



POLE DANCER

NIKKI ST. JOHN

POLE DANCER

By: Nikki St.John

First Edition: Copyright © 2014 Nikki St.John
Second Edition: Copyright © 2020 Nikki St.John

All Rights Reserved

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the internet or via any other means without the permission of the author is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikki St.John is a pole dancer and twerk instructor who came up with the crazy (or maybe not so crazy) idea that people would be hooked on pole once they found out how much fun it is. She wrote *Pole Dancer*, the first book in the *Pole Dance Nation* series, to give a glimpse into the life of the professional pole dancer.

Her daily postings of pole tricks and videos on social media, has caused Pole Dance Nation to grow into more than just the name of a book series. It's a global community of thousands of active pole dance lovers and avid fans.

Nikki St.John has a BFA in theater from Howard University and currently lives in Los Angeles with her two cats, Patches and Jack.

More information about Nikki St.John and the *Pole Dancer* book can be found on her website, **PoleDanceNation.com**.

PoleDanceNation.com
[Instagram.com/PoleDanceNation](https://www.instagram.com/PoleDanceNation)
[YouTube.com/PoleDanceNation](https://www.youtube.com/PoleDanceNation)
[Facebook.com/PoleDanceNation](https://www.facebook.com/PoleDanceNation)
[Twitter.com/PoleDanceNation](https://twitter.com/PoleDanceNation)

DEDICATION

Hey, Mom! Dad. Bubba.
I *finally* finished *something*.
😊

CHAPTER 1

I'm not a morning person. I consistently sleep through multiple alarms going off in random places around my bedroom. Like the alarm clock on the dresser, the iPhone on my bedside table, there's even an alarm clock on my smart TV. Still, in order to succeed in the corporate world and get to work on time, you have to have a routine. I've got mine down to a science. In a few minutes Juanita's motherly voice will drift through the kitchen finding its way to my bedroom like the smell of blueberry pancakes, turkey bacon and eggs she's cooking.

"Alex! Wake up!"

Next comes Shanice, questioning my lack of morning etiquette from the kitchen table. “She’s got ten alarms going off at once. Why can’t she hear any of them?”

I take the voices of my best friends as my cue to rise and shine. “I heard that!” Choosing the bedroom adjoining the kitchen is what I call brilliant strategy.

“You never hear your alarms. You always hear our conversations,” Shanice responds.

I slowly swing my legs out of bed, sliding French manicured toes into pink Victoria’s Secret slippers waiting by the bedside. “You know why I keep you two around? Juanita cooks and cleans. Shanice walks the dog and takes out the trash. It’s just like living at home.”

“And what do you do?” Shanice questions.

“I get us into celebrity events like Wordsmith’s birthday party.” I smirk, sliding into a chair.

Juanita and Shanice exchange knowing glances. “You sure you’re good with this?” Juanita asks.

“I’ll be fine,” I say coolly, although I’m not sure how I’m going to feel. Tonight, I will be in the same room with my ex-boyfriend and most popular rapper on the planet, Wordsmith. He’ll be with his girlfriend at the birthday party I arranged. Since tonight’s appearance is part of my job description, there’s no reason why my girls shouldn’t have a good time, even if I don’t. “Besides, I bought something to remind him what he’s missing.”

Juanita immediately perks up. “Wait until you see the dress I squeezed into! I call mine the millionaire matchmaker.”

“Mine is the millionaire baby maker,” Shanice boasts.

“Mine is called you know you like it so go ‘head put a ring on it.’” I sing with a cringe worthy Beyoncé impression.

Juanita places a full plate in front of me and pours a cup of orange juice. She may look like a homemaker now in a granny nightie, long hair pulled into a loose bun. Once she gets dressed, the petite Puerto Rican has an uncanny resemblance to Jennifer Lopez. Shanice is built like an Amazon with a body like Serena Williams and the same chocolate brown complexion. With these two by my side, I have to pay extra special attention to what I’m wearing. So many single millionaires will be in the building - standing out from the crowd is a requirement, not an option.

