

# ROCK



# CHICK

## REBORN

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK NINE

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# KRISTEN ASHLEY

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**By Kristen Ashley**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Cover Art and Interior Graphics: [Pixel Mischief Design](#)



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*This novella is dedicated to Malia Anderson, whose enthusiasm inspired me to write a story for a character who has always deserved one, but I had never thought she'd get one.*

*This novella is also dedicated to Kristin and Brandon Harris.  
And I think once Kristin reads it, she'll understand why.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A big thank you to all my Rock Chicks on Facebook, who were so about this story and helping me name Shirleen's hero, they pulled out stops to help me find his name.

And especially to Judy Keating, who gave me Shirleen's Moses.

It's important to note that although Gilliam Youth Services Center is a real place in Denver, Colorado, obviously I've fictionalized Richardson's employment there. And here I must thank Marvy McNe assisting me with some insights into juvenile detention.

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And as I hope you'll now discover, it was perfect.

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ONE



## YOUR ATTENTION

“Chicken and waffles.”

“Dude, are you crazy? No chick is gonna want you make chicken and waffles.”

“I’m makin’ her chicken and waffles. Everyone likes chicken waffles.”

“Yeah, and your bitch probably likes ’em too. The thing is, she’ll want *you* to know she likes ’em or that she likes *any food at all.*”

At that, I stopped us all on a skid.

“If you call a woman a bitch one more time, Sniff, I’m gonna clock you back to the seventeenth century,” I warned.

Me and my boys were standing in the floral section of King Sooper’s.

This was because Sniff and I had been warned the day before that we had to skedaddle from the house for the night because Roam was bringing one of his bitches (and I was an adult, I could think that *and* say it) to have her dinner.

So we were shopping for said dinner and for everything else it takes to raise two teenage boys, this last necessitating me being at the damned grocery store at least three times a week.



Case in point, I'd seen Roam eat an entire pack of Oreos in one sitting and Hoover through a whole row.

Not an ounce of fat on the boy though.

As an aside, why was the world so unfair? A woman did that would follow her into a room three weeks after she entered it.

And by the by, I mentally asked about the world being unfair a lot.

I never got an answer.

Though I shouldn't ask, because I knew the answer.

ing her It was partly about people doing stupid shit their own damned selves included.

en and It was also that the world was just unfair.

ll never Needless to say, raising two teenage boys meant most of the store time was spent in my Navigator in about an hour.

It should be noted that they weren't exactly my boys, in the sense of birth either of them, and that was only obvious with one—the white one.

ck you I was their foster mother.

They were still my boys.

rs. Sniff, as usual, acted like he hadn't heard my warning.

we had He said, "Shirleen, tell him. No girl is gonna want him to make chicken and waffles for dinner, because she'll *want* him to make chicken and waffles for dinner and it'll be torture pretending she doesn't want to snarf chicken and waffles at dinner."

took to I studied Sniff, eighteen and long-since having grown out of his acne-ridden early teens.

sitting, Now the boy was six foot of lean muscle, not skin and bone  
although he had a couple of acne scars, which only made his face  
interesting, the excellent insurance plan I was enrolled in at work and  
dermatologist had taken care of the rest.  
her ass

In other words, now he was hot.

It made me throw up a little in my mouth to think that about my brother  
the evidence was standing right in front of me wearing jeans that  
mother in the country would declare illegal and a cream, short-  
thermal that molded to various features of his developed chest, nar-  
ves, me ribs, and flat stomach.

The power that package had over teenage-girl pussy I blamed on  
Bunch. It was *them* that took the boys under their wing, this in-  
clude physical training, but also the inescapable soaking up of general bad  
So it was *them* that had honed the bodies my boys now had, including F  
I didn't who was a lot bulkier, taller, and a different brand of hot.

ie. Chocolate hot.

Effective chocolate hot.

As evidenced by his serial dating.

Leading to chicken and waffles.

chicken Sniff didn't serial date.

waffles He serial banged.

f down Due to an uncomfortable conversation Hank and I had some time  
one that put me in my bed with the vapors for two days, and one that  
skinny, Hank look like he might expire from trying not to bust a gut laughing  
I'd talked him into having "the talk" with the boys—Hank kept t

es, and condoms.

ce look They could buy their own, of course. They not only got an all a good from me for keeping their rooms clean, taking out the trash and looking the house, they were paid interns for Nightingale Investigations.

They didn't do any of the dangerous stuff. They did stuff in the room, but room and stuff on the computers.

t every Or at least they didn't *tell* me if they did the dangerous stuff. Or sleeved just had to trust Liam Nightingale and his band of merry badasses working the right thing with my boys.

I was all about "don't ask, don't tell." With two teenage boys in the Hot who I loved beyond reason but who were Hot Bunch in the making, including my new life motto and my only hold on sane.

ssness. But Hank made sure they were supplied so I didn't have to t Roam's, residence in Babies 'R' Us or factor child support into their allowances.

Thus Hank had taken me aside not two weeks ago to share that particularly, might want to get a second job to keep him at the necessity of prophylactics, and that I might want to buy stock in Trojan.

It was a warning.

I requested Hank engage in another conversation with both boys, in Roam just to make sure.

Then I took to my bed with the vapors.

ago— "If he wants to make his girl chicken and waffles, he's gonna make it made girl chicken and waffles," I decreed.

ig after I did this even though Sniff was right, no girl was going to show hem in loved chicken and waffles in front of a boy.

It was ludicrous, at that age or any age. I had long since learned the way to live in order not to do your own head in was to let it all hang out after

It was also the way of the world.  
Until you learned.

control Although I tried to teach my boys other practical knowledge that Bunch would never be able to transfer on them—like the importance that I keeping a house, laundering your clothes and being able to cook—Roam would do hopeless in the kitchen.

The kid could grill a mean burger.  
my crib, But other than that, frying some chicken and manning a waffle his was were the only culinary skills he'd mastered.

Sniff, on the other hand, was a savant in the kitchen. All he had to make up watch some show on Food Network, look up the recipe online, go out 5. the stuff, and *boom!* There it was on a plate in front of his brother Sniff, another-mother and me.

ry level He had the touch.

Good kid.

In a lot of ways.  
roping If he'd quit trying to make up for being scrawny and pimple-face he was younger by tagging every piece of ass who glanced his way would not have glanced his way two years ago.

ake his "It's gonna be a bust," Sniff muttered.

"It's gonna be awesome," Roam returned.

ow she "It's gonna..." I trailed off when something that felt like a finger lightly down the back of my neck.

he only     For some reason, maybe instinct after being around the Hot Bunch  
it.         long, this made me turn my attention to the rose section.

              And there stood a man with an empty cart, not moving, his eyes  
              on me.

he Hot     And oh sweet Lord, he was beautiful.

ance of     Tall as Roam, had to be, at least six-two. Close cropped hair  
am was     cropped beard that was thicker around his mouth, scatter but not sp  
              his cheeks. Both were sprinkled very minimally with a little white.

              He had wide set, big, deep-brown eyes and a beautiful brother'  
maker     thick and strong. Making that better, at the bridge there were a co  
              creases. There were some creases in his forehead that were interes  
do was     well, and with the white in his beard, they were the only things on hi  
and get     wide-shouldered frame that told tale of his age.

r-from-     He was just...perfect.

              Even the shape of his skull sitting on the column of his neck was d

              As I stared at him, his gaze unlocked on me to drop to my hands  
cart then it went to the boys, and a slash of white formed betwe  
beautiful full lips, exposing strong, white teeth.

d when     He gave us a group scan then turned to the display of roses.

ray and     “Is that brother seriously checkin’ you out in front of us?” Roam  
              not happy about the possibility and not hiding it in his tone.

              I turned my attention to him to see him scowling at Idris Hottie  
roses.

r traced     “No,” I answered.

              “He fuckin’ was,” Sniff rumbled, and I looked to him to s

1 for so glowering at the beautiful black man now examining a bouquet of bright orange roses.

locked “If you say fuck in front of me one more time, or *at all*, I’m knock back to ancient Egypt,” I promised.

Sniff ignored me, still busy frowning at the hottie at the roses.

close Right, there were groceries to buy, I was hungry and I wasn’t going to eat until they were bought, taken home, put away and Sniff and I left to hopefully make his girl chicken and waffles then do nothing more than hold her hand while watching TV.

So we needed to get shit done.

“You boys are going to Walgreens,” I announced.

Slowly, they both turned to me.

“Say what?” Roam asked.

“You work my nerves in a grocery store, I got things I need from a drugstore and we don’t have a lot of time. I got a list,” I stated, opening the raisin Artsy MM LV bag and yanking out my drugstore list, a pen from his wallet. In order for them to get the right stuff, I scrawled some words on the list before I shoved it with some cash at Sniff. “Go. Get that stuff. Come and get me.” I dug for my keys, got those and handed them to Roam. “Good to my baby. You break it, I break you.”

Sniff stared down at the list a beat then looked at me. “They got that stuff at King Soopers.”

“They do not have my nail varnish at King Soopers,” I retorted.

Sniff looked back to the list then to me. “I am not buyin’ nail polish. I’m called Clothing Optional.”

beautiful I crossed my arms on my chest. “Tell me, boy, one day when you  
notched so many marks on your bedpost you got no bedpost anymore  
in’ you you want yourself an Indy...” No reaction. “A Jet...” None there  
“Roxie...” Nope. “Jules...” Surprisingly, since they were both tight  
Jules and I thought they both crushed on her, that didn’t hit it  
“Stella...” Hmm, nothing. “Sadie...”

g to get

t Roam

re than

His eyes flared.

So he went for the fairy princess bitches.

If they were white.

Though I’d noted my boy had a thing for the sisters.

Then again, those were the fairy princess ones too. I’d seen him  
more Brandys and Gabrielles than I could shake a stick at.

“Right, you want yourself a Sadie someday, boy, you’re gonna be  
yourself buyin’ a lot more than nail polish to make her happy. You  
Hector blinks at nail polish?”

and my

s on the

ne back

m. “Be

“Yes,” he declared.

So they hadn’t learned all they could learn from the Hot Bunch.

“You’d be wrong, ’cause I might not’ve seen him buy nail polish  
sure as shit saw him snatching up some o.b.s and he did it like  
grabbin’ a six-pack. In other words, it made no never mind to Hector  
all this he was gettin’ his woman her o.b.s.”

Sniff looked at Roam. “What are o.b.s?”

Roam started to look sick.

l polish

“Tampons,” I educated.

Sniff started to look sick.

u done I could not talk about my boys having sex and the necessity of con  
ore and I could sure as shit talk about this.

either. “You do know the menstrual cycle is a fact of life and unless  
ht with some sad reason that makes a woman not have them, all women  
either. shared. “It’s entirely natural. And something you both are gonna have  
with on a hopefully normal and healthy occasion, that is, when yo  
down in a monogamous relationship with a woman you love more th  
own life.”

Both boys looked ready to hurl.

I heard a chuckle, and it wasn’t only my eyes that went in that d  
m with as Rose Hottie wandered into the fruit and veg section with that big b  
of orange roses having been wrapped in pretty paper at the floral  
findin’, sitting in the child seat at the top of his cart.

u think He had a woman.

Again, why was the world so unfair?

Sure, he looked my age and it would stand to reason that man w  
face and that bod (and that deep chuckle) at his age would have a wc  
h, but I his bed.

he was Still.

Chavez I watched him disappear around the chill case filled with Odwalla.

“Sniff can go get your nail polish. I’m stayin’ with you,” Roam de  
I turned to him. “What?”

“That guy’s gonna pounce,” he told me.

“He’s got flowers in his cart,” I told him.

“He’s gonna pounce,” he repeated.



doms. “He’s got flowers, boy. Means he’s got a woman,” I returned.

“He’s. Gonna. *Pounce.*”

there’s I shut up.

do,” I Roam did not like repeating himself.

to deal I hadn’t had them long. Both boys had been fifteen when I took th  
u settle now they were both eighteen and nearing on graduating high school.

an your But even back then, after all he’d been through, all he’d seen, all t  
been done to him, all he’d lost, Roam had honed that edge of steel tha  
him, and it was the kind you never lost. It didn’t matter what love you  
irection; in your life—and Jules had led both those boys to a lot of love, case in  
bouquet me—that kind of steel never went away.

station Steel like that replaced the marrow in your bones.

It was just what happened.

When he and his bud, Park, had taken Sniff under their wing,  
protected Sniff from a lot of what they’d endured.

ith that And when both he and Sniff had lost Park to bad dope, Roam had r  
man in able to protect Sniff from it, or protect Jules, and it was my feeling th  
and also the fact he hadn’t been able to prevent it, had chang  
irrevocably.

He did not waste time.

creed. He did not suffer fools gladly.

And he did not let anyone harm someone he loved.

He’d taken a bullet to prove that to Jules.

There were grown men who didn’t have it in them to make that  
sacrifice.

Roam had done it at the age of fifteen.

“Got no need for a man in my life, baby,” I said softly. “Got the o  
men I need right now, and I’m seein’ to them, and only them, until th  
seein’ to themselves. So don’t you worry, Roam. You can go to Wa  
with Sniff and I’ll make sure I got enough Double Stufs to last you th  
rem on, Now you get my varnish and don’t forget the lip gloss. Smoldering Ec

Roam kept scowling, and this had nothing to do with him imm  
hat had having to find lip gloss in the shade of Smoldering Eclipse.  
at made

Sniff huffed out a sigh.  
I found

I endured this until eventually Sniff tagged Roam’s arm and m  
n point, “Let’s go. She won’t back down. You know it. Faster we get her girl  
faster we can get back.”

“You need us, you call,” Roam ordered.

I did not inform him I was a fifty-three-year-old woman and cou  
they’d care of myself.

I just rolled my eyes.  
I’t been

They took off.  
at loss,

I watched them go, thinking there was more to what I said to Roar  
ed him wasn’t the fact that man with his flowers clearly had a woman in his li

It was that I was not going to take on another man for the rest of m

I’d had one and he’d changed me irrevocably, and not a bit of it v  
good way.

He hadn’t left steel in the marrow of my bones.

He’d left dust.  
kind of

After he was whacked, I’d gone on to make stupid decisions that a

not only me.

nly two I had a history—an ugly one—that no man would want to take on.  
ey start And I couldn't imagine anything on this earth worse (for me) than  
lgreensgetting the attention of a beautiful man who chuckled like humor bub  
e week.from his soul and having to watch his face as he learned who I was ar  
lipse.” I'd done.

inently Before hitting the doors, Roam stopped, turned and stared at me an  
of life on the streets before I got him under my roof meant I'd hav  
more badass than Lee Nightingale himself to hide anything from that b

uttered, But it wasn't about being badass.

ie crap, It was that I didn't hide shit from my boys. They'd led lives gi  
reason to trust, and it had been hell teaching them they could trust  
taking that further in showing them how to find others with whom the  
ld take do the same.

I didn't blow him a kiss, send him a smile or give him a nod.

You didn't do that with Roam.

He wasn't about displays of affection.

n and it You earned his by being real and being solid.

fe. So I just held his gaze and looked impatient.

ine. He turned and followed his brother out the door.

vas in a I swung my cart around and braced at the thought of facing Rose  
in the fruit and veg section.

He probably had a sister at home that rivaled Naomi or Halle or T  
Angela or Tyra.

affected He was nowhere to be seen.

“Lord have mercy on me,” I whispered to myself as I perused oranges, bananas, kiwis, spinach, cucumbers, broccoli and carrots, then it all in my cart even knowing I’d eat that shit myself as the boys dipped Oreos in full-fat milk and decimated party-size bags of ranch-frosted Doritos.

Which was what I was reaching for (times three) several aisles later I heard, “Hello.”

I turned my head and looked into dark-brown eyes separated by an interestingly creased bridge of a nose in a handsome face.

Then I did something so anti-Shirleen Jackson, it was literally immediately formed a split personality.

I bolted.

Shit, Roam was right.

No man called attention to himself by greeting some woman reaching for Doritos.

Unless he wanted to pounce.

Goddamn!

I was halfway through the next aisle when I realized I hadn’t nabbed cheddar cheese Ruffles for Roam, or the Pringles smorgasbord for them. So I motored down the aisle, swung wide to the next one, rounded down that one, caught Rose Hottie studying the water selection (which those shoulders, he probably drank while lifting weights) in the aisle stood between me and the boys’ Pringles.

I boogied as fast as my Louboutin Konstantina pompom flats would take me (which was fast, and that was good since I had to go fast, but it v

apples, since I wished being in that man's presence I'd been wearing a pair of overalls specifically my new Alexander Wang black Rina beaded slingbacks, though they weren't sure they went with my LV, still they were hot).

I circled back into the snack aisle and got the Pringles, Ruffles and Mission Mix on the trot, making sure to nab the cheesy crackers both boys would love when (times four).

Rose Hottie was out of the water and soda aisle, thankfully, and I was busy restocking up to do there. But as I hit the cleaning supplies section, I was perusing fabric softener.

I'd also needed fabric softener.

His head came around.

So I did a U-turn with my cart and hightailed my ass out of there, I (as usual) stocking up on paper towels (sorry environment, but I had been talking to teenage boys, they didn't understand global warming or the concept of reusable rags, no matter how much I drilled that shit in their heads with Charmin).

I circled back when the coast was clear for fabric softener.

It happened in the three-aisle freezer section.

I had to get tater tots and crinkle cuts. Not to mention a hefty supply of DiGiornos. Roam might starve to death if he couldn't bake a frozen pizza when I was out, and I was a Rock Chick so I was out a lot. I also had to get those teenage boys who obsessively maintained social lives and their reputations so they weren't home all that much, but when they got home they were hungry. The entire freezer in the garage was taken up with DiGiornos and we were running low.

But Rose Hottie was now on a mission. His fine black ass (and his

f heels, caught a glimpse and yes, it almost sent me into vapors) had speeded  
hough I every time he saw me, him and his cart made a beeline to me.

I lost him when I was doing my usual Hail Mary with the frozen p  
d Chex eat all those too), and as I trucked out of the frozen food section and  
s loved up with milk and creamer, as well as hit the cheese aisle, he was gone.

Bad.

s I had Good.

he was Bad.

No, good.

But it felt bad.

Since it felt bad, it was not the boys, but me who scored an entire b  
iberally cake (but in the end the boys would eat most of it) and I thought of r  
ad two Daisy, and her lover man, Marcus. I also thought of Indy and how dee  
cept of was adored by Lee. And Jet, who was practically worshipped by Edd  
ds) and then there was Roxie, who was beloved to Hank. Jules and Vance. A  
Luke. Stella and Mace. Sadie and Hector. Ally and Ren. Tod and  
Ralphie and Buddy. Tex and Nancy.

I was staring at the bagels and fresh rolls in the bakery section, c  
pply of tears...

n pizza Me.

ad two Shirleen Jackson.

badass Widow of the lowdown, good-for-nothin' Leon Jackson.

ie, they Ex-drug dealer.

Giornos I was tough.

yes, I'd I'd lived through hell.

up and     And there I was, near tears in the bakery section of King Soopers.  
Because I wanted a badass.

was (I'd     I wanted to be adored, beloved, worshipped by a good man w  
loaded     nothing but good in me.

I'd wanted that for as long as I could remember.

And it wasn't going to happen.

Not for me.

Never for me.

Because life was unfair.

But the worst of it was...

irthday     I'd made it that way.

ny girl,  
ply she     *CRASH!*

ie. And     I jumped back as my cart slammed into the bagel display, toile  
va and     packs and Bounty wobbling, full-fat milk glugging, chips rustling, b  
Stevie.     DiGiornos nearly toppling, cart ending up jammed against the shelves  
the bagels, caged there by another cart that was nearly as full as mine.

close to     I turned my head to see Rose Hottie, hands still on the cart th  
plowed into my own.

“Now that I have your attention.”

Oo...

*Wee.*

His voice was honey.

Warm, sweet, deep, delicious honey.

Hell's fire.

“Uh...” I forced out.

“I’m Moses,” he declared.

ho saw Oh Lord.

Good name.

*Great* name.

Goddamn.

“Um...” I mumbled.

“Moses Richardson.”

I got kinda lost in watching his lips moving.

They moved again.

“Now’s the time you tell me your name,” he ordered.

My eyes lifted to his.

t paper Bad idea.

oxes of He had fabulous eyes. Open, amused and curious.

s under “I’m grocery shopping,” I shared.

hat had His eyes turned more amused.

“Is that your name?” he asked.

“No.”

“I hadn’t really missed that,” he told me, tipping his head to my ca

I decided not to say anything more.

He didn’t take the hint and unjack my cart from the bakery display

He gave my cart a thorough examination before looking again at inquiring, “Those your boys?”



“Uh...what?”

“At the entrance. Those boys you were with. Ten frozen pizzas cart. They yours?”

“Yep.”

Expressive eyebrows went up.

“Both of them?” he pushed.

“Yep,” I pushed out.

“You got a brother?” he asked.

“As in the sibling kind?” I asked back.

“No,” he answered.

“No,” I answered.

“Hard to make that white one with a brother,” he decreed.

“Uh...yeah,” I agreed.

“Adopted?” he kept at me.

“Foster,” I shared.

That’s when it happened.

We were in the bakery section and it felt like the ovens had a dialed up, doors open, warming the place with bakery-oven goodness.

rt. “You’re a foster momma?” he queried softly.

“Just...just them.”

“How long they been with you?”

.  
me and “Three years.”

“So they’re yours,” he pressed.

My chin lifted half an inch. “They’re mine.”

in your More warmth, not from the ovens, coming direct from him.

Moses Richardson.

*Damn.*

“What’s your name?” he asked.

It was time to pull my shit together.

I tried to unwedge my cart, muttering, “I gotta go.”

He shoved my cart in farther, damaging the bagged, cardboard t  
Hawaiian rolls on the shelves under the bagels.

I looked back to him.

“They’ll like me,” he announced.

I stared.

Was this brother seriously jumping that far ahead?

“Because I like you,” he explained.

“You don’t know me,” I pointed out.

“Yeah I do.”

ill been That felt nice.

I still shook my head.

For his sake.

And mine.

“You don’t and you won’t.”

“I do and I will.”

It was time to snap back to Shirleen.

“Listen, my man, you need to move your cart. I got shit to do. My be back soon and Roam’s got a girl comin’ over tonight, and we got him set up before Sniff and I hit Jerusalem.”

He looked impressed. “Combo platter?”

You were either vegetarian or not from Denver if you didn’t combo (or meat) platter at Jerusalem.

“Absolutely.”

rays of More warmth and then, “Roam?”

“The black one.”

“I mean the name,” he clarified.

“Street name. Same with Sniff.”

Another brow lift. “You let them go by their street names?”

“There were battles to wage when they hit my crib, that wasn’t them.”

“I can imagine,” he murmured.

I took him in. Dark-wash jeans. Pressed button-down. Discreet attractive, curb-chained gold bracelet peeking from his cuff. Good boob

He had no fucking clue.

“No, you can’t,” I snapped.

His eyes stared right into mine.

“Work at Gilliam. Corrections officer. I can.”

Gilliam.

Gilliam Youth Services Center.

Denver juvie.

boys'll Well...shit.

otta get “Three years, those boys. You took them in at what, sixteen? Seven? There are about negative two hundred good foster mommas in Denver who take in boys that age, that size, with street names and a hundred years of scars that never should have lived on their faces. But then there was you,” he decided.

get the I started to feel goose bumps forming all over my skin.

“They were fifteen,” I said quietly.

“Same shit, different age,” he replied.

He was so right about that.

“Listen, Moses—”

“I want to take you to dinner.”

I snapped my mouth shut.

one of “You’re the most beautiful sister I’ve seen in ten years, and I thought you were before I knew what you were to those boys,” he went on.

Oh Lord.

et, but That felt *nice*.

ts. “I—”

“Don’t say no,” he whispered.

I swallowed.

“I got two teenage daughters, which might not be good with the boys, but we’ll tackle that when we face it,” he kept at me. “And I got a wife who didn’t make it easy in the beginning, but we got a flow now, been ridin’ that for seven years, divorced for eleven, so we got it done. She’s not a problem. You’re not wearing a ring, you got an ex?”

“My man’s dead.”

enteen? “I’m sorry,” he said gently.

who’d “I’m not,” I returned.

irs they  
reed. At that, he studied me.

And as it seemed was his way, he threw it right out there.

“Didn’t do you right?” he asked.

“We’re not talking about this,” I told him.

He gave one nod of that perfectly-formed skull. “Right. Good call  
talk about it over dinner.”

I had to escape this.

Now.

For him.

ght that  
And me.

“Listen, Moses—”

“Please God, woman, don’t say no.”

I shut my mouth again.

I opened it to warn, “Trust me, you do not want to take this on.”

He shook his head at that. “I do.”

“You really don’t.”

ose two  
t an ex-

“I absolutely do.”

and we  
It was then, I looked right into his eyes.

wn and  
“You absolutely do not.”

He was not deterred.

Damn it.

“How about you let me decide that.”

“How about you move your cart so I can keep on keepin’ on.”

His head tipped to the side. “You not into me?”

Was he seriously living in that body, having that face, that voice crinkles on his nose and that manner and asking that shit?

I decided a question that stupid wasn’t worthy of an answer.

l. We’ll Amusement lit his eyes again. “You’re into me.”

“I got a job herding badasses, and I got two badasses hoovering Oreos and Doritos at my house. I don’t need another badass on my har

He bent into his forearms on the bar of his cart, making his shirt ripple under his shirt that tightened on them, which made something r one specific part of me, him doing this like we were going to crack bottle of wine and stay awhile in the bakery section as he asked, “your job that you herd badasses?”

I started jimmying my cart to try to disengage it, muttering, “We doin’ this.”

“Stop,” he demanded.

I looked at him again.

“Move,” I demanded.

He did.

He moved from the handle of his cart toward me, one arm behind back.

I froze.

He pulled out his wallet.

“Got a pen?” he asked.

“Uh...” I mumbled because he was close and he smelled good.

Like...

Like those *Real* good.

He stopped even closer. So close, I had to tip my head to look into his brown eyes.

“Baby, I asked, you got a pen in that classy bag of yours?” he murmured. After Leon got whacked, I decided in my life I was not ever going to do anything I didn’t want to do.

And one could not say that I didn’t want to look down to my bag, because I pulled out a pen and hand it to Moses Richardson.

What one could say, that one being *me*, was that I had no control over my actions.

Him that close, looking that good, smelling that amazing, if he asked me if I had a honey-baked ham in my bag, I would have rushed to the kitchen, grabbed one, sprinted back, shoved it in my LV (no matter that broke the laws of my universe) so I could pull it out and hand it to him.

In other words, I gave him my pen.

He wrote on a white card on the back of his wallet then he returned his wallet to his jeans, offering the pen and card to me.

“My card. My cell number on the back. And your call. You think you want dinner, you call me. Then you buy a nice dress. Because remember when you call me, I’m not doin’ it up right.”

Slowly, my hand lifted and took the card and pen.

He didn't let it go.

At first.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"Shirleen," I whispered back, staring in those eyes.

Those eyes warmed and that warmth warmed me.

o those Straight to my bones.

Where I'd been cold a really, *really* long time.

nured. "It was nice to meet you, Shirleen," he said softly.

r doing He let go of the card only to stroll the three feet in order drop his  
the roses that I now saw had a receipt stapled to the paper so I could  
open it, right out with them. He came back and rested them on my LV in the  
seat.

ver my After he pulled that class move, I watched him go back to the ha  
his cart.

ked me He pulled his cart from mine, and looking over his shoulder to sho  
he deli, white smile, he walked away.

e all the

ned his

k on it,

io way,



He didn't let it go.

At first.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"Shirleen," I whispered back, staring in those eyes.

Those eyes warmed and that warmth warmed me.

Straight to my bones.

Where I'd been cold a really, *really* long time.

"It was nice to meet you, Shirleen," he said softly.

He let go of the card only to stroll the three feet in order drop his hand to the roses that I now saw had a receipt stapled to the paper so I could walk right out with them. He came back and rested them on my LV in the child seat.

After he pulled that class move, I watched him go back to the handle of his cart.

He pulled his cart from mine, and looking over his shoulder to shoot me a white smile, he walked away.

## TWO



## SO FAR AWAY

“Jesus, what’s all this shit?”

I saw a strong, long-fingered, veined hand reach toward my sorbet wet erase markers and did the only thing I could do.

I reached out, slapped it sharply and shot from my chair to my feet my desk in the reception area of Nightingale Investigations to face off Luke Stark.

I also snapped, “Don’t touch anything! I’m getting organized!”

Luke stood across the desk from me wearing a black T-shirt, blue and a shocked expression on his badass face.

He’d recently given up on his legendary Fu Manchu mustache and grown in a full, black beard.

I missed the Fu Manchu. There was exactly one man on the planet who could pull it off—Luke—but *he could pull it off*.

Saying that, the man was fine, so the beard far from sucked.

“You’re getting what?” he asked.

“Organized,” I clipped.

“What?” he repeated.

“Organized,” I bit out impatiently.

I mean, *sheesh*.

I was the office manager at the private investigations firm we worked.

Granted, I didn't file. And I generally didn't organize. I mostly Lee dodge anything that might chain him to his desk, like putting appointments, or taking them in his stead, or paying bills, or sending in or cutting paychecks. But, except for the last (which was mostly auto pack of I did it all when the spirit moved me (for instance when my nails didn't a new coat or when the latest *Us Weekly* hadn't been released).

behind Lee was cool I rolled that way.

against Still, everyone could be better organized.

Including me.

And no, I was not using purchasing hundreds of dollars of planner jeans a way to escape the fact it had been a week since I'd met Moses Rich at King Soopers, and I could not call him no matter how weak I wanted and had (and in that weakness, call him immediately).

And no, I would not be using organizing the shit out of my life and net who life that touched my life, including every member of the Hot Bunch, and to continue to escape that.

Even though I was oh so totally doing that.

Bottom line, Luke should be happy.

Not giving me shit.

He looked down at the healthy (okay, ridiculously out of hand) dis planner and planner accoutrement littering the entirety of the top of my

desk, and then he looked back at me.

“With purple markers, stickers and Post-its with flowers on the  
ere he queried.

“I’m creating a system,” I shared as the front door opened.

helped I didn’t look to it when Luke asked, “A system that includes  
ing offmarkers and stickers?”

nvoices What was he not understanding about this?

mated), “Yes. It’s all about color coordination, creativity and visual stimul

i’t need “Jesus, what’s all this shit?” Vance Crowe asked, eyes down to m  
body coming to stand on one side of Luke.

Hector Chavez appeared on Luke’s other side.

“Fuck,” Hector muttered, also staring at the desk.

Most women, facing off with that kind of eye candy in close pro  
: shit as would pass out.

ardson Yes, these men were that hot.

ed to be Seriously.

d every No female brain could stay conscious with Luke Stark, Vance Cro  
s a way Hector Chavez two feet away from them.

Fortunately, I’d grown immune to it.

(That was a lie, but I’d become accustomed to it.)

Vance, quicker on the move than his bros, probably due to his his  
an ex-con, reached out and nabbed my pack of gem-tone markers.

isplay of He then waved them in the air. “I’m pretty sure Lee wrote  
y large employee handbook that there are no pink markers allowed on the prer

“That’s not pink,” I shared. “It’s fuchsia.” I reached out to the sorb  
m?” he and tapped it with my nail (coated in Clothing Optional of course). “I  
has the pink.”

Seeing as Vance was taking my attention, I didn’t clock Hector  
purple up a sheet of stickers.

“You got somethin’ wrong with your hand?” he asked.

“No,” I answered.

ation.” “Then why you got stickers that say ‘trash day,’ ‘treat yo’self,’ ‘  
y desk, time,’ and ‘but first, coffee’ when you can write that shit out yourself?

“Because they have a cute font and cute little pictures,” I told him  
door to the inner sanctum opened. “And they’re *stickers*. Everyone  
*stickers*.”

ximity, “Little kids like stickers,” Vance pointed out.

He’d know. He was in the process of making an army of them with

“I’m becoming one with my inner child,” I informed him snottily.

“So you’re organizing *your* life, you’re not using stickers and  
we and markers to organize the men,” Luke declared, like he’d *just about* all  
but only under some duress.

“I’m organizing all you all’s asses too,” I shared and finished,  
purple markers. Though *you’re* purple, as in grape sorbet,” I told  
“Vance is teal. And Hector is amethyst.”

story as “Shit,” Hector muttered.

“Holy fuck,” Mace muttered, rounding the end of my desk with Lee  
in the aimed down, and stopping there.  
nises.”

When Lee came to a halt with Mace, his brows hiked high. “Wh

et packthis shit?”

his one Thank God I no longer carried a switchblade.

“I’m *organizing!*” I nearly shouted.

picking Lee reached out and tagged the pack of handy, glittery, metallic bands I bought to keep my planner closed, say, when I threw it in my p in my car.

“Did you buy this shit on the business account?” he asked.

laundry “Some of it,” I answered.

” Lee’s brows sunk low and most people, men or women, wou 1 as thecontrol of their bladder at that look.

ie likes I was accustomed to it.

“You bought stickers with mushrooms on them on the NI dime? asked, waving my autumn stickers.

1 Jules. “Those are for around Thanksgiving time,” I shared as the door inner sanctum opened again.

purple “And this is?” Hector asked, and I looked to him to see him brandi ow thislaminated picture that had a pink peppermint house with a snowflake door, a curlicue pine tree next to it fashioned in white and glitter, and “Withand snowflakes in the air all around against a blue background with m l Luke.in pink on it.

“That’s my Christmas cover,” I explained. “I have one for Thanks Easter, the Fourth of July and one for when I’m wearing blacks and e, eyes instead of browns and golds.”

“You change the cover of your planner with your outfit?” Vance as

1at’s all “And the season,” I answered.

“That go on the business account too?” Lee asked.

I swung to him. “Hell no.”

Though the Thanksgiving, Easter, Fourth of July and etcetera :  
elastic went on it because they had ones that said To Do.

course or “Ohmigod! Dope! You got planner stickers!” Brody, the Night  
Investigations computer guru (meaning nerd, alternately meaning hacker  
mostly it was nerd) shrieked (see? nerd). He dashed around the desk t  
by me, his hand snaking out to grab the entire sheet that had stickers th  
JAMMIN’ ON MY PLANNER. He looked at me with bright shining in h  
ld lose that was undimmed through his Buddy Holly glasses. “Can I have a s  
these?”

Since those were on the NI dime too, I stated magnanimously, ‘  
” Mace yourself out.”

“Whoa!” Brody yelled, looking back down to my desk. “Where’d  
r to the these ones that say ‘don’t be a dick’ and ‘fuck this’? I gotta get s  
those.”

shing a I decided not to meet any eyes as I replied, “Take one. I bought fiv  
: on the

l swirls “Yee ha!” he cried, snatching it up.

y name “Who’s Moses Richardson?”

My heart clean stopped in my chest, but my eyes moved to Hector.

sgiving, They did this slowly, but they moved.

silvers, He was holding Moses’s business card.

sked. Stupid me, I’d upended most of my purse on my desk in my ques  
organized.

And since I was carrying around Moses’s card like a personal talis

had fallen out.

Then again, none of the men had ever shown the least interest in stickers was on my desk.

And then again to that, it was rare anything was on my desk but a smattering of nail varnish and/or acetone.

But Hector's attention was on the card.

"Director of Juvenile Probation." He looked at me. "You got a picture with the boys?"

"No," I pushed out.

"There's a number on the back," Brody informed Hector helpfully.

Hector flipped the card.

"Knock it. Luke turned his head to look at it. Vance leaned in to look across the room. Mace was also looking at it even if, from his position, he couldn't see it. Though he had badass vision, so maybe he could see it, what did I know? I was a little badass but not like them.

Lee was watching me.

"Can you all move along?" I asked as a demand. "I've got a mission to organize your mission for tonight with peach sorbet being tactical and strawberry sorbet being surveillance."

Luke looked to me. "You seein' a juvie officer, Shirleen?"

Most of the time, considering some of the stuff they did was very illegal and not-so-vaguely unsafe, I thought it was great they were all so intelligent and uncannily perceptive.

This was not one of those times.

"We met. He asked me out. I said no. He gave me his card so I could call him."



rethink. The end,” I told him.

in what Luke looked to Lee.

Mace looked to Vance.

a bottle Hector looked back down at the card.

Brody looked at me. “Why’d you say no?”

“Have I ever struck you as a woman who shares her personal  
problem asked.

“I was over at your house watching *Tarzan* two weeks ago and you  
out your family albums,” Brody reminded me. “All twelve of them.”

Damn.

“I was drunk,” I lied.

Luke at “You were not.” He called me on it.

t see it. “Alexander Skarsgård got me to feelin’ sentimental,” I snapped.

now? I

“That, from you, I can believe,” Vance muttered.

I swept a hand above my desk. “Does it look like I don’t have th  
do? Once I color code your mission tonight, I have a year’s worth of  
plan to stickers to stick into my planner, and that shit includes Flag Day an  
nd lime Monday and Palm Sunday, so it’s gonna be *intense*. In other words, I  
to do.”

“Why’d you say no?” Lee asked.

vaguely

Oh no.

highly

This question did not bode well.

And the intent way he was examining my face boded even worse.

ould I

“This really isn’t your business,” I replied quietly.

Lee held my eyes.

But he'd broken the seal.

"You not into him?" Luke asked.

I turned my attention to Luke. "I already got a full life, don't need anything making it fuller."

life?" I "You're into him," Luke whispered.

Shit.

I pulled "There's full, Shirleen, then there's full," Vance noted.

"Are we really standing around my desk talking about my love life?" I demanded.

"No," Lee stated shortly. "We're standin' around it talking about it, you don't have one."

"And how's that your business?" I queried sharply.

Every single man, including nerdy Brody, leaned back from my badass affront (the badass part not including Brody).

holiday Okay, I had to give them that since I meddled in almost all of their d cyberBrody, who didn't have one (yet) and Lee, considering I wasn't around got shithe and Indy hooked up—okay, all of theirs).

"This isn't the same," I stated.

"Yeah, you're right. This isn't the same as you helpin' Ava get dressed to go out on a date with another guy when she was sleepin' in my bed, I rumbled.

Oh Lordy.

"That wasn't a date," I reminded him. "It was a thank-you dinner."

anyway, Ava was the first Rock Chick I was in charge of. I didn't have  
of experience."

This was now years ago, the woman was wearing his ring, and he  
not look happy this event occurred.  
't need

Damn, I *told* that girl it was a bad idea. Did she listen to me? No.  
She went. On a thank-you dinner that seemed a lot like a date with a  
the man whose bed she was sleeping in didn't like all that much, probably  
because he'd asked the woman who was sleeping in his bed out to a  
you dinner that was really a date.

life?" I And now she was *still* sleeping in Luke's bed, doing it with a ring  
and was she paying for that shit *she* pulled?

the fact Nooooooo.

She was getting the business.

Regular.

desk in While I'd named my vibrator Eustace because he knew me better  
any man on earth.

rs (save And I was getting Ava's man all up in *my* business.

d when "And that guy she went out on a date with is who my sister is now  
with," Lee put in.

Hmm.

ssed up I shut up.  
,” Luke

“You went with Sadie when she reported her rape.”

After Hector spoke, I pulled my lips in and looked at him.

er. And “You're a member of this family, Shirleen,” he said quietly. “Once  
in, there's no way out. What I'm thinkin' you might not get with this

ve a lotflapped Moses's card in front of himself, "that's a good thing."

"He crashed his cart into mine at King Soopers," I blurted.

still did Me!

Shirleen Jackson.

oooooooo. Blurting!

hot guy To badasses!!!

primarily "Deliberately?" Mace growled.

thank- Oh boy.

g on it, Short-fuse Mace.

He was getting it regular too, from his woman Stella, so his fuse  
be less short.

But he, like all the Hot Bunch boys, was of the Roam variety.

You didn't fuck with someone he loved.

er than "I'd been kinda, um...running away from him all through the froz  
section," I explained.

Vance's head dropped *and* turned to the side.

w livin' I still saw his shit-eating grin.

