

## ONE

Sherise Robinson took a look around and had to smile. At thirty, she was sitting on luxurious leather seats in the back of a driven car on her way to a meeting where she was going to be named one of the most powerful, influential people in the country. Not bad for a girl from the mean streets of Southeast D.C. that no one believed would ever amount to anything.

She checked her makeup mirror even though she didn't have to. She looked flawless. Her golden caramel skin was glowing against her silky dark brown hair that she'd recently cut to a few inches below her shoulders, adding more sophistication. She had perfect high cheekbones and full, sultry lips, but the highlight of her face were her piecing green eyes.

Her face and those dangerous curves framing her fit body created an image of beauty that Sherise used to her advantage. She wasn't afraid to admit that. She could make a man give her anything she wanted and make a woman concede defeat just at the sight of her.

But looks alone could never have gotten her where she was today; about to be named the Press Secretary to the next President of the United States of America. She worked her ass off for that.

Yes, she played dirty at times to get what she wanted, and to keep it. That was just the game of power and politics in D.C. She'd learned to play it as a teenager when she'd gotten her first internship at the Department of Agriculture. She was just making copies, but she made sure to leave an impression by being faster, more organized and more presentable than anyone else. Sherise knew what most sixteen year olds didn't at that age, in D.C. presentation mattered more than substance. She parlayed that into a college scholarship and several jobs on Capitol Hill.

Meeting and marrying an up and coming lobbyist didn't hurt at all, but Sherise put in the work and made a name for herself as one of the best message people in D.C. Her position in the communications department of the White House led to a job for up and coming Maryland Governor Jerry Northman's campaign for the Democrat candidate for President. He won the primaries and finally, two weeks ago, with Sherise running his communications, he won the highest office in the land.

And to think, just a year ago, it almost all fell apart. Everything was on the brink of being lost...everything.

She closed the mirror and placed it in her Furia purse. She had to always look perfect now that she was constantly in front of the camera, her face on newspapers and websites. She made sure her staff, now totally five full-time and two interns, always looked perfect as well.

Her staff wouldn't be at this meeting she was on her way to at the campaign headquarters for Jerry. She'd gotten the message this morning from LaKeisha Wilson, Jerry's campaign manager, texted her and only other core team members to come in for an announcement. It was just a formality. Everyone knew that Sherise would be named PS for the new administration, but she couldn't help but be excited.

The phone rang with that familiar ring tone reserved for only one person that made Sherise's heart light up. It was her husband, Justin, the father of her two children and the love of her life. She didn't even want to think that, a year ago, their marriage was barely holding on by a string after it was revealed that they had both been unfaithful and their oldest child, Cady, might not be his. That Cady turned out to be his helped make their attempt to reconcile go a lot smoother than it would have otherwise. They'd weathered some horrible storms, but got through them.

Now, their marriage was stronger than it had ever been. Sherise never hid from the fact that, although she loved Justin, she married him for the advantages he gave her. Over time, she'd lost sight of how good a husband he was and made some terrible mistakes. One of those mistakes came back to haunt her in the worst way and Justin strayed. She'd gotten him back. She knew she would. Sherise refused to give up anything that mattered.

Now, marrying for advantages was out the window. She loved the hell out of that man and appreciated him for everything he was. Her career had always been her priority, but she would give it up, even a position as powerful as PS to the President, for her husband and her two babies.

"What you doing, hot stuff?" he asked in a playful tone.

Sherise smiled. "On my way to the meeting. You know that. You saw me leave."

"I know where you're going smartass," he responded. "I want to know what you're doing?"

"Just checking out how hot I look in my mirror," she answered. "Why? Did you want me to say I was thinking about you and touching myself?"

"Considering how well I took care of things this morning," his voice shifting from playful to serious in a split second, "I expected you to still be trying to cool yourself down."

"Oh my God, the ego on you, boy." She laughed. "You start your own business and now you think you're cock of the walk."