Shanice picks up a leftover piece of bacon, throwing it to Baby, Juanita’s overgrown pit bull. “Stop feeding Baby people food,” Juanita protests. “Her digestive system isn’t set up to eat bacon.”

“You diagnose people, not animals. How would you know?” Shanice retorts.

“You work in finance but I can’t tell you know a thing about money management the way you run up your credit cards,” Juanita counters.

I laugh at my two bickering best friends. “Not much has changed since high school.”

“One thing has,” Shanice reminds us. “We said good-bye to the days of minimum wage.”

Juanita smiles. “Sometimes I can’t believe we all did exactly what we planned to do.”

I glance at the clock on the wall. “Well I better get dressed and get to work before my dream deflates like a hot air balloon.” I grab the leftover piece of bacon on my plate, tossing it to Baby. Juanita screams after me as I rush into my bedroom to change.

After achieving image perfection, I close the front door of my two story, three-bedroom apartment nestled in a newish Harlem brownstone that screams *we made it*, to everyone who passes by. I fasten the top button on my coat to keep out the winter chill and head to the subway station at the end of the block.

Wrestling for space on the crowded subway with thousands of other 9-5’ers, I feel the rush of being alive in New York City. I pump up with a sense of importance. People like me make this city thrive. A die-hard New Yorker since birth, I live by the motto, *if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere*. I don’t have any reason to believe it isn’t true.

A first generation American, my parents came from the Caribbean: my mother, from the Dominican Republic and my father, from Trinidad and Tobago. They immigrated here when they were teenagers, became citizens and quickly assimilated into the capitalistic culture. My Mom felt so discriminated against because of her heavy accent; she never taught us Spanish. She used my father as an excuse, since he didn’t know it either, regretting the decision years later when Spanish-speaking employees became in demand. They taught me and my three siblings we could be anything we wanted, have anything we wanted, if we

worked hard enough and didn't take no for an answer. They set a great example. My mom cleaned rich peoples' homes and my Dad worked in an auto body shop, running his own repair spot on the side.

My senior year of high school they turned my world upside down when they packed us up and moved to Atlanta. Dad opened a legitimate repair shop, Mom started a cleaning business and we purchased our very first house. I understood their reasoning but I didn't get why they had to do it my senior year. I was forced to live in the country bumpkin town until I started college and moved back to NYC free to live life as me and my best friends have always planned.

Juanita and Shanice have been my best friends since grade school. Growing up in Harlem it was nearly a requirement to have a strong crew ready to roll out on anyone if they dared disrespect. It started out as eight of us. As the years passed by, we were the only ones left standing. With the encouragement of our families, teachers, coaches, church members and the hand of God himself, we managed to stay on track and in school, get good grades and make it to college. Some would consider that an admirable achievement. In my family, I didn't have a choice. Excellence was the only expectation.

Now at 29, I have a masters' degree in Public Relations from NYU, a job at Perlman PR, one of the most prestigious public relations firms in NYC and thousands of dollars in student loans. I also have a wardrobe any recent college graduate would envy.

Getting off the train, I catch a glimpse of myself in a Christmas themed department store mirrored display. I pause, admiring my reflection. Thanks to a three day a week gym regimen, I've maintained the same measurements I've had since putting on the freshman 15 my first year of college: 36-26-38. I may not be a model's size but where I come from, a woman is expected to have curves. So, 135 pounds on my 5'2" frame doesn't make me want to run to the bathroom and stick a finger down my throat. It actually makes me want to grab another cheeseburger.

I look extra curvaceous today, squeezing into a new gray Armani pantsuit from luxury bargain store, Century 21. A wool Gucci coat keeps me warm. Leather gloves, black Christian Louboutin red bottom pumps and a monogrammed Louis Vuitton bag round off a polished look. During yesterday's visit to the local Dominican salon, my dark curly hair was streaked with light brown and honey blonde highlights, then blown straight, falling to the middle of my back. It accentuates my light brown eyes, peeking out below long false lashes. Reddish brown skin is smooth and clean after my faithful monthly facial. Fenty make-up is kept to a minimum, small diamond hoops dangle gently from my ears and a Movado timepiece rests on my left arm. I take a long hard look at myself. *I wouldn't change a thing.*

I walk into a tall Broadway building, ride the elevator to the top floor and greet the receptionist in the waiting area positioned under a large sign reading *Perlman PR*. A smoke-colored glass door behind the welcome desk leads to the inner workings of the company. A long hallway wraps around the office like the track on a football field. Tiny cubicles are in the middle of the circle. Spacious offices are along the outside. I'm heading for the kitchen, acknowledging co-workers as I pass, when Cynthia flies out of our shared cubicle clearly frantic.