*And* his body shaking with silent laughter.

What I said didn't make Mace much happier.

"So you clearly didn't want his attention, he shoulda took the h  
backed the fuck off."

All of the men dropped their heads and looked to the side at that.

you're "Yeah, and how'd that work for you when you so delicately  
is," heStella after she told you repeatedly you guys were over?" I asked.

Mace's jaw went hard.

"Unh-hunh," I said on a head snap.

Lee came back to the conversation before I could carry on about how he'd not backed off from Indy when she'd tried to make him do something. Vance had not done that with Jules, or Luke from Ava, and so on. "You're into him, and he's chasing you through the frozen food section. Why'd you say no?"

"He's attractive, but not my type."

"What's your type?" Vance asked curiously.

"Not him."

should

Brody piped up. "Alexander Skarsgård. Gerard Butler. Dwayne Johnson. Idris Elba—"

His mouth was still open when I turned and ordered, "Shut up, Brody."

His mouth closed.

en food

I was glaring at him and mentally deciding no more Brody-Skarsgård Movie Nights (at least for a month, what could I say, Brody and I had cinematic leanings) when Luke declared, "We're on mission in an hour."

"Yeah, and it's not color coded yet," I put in.

Luke gave me a blank look.

Vance shook his head.

int and

The rest of the men started to move away.

"My card," I snapped at Hector, who still had Moses's card.

Hector turned back, mouth open.

pursued

Vance's mouth opened.

Mace's mouth opened.

I didn't look, but I was sure Brody's mouth opened.

ut how Luke's mouth thinned.

so (and But it was Lee who spoke.

n). "So "Give her back the card, Hector."

section.

Hector set it on my desk, his liquid black gaze to me before it sh  
Lee.

I didn't touch it or say another word as all the men moved thro  
door to the inner sanctum.

Only then did I snatch it up and clip it with one of my (fou  
Johnson. magnetic paper clips to the week of Christmas, which was nine months

Because I had a feeling Moses Richardson was like Christmas v  
dy." was April.

Joy and goodness and dreams coming true...

Shirleen But still...

similar So far away.  
r."



### ***Lee Nightingale***

*TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER...*

LEE WALKED into the control room, asking, "What we got?"

Luke shifted away from the desk Hector and Mace were also star  
to expose Vance in a chair, rolling over from the other desk in the room  
one Monty was sitting behind with his laptop in front of him.

Monty looked up from the laptop and didn't fuck around with it out.

"Moses James Richardson. Fifty-one years of age. Army, honorable discharge. Distinguished Service Cross recipient." His eyes locked on the screen. "Kuwait. Sierra Leone. Bosnia. Kuwait. Somalia. Bosnia."

lifted to "Holy fuck," Lee whispered.

"His boots got dusty," Monty replied.

ugh the "Shit yeah," Lee replied, impressed.

That kind of résumé meant his unit was elite.

ir) new Monty looked back to the laptop. "Married seven years. I  
s away. acrimonious, but since then they've straightened shit out and his  
when it remarried. Two daughters, one seventeen, one fifteen. Both honor roll.  
drill team. Youngest, sophomore class president."

"How'd he get into juvie work?" Lee asked.

iding at n to the "Far's I can see from his interview notes, he had a cousin. His un-  
a good man, kid just had a tendency to go off the rails. Kid was young  
him, but Richardson took him under his wing. They were tight, helped  
him on the straight and narrow as best he could. While Richardson  
occupied with earning his Distinguished Service Cross, the cousin got  
some trouble that bought him being tried as an adult at seventeen and  
the big house for a dime. After Richardson got out of the Army, used  
Bill to get his degree, went into the Academy, became a beat cop  
detective. But eventually he moved over. Did his time as a j  
corrections officer, now he oversees that outfit. What we got, he's st  
hands on with the kids in a way it's not a job, it's a mission."

Monty turned the laptop around and on it was the photo pan

aying it Facebook page album entitled “Me and my dad.”

His youngest daughter was pretty.

norable Her dad was built.

Lee’s. And the man was good-looking.

“So no red flags,” Lee noted, starting to look at Monty, but Luke g switched his attention.

It was Monty who spoke.

“He undoubtedly knew Park and probably knew Roam. Which m might know Shirleen.”

Divorce Lee felt his neck get tight. “Say again.”

s ex is “Both Park and Roam went through Gilliam, Lee,” Monty  
Oldest. “Richardson was there when they were there. Park was there more oft  
Roam. Roam only hit juvie once, Park was there repeatedly.”

“So how’s he gonna know Shirleen?” Lee asked.

cle was “It wasn’t exactly off radar how Jules and King’s Shelter finagl  
ger than placement, two teenage street kids placed in foster care with an  
ed keep dealer who had not gone through the program. This right after a social  
on was was shot twice trying to protect one of those kids. It caused some rip  
got into isn’t a stretch this guy, working in the system as long as he has  
hitting reasons he quit being a cop and became a JCO, heard that word.”

l the GI “You think he has some problem with her?” Lee pushed.

, made “I think if there’s anyone who knows the difference between peop  
juvenile fuck up their lives with no intention to change them and people wh  
ill very stupid decisions in their lives, and worked their asses off and or put t

el of a the line to get their shit sorted or get clean, and admires it, it’s thi



Monty answered.

“But we can’t know that,” Luke growled.

Monty shook his head but did it in agreement. “We can’t know that.”

“So before we go all matchmaker, we feel this guy out,” Luke declared. Lee turned to Luke. “Absolutely.”

“I want on him for a day or two,” Vance, their best tracker, said. “I want in his house.”

None of them were slouches on that front, but Vance was also best at B&E.

“Do it,” Lee obliged.

“You do the house, I’ll do the follow,” Mace said.

“We gotta pass off on the follow, seein’ as we’re all famous no one guy, he might tag a tail,” Hector reminded them. “So we gotta pass especially if he tags one of us.”

“You get made, you share. Means we all gotta back off,” Lee continued. “Thanks to those fuckin’ newspaper articles and books, one and one make two, he sees more than one *Hot Bunch* guy.”

There were a variety of lip curls to share how they all felt about that. Lee and the others of them amused in the least.

Hector nodded.

Lee looked to Monty. “He cheat on his wife? She cheat on him?”

“Court records stated irreconcilable differences. No claims of infidelity recorded. He fought for more visitation with his girls, she fought against it. I can’t know why she did that, but he got it and both girls went

chambers with the judge in order to ask for more time with their da  
shit hit him hard financially, lotta time in court, lotta legal fees, but he  
back down. By the time he won split visitation, the girls were eight a  
t.”  
So they’d been battling it out for four years.”

ared.  
“Thought dual visitation was the standard now,” Vance remarked.

Monty shook his head. “She played the cop and corrections offic  
“And I How he’s never home. How his job was dangerous. How they needed  
exposure to that. She had a good attorney. Chewed him up. He got  
t with a Switched firms. Got himself a shark. He also got in debt.” Monty turn  
to Lee. “Worked his ass off, but he got outta that debt and managed  
up his court ordered deposits into the girls’ college accounts, not to r  
child support, through it all. But he lived tight, way tight, through tl  
and after it. Just not when he had those girls.”

w. This  
ass off, “Solid guy,” Lee whispered.

“On file, solid as they get,” Monty agreed.

ordered. “I wanna know what went down with that divorce and why she v  
ne willout to keep his girls from him,” Lee told the room at large.

at, none “I’ll get Brody on that,” Luke told him. “We might have to get crea  
“Do it.”

Luke nodded.

Monty lifted up a hand and scratched the back of his neck as he  
? What “Any of us got a problem with this dude rammin’ into her grocery cart

Monty had been briefed.

“No,” Hector said immediately.

“No,” Vance said with him.

fidelity  
nst it. I  
closed

d. That  
e didn't  
nd ten.

“No,” Luke said half a second after them.  
Mace paused and grinned at Lee before he said, “No.”  
Lee looked right at Monty.

er card.  
limited  
smart.

“No.”  
“I’d worry about this modern-day Neanderthal crap if your  
weren’t as totally devoted to you as they are,” Monty muttered, dropping  
hand.

ed back  
to keep  
ention

“A woman is worth it—” Luke started.  
“You gotta be willing to go all in,” Mace went on.  
“And Shirleen’s worth it,” Lee finished.

ie fight

It took a beat.  
But after that beat...  
Monty smiled.

vent all

ative.”

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?”

“No,” Luke said half a second after them.

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“And Shirleen’s worth it,” Lee finished.

It took a beat.

But after that beat...

Monty smiled.

THREE



## SLICE OF HEAVEN

*Lee Nightingale*

**S**eventy-two hours later...

LEE WAS LEANING against his company Explorer, boots crossed at the arms crossed on his chest, head turned to the side, watching the man across the parking lot toward him.

Also noting he was more impressive in person.

For his part, Moses Richardson had not missed he had company for him at the SUV parked next to his truck. The man didn't take his eyes off Lee the entire journey from front door to vehicles.

When he arrived, he also didn't keep his distance.

He got close before he stopped between the two cars, planted his feet, and crossed his own arms on his chest.

Richardson started it.

And he did it with a grin on his lips.

“Gotta admit, didn't expect this visit. But I'm thinkin' it means some things.”

In other words, introductions were unnecessary.

“If you’re thinking Shirleen set us on you to make sure you’re enough for her, you’d be wrong. She has no idea,” Lee replied.

The grin vanished.

“So obviously we gotta sort that shit,” Lee continued. “But seein’ no idea how to do that, I’m afraid I gotta tell you it’s gonna be neces get my wife involved, which probably means all the Rock Chicks, meeting is multi-purpose, and the one I’m talkin’ about now means y brace.”

“Outside of tellin’ my daughters they can’t read those books until forty-five, even though they both really want to, I know *who* you’re ankles, about. I just don’t know *what* you’re talking about with any of this, ma in walk

“Shirleen is never going to call you,” Lee announced.

Richardson didn’t hide looking disappointed, but he nodded, not his eyes from Lee. “So she’s not gonna do that, why are you here? / waiting repeat, what are you talking about?”

eyes off “I’m making a reservation at Barolo Grill,” Lee told him. “She’s she’s having dinner with the Rock Chicks. But she’ll be having dinn you.”

egs and Richardson’s brows shot up but he didn’t say anything.

“Once that happens,” Lee went on, “it’ll be up to you to get in ther

“If she doesn’t want—” Richardson started.

Lee pushed away from his truck, turned to fully face the man, is good hands on his hips and said quietly, “She wants. She’s still not gon you.”

“And you’re setting her up because...?” Richardson prompted.

“Because you’re a good man and she’s a good woman and it’s ti  
had some happy in her life.”

His eyes narrowed. “She’s not happy?”

Good point to hone in on.

Lee approved.

“I’m talking about the kind we’re hopin’ *you* can give her, not h  
givin’ her, not the Rock Chicks givin’ her, not her bossin’ around n  
givin’ her. I think you get me.”

“I get you. I’m still not sure why we’re standing here havi  
conversation.”

“You know who she is, don’t you,” Lee stated.

Richardson drew a visible breath in through his nose before he  
“Wasn’t sure. Kid looked a lot different when I had him at Gilliam. It  
a while and he grew up and good since he was thirteen. And we don’  
street names. But after she told me she was a foster parent and when sl  
me her name, yeah, I knew who she was and I knew who her boy was.

Lee studied him closely. “Okay, so you know who she is, do yo  
who she was?”

Richardson didn’t break eye contact. “If you mean do I know she  
Jackson’s widow and that her and Darius Tucker took over the k  
when the king was dead, yeah, I know that too.”

“And you still gave her your number.”

“She’s out of the game and so is her nephew. They’re both on boa  
you. So yeah. I gave her my number and straight up, it’s been a bum

hasn't used it."

me she Lee said nothing to that.

Richardson tipped his head to the side, beginning to look impatient

"Is this a setup for a setup or is this a test, you feelin' me out?" he

"Both," Lee answered.

That got him a look that said the man was getting pissed.

er boys "I'm way too old for this kinda shit," Richardson told him.

ny men Yeah, he was getting pissed.

ng this "And I'm way too fuckin' protective to let anyone near Shirle  
might hurt her in any way, and I'm just one of many who would  
pleased she even got bruised, much less broken," Lee shot back.

"Part of the bein' too old shit is being any part of a setup that bli  
shared, some woman who doesn't really wanna have dinner with me," Rich  
:s been returned.

't allow "She doesn't want to have dinner with you because she thinks wh  
he gave learn about her history, you won't want her."  
"

Richardson shut his mouth so fast, his chin dipping sharply back :  
u know neck, it was clear he hadn't thought of that.

"She didn't lose your number, man, to the point she clippe  
's Leon Christmas in her planner," Lee shared, with this in the cards, not h  
ingdom problem invading Shirleen's space to see where she was at with  
Richardson.

Christmas.

rd with He didn't have to be a private investigator to know what that sai  
ner she where she was at.



“Shit,” Richardson whispered.

He knew where she was at too.

“Yeah,” Lee agreed. “Now she’s not gonna call you, but she wants you. And I want her to have what she wants. I want her to find her happiness. Those boys are gonna graduate next month and they’re gonna get on with their lives, and they will never lose her. You understand that. They will not ever lose her. But they’re the kind of boys that will get on with their lives and how they’ll do that, big parts of her life will be alone, and my guess from all this, she’s hung up on her past so she’ll never do anything about it.”

Richardson just stared at him.

“And I’ll admit,” Lee carried on, “in order not to give you a call out sides out with you, and in order not to think about the fact those boys’re gonna be moving on soon, she’s bought herself a bunch of shit to organize her office, and my man Mace’s marker is black, but my man Mace’s marker is strawberry fuckin’ sorbet, what she calls it, but it’s pink. And to say he’s a big fan of that is an understatement. He’s not even a fan of being coded with a marker at all. But definitely not pink. And I hit my date night to see ‘date night’ stickers all over it, givin’ me the not subtle need to look after my woman, and my man Luke had a note in his cutlery that had a sticker on it that said ‘grocery shopping’ with a list Shirleen gave his wife. Now if we don’t turn her mind to something else, I can’t even guess what shit is going to go down at the office.”

“So this whole thing is self-serving,” Richardson noted, his lips twitching.

“Shit yeah,” Lee replied.

The lip twitch stopped.

“I don’t care what she was,” Richardson said quietly. “What she has to make her peace with herself and God. What she is now is the thing that interests me, and I saw her handle those boys. I know she picked up her life. I know it takes courage to do that. Turning your back on the life of life isn’t easy, and it isn’t safe, and she did it. So I want to get to know you for more than the fact she’s a beautiful woman. But I don’t have crying eyes that hurt her. Now if we don’t spark...” He let that trail off and lifted his shoulders.

Lee called him on that. “You know you’re gonna spark or you won’t have given her your card.”

Richardson didn’t reply.

Lee nodded. “You pick the night. I’ll get the reservation. Indy, myself, the will get her there.”

At that, Richardson studied Lee closely. “Are you sure this is her idea?”

Lee shook his head. “Absolutely not. The only thing I know is I watched Shirleen Jackson stand beside women as they fought their way through a load of shit to get to the other side and find their happy turn. That might not be you, man, but I want it to be somebody and she got to break the seal. Leon put her through hell. She paid her penance. It began when she found her slice of heaven.”

“Jesus, you really care about her,” Richardson murmured.

“There’s a long line of those and I’m not even at the front,” Lee replied.

“Make the reservation. Tuesday.”

At that, Lee smiled.

lid, she “How deep was the dive?” Richardson asked.

he only Lee stopped smiling.

cleaned “You’re Lee Nightingale,” Richardson went on. “And you’re here  
at kind to convince me to go on a mostly blind date with a woman who means  
ow her deal to you who has no idea, she turns up at a restaurant, she’s gonna  
tal ball, mostly blind date. That means I got the greenlight from you. So how d  
I won’t you and your boys dive?”

ted his “She deserves no drama,” Lee said instead of answering direct.

ouldn’t “Man, if this works out, my guess is it’s all in the family. So you a  
boys have this about me and I gotta know how much *this* is.”

He had to give it to him.

ly wife, And if the tables were turned, he’d want to know too.

“We know your wife cheated on you with her high school boyfi  
a good their reunion. You couldn’t go. You were at a mandatory cop conver  
San Francisco. You found out because you saw an email that led  
s that I lookin’ into it and finding more. She contended she got very dru  
air way. wasn’t in control of her actions. Guests at the reunion confirm the inel  
It’s her is true, but we all know it’s no excuse. Still, you went into counselin  
e needs her to save your family. Six months into counseling, when you disc  
’s time she continued talking to the guy after you found out about the cheat ar  
into counseling, you decided you couldn’t trust her again or sav  
marriage, which meant your family. By that time, she was all in to s  
marriage, if not the family. She made that and the fact she wasn’t  
plied. with your decision plain with four years of divorce court torture.”

“Holy shit,” Richardson whispered.

“We’re thorough,” Lee muttered.

“That it?” Richardson asked.

“Army record. Employment records. Your girls have a lot of shit on a great Facebook and they need a lesson on privacy settings.”

Richardson’s mouth got tight.

Lee had a feeling that lesson would occur that night.

“It was invasive and we had good reason. But it ends here,” Lee said.

“You get yourself to Barolo Grill, we’re out. Now the Rock Chicks, and your men make any promises.”

“These ‘Rock Chicks,’ they’re you and your men’s women?”

“They’re nuts, *and* they’re my wife’s posse. And Shirleen is them.”

He began to look less annoyed and more curious.

“It really crazy enough to have books written about it?” he asked.

“My wife was kidnapped...three times.”

“Fucking hell,” Richardson muttered.

“And I lost track of the explosions.”

His eyes got big before he burst out laughing.

Lee didn’t find anything funny.

“Let’s avoid any of that with you and Shirleen,” he ordered.  
suggestion.

Richardson was still smiling when he replied, “I’m in on that.”

“Tuesday,” Lee stated.

Richardson nodded. “Tuesday.”

Lee nodded back and turned to his truck.

“Nightingale,” Richardson called.

t up on Lee turned back.

“As fucked as it is considering you know more about why my n  
ended than my mother, still, think I owe you,” Richardson remarked.

Lee hoped so.

issured. “We’ll see.”

I can’t “Yeah,” Richardson replied. “We will.”

one of

d on a

Lee nodded back and turned to his truck.

“Nightingale,” Richardson called.

Lee turned back.

“As fucked as it is considering you know more about why my marriage ended than my mother, still, think I owe you,” Richardson remarked.

Lee hoped so.

“We’ll see.”

“Yeah,” Richardson replied. “We will.”

FOUR



## I KNOW IT GOOD

*Shirleen*

**T**uesday night...

“I’M HERE to meet my girls. Reservation under India Nightingale,” I said to the hostess only to watch her eyes get big right before her face closed off.

Damn.

What had those women gotten up to?

I looked to my watch.

I was only seven minutes late.

Then again, they were the Rock Chicks. Seven minutes of them there—one of them, or all of them—it was a wonder the restaurant wasn’t on fire.

“Right this way,” the hostess said, giving me a small, courteous smile as she moved into the restaurant.

I followed her, tucking my gunmetal Rebecca Minkoff envelope under my arm, staring at my shoes and thinking it was good that she had organized a night out. That meant I got to wear my Alexander Wang

slingbacks. I'd been obsessed with wearing them since I met  
(notthinkingaboutMoses, notthinkingabout  
alwaystotallythinkingaboutMoses).

Not to mention carry that kickass clutch.

I'd turned my attention to the hostess's shoes as she guided the wa  
table, thinking they were a little bit of all right and I'd ask her where  
them when she turned and murmured, "Careful of the carpet."

"Thanks," I replied, lifting my eyes to her face.

She gave me another polite smile before again turning forward.

I looked beyond her, wondering why things seemed calm and  
considering the Rock Chicks were in the house.

said to  
down.

No one was shouting, crying, whooping, laughing so loud the w  
shook, and I heard no loud conversations about sex.

I supposed this *was* Barolo Grill.

We were a crazy bunch of bitches but we could get our game fi  
when getting thrown out might mean you wouldn't get to eat your *riso  
milanese* (yes, I had pre-checked the menu, and yes, I totally knev  
n beingcourse I was ordering—all four of them).

isn't on

I just hadn't decided what cocktail I was going to start with.

What I had decided was that when I had the ambience of Baro  
nile andaround me, I'd go where the spirit moved me.

This was my thought when the spirit moved me to jack my ass  
clutchand take off running the other way.

ie girls  
beaded

And this was because the hostess was not leading me to the Rock C

She was leading me to a table where Moses Richardson was risir



Moses his chair, eyes locked on me. He was wearing a black shirt, a super  
Moses, dark-gray blazer, crisp jeans, and he looked good enough to eat.

Way better than the four-course meal I'd picked out.

All right.

y to the What...

she got In *the fuck*...

Was going on?

I didn't run. I couldn't run. And not because I was in a fancy res  
and wearing high heels (and I was thanking God I'd chosen the black  
sedate, con, midi dress with the bateau neck and art deco pattern that, yes,  
could say *I rocked*).

indows Because Moses Richardson was watching me walk his way, lookin  
looking alert (which was also fine) and looking like he might chase  
ran.

aces on "Your dinner partner for this evening," the hostess murmured w  
*ttto all* stopped at his table. "Enjoy," she finished, then she wasted no furth  
v every and took off.

She didn't even motion to one of the chairs or hand me the menu t  
sitting on one of the two plates.

lo Grill I stared at Moses.

He watched me.

around I kept staring at Moses thinking Indy had phoned me her damned  
set this up.

hicks. But I'd talked with Daisy, Jules and Ava about that night and w  
ig from were all wearing.

bly cut I'd been played.

By the Rock Chicks *and* the Hot Bunch.

Those boys had *such* big mouths.

I should have known this was not a Rock Chick night. Barolo G: Indy and Lee's place (though I didn't know how, I'd made reservations for them here, and for one reason or another in the lif RCHB, one of them was always cancelling).

staurant "You're not running away," Moses observed.

k body- "I'm too busy plotting multiple murders."

even I He smiled.

Lordy.

ng fine, He moved to pull a chair out.

me if I "Are you going to sit?" he asked.

hen we "I haven't decided yet," I answered.

er time He settled in while standing there. "I've got all night."

hat was And he looked like he did. He looked like he didn't give a shit w both standing, staring at each other at a table at the swanky-ass Barolo

"If I ran, would you chase me?" I asked curiously.

"Yes," he answered.

Hmm.

l self to "Please sit down, Shirleen," he said in that honey voice.

It was the "please" that got me.

hat we I shifted his way, turned, aimed my ass at the chair and sat.

He helped me bring my chair under the table.

Right.

Did I just do that?

Why did I just do that?

rill was I should not have done that.

fifteen I set my clutch to the table only because it was in my hand and  
e of an going to push up on it to get out of my chair.

“I should—” I began.

Honey poured into my ear because his lips were *right there*.

Which meant it felt like it poured down my neck.

And south.

“Just relax. It’s a man and a woman having dinner. Enjoying each  
company. In this moment, what goes from here doesn’t matter. Just b  
now...with me.”

I drew in a deep breath.

A man and a woman having dinner.

ve were A juvenile corrections officer and an ex-drug dealer having dinner.

Grill. I couldn’t do it.

My whole body tensed to bolt.

The honey came back.

“In the now, Shirleen.”

I turned my head and looked into his eyes.

“You’re not in the now,” he told me when his gaze caught mine. “  
in the past. Or you’re in the future. The now is just this table. Food  
Conversation. And then it’s done.”

“What are we gonna talk about?” I asked.

“Whatever you want.” He kept hold on my gaze. “And nothing t  
don’t want.”

“You’re being very accommodating,” I noted.

d I was “I want to have dinner with you.”

He wanted to have dinner with me.

This beautiful man wanted to have dinner *with me*.

Could I be in the now?

Not in the past?

(I didn’t care about the future.)

other’s I stared into those eyes.

e in the Then I looked away and left my clutch on the table as I grabl  
napkin to put it in my lap.

Moses walked around the table and sat across from me.

I tried to deep breathe without appearing to breathe deep.

The waiter arrived.

Thank the Lord.

“Would we like to start with a cocktail?” he asked.

“Bellini, please,” I ordered, leaving off the “and keep them coming

“Peroni,” Moses ordered.

The waiter nodded. “I’ll leave you with your menus and be right ba

‘You’re Moses didn’t watch him walk away.

. Wine. He looked at me.

“So which one do I kill first?” I asked.

“Pardon?” he asked back.

I lifted a hand and whirled it in the air, indicating the table. “Who’s the ringleader that arranged this? Indy? Daisy?”

“Lee.”

My hand dropped to my lap. “Say what?”

“Lee. He made the approach and he made the reservation. He also cleared he would not get his wife or your friends involved if he didn’t like it. But apparently he had to.”

I could not believe this.

“Liam ‘Badass isn’t my middle name, it’s my way of life’ Nightingale playing matchmaker?”

Moses grinned at me and my heart died a little.

“Yep,” he answered.

I was shocked.

Okay, freaked.

And that was the entirety of my dinner conversation.

Which made me even more freaked.

I stared at my clutch on the table.

It was a hot clutch.

I still didn’t think I could stare at it for an hour over dinner with a hot guy.

“You might want to read your menu,” Moses suggested. “It’ll give you something to do while you try to think of something to say.”

My gaze snapped to him. “So you got practice with this, do you?”

He shot me another smile. “Been divorced for eleven years, Shirley was the in that time did not enter the priesthood.”

I wished he wouldn't smile. It was annoying because it wasn't annoying. It was amazing.

I took up my menu even though I already knew what I was going to make. I made it order.

“Get what you want,” he stated like it was a command. “And if you consider suggesting we go dutch, rethink. There'll be consequences you pull something like that.”

I looked to him again. “Do you threaten all your dates at the beginning of the date?”

“Only ones I think might be difficult, that being only you.”

I made a noise that sounded like a humph and then wished I humphed.

I decided to check out my menu again.

I was pretending to consider my options when Moses asked, “What are the boys doing tonight?”

I didn't repeat my mistake of looking at him again.

I answered my menu.

“Roam, probably his latest girlfriend. Sniff, probably a two-finger already down, one on the go, and if he's got time, he'll find a third one to get that action in before he has to be home for curfew.”

“Seriously?”

At his tone, I looked to him.

en, and Yep.

His face matched his tone.

oying. I decided I should try to make him think I was at least a decent carer.

oing to “My friend Hank keeps them in condoms,” I shared.

His brows went high. “And you’re okay with this?”

ou even “Hell no,” I replied. “I don’t even want to be *talking* about this. Tl  
u try to am because I can’t quit *thinking* about it since I ride the razor’s edge  
of them getting a girl in trouble. Or getting a girl in so deep she bec  
ning of stalker, something not only they’ll have to deal with, but I’ll have  
with her crazy ass too. Or getting a girl whose parents aren’t all that  
young love, so their father comes to my house with a shotgun.”

hadn’t “These are all valid concerns,” he decreed.

“No shit?” I said by way of agreement. “And they’re the only ones  
myself think about. What really scares the snot outta me is that the fi  
of their lives hasn’t been sunshine and rainbows. I want the next pa  
that are what they want it to be. I don’t want them forced into a situation they  
cope with. I want them free and clear to make the decisions abo  
they’re gonna be and the kind of lives they want to lead.”

That bakery-oven goodness wafted over me across the table.

er, one Lord.

one and

I’d always wanted to live somewhere where there was no snow.

That just proved I could bask in warmth the rest of my days.

Especially that kind.

“Do you know for a fact they’re having sex?” Moses asked.

I tried a trick that Ally often tried.

“La la la,” I chanted, looking back down to my menu. “I’m sorry I t foster it but now this conversation isn’t happening.”

“Shirleen,” he called, and I was forced out of politeness (ok proximity of his hotness) to look at him again. “You need to tell t abstain.”

hough I I stared at him.

of one Then I threw back my head and burst out laughing.

comes a When I was done laughing, I saw he didn’t share in the joke.

to deal Still, he said, “First, you’re gorgeous when you laugh.”

big on I was?

“Second,” he went on, “I neglected to tell you I really like that dres

Every inch of skin under said dress got hot.

s I’ll let “And last,” he continued, “I wasn’t being funny.”

irst part “When did you lose your virginity?” I asked.

rt to be That shut him up.

have to “Mm-hmm,” I murmured, turning my attention back to the menu I  
ut who intention of reading since I’d memorized it that afternoon when I  
(probably) have been sending invoices.

“I wasn’t a father with two teenage daughters back then.”

Oh my God.

My eyes again went to his. “I should tell them that.”

“Sorry?”



“I should tell them to catapult themselves into the future thirty years, give themselves teenage daughters,” I explained and nearly clapped hands, but considering the Ritz factor around me, decided against it. “Damn, that’s perfect. They might listen to that.”

“They might not.”

“But they also might.”

“Well, Sniff probably wouldn’t.”

“But Roam might.”

“(Maybe.)”

“Glad I could give you a new strategy,” Moses said.

“I’m glad you could too, though I don’t hold high hopes.”

He shot me another grin. “I wouldn’t be able to see past my hormones.”

“I thought back to when I was eighteen.”

“I was dating Leon when I was eighteen.”

“I quit thinking about when I was eighteen.”

“Why don’t you just tell them that part about wanting them to be in a position to make the decisions about what’s next in their lives?” he asked.

I gave up on the menu and set it aside before I answered, “Be honest. I don’t like to remind them that they were forced into the position. I don’t want to say anything about the early part of their lives, that bein’ becoming runaway.”

“Are their parents in the picture at all?”

“No. They. Are. *Not*.”

At my words, more I suspected at how I spoke them, fire lit in his

ars and The same fire that I felt burning inside me anytime I thought of Roar  
ed my Sniff's parents.

t. "Hot It took time for the stories to come out. They both told Jules before  
told me.

But then they told me.

And that was that.

I never made them speak of it again.

And that was when I retired my switchblade.

Too much of a temptation.

For certain.

But it was not good that with four words, Moses understood and  
ones at that emotion with me for two boys he didn't know. It was not good  
that kind of man. It was not good that kind of man was sitting across  
table, having dinner with me.

It was not good because it was beautiful and I knew I wanted more  
of that, more of coming to know how much better he could get.

e in the "That bad?" Moses asked quietly, taking me out of my thoughts.

ed. "Worse," I said sharply.

cause I At this point, fortunately, the cocktails arrived. The waiter then raised  
1 to do the specials, through which I chanted "la la la" again (but only in my  
ways." because I didn't want him to take me off target.

We ordered and I was pleased Moses ordered all different food from

is eyes. What could I say? It was a thing. If he ordered the same as me, I  
to change mine and I'd been looking forward to my choices since  
them at two o'clock that afternoon.

n's and     And no, this was not so I could taste all he got (even though it would be with anyone else), just that I couldn't even begin to think of where they were off Moses Richardson's plate. The room would get too hot for me to be

“So what are the boys *really* doing tonight?” Moses asked when the waiter moved away.

I was sipping my Bellini.

Yes, I needed those to keep coming, and not just so I could get through this date.

It was *delicious*.

I put it down and answered, “They’re manning the control room office tonight while doing their homework.”

shared     “The control room?”

he was     “Where the men do surveillance at Nightingale Investigations. I’m not sure what kind of interns.”

ross the     “That seems...unusual for high school boys,” he stated carefully.

e, more     “They need good male role models. And there they have a lot of them.”

“I see,” he murmured. “Is that going to be what’s next in their lives?”

I shrugged. “I hope so.”

n down     Another grin from Moses. “You like herding badasses.”

y head)     And so he obviously had his answer about what I’d shared during the grocery store incident.

m me.     He was also right. I liked herding badasses.

’d have     What I liked more was the fact that, if Lee took them on permanently,

I made     I’d see my boys every day. Even when they moved out, I’d see them.

as, or it and thus could keep tabs on them (and ride their asses) for the foreseeable future.

reathe. “Yes,” I replied.

then the The look on Moses’s face said he’d read my thoughts but he was enough not to comment on them.

I grabbed my Bellini again and took a sip.

through When I put it down, I realized I didn’t have anything else to say.

I mean, I did.

I could ask about his daughters. I could ask about his job. I could see if he’d seen *Tarzan* or *300* or *The Accountant* and assess his taste. I could wonder why his wife was stupid enough to lose him, or learn he wasn’t as perfect as he seemed, had done something stupid and he’d lost her.

They’re But I didn’t want to know any of that. I didn’t want to know if he was even more fabulous. I didn’t want to know if he could be less fabulous than I would confirm he was human.

em.” I didn’t want anything that might make this hurt more when it was

is?” “You do know, I know who you are.”

My attention went from my Bellini to his face, and I felt my lips part.

ing the “I know you’re Shirleen Jackson,” he carried on. “I know what your husband was. I know what you and your nephew did before you started doing it.”

I continued to stare at him with my mouth open, but now my throat-like, burning and there was so much pressure in my head, I thought it was at work explode.

seeable I should have run.

But since I didn't, I should do it now.

I just couldn't move.

s smart He leaned into the table, staring right back at me.

"So let's get this out there and get past it right now," he kept going. "I don't care, Shirleen. That was who you were. I'm sitting across the table from the woman you are now."

"You...you know that I—?"

I'd ask if Moses cut me off. "I know about the drugs. I know about the old askgames. I know about the bar you no longer own and what ran through the perfect asAnd I know that's all done."

I pressed my lips together.

he was "We clear on that?" he asked.

s, but it I swept up my drink again, looking away.

I took a sip.

over. It didn't help the burn in my throat.

lips had I should have ordered three all up front.

"Shirleen—"

io your I turned back to him and put my drink down. "You know that I stopped change the fact that this is it, and then we're never seeing each other again."

His brows drew together. "Why not?"

coat was "Because that will always be there."

would "It isn't here now."

I blinked at him.

“If it’s not here now, why would it ever be here?” he asked.

Was he crazy?

“I...” I shook my head. “It never goes away,” I explained.

He nodded once and sat back. “So you got out of that shit so young. [I] continue to let it control your life and inform who you are?”

He with That sounded stupid.

“Of course not.”

“So why are you letting it control your life and inform who you are?” I poked/pushed.

He there. “It isn’t that easy,” I told him.

“It wouldn’t be that easy if you got out of the game you were in: sell guns or peddle flesh or hire yourself out as a hitman, or sorry, hitwoman if you wallowed in the mistakes you made and spent your life dedicating yourself to death while watching shows about serial killers on TV. You didn’t do any of that. You did it the hard way. You scraped all the shit off yourself and got yourself a decent job with decent people and became a foster mother.”

I snatched up my drink at that last.

This was because I was a foster carer.

Unofficially.

doesn’t  
gain.”

Officially, I was an ex-drug dealer, current office manager who’d had several runaways placed with her by means that were a little bit shady (okay, a little bit shady as in, probably illegal and definitively not through any valid channels).

Luckily, Roam and Sniff both were eighteen now so they were of legal age and could be anywhere they wanted to be...

And he was a JCO. No, he was Director of Juvenile Probation.

He probably lived and breathed valid channels.

“Shirleen,” he called.

I looked at him while gulping back a glug of Bellini.

“I know it wasn’t above board, how you got those boys. I don’t care about that either,” he declared.

I took the glass from my mouth but didn’t set it back on the table.

There was less than half left, but I needed it close.

“What *do* you care about?” I asked.

And I’d find that I shouldn’t have.

Alternately, it could turn out it was the best thing I’d done in my life.

Because he answered.

Thoroughly.

“I care that my daughters get through high school without some hooker or boy making me a grandfather ten years before I’m ready for that sluttage and also ruining my record of living fifty-one years of life without murdering a teenager. I care about them making decisions that will lead to happiness, not wealth or status or designer clothes, not drugs or booze or men who treat them like garbage.”

These were good things to care about, I thought.

Real good.

Moses didn’t give me the chance to make comment.

He kept going.

“I care about the turkey being cooked just right on Thanksgiving and the goodness for the meal and days of leftover turkey sandwiches. I care

staying healthy for the day at least ten years away when my grandc  
come and I can put them on my shoulders and keep up with them whe  
horsing around. I care that my toilets don't run and my faucets don't le  
my yard looks good because I like to come home to a house that  
r't care maintained with a yard that looks good. But also I think everyone sh  
the kind of neighbor that cares for their home, and cares enough f  
neighbors no one has to look at a shitty-ass yard when they come hom

This was all good too.

Especially the turkey and home maintenance parts.

Who was I kidding?

fe. Especially the taking care of himself part.

(But the turkey was a good one.)

Moses didn't stop.

rmonal "I care about the Broncos and hope they win another Super B  
nit, and twenty of them before I die. I care about global warming because I'm  
lering aas shit about what my daughters and their children are going to fac  
ess, not don't sort our asses out. I care about the kids at my center and hope li  
to treat every one of them finds the righteous path, even if I have enough exp  
to know that not many of them will because their parents are for shit."

He leaned in again and not that he'd taken his eyes from mine as  
giving this speech, but the way he started looking at me nailed me righ  
spot.

3. Juicy  
e about "And this minute, I care about talking a beautiful woman, in a ge  
dress with the most badass head of hair I've seen in my life and th  
amazing eyes I've ever looked into who has a golden soul she hasn't l  
acquainted with yet, into letting shit go so she not only enjoys this



children with me, she lets me take her to a movie on Thursday.”

When we're "You already want a second date?" I whispered.

Speak and "I already want a lot more from you, Shirleen Jackson, but I'm  
it's well remain focused on the short run in hopes I can stretch it long so may  
could be day you can taste my Thanksgiving turkey. I make the best turkey, b  
or their good, you'll want Thanksgiving to come every day."  
e."

"You brine it?" I was still whispering.

"Absolutely."

"Roast it with stuffing?"

He nodded his head. "Mm-hmm."

"I like the way you look at me."

Unh-hunh, still whispering.

"I like the way you look sitting across from me," he replied.

owl, or "I never want to see your face looking at me any other way th  
I scared you're looking at me right now."  
e if we

ke fuck The bakery-oven goodness shot across the table as a blast of hea  
erience understanding seeped into his eyes.

"You ever gonna deal drugs again?" he asked gently.

he was "That wouldn't be a very good example to Roam and Sniff and th  
it to the grandbabies I hope they give me in no less than ten years."

"I'm thinkin' 'foster' doesn't really factor anymore, baby."

orgeous I shut up.

ie most God, wouldn't that be *heaven*?

become "You gonna go to a movie with me on Thursday?" he pressed.  
dinner

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to make it through the appetizer,” I admit  
He looked confused. “I thought we were getting somewhere.”

I’m gonna “You terrify me, Moses Richardson.”

be one That wasn’t a blurt.

aby. So I said that cognizant of each word that came out of my mouth.

He did not take it as intended.

He looked pleased with himself.

Seriously pleased.

It was his best look yet.

Oowee.

“I know how to settle you down,” he assured.

Lordy.

an how “That’s what terrifies me,” I pointed out.

He grinned, and it was not like any of the other ones he’d given me

it while My toes curled in my Alexander Wang’s.

“You’re very sure of yourself,” I noted.

The promise went out of his face and something else set in it be  
e foster<sup>refuted</sup> me.

“No I’m not. The only thing I’m sure of is that I want to get to know  
better, Shirleen, in a variety of ways. I don’t know how this is gonna  
don’t know where this is gonna go. I don’t know how deep you’re gonna  
me in. I just know I want to give us a shot, which means I want you to  
in doing that. That’s all I know. But I know it good.”

I looked deep into his eyes.

ted. *It isn't here now.*

“You got pictures of your girls?” I asked.

That didn't get me a blast of bakery-oven goodness.

A cool breeze drifted across the table emanating from the relief in his eyes, and I watched the tension leaving his shoulders as he sagged regarding me.

“Only about seven thousand two hundred of them,” he answered.

“Then whip out your phone, my man,” I invited.

The warmth came back in his smile as he reached inside his blazer to pull out his phone.

Moses Richardson did not have seven thousand two hundred pictures of his daughters.

He had nine thousand two hundred of them.

They were beautiful.

