent. *Her* Vincent would have just given it to her straight and kept going about the conversation. This had to be bad, real bad.

“Your insides,” Vincent began, gesturing to her abdomen. “Well, you can’t have any more ...”

Sera filled in the last word. “Kids. I can’t have any more kids.”

The shimmer of tears in Vincent’s eyes said it all.

Sera turned away from him and put her focus on counting the holes in the ceiling tile. Her heart rate slowed as anger set in, hardening her arteries, removing all remnants of the emotional weakness that put her in the hospital in the first place. Every second another shield slid into place. “No Ninja,” she said in a voice so cold she could barely recognize it as her own. “Michael is mine.”

Walking to her bed, Vincent used the pad of his thumb to wipe a tear from her cheek. “No, ma petite; he’s mine.”

That day, when Seraphina closed her eyes to get comfortable with the shields that would keep her from ever being this hurt again, she opened them in the hospital. That was then.

Today, when she closed her eyes, she opened them to see Chase Glen, the stranger that she married on a whim, walking back through his front door. *If you’re going to marry a stranger, might as well be a rich one.*

As soon as he dropped the bags onto the marble floor of the foyer, she jumped in his arms. “Baby, it’s beautiful. I haven’t even seen the rest, and I can tell it’s wonderful.”

She kissed him as she slid down his body. Footsteps trotting down the stairs caused Seraphina to pull back and make her way into the living room. The children.

“Dad?” a female voice inquired.

The girl slid to a stop at the bottom step, causing her brother to run into her back and bump her into the living room. Without speaking, the two looked at each other, frowning at this new addition in the house.

Sera assessed them through their silent communication. The girl was tall with a medium build. Her natural hairstyle was achieved with the help of a decent colorist. She wore a pair of ratty jeans and a Lenny Kravitz t-shirt.

The boy was slightly taller than Chase, but had that “look” about him. His hair was cropped close to his head; he had thick eyebrows and eyes that were now even narrower as they focused on his sister. He wore a button-down shirt and a pair of high-end jeans, whose special discoloration was created in the lab and not from too much washing or sitting. He was a younger version his father—a pretty boy who’d be pulling women for the rest of his life with no effort whatsoever.

“Hey there.” Chase said with a laugh that barreled through his chest before pushing through those kissable lips. “Enough of that twin telepathy. I want to introduce you to Seraphina.”

“You can call me Sera.”

The girl extended her right hand. “Hi, Sera. I’m Giselle.” As they shook hands, Giselle turned Sera’s hand over to view the sparkling four-carat diamond wedding ring. The girl raised her left eyebrow and blew out a slow breath. “Well, it looks like you’re a bit more than a guest. Might your last name be Glen now?”

Sera stiffened at the accusation that laced her tone.

The boy’s mouth dropped open. He snapped it shut, and his jaw rippled underneath the skin of his chin. He exhaled, shifted a gaze to her sister, then held out his hand. “Hawk.” He too turned her hand for a better look at the ring. “Well, Dad. It seems like you struck the jackpot in Vegas.”

He was more welcoming than his sister, but there was still an underlying accusation in those words.

Chase laughed again, his merry eyes twinkling with pride. “Yes, I did. Let’s sit for a bit,” he said, gesturing towards the orange leather couch.

Again, the twins shared another silent communication before

complying with their father's wishes. Sera settled next to Chase. Something about having his arm around her brought a stability that had escaped her for most of her twenty-five years. After the original shock of seeing her standing in their home, the twins stared without blinking.

"It's an amazing story really," Chase began. "I go all the way to Vegas and find someone as beautiful and wonderful as Sera. She was born and raised in Chicago, too. A few miles from here—right, Sera?"

"Yeah, not too far," Sera replied, trying to keep her voice level. She hadn't exactly lied about where she used to live, she just didn't bother to disclose everything. In relationships, who discloses everything?

Giselle leaned forward. "And out of curiosity, what year did you graduate?"

Age? They were worried about age? Sera almost laughed out loud. She thought for sure a bank account or pedigree would be their first question; especially, given the fact that it was obvious privilege was as much a part of their life as milk and eggs.

She relaxed a bit more, crossing one jean-clad leg over the other. "I'm 25 years old. I know that's young, but you'd be surprised at how much your dad and I have in common."

Hawk's dark brown eyes opened wider than the shades covering the matching lamps on the end tables. "Dad? Really? That's more than fifteen years?"

Giselle's hands curled into fists. "Well, did you know each other before Vegas?" she inquired, her gaze falling to that wedding ring again. "Dad just left on Thursday. I mean, were you drunk? What happened? How can you get married in four days? She doesn't even know—"

The caution in Hawk's eyes caused Giselle to stop mid-sentence. Chase stiffened under the weight of those words. The silence stretched out and engulfed them until taking small inhales of breath became a labored thing

for Sera, as though a hand was pressing down on her chest and wouldn't let her go. She looked between the Glens. She shifted her gaze so that it took in each one of the Glens. "What? What don't I know?"

Chase relaxed again and rubbed his hand down Sera's arm. "You know when you're in love."

The twins whipped their heads to stare at their dad as if he had grown another head. "Love!?!"

Chase grimaced and then stood, pulling Sera up beside him. "Yes, love," he confirmed; but there was something in his tone that brought Sera up short. "It was instant and liberating."

The heat of his gaze nearly seared a hole in the shield on her heart. She'd have to be careful. She concentrated on trying to figure out all the emotions crossing his kids' faces—shock, anger, resignation.

Hawk's cell phone buzzed as Chase continued, "And you guys are going to go on with your own lives soon, so"

Hawk shrugged, extracted his cell from the shirt pocket and looked at the caller ID. "I have to take this."

Chase lifted his hand in an effort to pause Hawk. "Wait, Hawk. I had hoped—"

"Yeah, welcome to the asylum, Sera." Hawk raced out of the room, but yelled back over his shoulder, "I hope you enjoy your stay."

Chase watched his son's retreating back for a moment before shifting his gaze to Giselle, whose solemn expression signaled that something wasn't quite right in the world of everything Glen. "Why don't you whip up something for dinner?" he suggested. "We can get to know each other better."

Giselle nodded. "No problem, Dad. You could do steaks on the grill, and I'll handle the sides. We have some asparagus, maybe a bit of risotto."

“Risotto?” Sera quipped.

Chase chuckled, “Giselle is addicted to *The Food Network*.”

As Giselle rushed from the room as though a burning fire were nipping at her heels, Chase pulled Sera into a hug. “See, that wasn’t that bad. Was it?”

Uneasiness settled into the seat of her soul. If growing up in the hood taught her anything, she knew when she was being watched. Instead of responding to Chase’s baited question, she angled her head toward the back of the house.

Hawk had the phone to his ear, but he was watching them intently from the upper level of the steps. Giselle peered out from the edge of the dining room.

They didn’t look pissed anymore. If she had to sum up their countenance and expressions, it would be—sad.

Maybe it was because their father had mentioned love. Did that word, applied to her, mean that their father would have less to give to them?

Sera didn’t know anything about the three wives that came in between his first love and the “love” he claimed he felt for her.

She didn’t know at the time that they weren’t worried that she was using him for his money because he didn’t have any left.

Sera didn’t know that their lives were falling apart and his wedding was just another boulder on the crumbling structure that was his family.

She didn’t know that one day she’d be awakened by the pounding of the sheriff’s department, expecting their immediate departure from the premises; and with it, all hope for the kind of future that she’d been promised when she stood in front of an Elvis impersonator and pledged her life to Chase Glen.