Cynthia and I started working here together, as part of a high school program. It's practically a miracle we were officially hired at the same time when owner, Ester Perlman, created an urban division catering to the hip-hop elite. We eventually grew close enough where I felt comfortable giving her unsolicited fashion advice. Boy, did she need it. I convinced Cynthia to dye her brown hair blond, trade in her glasses for contacts so people could really see her big green eyes and to tactfully accentuate her DD's.

"Did you hear the news?" I stare back at her with a puzzled expression and she takes that as a no. "Guess not." Cynthia keeps talking as I step into the kitchen, making a cup of tea. "Perlman is retiring."

"What?" The tea misses my suit, spilling onto the floor. I bend down, cleaning up the mess.

Cynthia sinks into a chair, talking a mile a minute. "We all knew it was coming. She's spoken about it for years. No one thought she was actually going to do it. Somehow, I imagined she'd keep working until the day she died. Have you ever known her to miss a day of work?"

I don't know if the words are zipping out of her mouth like NASCAR drivers on the Speedway or if my whole world just froze because everything is moving in slow motion and suddenly, it's hard to breathe. "Calm down, Cynthia. Breathe." I can't tell if my words are more reassuring for her or for me.

Cynthia breathes deeply. “I didn’t get to the bad news yet. Well, that was bad news. But this is really, really, bad news.”

“Morning! Heard the good news?” Madison Archdale stands in the doorway, bleached blond ringlets falling across devilishly dark eyes. I hate to admit she looks amazing but she does. Always well put together, she has every coveted designer necessity before it hits stores. I can’t remember ever seeing her in the same outfit twice.

Madison doesn’t wait for a response. It’s like she’s eagerly anticipated the dumbfounded looks on our faces and is getting a rush out of kicking us while we’re down. “Old Perlman is finally retiring and selling the company to Dave. But don’t you worry. He’s only cutting a few positions. Wait a sec. The cutbacks are in our department.” She pauses, as if digging a deep wound into my skin, then waiting for my reaction as she throws salt. “See you at the Wordsmith party!” She disappears as quickly as she came.

Cynthia buries her head in her hands. “We’re going to lose our jobs. Dave hates us.”

Cynthia is right. Dave, Perlman’s second in command isn’t our biggest fan. Still, I try to look at the situation from a positive perspective. In business, feelings frequently get pushed aside for the black and white figures at the bottom line. “Without us, there is no urban department,” I reason. “The clients we service bring in 30% of the revenue. Madison can’t run the department by herself.”

Cynthia shakes her head. “I don’t know, Alex. I’ve got a bad feeling. Dave has been giving Madison projects outside our department for months. Like the MADD luncheon.”

On the way back to my desk, I walk by Perlman’s office, hoping to have a quick word. Her door and blinds are closed, warning us she doesn’t want to be disturbed. “Let’s concentrate on the Wordsmith event. Show Dave why we’re assets to the team.”

My phone rings when we reach our adjoining cubicle. It’s Dave. Cynthia and I stare at one another. “Aren’t you going to answer it?” she asks.

I grab the phone before it finishes a third ring. Cynthia presses her ear against the other side of the receiver, trying to hear the conversation. “Good morning, Dave.”

“I need you in my office right away,” Dave says, quickly hanging up.

“This is bad. Really bad,” Cynthia mumbles.

I head back down the hallway, past Perlman’s office, hoping she’s opened the door by now or at least cracked the blinds. No luck. Before I step through the office door next to hers, I collect my thoughts and take a deep breath. “Hi Dave. You wanted to see me?”