2. And as he spoke of them, I realized that beauty ran deep.

So it was clear they got a lot from their dad.



fore he I HAD no earthly clue how I was sitting next to Moses Richardson in the truck.

ow you Yes, I did.

na go. I I'd planned to have a few drinks at dinner with the girls, and the bossanna let need of my Navigator, so I'd Ubered it there.

with me And after dinner, when he'd found out I did, he would hear nothing from me allowing him to plant my ass right where it was so he could drive.

home.

We were going to a movie on Thursday.

He loved *300* and thought *The Accountant* was the shit.

f in his “That belt scene, baby,” he’d drawled. “Bad...ass.”

t back, Though he hadn’t seen *Tarzan* and shared he had no intention asked, “You like yourself some white boys?”

“He’s six foot four,” was my reply, and if Moses had a vagina (thankfully he did not), he would understand this was all I had to say.

to pull Moses had no reply to my reply.

Clearly I had to say more.

ures of “And his portrayal of Eric Northman adheres to my philosophy on be a vampire.”

A surprised chuckle bubbled from him as he asked, “You’ve got a philosophy on how to be a vampire?”

“Who doesn’t?” I asked back.

Moses again had no reply, but this time he did it looking like he was trying real hard not to bust a gut laughing.

in his “It’s simple,” I stated.

“Share,” he urged.

I did.

oys had “Own it. You’re gonna live forever and gotta do that by drinkin’ and raisin’ hell, why not? Live it up. Go for the gusto. Bust it out. An’ give me no apologies.”

ive me “Maybe there’s somethin’ for you to learn from this fictional v

guy,” he’d said quietly.

That was when I had no reply.

Until I did.

“There you go, making it all deep.”

to, but “I don’t know what’s deeper than finding out what kind of var  
woman would wanna be.”

(which And that was when I burst out laughing.

That had been it.

After a rocky start, it was good conversation with delicious fo  
cocktails that led into fantastic wine, and now my ass was beside hi  
how to truck where he was driving me home.

How did this happen?

I got a One second, I was “puttin’ on the Ritz” to hit the town with my gir

The next, I was sitting beside a hot guy in his truck after having  
date.

he was No, a great date.

No, a fabulous date.

Damn.

“We’ll hold hands at the movie theater, but tonight, baby, I’ll ju  
you to the door. So you can settle down. It’s been beautiful and I don  
, blood you to get all nervous now. That would fuck it up.”

d make I turned my head to look at him.

The last thing Leon Jackson did before he left our home and tl  
vampirewhacked was backhand me into a wall.

And I knew without asking, the man sitting beside me had never raised his hand to a woman.

Hell, he might never have raised his hand to a man, unless I was sparring with him at his boxing gym (I did not know if Moses belonged to a boxing gym, but it was a good thought).

He glanced at me, his beautiful lips quirked, before looking back at the road.

“You good?” he asked.

What did I say?

My dead husband regularly beat the shit out of me? And the last year of our marriage, sex was more like habitual rape since I never wanted it and he took it anyway, and by then I’d learned not to fight it? And since the rape was over, I got myself a little somethin’-somethin’ here and there but it didn’t last and it never meant anything? Now I’m sitting next to Moses and he works with good men. And through them and my friends, I witnessed every day how a functional, loving relationship survived.

But I had no clue what I was doing and how I got my ass here beside him.

“Shirleen?” he prompted.

I turned forward.

“Okay, baby,” he said gently, “we’ll let whatever you got going on go on your own head of yours slide.”

Thank the Lord.

“For now,” he finished.

Shit.

He drove.

raised a I sat beside him listening to the soothing strains of vintage  
punctuated with his GPS guiding him to my driveway since he made r  
he was him my address to program it in (okay, he didn't "make me," as su  
ged to a asked and I gave him my address), as well as my phone number.

He let the silence settle, and I had a feeling it was all right wi  
κ at the Moses struck me as a man who could be comfortable in silence.

I was not.

He pulled into my drive, put the truck in park, turned it off a  
twisted to me.

years of "Boys home?" he asked.

t but he I shook my head. "I told them to text me when they got home. T  
nan got learned to do that without fail. And they haven't done that, so no."

t never "I'm walking you to your door."

s and I Moses bringing up my boys made me think of them and the fa  
d every wouldn't be home any time soon since it wasn't yet eleven and that w  
curfew when they were working at NI.

de him. But maybe Jack at the office who usually manned the control rc  
the night shift was feeling some alone time and let them go early.

This was my last thought before Moses opened my door.

in that The man opened a woman's car door.

Oh sweet Lord.

He offered me his hand.

I took it and the warmth and strength of his long fingers wrapping  
mine made me freeze solid as I stared at our hands. His unrele  
masculine, mine had long fingers, rounded knuckles with the skin

2 R&B there, my nails long and now coated in a silvery metallic with a hint  
ne give purple.

ch—he And staring at them, it hit me there was nothing more beautiful than  
clasped hands.

th him. “Shirleen?”

I tore my eyes from our hands and forced myself to shift my body  
out of his truck.

nd then He held me gripped tight as I negotiated my dismount.

And he kept hold on me as he guided me out of the door, closed  
walked me up to my front door.

They’ve He stopped us there and I stared at it so I wouldn’t turn my head  
at him.

Or burst out crying.

ict they Because there I was, Shirleen Jackson, fifty-three, with my history  
as their walked to her front door after the best date I’d had in my life.

“Uh, baby.”

om for Forced to do so due to manners, when Moses called, I turned my head  
Yep.

Best date of my life.

“You got the key?” he asked.

It was then, I didn’t know what came over me.

Well, I knew what came over me. I just didn’t know how I let  
around over me.

ntingly You see, I tugged my hand free from his.  
darker



of soft Then I put my hands to either side of his head and pulled it down to  
And I kissed him.

can two His beard was bristly.  
But his lips were soft.  
I slid my tongue between them.

y to get Lord God, he tasted of *panna cotta* and man.  
Nothing more beautiful had ever touched my tongue.

it, and Overwhelmed by it, I shoved him back until he hit the side wall  
alcove that shadowed my front door, protecting it from the elements.

and stare And I kissed the ever-lovin' hell out of Moses Richardson.  
Then suddenly I wasn't kissing the ever-lovin' hell out of him.  
Even though I was pressed up to his big, solid body having shoved  
into a wall, his arms were tight around me, his head had slanted, and  
7, being kissing the ever-lovin' hell out of *me*.

Oowee *God!*

ead. Shirleen was dizzy!  
Suddenly (and regrettably) I became conscious of the fact that I  
woman raising two boys and I had neighbors.  
So I tore myself out of his arms, took a step back, and smoothed my  
down my hips.  
“Uh...” I mumbled.

it come I found my jaw cupped by a big warm hand and a handsome face  
mine.  
“How we feelin' about watchin' that movie on my couch?” he asked

o mine. honey gone, all that was there was smooth gravel.

Lord.

“Um, I’m thinkin’, uh...”

I couldn’t finish because what I was thinking about was lying  
couch action and if one of the boys would miss it if I took a condom or

No, no, no. A woman did not steal condoms from her boys.

That was what drugstores were for.

l to the And anyway, wasn’t that Moses’s territory?

I didn’t know. It had been too long.

And I wasn’t asking a Rock Chick as I’d decided I wasn’t spea  
them (any of them) for at least a week.

red him “We’ll pick a movie for both and decide Thursday,” he stated.

he was “Sounds like a plan,” I forced out.

“That was a nice kiss,” he murmured.

“Um, yeah,” I murmured back.

“*Real* nice.”

I was a “Uh...”

His eyes started twinkling. “Never been body slammed into fake  
y dressbefore.”

My eyes narrowed.

His eyes roamed over my face and hair and the look in them chang  
right in “Fuck, could you get more perfect?” he whispered.

I went solid.

ced, the His gaze locked onto mine. “Don’t go back there.”

“Moses.”

“In the now.”

“I’m not—”

g-down  
two. are...*perfect.*”  
“In the now, right now, after that kiss, you bein’ so cute,

Hell and damn.

I wanted to cry again.

He bent in, brushed his lips across the apple of my cheek and  
away, dropping his hand from my jaw, and the loss of it felt like the l  
king to limb.

I drew in a steady breath.

He bent and nabbed the Minkoff clutch I hadn’t noticed I dropped.

“Please tell me there’s a key in there,” he joked, offering my bag to

I took it, opened it and slid the key out.

I held it up and showed it to him.

He took it from me and turned to the door.

Then Moses Richardson, like a gentleman, let me into my own hou

Adobe Of course, I had to push in to reach and punch in the code for th  
that was beeping.

But still, the move was smooth.

ed. And it was sweet.

Like honey.

Like Moses.

Standing just inside my door, I turned to him.

He moved close and rested a hand on my waist.

“Please don’t kiss me again,” I begged in a whisper.

“No way,” he replied. “I’d rather not meet your boys when I see you... naked on the tile of your foyer.”

I huffed out a breath that I wanted to be a huff of irritation, but more a huff of relief because I didn’t want that either.

Though I did.

Just not the meeting my boys while it was happening part.

He knew what it was and smiled at me.

Then he bent in and I sucked in breath while he touched his lips to my skin right in front of my ear.

He pulled away.

“Great night, Shirleen. Perfect.”

“Mm-hmm,” was the only thing I trusted to move between my lips.

“Thursday, baby.”

I nodded.

His fingers at my waist gave me a squeeze.

After that, he turned and I watched him walk away.

He wasn’t as fabulous from the behind as from the front.

But it was a close call.

He got in his truck and gave me a finger flick before he pulled out.

I was closing the door as he was driving away.

Once I got the door closed, I locked it.

Then I put my forehead to it.

I closed my eyes.

got you *After that kiss, you bein' so cute, you...are...perfect.*

I opened my eyes.

it was And like I was addled...

I smiled—huge—at my own damned door.

s to the

.

Then I put my forehead to it.

I closed my eyes.

*After that kiss, you bein' so cute, you...are...perfect.*

I opened my eyes.

And like I was addled...

I smiled—huge—at my own damned door.

FIVE



## BLESSINGS

*Shirleen*

The next morning, I walked into the offices.

I didn't miss a step as I marched to my desk, regardless of the fact Luke Stark had his thigh leaned against the extension where my coffee table was, Vance Crowe had his ass up on the corner, Kai "Mace" Maslow leaning against the opposite end, Hector Chavez was lounged on the sofa across from it, boots on the coffee table...

And Lee Nightingale was sitting in my damned desk chair, leaning his elbows to the chair arms, his hands linked on his abs.

"Well?" Luke asked.

"Sss!" I hissed, moving directly to my occupied chair.

"Give it up, Shirleen," Vance ordered.

I lifted my hand, slapped my fingers against my thumb and it snapped, "Zzzp!"

I stopped. Dumped my Prada on the desk. And put my hands to rest on the desk to glare down at Lee.

He didn't move.

Though his mouth did.

“Indy called you seven times last night.”

“Ava called five,” Luke put in.

“Jules called three,” Vance added.

“Sadie called Indy, Ava, Daisy and Jules repeatedly,” Hector stated from the couch.

“Stella and me were out to dinner with Roxie and Hank, and they were manning their texts like they were planning the Normandy invasion through them,” Mace shared.

I swung an arm out to indicate all five men.

In fact that “I’m not talkin’ to all you all,” I declared.

computer on was after I told them to do that,” Lee announced.

the couch My eyes got huge and I forgot I wasn’t talking to him.

and back, “You told my boys to check in on me?”

“They said you were in bed, reading,” Lee replied. “And I took them to bed. I didn’t have to go out and murder someone for bein’ a dick to my girl.”

So that was why they knocked on the door and stuck their heads in.

Both of them.

him and Usually it was just a shouted, “We’re home, Shirleen!”

“What excuse did you use to tell them they had to check in on me?” I asked.

my hips “As far as they knew, you were out with the Rock Chicks. They didn’t check in on you after you’re out with the Rock Chicks. They didn’t do anything of it since my wife is a Rock Chick, you were supposed to



with her, and who knows what you all get up to.”

“What, with stun gunning and car chases not out of the ordinary, filled in.

ed from This made sense.

And this was true. Whenever I was in after being out with those two Chicks, one or the other of my boys checked in physically.

invasion Just not both of them.

“You’re in my chair,” I pointed out to Lee.

“Technically, it’s my chair,” he returned.

This was true too.

on you Fine.

He wanted to play it that way?

I picked up my bag, mumbling, “I’ve been meaning to take son off.”

hat as I “Shirleen, you can have your chair back when you tell us how it went that night,” Lee stalled me.

“Who says I want my chair back?” I asked. “Maybe I want to call and have some brunch before we go shopping.”

“Daisy’s at work at Ally’s office, and anyway, I know you’re not me?” I to her since she called you last night, ten times, and you didn’t answer either,” Lee retorted.

always “The girls bought themselves Shirleen’s Patented Silent Treatment ‘t think whole week for their shenanigans,” I shot back.

be out Suddenly, Lee’s expression shifted.

And I'd become accustomed to a lot from these men. Their hotness, Luke's sweetness with their women. Their occasional scariness when they got on edge.

Even so, I took a mini step back at the look that hit his face.

Rock And the tone of his voice I'd never heard in my life and I'd know since he was a teenager.

"You didn't have a good time?"

"We're going to a movie tomorrow night."

Lee relaxed.

"So you had a good time," Mace growled.

I drew in a big breath and let it out on a sigh.

"Yeah," I told Mace. "He's nice. He's handsome. He didn't blink ordering a four-course meal at an expensive restaurant and he was right with me. So we're gonna take in a movie tomorrow." I then glared at

ent last "Happy?"

Broody Mace left the building and he smiled at me. "Yeah."

I Daisy I turned back to Lee. "Now will you get outta my chair? I got involved."

talkin' Or not.

wer her I was feeling the need to have a new outfit for movie night. And I could order online and pick up at Nordstrom on the way home.

nt for a "So it's all good," Lee noted, straightening his long body out of my

"The *date* was all good," I corrected. "You men and your interfering with my life and setting me up like that was *all bad*."

s. Their “Can’t be bad if you had a good time,” Vance pointed out.

t pissed I positioned myself in front of the chair Lee had vacated and sk  
him with my eyes.

“And what if it had been a disaster?” I asked.

wn Lee “We would have killed him,” Vance answered casually.

This might have been sweet, or funny, if it wasn’t possibly true.

“You’re officially not allowed to kill or maim or otherwise torture  
Richardson even if things don’t work out with us,” I decreed.

“So you had a *good time*,” Hector remarked, having risen from the  
to stand between Mace and Vance in front of my desk.

He was grinning.

k at me I looked among the testosterone brigade. “You’re all pretty pleas  
ht thereyourselves, aren’t you?”

t Mace. “Pretty much,” Luke rumbled.

His lips had formed a half-grin.

Okay, they got what they wanted from their interrogation, it was t  
oices to me to shop.

So even as I sat my ass down, I had a hand up, shooing them. “Fin  
git. This conversation is at an end.”

outfit I As I spoke, my purse rang.

I reached in, took out my cell, saw the number was local l  
/ chair. programmed in.

women As much as I wanted to ignore it because in all likelihood it was sc  
trying to sell me something, I couldn’t.

Local could mean a local marketing call.

answered It could also mean I forgot I scheduled the boys in for their cleaning and the dentist office was calling to remind me, which was good, since if that was the case, I'd forgotten (mental note: put appointments in planner; second mental note: buy dental appointment stickers). Or the school was calling about something. Or Roam's girlfriend's father was calling to schedule an inter-family meeting to discuss the reasons of reasons why chicken and waffles were never happening again.

So I took the call.

on the couch "You got Shirleen," I said into my phone.

"Mornin', baby," Moses said into my ear.

Heat and goose bumps both fought for control of the surface of my forehead with

"Hey," I whispered, my eyes dropping to my desk, but that day in the office, the men and the world had vanished.

Everything had become Moses.

He was calling me the morning after a date.

No messing about for him making me wait to hear his voice, precisely because he didn't want to connect with me, letting me know right away I was not in his mind.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Good," I lied.

I didn't sleep.

I kept reliving that kiss, the sound of his laughter, the sight of his face, his words about me being perfect over and over again.

It was the best sleepless night in history.

“Good,” he replied. “So, might be too early for a home date, but I’ll slow-cook brisket recipe that’ll knock your socks off. I introduce you to my friend, you introduce me to *Tarzan*. Work for you?”

I loved brisket.

“Alternately, the Mayan has a retrospective screening of *Set It Off* and my friend’s can hit *The Hornet* after,” he went on.

Oowee!

Latifah, Jada, Vivica and Kimberly?

Oh no.

How was I going to decide between brisket or Latifah?

“Too much goodness, my man,” I told him. “I can’t pick.”

“You know I’m gonna choose you bein’ on my couch, even if I watch a white boy swing from a tree.”

I burst out laughing, this making me look up, this reminding me I was not surprised to note, *shooed*.

Damn.

I had five sets of hot-guy eyes on me in varying degrees of amusement and warmth.

But it was Lee who approached me.

And then it was Lee who bent down and kissed my forehead.

Yes.

You read that right.

Lee Nightingale bent down and kissed me, Shirleen Jackson’s forehead.

Hell and damnation.

I got a      And it was Lee who whispered, “You’re welcome.”  
to that,      When he pulled away, I gave him a death glare.

But honestly?

My heart wasn’t in it.

Off. We      He knew this and thus gave me Liam Nightingale’s Patented  
Your-Panties Smile.

He had no intention of getting in anyone but Indy’s panties, and I  
desire for that.

Still.

It was just the way it came out.

I fought fanning myself and continued to push out the glare.

have to      He wandered away.

His men followed him.

had an      Moses called in my ear, “Shirleen? I lose you?”

“The men were hanging around my desk, annoying me. I had  
them my death glare to get them to move out, and when I have to pull  
isement death glare, I need to concentrate,” I explained.

He chuckled.

Hearing it, the world suddenly felt right for the first time since  
Jackson looked across the high school cafeteria at me.

I was in trouble.

Or I was in heaven.

head.      Time would tell which one.

Moses brought me back on target. “*Tarzan* and brisket or *Latif*

popcorn followed by bar food?”

*Tarzan* included his couch, which was a plus and a terrifying minus.

*Queen Latifah* included a dark movie theater, which would mean no people and a possibly loud bar, but definitely other people around, which mean no meaningful chat.

Get-In-

And I wanted to get to know Moses Richardson.

had no And maybe, just maybe, I should get what I wanted for a change.

“Brisket,” I forced out.

“That was my choice, sweetheart.”

Hmm.

“I gotta get back to my kids, but first, tell me how the men are at you,” he ordered. “Do I have to have a talk with *Nightingale*?”

I wondered briefly how that would go, and even briefly it was enough for me almost to say yes just to find out.

to give out the “Maybe we can save you gettin’ in his face for when he does something stupid. Like refusing to wear a vest when the mission calls for it,” I suggested.

“Does he do that?”

e Leon “He loves his wife, his family, wants to make his own one day, and he’s a moron, so...no.”

That got me another chuckle before, “Okay then, I’ll let you handle the men and I’ll go handle my kids. I’ll text you my address. Six too early for you?”

If he lived anywhere in the Denver Metro area, a six o’clock date would mean *Latifah* and I had time to get home and get changed, refresh makeup and check my ’

deal with lift, or shrink, and moisture, depending on where the day too

s. And this was fantastic. I could now focus my Nordstrom shopping  
10 chat, not knock him dead with too much fabulousness (but still bring just  
would fabulousness) since we were going to be at his house, not out on the to

“Six works,” I replied.

“Right. Text you and call you tonight.”

Call me tonight?

When I didn’t say anything, he asked, “You got something on tonight?”

Only continuing to phone block all the Rock Chicks.

And maybe door block them if they descended *en masse* at my  
moving which could happen.

In fact, they were probably planning that right now.

strong Or ambushing me at the office.

“No,” I answered.

nothing “You good with a call?” he pressed.

one,” I “I, uh...”

“Wanna get to know you, Shirleen. We don’t gotta talk until  
Corden comes on, but phone talk is easier than across-a-table talk. Espe  
l isn’t a in the beginning.”

Boy, he had this date shit down.

idle the “It is?”

arly for “Yeah, baby,” he said, sounding like he was smiling. “Prove it  
tonight.”

meant I “All right, good,” I replied quietly. “I’d like that.”  
fro and



k it. “Good.”

ing and “Yeah.”

enough “Okay.”

wn. “Mm-hmm.”

A pause then, “Sweetheart, I’m sorry but I gotta go.”

Damn.

ght?” “Okay. Yes. Right. I’ll let you go.”

Another chuckle then, “Talk to you later, Shirleen.”

house, “You sure will, Moses.”

“Later, baby.”

“Later, uh...Moses.”

That got me another chuckle before he disconnected.

I stared at my phone after I took it from my ear, having the strangest feeling to hold it and what had just been coming from it to my chest.

Then I jumped so high, I nearly fell out of my chair when I heard a voice I didn’t gotta kill my best friend for settin’ my aunt up with some asshole

Jamesbrother?”

pecially I lifted my eyes to see my nephew and ex-partner in crime (lit Darius Tucker, standing at my desk looking like he was trying to attain a clairvoyant vision as he scowled down at me.

Boy, the power of Moses Richardson was *fierce*. Darius could be as scary as a cat but no one got in that room from either door without me knowing

Normally.

“Those boys tell you they set me up?” I asked.

“Nope,” he answered. “Monty told me. Thought it’d be best if sh south, I was in the know so if some asshole fucked you over that Lee guys set you up with, I only had one reason to murder them, not two.”

“It went okay, son,” I said quietly.

“Just okay?” he asked irritably.

“No. It went real good. He seems like a decent man. So we’re h movie night tomorrow.”

“You ever think Leon was a decent man?”

I pressed my lips together.

When Darius’s father was murdered, Leon had homed in for t recruiting my nephew to groom him to be his right-hand man, using I grief that manifested as anger to drag him into a life that was not for world he should have never known.

ge urge And by then, I was so cowed by my husband I had not saved my 1 from that nightmare.

l, “So I We’d become partners after Leon had been killed.

ole of a In other words, I hadn’t saved my nephew from an ongoing nightr

“We got things we should hash out, Darius,” I said meaningfully.

erally), “No we don’t,” he returned, as ever, catching his aunt’s meaning.

mpt X-

I lifted my chin. “We should have hashed them out ages ago.”

ilent as He shook his head. “No need. We were both drowning. Can someone when you’ve got two lungs filled with water.”

;

“Son—”

I shut up when he leaned into a fist on my desk.

it went “You think you should have saved me. I think I should have sav  
and theAnd you know what, Aunt Shirleen?”

“What?” I whispered, staring into cold, dark, dead eyes that I had  
looking like that since the bad old days.

He’d been redeemed.

aving a He’d been reunited with his one true love.

He wasn’t living the life.

But he was finding his way there.

With Lee’s help. The Hot Bunch. The Rock Chicks.

he kill, Malia.

Darius’s And lastly...

him. A His son.

nephew He told me the what.

I just didn’t get it.

“On that, I win.”

are. “Come again?”

“I didn’t go home to him. I didn’t go home to him bustin’ my  
blackening my eye or whatever he did to you that I still feel sick in  
thinkin’ about when you walked funny and wouldn’t look anyone in th

’t save I swallowed.

It was good in the bad old days, and now, in the good new ones,  
was exceptionally observant.

Though I was seeing it might also have been bad.

“So I shoul da saved you,” he declared.

ed you. “If you tried, you woulda died.”

“And that was a result I should have risked if it meant I might have  
n’t seen it and got you free.”

“Darius—”

“But it didn’t happen that way and here we are.” He pushed off n  
and swung a hand out. “Can’t go back. Just gotta move forward.”

“No,” I disagreed, realizing right then how wise Moses’s advic  
“We gotta be in our nows.”

“What?”

Holding my nephew’s gaze, I stood.

“We gotta be in our nows, son. I met a decent man and he wants a  
date. You got a second chance with Malia and your boy. That’s ou  
And they’re good. So we gotta be where our feet are. Right here. Rig  
Not back then, where there’s nothin’ good, but it doesn’t matter, w  
change a thing. Not in the future, which we don’t know what’s gonna  
and we got no control over it anyway. The now. Right now. Wh  
good.”

7 lip or “I always trusted you.”

my gut Lord God, I was going to cry.

ie eye.” “Darius.”

“I always loved you.”

Darius So going to cry.

“Son.”

“And the only reason I stayed in was to protect you.”

That shut my mouth.

He bested “And I don’t regret it,” he finished.

“The only reason I stayed in was to protect you,” I shared.

“The vicious cycle,” he muttered.

My desk “I regret that. The fact you stayed in for me. The fact I stayed in to  
you instead of getting you out. Hell, I regret all of it,” I whispered.

He was. “That’s not in the now,” he pointed out.

“It isn’t, you’re right,” I replied. “But it’s still true.”

We stood there, staring at each other.

Two sinners.

second He’d been redeemed.

r now. But I was so destroyed by the experience, I needed to be reborn.

ht now. “Be happy,” Darius whispered.

we can’t “I’m trying.”

happen “And I’m glad.”

ere it’s With that, as was his way, Darius ended it without another word, I  
to the door to the inner sanctum.

He stopped at it and turned my way in order to give me another wo

“Wished I’d killed him myself, what he did to you.”

I shook my head. “Don’t matter, son. Bottom line, he’s dead and it  
it wasn’t at your hand.”

“I still wished it was.”

I got that.

I felt that.

Sometimes, in my darker hours, I thought the same thing.

So I nodded.

My nephew didn't nod back.

protect He punched in the code to buzz open the door and he walked through

I stood there watching as the door closed him from sight.

My worst mistake.

Shit.

It was time to go shopping.

I sat, booted up my computer and virtually went to my happy place

In other words, I hit Nordstrom.



“OKAY, lay it on me. What's on your mind?”

It was that evening and we were having a phone conversation, I  
Moses.

moving The boys were at the NI offices, not pulling a shift but working c  
rd. Mace in the down room. They'd be home soon and they'd be hungry  
was why I had the hamburger patties already formed, the deep fat fr  
ready to be plugged in to prep for the crinkle cuts, and the tomatoes  
the lettuce leaves cleaned, in hopes they'd get some vegetables by d  
's good their hamburgers with them.

And I was hiding in my bedroom because Moses had called, and  
the boys had caught him checking me out at the grocery store, they  
liked that much.

They also both gave the roses dirty looks, but I just pretended I gave them myself.

So now I was worried about them coming home to catch me on the phone with him, putting the one of the roses together with the one of me hanging in my room talking on the phone and getting Moses.

But this was only part of the heavy weighing on my mind.

Heavy it was weird that through the miracle of wireless communication Moses had caught.

“I’m not sure I want to talk about it,” I told Moses.

“This is the beauty of the early dating phone conversation. You come to me pretending I’m one of your girls.”

He seemed sage about this beginning-to-date shit.

But even I hadn’t been out of the game long enough to know that was seriously not right.

me and “My man, ain’t no way I can pretend you’re one of my girls.”

out with “I know. But I had to give it a shot because I wanna know what’s on your mind.”

, which You had to hand it to the brother, he didn’t beat around the bush.

er out “My nephew Darius and me had a convo this morning, and it just sliced, I couldn’t finish because I didn’t know what to say.

“It just what, sweetheart?” he pressed gently.

d when “We never talked about some things we probably should have talked about a long time ago.”

“And you talked about those things this morning?”

bought “As much as Darius would let me,” I shared. “He isn’t a big get  
feelings-out-there-and-process kind of brother.”

the phone “Just in case you haven’t figured this out yet, there aren’t many b  
talking inwho are that kind of brother,” Moses pointed out.

I knew that was the truth.

“Though I got no problem with that shit,” he added.

ication, Fantastic.

“I know you aren’t cool with it, but did he seem cool with it when  
done talking?” he asked.

can talk “We both got regrets.”

“Everyone has regrets.”

I heard that.

that was It was just that some were more extreme.

“We both got guilt.”

“Shirleen—”

on your I cut him off. “I know you’re gonna say be in the now, but that’s  
and I fucked him up. He was Roam and Sniff’s age when it happen  
now I got a second chance, and what if I fuck that up?”

...it...” “You and your nephew are both on the righteous path and those tw  
you got under your roof, Shirleen, you know if their path was goin  
different, they would have gone down it by now and they’d be in a d  
talkedplace. Not manning the control room at Nightingale Investigations c  
grocery shoppin’ with their momma. They’d be dealers, rent boys or d

I had nothing to say to that, mostly because it was true.



st-your- And it gave me the shivers just to think about it.

Moses, however, still had shit to say.

rothers “You say you fucked one up, but he’s still standing and he made it  
other side, and he did that with you. But straight up, you *saved* two so  
your record’s pretty fuckin’ good, baby. Think on that.”

I would.

I’d think on that.

you got Because I liked the way he saw it and I hadn’t seen it that way.

“They don’t know about you yet,” I blurted.

The smile came through when he replied, “I didn’t figure you  
about your ambush date over Cream of Wheat this morning.”

He could give it straight, I needed to do that too.

“I’m not sure they’re gonna be super hip on you.”

“They’ve had you to themselves for a while, Shirleen. But nei  
those two struck me as momma’s boys, and they might be protective  
beginning, but if this works, I’ll win them over in the end.”

my boy  
ied and “I don’t think I’m gonna say anything for, you know...a little whi  
you know...to see. No reason for any drama if there’s, uh...eventu  
reason for that drama.”

vo boys  
g to be “I’m doing the same thing.”

ifferent I nodded. “Wise.”

r goin’ “When the time comes, though, the girls are gonna love you.”

ead.”  
I was not thinking about this.

This was not in my now.

I had enough scary shit in my now. I didn't need to add to it.

"Mm-hmm," I mumbled.

it to the He chuckled.

I think "I like your laugh," I whispered.

"I like yours too, sweetheart," he whispered back. "Need to get y  
place where I hear it more often."

"I laugh a lot."

"Not around me."

"That's because you're scary as hell."

shared "That's the place we gotta get you around to get you to the right pl

I tipped my head to the side. "You got this shit down, how many  
have you dated since your divorce?"

"I didn't keep track."

ither of "Is that another way of saying you lost count?"

e in the He chuckled again, but did it as he said, "No."

"This is not an answer to my question, Moses."

le. Just, "I haven't been celibate, but I'm not a player. Promise that, Shirlee  
ally no answer work for you?"

"I 'spose," I mumbled.

"No offense, just getting it out there, but you haven't hidden you'r  
practice."

Fabulous.

He kept going, "So we'll take this at your pace, baby. Just as  
we're moving forward for as long as that works for both of us, I do

how slow we go.”

“You know the scariest part about you, Moses?” I asked.

“Hit me with it, Shirleen.”

“You seem too good to be true.”

you to a There was a weighty pause before, “I’m human. I’m gonna fuck u  
you off. Annoy the hell out of you. I’m not givin’ you the good st  
hidin’ the bad to get in there. This, where this is at right now, I’m ta  
indication that we got something good to work with. Normally, the re  
fly right off. That said, there’ll come a day when you won’t feel tha  
hope that day you still feel this foundation we’re building and wanna u  
ace.” work whatever it is through.”

women “I can be...a bit much too,” I admitted.

Another smile in his voice. “Yeah, and how’s that?”

“I can be...stubborn.”

That didn’t get me a chuckle. He out and out laughed.

“You find that funny?” I asked.

“Baby, you refused to call me, but wanted to, so your boss set us  
n. That date. But I got the stubborn thing even before that happened.”

Well then.

“I sometimes talk about myself in the third person.”

e out of Moses was silent.

“It’s my thing,” I went on.

“And?” he asked after I shut up.

long as  
n’t care “Some people find that weird.”

“So?”

I grinned. “Shirleen’s happy you don’t find that weird.”

He started laughing again.

My phone sounded in my hand telling me I had another call just  
up. Tickheard shouted by Sniff, “Shirleen, we’re home!”

uff and See?

lkin’ as Told you that’s how it went down.

ed flags “I’m plugging in the deep fat fryer!” he continued.

t. I just And see?

use it to

Told you they’d come home hungry.

I took the phone away from my ear, saw it said Daisy calling, ignored  
and put the phone back to my ear saying, “Hold on a sec.”

Then I took it from my ear again.

“I’ll be out in a minute!” I shouted.

“Awesome!” Sniff shouted back.

up on a I put the phone to my ear again. “The boys are home.”

“That was my guess.”

I smiled again.

Then I frowned.

“Means I should let you go,” I said. “They were working out with  
gotta get the burgers goin’.”

“Then I’ll let you go, baby. And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, Moses.”

“Do you want me to fire up the grill?” Roam yelled.

I put my hand over the phone and yelled back. “If you wanna grill stop you! But I was gonna fry!”

1st as I “Grill!” Sniff bellowed.

“I’ll fire it up!” Roam shouted.

“Great!” I yelled.

I took my hand off the phone and heard Moses chuckling again.

“Sorry, that was rude,” I mumbled.

“Yep, ain’t nothin’ foster about that, sweetheart. Sounds just like a to me. Now I’m lettin’ you go. See you tomorrow at my place. Six.”

1ored it “Okay, Moses, see you then.”

“Bye, baby.”

“Bye, uh...Moses.”

He disconnected mid-chuckle again.

I took my phone from my ear and engaged texts.

I then texted Daisy, *Rock Chick freeze out still in operation. I’ll about the date and the movie we’re watching tomorrow night LATER.*

That’d get her. Her big-haired head would explode knowing we had a second date planned before she knew one thing about the first.

Mace. I I got up from my bed and padded in my dress from the office that with my slippers on my feet to the door. I opened it, went through and down the hall toward the open-plan kitchen that was in the middle great room.

During this walk my phone sounded with a text.

Daisy.

I, won't *You know it don't work that way, sugar.*

*An extra freeze out day for every text,* I replied.

Those three dots that said she was typing didn't even form.

Daisy Sloane knew when I meant business.

*Spread the word to the Chicklets,* I ordered.

I sent that off and hit the kitchen to see Sniff shoving Doritos in his

“Shouldn't you be eating a banana?” I asked.

I family “Maybe,” he answered.

I put a hand on my hip. “You missed this, but every time I say that my way of saying put the junk down and eat a banana.”

He grinned at me, teeth filled with Dorito goo, which he knew wore *last* nerve.

Then he kept eating Doritos.

I could have no idea if this was universal teenage boy or his last I *tell you* rebelling against authority.

My boys were good boys. Even in the beginning, they did what they already told. That had never been a battle.

Of course, at the time, Sniff was with me first since Roam was day but hospital recovering from a gunshot wound. Then Roam was home, and walked all over his ass to make sure he recovered from that gunshot wound. of the then, I figured, they were so happy to have three squares, a roof over head, and their precious Jules still alive, they didn't bust my choice instead followed my rules and did as told.

Roam didn't openly rebel. Roam was more man than most grown men I  
known by the time I got him at fifteen. Definitely now. He did his  
with no backtalk, and now he did them without me even asking. Did  
his schoolwork. He didn't mouth off. And he was smart enough not to  
catch him eating Doritos when he knew I'd want him to eat a banana.

Sniff mostly did the same.

Except in times like this.

s face.

I'd always wondered about times like this.

But I'd never asked.

Now, I asked.

t, that's

"Are you just bein' a teenage boy or are you rebelling against authority?"

ked my

"Isn't that one and the same?" he asked back.

I added one more choice. "Or is it that you're just a smartass?"

hold on

"That last one," Roam answered for Sniff, coming in from outside

he'd been firing up the grill.

He already had the spatula in his hand even if no meat was over the

ey were

My boy was on a mission.

s in the

I stared at him as he sauntered into the kitchen, all long legs, looking  
eighteen and entirely in control of his own body.

with me

And so handsome.

d. And

Lord.

er their

He was beautiful.

ps, but

I looked at Sniff.

He'd put away the Doritos but now his hand was on the side of the

men I'd fryer, checking the temperature even though the light went off to tell u  
chores it was ready and that light was still on.

to with He got all As.

o let me Didn't even try. Studied, but didn't like it much so did the least he  
I wondered what he'd do if he'd try.

I wondered if he'd be a doctor or an engineer or an architect.

But I knew in my bones, whatever he wanted, he'd be able to do it.

Roam got As too, but some Bs. He was a reader. He got math and  
stuff that was way beyond me.

But he had no patience for writing. English Comp irritated the hel  
ority?" him. And if he had a report to write, Lordy. *Watch out.* That put my b  
*mood.*

But they were so much more than good-looking.

e where So much more than sharp.

Smart.

e heat. They were funny.

They were loyal.

se hips, They were mine.

Right then, in my kitchen, it was not the first time I wondered abo  
parents, even if I knew the greatest penance they could endure wa  
knowing the men they'd made.

Never knowing how beautiful those two boys turned out.

Never knowing the goodness they put on this earth.

he deep And worst of all, not caring.



is when But that was what I was thinking right then in my kitchen.

Somehow, some way, I got the chance to know all that.

Feed it.

could.

Nurture it.

Hold it in my heart.

“Sniff,” I whispered.

“Yeah, Shirleen,” he answered the deep fat fryer.

science

“I love you, boy.”

His body shot straight and turned to me.

I out of

I felt the air in the room go electric.

joy in a

I also felt Roam’s attention hone in on me.

So I looked to him.

Right in the eye.

“I love you too, Roam. You’re the best thing to ever happen to me entire life.” I included Sniff in my look. “Both you boys. Blessings count my blessings on two fingers. But they’re the best ones I could got.”

“You okay, Shirleen?” Roam asked quietly.

ut their

s never

“You’re in my kitchen, son, and so’s your brother. So yeah. I’m the best I’ve ever been,” I replied.

Sniff looked to Roam.

Roam didn’t take his eyes off me.

Sniff stopped looking at Roam and moved my way, muttering, “Go the shower real quick before dinner.”

But as he was about to walk by me, he leaned in and down and kissed my cheek.

Then he hit the stairs to the basement where both the boys had their TV room and bedrooms.

Roam just went to the fridge, got the platter of burger patties, closed the fridge and walked right by me to the doors to the outside.

He stopped inside them after he'd opened one.

And he turned to me.

“You know we love you too, yeah?” he asked.

I clenched my teeth together real hard and nodded.

“Yeah,” he said and walked out the door, sliding it closed behind him.

I watched through the windows as he moved to the grill, plate of food in one hand, grill spatula in the other.

I wasn't sure I'd saved them.

... In my  
... I can  
... da ever

Jules was on a mission to do that before I came into the picture.

But I had a hand in that.

A good strong hand.

God gave me that shot.

... he best

So maybe He hadn't given up on me.

Maybe He believed in me enough to give me a second chance.

And then, when I refused to let Him down...

Upon me He bestowed His blessings.

... onna hit

sed my

neir big

sed the

im.

burgers

SIX



## WONDERS

*Shirleen*

**T**he next night, as the Uber came to a stop at the curb in front of the house, I drove up to Moses's front door, I checked out his place.

Newish build. Three stories. Attached on both sides to other units. When we drove by the alley that ran behind his place, I knew the bottom floor was the garage, so the top two floors had to be the living area. The trees in front of the development had not filled in yet.

Still, it was nice. Neat. Attractive.

And Moses had some big pots on his front porch, already filled with flowers.

I started up the walk as the Uber driver took off and Moses's front door opened.

He leaned against the jamb.

Okay, changed my mind.

His house was *da bomb*.

His eyes weren't on me.

They were watching the Uber take off.

“Hey,” I called.

His gaze slowly came to me. “Hey.”

He didn’t move from his door as I took the two steps up his stoop which was his cute little porch with its flower pots, which also had two Adirondack chairs on it with a table in between.

Seeing as he was in my way and not moving, I stopped.

“Something wrong with your car?” he asked.

“I hope not, since Roam’s out on a date in it.”

ie walk “Something wrong with your phone?”

I was confused but I answered, “No.”

s. Since “So is there some reason you didn’t use it to phone and ask me  
oor was you up?”  
around

Ah.

“It’s all good, my man,” I assured. “I’m an Uber expert.”

ed with “Sniff at home?” he asked, not moving from barring me from his h

“No. He’s out with some buds,” I answered.

nt door “So it isn’t that you didn’t want him to catch me picking you up.”