It was true that he'd been great in bed this morning, and the night before. Their sex life was better than ever. Justin had a new confidence now that he'd left the lobbying firm he worked at and started his own. A false claim of sexual harassment against him turned the firm that he'd made millions for against him. After the truth came out, they were all apologizes, but Justin had made up his mind.

Only three of his clients followed him, but in the last eight months, he'd gotten five more. He had an assistant, an intern and was about to hire a new lobbyist to join him. He was doing well and future prospects were all positive. With a new baby on the way, it was a risk, but it paid off. His confidence was through the roof and Sherise was reaping the benefits in their bank account and their bedroom.

Justin laughed in the self-assured tone of a thirty-three year old man who knew he made well with his life does. "So we're celebrating tonight?"

“I know what you mean by celebrate,” she said. “You trying to get me pregnant again?”

“God forbid,” he laughed. “I think you’ve made it clear that the baby factory is closed after Aiden.”

Aiden, their six-month-old son, was perfect in every way. He was starting to develop his unique personality traits and Sherise couldn’t love him more. Their older child, Cady, was almost three now and as stubborn and difficult as ever, just like her mama. They had a perfect family now, made only more precious considering it had all almost fallen apart.

“We both barely have enough time for the kids we have now,” Sherise said. “You know how guilty I feel with two babies and working non-stop?”

“You’ve been on a presidential campaign,” Justin said. “You couldn’t pass up this chance of a lifetime. We made it work.”

“It’s not changing any time soon,” she regretfully admitted. “Ugh, how did we get on this topic? You wanted to celebrate?”

“Sorry,” he said. “Jeniah is at home with the kids and she said she can stay until about nine tonight. I’ll try and knock off early and we can just have a quick dinner somewhere nearby.”

Jeniah was the nanny they hired just before Sherise gave birth. With her working on the campaign and Justin working overtime at the new business, there was no other choice but to bring someone in the house. Taking the kids to a daycare or a sitter was no longer feasible.

“You knocking off early? The tide is turning?” she asked.

“The calm before the storm,” he said. “All the new elections. Everyone has decompressed and it’s about to get crazy, so we better take it while we can.”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be, but you’ve got a date.” She felt the car stop. “Oh, I think we’re here. I’ve gotta go baby. I love you.”

“I love you more,” he answered back before hanging up.

Sherise smiled and took a heavy sigh. She waited for the driver to come around and open the door for her. As she stepped out to in front of headquarters, everyone on the sidewalk stopped to take a look. Maybe one or two of them might have recognized her, but most were just staring at the beautiful young woman in the sharply tailored heather grey suit who looked like she’d been stepping out of driven cars her entire life.

If they only knew.

Billie Carter leaned her petite frame over the balcony overlooking the Atlanta skyline as the day was coming to life. It was only her third day in the city, but she was starting to fall in love with it. This was mostly attributed to the personal guide she’d had since arriving. That same guide came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her and placed his head on her shoulder.

She turned her head slightly to the right and his lips met hers with a tender morning kiss that warmed her chocolate body underneath the silk bathrobe she was wearing. She turned around to face him, their lips still touching as she wrapped her arms around his neck and gently caressed the back of his head.

“I’m mad at you,” Michael said slowly as their lips parted. “I don’t like waking up with you not next to me.”

Michael Johnson was the man of Billie’s dreams and she’d almost lost him. They’d had a chance encounter on a train in D.C. and all she could see was a six-foot Adonis with cocoa skin, deep black eyes, thick dark eyebrows and a smile that made her lose her balance. But when her stop came, she got off and thought she’d never see him again.

When she’d formally met the thirty-six year old executive headhunter just a few days later, it wasn’t under the best circumstances. She was just trying to get her career as an attorney, which had derailed, back on track with a new job at Agencis. Agencis was one of Michael’s clients and he’d wanted someone else to have the job she’d gotten.