Dave sits behind a gigantic desk looking unusually smug in a dark pink blazer and light pink shirt. “Time is money and money is time. I don’t have either to waste, especially not on employees who come to work late.”

“I wasn’t late,” I answer defensively. “I handled the Love and Hip Hop premiere last night and the after party. We get a two-hour window for AM events.”

“Those were Perlman’s rules. Weren’t they? However, today is the beginning of a new era.” Dave abruptly stops texting and puts the phone down. “Well, aren’t you going to congratulate me?”

Isn’t that something people are supposed to do voluntarily? I reluctantly spit out the word. “Congratulations.”

Dave steps out from his desk, standing next to the floor to ceiling window, staring at the busy streets. “I own the company where I’ve worked for the past 30 years. Maybe someday you’ll know how good this feels.” He leans into the glass, arms outstretched, looking down on the city, realizing, maybe for the first time just how far he’s come. He grins at me. I smile back.

After 15 years I finally feel we might have made a personal connection. “That’s great Dave. I can only imagine-”

“Enough about me. Work needs to be done by my busy worker bees.” He sits back down, occupying himself with something on the computer screen. “The Mothers Against Drunk Driving celebrity charity luncheon is in three hours. We’re adding Ashleigh Van Buren to their list of speakers.”

“Ashleigh Van Buren? The 17-year-old socialite arrested for drunk driving? You want to put her on a panel of MADD mothers?”

“The Van Burens have been valuable clients for years. Ashleigh is frequently covered in the press. She has become a brand in need of protection.

“I hope Madison is prepared. Those angry Moms are going to eat her alive.”

“They won’t. You’ll make sure of it.” His dark eyes are challenging me.

“I have the Wordsmith party tonight.”

My protests fall on deaf ears. “Changes will be made in this office at the end of the week. Some people will clean off their cubicles. I need employees I can count on. Team players. Are you a team player, Alex?”

I want to knock the arrogant look off his face with my red bottoms. That would definitely cost me my job. I use the only other viable alternative, an unconvincingly enthusiastic, “Of course I am.”

“Good.” He writes on yellow sticky paper, sliding it across the desk with a pudgy manicured index finger. “Here is the address to the luncheon. Get there immediately. You will take care of Ashleigh personally.” He promptly picks up the phone, calling a client, dismissing me with a hand wave.

I turn and exit without saying a word so he doesn’t catch the obvious look of contempt on my face. I notice Perlman on the phone through the now open blinds. She’s in a heated discussion with the person on the other end. “I needed those pictures yesterday!” She shouts.

I feel a sudden urge to plead with her, beg her not to leave. She turns around as if sensing my gaze and nods at me, almost apologetically.

Cynthia comes out of nowhere wheeling a pushcart of pre-assembled gift bags, interrupting the opportunity at silent communication with my longtime mentor. “How did it go?”

“You know that bad feeling you had earlier? I think you’re onto something.” I look back in Ms. Perlman’s direction just in time to catch her slowly closing her blinds.

Fifteen minutes later I’m riding the subway to the MADD luncheon at the Four Seasons. While Madison micromanages details, I make my way up to Ashleigh’s hotel suite. Her personal assistant answers the door. I slip in quietly and stand against the wall, taking in the action.

A frenzied Ashleigh Van Buren is positioned in front of a large vanity mirror in the living room, worked over by a make-up artist and hair stylist, while she and her mother yell at each other on Facetime. A champagne glass dangles from Ashleigh’s outstretched hand. An open bottle of Perrier-Jouët chills in a nearby ice bucket.

“I don’t think this is the best time to have a drink,” her assistant says timidly.

“It’s not like I’ll be driving a car anytime soon,” Ashleigh snaps.

If there was ever a moment when a mother wished she could reach out and touch her child and not in the sappy Hallmark card kind of way, this would be it. Mrs. Van Buren slams her own drink down before addressing her daughter. “You’re drinking? Ashleigh, what are you thinking? How did she get any alcohol in the first place?”

“I’m *not* thinking, Mother. Isn’t that what you always tell me?”