Hmm.

“Moses.”

“Okay. Before we start this date, since I got your undivided attent share something important. You’ve been an independent woman a lon Lookin’ out for yourself. Lookin’ out for your boys. I get that’s hab I’ll point out I find it attractive. But we do this, it works with you a you will no longer be alone. You’ll have someone to help look out f

Granted, you'll have someone else to look out for, but he'll be returning the favor. To end, if you need a ride, *you call.*"

If I was a normal Rock Chick, say, any one of them but Daisy, I wouldn't lose my mind at him barring the door to deliver this statement, a statement not even vaguely disguised as a command. I'd then stomp off and get my girlfriends to meet me at a bar so I could throw a hissy fit.

I was not a normal Rock Chick.

I was me.

So I said, "Okay."

"Okay, baby," he whispered then moved aside so I could enter his room.

I walked in, deciding not to hide I was interested in what I was seeing. Up front, carpeted stairs that were nice.

To the right, a door that opened to what was clearly a laundry room, what with the telltale signs of washer and dryer and bikes mounted on the wall.

I headed up the steps.

There was a landing where things got interesting, this being a little cut out of the pearly-white wall. There was an African tribal mask on the wall set there, lit from above. It was beat up a little, but painstakingly painted. It still had all the little shells that ran across the top.

"Nice," I noted, stopping to look at it.

"*Ngady amwaash*. Mask for a woman. From the Congo."

I looked up at him. "No kidding?"

"My uncle was a collector of African art. On our twenty-first birthday, he gave all his kids and nieces and nephews a piece." He tipped his

ing that the mask. “That was mine.”

I looked down at it. “It’s amazing.”

[ would “Yep.”

atement “I should do something like that for Roam,” I murmured.

call my “Yep.”

I looked at him again to see he was grinning at me.

He then put his hand to the small of my back and propelled me next flight of stairs.

house. More nice.

ing. Wood floors.

A living room to the left, big.

A kitchen to the right, also big, off which there was a bar and beyond a dining room table.

nted on Balconies off the front and back.

I didn’t know what was behind it, but between living room and there was a big pantry, the doors were open and inside it was a work of

alcove “Don’t get ideas,” Moses said as I stared at it. The distressed a stand countertop that had been installed into it. The drawers under ed, and interesting handles, the cabinets under the drawers that had dense wire as fronts. The shelves above it a display of pantry-type items in baskets and glass canisters as well as cans on recessed baby shelves. All of it be photographed for a magazine. “I let my oldest loose on that. I made designed it. And after her week is up with her mom, she comes back thdays, straightens it when I fuck everything up.”

head to I again turned my gaze to him. “She’s got an eye.”

“She wants to be an interior designer, and the rest of the house will be up to her desire to do that.”

I smiled at him.

He took that opportunity to lean in and touch his lips to mine.

Oowee.

When he pulled back, I tried to keep breathing right as I remarked, “Sweet, you let her loose.”

“Let her loose as much as I can. She’s got an eye, a talent, and works with clients who do not have the limited budget her old dad has. Fortunately, she looks at it as a challenge.” His gaze roamed my face before he looked into my eyes and asked, “You hungry?”

I nodded.

Hand to my waist, he propelled me into his kitchen, saying, “Let me see if you fed.”

Interesting punched tin backsplash above the stove. Gray ceramic kitchen countertops. Stainless steel appliances. His girl took into account her collection of art. A guy in everything but the stained glass suncatcher hanging in the window. A wooden shaped like a sunflower.

“You wanna sit in front of the TV and eat or you wanna eat at the bar and talk first?” Moses asked, getting down plates.

“Bar,” I answered. “Can I help?”

“Next time, yeah. This time, let me look after you. Have a seat at the bar with me. Baby. Wine to drink? Or beer.”

“Wine’s good,” I told him, heading around to the wooden stools on the other side of the bar.



l reflect     He got down a wineglass as I hefted my ass up on a stool.

“Red or white?” he asked.

“You got both?” I was surprised. He drank beer all through di  
Barolo Grill.

He looked to me. “You were coming over. So yeah, I got both.”

d, “It’s     I didn’t know what to say to that because I didn’t know what to thi

Leon had put some effort into it in the beginning, but not much. I v  
ill needyoung. I didn’t know to expect more, expect better. And by the  
ely, shesuspected even in the beginning he had no clue how to give more, de  
ed backnot better.

I’d never had a man serve up a meal to me unless I was paying h  
waiter at a restaurant.

et’s get     Or buy me wine.

“Red,” I said softly.

oncrete     His head tipped to the side and his attention became acute. “You g

lad was     I had kind, decent, loving friends. I had a job I was proud of. I h  
window     boys under my roof I wasn’t quite done raising, and I didn’t get to the  
late, but what I’d done, I’d done right.

bar and     And I was on a stool in Moses Richardson’s kitchen.

What I was not was “good.”

the bar,     There was no definition for the wonder I was feeling.

“Yeah,” I replied.

on the     He studied me a beat, nodded, then moved to a bottle of red wine  
counter.

Moses was opening it when he asked, “There a reason why those don’t have their own cars?”

“I made a mistake.”

He pulled out the cork, but didn’t move to fill my glass, just looked

I took that to mean “explain.”

I explained.

“In the beginning, I wanted them to trust me. But I was stuck. I had been gettin’ on on their own for a while, they didn’t need me to feed them and give them a bed. Still, beds and food at my place were better than what they could scrounge up. Their clothes were for shit. Secondhand, got them as a the shelter. They had phones and I did not ask how they got them, they paid for them, but they weren’t top of the line.”

When I paused, Moses nodded to tell me he was with me.

So I kept going.

“Coulda gone the route of givin’ them everything they needed and instead of what they wanted. But I didn’t think spoiling them was the way to get them trust me and the home I was giving them. Bought them enough things new of what they needed, got ’em good phones and I paid for the phone that was it. Otherwise, I gave ’em chores so they’d get allowances and money in their pockets to buy themselves things. I didn’t want to just give everything over so they didn’t learn how to work for something they wanted. It was more, though. I wanted it normal. I wanted to teach things to them not to expect things. But I also wanted them to know I wasn’t doing it for them or their behavior or my place in their hearts.”

“Think that was a smart move, sweetheart,” Moses said, now pouring wine.

se boys “Yeah, the problem with it was, they never asked for anything. No Not new jeans. Not new phones. Not new undies. Not a thing. Chris crisis time for Shirleen. Got no clue what they want or need.” I sh head. “But anyway, got it in my head cars were too big a deal fo l at me. Especially two boys who’d had nothing, until they got me. They’d de never ask. I couldn’t just hand them over, ’cause what am I teachin’ did? So I decided, anytime they wanted the Navigator, I’d give it to ’e They’d told ’em, they both graduated high school on the honor roll, they cou d them their own cars. That way, they’d earn ’em. But I didn’t realize I’d be m what myself on the Uber VIP list for frequent riders by doing all of that.”

’em at Moses set my wineglass in front of me. “Since they’re graduatin or how you won’t have to worry about it much longer. Unless they’re not honor roll.”

“They’re on the honor roll,” I shared, lifting the glass and taking a

Nice. Dry. But fruity. With a hint of oak.

id most The man could pick wine.

o make Maybe he *was* perfect.

ney had “Two street kids graduating on the honor roll,” he murmured, pu an. But bag of big sesame seed buns his way. “You’re like a miracle worker.” id have

st hand “They’re smart kids. They don’t even try. It just happens,” I told hi

wanted. He turned his eyes to me. “They gotta go to class. They go

and for attention in class. They gotta hand in assignments, which means they g

buying homework. And they gotta pass tests, which means they gotta study at

little bit. So no, Shirleen, that shit doesn’t ‘just happen.’ Kids do that b

ing my they’re either taught to do it because they’ve lived lives with pare

helped them learn to live those lives right. Or because they respect the

at once. who's lookin' after them and they don't want to let her down."

Thomas is "I hear that, honey," I said softly and watched his eyes flare. I didn't look mythe flare, but I kept on the current subject. "What I'm sayin' is, they're r them.kids. Smart kids. And that's just how they are, natural-like. I didn't ma finitelyin them. That's who they are. So I don't think I should get credit for 'em if Ithink they have to understand who they are and it's good down deep m. Anddon't ever get it into their heads that what made them is what is old pickbecause it's not. They're their own people and *they* built that through puttingwork and just bein' good."

He pulled the top off a Crock-Pot, after which zesty, saucy goodness soon,wafted into the room, doing this saying, "This is because you're humbled on the "Roam took a bullet for Jules."

He stopped spooning brisket on the bottom of a bun and turned to sip.

"And one of the reasons Roam and Jules didn't die on the floor living room is because Sniff was runnin' flat out, he'd lost his phone was flagging down anyone who would stop, lookin' for help. Just God that the car he flagged down had Luke Stark in it."

calling a "Sweetheart," he whispered.

"What made them is there, natural-like," I said firmly.

im. "Okay, baby," he agreed quietly.

ttta pay Since we had that straight, I took a sip of wine.

gotta do He dished up, and when he slid my plate in front of me, it did not t least a sandwich and some chips on it.

because It had a sandwich, potato salad, a mound of spinach salad with nts that blue cheese crumbles and red onion sliced so thin you could see through person

(and thank God I had mints in my bag for that) and baked beans he put in the oven in a crock he had to have gotten from his momma.

“You wanna feed me or make me explode?” I asked as I stared at my plate.

“My momma taught me, worst thing a guest could do after they sit at the table is want for more and not be able to get it. She never laid a table with each serving dish wasn’t filled to the brim with more in the kitchen.”

“And you took that one giant leap further and put so much on a woman can’t get through it.”

He slid his ass up on the stool beside mine and grinned at me. “Complaining?”

I pointed a fork at my plate. “Is there molasses in these beans?”

“Brown sugar. I came home at lunch and started them up. They’ve been cookin’ for five hours.”

Nice.

“No, I’m absolutely not complaining,” I belatedly answered.

He leaned into me and gave me another lip touch (which was good because I had blue cheese and onions) before he turned to his own food.

He was scooping up some potato salad mixed with beans (I appreciated it when I called, “Moses.”)

He turned his head my way.

“No man has ever come home at lunch to make up some beans for me.”

Warmth (or more accurately, *more* warmth) seeped into his eyes. “You had to wait this long, but still honored to be the first.”

“Stop bein’ perfect,” I whispered.

lled out “Gonna stretch that out, Shirleen, as long as I can.”

It was then I leaned in and gave Moses a lip touch.

lown at I didn’t look at his face as I sat back and turned to my food.

The beans were sublime.

at your The brisket was orgasmic.

e where

But it was the company that altered my world.



plate a I WOULD FIND, around about the time all was well in the world of Tar:  
Jane, that making out on the couch like teenagers, hot and heavy, was  
: “You that stood the test of time, even if you didn’t practice it.

And I would find, to my horror, that post-traumatic stress was not  
soldiers.

ve been This I would find when Moses was deftly sliding into second bas  
inching toward my breast.

I wanted him to tag that bag more than I wanted my next breath.

And then my mind blanked, sheer panic saturated every cell in m  
d, pre-and somehow I was off my back on the couch with Moses’s long lei  
top of me.

proved) Instead I was across the room, breathing hard, hand up his way lik  
fending him off even as he lay on his side on the couch, up on a forea  
breathing also accelerated, his eyes alert and locked on me.

me.” “Baby,” he whispered cautiously.

. “Hate I still felt the tingle in my lady parts, the taste of him in my mo  
feel of his heat against my skin, the weight of him on my body.

I could see his beauty right there on his couch.

But my brain was twisting shit up, feelings I was feeling making grow foggy.

I wasn't having visions, seeing Leon's ghostly face hovering over the magnificence that was Moses.

It was all in the emotions as things I hadn't felt in years started stirring through the dust in my bones, kicking it up, making me not able to sit straight.

“Shirleen,” Moses called, slowly moving his body so he was seated on the couch before, equally slowly, straightening from it.

Okay.

All right.

This was movie night with Moses.

This was brisket and baked beans, and lip touches and smiles and wine while he told me about his oldest, Judith, named after his mother, spending an entire summer in search of the perfect lamps for his nightstand. She had this mission because, after he'd recovered from the financial struggles of the divorce and the ensuing legal battles, three years ago he'd moved his two daughters into this place and had given his eldest a budget to do her daughter's room up right. And even at fourteen, she apparently took this task seriously.

He also told how he was struggling with what it said about him and how he had a problem with her latest boyfriend, who was white “when I never saw my girl with anything but a brother.”

And he shared about his youngest, Alice, named after her mother's favorite writer, Alice Walker, and how she was a good kid, a great one, and she'd arranged three sit-ins that year on a variety of things that she had changed about the school and “she just cares about things so much, but

ng him wants change yesterday, doesn't understand she can't have it and I'm  
what the world is gonna do to my little girl when she realizes it's neve  
ver the be easy, it's always gonna be hard and sometimes impossible."

In other words, dinner was not light. It was heavy and it was the s  
omping conversation I'd had, because he trusted me with these things about h  
to see about his feelings about his girls, and that was an honor the likes I'd  
had bestowed on me.

ated on *Tarzan*, as fantastic as it was, was a letdown after that. But we  
light after all that heavy and it was good to cuddle through a movie  
man. Hear his beautiful chuckle. Feel his arms around me. Smell hi  
Be in his space.

And kissing after the movie was over was a revelation. I couldn'  
started out easy, I was stiff. The ease came later as Moses led me to it,  
id good made it good before it got *good*.

omma, Now I was there.

tstands. Across the room facing off with a decent, kind, deep-feeling m  
train of could cook brisket and pick wine while the dust of the one from  
ved his drifted up in my bones, blinding me and making my mouth feel dry.  
d's pad

"Talk to me," he urged.

that he "I...this...I...this," I stuttered then shook my head. "This isn't  
ver saw work."

"She cheated on me."

omma's I blinked at him when these words came at me.

ne. But "Sorry?" I asked.

wanted "At her high school reunion. With her high school boyfriend. S  
by. She



worried drunk off her ass and cheated on me.”

r gonna He was talking about his wife.

Had to be.

weetest And was she insane?

is girls, I'd only had his kisses.

d never And they were fabulous.

needed But I'd also had a good amount of what else made him.

with a So she had to be insane.

s scent. “I—”

He cut me off.

t say it “Kept talkin’ to him on the phone after. Believe her when she  
and he didn’t go further than the reunion physically. But she kept contact. Even  
I found out and we got into counseling. She ended it with him only w  
were in counseling. But I heard her talking to him, tellin’ him to quit  
an who and when I confronted her with it, she admitted she kept that up for a  
before Needed it somehow. But it was over. He just wouldn’t quit calling.”

“I’m sorry, Moses.”

He nodded his head sharply, only once.

: gonna “I am too. I loved her. And I gotta take responsibility for my  
because I perpetrated one. I was a man and acted like a dumb-shit m  
had babies and I helped her make them and then I did my thing. V  
work. Went to the gym. Might go to the grocery store but other th  
pretty much expected her to do everything. Feed ’em. Bathe ’em. Get  
bed. Take care of the house. I spent time with my babies, of course, th  
She got my babies. I’d do the odd thing here or there to pitch in. But mostly I t

good times. Not the waking-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night times. The stuff, I was gone. Mostly at work. Could say I needed the overtime, I worked hard, and everyone can use more money. But truth was, I loved my job. It wasn't that. I was just doin' whatever I wanted to do. She had a job too, one of them, one bein' a momma, one in an office. She was worn out. She also fed up with it."

"I, yes...I mean, I don't know, but I think that wouldn't be much murmured.

says it  
en after  
hile we  
calling,  
a while.  
"The thing was, she didn't say dick about it. Not until counselin' saw the error of my ways after the fact. And I was good to hold up my end and cop to it. Even could see, just a little, not totally, but enough to forgive her for having a weak moment, getting hammered and thinkin' if? What if it had worked out with that guy back in high school? What if her life be like if she wasn't raisin' two girls mostly on her own while her husband MIA at work? I could also see wanting to go back in time to when things was simpler. When there wasn't the house, the husband, the kids, the mess. When it was just dressin' up, goin' out, booze and fucking and good times."

I nodded.

fuckup,  
an. We  
vent to  
an that,  
'em to  
ey were  
ook the  
I mean, I wasn't sure I agreed with him. That was a leap to take and a lot about him that he'd try to find a way to forgive a disloyalty fuckup, magnitude. That he'd try to understand what lay beneath it.

an. We  
vent to  
an that,  
'em to  
ey were  
ook the  
But it wasn't my experience, my marriage, my spouse, so it was my call to make.

'em to  
ey were  
ook the  
For my part, Leon cheated on me all the time.

ey were  
ook the  
And when he did, I just found it a relief.

ook the  
Moses kept speaking.

“Talkin’ to him, though, that I didn’t get. She betrayed our love, our vows, and I agreed to try to work that shit out, and every phone conversation, so it was from the first after she got back from that reunion, to the last when I told her to tellin’ him to stop phoning’ was another betrayal. Why didn’t she tell her she was calling? Why didn’t she just hang up? And every time her phone rang from then on, was I gonna think it was him or some other guy she was having fun,” I said.

“I can see that,” I said quietly.

“She told me in counseling that maybe she needed the attention. She was very attractive. To feel wanted. By that time, it was flowers for no reason, maybe breakin’ my back to prove I was doin’ my part for our family and regular nights to keep the us in our marriage. So I did not get why she needed a man’s attention when outside of what I was giving my girls, she had her mine.”

Seemed to me she was a selfish bitch.

I did not share this.

“So I called bullshit,” he declared.

“I can see that too,” I replied.

And I really could.

“Is that enough to end a marriage, break apart a family?” he asked.

“I don’t know, darlin’,” I answered.

“I didn’t either. What I knew was, after I lost my shit when I found out my wife fucked another man, I got myself together. About that. But the phone calls jacked with my head. I could deal with a one-time fuck, but a wakeup call for us both. We were on the wrong path and that wasn’t t

me, ourto yank us back to the right one, but shit happens. But those fuckin  
ersation Shirleen, all I could think was not about those calls or even about her r  
caughtattention. Once I knew he was still phoning, anytime I thought about  
tell meall I could think about was him inside my wife. Blinded by it. Pissed  
ne rangat it. Couldn't get it out of my head. And the question became, si  
askingsacrifice my peace of mind for my children, and worse, teach them  
forbid, they find themselves in the same situation, that they should s  
betrayal and live on the edge with distrust clouding every moment, an  
end give up any chance of true happiness?"

To feel

and me "I can't answer that for you, Moses."

lar date "Well I could, after she nearly bankrupted me taking me to  
anotherrepeatedly to teach me a lesson about how she feels when she does  
d all ofwhat she wants, using our daughters as tools to do that. I couldn't imag  
woman I married had that in her. But she did. So I got my answer. And  
our daughters, watching their mother put their father through that  
think it was the man she met that made her stop. I think it was the t  
daughters were drifting away, angry at her for making shit ugly. That  
made her stop."

"I'm glad something did," I told him.

"Me too."

When he said no more, I asked carefully, "How are things now? I  
you said at the grocery store that you two had it together, but—"

und out "I can barely stand to look at her."

it those Oh boy.

ring. A

he way "That," he went on, "I do for my daughters when school functions  
have to be in her space. And don't take that anger at her as me still

i' calls, feelings for her. I don't. That anger is not about what she did to me, to needing what she did to my girls. No one fucks with my girls, and for four years I had a call, no choice but to put up with my wife fucking with our girls."

as hell      Yep.

ould I      A selfish bitch.

if, God      "Other than school functions," he continued, "we do not have  
wallow      those arrangements where we share Christmas Eve dinner or I come  
d in the      family's big Fourth of July parties. There's my house, our family, and  
                 their mother's house and the family they got with her."

                 To that, I had no choice but to utter an understatement.

o court      "That's very sad."  
sn't get

gine the      "Do I deserve that for bein' a man and bein' clueless and makin'  
I so did      with my wife and not pitchin' in?"

. Don't      I shook my head. "I...I don't think so. I mean, she should ha  
fact her something."

's what      "Yeah. She should have. We didn't start our family young. We we  
                 in our thirties. Our friends had kids. Both our families are in town.  
                 both tight with them. We weren't immature and finding our way on o  
                 And we'd been together a long time. She knew how to communica  
I mean,      me."

                 I nodded that I heard him.

                 "I still fucked up. That was on me. Sayin' what I just said, it was r  
                 was old enough to know better than to make babies with my wife a  
                 take care of all of them. And I didn't."

mean I      "I don't want to, you know, butt in here and defend you when all  
having

us, but shared is all I know about the situation. I wasn't around and I've never seen the woman. But even though that really was not good, Moses, with what happened I think it's safe to say something would have happened anyway.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Though easy for me to think that because it was me the good guy in the end no matter how you look at it."

one of I just gave him big eyes because that was true.

to her Still, the woman stepped out on him rather than telling him to go home. There's then she took out her anger at him using their daughters.

She had it in her to fuck their shit up.

And that was going to happen, one way or another.

I'd pretty much said this already, therefore I didn't repeat it.

babies "So there it is," he stated.

"Yes," I agreed. "There it, um...is."

ve said "Your turn."

My throat closed and I felt my joints seize.

re both Moses didn't miss anything and I knew he didn't miss any of that.  
We're

ur own. He still didn't let up.

te with "What'd he do to you?"

I didn't see this coming. Tit for tat. He laid it out, made me feel vulnerable, showing me the way, making it safe to follow.

ne who I still didn't want to take that way.

and not "I think—" I began.

"Baby, you look good and you dress good and you kiss good and you've listen good and you open up good." He lifted a hand and gestured back at me.

ver metus. "I want this. I want more. I want to know more about you and even  
h what I'll want to be inside you."

way." Oh God.

It makes "This is too fast," I told him. "Too fast and too soon."

"Five minutes ago this wasn't going to work. Now I can go slow  
cannot have you preparing to bolt every time something tweaks  
step up Preparing to bolt *and* ready to end us. I need you to *talk to me*."

His ex had not talked to him and his whole life got derailed.

Damn.

I shook my head but said, "I don't know what happened. He's  
*there*."

"How?"

"In my bones. In my soul. It was all good and then it wasn't and  
across the room and I don't even know how I got here. I just know  
back."

"He's dead."

"Not in a way he'll ever be gone."

"Dead is dead, sweetheart, it's *you* who can control if he stays alive  
ways he can."  
himself

"He beat me."

It was like he'd crossed the room, wrapped his hand around my throat  
squeezed so I couldn't take a breath, the anger burning from him  
strong, the air in the room vanished.

and you "I did not enjoy having sex with him. He did not care. He took  
between wanted whenever he wanted."

eventually I'd felt the room.

Why did I say more?

Now his arms were bent at his sides, his fingers curled into fists, his hands moving steady but fast, the heaves powerful, rhythmically lifting his torso as his eyes stayed glued to me.

"I'm too much for you, or any man, to take on," I whispered.

"You wet for me?" he growled.

"S-say what?"

"Are. You. Wet. For me?"

just in Oh Lordy.

Just him asking that question made me wet(ter) for him even if we were having a serious conversation that shouldn't be sexy at all.

and I was It was jerky but I nodded my head.

he was "You were there with me, *definitely* there with me, I was about to go further, and then you were across the room. What triggered that?"

"I don't know. It just happened."

"Something triggered it, baby."

live the I shook my head.

"No one since him?" he asked, going for gentle, I could tell. It was slightly terse because he was still highly pissed after I shared what Leona had done to me.

was so "I...yes, but none that mattered."

"I matter."

what he I closed my eyes so tight I felt the wrinkles in my lids.



Because this was oh so true.

“That’s it. I matter,” he said to me. “And you’re either scared  
is chestgonna fuck this up or you’re scared you’re not reading it right and you  
s entireyou’ve picked another asshole.”

I opened my eyes.

“I’m not sure I have it in me to give you what you deserve,” I admitted.

“And what’s that?”

“Goodness. No drama. Just a clean go without history and piles  
you got to wade through to maybe make it to the other side, but that is  
not guaranteed because there’s so much shit, you might find you need  
up for your own sake.”  
ve were

“You think I’m gonna give up on you?” he asked, a tad bit scarily.

“I don’t know. More, I’m not sure I’m worth the effort.”

The air evacuated the room again because he was pissed as shit again.  
I decided maybe it was best if I stopped talking.  
o take it

“I thought we got past this,” Moses said when I said nothing.

“You don’t see.”

“Make me see.”

was still Suddenly I threw up both hands at my sides.

son had “It wasn’t what Leon did to me, Moses!” I snapped. “He was always  
for nothin’. And I let him have me. What does that say about me?”

“I don’t know, but obviously you do, so I want to hear you say it.”

“My sister, Dorothea, she was the pretty one. She was the quiet one.  
was the sweet one. She got the handsome man. She made the best

family.”

you’re “And that wasn’t for you?”

i’ll find “I was the hell raiser. I was good for nothin’, just like Leon.”

“So you had sass and that means you didn’t deserve a good life  
decent man in it?”

itted. “I was never good enough.”

“Good enough for what, Shirleen? Good enough for who?”

of shit “Good enough for my teachers, who thought I was slow. Good  
result is for my father, who took off on us. Good enough for my aunts and  
to give who saw a hellion and thought I’d never amount to anything.”

“So you proved them right.”

I lifted my chin. “Damn straight.”

ain. “And then you had time enough without their bullshit, and wi  
husband dead and not beating you or raping you to realize who you w  
you proved them wrong. ’Cause you know, baby, you know a man tal  
without you wanting him to, he’s your husband or not, it’s rape.”

My teeth clacked audibly I shut my mouth so fast.

ys good “I don’t know who you were, sweetheart,” he continued. “But ever  
see kids who someone doesn’t think will amount to much and even if t  
is not right, they’re convinced of it just because the asshole adults  
them feel the need to share. And you know what?”

“What?” I whispered.

ne. She “In most cases, it’s got fuck all to do with the kid. It’s about the  
adult feelin’ less, understanding their limits, and the kid’s got smarts c  
beautiful or a big personality or a sweet disposition, and they gotta do what the

do to shut that down because they're jealous as fuck and they know inside they'll feel even smaller than they already are because that's gonna be something. So they not only gotta drag the kid down, they smother the life out of them."

with a

Suddenly, I was breathing funny.

"Half the problems in Gilliam are kids with parents who don't give a first fuck, or who are so messed up it's a miracle they can get themselves out of bed in the morning, and some don't even try," he bit off. "The other half are kids with parents or adults in their lives who are determined to do something in their miserable lives and that's finding a way to make damn sure their child doesn't show them up by making something of themselves which they didn't have what it took to do the same thing. You know that shit piece where a kid is just misunderstood?"

th your I nodded.

ere and "Well in a lot of cases, that shit is right. It is very rare when a kid makes you bad seed. For the most part, someone planted that seed and put a lot of effort into forcing it to grow and in a kid, that ground is fertile. It's so much easier to think bad of ourselves than it is to think good. And that shit blows up and out of control."

y day I

hat shit "I had a good momma, Moses. A good family. Not a good daddy, around rest? They didn't deserve what I did to them."

"If they made you feel less, Shirleen, then they got what they made of the woman standing across from me right now that you made and that's nothing to do with them."

asshole

or spirit "I love that you think that way but—"

y gotta "Fuck, baby!" he exploded, tossing both his arms wide and

He leaned toward me even as his outburst shocked me so much I leaned back. “Do you not think I see young Shirleens every day of my life? Do you not understand how hard it is to pull yourself out of the shit you let yourself get bogged under and find your way clean? Do you not get how huge what you’ve done is?”

“He lives in me,” I said weakly.

“You let him,” he clipped.

“Everything you do, I compare to what he did.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms on his chest. “Well, shit, sweetie, you’re human. You had a man who did you wrong and you found a man like that you might want in your life, so you’re comparing the old with the new so you can make sure you don’t fuck up again. I’m not sure I can help you with you bein’ smart and lookin’ out for yourself so you don’t make the same mistake twice. Best get on calling Uber so you can take your sweet ass home.”

At that speech, I couldn’t stop myself from cracking a smile.

His eyes narrowed. “You find something funny?”

“Well, uh...yeah.”

He uncrossed his arms and planted his hands on his hips before rumbled warningly, “I’m not bein’ funny, baby.”

I decided to shut up again.

“In time, you will learn I’m not him,” he said low.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Now I told you we’d go slow and you may have forgotten that. I’ll remind you, Shirleen, this is at your pace. As long as we’re movin’ forward,

Do you I'm good. So next time I take shit too far, you don't bolt out of my ar  
lerstandhold up your hand to me like I'm causin' you harm. You say, 'Moses,  
free ofI need you to slow down,' and that will happen. I swear it."

Do you My God.

I could fall in love with this man.

No.

Damn.

I was falling in love with him.

etheart.

"Shirleen, you hear me?" he prompted when I said nothing.

ian you

"I hear you, honey."

with the

"And you are not fuckin' Ubering home."

an cope

ie same

I nodded.

ass and

"Your boys won't be watchin' for you, will they?"

I shook my head.

"Good," he muttered.

"Are we done making out?" I asked.

"I don't know, are we?" he asked back.

fore he

I pressed my lips together, tight.

"Get over here, woman," he ordered.

My breath caught.

I'd heard one of the Hot Bunch demand that of one of his Rock C  
many times, I'd be able to buy Roam and Sniff top of the line Merce  
, so I'll had a dollar for every time I heard it.

orward,

And I always just shook my head, sometimes mentally, son

ms and physically, thinking if I had a man who told me to walk my ass to h  
honey, walk my ass the other way.

That man being Moses, I walked my ass right to him.

He wrapped his arms loose around me.

I placed my hands on his chest.

They felt good there.

Under my right one, I could feel his heart beating, strong and true.

“You gonna read me the riot act every time I freak out?” I asked.

“Only when the situation warrants it,” he answered.

Hmm.

“I’m gonna be some work,” I told him something he couldn’t  
missed.

He confirmed my suspicion by saying, “I didn’t miss that.”

I slid a hand up and curled my fingers around the side of his neck.

His arms grew tighter.

“I don’t want you to think I didn’t love him. For some reason  
important to me. In my way, the girl I was, not yet a woman, I loved  
admitted.

“Okay, baby,” he whispered.

“Before I hated him,” I finished.

hick so He nodded before he dipped his head, his cheekbone brushing  
des if I mine as he pulled me even closer to give me a hug.

A hug.

netimes He held me to him in his living room like he intended to do that all

him, I'd And I could stand there all night.  
I could stand there for weeks, held in Moses Richardson's arms.  
Eventually, he asked, "You want ice cream?"  
"Yeah."  
He lifted his head and looked in my eyes. "You wanna make out  
more before, after or in the middle of ice cream?"  
I shot him a grin. "All of the above."  
He grinned back.  
When he dipped his head that time, it was to capture my mouth.  
He kissed me soft before he slid his tongue inside.  
't have I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed against him.  
He angled his head and took the kiss deep.  
I cupped the back of his head with a hand to hold him right where I  
It didn't feel good being held to him like this, feeling his strength  
against me, his tongue stroking mine leisurely, taking it slow, giving, s  
, that's The wonders of all that had no words to describe them.  
him," I And I lost myself to whatever that was.  
Since I was lost, happy where I was, in his embrace, connected  
Moses gave me all I was willing to take.  
He did scoop out some ice cream for us.  
against He just did it...  
Later.  
night.

it some

he was.

pressed

weet.

to him,



## SEVEN



## CHOICES

### *Shirleen*

**A**fternoon the next day, I was sitting in my Navigator, staring at the school, my phone in my hand, my heart in my throat.

This was because Roam's history teacher had called and asked me to come in to have "a discussion."

I hated schools. I'd take visiting a hospital or walking my ass into a police station over walking into a school.

And with my old profession, both of those were saying something.

Not to mention, with my membership in the Rock Chicks, being able to visit a hospital or walk into a police station was an important skill to have.

Moses told me he often didn't have his phone on him when he was at work.

Still, for whatever reason, I pulled up his text string, which had a lot of texts (yes, I counted). Him giving me his address. Me confirming I had it. Him saying something sweet after I confirmed. Me telling him I was on my way to his house last night. Him confirming he got that and telling me he was looking forward to feeding me. Me texting that morning to say I'd had a good time the night before. Him replying, telling me he did too.

*I'm at the school. Roam's teacher called. I'm worried,* I typed in.

Neither boy had had trouble with school. It took some tutoring them up to scratch when they started back after being out for so long then they just assimilated.

Easy as pie.

Which freaked me out.

I'd talked to Jules about it because I'd found that odd. I thought it would be a battle too and was surprised when it wasn't.

he high “We'll keep an eye, Shirleen,” she'd said. “But not for the reasons. Sometimes, when kids get it good after they've had it bad, they go overly hard to prove they deserve to have something that's just the like. Like an education. They don't want it taken away, so they go beyond that to make certain it isn't.”

It didn't seem like they were trying overly hard. I didn't have any practice, but it just seemed normal. They didn't have an aversion to school like I did when I was their age. They didn't jump for joy every morning at the prospect of hauling their asses out of bed, shoving their books in their bags, and heading out with a pep in their step.

Since it was seemingly normal, we just rolled with it.

And now I'd been called by a teacher to come in “as soon as you can, Jackson,” and have “a discussion.”

I stared at the text, wondering if I should send it.

In usual circumstances, I might text Daisy, and it wasn't that I was talking to her that I didn't type the text into her string.

It was just...

Now there was Moses.

to get Before I could chicken out (of a lot of things), I hit send, opened my  
ng, butpulled myself out of my car and hoofed it on my high heels to the school

School was out for the day so the halls were quiet, but I could see through  
the windows there was a woman at the reception desk in the administrative  
office.

ght that It took a lot, but instead of giving in to my heebie-jeebies I walked  
school and turning around to walk right out, I walked in there.

normal She looked up.

hey try “Hey,” I greeted. “I’m Shirleen Jackson. Mr. Robinson called and  
air due.wanted to talk about my boy.”

he pale She nodded. “Just out the door, to the left, down the hall, take a  
the end. Mr. Robinson is in the second classroom on the right.”

ve any I nodded back, muttered my gratitude and took off, my heels echoing  
schoolthe tile in the empty hallways, my hackles coming up.

g at the I’d had to have meetings with the folks at school to get the boys across  
air bags I’d also had to go to parent-teacher conferences for three years running  
of this had been comfortable, and not because I was worried about my  
tough boys in new environs (or not only because of that).

an, Miz And I was seeing right then it was because it was bringing it all back

This wasn’t just Leon and starting things with him when I was a junior  
and he was a senior and how bad that all went.

wasn’t It was that, back then, I hadn’t come into me. I was awkward. Unlike  
My older sister was popular, I was not. I hadn’t found my way and I  
back at it, I’d always felt embarrassed, even humiliated at how I’d handled

myself.

ly door, But now I saw that there was no way I'd understand who I was,  
ol. wanted and how to get it.

through Hell, I wasn't sure I knew any of that now.

stration But then, I was a kid.

Why did I expect so much of myself?

as in a I found the room and knocked on the open door, my eyes  
handsome, somewhat disheveled man sitting behind the desk.

At my knock, he looked up at me, and I was relieved when he smile  
said he "Miz Jackson," he greeted.

"That's me," I answered, taking a step in.

right at He stood. "Thanks for coming." He gestured to the student desks  
of his own. "Please come in."

oing on I walked in farther as he looked down, shuffled papers around, &  
some and rounded his desk.

mitted. "Have a seat," he invited, and as I took a seat at one of the student  
g. None he didn't return to his own. He sat at the one beside mine. "We met at  
7 street-teacher conferences last winter."

ck. "I remember," I told him.

a junior "Sorry to take your time, but I thought this was important," he said

"What was important?" I asked.

certain. He offered the papers he had in his hand to me.

looking "My students turn in their papers online. I printed this one c  
andled Roam's report on the escalation of American involvement in the V

War.”

what I Slowly, I reached out and took it.

When I did, I felt my heart start beating faster because in the corner, it said:

*Perspectives of American Military Action in Vietnam*

*American History*

to the *Mr. Robinson*

*By Roam Jackson*

ed. Roam Jackson?

Roam’s last name wasn’t Jackson.

Mine was.

in front “Do you go over your boys’ homework, Miz Jackson?” Mr. Ro asked.

grabbed I looked from the papers in my hand to him. “Sometimes. When t me.”

t desks, He dipped his head to the paper. “Did you read that?”

parent- I looked down at it, forcing my eyes to anything but the words JACKSON.

There were no marks on the paper. No grade.

I read the first couple of lines and saw this was not something Ro asked me to look over.

I looked back at Roam’s teacher and shook my head.

ut. It’s Mr. Robinson nodded his. “Right then. Outside of it being g  
vietnam obvious he did more than watch a couple of episodes of 1

documentary, a lot more, I'm not entirely certain how to describe the p  
that report."

top left I felt my back hitch straight. "What are you saying?"

He looked me right in the eye. "It's well beyond a high school s  
aptitude."

That was when I felt my eyes narrow. "You sayin' my boy plag  
this report?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm saying Roam is an exceptionally gif  
intuitive writer."

Say what?

I stared at him.

obinson "I'm sorry I didn't bring this to your attention before," he w  
"However, even if his earlier reports and test essays were very goc  
noted as the semester wore on, his talent has markedly increased. Th  
hey ask I've seen nothing from him like that."

"He hates writing reports. It drives him 'round the bend," I said  
"Like, *seriously*."

ROAM Mr. Robinson nodded. "I'm not surprised. For many outstanding  
their need to tell their story, get their point across, doing this in the w  
want the words to be crafted to share their narrative is a painful pro  
am had can be very frustrating, as they can be very hard on themselves becau  
word has to be the perfect one and more, they all have to fit just right."

I looked down at the paper.

laringly "It's my understanding Roam hasn't applied to any colleges  
Burns's Robinson remarked.

rose of I lifted my gaze again to him. “We had the talk. Only briefly. He seem interested so I didn’t push him.”

Another nod from Mr. Robinson with a gentle, “I know his history senior’s Jackson, and this doesn’t surprise me. Saddens me, but doesn’t surprise will say that it’s more than just this assignment that made it clear. He gjarized with this,” he tipped his head to the papers again, “it’s more than c should go on to higher education.”

ted and “To be what?” I asked.

“That’s yours,” he replied, now pointing at the papers in my hand it and read it and you’ll understand. But I’ll tell you what it did for me was not a high school report. That was not even a college level essay. read that, I forgot I was reading an assignment. It was like I was re ent on. book, a very good one, and when it was done my first reaction d, I’ve annoyance because I wanted more.”

at said, “Lord,” I whispered.

quietly. “He took a chance with that, Miz Jackson. He didn’t simply inform what he’d learned about American involvement in Vietnam. There a parts to that report told from the perspectives of an American gen writers, member of the Viet Cong, an American Marine, and a Vietnamese peo ay they reads like fiction even if every word is factually correct. And the cess. It handed empathy for each viewpoint that he shared through his narrati se each astonishing. Especially as written by the hand of a high school seni , wasn’t even alive during the conflict he was writing about.”

“Lord,” I breathed.

,” Mr. “Roam is a natural storyteller, Miz Jackson. You can’t teach wh got. His voice is unique, and although I’m not surprised he struggles

didn't you will not find even a hint of that in his work. It flows beautifully."

My eyes drifted down to the paper.

ry, Miz "It's too late now to apply for him to start in the fall," Mr. Ro  
se me. I continued. "But I'd strongly advise you have another discussion wi  
however With his grades, and the way he writes an essay, he'd have no issues  
lear he accepted and he could perhaps begin for mid-term enrollment. Or h  
take some time and start next year."

I didn't see Roam slaving away at a computer, writing books for a  
. "Take I didn't even see him walking around with a backpack on some un  
ie. That campus.

When I What I saw was the fact my boy's world was opening up.

ading a He had opportunities.

on was He had choices.

His past was bleak no matter what way you looked at it.

n me of But his future was bright whatever way he wanted to take it.

ire four I didn't feel I had any of that when I sat at a desk like this years ago

neral, a But I got to live it with Roam.

asant. It And Sniff.

even- "Maybe I should have pushed it," I told the papers.

ive was "I wouldn't have," Mr. Robinson told me.

or who I looked at him.