They got off to a bad start, but Michael was determined to break the ice that Billie had formed around her heart after having it broken by a cheating ex-husband and a lover who turned out to be a secret drug dealer. Her inability to get past the awful ex-husband almost cost her Michael’s love, but she fought for him in the end, the way he’d fought for her in the beginning and they made it through.

A year later, they were going strong and head over heels in love. Billie had never thought she’d experience this again. She was convinced her chance had passed. Yet, here she was in the arms of this handsome devil.

She pouted and kissed his nose. “Poor baby. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “Just come back.”

He took her hand and tried to lead her back into the bedroom of their luxury hotel suite, but she hesitated. He looked back at her, taking in her small features of her face, framed by her curly natural hair, cut close to her head. She wore her emotions on her sleeve and Michael seemed to notice.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m worried about lunch,” she said. “I want things to go...better than before.”

By before, she meant the night they’d arrived in Atlanta. It was the second time she’d met Michael’s family. As his father had passed years ago, his mother, Dee Dee and sister, Aisha, were all the family Michael had. They’d all had dinner at Michael’s childhood home on the Eastern side of the city.

The night had gone about as well as the first time she’d met Dee Dee and Aisha, when they came to visit Michael in D.C. four months ago. And by well, not well at all. While Billie had bent over backward to be gracious to her new boyfriend’s family, it was not returned. From the beginning, Dee Dee grilled her with question after question about her previous marriage. Apparently, Dee Dee still lived in the 1950s and believed that a divorced woman had to be to blame for not holding onto a man. It had gotten bad enough that a small argument had started, which Michael interrupted.

Aisha, on the other hand, had followed in Michael’s activist roots. One of the things that Billie loved about Michael was that, no matter how successful he’d gotten, he never forgot where he came from. He was active in the community in D.C., especially working with young black men in dire need of a role model. Billie related to him as she spent most of her volunteering doing pro-bono work, which stemmed



from her past. Her father had been railroaded by the legal system and sent to jail for a crime he didn't commit. He'd died there and it had changed her forever.

But while Michael remained active helping the less fortunate, Aisha had taken it a step further. She was pretty militant and immediately pegged Billie, and her lifestyle, too bougie to be authentically black.

"Don't worry." Michael gently cupped her chin and lifted her face to meet his.

She was tiny and he was tall, always looking down at her in a way that made her feel protected...loved.

"Trust me," he assured her, "they will warm up. It's just how they are. How they've always been."

"I can't seem to say anything...."

The phone that suddenly rang was Michael's, which sat at the edge of the bed only ten feet away. They both looked at it and looked at each other.

"Go ahead and answer it," Billie said, knowing that Michael was seeking her okay.

"I don't have to," he said. "It can..."

"It could be your mother," Billie said. "If you didn't answer, she'd find a way to blame it on me."

"That's just silly." He quickly touched his finger to her nose before kissing her forehead and turning towards the phone.

It might be, she thought, but wasn't particularly far fetched. The second meeting wasn't much different than the first. When Billie arrived in Atlanta three days ago, Dee Dee's first words were to ask Billie if she was planning to yell at her

again. Billie hadn't been the first to yell in their initial argument, but apparently Dee Dee forgot that. She laughed it off, but Billie knew it was intended to insult. Aisha called her a princess twice, pretending to be friendly teasing, but the bite to her tone made it clear to Billie that she still thought she was a snob.

At thirty-one years old, Billie knew the best approach was to put on a brave face and remain as gracious as possible. She was in the woman's home after all. But today, they were supposed to be eating lunch with them in the hotel restaurant and Billie had been racking her brain trying to figure out how to make things better.

"Can you believe that?" Michael said to her as soon as she entered the bedroom. He tossed the cell phone back on the bed. "This is the third work call in as many days. Nobody respects vacation."

"Clients don't care about vacation." She fell back on the back, loving the feel of the thick down bedding.

"That wasn't a client," Michael said. "That was my office. I need to fire someone."

Billie eyed him to see if he was serious and it looked like he was. "That's a bit harsh. We all get called on vacation. It's not right, but it happens."