“Someone has to clean this up before you make a bigger mess of things. Where is the publicist?” Mrs. Van Buren picks her drink back up and takes a large sip.

I step out of the shadows, awkwardly sticking my face in front of the screen. “I’m right here, Mrs. Van Buren. My name is Alex Monroe.”

“Is this how you people operate in a time of crisis?” Mrs. Van Buren asks, speech slurred. “The luncheon starts in two hours and we don’t have a speech prepared. Someone get that drink out of her hand!”

I take the champagne, passing it back to her personal assistant.

“Hey! Give it back.” Ashleigh screams.

“She will do no such thing,” her mom answers for me.

We’re running short on time and the yelling is giving me a headache. I put some bass in my voice and shout, “Ok, people. Listen up! I need five minutes alone with Ashleigh.” Her crew drops what they’re doing, clearing the suite, leaving me alone with the Van Burens.

Mrs. Van Buren heaves a sigh of relief. “It’s time to get our strategy together, ladies.”

“Give me a minute, Mrs. Van Buren. Ashleigh will call you back,” I say firmly.

“Now just you wait-”

She doesn't get a chance to finish her sentence. I end the call, enjoying the sound of silence, if only momentarily. The simple act of standing up to her mom earns me Ashleigh's complete attention.

“No one ever hangs up on my mother.”

“I didn't hang up on her. I said we'd call her back.” Ashleigh's phone rings. The name *Mother Dearest No Wire Hangers* appears on the caller ID. “Is she really that bad?” I switch the ringer off.

“My family *is* the reason I drink. There's so much pressure to live up to their expectations.”

I may not come from one of the richest families in the country but I know something about demanding parents with impossible expectations. “When I was in high school, my older brother came home drunk every weekend. My parents never caught him. I get drunk one time. I was so gone I couldn't stand. My friends brought me home. My Dad was sitting in the living room when they carried me inside. I've never seen him so mad. He grounded me for weeks.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Ashleigh asks with typical misplaced teenage attitude.

“Everyone breaks rules. But everyone doesn't get caught. And don't drink and drive. You can afford a cab.” I walk into the kitchen, pouring the rest of the champagne down the sink before Ashleigh gets another chance to reach for the bottle.

“You're not like any publicist I've ever met.”

“I'm the best. And don't you forget it.”

She cracks her knuckles, staring at her hands. “I wish I could forget this happened. Good thing I didn't hurt anybody. What am I going to say? Everyone out there probably hates me.”

“Didn't you tell Seventeen you want to give acting a try? Think of this as the role of a lifetime.” I pace up and down the room as we talk, a genius promotion strategy coming to me. “I'm going to find you a good rehab program with plenty of other young hot celebrities before this drinking thing gets out of control. I have an idea. We can flip this situation and turn it into good publicity if you do exactly what I tell you to do.”

Time flies. Before I know it, I'm surrounded by Cynthia, Dave, Madison and selectively invited members of the media. The room is filled with A-listers, socialites and activists pushing food around on their plates to give the appearance they're actually eating. From the looks of things, Cynthia and I are the only ones enjoying the pricey five-star fare.

Ashleigh stands behind a podium delivering a remorseful and touching speech. “By age 18, 70% of teens have had at least one drink.”

Cynthia whispers, “You really pulled it together last minute.”

I shrug my shoulders. “Just doing my job.”

“I heard she was hysterical. You calmed her down with a story about your older brother. I didn't know you have an older brother.”

“I don't.” I smile, turning my attention back to Ashleigh.

“I am almost an adult now, so I have to do the grown-up thing, stand before you today and own up to my mistakes.” The audience applauds. I silently pat myself on the back for a job well done.

As the luncheon wraps up, we mix and mingle with the who's-who guest roster. That's when Cynthia and I overhear Dave and Madison talking with two of the event organizers. One is a fashionable older woman with a distinct mole on her face. The other is a middle-aged woman with a huge wedding ring practically covering three fingers.

The woman with the ring speaks first. “Using Ashleigh as a speaker went over so well.”