"It's only a guess," he continued, "but that guess is that you're s  
at he's to allowing both your boys to feel in control of their lives, their de  
with it, This is crucial not only because of their pasts, but for them to learn t



smart choices for their futures. It is far from necessary for Roam to  
college degree in order to be a writer, if that's his choice. What's neces  
be a writer is to fill your life with as many experiences as you can  
inform your writing, enrich it. If more schooling is not his thir  
shrugged, "it's not. It isn't everyone's thing. He can gain life experier  
lot of different ways, and I'm sure we can both agree he has mo  
enough of one kind already. But I'd broach the subject with him again.

"I will, Mr. Robinson."

He smiled. "Please call me Keith."

"And you should call me Shirleen."

His smile got bigger.

I smiled back then looked down at the paper.

"I've been teaching history a long time," he said, and my gaze  
back to him. "And I have never, not once, assigned a paper when a  
has used that kind of creativity in order to fulfill an assignment. I h  
God didn't know how to grade it. I felt like an armchair quarterback  
never played football in his life calling a play."

"Wow," I whispered.

Boy, I couldn't wait to read that report.

"Precisely." He grinned.

"I'll have the talk with him," with *them*, "soon's I can."

"I'm glad to hear it, Shirleen."

I stood. He stood. We shook hands.

And I didn't care what he read in me holding that report to my che  
walked me to his classroom door.

have a “Shirleen,” he said when we’d reached it.  
ssary to I stopped just in the hall and turned to him.  
I get to “After my mind unboggled, reading that report,” he started, “it c  
ig,” he me the young man who wrote it and how that young man got to the p  
nce in a his life he was in my class and able to write it.”  
re than

” I stared in his eyes.

“They were very lucky to find you,” he said quietly.

“I feel it’s the other way around,” I replied.

He gave me a gentle smile. “Like I said, they were very lucky  
you.”

“Gotta admit, Keith, wish I had a teacher like you in high school.”

shifted He seemed embarrassed by the compliment, and if he’d scuffed th  
student with the toe of his shoe, I would not have been surprised.

onest to “But glad Roam got you,” I finished.

who’s “That pleasure has been mine,” he returned.

“Like I said, glad Roam got you.”

He chuckled and I grinned at him.

We said our goodbyes and I walked a whole lot faster back to my c

I didn’t even start it up after I tossed my bag to the passenger seat I  
turned my attention to Roam’s report.

I had no idea how long it took me to read.

What I knew when I reached the end was that my boy could se  
st as he *write*.

I was nearly home when my car rang.

I looked down at the dashboard to see it said MOSES CALLING.

I took the call, greeting, “Hey, my man.”

ame to “You all right?”

point in “Yep.”

“Roam all right?”

“Apparently, I got Alex Haley livin’ under my roof.”

“Say again?”

to find “Just heard the word that Roam’s an *exceptionally gifted* storyteller.

“Who gave you this word?”

“His history teacher. And just to say, I just spent the last however  
minutes reading Roam’s “Perspectives of American Military Ac  
the floor Vietnam,” and the dude does not lie.”

Moses chuckled. “So it was good news.”

Good?

Hell no.

*Exceptionally* awesome?

Absolutely.

car. “We didn’t talk much about college. Roam didn’t seem into it  
before I either. I’m opening up discussions again,” I shared.

“Good,” he murmured.

I let seconds slip by before I whispered, “My boy’s *exceptionally g*

eriously “Does this surprise you, baby?” Moses whispered back.

“Not even a little bit.” I let more seconds slip by before I asked, “I  
I get him to believe it?”

“No idea, sweetheart. But I think the best way to try is just to start.

“I’ll be doin’ that.”

“Good.”

I saw my house on the block so I said, “Almost home. Got pride and college lectures to speechify.”

Another chuckle before, “Call me later, tell me how it goes.”

“Will do.”

r.” “As you know, girls are back with me tonight. I’ll find out their sci  
and if there’s an opening when they’re doin’ something else with sc  
else somewhere else, we’ll fill it.”

r many  
tion in

That made me feel warm all over. “Works for me.”

“Later, baby. Thanks for sharing this news with me.”

I hit the garage door opener. “Thanks for listening to it. Have fr  
your girls.”

“Will do. ’Bye, sweetheart.”

“’Bye, Moses.”

We disconnected. I drove into my garage and sat in my car while I  
door opener again to close it. I didn’t get out until the door was down.

t. Sniff

Old habits.

I’d barely walked into the house before I heard Sniff shout fr  
basement, “That you, Shirleen?”

ifted.”

“You better hope so,” I shouted back, dumped my Chloe on the  
bar, but kept hold of the report as I walked to the steps to the basement

How do

I went down to see two tall, good-looking boys sprawled on the sc

” with game controllers in their hands, attention riveted to the TV and school junk consumption evidence all over the coffee table in front of them.

“Pause,” I ordered.

Not even a hesitation, they paused the game, then their eyes came to give God, my boys were such good boys.

I looked to Roam. “Just got back from rappin’ with Mr. Robinson.”

His expression shifted from alert to wary but he said not a word.

Sniff, however, as usual, wasn’t silent. “Oh shit.”

“Apparently,” I walked closer to them and tossed the report and chip bags and cookie packaging on the square coffee table that sat in the middle of the sectional, “you wrote a report he had no clue how to grade.”

Roam’s gaze dropped to the papers then shot back to me.

“Because it was so good,” I finished.

“Whoa,” Sniff muttered.

Roam remained silent and stoic.

In the early days, he’d let things through, give things away.

He’d been among the Hot Bunch so long, he’d learned when he wanted to hit the hide something, how to make sure it remained hidden.

It worked my nerves.

But whatever.

I looked between them both. “I’m gonna say this once and I want it in the kitchen. Are you both listening to me?”

“Yeah, Shirleen,” Sniff answered.

“Yeah,” Roam grunted.

d after- “Are you listening good?” I pushed.

them. “Yeah, Shirleen.” Sniff was getting impatient, maybe to get back  
game, probably because he knew a Shirleen Lecture was coming  
to me. wanted it over.

Roam just nodded.

” “When I got you, and I knew I was gonna be able to keep yo  
money aside. I didn’t know what it was for. Didn’t care. Just knew it  
you.”

ong the They both stiffened, even Roam.

t in the I kept at them.

le.” “I know you don’t ask for anything. Don’t expect anything. Mayb  
want anything you can’t earn yourself. But that’s not how families  
Families look out for each other. And we’re family. And I know you t  
take care of yourselves, but you gotta give a woman something, and  
want is to give something to you. We had the talk, I didn’t push it.  
gonna have it again because I’ve been informed, Roam, that you ge  
serious talent with writing. And it didn’t escape me with either of y  
anted to you get yourself some good grades even if you don’t try real hard. So  
you both to think about usin’ that money to go to college.”

“I’d rather use it to get some wheels,” Sniff muttered.

“I’m buyin’ you both a car when you graduate,” I reminded him.

t heard. “I’d rather use it to get some shit-hot wheels,” Sniff amended.

“Boy, you don’t quit cussin’ in front of me, I’m gonna knock y  
outer space,” I snapped.

Sniff grinned at me.

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling, drew in a breath, let it out, and  
back at them.

and he “You two can be anything you want to be,” I said quietly.

They stiffened again.

I powered through it.

u, I set “And I want no limits on that. We don’t talk about it and we don’t  
was for to, but I’m just gonna say it is not lost on me the limits you’ve had  
lives and I want you to know, right here, right now, those limits are  
You wanna go to college, it’s yours. You don’t, that’s your choice, but  
you to think real hard on that and know even if it takes a while for  
come to that decision, the resources are there for you to have it. You  
e don’t something else for your lives, it’s your life, you get to make that choice  
s work. just sayin’ I want you to discuss that with me. Bottom line is, you  
wo can choices. There are no limits. I don’t care if I’m covering your asses for  
what I of medical school and residency. Your futures include options. Give  
We’re privilege of giving that to you. Don’t limit yourselves because you  
at some concerns at all about taking it.”  
ou that

I want They said nothing.

“Am I heard?” I asked.

“You’re heard, Shirleen,” Roam rumbled.

“Yeah, you’re heard,” Sniff put in.

I looked to Roam. “That report, son, I read it. Nothin’ else to say  
ou into share the fact I got so much pride for you, it hurts me inside havin’ to  
it and not let it explode all over the place.”

“Shirleen,” he whispered.

looked He wasn't hiding anything right then. The goodness coming to me  
him came strong and pure.

God, I loved that boy.

Sniff punched his own heart with his fist twice then reached out and  
punched Roam in the arm with it. "Way to go, my brother."

I loved both of them.

"Piss off," Roam muttered.

And a little bit more eked out.

He was embarrassed.

I fought grinning as I ordered, "Don't tell your brother to piss off."

"He's annoying," Roam returned.

"He's proud of you too," I shot back.

"I totally am," Sniff stated.

Suddenly Roam pushed up from his lounge and clipped, "Shut up."

"Don't tell me to shut up when—" Sniff started.

He stopped talking when Roam pointed in his face then pointed at the  
ceiling and hissed, "Shut *up*."

Sniff shut up, tensed, then both boys shot off the couch like rockets.

My heart dropped to my feet.

"Stay down here," Roam ordered quietly as he and Sniff swiftly  
took their way to the stairs.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Got your phone?" Sniff asked as answer.

"No," I told him.



ie from He dug his phone out of his pocket and tossed it to me.

Oh no.

“Boys,” I snapped in a whisper.

out and Roam was four steps up, Sniff two down from him, when Roam  
and turned to me.

“Stay. Down. Here. And *quiet*,” he commanded on his own whispe

If I wasn’t so freaked, I would lament all the time I allowed that  
hang with the Hot Bunch learning to be so damned bossy.

Instead I was freaked.

Because something was up.

And in the life of the RCHB, something being up could be anything.

I mean, I’d shot a man in my own home because the RCHB (that  
was mostly HB with the RC dragged in) had some big shit going down

, Was I going to let my teenage boys slink, unarmed, up to face up  
*anything* and wait downstairs for them?

l to the Hell no.

I started to follow when I heard squealed, “Well look at you  
bunches of love! You get more handsome each time I see you!”  
s.

Daisy.

y made Daisy had broken into my house.

As fast as my high heels would take me, I stomped up my stairs.

Nope.

Not Daisy.

*The Rock Chicks.*

Every one of them.

Daisy. Indy. Jet. Roxie. Jules. Ava. Stella. Sadie. Ally. And I  
thrown in, I hoped, for comic relief.

I halted Because we'd need some comedy.

Seeing as I was about to *lose my mind!*

r. "Did you all break into my house?" I asked furiously.

boy to "Well no, sugar," Daisy answered calmly. "You gave me your  
check on things when you had that staycation that time Vance and Jul  
the boys campin' for spring break."

Shit.

g. "I—" I began.

time it "Zip it," Ally ordered.

I. I stared daggers at her and would learn quickly I should not have  
uncertain time staring daggers and instead should have maybe gone for my st  
when I found myself bum-rushed by ten Rock Chicks through my grea  
down my hall, into my bedroom.

, sugar "All's good, just Rock Chick business," Jet called behind her to n  
before she slammed the door, turned to rest her back to it and glared  
"Two dates and no spill?" she whisper-hissed. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I mean, are you *seriously serious?*" Roxie demanded.

I crossed my arms on my chest. "Can't do a freeze out and spill."

"Oh. My. *Goddess!*" Annette screeched. "This room is fuckin'  
mean, I can see myself...*everywhere.*"

She did a whirl, checking herself out in a variety of directions.

What could I say? It was my bedroom. I decorated in *glamor*.

Annette And glamor meant mirror.

“Annette,” Ally clipped.

Annette stopped whirling and grinned at me. “Even your furniture mirrors. And you got yourself a purple padded headboard. *Sah-weet*.”

“It’s lavender,” I corrected.

key to “Whatever,” she replied. “It’s *sah-weet*!”

es took “Can we stop talking about Shirleen’s headboard?” Indy asked.

“Unless that headboard’s seen some action,” Ava added.

“What kinda girl do you think I am?” I asked. “We’ve only had dates.”

“A healthy, red-blooded one,” Ava answered.

wasted “Have you kissed him?” Roxie asked.

un gun “Have you slept with him?” Ally asked.

it room, “What’s he look like?” Stella asked.

ly boys “Is he tall?” Sadie asked.

l at me. “Is he hot?” Indy asked.

“Is he sweet?” Jet asked.

“Are those pillowcases satin?” Annette asked.

“Oh for goodness sake, let her speak,” Jules demanded of the *phat!* Chicks. She looked to me. “By the way, you should know, I know him in professional capacity. And I approve.”

From Jules, that said a lot. She was a social worker at King’s She kids.

I was still ticked at her because she'd played her part in putting there.

“He’s tall. He’s hot. He’s sweet. I’ve kissed him. I have *not* slept with him,” I answered the room at large. “And now you can all just get on your way out of my house.”

Roxie plopped her ass on the low bench at the foot of my bed covered in a purply-gray, patterned velvet, declaring, “Shirleen, you cannot be pissed at me for setting you up with a tall, sweet hot guy.”

“I can’t?” I asked.

“No,” she answered immediately.

“Did he really ram his grocery cart into yours at the store?” Sadie called out.

“Yes, he did,” I bit off at Sadie.

“Hot,” Indy murmured.

“Totally,” Ava replied.

“He’s a good man. He’s a loving man. He’s got two daughters he loves. A job that’s more a calling. A nice home he let his oldest decorate,” I said, trying to share myself to share.

“That’s fantastic,” Jules said.

“And he could have found out who I was and what I did and ended my life by himself to go to the bathroom and never came back,” I finished.

“Oh please,” Indy drawled while throwing herself on my bed, curling up in the perfect fold of my duvet.

So I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Like Lee and the boys didn’t investigate him to within an inch of his life,” she continued.

me out That was when my eyes, of their own accord, bugged out at her.

“Yeah, and followed him for days,” Stella put in.

pt with Say...

1 out of *What?*

“And then Lee had it out with him face to face to make sure it  
vered in good and he wasn’t gonna find out about your history and pull a lose  
ised we like that,” Jet added.

Well, I knew that last part.

“They investigated him?” I asked.

“Of course,” Indy answered.  
jueried.

“Does he know this?” I asked.

“Yep. Didn’t care. Just wanted to go to dinner with you,” Roxie sh  
Good Lord.

adores. He didn’t care.

allowed Moses didn’t care the Hot Bunch had invaded his privacy, his histo  
*Followed him.*

He just wanted to go out to dinner with me.

excused I jumped when a pounding came at the door and through it Roam  
“Shirleen, you okay?”

totally “Those boys are *so cute*,” Daisy whispered. “They so love their Sh

“I’m fine!” I yelled back, hoping he hadn’t overheard anything. “*I*  
talk is over. You can go back to playin’ your game.”

1 of his No hesitation before, “You sure?”

“We’re her girls!” Daisy shouted. “Of course she’s sure. It’s just g

sugar bunch! Go on back to your game!”

I gave it a beat until I sensed Roam leaving and turned to Jules. “ conversation with his history teacher today. He reported to me Roa exceptionally gifted writer.”

was all  
r move “Whoa. Wow. Really?” she asked but smiled and said, “Cool,” b  
could answer.

“I’ve reopened discussion about college with both of them,” I in  
her.

Her smile got bigger. “Awesome.”

“Uh, as great as it is Roam’s exceptionally gifted at something,  
news, he’s a fantastic kid. But we’re off hot-guy topic,” Ally butted in.

I looked to Ally. “I’ve said all I’m gonna say.”  
ared.

“You totally have not said all you’re gonna say,” she shot back.

“Yo, bitch,” Annette called, and I looked to my bed to see her star  
my bedside table, the drawer open. “I approve of your choice of vibra  
ry. you got yourself a hot guy and you don’t have any rubbers in here.”

Only Annette could get away with snooping through a woman’s c  
with said woman right in the room with her.

yelled, That was to say she actually couldn’t, but she was such a good-  
hippie-chick, you couldn’t get mad at her.

irleen.” “I’ll get Lee to buy you some,” Indy offered.

And our My eyes darted to her. “You will *not*.”

“Shirleen,” Roxie started hesitantly, “perhaps the ship has sa  
pregnancy, but there’s more than one reason to use prophylactics.”

irl talk, “I don’t need sex education courses at age fifty-three,” I snap

Roxie.

'I had a "Then why don't you have condoms?" Jet asked.

m's an "Because Moses hasn't even stepped foot in my house, much l  
bedroom," I said to Jet. "And we're not there. We're taking it slow."

efore I There was general vocal merriment to this comment befor  
murmured, "He crashed his grocery cart into hers. They so aren't ta  
formedslow."

"Oh my God, we get to do a new pool. I'm in for fifty bucks for S  
gettin' the business on her next date," Sadie decreed.

it's not "I see..." Daisy began, tapping a long, French manicured nail t  
cherry blossoms painted across it on her lower lip, "date number four."

"Grocery cart ramming, there's no bet here. It's totally going to  
next date," Stella announced. "It's actually a shocker it wasn't the first

iding at "Teenage boy blocks," Ava accurately surmised.

tor, but I had to stop this even if the famous Rock Chick Getting the B  
Pool was started by me so I deserved this ridiculousness.

drawers "He knows Leon beat me, sexually abused me and piled a load of  
me. He wants me to understand he's not Leon. So he's dedicated to t  
naturedslow," I retorted.

"Sister girl," Daisy whispered.

That was when I felt the change in the room.

And with it, I felt the gentle eyes on me.

iled on I swallowed.

Then I announced, "I'm not sure I'm worthy of him. He's dedic  
oped approving I am. It's going to take some time. But he wants this, and I de

want it so we're gonna give it a shot."

"You're scared," Ally noted softly.

"I'm terrified. Two dates, I never had it so good," I replied.

"This makes me happy," Jules put in.

I looked to her. "That's part of the scary. It makes me happy. But the scary is it seems I'm making him happy, and he's the kind of man I ever want that to stop."

"That's pure Shirleen. More worried about giving than getting mumbled.

I was struck.

"Say what?" I asked her.

She grinned gently at me. "You put the super-bad into badass, Sadie. But you're the most selfless person I know." Her grin strengthened didn't get less gentle. "Outside all these chickies in this room, of course

"We're so happy for you, we could spit," Sadie declared, a little her fairy princess face.

"Look at this!" Annette cried, and I looked in the direction of her voice see she had the massive mirror that sat on the floor opened to expose enormous and perfectly laid out jewelry display inside. She was swinging door open and closed. "You can, like, accessorize then check yourself see if it works, like, *right away*."

"Annette," Roxie called impatiently.

Annette turned from the mirror, closing it as she did, and locked me.

"And woman, if I ever hear you say you're not worthy of anything



anyone, I'm gonna shake you until your teeth rattle. You've got a big soul. Nothing dims that. Not one thing. It might have lived in the shadow a while, but it surprises nobody that it broke through. So don't you do yourself down, not in front of your girls. Not in front of anyone. *Am I understanding me?*"

most of  
I don't

Well, *oowee*.

I'll be damned.

,” Indy

Annette had some badass to her.

“I’m under—” I started.

I didn't get it all out because Jet went flying from the door as if thrown open.

hirleen.

Everyone turned to it to see Tod, in his flight attendant uniform, teared, but

ed, but  
e.”

He slammed the door, looked around and snapped, “I *told you I came my way!* It isn't *easy* getting from DIA into town at rush hour. A grin on started without me!”

grin on

“Chill, sugar. We been waiting *days*, you know we couldn't wait longer,” Daisy said.

voice to

“Not even *ten minutes?*” Tod asked.

ose my

All the Rock Chicks (save Annette) looked guilty.

ging the

f out to

Tod turned to me. “Is he cute?”

Tod was Indy and Lee's neighbor. Tod was one half of Tod and Tod (and obviously Stevie) was gay.

eyes on

It wasn't that Tod was gay that he was a Rock Chick. It was a thing seeing as they swung both ways (those ways being both Hot Bunch and Chick), but Tex and Duke, both who worked at Indy's bookstore, b

beautiful gay, were also de facto Rock Chicks.

It was just how we rolled.

I didn't know if "hot" translated to "cute" in gay-speak.

Still, I replied, "Mm-hmm."

He leaned back and grinned. "Well, all right."

"Tod can buy you some rubbers," Annette declared.

Tod's eyes got big.

At me.

"You don't have any condoms, honey?" he asked.

"Can we give the condoms a rest?" I requested.

"I'll talk to Eddie," Jet murmured.

I guessed we couldn't.

"Don't talk to Eddie," Indy advised swiftly.

"Why not?" Jet asked.

"Eddie's not a big fan of buying condoms for other dudes," Indy told

"Do I want to know this story?" Jet inquired.

"Sure, it's funny," Ally answered, also tossing herself on my bed.

"And it reminds me I might need to stock up on Lip Smackers  
muttered.

Stevie. "Oh for goodness sakes, *I'll* buy you some condoms," Daisy stated  
was now at my jewelry mirror, had it open, and was draping some necklace  
around her neck. She turned to me. "Can I borrow these, sugar?"

"I need a drink," Stella announced before I could give approval, on  
Daisy's request.

“I need three,” Tod declared, also throwing himself on my bed. ‘manning the cocktail shaker?’”

“Shirleen, you got some chips?” Ava asked.

Did I have some chips?

I was raising teenage boys.

I had more chips than the Lays factory.

“Yeah, hey,” Annette could be heard. She was on her phone. Alarm  
“I wanna order some pizzas.” Yep. Shirleen was alarmed. “You ready?  
One large veggie. That’s for me,” she said this last to the room before  
back to her phone. “One large pepperoni. One large sausage. We’re  
need some of that cheesy bread. Two orders. And maybe a salad.” She  
some looks. “Okay, no salad and three orders of that cheesy bread.  
You got my account from my number? Right. Cool. Charge it on the  
file. But it’s a new address.” Her gaze came to me. “What’s the address  
again?”

ld her. Ten voices told her the address.

I’ll note, none of those voices was mine.

Annette strolled to the door after giving my address, stating,  
thanks. Laterzzzzz.” She took the phone from her ear, opened the door  
,” Indy shouted, “Pizza in thirty!”

ed. She “Right on!” Sniff shouted back.

cklaces Roam had no reply.

not, to “Oh my God! I *need* to borrow these shoes!” Ava wandered out  
walk-in holding my Gucci crystal embellished sandals that I’d bought  
whim because they were fancy and I had nowhere to wear them but the

“Who’s just so hot I couldn’t pass them up. “Luke would *love* these.”

Damn.

Now I just had to give them to her.

This was because I held the knowledge that Luke Stark liked his in sexy shoes, and just *how* he liked to work things out with those sex and their heels digging in certain areas of his flesh. And now I couldn’t wear those shoes without thinking of those heels digging in Luke Stark’s flesh. I was *damn*ingly.

? Right. Shit.

“Bring those to me,” Tod ordered, already twisting his body in a way that I was *gonna* take off his own shoes. “I’m *feeling* those sandals. I’m feeling ‘Boys n’ Girls.’ I’m feeling ‘You Make Me Feel Mighty Real.’ I’m feeling ‘Right in the Number Three, Dress Number Seventeen.’ No. I’m feeling *shopping*.”

Tod, when he was not being a flight attendant, dad to a chow dog named Chowleena, partner to Stevie or the unofficially official Rock Chick with a planner, was a drag queen called Burgundy Rose.

Ava walked the Guccis over to Tod.

I felt something touch the back of my hand.

“Right, I looked to my side.

Jules was there.

“You knew it would happen,” she said quietly.

I did.

I sighed.

“They just love you,” she continued.

They did.

I sighed again.

Jules smiled.

“I’m on cocktails,” Stella announced on her way to the door. “Who’s the woman what?”

“I’ll help,” Sadie said, following her.

“Cosmo,” Roxie ordered.

“Surprise me,” Tod put in, bent over the side of my bed, strapping on his Gucci.

“I’m in for a cosmo, but I gotta call Eddie. Tell him he’s on his own for this dinner,” Jet shared.

“He can come over,” Annette invited Jet’s husband to my house. “Call and order more pizza.”

“Tell him to go to Lincoln’s. Lee’s having a team meeting. He can’t be at the guys there,” Indy told Jet.

“Tell him to tell Hank,” Roxie added.

“I better call Blanca and let her know she’s got Alex for dinner,” Jules muttered.

“And I better call Nick and see if he’s down with watching Max and the boys for the foreseeable future,” Jules said, disengaging from me.

Eddie and Jet, and Jules and Vance had started their broods.

The rest would follow.

And as evidenced with what was right then happening in my bedroom, it wouldn’t slow any of them down.

I went to the closet to take off my heels and put on my slippers.

What could I say?

The Rock Chicks were in the house.

o wants And as I've said, I was relatively badass, and the fact remained  
been ticked at them.

But still.

The truth of it was...

g on my I wouldn't have it any other way.

own for

I'll just

in meet

er," Jet

nd Sam

oom, it

What could I say?

The Rock Chicks were in the house.

And as I've said, I was relatively badass, and the fact remained, I had been ticked at them.

But still.

The truth of it was...

I wouldn't have it any other way.

EIGHT



## HOLDING IT TIGHT

*Shirleen*

“**W**hen the time comes, sweetheart, you won’t have to worry  
condoms. That’s the man’s domain.”

It was later that night.

The Rock Chicks had gone.

The boys were down in their space.

And I’d reproofed my duvet so I could unproof it my own damned  
lying on it to talk to Moses.

Obviously, I’d told him about the Rock Chick visit.

Yes.

Even the uncomfortable parts about it.

“Great,” I murmured.

“Though it would be funny to find out how Lee Nightingale  
Mason would react to being asked to buy you condoms,” he w  
sounding like he thought it was funny just to think about it.

And hearing that in his voice, it got funny instead of being mortify.

“Yeah,” I replied.



“We’re out to your girls.”

His tone was entirely different when he said that.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

“You talk me up?” he teased.

“I talked me down.”

After I said that, I could actually feel his pissed-off vibe coming over the phone.

“Don’t worry, honey,” I assured. “They don’t like it any more than I do and didn’t mind sharing that.”

“I hope so,” he stated shortly.

I changed the subject. “Had the talk with the boys about school.”

“How’d that go?”

“Told ’em to think on it. I’ll give them time to do that and we’ll talk about it another chat.”

“You get a sense of where they’re leaning?”

“Didn’t get that shot seeing as the Rock Chicks broke into my room before we could formally end discussions.”

I heard him chuckle.

“But that’s probably good. They tend to do better when I give them their own space,” I told him.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You have a good night with your girls?” I asked.

“We always do. They’re good girls. For them, they’re just home. It’s like a reunion every time they come home. My daughters, they love it.”

biweekly reunions instead of them just bein' with me every night."

His tone was again different. And not a good different.

"Darlin'," I whispered.

"It is what it is. But what that is doesn't get better no matter how time goes by."

g at me "Wish it was different."

There was a silence he didn't fill before he cleared his throat. "I can you shared that with anyone. Not a friend. Not even my momma."

"Glad you felt safe sharin' it with me."

"Feels good to have you to share it with."

It sure did.

Just like it felt good to have him to text when I was worried about 'll have would happen about Roam at school, then when I was thrilled with happened about Roam.

I'd never had anything like that with Leon. I'd learned early on 7 house share a fear or a sorrow, and there weren't any triumphs worth sharing catalogued any weakness and had a specific skill where he'd time it just to use them against you when he could make the most damage.

n space "What're you thinkin'?" Moses asked.

"I was thinkin' that Leon used vulnerabilities against you, so I learned to share them."

He said nothing to that.

So I spoke.

For me, "I'm sorry, Moses. I get used to this, there'll come a time when  
ir ages,

compare him to you.”

“I wasn’t quiet because of that, baby. I was quiet because I was trying to get a rein on bein’ pissed he was such a humongous jackass and you v much live for years with that.”

That didn’t make it any better.

“Maybe we should be a Leon Free Zone,” I suggested.

Haven’t “Why?”

“It messes with me and pisses you off.”

“How you gonna work through what he did to you if you don’t out?”

Good question.

ut what “Might be time to make somethin’ else clear about the us I war  
h what build, Shirleen,” he declared. “And that’s the fact we gotta be real. We  
talk. We gotta share. We gotta be there to help the other work shit out  
ever to gotta be open to talk so we can get on working our own shit out.”

ing. He And here we were.

ist right Again.

“This is where it gets scary because I got more shit to work out than I do,” I pointed out.

ned not “If you think I got the job I got lookin’ after the kids I see every day, I  
don’t take that home with me and need somewhere to unload it, I’m  
wrong. I been doing that job a long time, and most of the time I can handle it.  
Sometimes, some kids, it gets under your skin and I need to work it out.”

I don’t “Who do you work it out with now?” I asked curiously.

“Who do you work Leon out with now?” he returned.

“Mm,” I hummed.

ying to “Yeah,” he agreed.

I had to And there it was.

Alone was alone in the way we’d both been alone, even having pe  
our lives.

And it could suck for anyone.

“Never had this,” I said softly. “Even with all my girls, who would  
I didn’t wanna bog them down with it. So I never had this.”

t get it “Me either,” he replied. “Even when I had my wife, I didn’t give  
her because she wasn’t real interested, and then we had our babies  
didn’t bring it home. But it didn’t matter. I’d learned by then she was  
interested.”

it us to One could say I would not have been a big fan of the woman who  
e gotta on Moses Richardson and broke his heart.  
and we

But seriously.

She was sounding like a real asshole.

“Got no reply to that?” Moses asked.

ian you “I’m pleading the fifth before I say anything super ugly about the  
of your children.”

ly and I “You know, you aren’t the only one comparing, Shirleen.”

you’re Oh boy.

ndle it. “I don’t want to make the same mistakes either,” he shared.  
t.”

I hadn’t thought about that.

But it sure made sense.

And I hoped to God Moses never thought of me as a mistake.

“I hear that, honey,” I murmured.

“Now, I don’t wanna let you go but I’m gonna let you go, because people in getting late and my girls haven’t gone to sleep yet. I need to see they’re at. I’ll call you tomorrow. And we’ll set something up if we can next week. If we can’t do that, I want to be on your calendar first chance. Next Friday night. Yeah?”

I listen,

Oh yeah.

And this to

“Yes,” I agreed.

s and I  
n’t real

“Take you out somewhere nice so I can see you in another pretty dress. I could totally do that.”

“I’ll look forward to that, Moses.”

cheated

“Great, baby. You sleep well.”

“You too, darlin’.”

“‘Night, Shirleen.”

“Goodnight, Moses.”

mother

We hung up and I looked at my feet in their slippers.

I still didn’t know how this was happening, me sitting on my bed in slippers talking to a handsome man about life and our kids and our parents and what we wanted in our futures.

I just knew it was happening.

And I was beginning to believe I deserved it.

So I quit looking at my feet in their slippers.

And I started smiling at them.



“YOU GOT WHAT ON YOUR FACE?” Moses asked.

use it’s “Purple goo.”

where “Purple goo?”

can this “A facial. And it’s gettin’ on my phone. Can I call you back in two

e I got. “It takes twenty minutes to wash purple goo off your face?”

It was the next night.

Moses and I were on the phone again.

He’d texted me that morning to say he’d call that night after talkin  
ress.” girls.

I’d texted him back to say I’d be looking forward to that call.

He’d then texted me with five options of where we could have  
Friday night.

I’d texted him to share I liked all five options and it was his choice

He’d then texted me to ask if it was appropriate for a girl to hav  
drawers full of makeup and still think she needed more.

I texted him back to give him the news it wasn’t only approp  
l in my should be encouraged.

sts, and He texted to share he wasn’t sure he agreed with that.

It was then, me, Shirleen, texted him a tearing-up-laughing emoji.

He’d texted back a smiley-face emoji.

Shit, we were emoji-ing.

Emoji-ing!

Now it was later and he’d called in the middle of a facial.

So I needed to call him back.

“It takes twenty minutes for it to work its magic and then it takes seconds to wash it off,” I educated him. “You called right after I brought it on.”

“Just put me on speakerphone.”

Oh.

Right.

That’d be the smart way to play it.

I took the phone from my ear and put him on speakerphone.

“You’re on speaker,” I declared.

Through the speaker, I heard him chuckle.

Boy, a woman could fall in love with that sound.

After he quit doing that, he asked, “Have a good day?”

“You ever tried herding badasses?”

“I spend my days herding kids who think they’re badasses, do you count?”

“I’ll introduce you to Luke Stark. Then you can tell me your guess on how he reacts to me telling him to sit his ass down and write out his time sheet.”

Another chuckle.

Yes, a woman could fall in love with that sound.

Okay.

Would it sound too eager for me to bring it up?

Damn.

I was just going to bring it up.

He wanted us open. Real.

is thirty I still tried for casual.

ished it “So did you talk to your girls?”

“Yeah. Though Judith has a study date, *here*, with her brother on Wednesday night, other than that, it’s father-daughter time.”

I was happy for him he had that.

But I found it disappointing.

“We can have phone dates,” he said.

“I’ll take it,” I whispered.

“I’m glad, baby,” he whispered back.

“And just to say, I hear you, my man, about this boy Judith is Roam dates white girls. He dates some sisters, but mostly he dates white girls. Sniff, however, sees black girls. Almost exclusive. There’s a white girl here and there, but I’m sensing the sister is just his type. But I got a problem with Roam when he’s with a white girl, and I don’t got an issue with her because he sees the beauty of a sister. And I know that’s messed up. I know the way I feel.”

at how eets.” “Yeah. And I just want her to be happy. This kid, his name is Jaxon, an X, by the way.”

“Oh boy,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s not there. To him Judith is a pretty girl. She’s his girlfriend. He’s not weird with me. They’re just people.”

“World fucks that up when you get older,” I noted.

“Right. And I don’t wanna be the one who fucks that up. I don’t wanna be the one who points it out that he’s dating a black girl and he needs to



her culture, her people, and respect it when that isn't on his radar.”

“It's gotta be *partially* on his radar, Moses, unless he's blind.”

“I'm not sure it is. He's just really into her.”

My friend I couldn't even stop myself from uttering, “Gulk.”

He totally got me and that was not about the kid being white.

“I know. When'd she stop being seven?” he asked.

“Ten years ago,” I pointed out.

“Yeah,” he muttered, then went on, “In the end, it doesn't matter. He's hurting her or changing her personality in ways that concern me. I gotta let it play out.”

Dating. “Yeah, you just do.”

As white “You ever talk to the boys about them treating girls now with a white girl how they'd feel having their own girls in the future?”

In issue “Not yet. But I'll be leveling that Shirleen Lecture on them in the h Sniff, waiting on them getting their Follow Up Shirleen Lecture about g It's just college.”

That got me another chuckle before he said, “Ever think there'd be on, with you'd be scheduling lectures to your teenage boys?”

“Dreamed it every day, but no. Never.”

There was a beat of silence then he asked, “You wanted kids?”

He's his “Wanted a boy. Least one. One I could make into a good man. One take care of his momma.”

“And then God gave you two,” he remarked.

Want to s to get “And then God gave me two,” I repeated. “We shouldn't bitch,

We're so lucky. We both got good kids."

"We are, baby," he agreed. "Don't I know that. Damned lucky."

It was heavy and it went on with the heavy as Moses shared about of the kids at Gilliam and the obstacles they faced in their lives to go on the right path.

I took us out of the heavy when I felt he was ready by sharing about antics of the Rock Chicks (the tamer ones, we were starting out, I didn't to scare him) just to try to make him laugh.

Unless  
e, I just  
We talked and we talked, and we talked some more.  
We even talked through me washing my face.  
And a whole lot longer.

mind to  
between  
oing to  
In fact, I was in bed, my hair twisted up, my silk scarf wrapped around under the covers in the dark after we'd talked out his kids, the Rock Chick movies we liked, books we'd read, places we'd been, dream vacations we wanted to take, and Moses's sweet honey voice was in my ear, soothing to me like a lullaby.

e a time  
He didn't miss it.  
"Gonna let you go, sweetheart."  
"I don't want you to let me go," I mumbled.  
And I really, *really* didn't.

e who'd  
I was.

Moses.  
"Okay, you can let me go."  
"Call you tomorrow."

“Okay.”

“Thanks for listening, baby,” he said.

it some “Thanks for talking, and also thanks for listening,” I replied.

et them He chuckled.

And hearing it, that was where I wanted to end it.

out the “Night, Moses.”

i’t want “Night, baby.”

I pressed my phone to my chest after we disconnected and I did n  
care I slept with it there.

Holding him close.

ound it, Holding his goodness to me.

Chicks, His promise.

ons we Holding it tight.

ing me



“SAY WHAT?” I asked during our phone date Thursday night (we’d h  
Wednesday night too, bee T dub).

“I’m reading the *Rock Chicks*. I’m at the beginning. Indy and Lee.’

Damn.

I didn’t know how I was feeling about this.

out.” “When do you come in?” he queried.

“Uh, the next one. Jet and Eddie.”

“Do you know this Kristen Ashley person who wrote them?”

“It’s a penname. It’s really someone who used to work at  
bookstore.”

“Did she fire them?”

“No. But the books took off so she writes full time now.”

“Goes on book tours?”

“Apparently, unless you sell a bucketload, that doesn’t happen. Unless it’s your own dime.”

He sounded confused. “But she has a schedule of appearances website.”

not even  
Hmm.

He’d checked the website.

“That’s just some woman in Phoenix Jane hired to pretend she’s Ashley. Jane’s not super social. She’d lose it if she had to go to signing.”

“Ah,” he mumbled. Then he asked, “You okay I’m reading these?”

Yikes, but he could read me already.

had one  
Even over the phone.

“Well, uh, they met me when, uh...”

,  
“Babe,” he clipped.

I shut up and not only at his tone.

He’d called me “babe,” not “baby” not “sweetheart.”

That was totally Hot Bunch.

Toe-tah-lee.

Indy’s  
I’d heard Luke Stark call an eighty-three-year-old woman, who’d  
into the office to hire the guys because she was concerned her children  
slowly poisoning her, “babe.”

She'd blushed like a schoolgirl.

And Moses was getting impatient with me being an idiot.

He was into me.

That is, He called me every night.

We were going out to a nice dinner the first night he was free and on her girls went back to their mom's.

I needed to get over it.

"Actually, I'm pretty funny in those books," I told him. "It's just the early ones, I was drug-dealing, poker-game-running funny."

Kristen "This isn't going to surprise me, Shirleen," he reminded me.

a book "Right," I muttered. "Uh," I went on, "have you thought, you know this works with us—"

Moses cut me off. "If it does?"

"Well, yeah."

"You don't think it's working?"

"It is now."

"You think it's going to quit working?"

"I hope not."

"So how 'bout we use the word 'when' this works."

This was not a suggestion.

"It doesn't fit in my question," I explained.

d come "What's your question?"

en were "Okay, *when* this works and I meet your girls, and then I got a question after that. Do you think that fits?"

“It could be *when* we’re confident this is working and you meet my girls.”

It was safe to say Shirleen was getting irritated.

“My man, are you honestly tellin’ me what to say?”

After his “I’m telling you not to say or think negatively that it might not work

“I can tell *you* right about *now* I’m thinkin’ negative thoughts about a man telling me which word to use.”

That, in I knew what he thought about that.

He thought that was funny, and I knew he did because I heard him laughing.

Now, if “You think I’m being funny?” I asked.

“No. I think it’s all kinds of good you got no problem tellin’ me I’m being a jackass when I’m being a jackass.”

“Well...*humph*.”

Yep.

I humphed.

But the situation warranted it.

“So, what was the question you wanted to ask about *when* we know it’s working and you meet my girls,” he prompted.

“I know *this* girl’s nerves are getting worked by her man.”

“Yeah,” he whispered, that honey pouring right in my ear. “Lil’ girl’s ‘Her man.’”

Question I shut up.

But I liked it too.

meet my Legs-getting-restless-while-I-was-lying-on-my-bed liked it.