"It doesn't happen here," he said, pointing to the floor. "In Atlanta, people respect your vacation. Just another difference that makes Atlanta better than D.C."

"Don't knock D.C.," she admonished. "D.C. helped you build your agency. Most importantly, D.C. gave you this."

He watched with a wicked smile as she undid the top of her bathrobe, revealing her perfectly round, perky small breasts and flat stomach.

“I can’t argue with that.” He walked over and leaned on top of her on the bed.

He straddled her, leaning down so she could grab him by the collar of his robe and pull him closer.

“For all its faults,” he said. “It gave me the woman I love.”

Her heart leapt at his words. She would never ever get tired of hearing them and was warmed to her core at the ease with which he said them. There was no fear or hesitation.

“I love you so much,” she professed, her hands coming gently to his face as she looked up at him.

“Show me,” he whispered, before lowering his mouth to hers.

She closed her eyes as she tasted his lips and felt her body respond with a tingling sensation throughout. His mouth moved down to the place where her neck met her chest and she felt his tongue gently taste her soft skin. She let out as a moan as his lips kissed her again, this time lower. Then lower.

“Michael,” she said, her voice already getting breathless. “The aquarium, remember? We’re supposed to be going there this morning. If we start on this....well, you know how long we can go.”

He looked up at her, his mind already made up. “Do you want to play with fish or play with me?”

There was no need to answer. There wasn’t anything she wanted more than his hands on hers. And as he leaned back to remove the rest of her bathrobe, Billie had already forgotten the question.

When Erica Kent knocked on the door to her boss's office, she knew he wasn't going to be happy. She was late and the last thing she wanted was for him to think she took this job for granted. She had been arguing with her landlord over the phone because the toilet hadn't been fixed all week and time got past her.

Still, that was no excuse and she wouldn't make any.

"Come in," he said.

She opened the office door to the CEO of Robinson & Associates, Justin Robinson, the husband of her best friend, Sherise, who had practically saved her life when he hired her eight months ago.

Erica was not in a good place in her life a year ago. She'd allowed herself to be suckered into working for Jonah Nolan's vice presidential campaign, believing that somehow she could have an actual relationship with the man she learned was her father at the age of twenty-five. He'd had a brief affair with her mother and the two parted ways with Erica's mother, who died when Erica was 19, choosing to keep her father's identity a secret.

He wanted to keep her a secret for the sake of his career. At the time, he was one of the highest-ranking people with the Defense Department and on the short list for the White House. Being selected as the Republican candidate for Vice President in the last election was all part of the plan.

Erica wasn't part of the plan. She was often reminded of how lucky she was. Jonah was an awful person who wielded immense power and used it to hurt anyone who crossed him. He used people, innocent people and thought nothing of it. Jonah's complete failure as a human being was made undeniably clear to her in the

worst way. She'd found out that he was also the father of Alex Gonzales, a man whose mother was a maid of Jonah's sister.

The worst part of it was that Erica and Alex had started falling for each other before finding out the truth. They'd even kissed. When the truth came out, there were no words to describe how devastated they both were. Their lives were ruined. Alex's more than Erica's because, while she was still kept a secret, Alex's relationship, or the lack of one, with Jonah was declared to the world.

Erica quit her job on Jonah's campaign. Things were rough, especially with her younger brother, Nate, deciding to get a place of his own. Struggling with money had always been a part of Erica's life, but she was down to her last penny when, eight months ago, Justin came to her and offered her the job of his assistant at the new lobbying firm he was starting up. She knew this was more of a favor than a genuine request, but she made a vow to make it the best choice Justin could make for his company.

"I'm so so sorry," she said as she rushed over to his desk.

Justin looked up from his computer and reached his hand out to get the report she'd completed. "You're lucky that the client is late for the meeting. Otherwise, I'd be in deep shit."

"I know," Erica said. "I just...I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

He placed the report on the desk and looked at her with an analyzing expression.

"Are you okay, Erica?"