“At first we thought it was a terrible idea,” the older woman with the mole confesses.

“She wasn't the only one,” I comment. “Guess Dave was onto something after all.”

The Mole asks Madison, “Are you the publicist who assisted Ashleigh with that brilliant speech?”

Dave gently pushes Madison forward. “This is Madison *Ashdale*.” The emphasis placed on her last name is a not so subtle reminder of her powerful family.

“Ashdale.” The Mole mulls over the familiar name. “Is your father *Mason* Ashdale? The construction magnate?”

The Ring jumps in eagerly. “We thought you looked familiar.”

Cynthia nudges me. I walk over towards the group, intent on righting my wrong. Dave turns around suddenly, noticing me for the first time. “Why are you still here? Wordsmith’s event is tonight. Get going.”

“I’ll go with you. I don’t mind helping,” Madison volunteers cheerfully.

“Unlike you, we don’t need help.” I walk off with my hand on my hip emanating schoolgirl attitude. My body speaks volumes, conveying what I cannot say verbally.

Dave returns to his conversation with the MADD mothers, proudly proclaiming his new acquisition.

I turn to Cynthia angrily. “I’m sending out resumes tomorrow.” There is no doubt about it. My days at Perlman PR are over. We ride the subway back to the office in silence, consumed with our thoughts.

In the office bathroom, I change into a lipstick red Hervé Leger bandage dress proudly emphasizing my ample assets. I exchange Louboutin’s for Manolo Blahnik pumps. The dress and heels cost a small fortune but there is no way I am going to this party unless I’m a showstopper. I keep on the diamond earrings and Movado watch, all gifts from Wordsmith the Christmas before last.

Running my finger over the blinged out diamond-encrusted bezel I think, *tonight I’m going to find a new man. Maybe one of Wordsmith’s celebrity friends.* It’s something I would never do. Still, the thought makes me smile, picturing how furious he would be.

I quickly touch up my make-up, gather my interns and exit the building. We’re just about to get in a cab when I realize we forgot the last-minute delivery of perfume and cologne bottles for the gift bags. I race back to the office with an intern in tow, planning to meet up with Cynthia at the venue. I am nearly out the door and back on schedule when I run into Ms. Perlman. She calls me into her office.

Seated on her couch, running my hands over the soft leather, I’m suddenly at a loss for words. This is a first. We stare at one another for a few moments before I stammer the only word that comes to mind. “Congratulations.”

Ms. Perlman throws her head back and sighs, removing her glasses. “Congratulations. That’s what I said to myself when I first moved into this office. We’re a lot alike, you and I. I came from humble means and had big dreams. No one imagined I would get this far. I have been a participant in the rise of some of the most influential businesses and people New York has ever seen. Perlman PR has become an establishment. I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. Now it’s time to get rid of the old and make way for the new. Alex, dear, this office may no longer be mine. But my door is always open to you. I’m sure you know by now life isn’t always fair but you have a valuable advantage. Do you know what that is?”

I shake my head.

“Ambition. Perseverance. Faith. They will see you through every time. Events work themselves out in the most unexpected ways. Remember that. Now get going and rock this event.”

I’m not ready to leave. There are so many questions I want to ask. Am I going to get fired? Why doesn’t Dave like me? Can you give me a good reference for my resume? There’s no point in asking. I know the answers to all of them. Instead, I hug her firmly and say goodnight, leaving my mentor and closing the door behind me.

Wordsmith’s birthday party is at current Manhattan hotspot, The Light Box. I enter the nightclub behind a line of muscular attractive men. They head up a flight of stairs next to the door and disappear.

“Who are they?” Cynthia asks curiously.

“Male strippers. They booked the room upstairs.”

“I need to crash that party,” Cynthia jokes.

We laugh about it until I bring the conversation back to business. “Listen up, everyone.”

Our crew of interns stops what they’re doing, forming a circle as Cynthia speaks. “Wordsmith is going to court in a few weeks to face drug and gun charges. Tonight, he’s celebrating his birthday. His guests will be part of the taping of the second season of his reality show, *Rap Royalty*.”