“Baby, you were gonna ask me a question?” he pushed.

“What are you gonna tell them about the woman their daddy’s being an ex-poker-game-running drug-dealer.”

“k.” After I asked that, I held my breath.

about a I didn’t have to hold it long because Moses answered immediately.

“*When* the time is right, which will be when they’re older, I’m gonna tell them you used to run games and deal drugs.”

heard him “Say what?” I whispered.

“By then they’ll know you, Shirleen. They’ll know you’re good. They’ll know Roam and Sniff and what you did for them. They’ll hear from your friends and know how much they love you. And I don’t keep anything from my girls, not anything that big. It’s disrespect. So they’re too young now. But when they can get it, they’ll know.”

I didn’t know what to think about that either.

“I know my girls, baby,” he went on. “And when you do, you’ll get the right way to play it.”

“That scares me.”

and this is

“I bet,” he said gently. “Sadly, that’s the penance you have to be paying after you do shit in your life that affected other lives in bad ways that you regret.”

like that.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“It’ll be okay,” he assured.

I hoped so.

“It’ll be okay, Shirleen,” he repeated.

“I hope so,” I replied.

“Baby, listen to me,” he urged.

I was listening but I listened harder.

“Do you think I’d be with you if I didn’t think they’d see in you see in you?” he asked.

That made sense.

“No,” I whispered.

“I wouldn’t do them like that and I wouldn’t do *you* like that for me.” continued.

“Okay, Moses.”

“So don’t worry about it.”

That might not be possible.

“Okay, Moses,” I lied.

“My beautiful woman is totally lying,” he muttered.

“*Humph.*”

Yep.

Even though he called me his beautiful woman, I humphed again.

He chuckled again.

Then he got serious. “We had our bad, Shirleen. It’s time for our I’m committed to giving you that. Now what I need from you is for believe in it. But don’t worry. I’m okay with taking that slow too. Just as we’re moving forward.”

“You’re annoying when you’ve *been* annoying and then you



sweet.”

“Wish right now I could be a different kind of sweet,” he murmured.  
I shivered.

“Please tell me your boys have plans tomorrow night so I can make  
what I the car with you for at least an hour after I take you out to dinner,” he said.

Another shiver.

“They got plans,” I promised.

“Good,” he said low.

at,” he And...

Another shiver.

It was time to change the subject.

“I will state, in my defense, as you read those books, that I told  
was a bad idea to go to Vito’s house prior to her nearly flipping her  
over onto I-25 with me in it.”

“I’m sorry?” he asked quietly.

Perhaps I picked the wrong subject.

“Uh, spoiler alert,” I mumbled.

“You were in an SUV that nearly flipped onto I-25?”

“It didn’t.”

r good. “You were in an SUV that nearly flipped onto I-25?”

you to “We were being chased. By an, um, mobster.”

as long Moses fell silent.

“You might want to get into the frame of mind of me and all my  
i’re all as fictional characters before you get any deeper in those books,” I advised.

“Lee told me his wife was kidnapped three times.”

d. “Um...”

“Were *you* ever kidnapped?”

e out in “No,” I said swiftly.

stated. “Did anything of yours explode?” he asked.

“Uh, no.”

“Why was there an ‘uh’ before that ‘no?’”

“Just that, you know, I don’t want you to get overly concerned w  
read about the fact I shot someone in my living room when they bro  
my house ’cause a bad guy didn’t want Mace, Lee, Eddie, Hank and tl  
to keep doing what Mace, Lee, Eddie, Hank and the boys were  
Primarily, trying to get him incarcerated.”

Ava it  
er SUV “Why didn’t you call nine one one?”

“There wasn’t time. Seein’ as I had my boys with me, I had to l  
for them and he shot first.”

More silence.

Scary silence.

“It’s all good now,” I said quickly.

“Are there any more of them left?” he asked.

“More of what?”

“Rock Chicks.”

“Only me.”

friends “You’re not getting kidnapped and shot at on my watch.”

ised. I grinned. “Good to know.”

“Jesus,” he muttered.

“Maybe you shouldn’t read those books,” I suggested.

“Are you in danger working for Lee Nightingale now?” he asked.

Hmm.

“Shirleen,” he growled when I didn’t respond immediately.

“Define your concept of danger.”

That got another growl, just one that didn’t come with words ass  
ien you with it.

like into It was hot.

he boys Before my legs got restless again, I told him, “Lee and the boy  
doing keep the action out of the office.”

“Try?”

“Sometimes they fail,” I admitted.

ook out “Fucking hell,” he whispered.

“It isn’t their fault,” I defended. “Obviously they don’t *want* bad  
storm through the front door and shoot up the joint.”

“Holy fuck,” he bit off.

“But that hasn’t happened for a while,” I shared.

“*When* this works, we might need to have a conversation about  
employment.”

“Baby,” I said softly, “I love my job. I love those boys. We  
protocols should anything like that happen, one such protocol being  
place when that Balducci brother invaded. I was under lock and key v  
police en route, a skilled, armed man between the bad guys and me, a

and Luke sprinting up the steps. We have tight security. No one even that building without us knowing, and if they were a threat, I'd be pro Swear."

He didn't share he was appeased by this explanation.

"Each one of those men would take a bullet for me, make no about that, Moses."

"That, I know," he replied.

ociated

I drew in breath and let it out, saying, "And I'm pretty good at taki of myself."

"Mm," he murmured.

s try to

"But can I tell you how sweet it is you're worried?" I asked.

"You can tell me that," he said.

I grinned.

"I'm glad I didn't have to live through all that shit with you," he n foresee a kidnapping if I did, that being me kidnapping you."

guys to

That got him another grin as I said, "Talk to any Hot Bunch n They'll share just how much unfun they were having when happening."

"Hot Bunch?"

ut your

He hadn't gotten to that part in the books yet, obviously.

"The men."

e have

"And the women are the Rock Chicks."

; put in

"Yeah."

with the

nd Lee

"And the Rock Chicks?"

gets in I didn't know what he was asking.  
ected.

"What about them?"

"Did they think it was unfun?"

Hmm again.

mistake "They didn't think *all* of it was fun," I hedged.

"Say, the explosions," he started to break it down.

ng care "That there's a good example, because we all thought it was pretty  
Tex exploded that warehouse where he'd been taken after he was kidn  
But we didn't think it was funny at all when Stella's apartment got  
up."

"Maybe we should quit talking about this."

"I hear that," I said quietly. "And maybe you should give those l  
miss."

oted. "I "I am absolutely reading those books."

"Moses—"

ember. "I need to know what I'm getting into."

it was "Maybe that's a good call," I mumbled. "But, remember, it's bee  
and I've got no ill effects after I got conked on the head when Slick  
boys shot up my poker game."

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

I couldn't help it.

I grinned again.

"You're totally gonna love the Rock Chicks," I told him.

"I thought I would. Not sure now if that's true."

“They love me straight to their souls.”

“Then you’re right, sweetheart. I’ll love them.”

And that made me grin again.

We talked a lot longer.

And I grinned a lot more.

We ended our conversation with me lulled half asleep with Moses’  
y funny voice sounding in my ear.

napped. I fell totally asleep yet again with my phone held to my chest.

: blown But this time it was different.

This time, everything was different.

Because tomorrow, for the first time in a long time, I had sor  
books a amazing and beautiful and exciting to look forward to.

Tomorrow, I was going to see Moses again.

n years

and his

“They love me straight to their souls.”

“Then you’re right, sweetheart. I’ll love them.”

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NINE



## REBORN

*Shirleen*

The next night, I opened the door to my house.

I stood there in my dress and heels, hair done, makeup ref, staring at the handsome man on my doorstep wearing a *café au lait* but a chocolate-brown blazer, his eyes warming, his lips forming a sexy upon seeing me...

And I was reborn.

His warm, rich voice came at me, covering my skin, washing the the dust away at the same time it seeped in, through the skin, the fle bone, to fill my marrow with liquid goodness.

“Ready to go?”

I stood there, unable to move.

“Or you wanna show me your place?” he asked.

He was so beautiful.

So beautiful.

And I had it in my power to make him mine.

Like I had it in my power to keep on keeping on the way I’d been l



on and told Daisy I was not going to help Jet find her daddy.

But I made my choice.

Then I helped Jet find her daddy.

Like I had it in my power to stay detached, stay removed, not involved.

But I made my choice.

And I became friends with Jet. I renewed my friendship with Daisy with time, the rest of them came along.

Like I had it in my power when things were heating up on the streets, refreshed, Jules being a vigilante and I had a choice to make.

And I made that choice.

Then Darius and me got out of the game.

Like I had it in my power when the worst that could happen happened and Roam and Jules both got shot, Jules nearly got dead, this happened last of while they were looking out for each other, and I wanted Jules's kid, my roof so I could look after them.

And I made that choice.

Then I made it happen.

I'd been experiencing the longest, slowest rebirth maybe of all time.

A rebirth I had to fight for.

And could have died for.

But I kept at it.

And I would never be at peace. Not after all I'd done.

But I was going to take this new life I'd chosen.

And I was going to live it up.

“Baby, you okay?” Moses asked.

Only then did I move.

not get I reached out a hand, grasped him by his button down, and pull  
into my house.

Into me.

sy. And His hands immediately came to my waist.

And with my head tipped back, his lips came immediately to my m

ets with I clamped a hand on the side of his head.

And that was when Moses kissed me.

I moved backwards, taking him with me.

His lips detached.

opened,  
opening

Oh no.

s under

“Shirleen.”

“Close the door.”

“Baby.”

“The boys are gone.”

e. “Sweetheart.”

I let his shirt go so I could clamp both of my hands on his head.

“Please,” I whispered.

Moses looked into my eyes.

He then turned to shut the door.

I heard the lock go.

Then he turned back to me.

And I again had his mouth.

I took it. Lord, did I. I took from it and let him take from me. I  
ed him tight to his strong length, walking backwards, leading him with me, d  
from that sweet mouth, drinking *deep*.

When I sensed my bedroom door, I shifted us, his head came up  
and he stopped us.

mouth. “You sure?” he whispered.

“I have only been more sure of one thing in my life. Offering my  
home,” I answered.

His warm brown eyes got warmer.

Then they got hot.

And suddenly I wasn't leading Moses Richardson anywhere.

He was taking me where he wanted us to be.

Which, shortly thereafter, was us falling on my bed, him on top.

That was a way I did not mind in the slightest my duvet getting unj

He was hot and heavy with his mouth, his tongue, but he went ger  
slow with his hands.

Until I pulled his hand up to my breast, curled it around, arched  
and when he slid his thumb over my nipple, I moaned into his mouth.

This was it.

This was the good stuff.

Real.

Open.

*Safe.*

I believed.

pressed I believed in that.

rinking And I believed I deserved to have it.

I pulled at his jacket.

p again He yanked it off and tossed it away.

I tugged his shirt out of his pants, dove my hands under and smooth, warm skin.

boys a Lord.

*Heaven.*

“You feel good,” I whispered against his mouth when he stopped me so he could nibble my lower lip.

His thumb slid back over my nipple, and I whimpered a little and into him again.

“You feel better,” he rumbled, slanted his head and kissed me again.

ooofed. And again.

tle and Then more.

He made me dizzy with it.

into it, Lost to it.

Until it hit me I wanted even more.

I went after the buttons of his shirt.

His mouth went after my neck as I undid the buttons of his shirt.

That felt *nice*.

“Please tell me you brought condoms,” I breathed in his ear.

Another button open.

“I put three of ’em in my wallet the night after the Rock Chicks bro

Oowee.

I smiled.

And opened another button.

felt his He lifted his head to catch my smile.

Then he dropped it to kiss me again.

I forgot about his buttons because his kiss was so sweet, so hot, I hold on or I’d get an ice-cream headache at the same time I melted i kissing<sup>bed</sup>.

And I had to get serious about that, and in doing so might have cur arched<sup>nails</sup> into the flesh at his back.

He instantly let my mouth go to lift up a smidge in order to undo h n. then he yanked the still half-buttoned shirt over his head.

I caught sight of his wide pecs, the swells and planes that m. midriff, his flat stomach, the crease of his navel.

And it was then, I lost control.

In other words, I attacked.

He was on his back and I’d yanked my skirt up to straddle h hunched over to get my mouth on that chest.

His skin felt good.

It tasted better.

“Baby,” he murmured.

I licked his nipple.

His hand clamped on the back of my neck. “Fuck, *baby*.”

“Come in.” He was all kinds of goodness to offer to go slow.

But enough of that shit.

I had my mouth to his abs, mouth to his neck, when I felt his fingers  
skirt of my red, long-blouson-sleeved, cold shoulder dress.

“Want this off,” he murmured.

I lifted up and twisted my arms behind me to get at the zip.

“I had to He curled up to sitting and said, “Before you dislocate a shoul  
nto my me.”

He was smiling at me.

“I rled my I went in and kissed that smile off his lips.

The zip went down fast.

“is cuffs The dress then went up, up...

I broke my mouth from his and lifted my arms...

“ade his And away.

His eyes fell to my body.

“I got nowhere. I clasped his bristly cheeks to lift his head so I could kiss him agai  
got nowhere.

“im, but Except on my back with Moses on top of me.

“I liked the dress,” he growled.

“Good,” I pushed out, staring into his face, that face wear  
expression I’d never seen before.

I saw it with my eyes, but I felt it with my lady parts.

*Nice.*

“But the underwear...” he went on.

I had to admit, I had a thing for underwear.

Lacy underwear.

tug the “Did you know we’d be right here, right now?” he asked, his hands smoothing over my side, starting to go in.

“Um...no. If you’re asking if I wore these for you, it’s not even in the set.”

der, let His expression shifted to another one I’d never seen before and his body parts rippled.

*Hot.*

“Stop talking,” he ordered, his hand now at my belly.

“Okay,” I whispered.

His eyes held mine as his hand went down.

“Good?” he said softly.

I nodded.

His fingertips hit an edge of lace.

n, but I “Good?” he repeated gently.

“Yes, baby,” I answered.

His fingertips slid in, more, down, curved, the middle one gliding to

My lips parted, I hooked my ankle around his calf and my nails digging and dug into his flesh.

“I’ll take that as good,” he rumbled appreciatively.

“Yeah,” I panted.

He kissed me.

He stroked me.

He built it in me.

And I sucked his tongue deep when he made me explode.

is hand He was cupping my sex and nuzzling my ear when I came down  
him to me.

ny best “How late you wanna be for our reservation?” he murmured into m  
I’d had mine.

ny lady He’d given that to me.

He hadn’t had his and the evidence of that was pressed against my

“Mm? Sweetheart?” he prompted against the skin at the side of my

He was hard.

And if I said I was hungry or if that was as far as I could go right t  
would have put his shirt on, his kickass blazer, helped me zip up my di

And we’d go.

“Moses,” I called.

He lifted his head and looked down at me.

Boy, this man was *beautiful*.

“I don’t care if I ever eat again,” I declared.

ight. Maybe that was dramatic.

*initely* But a point needed to be made.

I made it.

A flash of white shown behind his lips as a flash of heat shot thro



eyes and he dipped his head and kissed me again.

We went slower. He took his time. In some far part of my mind wasn't all about Moses, what he looked like, felt like, smelled like, sounded like, how he was making me feel, all of it so magnificent it was beyond fathom, and gorgeous to revel in, I'd realize that first orgasm was for holding it was also so we could dial it back and if we carried on, he could get this.

by ear. This intimacy.

These moments.

Being right there, firm in our nows, and doing that in order to make most of it, but also make this the best memory it could be.

neck. And he made it the best through his touch, his murmured words taking my bra and panties off me like he was unwrapping a package when he knew what was inside, and he wanted it so badly he wished to draw this experience.

And he showed me him and how his strength and beauty were in every inch (and of a few particular inches, there were a *lot* of them).

And when he slid inside me, he'd given me enough kisses.

He'd given me enough touches.

He'd tasted enough with his tongue.

He'd let me taste enough with mine.

So we were right there, firm in our nows, staring into each other wrapped around each other's bodies, as he inched inside me slowly. I knew I'd never forget a second of it.

ugh his When he'd filled me, when I saw the lazy hit his lids and the pos

curl his lips, I stroked his cheeks with both my hands, lifted my head and that were so close there was nothing between our eyes but lashes and whirled around. “I love my now.”

hard to Only then did Moses kiss me again as he started moving inside me, but making love to me, making my now even better.

give me And sealing the deal on Shirleen reborn.



“YOU WANT me to call the restaurant and see if they still got our table or any table open, or you wanna give it up and just go to Arby’s?”

make the Had to admit, I loved that his go-to was Arby’s.

Moses and I were lying across my bed. The fluffy folds of my duvets, his duvet (with just a hint of lavender) were totally demolished seeing as if that he had we had sex on them, Moses had pulled them out from under us and they were kinda covering our bottom halves.

And I was resting down his side, but chest to chest with him, smiling with every finger over the creases at the bridge of his nose.

Up that close, they were *fascinating*.

“Shirleen,” he called quietly.

I looked into his eyes. “You hungry, honey?”

“I want to leave this bed like I want someone to drill a hole in my chest. But your boys—”

his eyes, “They won’t be home for hours.”

my and I He grinned, rolled me, then he was chest to my chest, sweeping his thumb against the bottom edge of my lip.

session “Right then, I’m good right here with you for hours, sweethearts.”

I so we murmured, watching his thumb move.

spered, I loved that.

Still.

de me, “I should feed you something,” I offered.

I wanted to make him my Coca-Cola ham with my famous potatoes and my momma’s flakey biscuits.

e open, I wanted Roam to grill him burgers.

I wanted Sniff to knock his socks off with something he stole from Flay.

ve-gray I wanted everything and I wanted it right then. I wanted it all to  
not only within the next few seconds. For the first time since I could reme  
to have could *not wait* for what was next up in my life.

But even so, I never wanted to move from that bed.

oothing His other hand shoved in at the small of my back and started up my

“I neglected to mention it at the time, seeing as I was occupied, but your room, baby. You got style.”

I grinned up at him.

y head. His hand at my spine became a steel arm around my back, and his  
door. at my lip became a hand clamped on my neck when a pounding came

“Who’s in there?” Roam shouted.

ie tip of “Uh-oh,” I whispered.

Another pound came at the door.

art,” he “Shirleen! You okay?” Sniff shouted.

“Fuck,” Moses whispered.

“You got five seconds to open this door!” Roam yelled.

“We’re armed!” Sniff declared.

“*Fuck*,” Moses whispered, gently but swiftly rolling us both up.

mashed “*One!*” Roam barked.

I hit my feet and had my panties in my hand as given to me by Mo  
a second later.

. Bobby “*Two!*” Sniff roared.

I was shoving my feet in the holes when I yelled, “It’s me! I’m fine

happen There was silence while I pulled my panties up.

mber, I Moses handed me my bra.

“Whose truck is in the driveway?” Roam shouted.

y spine. “Just give us a second,” I called.

it I like “*Us?*” Sniff thundered.

“Shit,” Moses muttered.

“A second!” I snapped.

; thumb I put on my bra double time and saw Moses had his pants and unb  
e at the shirt on when he handed me my dress.

I pulled that over my head while he put his socks and shoes on.

He zipped me up.

I left my shoes where Moses had tossed them and stomped to the d

“Shirleen,” Moses called urgently.

I didn’t listen.

I marched right to the door.

I did this thinking the boys would retreat to the living room.

And it would be there I could ream them.

And *good*.

I hauled the door open and saw the boys standing right there.

ses half Their eyes hit me then they shot beyond me.

To Moses.

“You!” Roam shouted.

el!” “Motherfucker!” Sniff shouted.

They both pushed in.

“Boys!” I yelled, reaching out and grabbing Sniff’s arm.

He shrugged me off as they faced off with Moses.

I had their backs but I still could see they took in the bed.

The air in the room became stifling.

“*You did our mom right under our roof?*” Roam bellowed.

I froze.

uttoned Solid.

Suspended in time.

And as I hovered there, a vision filled my mind.

Words on paper.

oor. *Perspectives of American Military Action in Vietnam*

*By Roam Jackson*

Roam Jackson.

Roam *Jackson*.

“Right now, you both need to cool down,” Moses’s voice t through the room, taking me out of my stupor.

“Your mom?”

That came from my mouth and it sounded hoarse.

Forced from me.

Tortured.

Roam jerked around towards me, angry.

Sniff turned towards me, also angry.

They both caught one look at me and stilled.

Completely.

Suddenly, it looked like Roam was preparing to take a step away, stopped himself.

Though he started talking.

Fast.

“Not our mom. Sorry. I’m sorry. You’re not our mom. You’re yo independent and you got it together and you dress real nice and yo great crib and you can boss around the guys and they don’t care l you’re badass like that and you’re like, your own woman. With lik own life. And you’re just, like, not anyone’s. You’re yours. You anyone’s mom. You’re Shirleen.”

“Shut your mouth, boy,” I whispered.

He shut his mouth but he looked sick.

My Roam who didn’t expose anything, he looked *sick*.

Not sick.

umbled Wounded.

My eyes shifted to Sniff.

His torso was rocking slightly, his gaze not meeting mine, but moved, standing partially in front of Roam like he was preparing to shield.

I walked their way, slow, on bare feet.

When I got to them, I lifted a hand to Sniff.

He flinched when I touched his cheek, but I didn't bother myself that.

I slid my fingers back into his thick hair, curling them around his scalp,

, but he Then I reached long and high, to Roam.

I did the same with him, the pads of my fingers gliding over his cropped hair, curving in.

And when I got my hands on what was mine, I gathered it to me, yanking them in, until all of our foreheads collided.

1. Like, "Shirleen," Sniff whispered, his hand had come to my hip, making me steady himself, but it stayed there, gripping tight.

because I dug their heads into mine.

e, your "You're *my boys. Mine.*"

I're not That wasn't hoarse.

It was guttural.

It sounded like it came from an animal.

And maybe I was an animal in that moment.

A lioness.

“Shirleen,” Roam whispered, his hand coming to my hip, sliding, pressing in.

But he’d My eyeballs shifted to him.

Maybe his “Don’t you ever say I’m not your momma, boy, you hear?” demanded.

“Yeah. Yeah, Shirleen, yeah.” His words were fast, conciliatory.

Greedy.

Myself with My eyeballs shifted to Sniff.

“You ever gonna say anything like that, Sniff?”

Sniff. “No, Shirleen, never. Not ever.”

“You sign your assignments Sniff Jackson?” I asked.

Sniff’s short- “Well...yeah,” he answered, like it was the stupidest question he heard.

It was, *hard*, And that was all I could stand.

So that was when I went down.

Maybe to “Boys!” Moses called sharply.

But my boys had their hands on me.

They *had me*.

They caught me before I fell. And like every time, Sniff gave into my brother and he let Roam lift me into his arms and hold me close as he carried me out of my bedroom, down the hall of our home, to our living room where he put me on the couch next to him and gathered me in his arms.

And I wept.



I sobbed.

g back, I held on to my boy.

Until I realized something crucial was missing.

I pulled my face out of his neck and saw Sniff standing close  
me?” I hovering.

“You better get down here before she blows,” Roam warned. “Ag:  
finished.

Sniff moved, burrowing in.

I was still a mess, and only slightly recovering from my episode, b  
were teenagers and they hadn’t yet learned to read a woman right, so I  
no shape at all for Roam to announce, “I wanna make it official. I wa  
to a court and get the name Roman Jackson. I’m eighteen now and I  
that. I don’t want anyone asking me what Roam means anymore, and  
’d ever want anyone wondering why my name isn’t the same as yours.”

The holler that tore from me probably shook the windows.

“Shit,” Roam muttered over my head.

“Too soon,” Sniff muttered over my head too.

Roam decided to pack it all in since the damage was done.

“You know, while you’re in this state, Sniff wants his name cha  
Julien Jackson, for you...and Jules.”

his big My body started bucking with my tears, but fortunately this time  
walked silent.

1 where “No offense to you, Shirleen, but you kinda can’t make Shirleer  
dude’s name,” Sniff said.

The sound of my choked laughter could be heard through my co

tears.

If it happened for them, it didn't matter that it had happened for me

But like it was for me, it was going to happen for them.

to us, It was going to happen for my sons.

They were going to let the old go.

ain," he And be reborn.

"Shit, is she ever gonna quit crying?" Sniff asked Roam.

That was when I pushed myself up and found I was sitting between them on the couch, both of them turned to me, their arms around me, caging me in

I grabbed hold of Sniff's jaw, gave it a gentle squeeze and let go, saying, "Son, if you curse in front of me one more time—"

can do "Roam cursed and you didn't give him sh...stuff for it," Sniff clipped

I don't I turned to Roam and grabbed his jaw, gave it a gentle squeeze, and let go, saying, "You need to mind that mouth, son."

"Shirleen, you got a worse mouth than either of us do," Roam said out.

"I'm an adult."

nged to "We're both eighteen," Sniff reminded me.

"There's worse we could do," Roam added.

it was This was all true.

Stymied.

into a "When I'm not feeding you or putting a roof over your heads, you talk however you like," I decreed.

ntinued Roam shook his head, his lips twitching.

Sniff rolled his eyes, his lips twitching.

They totally were not going to quit cursing.

Lord.

My boys.

*My boys.*

*Mine.*

Roam's lip twitch vanished as something caught his attention, but when they went hard, and he instantly announced, "What I'd like to talk about is me in. what this player is doin' here."

Oh boy.

I faced front to see Moses standing, looking hot, arms crossed over his chest, still no blazer (though he'd buttoned his shirt), smiling and letting it drop at me.

I knew my mascara was everywhere.

Damn.

"Get me a tissue, Sniff," I ordered.

He did not get me a tissue.

He pushed up to his feet. "Give us an explanation, Shirleen."

*Oh boy.*

I pushed up to my feet and Roam came up with me.

"You do not give the orders in this house," I said to Sniff.

"You didn't know we'd come back," Roam accused me.

"What are you doing back?" I rapped out, though I had to admit I was curious.

“You asked us seven thousand times if we’d be gone on Friday and long we’d be out, and you were in your room every night gabbin’ phone, and you had a full Rock Chick Gathering in your friggin’ bedroom it was hard to miss you were planning a little somethin’ somethin’,” explained.

“And anyway, you didn’t even *try* to hide those roses,” Sniff put in Hell.

his face  
now is

“Not real good with the covert, are you, baby?” Moses teased.

I shot him big eyes.

He shot me a big smile.

on his  
ilgently

“We’ll talk to *you* in a minute,” Roam bit off.

“Roam!” I snapped.

He shot me a scowl.

I turned to Sniff. “So you knew I had something planned gentleman friend and you came home and pounded on my bedroom door

“We gotta look out for you,” Roam answered for Sniff.

“Yeah, that’s like, *our job*,” Sniff added.

Okay.

Now I couldn’t be pissed at them.

Shit.

“And we looked out for you and found out you got yourself tan; with some player,” Roam finished.

t I was

“He’s not a player, Roam,” I said quietly.

“Yeah, he’s not, why’s he all cool with you makin’ sure we’re

nd how before he'll come get you for a date? Hunh? Why won't he walk on the knock on the door like a man and meet your sons like..." Roam leaned forward, some, "a man?"

' Roam All good questions.

l. "Moses has daughters and we were going to give it some time and I slid my eyes to Moses before I looked back at Roam, "we were confused what was building between us, we were going to bring all of you into it"

Roam shut his mouth.

Apparently that was a good answer.

Thank the Lord.

"You got daughters?" Sniff asked Moses.

Shit.

Roam reached behind me and smacked Sniff up the backside of his pants

with a "Dude," he warned low.

or?" "What?" Sniff asked. "That's cool. Shirleen's got two boys. This with this guy, she might get some girls. That's pretty awesome."

Lord God, I loved that kid.

"How about we try this again," Moses decided to officially end the conversation. He walked forward with his hand up. "I'm Moses Rick and I really, *really* like your momma."

gled up He aimed his hand at Roam first.

Roam looked at it a beat before he took it and shook it.

When they let go, he offered it to Sniff.

re gone Sniff took it and shook it and they let go.

up and Moses then took my hand and led me one step toward him.

led into Both boys closed in at my back.

Yep.

Loved those kids.

when,”  
ident in  
t.” he said, giving my hand a squeeze.

“Moses—” I started.

“You don’t have to do that,” Sniff said quickly.

“Yeah, we...maybe, uh...didn’t play this right,” Roam put in.

“And Shirleen’s got a pretty dress on,” Sniff continued.

“So, yeah, maybe we should just head back out and...” Roam  
trail.  
; head.

Moses kept hold of my hand but looked between the boys.

“I think tonight was a big night for all of you.” He looked down  
; works  
“Rain check? Tomorrow night?”

“No really, you guys should go out,” Sniff said, again quickly.

But it was a different kind of quickly.

fter the  
ardson I turned suspicious eyes to Sniff. “What’s going on?”

He shook his head. “Nothin’. We just...Roam and me just wanted  
to you tomorrow night.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Tomorrow night,” Roam put in firmly. “Go out with, u  
Richardson here and we’ll get into it then.”

My heart squeezed.

But my eyes hit the ceiling.

“Oh Lord,” I looked between them, “which of you got who pregnant?”

“Shirleen!” Sniff bit off.

“Neither, Shirleen, Jesus,” Roam huffed out.

“Then what do you need to talk to me about tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Baby, think maybe now is the time I should—” Moses started, squeezing my hand another squeeze.

“I’m goin’ to work for Lee after I graduate,” Roam cut him off to cut the conversation short.

Okay.

All right.

When they were interns, this was fine. They worked computer support desks, watching monitors in the (relative) safety of the office. I could handle the idea of them becoming members of the team when it was all future. All fan

But then it wasn’t *real*. It wasn’t Roam having his own bulletproof office or the *locker room*.

I felt the vapors coming on.

“And I’m going into the Army,” Sniff announced.

Say...

What?

The *Army*?

The United States Army that fought *wars*?

h...Mr. It was official.

I had the vapors.

For certain.

nt?”

ked.

giving

leclare.

uff and

he idea

tasy.

vest in



TEN



## FUTURE WAS BRIGHT

*Shirleen*

“Babe.”

That was Moses.

“Nope,” I snapped, listening to my phone ring in my ear as I paced the living room.

“Shirleen.”

That was Sniff.

“Unh-unh,” I bit out, still listening.

“C’mon, Shirleen.”

That was Roam.

I didn’t have to reply to him.

Lee picked up.

“Hey, Shirleen. Everything good?”

“So you had some conversations with my boys about their future, huh?”

“Oh shit,” Lee muttered.

“Hell yeah, oh shit. You think to talk to me about that?” I asked her.

When he spoke again, he sounded mildly confused. “They’re recruits. I thought you were on board with that.”

My voice was pitched so high, it was a wonder all my crystal shatter when I demanded, “*You told Sniff to go into the Army!*”

“Shirleen—”

“The enemy *shoots at you* when you’re in the Army, Lee,” I explained to him.

“I know, Shirleen, I was in the Army, remember?” Lee returned.

I ignored that.

“Or they blow you up with land mines and shit.”

ced my “Have you talked with Sniff about this?” Lee asked.

“Yeah, he said, ‘I’m going into the Army.’ Then, after I fought an attack of the vapors, he shared, ‘Lee and the guys think it’s a good idea that was when I got my phone and called to *lay you out.*’”

“He wants something that’s his,” Lee said low.

And that low caught my attention.

Lee kept at me.

“He’s been in Roam’s shadow for years. He needs out from that shadow. He needs to find out who he is without his brother always at his side. The groundwork has been laid for him to be the man he wants to be, but he can’t walk that path alone now so in the end, who he becomes...it’s his.”

futures, *Goddamn*, I hated it when these men made sense.

“And Roam?” I clipped out. “He’s eighteen, Lee, and you’re gonna get him on?”  
atedly.

already “He knows he has six months in the office working with Brody. Working with Jack. Working with Monty so he can learn how intel that’s gathered didn’t formed into tactics and strategy. Working with *you* to understand the back side of things.”

“And that puts him at just over eighteen and a half and then you educated he’s all good?” I asked.

“No,” Lee retorted. “After that six months, he’s got three shadowing each man. Hector, Vance, Mace, Luke and finally me. He’s by seeing, then doing, and he won’t be involved in anything that he’s ready for. That’s for him but that’s also for the protection of the team that, he’s got a year where he gets assignments I’d give Bobby on Assignments where he doesn’t go out without a partner until I’m sure off an step that up and he can go out alone. That’s nearly two years in training. So year of what’s essentially probation before I’ll even consider him taking on as a full-fledged member of the team.”

Huh.

Well.

Shit.

hat. He “And just so this is all out there, if Sniff gets out of the armed force the right he wants a spot on my team, he knows that’s guaranteed,” Lee corrected. “The Army will teach him most of what he’ll need to know and we’ll fill any gaps. I have no questions in my mind he’ll serve his country and come me the man I’ll need him to be. And when that happens, Shirleen, I’ll forward to having him on my crew.”

na take

Huh.

Well.

Working *Shit.*  
erred is “Are you done laying me out now?” Lee asked impatiently.  
usiness “You should have told me,” I declared.  
u think “It’s the men we both want them to be that they wanted to do  
obviously, I agreed,” he shot back.  
months Huh.  
'll learn Fuck.  
ie’s not Whatever.  
1. After “Roam is an exceptionally gifted writer,” I shared.  
r Matt. “Good. I’ll look forward to reading his mission reports,” Lee re  
e I can “Now are we done?”  
g and a “You’re a pain in my ass, Liam Nightingale,” I told him.  
ing shit “Glad that feeling is mutual. Now we’re done,” he muttered.  
And then he hung up on me.  
Slowly, I took the phone from my ear and narrowed my eyes at it.  
“Baby,” Moses whispered.  
I raised narrowed eyes to him.  
ces and He did not, as many did (and should), rear back.  
rtinued. He grinned at me.  
ll fill in “Have I failed to tell you I was in the Army?” he asked.  
ome to He did, indeed, fail to tell me that.  
'll look “You were in the Army?” Sniff asked.  
Moses turned to him. “Yeah. It’s a good choice, son.”

Lord!

“The vapors are comin’ back,” I declared.

Three sets of male eyes turned to me.

It and All three were amused, though two were also exasperated.

The brain behind one of those sets made a decision.

“You’re on duty,” Roam announced, his attention to Moses while the sleeve of Sniff’s shirt and pulling him toward the front door. “Her are serious. Good luck,” he finished.

“You’re gonna need it,” Sniff muttered as he followed Roam.

turned. Moses just shook his head, smiling and watching them go.

I moved to the wide hall that led by the kitchen to the front door.

“Where you boys going?” I called.

“Out,” Roam answered, but he wasn’t done. He stopped at the door and turned my way. “And for the record, we’re not at the place in this situation where we’re down with some dude spending the night with our mom.”

“Totally not down,” Sniff agreed.

I felt Moses come to stand behind me as I studied the ceiling.

But one could say (that one being *me*) I absolutely *loved* the word “mom” coming out of my boy’s mouth.

The front door opened and I looked there.

“Be good. Do right. Make good decisions. And *come home safe mother!*” The last I shouted because the door was closing. “Those boys mumbled irritably after the door shut.

I barely got that out before I was turned into Moses’s body with h

around me.

I put my hands on his biceps (as best I could with one, seeing as I s my phone) and looked up at his face.

His eyes were roving over mine.

“Was in the room when both of my daughters were born,” he tagging  
strangely.

vapors “Yeah?” I asked.

His gaze finally stopped on mine. “So that was the third most b thing I witnessed in my life.”

Oh no.

I was going to start crying again.

I swatted his arm and warned, “You’re gonna make me cry.”

oor and  
ituation “Have at it. All your mascara’s gone already. There’s no reason  
back anymore.”

Oh no!

I put my hands over my face, conking my own damned self w phone.

ds “our Lord, I was a mess.

He shoved my face in his chest.

“Are you even partially clued in to how much those boys love yo  
to your” whispered into the top of my ’fro.

boys,” I I was.

I absolutely was.

is arms As an answer, I took my hands from my face, wrapped my arms

him and pressed my cheek to his chest.

still had Boy, it felt so good being in his arms, I could just hug this man...

For eternity.

“Yeah,” I whispered back.

shared “So if anyone ever told me I was gonna get caught by my woman  
teenage boys after making love to her for the first time, necessitat  
scrambling to get my clothes on, and help her with hers, I’d take that  
beautiful they told me I got to witness what I just saw.”

I tipped my head back, mascara traces all over my cheeks and all.

“Sorry they got in your face,” I said.

“I’m not,” he replied.

I smiled at him.

to hold Moses smiled back and gave me a squeeze.

“You hungry?” he asked.

I was feeling a might peckish.

with my I nodded.

He smiled again. “You wanna fix your face?”

Was he seriously asking that question?

I nodded again.

you?” he “Go fix your face, baby,” he urged quietly, dipping his head and to  
his mouth to mine. “I’ll wait.”

I touched my mouth to his right back.

Then I scooted out of his arms to my room to fix my face.

around When I got there, my bathroom seemed different.

Like it was shiny and new.

I had a feeling I'd have to get used to that kind of strangeness all me.

Though I wouldn't know, I'd never experienced it.

n's two But my guess was that was how things seemed when your futu  
ing me bright.

blow if



JUST FYI...

I would find my guess was right.

ouching



Like it was shiny and new.

I had a feeling I'd have to get used to that kind of strangeness all around me.

Though I wouldn't know, I'd never experienced it.

But my guess was that was how things seemed when your future was bright.



JUST FYI...

I would find my guess was right.

# EPILOGUE

SHE MADE ME BELIEVE

## *Moses*

*S*ome time later...

“HEY.”

Moses looked to the man walking through the side door that led into the vestibule.

“Hey, son,” he replied.

Roman started toward Moses.

The tux looked good on him.

Roman shifted his trajectory, moved to the closed door to the sanctuary and looked through the windows.

“It’s my understanding you and Julien are supposed to be walking the aisle and stand at that altar right about now, meetin’ me there,” Moses observed.

Roman turned his head Moses’s way and shared, “Sent a message to her. She knows I need some time.”

Moses drew breath in through his nose.

It was then Roman walked to him, asking, “She been cryin’ a lot?”

“Daisy’s had to put her false eyelashes back on three times.”

A ghost of a smile formed on his lips.

“Say what you gotta say, son, there’s important shit that’s gotta g today,” Moses prompted.

Roman focused on him in a way that Moses held his breath.

“Nothing will ever harm her.”

His tone was utterly inflexible.

Moses’s throat closed.

“And I will love and protect her and the children I’ll make wi daughter until the day I die,” Roman continued.

“Roam,” Moses forced out.

into the “She means everything to me,” Roman told him.

“You haven’t hidden that,” Moses replied.

And praise be to the Lord he had not.

Not from the beginning.

Roman examined Moses’s face before he nodded and moved back into the sanctuary doors to the vestibule.

He looked through the window.

’ out to “Thank you for lovin’ her the way you do,” he said quietly.

’ He was looking at his momma sitting in the front pew.

to her. “It hasn’t been hard,” Moses replied in the same tone.

And that was the damned truth.

Roman turned to him.

“She made me believe in love,” he shared.

Moses nodded.

et done “And she taught me how to do it,” Roman went on.

Moses knew full well the way Shirleen loved. He’d now had y learning how deep that woman could love.

“Then my baby girl is gonna get what she deserves.”

“Yes, she is.”

That was a vow.

th your Moses moved to him and lifted his hand to rest it on that broad sho

“Son, go,” he whispered. “Go on. Marry my daughter.”

Roman lifted his hand and took hold of the side of Moses’s neck.

After a firm squeeze, he dropped it and Moses’s hand fell when stepped away.

Moses watched as Roman walked back to the door that led to t hall.

k to the He moved through it.

The door closed.

Moses turned his attention from there to the window Roman ha looking through.

The mother of the groom was sitting in her pew on her boy’s si head turned, leaned over the arm rest at the end of the pew, her eyes through the window at her husband.

They’d had a number of discussions about where they were going t

Shirleen Richardson was not to be deterred from taking her boy's side. Since her mother was sitting on her side, his daughter was entirely with her dad sitting beside her fiancé's momma.