“Uhm....well, yes.” Erica wondered what she looked like. “Is something wrong with me?”

The twenty-eight-year old was still the same vivacious, curvy girl she’d always been since puberty. Her fair skin and light eyes highlighted a pretty full face. She had a girl next door look about her, but was now showing a little more sophistication in the way she carried herself.

“You look stressed,” he said. “I need to know if this is too much for...”

“No,” she insisted quickly. “This job is not too much for me. You know I’ve been doing admin jobs for the longest, Justin.”

“This job is more than that,” he said. “I know I require a lot of you and if you think it’s outside of your area.”

“I may not have gone to college...” Erica stopped herself, noticing that her tone sounded a bit defensive.

Always being around people with college degrees, sometimes more than one, and not having any can make a girl that way.

“I can handle it. Sorry I was late.”

“Seems like everyone is late today.” He glanced at his watch. “This meeting was supposed to start a half hour ago. Hopefully, it’ll be quick.”

“Would you like me to call them?”

“I think...” Just then the Skype ring came up on Justin’s computer and he sighed. “Finally. It’s them. It’s fine, Erica. That’ll be all.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” she said before leaving and closing the door behind her.

She needed this job. She had to make sure not slip up. Money was extremely tight. She was paying for everything herself. Before, it was her, her brother Nate and her fiancée Terrell sharing the rent of a two-bedroom apartment. Then it was down to just her and Nate. Then it was just her.

It didn't seem fair, Erica thought. While her friends Sherise and Billie were able to go off to college on scholarship, Erica couldn't afford it. Nate was only 12 when their mother died and Erica had to take care of him. Neither had she found a lobbyist or lawyer to marry. The girls had loaned her money in the past, but Erica hated that. She hated being reminded that she was always the broke one.

This job paid decent enough and now that Justin was doing much better, she was promised a raise. She needed it desperately, so now was not the time to start messing up.

As she turned to enter her office just a few steps away from Justin's she heard the office doorbell. Their office, located on K Street downtown Washington, D.C. shared a receptionist with the consulting agency next door. When she was out, the front door was locked and visitors had to ring a doorbell for Erica to let in.

She rushed to the front of the office, towards the glass doors. When she reached them, she was pleased with what she saw. A very good looking brother, sort of a walnut brown color, a close fade, and a finely shaven goatee in a dark blue suit that was tailored perfectly to show that he had a large, muscled body underneath, but not too tight to make it seem like that's what he wanted you to see. He was smiling at her and he had a dimple on his left cheek.

Erica had a thing for men with dimples, but she pulled herself together and approached the door as professional as she could.

“Can I help you?” she asked as she opened the door.

“Yes.” His voice was deep and confident. “I’m Corey James. I have an appointment with Justin Robinson.”

Erica had a hard time looking away from those deep eyes of his, but after a few seconds, she glanced down at her watch. “Your interview isn’t until eleven. It’s...”

“Ten thirty,” he said. “I know. I didn’t expect it to be so easy to get here from The Hill.”

The Hill was the word used to describe Capitol Hill with the U.S. Capitol as its centerpiece. It was where Congressional staff, which Erica assumed Corey was, worked.

“He’s actually running kind of behind,” Erica said. “It’s not his fault. A client took too...”

Erica realized his brows centered in a frown. He was looking at her weird and she suddenly realized why. She hadn’t let him in!

“Oh!” She jumped aside, holding the door open for him to enter. “Sorry about that.”

He laughed as he entered. “I was starting to worry I’d have to conduct the interview in the hallway.”

“Please sit down anywhere,” she directed.



The front of the office was sharply designed with a minimalist look of green and blue. The centerpiece was the large screen television against the wall behind the receptionist desk. It was always on to C-Span, the public affairs channel that covered Congress and the White House.

“So you’re here for the associate position?” she asked as he sat down.

“Yes I am.” He had a generous smile that didn’t hold back. “Are you an associate? I can tell you’re not the woman I spoke to on the phone because she had a Midwestern accent.”