"You'll get to see my face from there, Daddy. Not my back," she said to him.

That had decided it.

He watched his wife tip her head to the side.

She had some subtle glitter in that gorgeous 'fro.

She looked beautiful.

He smiled at her.

Her pretty face got soft before she forced herself to toughen up. She wouldn't lose it (again) and she smiled back.

He watched her turn to face forward.

Only then did he step away to wait for his daughter to come to him.

It was his girl's wedding day and Moses Richardson was not jittery. He was not worried. He had no reservations.

He knew, from the beginning, that Roman Jackson would do anything to win his girl then hold her safe.

He'd even proved it.

Without a doubt.

So Moses had not a single reservation.

He loved that man like a son.

And he knew Roman would make his girl happy.

Though, through the ride that had brought them all right there,

side. could have done without the kidnappings.

y down

**The End**

e'd told

so she

.

ery. He

hing to

Moses

could have done without the kidnappings.

**The End**

# Rock Chick

BONUS CHAPTER

ADDED  
OCTOBER 1, 2023







# BONUS CONTENT

## HIS FUTURE

### **Moses**

“Chill, baby,” he murmured.

“Chill is not an option, my man,” his woman replied.

At this comment, he heard nothing from the back.

This was both surprising and unsurprising.

At least with Julien, who had something to say or grunt at or at the least verbally smirk about, with everything.

Moses was noticing, though, that since graduation a few weeks after his official sign on with the Army, Julien was shirking off the last remnants of boyhood.

He was off to boot camp in a month. Maybe it was the fact that weightier things were on his mind. Maybe, in preparation for what he was about to face, he was fully letting the teachings of the men at Night Investigations sink in.

Maybe he was just growing up.

Roman, on the other hand, finished growing up around a decade ago.

“They know how I feel about you,” Moses reminded her. “And my girls. How is this going to go bad?”

He was at the wheel of Shirleen’s Navigator (a rite of passage relationship, seeing as Roman nor Julien even blinked when she handed and not one of them, the keys).

He chanced a glance from the road to Shirleen and saw the looks aiming at him.

He turned back to the road and chuckled.

“Nothing is funny, Moses,” she warned.

“Be nervous, sweetheart,” he invited. “You’ll meet them soon, so get over it soon.”

They were joining his girls for dinner, meaning she and her boy meeting his daughters for the first time.

The full Jackson onslaught, rather than them meeting just Shirleen had been Alice’s idea.

“No reason to draw it out, Dad,” she’d said like he had an IQ of 100. “You come as a package with us, right? So does she with her boys. Let’s get it all out of the way in one night. At Bastien’s.”

He couldn’t fault her logic.

Though he had the sense that part of it was about her angling to Bastien’s. It was her favorite restaurant.

Their turn with their mom was over that evening. Judith had her own car so she was driving them to Bastien’s. After dinner, he’d go home with his girls, Shirleen would go home with her boys, and he’d add more time to his head trying to figure out how long he had to wait to ask her to move.

they're one day, he could just go home with her.

He heard Shirleen make a freaked noise, and he knew it was her. Bastien's sign was in sight.

He decided to ignore that, and so did the boys.

But he felt his lips quirk.

He found a parking spot and they all got out.

But Moses halted in his intention to go to Shirleen and claim her.

This was because Roman had already done it, and Julien was sentry, eyes on Moses to share he needed to keep distant.

So they'd passed the rite of passage of Moses taking the wheel that

And definitely in the last couple of months, the boys had given in. They were getting used to him and they liked him being with their mom

But they were protective.

He loved that for her.

And they'd had her all to themselves for a while, and they were adjusting to a new man in their midst.

He'd give them the time they needed.

Just as long as they didn't take too much.

Bottom line, he'd always have to share her with them, but she had so much love to give, that wouldn't be a problem.

Therefore, Moses hung removed while Roman, head bent to Shirleen in her space, gave his mom a peptalk. She nodded. He spoke so low she couldn't hear him. She nodded again. Roman spoke more. She squatted on her shoulders and lifted her chin.

There it was.

because She then turned to Moses. "Right, let's do this."

Moses smiled at her and finally made his approach. He took her hand and together they led the way inside.

He knew his girls were already there because he'd seen Judith outside.

And he was prepared for what was going to happen next because his daughters were beautiful, and her boys were boys.

However, he wasn't prepared for *how* it happened.

it night. Shirleen had told him both boys didn't discriminate, but for the moment Roman liked white girls. Julien's attraction tended to lean toward Black girls.

1. So he figured it would be Julien whose interest would be piqued.

But when they'd walked up to the table Judith and Alice were occupying, he noted that Julien had a wary, aloof smile on his face and they were still standing protectively close to Shirleen.

Roman, however, had his gaze locked on Alice, and he looked like he'd been struck by lightning.

Shirleen might have been nervous, but she didn't miss this.

had so Her eyes flew to Moses, and they got big.

This was the lot of any man with daughters. It wasn't as if it was the first time it happened.

Moses However, it was the first time it happened when his Alice appeared here. She had been struck by that same lightning bolt. So far, with so much to do in the world she needed to fix, she hadn't really shown a lot of interest in boys.

That just ended.

Damn.

“Right, since everybody seems to be down with staring at each other and do this,” Julien stated. “I’m Julien. This is my brother Roman. And this is my mom, Shirleen.”

He indicated his brother and mother with a jerk of his thumb.

Moses stepped up. “And these are my girls, Judith and Alice.”  
Judith and Alice gestured both in turn.

“Hi,” Judith said.

“Hey,” Alice whispered, eyes still glued to Roman.

“Hey,” he whispered back, his voice a low slither of velvet that he had never heard before. It was an invitation in that one syllable, even Moses felt drawn in.

Damn.

“Nice to meet you girls,” Shirleen said warmly, and added humorously, “Let’s all sit.”

Roman, Julien and Moses bumped into each other, all intent on making room for Shirleen with her chair.

Judith laughed.

Alice sighed (still watching Roman).

Roman and Julien backed off and Moses moved in.

They had a round table so, at first, he was pleased Julien slid into the seat beside Alice.

Until Roman slid into the seat on the other side of Shirleen, which meant he had direct eye contact with his youngest, something he immediately noticed.

Moses shared some eye contact with Shirleen.

her, I'll     The expression on her face said both *It's not my fault!* and *It isn't*  
s is our*didn't know this might happen!*

He hadn't been with her long, but he still could read that.

Judith waded in. "So, uh, you work for a private investigation firm  
e." He     She asked this to Shirleen, therefore, she startled when she got  
simultaneous answers of "Yes."

"You work for a private investigations firm?" Alice breathed  
Roman.

ld such     "Yeah," he answered.

"Wow, that's cool," she said.

"Yeah," he confirmed on a sly smile.

riedly.     Moses turned his head again, leaned in and looked over Sh  
shoulder as he whispered in her ear, "Kill me."

to help     He heard her soft laughter.

Now it was him who didn't think anything was funny.

When he turned back, he saw Judith's attention on him. He  
Shirleen. But when he caught her gaze, she quickly looked away.

He didn't know how to read that, so, with no other choice at that m  
the seathe let it be.

"It's the best outfit in the Rocky Mountain region," Julien bragged.

1 meant     "I've heard of them," Judith put in. "There's books written about  
stigated<sub>right?</sub>"

"Books you're not allowed to read," Moses warned.

“Whatever, Dad,” she mumbled, aiming the side eye at her sister t  
*like we* meant for him.

Two teenage girls, he knew what the side eye meant. Absolutely.

“What do you do there?” Alice asked Roman.

?” “I’m the office manager,” Shirleen cut in swiftly so Roman c  
t three continue to charm Moses’s youngest with his ultra-cool badassness.

“I bet that’s interesting,” Judith said with a tentative smile at Shirle  
toward “It sure is, pretty thing,” Shirleen replied.

Judith’s smile became less tentative, and it moved to her dad.

Right, okay.

That smile was all good.

The server came to take their drink orders.

irleen’s “What’s everyone getting to eat?” Moses asked when the server let

The girls chimed in, Roman and Julien had never been there, so th  
his cue to study their menus, as did Shirleen, even though he knew  
already decided what she wanted. His woman was good at online r  
im and when it came to menus.

Things smoothed out from there, mostly because Julien demonstra  
moment, he was, indeed, simply growing up. Or at least that was what Moses  
the *Jesus, man, cool it!* looks he was aiming Roman’s way.

Reading these looks, Roman checked back in to what was happen  
its importance, which was both good and bad.  
it them,

Good, because Moses no longer had to bear witness to his dau  
yearning gazes at Shirleen’s son.



hat was Bad, because Roman was no longer returning those gazes, so seemed confused he'd suddenly lost interest.

Which might be why, when their entrees were served, she tried to find out more about the boy who caught her eye.

ouldn't "So, I don't want to be nosy, but we're all kinda in this together, and I told us you guys were adopted." She gave a sweet smile to Julien and Shireen. "I mean, it's also kinda obvious, you know."

Julien smiled back. "Yeah."

"We were runaways," Roman announced, his attention fixed to Ali.

Her attention shifted right to him, then she sat completely still and stared at him.

Judith's gaze raced to her dad.

Shirleen's hand curled around Moses's thigh.

ft. "I got shot," Roman continued.

ey took Judith gasped.

v she'd Alice put her hand on the table like she needed to steady herself and almost fell out of her chair.

ted that Shirleen's nails dug into his thigh.

read in "When I got out of the hospital," Roman carried on, "Shirleen took Sniff's more brother to me than most blood brothers are to each other, and where I go, he goes, and vice versa. That means he moved in too. We fell in love with her, she fell in love with us, we all decided to make our relationship official. We both turned eighteen, we made it official. That's what happened."

At this point, Shirleen took away the one she had on Moses and

o Alice other hand on Roman's forearm that was resting on the table.

“Who’s Sniff?” Judith whispered across the table to her father.

to learn He jerked his head to the side, Julien’s way.

She nodded.

nd Dad “Why’d you get shot?” Alice asked Roman quietly.

added, It was Julien who answered.

“We’re tight with a lady who’s a social worker at the shelter wh  
hung. Long story, but she had some bad guys after her, one who wa  
ce. kill her. He got his opportunity, and Roam put himself in front of one  
I stared bullets.”

Alice lifted both hands to the base of her throat.

Now Judith was also staring at Roman.

Moses stifled a groan, because that kind of show of devotion wou  
the same thing from his youngest for maybe the rest of time.

“He got me, but he still got her. Shot her twice. It’s just that I  
or she’d survivor, so she survived,” Roman muttered, a sliver of embarrassme  
creeping into his words.

“Seems like you’re a survivor too,” Alice noted.

o me in. “Only because Law taught me how,” he replied. He glanced at S  
ther, so “And Shirleen did too.”

e fell in “Law’s the social worker?” Judith asked.

family “Jules. Law’s her street name,” Julien answered. “I named myse  
how it her because Shirl-Ike isn’t a badass name, not to mention, it isn’t  
name.”

put her

Judith laughed. Alice tore her eyes off Roman and laughed too.

After giving a visible squeeze, Shirleen took her hand from Roman and carried on eating.

“And you’re going into the Army?” Judith inquired of Julien, taking them out of a conversation that would only serve to make his y fall deeper for Roman.

“Ship out next month,” Julien replied.

They managed more normal through the entrees and desserts, and t here we  
nted to that, Moses was pleased to see the girls respond to Shirleen’s unique b  
e of the warmth and sass.

When they were finished, his family walked hers to their car and S  
handed out hugs to both his girls. He got handshakes from both he  
And his girls looked happy their dad was happy when he kissed Shir  
ld earn the mouth before he helped her in the passenger seat.

Roman was now behind the wheel.

aw’s a He didn’t pull from the curb, though, until Moses and his girls wer  
nt now car.

Shirleen raised good kids.

He’d paid for it, so even though it drove Judith nuts whenever sc  
hirleen. else drove her baby, Moses took the wheel.

“So?” he asked, pulling out behind the Navigator after he adjus  
seat, something else that drove Judith nuts.

lf after “I like her a lot!” Judith exclaimed, and she had to mean it, cons  
even a her dad just adjusted her seat. “Her Afro is *insane*. It’s so cool. The  
much beauty in Black hair, and she’s all about it.”

He could not argue this because he felt the same way.

n's arm "Alice?" He directed this at the back seat.

"She loves them," Alice said.

nkfully "Of course she does," Moses replied. "They're her boys."

oungest "No, I mean, Julien, he's obviously not hers, but if you were blind never know it. It's like they're *hers* hers. Not like she adopted them."

"It is like that," Moses concurred.

hrough "I noticed that too," Judith said. "It was really sweet. I thought Jul  
lend of going to give us a talking to so we'd be nice to her when he first she  
the table."

hirleen "They're protective," Moses murmured.

r boys. "I like that for her. Sons should be protective of their momma  
leen on daughters are protective of their daddies," Judith decreed.

"Exactly like that, sweetheart," Moses confirmed.

e in the They let it lie then, and Moses didn't think it was a good idea t  
further opinions out of them. It was one dinner. They all had a lot of  
to know each other to do. Shirleen was a beautiful, sharp, funny, kind-  
woman with an enormous amount of love to give. His daughters wei  
omeone girls to their souls.

They had time.

sted the It was all going to be great.

sidering That said, he was glad the first meeting was over. He loved his da  
re's so and Shirleen was the best woman he'd ever met, and although he didn  
it, he was nervous too.

He got them home and got them settled, not that there was much

They had the switching houses thing down, something that nagged every time it happened. But it was part of their lives. Nothing he could do about it, and nothing he would, because the alternatives were either not to move or to have stayed with their mother, which was not going to happen.

He was in his bedroom, about to call Shirleen to get her take care of the laundry, when there was a knock on the door.

“Yeah?” he called.

Judith opened the door and peeked her head around. “Can we come in for a second, Dad?”

“Always,” he answered, throwing out an arm to invite her to sit with him on his bed.

As she came his way, he gave consideration to the consolidation of households. Like

He liked his place in Stapleton. There was a ton of greenspace. It was small, a newish build, so upkeep was minimal. And he’d given Judith a hand in decorating it, so his girl was all over the place.

This included his bedroom, with the long, black headboard she’d selected that went well beyond the mattress on either side. There were also cubbies on either side for books and shit, free floating shelves in front of them for putting other shit, and built-in gold lamps above the cubbies with swing arms so you could aim them over your book, or out of the way.

She’d rested some cool African-inspired art on the ledge at the top of the bed, with some family photos.

And she’d found this dark-brown leather bolster she’d instructed him to rest his plethora of pillows against at the head when he made the bed. It hadn’t been big on that bolster at the time of purchase, but now he could

his gut deny, it looked good.

ould do On the other hand, Shirleen had at least a thousand more square feet of space than the place was stamped with her. Glamor and attitude and in-your-face. He liked that style. He liked her. He liked being on the space.

It was going to be interesting to see what they decided.

“I gotta warn you about Mom,” Judith announced when they were talking. As sitting on the bed, Moses with one bent leg up on the mattress, turned to give her his full attention, Judith cross-legged, angled his way.

He expected her to dish on her newly love-struck sister, not waste time about their mother.

Shit.

“What’s happening, sweetheart?” he asked, with practice, keeping his patience for their mom out of his voice.

“Well, obviously, we had to dress nicer for Bastien’s, which we did. She noticed, and she asked why, and...I don’t know. I don’t know what she selected. It was my decision. I figure I told her because, first, she gets stupid. We keep things from her.”

Judith, the eldest, noticed more of her mother’s bullshit when she was talking.

Alice had baby birds that had fallen out of their nests to save, and she was talking on the playground to tell off. She noticed it. But it took longer to dig up her skin than it did Judith.

“You shouldn’t call your mom stupid, honey,” Moses rebuked gently.

“She acts stupid sometimes, Dad. It should be called what it is.”

She wasn't wrong. He didn't want his daughter to speak of her  
bet, and that way, but she wasn't eight anymore. She was nearly grown. Eve  
re-take-she got closer to becoming the woman she was going to be. As muc  
; in her wanted to freeze them as his babies forever, he had to let her bloc  
whoever that was.

On this thought, his phone rang. They both saw the screen said S  
re both Calling.

l to her "Two seconds," he said to his girl, then took the call. "Baby, I'm  
with Judith. Call you back."

urn him "Okay, darlin'. Since it's probably on your mind, just to say, a  
here. But talk soon," she replied, and he heard the disconnect of her  
him what he needed before he did it himself.

ing his Yeah, he had to figure out how to come home with Shirleen.

He put the phone down.

lid, and "I like her for you," Judith whispered.

y I told He felt his chest get hot. "Sweetheart."

d when "I hate you alone when we're not here. You're too good of a gu  
alone."

it was Right, enough of this mature adult dad and maturing-to-an-adult d  
shit.

bullies He pulled her out of crossed legs and shifted them into the be  
g under against his big pillows and leather bolster, his girl tucked to his side v  
head on his shoulder.

tly. "Talk to me," he demanded.

"Okay, so I told Mom we were meeting you and your new girlfrie

motherher sons. It was after, when we talked about it in the car, that Alice a  
ry day, was the right thing to do. I mean, obviously, since you wanted us to m  
h as he she's going to be around awhile."

om into "She is," he confirmed.

"So Mom's eventually gonna find out."

Shirleen "She would."

"And I think she's mad about it."

talkin' He sighed.

ll good She pushed up and looked down at him. "But again, Dad, *stupid*  
' giving married to another guy. Why can't she just *move on*?"

"I don't know, honey," he muttered, hating he didn't have the a  
and pissed at his ex because she was still finding opportunities to put  
that place. He gave his girl a squeeze and shared, "I'm glad you ar  
sister are smart enough to read this for what it is. And I love how sw  
interested you were in Shirleen, Julien and Roman."

"Particularly Alice with Roman," she mumbled, settling back into  
y to be man, sounding amused, and although this didn't amuse Moses, he l  
hear his girl was.

aughter "Yeah," he grunted.

She giggled.

ed, him He gave her another squeeze. "And the bottom line is, there's  
with her your mom can do about it."

"Doesn't mean she's not gonna dream up something to do."

"Maybe so, but it's not your problem. It's not mine. It's hers."

end and "She might try to make it your problem."



greed it     God, his baby girl.

meet her,     “Listen to me, honey,” he urged. “Don’t take this on. Definitely before anything happens. And not after. It’s summer. You got that into you’re doin’ and other than that, all you gotta concentrate on is havin’ and bein’ young. Next summer, you’re gonna be graduating and gettin’ ready for college, and then you’re gonna be in college and then grown up startin’ your life. After that, you’ll be *in* life and working for the man to pay your bills and findin’ your way to get ahead. You warned me. I listened for it. But now, your job is done. Hear me?”

l. She’s     “I hear you, Dad.”

                  “Wanna get your sister in here and watch a movie?”

answers,     She lifted up her head. “*Wakanda Forever?*”

                  “I haven’t we already seen that?”

                  “If we don’t pick one, Alice is gonna make us watch *Judas and the Black Messiah* again. It’s a great movie, but we need a happy ending.”

her old     “*Boomerang?*” he suggested.

liked to     She shook her head.

                  “*House Party?*”

                  She rolled her eyes, then shook her head again.

                  “*Waiting to Exhale?*”

nothing     “God, Dad, get in the new millennium.”

                  He grinned at her. “You pick. Go get your sister. And popcorn. I’ll call Shirleen we’re doin’ movie night and I’ll call her tomorrow.”

                  She jumped over him and hopped off the bed.

At the door, she turned and warned, “You two can’t gang up on  
ely not make me watch *Poetic Justice* again.”

ernship “That movie is a classic.”

in’ fun “We’ve seen it seventeen times.”

g ready “Maybe...four,” he contradicted.

up and “Whatever, we’re watching *Girls Trip*,” she decided then flounced  
oney to door.  
ve you

Oh shit.

He hadn’t seen that one.

He texted his woman that she had the stamp of approval, it was all  
they were doing a movie, and he’d call her tomorrow.

While he was looking up a rating and the trailer for *Girls Trip*,  
back, *Love that for you, baby. Like I said, all good here too. Talk tomo*  
*e Black*

So he was smiling when his girls, both of them this time, flounced  
in.

Then he got another text with advice from Shirleen.

*That movie...maybe fast forward through the grapefruit scene.*

Oh shit.



need to He didn’t expect it.

Even with the warning.

They’d had a good run. Nothing like this had happened in a long w

me and Though, if it was going to happen, he would have thought at least to start with a shot across the bow.

Not a hammering on the door the first day the girls were back with their mother.

Or...not day.

out the Evening, seeing as he and Shirleen were in his kitchen making dinner together.

No one should bother you at dinnertime.

Not even your crazy ex-wife.

ll good, Shirleen looked to him, and considering she worked in a place where she knew the protocol for a lockdown when someone was armed and in breach of the office (he knew all about it because he read it in those books she did confirm it), she was conditioned to reacting to a different level of danger than he was about to face.

he got  
arrow.  
ed back

And that was her response to the hammering.

“Yvonne,” he explained.

“Oowee,” she mumbled, her beautiful, tawny eyes growing large.

He’d told her about Judith’s warning. She hadn’t said much, although her eyes had blazed with hellfire. She reined that in and just commiserated. It wasn’t her way to share he was on his own, it was his cross to bear. It wasn’t her way to share she was as powerless to stop Yvonne as he was, so there wasn’t much to say.

The hammering kept happening.

Those gorgeous eyes grew larger.

hile.

Moses got close and put his lips to hers. “I’ll take care of it.”

ast it'd "You need backup, I know a man who has grenades," she offer  
close up, he could see the warmth in her eyes, the humor, but a  
th their concern.

And it was then he knew he was in love with this woman.

He let that feeling settle in him, and somehow, the pounding at th  
dinner muted, everything around them grew hazy, and it was him and Shir  
this world, and no other.

Moses snapped out of it when she tipped her head to the side and h  
grew questioning.

ere she "Keep Tex on standby," he joked, feeling her strength seep into h  
tent to something more.

oks, but It wasn't that she was a survivor, but she was giving that to him too

kind of It was in her eyes. He realized it had been for a while.

She felt like he did.

Suddenly, he didn't give two shits Yvonne was at the door, exc  
part where he had to leave Shirleen to go deal with her.

"Gotcha," she replied, and that word was a little breathy.

ugh her But even so, with Shirleen, she might be joking as well, or she mi  
d. This Tex when he went downstairs to the front door.

was her With regret, he left her and did that, opened it enough to stan  
wasn't keeping his hand on the knob on the inside.

"I really thought we were done with this shit, Yvonne."

"It's my understanding you introduced our daughters to another wo

"We've been divorced awhile," he reminded her.

ed, and “When things got serious with Demetri, I told you when they were also the to meet him.”

“You did. They were a lot younger then. And you didn’t ask me if it was all right with it. You told me it was going to happen.”

he door “And that makes a difference?”

Shirleen in “To me it does.”

“Obviously.”

her gaze Fuck, he was so damned tired of this shit.

him, and “Yvonne, why am I standing here talking to you when I should be talking with the chicken I got upstairs?”

“Because I’m not happy you didn’t offer me the same courtesy as you.”

He felt her, so he looked over his shoulder and up the stairs.

Shirleen was standing on the landing. Not curiosity. His woman had accepted the back.

He lifted his chin to her.

She crossed her arms in front of her.

ght call “Is she in there?” Yvonne’s voice was pitched higher.

He returned his attention to her and forced her back by stepping out

d in it, He closed the door behind him.

“Right, this conversation needs to be had,” Moses began. “You have called me with your concerns, but instead, you wanted to control the situation. To address this situation, yes. I’m seeing someone. Yvonne’s serious. No, it isn’t any of your business. No, you don’t have any right to be a man.”

e going pissed at me because I didn't warn you I was going to introduce her boys to our girls. You know me. I've dated. I've seen other women. I if I was introduced any of them to Judith and Alice because they weren't in my that way, so I didn't make them a part of my daughters' lives. I'm kind of man, I'm definitely not that kind of father. You know that to don't owe you any explanations. And when it'll have no bearing on you I don't owe you any notice that I'm going to share something with our

"I think we have differing opinions on that," she retorted.

"I don't give a fuck what you think."

dealing Her head snapped back like she was avoiding a blow.

Moses kept at her.

as I did "Since you're here, it gives me the opportunity to tell you, now that addressed this latest situation, I'm no longer going to get involved more. We share two beautiful, smart, sweet daughters. That's it. I had his nearly all grown. There'll be some conversations we'll have to have sure. But other than those, you live your life, I live mine, and I'm done

"You can't—"

t. "I can, Yvonne. Test me," he warned. "You stay here, pounding door, you won't be talking to me next. You'll be explaining to an of the law why you're pounding on my door after I told you I'm done and you need to go home. Now, I'll be sure to make that clear. I'm talking. You need to go home. This continues, I'll get a restraining order

1 could She gasped.

reate a "I'm not jokin'. Seriously. Test me. But just to say, this test, it's es, it's whether you pass or fail." ht to be

and her On that, he turned, walked in, closed the door and locked it.

haven't He did the last part with eyes to Shirleen, who had jumped back w  
y life in opened the door.

not that "You couldn't stop yourself, could you?" he asked, feeling his lips

o. So I "I had to have my man's back."

our life, "By eavesdropping?"

girls." "Honey," she hooked arms with him, and they moved to the stair  
was hot." She mimicked his deep voice. "On you whether you pass  
Good parting shot."

His lips stopped twitching because he was chuckling. "I'm gl  
approve."

hat I've "I'm thinkin' the chicken can wait. Shirleen needs some betwe  
in any sheets time with her man to congratulate him for being calm and co  
They're under duress, and still kicking ass, just verbally."

ve, I'm He was still chuckling as they made the living room, but he didn'  
." them to the kitchen.

on my He guided them to the next flight of stairs, seeing as his bedroom  
ficer of the top level.

talking "You spoil a girl," she whispered, her eyes on him, and they'd fire

m done "I wanna say this is all for you, and I'll be all about you, baby. Bu  
er." also for me."

"You bet your ass."

on you At that, he burst out laughing.

But she wasn't done.

“Though, you might need to give me five to call Tex and tell him when he can turn back with his grenades.”

Moses’s laughter got louder, even if he didn’t know if she was joking or twitching. And since he was all about Shirleen and how funny she was and how they were going to get up to next, he didn’t even notice he’d closed the door on an ugly chapter in his past that had tried to haunt him.

And when he did, she didn’t pound on the door, still trying to do it right or fail, back to his past while he guided his future to his bed.

and you



Moses lay in bed and watched Shirleen, wearing his shirt, walk from the bathroom to the bed.

It was after chicken, greens, mashed potatoes and gravy.

It was after they watched a little TV.

It was after their second round of between-the-sheets time.

And seeing her in his shirt, those long, shapely legs on display, wishing he was twenty-three again so he could keep her up all night.

He threw back the covers.

She reversed her trajectory from her big tote, where she’d have a clean pair of panties and her morning toiletries stashed, and she came to him.

She put a knee to the bed and joined him, getting close, tangling her legs, but sitting up on a forearm on the mattress at his side.

“Need to change, baby,” she told him. “I fell asleep in your shirt.”



n so he remember? The buttons kept snagging the sheets.”

“In a second, we need to talk.”

ng. Her expression changed from peaceful, post-chill night spent to  
id what post-coital to alert.

he door “You okay?”

“I met the boys. We instigated sleepovers, here, not at yours, in de  
rag him to your sons. You and the boys met my girls. You eavesdroppe  
situation with Yvonne.”

She smiled.

He felt his lips twitch again but kept talking.

“Today, before you got here, I cleared out two drawers and some  
om the space for you.”

Her brows shot up.

“No more nighties in your purse,” he declared. “Bring some over to  
And double up on toiletries.”

“Ooo, my man. Doubling up on toiletries. I can’t wait to tell th  
he was Chicks. They’ll throw a party.”

He laughed.

“No, really,” she asserted. “They’ll throw a party. Cashev  
nightie, everything.” She snuggled closer. “But I’ll make sure someone makes  
ame to a blanket.”

He kept laughing, regardless that he knew she didn’t lie. She’  
ing their holding back the RCs from throwing a Shirleen’s Got a Man party sin  
got together, so she was now holding them back by a thread.

rt once, He got serious, wrapped an arm around her and pulled her closer.

“It’s time for the next step, baby.”

“I’m in.”

together, He let out a slow breath, happy that was where she was at, happy that she  
so easily gave it to him.

“So then, next up, and I’m not talking now. We’re not ready. They aren’t ready. T  
ference aren’t ready. But when we’re ready, we need to have discussed it so well  
d on a what we’re gonna do.”

“You mean, who’s going to give up their kickass crib to move in there?  
one.”

He fucking *loved* they were on the same page.

the closet “That’s what I mean,” he confirmed.

“Okay, I gotta say, Moses, my house is the only safe home my boy ever had. I know Judith pimped this place out for you, and it’s gorgeous  
o leave. maybe, if we pick my place, we can give her a budget and she can run  
livin’ room.” She thought about it. “And maybe my dining room.”

the Rock He also loved that she offered that.

Even so.

“You have a big house, Shirleen. You and me, when all the kids are  
vs and to be gone soon, we don’t need that much space. Julien is going to be  
pigs in Army, and he’s probably not ever going to move back in.” He watched  
cloud pass through her eyes at the thought of her son leaving her, so he  
delay moving on to the next. “And Roman will probably stick around  
d been while, but not long.”  
ice they

She nodded. “He’s already savin’ for a down payment on a car  
deposit for an apartment. He’s in training with Lee, but even in traini

pays well. He might need a roommate for a year or two, but he's warned me, he's wanting his freedom."

that she "Okay, so..."

He let that hang.

he kids She picked it up. "So, Christmas. Thanksgiving. Their birthday. Fourth of July. Eventual wives and babies. When they went years with no safe space they could call their home, I want them to hie other next fifteen years knowing it's there, waiting for them, on holiday whatever might come."

"You're right," he muttered.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

ys have "Why?" he asked.

ous. So "You obviously have reservations."

edo my "No, except your boys will be gone, but I'm sensing you'll want their rooms as they are, and we have three more years of high school. Alice, one with Judith, and summers when they come home from college.

"I hear you," she replied. "And they each have their own rooms here at my place, Judith could take the guest room upstairs. We can convert the junk room downstairs for Alice."

hed the "Isn't Roman's room downstairs?"

e didn't Her lips curved up. "Okay, maybe Judith downstairs and Alice upstairs.

id for a "How about we talk to them?" he suggested. "This isn't happening tomorrow. You put your stuff in your new drawers, double up on the first and second floors. We can wait until Judith graduates, and maybe they'll be down with Lee together during holidays and summers when she's home from college."

already “My man with a plan.”

He grinned.

She leaned in and kissed it.

When she pulled back, she cupped his face with her hand and stroked his cheek with her thumb.

“You sure you’re okay after Yvonne came callin’?”

“Old Yvonne would have pounded on the door again after I closed my eyes and kissed her face. Maybe she heard me this time.”

“Maybe.” She didn’t sound sure.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does if it upsets you,” Shirleen disagreed. “It does if it upsets Judith.”

“Judith gets upset because I get upset. If I don’t get upset, why would I give her a squeeze, “baby, I got no reason to be upset. Then like I said, it doesn’t matter.”

He wrapped his other arm around her and pulled her full on his back.

“She’s the past,” he whispered. “I got my future in my arms and that’s my sole focus. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she whispered in return.

“Love you, Shirleen Jackson.”

He’d never said the words.

That was why her tawny eyes fired and stayed warm as she melted into his arms.

“Love you too, Moses Richardson.”

He slid a hand to the base of her neck and pulled her to him.

And Moses embraced his future.  
His future embraced him back.

ked his

ed it in

idith.”

ch,” he  
said. It

ly.

at’s my

ed into

And Moses embraced his future.

His future embraced him back.

---



**KristenAshley.net**  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Go back in time before the Rock Chicks and  
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# ROCK CHICK REAWAKENING



# ROCK CHICK REAWAKENING

PROLOGUE

***Building Castles***

*Daisy*

“You’re a lunatic!”

“You didn’t think that when I had my mouth wrapped around your

“That’s because you couldn’t use it to talk!”

“Kiss my ass!”

“Not anymore, babe. We’re done.”

“Like I care.”

“You’ll care when you got no one’s dick to suck to pay your cable

My eyes were closed. I was lying alone in my dark room, on my my twin bed.

My bed was lumpy, seeing as Momma bought it from a yard sale didn’t feel that.

And my room was small and it didn’t smell all that great, this mostly from the carpet. It smelled like that from all the way back when we first moved in. Momma didn’t bother to do anything and got mad complained about it, so I’d tried to clean it myself, three times. But that

just wouldn't go away.

I didn't smell the smell either.

And I could hear the words but even though they were coming from down the hall, I was somewhere else.

I was building castles.

"Do not go there!"

"Fuck off."

"I'm tellin' you, *do not go there!*"

The door to my bedroom opened and so did my eyes, the beautiful was building melting clean away.

dick!" I could smell the smell.

I could feel the lumps.

I could sense the closeness of the room, its thin walls, its fading, in-places wallpaper, the ceiling light I never turned on because the ceiling had been shattered on a night I didn't like to remember and now it made the room bright when I turned on the light.

bill." "Daisy, sweetheart?" he called.

back in I looked to the door.

He was in shadows, those caused by the dark of my room and the light from the door. The only light was coming from somewhere else, probably her because it was real late.

Tall, he had a beer belly but he also had broad shoulders.

I liked his shoulders. And his eyes. They were always twinkling at me. They looked at me. Even when he was mad at Momma, he'd look at me

was like he forced the ugly out so all he'd ever give me was just the tw

And he always used that soft voice when he talked to me.

om just Always, even when he was fighting with Momma, like just then.

“*Get away from that door!*” my mother screeched and I s  
shadowed man jolt as she shoved him to the side.

He came back, hand up, finger pointed in her face.

“Chill,” he bit off.

I wanted to close my eyes but I didn't. I never could in times lik  
castle I Times like these, it was impossible to build castles. I knew this  
certain.

Seeing as I'd tried.

His head swung back to me.

ripped- “I gotta go, girl. You need somethin', all you gotta—”

ver had “She don't need shit!” my mother snapped.

e it too His head turned to her again. He hesitated and I watched as hi  
moved when he took in a deep breath.

Then he looked back to me.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered.

he hall. So was I.

room, I was young, only ten, but I understood why he was sorry.

But he wasn't sorrier than me.

g when “You tell *her* you're sorry. You treat me like garbage and you  
e and it you're sorry?” Momma shouted and the shadowed man jolted again l  
she'd shoved him again.

inkle. He reached in, grabbed the knob to my bedroom door, and pulled i

He did stuff like this too, a lot, because they fought, a lot. He  
make it so I wouldn't see. Coming down the hall and closing my d  
aw the when they were in the middle of it and I was in the living room or l  
telling me quietly, "Maybe you should go to your room, sweetheart, ar  
that door, yeah?"

But he could never make it so I wouldn't hear.

e these. With that, he disappeared.

sure as But she didn't.

Her voice still came at me.

"That's it? You're just leaving?"

Nothing from him.

But more from her.

"You can't be serious. You cannot be freaking serious!"

is body He didn't reply.

"You're such an asshole. A total *freaking asshole*."

He wasn't an asshole.

He was a good one.

The *only* good one.

Or, at least, the only good one I'd met.

He didn't hit her. He didn't hit me. Both of these my daddy did be  
tell *her* took off and we never saw him again. And other ones did besides (l  
because me).

He didn't steal her money (Daddy did that too). He didn't look at



t to. way that made my skin feel funny (it was good that Daddy didn't do that).  
tried to didn't eat all the food in the house and drink all Momma's beer and bourbon.  
oor. Or and then complain there was never any food or beer or bourbon in the  
kitchen, and ride her behind until she got in her junker car and went out to get  
id close for him (and yeah, Daddy had done that too).

Those kinds stayed around a lot longer than this one did.

Too long.

But never that long.

They always left.

Like Daddy did.

And I never missed them.

Yes, even Daddy.

But I'd miss this one with his twinkly eyes and his soft voice and the way  
he called me sweetheart not like that was what I was, but that was what I  
had. A sweet heart.

No, there were not a lot of those kinds. Not for Momma.

Not for me.

*"Stretch!"* she shrieked. *"You get back here, Stretch! Get back here!"*

The front door slammed.

*"Fucking motherfucker!"* Momma screamed.

I closed my eyes.

Let myself drift away.

And I started again to build my castle.

before he  
her and  
me in a



at). He “A Southern woman always has her table laid.”

bourbon  
e house  
et more

Miss Annamae was talking to me in her pretty dining room with dining room table all laid with the finest china, sparkling crystal, silver, and its big bunch of light-purply-blue hydrangeas with cream roses in the middle.

She adjusted a napkin in its holder sitting on a plate that was sitting on a charger that was resting on a pressed linen tablecloth.

“If she’s fortunate,” Miss Annamae went on, and standing opposite to her, the fingers of my hands wrapped over the back of a tall chair, ears, like I always was when I was with Miss Annamae, I watched her move around the table with difficulty. She wasn’t a young woman. She also had a beaten one, even losing both her kids and her husband and having to live on alone. “She can change it with the seasons. I have Christmas china that has faded blue eyes turned to me and a smile set the wrinkles in her face shifting. “But you’ve seen that, haven’t you, Miss Daisy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

And I had. Miss Annamae did her house up real pretty at Christmas and always made sure I came over so she could show me all around and give me a tin of Christmas cookies she baked herself.

Momma had been working for Miss Annamae now for over two years and it was the longest job she’d ever had. She usually got fired a lot soon after that.

I reckoned Miss Annamae kept her on as her daily girl not because she liked her or she did good work and kept a tidy house (which she did in Miss Annamae’s and definitely not ours). I also didn’t reckon she kept her because she liked the fact Momma would be late a lot, show up hungry,

lot, call off sick a lot, or one of her “men friends” would show a  
the big Annamae’s big, graceful mansion and cause a ruckus.

shining No, I didn’t reckon any of this was why Miss Annamae kept her or

oses set I didn’t know why Miss Annamae kept Momma on.

Except for the fact she was a good Southern woman.

ng on a Miss Annamae turned to the big window that faced her back  
calling, “Come here, child.”

site the I moved directly to her.

hair, all When I got there, she lifted her scrawny, veined hand to my shoul  
r move rested it there.

wasn’t It felt light and warm.

to carry a.” Her “She works in her garden, a good Southern woman,” she shared, h  
face to still aimed out the window. “She cuts her own flowers, arranges them  
own table.”

We didn’t have any flowers at our house. It was actually good w  
as. She yard died during that drought last summer and became a big patch of c  
give me scrub. It looked better not overgrown. Like someone lived there, th  
didn’t care. Instead of looking like no one lived there, and no one wou  
want to.

years. It The landlord didn’t agree. He got up in Momma’s face about it a  
er than she ignored him like she always ignored him when he got up in h  
about things. Like the neighbors complaining about the fights or whe  
use she play her music too loud, which was also a lot, on all counts.

not, not “You have sweet tea in your fridge, sugar, always,” she said to me.

t her on I nodded, looking from her colorful garden to her and feeling  
gover a

at Misspressure from her hand on my shoulder as she rested into me, giving weight.

1. I stood strong and took it. I'd take all her weight if she needed to to me. That's how much I liked Miss Annamae. And she had *all* r seeing as Momma was how she was, her men were how they were, the school were how they were, the teachers, the lady behind the counte garden, store.

Everybody.

der and Yes, Miss Annamae had all my like mostly because there was no c who'd let me give it to them.

This made it sad that Momma didn't let me come with her t Annamae's house often, even though Miss Annamae always acted l her eyes was real happy when I came. And I knew down deep in my heart this for her because I helped Momma and did all the gross stuff, like cleaning the so she could have a break from that kind of thing. But I did it a wl hen thebetter than Momma did so Miss Annamae actually had the house k dirt andway she was paying to keep it.

ey just Still, Momma didn't let me come often. Not even when I was in lld ever and I had to walk home by myself and stay there by myself until she f work (and then again stayed by myself when she went right back out).

lot. But I didn't know why this was either, except, even if it was mean to er face Momma didn't like it that Miss Annamae liked me.

n she'd I didn't understand this. If Momma was quiet and respectful, lik Annamae had told me a lady should be, a lot more people would like h

I was beginning to think Momma didn't care if anyone liked . 3 some much, she'd rather they *didn't* like her so she didn't have to both



at a restaurant, he gives you the seat with the best view. He stands when you stand. He offers you his hand when it's needed. And if you've got a hole in them with a drill and a hankerin' to use it, then you use it, girl. But if you do get a hole in them, you got hooks you need put up in your bathroom, he best be gettin' 'em for you and doin' it without any backtalk or delay."

"Yes, ma'am," I whispered, the wonders of such a boy as I'd never known making my insides feel funny.

"As for you, Miss Daisy, you take care of yourself," she corrected. "Don't you leave the house without your hair set, your face done, and your earrings in." She patted my shoulder but then gripped again tight. "You're older, you'll find your style. And don't you let anyone tell you what to do. You're a good girl in a way I know you'll always be a good girl. Be polite. Good posture. Chin up. Show your pride, sugar. Be who you are, however that evolves and don't let anyone cut you down."

Gosh, but it felt nice her saying I was a good girl.

It was harder to think of not letting anyone cut me down. That was what was happening. I'd decided just to get used to it.

She let my shoulder go to put her hand in the pocket of the white flowered dress.

She pulled out a small, dark-blue box with a white bow.

I took in a hard, quick breath.

"And last, Miss Daisy, a good Southern woman always has her manners," she said softly.

I looked from the box to Miss Annamae, but she was blurry seeing I had tears in my eyes.

When you “Miss Annamae.” My voice was croaky.

a touch She lifted the box to me.

Don't and “Daisy, a gift is offered, you take it, you express your gratitude ar  
on that you write a thank you note,” she instructed.

I never I nodded, taking the box.

I pulled the bow but held it in my fist as I flipped open the top.

Continued. Inside, on a delicate gold chain, the prettiest, daintiest thing I'd ev  
and your hung add-a-pearls. Their creamy gleam made me feel dazzled. The on  
You get middle was the biggest, getting a little bit smaller as they went dow  
that is. side.

around of “One for every year of your life, child,” Miss Annamae told m  
you are counted them.

She was right.

There were thirteen.

always And I was thirteen.

That day.

pretty, It was my birthday.

“Now, to keep that set the way it should be, you come to me when  
fifteen and I'll add the next two pearls, balance it out,” she shared.

My gaze drifted up to hers. “Miss Annamae,” I repeated, my vo  
pearls,” sounding all choked.

And suddenly, with a swiftness I'd never seen her move, she was  
ing as I into my face.

“You hide that from your momma. You hear Miss Annamae?”

I nodded, doing it fast.

I heard her.

id later, Oh yes, I did.

“You wear those when the time’s right. They’re yours, Daisy. wear them when the time is right.” She drew in a breath so big, I s draw it, before her voice got softer but no less strong. “They’re yours er seen, However you need them when the time comes, they’re yours.”

e in the I didn’t understand what she meant by that but she was being so s m each felt it best to nod, and again do it fast.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

e and I The fierce went out of her face and she cocked her head to the si soft, white hair swept back in the bun filtering with the sunlight cor her window like she was an angel, she smiled as she lifted a ha brushed my bangs sideways on my forehead.

“Every girl needs pretty things, every girl needs a little bit of however she can get it, but every *Southern* girl needs her pearl whispered back.

“*Daisy!*” Momma yelled from somewhere in the house.

you’re I jumped.

ice still Miss Annamae closed her eyes. Her wrinkles shifted again with he before she opened them, looked at me and said, talking quietly, “I your momma’s got good in her, girl, but just to say, a Southern woma leaned not yell.”

I nodded again.

She nodded back. “Go find your momma, child.”



I stepped away, took another step, and started to turn.

But I stopped and turned back.

“Miss Annamae?”

So you “I’m right here, Daisy.”

saw her What did I say?

, child. No.

erious I How did I say *all* I wanted to say?

The words got caught, twisting, filling my throat.

“*Daisy!* Where are you?” Momma shouted.

de. Her “I know,” Miss Annamae said, and from the look on her face I  
ning in some miracle she *did* know exactly what I needed to say without me  
nd and to say it. “Now go to your momma, child.”

I nodded yet again, the feeling in my throat making wet pop out  
sparkle eyes.

s,” she I swallowed, took in a big breath, dashed my hand on my eye  
shoved the box into the pocket of my jeans.

Then I turned and walked slowly out of the dining room.

Like a lady.

r frown

'm sure

an *does*



“I suppose you’ll be wantin’ some cake and ice cream or som  
Momma muttered when we were in her car on the way back home fro  
Annamae’s house.

“No, Momma. It’s okay.”

“Now she’s bein’ that passive-aggressive bullshit,” Momm muttering, now to herself, sort of. It was also to me.

I closed my mouth.

Momma didn’t stop at the store.

In the end, I made myself bologna sandwiches for my birthday while Momma got ready to go out to DuLane’s Roadhouse.

But after she was gone, I ate my sandwiches sitting in front of the ‘ I did it wearing pearls.

And three days later, Momma lost her job with Miss Annamae se  
saw by she went to work (late) and found Miss Annamae had passed quietly  
having night while she was sleeping.

t in my



res and

I walked away from Quick Swap with the cash in my pocket.

I went right to the bus station.

I bought a ticket and sat outside on the bench, my two suitcases sidewalk by my boots.

The bus came.

The driver tossed my beat-up, second-hand suitcases under the bu  
climbed in.

ethin’,”

m Miss

There weren’t a lot of folks there, which was good. I didn’t fe  
friendly mood and Miss Annamae had taught me that a lady can :  
stranger a friend in no time flat...and she *should*.

I picked a seat at the back by the window.

a kept I rested my head against it and stared out, unseeing.

I heard the bus start up and felt it pull away from the curb.

When it did, I also felt the wet drip from my eye, rolling down my  
Then some more from the other eye.

dinner I let myself have that. Just for a spell. Doing it, lifting my ha  
touching my fingers to my neck where the pearls I'd worn every day  
TV and last two years no longer were.

They were at Quick Swap.

eing as The time had come when I needed them.

7 in the I knew Miss Annamae wouldn't mind. I understood her  
understood a lot of things. Most of it I wished I didn't.

They were gone, all I had of her. She gave them to me on my th  
birthday and I'd pawned them on my nineteenth.

I'd miss them.

But not as much as I missed her.

When it was time to be done crying, I made myself be done. I ope  
on the purse with its cracked fake leather and fished out my hankie (l  
Southern women carried hankies). I also pulled out my compact. I dab  
eyes and carefully, swaying with the bus's movements in order not to  
mess of it (but I'd been doing it now for some time and I was good  
is and I fixed my makeup.

ael in a I returned everything to my purse, kept it tucked in my lap, and  
make a down the long bus out the front window.

We were headed west.

It was going to be a long journey.

I rested my head back on the seat and closed my eyes.

Passing the time as the bus rolled over the miles, I built castles.

r cheek.

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looked

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**KristenAshley.net**  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Rock Chicks spin-off series takes you on the journeys of four men who might not (or they might) seem like the men of your dreams.

**Mystery Man**  
the story of Hawk and Gwen kicks off the  
**Dream Man Series**





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Dream Man Series Book One

While drinking cosmopolitans in a fabulous little black dress, Gwen Kidd meets the man of her dreams. Then she takes him home. The next morning she wakes up alone. But her fear that she lost her dream man turns her relationship with a mystery man when, night after night in the dead of winter, he comes back for more. Hoping it will blossom into something real, she tries to win him.

But she doesn't even know his name.

Gwen's struggling with the decision to end their crazy non-relationship when her sister-from-hell, Ginger's best friend pays a visit and warns that if she and her sister don't get smart, they'll both get d-e-a-d, dead.

Gwen has no clue what's going on, but she's used to Ginger's antics and decides to lay the problem on her sister's biker boyfriend's doorstep. She catches the eye of the biker hottie president of the Motorcycle Club. Not long after she gets the attention of a Denver detective who surely is on the cover of the DPD's Hot Guy calendar, she lastly she hits the Denver Underground radar with a big, loud ping.



This means Gwen's Mystery Man, Cabe "Hawk" Delgado has to keep her safe. But when Hawk gets a dose of Gwen in the daylight makes the decision that he finally wants real with Gwen.

√

However, when Gwen gets a dose of badass, bossy, straight-talker in the daylight, she decides she's done.

Thus begins the head to head of Commando vs. Cosmo Girl as he woos Gwen in his unique way, and Gwen survives firebombs, kidnappings, hot pursuits by biker hotties and gorgeous police detectives discovers the heartbreaking reason why Hawk kept her at arm's length

And as all this happens, Gwen finds that her sister's trouble is serious trouble and she must decide who to keep alive: her sister-from-then she the man of her dreams.

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f night,  
she lets

[Click here to read an excerpt of Mystery Man.](#)

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ar. And

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[Click here to read an excerpt of Mystery Man.](#)

# MYSTERY MAN

# MYSTERY MAN

## **Prologue**

### *Mystery Man*

I felt the covers slide down my body then a hand light on the small back. It was so warm it was hot, like the blood that ran through its vein faster than the blood of any average man.

If this was true, it wouldn't surprise me.

I opened my eyes and it was dark. It was always dark when he visited.

I had a moment like every moment I had when he showed. A moment of sanity. A moment where my mind said to close my eyes, open my mouth and tell him to go away.

But if I did, I knew he would. He wouldn't say a word. As silent as death came, he'd leave.

And he'd never come back.

But this was the right thing to do. The smart thing to do. The sane thing to do.

And I was thinking of doing it. Honest to God, I was. I thought of doing it every time.

Then I felt his weight hit the bed and his body stretching out beside me.

He turned me into him. I opened my mouth to speak. Before I could say a sane thing, his mouth was on mine.

And for the next two hours, I didn't think at all.

But I felt. I felt *a lot*.

And all of it was *good*.

\*\*\*\*

It was still dark when his shadow moved in the room.

I lay in bed and watched him move. He didn't make a noise. It was silent. There was a rustle of clothes but other than that, silence.

Even as a shadow, I saw he had masculine grace. Powerful, manly grace. That was weird too. Just watching my mystery man putting on his pants was like watching a badass, macho dance if there was such a thing. Of course, there wasn't except in my bedroom when he came to visit. Not that he was getting ready to leave.

It was so fascinating I should sell tickets. But if I did, I'd have to probably already shared with half of Denver, all of them getting the private show. That already messed with my head enough, that and the fact that he came at all. I let him come then he made me come after work. Then, often, like tonight, repeat.

He moved to the bed and I watched that too. He bent low. I felt the weight of his hand on my knee, his fingers curling around the back. He lightly touched my hip, his lips skimming across my skin, making it tingle. Then he covers up my body to my waist where he dropped them.

I was mostly on my belly but partly on my side. My arm was curled, hand tucked under my face on the pillow. His body moved in that direction against mine.

do the his fingers slid under my hair, pulling it gently back and his lips came  
ear.

“Later, babe,” he whispered.

“Later,” I whispered back.

His head moved infinitesimally and his lips skimmed the skin at the  
of my ear before his tongue touched there. That made my skin tingle  
much my whole body shivered.

is weird. He pulled the covers up to my shoulder.

Finally, he turned and he was gone.

isculine No noise, not even the door opening and closing. He was just gone  
clothes he'd never even been there.

ing. Of Freaking crazy.

), when I stared at my bedroom door awhile. My body felt warm, sated and  
My mind did not feel the same.

share. I I turned onto my back and tucked the covers around my naked  
air own stared at the ceiling.

the fact I didn't even know his name.

hich he “God,” I whispered, “I am *such* a slut.”

he heat

## Chapter One

7 kissed

*D-e-a-d, Dead*

slid the The next morning I was sitting at my computer in my home office.

I should have been working. I had three deadlines over the next  
rooked, weeks and I'd barely begun the work. I was a freelance editor. I got  
rection, the hour and if I didn't work that hour, I didn't get paid. I had a m

e to my feed, my own. I had a body to clothe, a body that liked all sorts of clothes. I craved them, so I had to feed the habit or things could get nasty. My cosmopolitan addiction and cosmos didn't come cheap. And I had a house that was fixing up. Therefore, I needed to get paid.

ne back  
too, so  
Okay, that wasn't strictly true. I wasn't fixing up my house. My I did some of the work. My friend Troy did the rest. So I should say that house I was guilting, begging and emotionally blackmailing others into fixing up.

ie. Like  
But still, it needed fixing up and cabinets and tile didn't march into Cabinet and Tile Land into my house and say, "We want to live with you. Like Gwendolyn Kidd, afix us to your walls!"

That only happened in my dreams, of which I had many, most of which were daydreams.

id tired.  
Like right then, sitting at my computer, one heel on the seat, my hand on my knee, my eyes staring out the window, I was thinking about my next body. I was daydreaming about changing our first man into a man who was Being smarter, funnier, and more mysterious. Being more alluring and interesting.

I'd hook him instantly with my rapier wit, my flair for conversational ability to discuss politics and world events intelligently. I'd tell my stories of expansive charity work all wrapped up with enticing local promises that promised a lifetime of mind-blowing orgasms, making him declare undying love for me.

ext two  
Or at least tell me his name.

paid by  
Instead, I was drunk when we met, and definitely not any of that.

outh to  
I heard my doorbell go, a chime then a clunk and I started out



thes, itelaborate daydream which was beginning to get good.

I had a I got up and walked through my office into the upstairs hall m.  
house I mental note, again, to call Troy and see if he'd fix my doorbell for a s  
and a homemade pizza. This might mean he'd bring his annoying,  
Dad didconstantly bitching new girlfriend though, so I changed my mind and  
I had ato call my Dad.

o fixing I got to the bottom of my stairs and walked through my living  
ignoring the state of it, which was decorated in Fix Up Chic. In other  
h fromdust rags, paint brushes, power tools, not-so-power-tools, cans and t  
th you,practically everything, all of it jumbled and covered in a layer of dust.  
it through the area without my hands going to my head, fingers clench  
of themhair and mouth screaming, which I counted as progress.

I got to the entryway which was delineated by two narrow walls  
chin towith gorgeous stained glass.

Mystery Two years ago, that stained glass was my undoing.

reeting. Two years ago, approximately six months and two weeks prior to r  
ng andmy Mystery Man, I'd walked one single step into this ramble and wre  
house, saw that stained glass, turned to the realtor and announced, "I  
ion, myit."

humble The realtor's face had lit up.

ks that My father, who hadn't even made it into the house yet, turned his  
are his the heavens. His prayer lasted a long time. His lecture longer.

I still bought the house.

As usual, I should have listened to my Dad.

I looked out the narrow side window at the door and saw Da  
of my

sister's friend, standing out there.

aking a Shit.

ix pack Shit, shit, *shit*.

whiny, I hated Darla and Darla hated me. What the hell was she doing then  
decided

I searched behind her to see if my sister was lurking or perhaps hi  
the shrubbery. I wouldn't put it past Ginger and Darla to jump me, ti  
; room, the staircase and loot my house. In my darker daydreams, this w  
r words Ginger and Darla spent their days. I was convinced this was not far fr  
ubes of truth. No joke.

I made Darla's eyes came to me at the window. Her face scrunched up, :  
ing my what could be pretty, if she used a less heavy hand with the black e,  
her blush, and if her lip liner wasn't an entirely different shade as  
both fit gloss, not so pretty.

"I see you!" she shouted.

I sighed.

neeting Then I went to the door because Darla would shout the house dow  
eck of a liked my neighbors. They didn't need a biker bitch from hell standing  
'll take doorstep and shouting the house down at ten thirty in the morning.

I opened it but not far and moved to stand between it and the  
keeping my hand on the handle.

eyes to "Hey Darla," I greeted, trying to sound friendly and pretty pleas  
my effort.

"Fuck 'hey', is Ginger here?" Darla replied.

See!

rla, my Totally spent her days looting.

It took effort but I stopped my eyes from rolling.

“No,” I answered.

“She’s here, you better tell me,” she warned then she looked beyond me and shouted, “Ginger! Bitch, if you’re in there you better come out here fucking now!”

“Darla!” I snapped, “Keep your voice down!”

She craned her neck and bounced on her toes, yelling, “Ginger! You crazy, stupid, bitch! Get your ass out here!”

I shoved out the door, forcing her back and closed it behind me, making a yeliner, that. So shut up and *go*.”

“You shut up,” she shot back. “And *you* get smart. You’re helpin’ She lifted her hand, pointed her finger at me, thumb extended upward then she crooked her thumb and made a gunshot noise that puffed cheeks and made her lips vibrate. I would have taken a moment to realize how good she was with verbal sound effects if the serious as shit look on my eye wasn’t scaring the crap out of me.

So, instead of congratulating her on the only real talent I suspected I had, I whispered, “What?”

She dropped her hand, got up on her motorcycle-booted toes so we were eye-to-eye and said in a soft, scary voice, “D-e-a-d, *dead*. You and he don’t get smart. You get me?”

Then I asked a stupid question because the question was asked of there was always only one answer. The answer being yes.

“Is Ginger in some kind of trouble?”

Darla stared at me like I had a screw loose. She lifted her hand, gun thing with the sound effect, finger pointed at my head. Then she around and walked swiftly down my front steps.

I stood on my front porch staring at her. My mind absently noted t was wearing a tight tank top, an unzipped, black leather motorcycle j; short, frayed jeans skirt the wearing of which was a crime in several st a variety of reasons—both fashion and decency—black fishnet stockin motorcycle boots. It was around forty degrees outside. She didn't eve on a scarf.

The rest of my head was caught up with my sister and Darla's effect.

Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

\*\*\*\*

As I drove, I kept trying to tell myself this was a good plan. Know my first plan, the one where, after Darla left and I went back into my h walked directly to the phone and called my father, was the right plan a plan was garbage.

But my father and his wife Meredith had disowned Ginger a while was approximately ten seconds after they came home from a vaca Jamaica and lost their happy, island holiday mojo when they sa daughter. She was on her knees in the living room, her head between t of a bare-chested man, his jeans opened, his head lolled on the back couch because he was passed out. Ginger was so whacked on whate was taking she had no idea her activities were getting her nowhere.

And, incidentally, the living room was a disaster as was the rest house.

As you can probably see from this story, I was loath to bring my  
turned into another situation involving Ginger. Especially since this wasn't the  
story I had, it was just, for Dad and Meredith, the last. They were cut  
living a carefree, Ginger-free existence and I didn't want to rock that b  
bucket, a Therefore, I didn't call Dad.

Instead I thought of Ginger's boyfriend, Dog. Dog was a member  
biker gang and Dog was as rough as they come. But I'd met Dog.  
Dog. Dog was funny and he liked my sister. She was different around  
Not a lot, but at least she was palatable.

Okay, so Dog was likely a felon. As ironic as it was, he was  
influence on Ginger and those didn't come around very often. As in  
Not in twenty-five years. So, since I was getting the hint from  
Ginger's one and only friend, that Ginger's trouble was a little wor  
normal, I needed firstly to do something about it. Secondly, since th  
Ginger, call in reinforcements or better yet, lay the problem on their de  
Enter Dog.

I drove to the auto supply store on Broadway and found a spot  
street. Even before I knew Dog, and thus figured out this was prob  
front for a biker gang's nefarious dealings, I knew about this store.

It was called Ride and I'd shopped there mainly because I could  
the legsexuse for shopping anywhere. But Ride was awesome. It had cool  
of the there. I bought my windshield wiper fluid there. I bought new car ma  
ver she last year and they were the bomb, supreme car mats, the best I'd ev

And when I was in my twenties and going through one of my many  
in an effort to pimp my ride, I went there and bought a fluffy, pink s  
wheel cover and a glittery, pink Playboy Bunny thingie to hang fr

y father rearview mirror.

e worst Everyone knew Ride had a triple-bayed garage in the back but it  
urrently for normal cars and motorcycles. It was for custom-built ca  
oat. motorcycles and it was world famous. They built cars and bikes and  
were extremely cool. I'd read an article in *5280* magazine about the  
er of a Movie stars and celebrities bought cars and bikes from there and, fr  
I liked pictures, I could see why. I wanted one but I didn't have hund  
nd him. thousands of dollars so that was a bit down on my List of Things I  
right under a Tiffany's diamond bracelet which was directly under a  
a good Jimmy Choo shoes.

never. I got out of my car and walked down the sidewalk to Ride hop  
Darla, outfit was okay. I'd put my hair in a girlie ponytail at the top back  
se than head, I was wearing low-rider jeans, low-heeled boots and my biker  
his was Mine wasn't like Darla's. It was a distressed tan leather, had a bit of  
or. around the high waist, was lined with short, warm fur and had a six-in  
of fluffy fur at the sleeves. I thought it was *hot* and the deal I got or  
hotter. However, I wasn't sure about the fluffy fur. I didn't think bike  
on the concerned with animal rights. I thought they'd think it was an affront  
bably a brotherhood and they might garrote me.

Welp! Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

find an I straightened my shoulders, walked into the cavernous store and  
stuff in direct to the long counter at the front. It held one cash register even  
ts there sometimes the place could get packed. Since I didn't have his c  
er had. intention was to ask if someone there knew how I could get hold of  
phases, didn't expect to see tall, broad, inked-to-the max, long blond-hair  
steering standing at the other side of the counter. There was one big, rough bil  
om my on his side of the counter, three on the outside and all of them turned

the minute I walked in.

wasn't "Hey Dog," I called on a smile, walking toward him but stopping  
rs and when his eyes sliced to me.

and they Uh-oh.

place. His eyes narrowed and his face didn't get near to hiding the fact t  
om the look at me made him extremely pissed off.

reds of "Do not shit me," he growled. I took the nanosecond before I p  
[ Want, pants to try to remember the moves I'd learned in the one, half ho  
pair of defense class I took.

ing my When I made no response and didn't move, Dog repeated, "Do no  
: of my in here and fuckin' shit me."

jacket. "I'm not shitting you," I told him because, well, I wasn't.

quilting His brows flew up. "That cunt sent *you*?"

nch tuft Uh-oh again. Dog was using the c-word. I suspected that the  
it was wasn't worda-non-grata in Biker Club Land like it was in the rest  
rs were English-speaking world but still, it said a lot.

to their Before I could speak, Dog did. "She sent *you*. Jesus, Gwen. You  
warning, woman. Get your head outta your ass, turn that sweet tail a  
and *get... outta... here.*"

l turned Wow. Dog thought I had a sweet tail. He was scaring me but he  
though entirely unattractive so I thought that was kind of nice.

ell, my I focused on the matter at hand, took a deep breath and walked f  
Dog. I All of the bikers went on alert, or, more accurately, scary, biker guy a  
ed Dog stopped moving.

ker guy Then I said to Dog, "Ginger didn't send me."

d to me

“I’m bein’ cool with you, babe, go,” Dog replied.

ig dead “No, really, she didn’t. Darla came around this morning and she  
me out. She did this.” I lifted my hand up and did the gun thing w  
sound effect thing and my gun blast was nowhere near as good as he  
hat one forged ahead. “She seemed serious so I thought I’d check in with you  
sure Ginger is all right.”

eed my “Ginger is not all right,” Dog returned instantly. “Ginger is *far* f  
ur self-right.”

I closed my eyes. Then I sighed. I did the sigh thing loudly. I was  
ot come that since my sister made me sigh a lot and I had practice. Then I ope  
eyes.

“I take it you two aren’t together anymore,” I surmised.

“No, babe, we are *not*,” Dog confirmed.

c-word Damn.

of the “What’d she do now?” I asked.

“You don’t wanna know,” Dog answered.

got one “Are the police after her?”

i’ yours “Probably.”

I studied him. Then I asked, “But that’s not why she’s in trouble?”

wasn’t “Ginger’s got all kinds ‘a trouble, babe. But if the cops are af  
that’s the least of her worries.”

orward. “Oh boy,” I whispered.

lert so I “That’s about right,” Dog remarked then his eyes shifted ov  
shoulder.



I was turning to see what he was looking at when I heard a deep, freaked voice ask, "Who's this?"

Then I saw him.

I wasn't into biker dudes but I could seriously make a turn to the side for *this* guy.

He was tall-ish. He was broad and ripped and there was no "ish" either of those. He had a lot of tattoos up his arms and neck that I wanted to examine, up close, to the point of cataloguing them and writing books about them. He had salt and pepper hair, mainly pepper and it was long with a bit of wave but not too long or too wavy with the pepper in his salt and pepper goatee that hung a bit long at the end in a biker way that was mammoth cool. His cheeks were a couple days needing a shave which looked good on him too. He had spikes radiating in the tan skin around his blue eyes.

There were only two words to describe all that was him: *Biker Yum*

"Hey," I whispered and his eyes went from over my shoulder, looking at Dog, to me and my whole body did a shiver.

Then his blue eyes did a body scan and it shivered again.

They locked on mine and his gravelly voice growled, "Hey."

Another shiver.

Yowza!

"Tack, she's cool. She's with me," Dog stated. My body did a lurch and I turned to see he was around the counter and heading my way.

"I am?" I asked and Dog's gaze pinned me to the spot and said words, "Shut the fuck up!"

gravelly I shut the fuck up and turned back to Biker Hottie.

“Sheila know about her?” Biker Hottie asked.

I turned to look at Dog who was standing next to me. “Sheila?”

Harley “How many bitches you need?” Biker Hottie went on.

“She’s not my woman, brother, she’s a friend. She’s cool,  
” about answered.

instantly “All right. So who is she?” Biker Hottie, otherwise known as  
maybe pushed.

r, *black* “Her name’s Gwen,” Dog answered. Tack looked at me and I froze  
y. Ditto

his chin Then I watched his lips move to form my name softly.

lips past “Gwen.”

of pale Another shiver.

I’d always kind of liked my name. I always thought it was pretty  
*my*. saying it made me freaking *love* it.

looking at “So who are you, Gwen?” he asked me directly.

“I’m, um... a friend of Dog’s,” I told him.

“We established that, darlin’,” he informed me. “How do you know  
boy here?”

“She’s Ginger’s sister,” Dog said quickly. Tack’s entire, powerful  
frame went wired instantly and it was so damned scary, I forgot  
h and I breathe.

“Tell me she’s here to drop the money, brother,” Tack whisper  
without voice that was equally as scary as the way he was holding his body  
more.

“She and Ginger aren’t tight,” Dog explained. “Like I said, she’s good people.”

“She’s blood of the enemy, Dog,” Tack whispered.

Uh-oh-uh-oh-uh-oh.

,” Dog I didn’t want to be blood of the enemy, not anyone’s enemy especially not *this guy’s* enemy. He was hot but he was also freaking scary.

,” Tack, Time to sort things out, pronto.

I pulled my purse off my shoulder and tugged it open, muttering, “A pain in my ass. A pain in my ass since the day she cut off all the hair on my Barbies. She was three. I was too old for Barbies but they were *mine* and I couldn’t leave them alone? What’s with cutting their hair?” I looked at Dog and said, “I think that’s what psychos do. We should have known she was three, wielding scissors and causing mayhem and heartbreak.” Tackblabbing as I dug in my purse, found my checkbook and then kept searching for a pen declaring, “She was always, *always* a bad seed.”

I yanked out my checkbook, flipped it open, clicked my pen smartly and pointed to the check and looked at Tack.

ow my “All right, how much does she owe you?” I asked irately, not happy about bailing Ginger out *again*, especially when money and angry bikers were involved.

how to It was at this point I noted that Tack was staring down at me and he wasn’t being scary anymore. He was looking like he wanted to laugh at me in a good look.

, if not I didn’t want to see his good looks, not his expressions or the rest of his face (and hair and tats and body). I wanted to go home, whip up a batch of cookie dough and eat it. All.

's cool. "Well?" I snapped.

"Two million, three hundred and fifty-seven thousand, one hundred seven dollars," Tack answered. I felt my jaw go slack and his white flash smile surrounded by his dark goatee dazedly hit some recess of my brain. I finished with, "And twelve cents."

"Oh my God," I whispered.

Tack was still smiling when he dipped his head to my checkbook. "Ginger, you can get that on one line, peaches?"

"Oh my God," I repeated.

"You need mouth to mouth?" Tack asked, leaning in. I took a step back and clamped my mouth shut and shook my head. "Shame," he muttered, then he stepped back.

"My sister owes you over two million dollars?" I whispered.

"Yep," Tack replied.

"Over two million dollars?" I repeated, just to confirm.

"Yep," Tack confirmed.

"You haven't made an accountancy error?" I asked hopefully.

Tack's smile got wider and whiter. Then he crossed his big, tattooed arms over his wide, ripped chest and shook his head.

"Perhaps this is foreign currency and you forgot. Pesos, maybe. It was suggested.

"Nope," Tack returned.

"I don't have that kind of money," I told him something I was griping up on already knew.

“Sweet jacket, peaches, but I was guessin’ that,” he replied.

red and Well, the good news was, the tufts of fur didn’t turn him off. The  
ash of a news was, my sister owed him over two million dollars.

ain. He “I think it’ll take me a while to raise that kind of cash,” I explain  
finished, “maybe eternity.”

“Don’t got eternity to wait, darlin’,” he responded, still grinning s  
“Think if he burst out laughing it would not surprise me.

“I figured,” I muttered, clicked my pen, snapped shut my check  
shoved both in my purse and lost my mind.

p back, I mean, I had reason to lose my mind and that reason had a name.

leaning Ginger Penelope Kidd.

I looked up at Dog and demanded to know, “Why me? Why  
innocently being born and seven years later, *zap!* God curses me w  
sister from hell. Is it too much to ask for a sister who giggles with y  
trades makeup secrets? Is it too much to ask for a sister who finds  
sale, calls you immediately but peruses the racks to stash great de  
knows would look *hot* on you, so you’ll get a shot at them before  
nabs them? Is it too much to ask for a sister who’ll come over and wa  
ed arms new *Hawaii Five-O* with you so you can both perv on Steve McGar  
wish you had a Camaro? Is it? *Is it?*” I ended on a shout.

“be?” I “Gwen, babe, think you should calm down,” Dog muttered and  
swear I could read on his face that he was wondering if he should kn  
out for my own good.

uessing “Calm?” I yelled. “Calm?” I yelled again. “She owes you guys o  
million dollars. She cut the hair off my Barbies. She stole the lava  
grandmother gave me on her deathbed and pawned it to buy pot. S

drunk and stuck her hand down my boyfriend's pants at Thanksgiving  
He was straight-laced, went to church and, after Ginger's antics... the bad  
down the pants was only the culmination, he caught her snorting coke  
bathroom too... he thought my family was insane, possibly *criminally*  
ed then and he broke up with me a week later. He might have been straight-lac  
looking back, probably boring but at the time *I liked him!*" Now  
o huge, shrieking. "*He was my boyfriend!*"

"Peaches," Tack called and my body swung to him to see he'd  
kbook, into my space.

I tipped my head back and snapped, "What?"

His hand came up, fingers curling around my neck, then he dip  
face into mine and whispered, "Baby, calm down."

y? Just I stared close up into his blue eyes and instantly calmed down.

with the "Okey dokey," I whispered back.

ou and His eyes smiled.

a great My body shivered.

als she With his hand at my neck, I knew he felt it and I knew it more w  
anyone atch the fingers curled deeper into my flesh. Something flashed in his eyes tha  
rett and me shiver someplace he couldn't see but I could feel. A lot.

Time to go.

I could "I could probably sell plasma and a kidney but I don't even think t  
ock me get me enough money, so, um, can I just leave my sister to deal with  
asked politely, wanting to move from the strength of his hand but sc  
ver two do it.

lier my "No one takes a blade to you for Ginger," he said quietly.  
She got

dinner. “Okay,” I replied.

ie hand “Or at all,” he kept going.

e in the “Um...” I mumbled. “Okay.” I said this because I didn’t want an  
insane, take a blade to me for Ginger or at all and I didn’t want that in a big w  
ed and,

r I was His fingers curved deeper into my neck and he pulled me up a bit s  
almost on my toes and his face was closer. Way closer. Too close.  
moved close.

ped his “I don’t think you get what I’m sayin’ to you.” He was still  
quietly. “This Ginger shit heats up, you get on radar, you mention my  
yeah?”

Oh no. This didn’t sound good. This sounded worse than owing  
gang two million dollars. And I suspected there weren’t a lot of things  
than that but, if there were, Ginger would find them.

“Um...if you’re asking ‘yeah?’ as in, ‘Yeah, I get you’, then no,  
get you,” I told him honestly because I was thinking with Tack hone  
the best policy.

hen his “All right, peaches, what I’m sayin’ is, you get in a situation, you r  
it made my name. That means protection. *Now* do you get me?”

“Um... kind of,” I answered. “But why would I get in a situation?”

hat will she’s shit everywhere. You walked in here and had no clue. Don’t  
this?” I into another situation because others...” he paused, “they might not f  
ared to cute like I do.”

“Okay,” I whispered, liking that he found me cute at the sam  
regretting my decision not to call my father or, say, get on a plane an

France. "If I um... have to use your name... um, what does that mean?"

"It means you owe me."

Oh boy.

"Owe you what?"

He grinned but didn't answer.

*Shiver* Oh boy!

"Owe you what?" I repeated.

talking "I gotta get on my bike and get you out of a situation, we'll talk  
7 name, then."

a biker "I'm sure I'll be fine," I assured him and said a short prayer in h  
s worse making that true.

His grin got bigger.

I don't Then he let me go but slid my purse off my arm and before I coul  
sty was a peep, he dug into it. I decided to let him have at it. He'd already touc  
and I wasn't certain I wanted that to happen again. I wasn't certain w  
nention response would be but I was certain that jumping his bones was high  
the list of possibles. I also figured he could best me in a fight for my p  
I was going to let him take what he wanted. My best lip gloss was  
, purse but at that point, if he wanted it to give to one of his bitches  
i't live, willing to let it go.

bumble He came out with my cell, flipped it open, his thumb hit butt  
ind you flipped it closed, dropped it into my purse, then slid it back on my arm

"You got my number, darlin'. You need it, use it. You don't need  
ie time still wanna use it, don't hesitate. Now, do you get that?"

d fly to I hitched my purse further up on my shoulder and nodded. I got t



” thought I was cute.

I fought back another shiver.

“Nice t’meet ya, Gwen,” he said softly.

“Yeah,” I whispered, “later.” Then I turned to see Dog grinning c  
me and I said, “Later.”

“Later, babe,” Dog replied in a way that made it sound like he’d a  
see me later which made me have to fight back another shiver.

about it I turned to the silent biker boys behind me, saw them all smiling  
this scarier than them being scary, lifted a hand and called, “Later.”

opes of I got a bunch of chin lifts and one, “Later, darlin’.”

Then I got the hell out of there.

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thought I was cute.

I fought back another shiver.

“Nice t’meet ya, Gwen,” he said softly.

“Yeah,” I whispered, “later.” Then I turned to see Dog grinning down at me and I said, “Later.”

“Later, babe,” Dog replied in a way that made it sound like he’d actually see me later which made me have to fight back another shiver.

I turned to the silent biker boys behind me, saw them all smiling, found this scarier than them being scary, lifted a hand and called, “Later.”

I got a bunch of chin lifts and one, “Later, darlin’.”

Then I got the hell out of there.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Ashley is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over 100 romance novels including the *Rock Chick*, *Colorado Mountain*, *Dream Team*, *Chaos*, *Unfinished Heroes*, *The 'Burg*, *Magdalene*, *Fantasyland*, *The Ghost and Reincarnation*, *The Rising*, *Dream Team* and *Honey* series with several standalone novels. She's a hybrid author, publishing titles independently and traditionally, her books have been translated in 15 languages and she's sold over five million books.

Kristen's novel, *Law Man*, won the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewer's Award for best Romantic Suspense, her independently published title *On* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* best Independent Content Contemporary Romance and her traditionally published title *Breathe* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* Contemporary Romance. Kristen's titles *Motorcycle Man*, *The Will*, and *Steady* (which won the Reader's Choice award from *Romance Reviews*) made the final rounds for Goodreads Choice Awards in the Romance category.

Kristen, born in Gary and raised in Brownsburg, Indiana, was a first-generation graduate of Purdue University. Since then, she has lived in Denver, the West Country of England, and she now resides in Phoenix. She worked as a charity executive for eighteen years prior to beginning her independent career.

publishing career. She now writes full-time.

Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To thank her readers and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to yourself, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, talk to your sister's back whether they're at your side as friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are.

The programs of the RC Nation include Rock Chick Rendezvous, where Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisters together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards.

Rock Chick Rewards is an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations. Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity and this number continues to grow.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation on her website.

[KristenAshley.net](http://KristenAshley.net)



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ver, the  
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Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through all of Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To this end, and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created the Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to her readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to your true self, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, take your sister's back whether they're at your side as friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are.

The programs of the RC Nation include Rock Chick Rendezvous, weekends Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisterhood together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards, an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity and this number continues to rise.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation at [KristenAshley.net](http://KristenAshley.net).



## ALSO BY KRISTEN ASHLEY

### **Rock Chick Series:**

*Rock Chick*

*Rock Chick Rescue*

*Rock Chick Redemption*

*Rock Chick Renegade*

*Rock Chick Revenge*

*Rock Chick Reckoning*

*Rock Chick Regret*

*Rock Chick Revolution*

*Rock Chick Reawakening*

*Rock Chick Reborn*

**Rock Chick Rematch**

### **The 'Burg Series:**

*For You*

*At Peace*

*Golden Trail*

*Games of the Heart*

*The Promise*

*Hold On*

### **The Chaos Series:**

*Own the Wind*

*Fire Inside*

*Ride Steady*

*Walk Through Fire*

*A Christmas to Remember*

*Rough Ride*

*Wild Like the Wind*

*Free*

*Wild Fire*

*Wild Wind*

**The Colorado Mountain Series:**

*The Gamble*

*Sweet Dreams*

*Lady Luck*

*Breathe*

*Jagged*

*Kaleidoscope*

*Bounty*

**Dream Man Series:**

*Mystery Man*

*Wild Man*

*Law Man*

*Motorcycle Man*

*Quiet Man*

**Dream Team Series:**

*Dream Maker*

*Dream Chaser*

*Dream Bites Cookbook*

*Dream Spinner*

*Dream Keeper*

**The Fantasyland Series:**

*Wildest Dreams*

*The Golden Dynasty*

*Fantastical*

*Broken Dove*

*Midnight Soul*

*Gossamer in the Darkness*

**Ghosts and Reincarnation Series:**

*Sommersgate House*

*Lacybourne Manor*

*Penmort Castle*

*Fairytale Come Alive*

*Lucky Stars*

**The Honey Series:**

*The Deep End*

*The Farthest Edge*

*The Greatest Risk*



**The Magdalene Series:**

*The Will*

*Soaring*

*The Time in Between*

**Mathilda, SuperWitch:**

*Mathilda's Book of Shadows*

*Mathilda The Rise of the Dark Lord*

**Misted Pines Series**

*The Girl in the Mist*

*The Girl in the Woods*

**Moonlight and Motor Oil Series:**

*The Hookup*

*The Slow Burn*

**The Rising Series:**

*The Beginning of Everything*

*The Plan Commences*

*The Dawn of the End*

*The Rising*

**The River Rain Series:**

*After the Climb*

*After the Climb Special Edition*

*Chasing Serenity*

*Taking the Leap*

*Making the Match*

*Fighting the Pull*

**The Three Series:**

*Until the Sun Falls from the Sky*

*With Everything I Am*

*Wild and Free*

**The Unfinished Hero Series:**

*Knight*

*Creed*

*Raid*

*Deacon*

*Sebring*

**Wild West MC Series:**

*Still Standing*

*Smoke and Steel*

**Other Titles by Kristen Ashley:**

*Heaven and Hell*

*Play It Safe*

*Three Wishes*

*Complicated*

*Loose Ends*

*Fast Lane*

*Perfect Together*

*Too Good To Be True*

*Too Good To Be True*