“Don’t tell her that,” Erica warned as she sat down in the chair next to him. “She’s from Minneapolis and hates it when people ask her about her accent. She thinks it makes her sound like a hick.”

“I know the feeling,” he said. “Being from Waukegan, Illinois, I got a lot of weird looks when I first moved here.”

“Isn’t that near Chicago?” Erica asked.

“A little less than an hour away,” he answered. “Where are you from?”

“Right here in D.C.,” she said. “Southeast as a matter of fact.”

She eyed him closely to gauge his reaction. D.C. snobs were predictable. If you came from southeast D.C. you were considered ghetto no matter who you actually were. The elitist culture in the district would shun you right away. Erica wondered if Corey was a part of that culture.

But he didn’t seem to react at all. Maybe he was a good actor. After all, he worked on Capitol Hill.

“Nice,” he said. “I’m gonna need your help.”

“With what?”

“Well.” He placed his briefcase in the chair next to him. “First, I’m gonna need your name.”

She laughed girlishly and was immediately embarrassed by it. “I’m sorry. My name is Erica. Erica Kent.”

He held out his hand to her. She accepted and shook it firmly. His grip was strong, but not strangling. She liked it.

“Second,” he said. “I’m gonna need you to show me around Southeast.”

Was he asking her out? Erica didn’t know how to react to this. After having been with the same man for five years, her one attempt at getting back in the saddle was with someone who turned out to be her half brother. Other than that, her dating experiences were rare and awful.

“Show you around?” she asked, trying to act unfazed. “How can you work on Capitol Hill and not know southeast? You’re in Southeast.”

He shook his head. “I’m in the Capitol Hill southeast. You know that. I’m used to the hot spots to go eat and the food markets, but I don’t know the real southeast. The neighborhood. In the two years I’ve lived here, I’ve never been able to really explore the real D.C.”

Erica liked what she was hearing, a man who saw past all the pretty regentrification that Capitol Hill always raved about. He wanted to learn about the D.C. that was there before people decided to bring in all the cafés and candle shops.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he said. “The family joints, the dives and mom and pop places that the transients don’t know about.”

“I’d actually...I guess I could.” So was this a date? She didn’t even know this guy.

“I don’t want to put you on the spot,” he said, reaching into his pocket. “Here is my card. Don’t worry about it now, but think about it later.”

She hesitated a second before taking the card. “I’ll think about it, Corey. I’ll let Justin know you’re here. Like I said, he’s running a little behind.”

“I’m good,” he said, holding up his smart phone.

She went to the receptionist desk and grabbed the remote to the TV behind the desk.

“If you want, you can watch something other than C-Span.” She handed him the remote.

“Thanks.” He accepted the remote, but frowned as he looked at the television. “What is this guy doing on? I thought he disappeared.”

Erica turned to the screen and felt dread at the site of Jonah. It was stock footage of him and his now ex-wife, Juliette, standing in front of their massive Virginia house waving to the media. It was taken after Jonah was named as the vice president candidate more than a year ago. The piece was just reflecting on all of the high and low points of the presidential campaign that had recently ended. Jonah’s bit was obviously a low point.

Disappeared was a good word to describe Jonah these days. After the news of his affair with his sister’s maid and his love child he’d kept a secret all these years hit, the once hero war veteran and future of politics was everything that was wrong

with the world. The campaign dropped him from the ticket, choosing a female senator to replace him.

Erica had cut all ties with Jonah after that, even though he tried several times to contact her. She heard about him resigning from the Pentagon, his wife filing for divorce, and his general withdrawal from the powerful society scene. It was unavoidable, but she still tried to stay as far away from it as she could. It was too upsetting.

Unable to even stand the sight of Jonah, Erica snatched the remote away from Corey and quickly turned to a channel focused on the day's financial markets.

"Better?" she asked, smiling, handing it back to him.

"Much," he agreed with a nod.

A blank screen would be better than Jonah, Erica thought as she walked back towards Justin's office.