I interject. “The name of the game is, avoid conflict at all costs. Let’s make this guy look as clean as new boxers fresh out the plastic wrapping.”

Cynthia pulls me aside as the interns disperse. “Are you going to be okay? With Wordsmith here? With *her*?”

“It’s my job,” I respond matter-of-factly.

She stares back at me, unconvinced. “You didn’t answer my question.”

I sigh. I’m doing my best to avoid thinking about the situation. My friends think they’re helping me by bringing it up. “Am I ok with planning a birthday party for my ex? He cheated on me and made the side bitch his girlfriend. Now he’s parading her around on this dumb reality show I have to promote. How do you think that makes me feel? There’s one word I can think of. Stupid.” I walk away, leaving Cynthia speechless.

I review the event checklist, making sure everything is in order. I try to not think about Wordsmith. Instead, my thoughts turn to something equally gloomy: life after Perlman PR. I have connections. I have friends at other agencies. Someone will hire me. I think about Cynthia. I’m going to miss her. Will we still hang out when I leave or will she become a distant memory like most work friends do? Maybe she won’t get fired. Dave dislikes her but he really hates me.

Cynthia’s voice abruptly comes through my headset. “We need the guest list at the door.”

Photographers and camera people make their way into the building, set-up equipment and get into position. Guests flood the party surprisingly early. They must have heard there are more names on the list than the club can hold. That’s how I planned it. Tomorrow, everyone will be talking about which celebrities couldn’t get in, stuck on the sidewalk with the Joe Blows. That’s what happens when you party with Wordsmith, rap’s currently reigning king.

We’re nearing capacity at 11:00 PM. Cynthia is outside, selectively choosing who gets immediate entry and who has to wait in the line rapidly extending to the end of the block. I’m inside overseeing the party progression, ensuring the media obtains necessary shots, especially of Perlman clients. Tables are filled with the appropriate bottle popping celebs and Wordsmith is getting noteworthy footage for his reality show.

Of course, a reality show wouldn’t be complete without some type of drama. Cynthia’s voice comes through our connecting headsets, confirming my expectation. “Wordsmith’s baby mama is at the front door. I don’t see her name but she says she’s supposed to be on the list.”

“Be right there.” I navigate my way through the packed club and to the front door.

The blogs are going crazy with articles about Keke’s on screen antics, elevating her from oblivion into celebrity status. After brief appearances on episodes last season, the audience loved her so much they demanded more. The network felt compelled to expand her role into one of regular occurrence. Steve, a producer for the VH1 series and my network connect, claims Keke is in talks to get her own show. He told me she’s coming to crash the party tonight and he plans to capture the drama on film. *This is going to be interesting.*

The scene at the entrance is purely comical. Keke and three of her ghetto fabulous girlfriends are at the front of the line arguing with Cynthia. Even the bouncers look amused. “What you mean, you can’t find my name on the list? I’m on the show. I’m the baby mama, dammit.” Keke speaks with her hands and a strong Brooklyn accent, waving fingers with colorful five-inch long nails as she talks. A bevy of cameras catch the argument in progress.

“I’ve got this.” I casually step in front of Cynthia. I feel the heat from the flashbulbs and silently curse for not checking my make-up before running outside.

The look on Keke’s face is priceless. I’m the last person she expected to see guarding the door to her baby daddy’s party. But if anyone should feel foolish in this situation, it’s me. “Didn’t expect to see you here,” she says sarcastically.

I try my hardest to ignore her sideswipe of a comment. The cameras aren’t going to be privy to my embarrassing situation unless I allow them to be. So far, I’ve been portrayed on Rap Royalty as Wordsmith’s publicist, not his ex-girlfriend. And that’s all they’re getting out of me.

Standing directly in front of Keke, I’m able to get a good look at her for the first time in a long time. She’s always had a pretty face but she’s been borderline fat as long as I can remember. Now she’s slimmed down but kept her curves. Her appearance is a lot less over the top than it used to be. I wonder if

she has a publicist. She most certainly has a miracle-working stylist. However, like my father always says, you can take anybody out the hood but you can't take the hood out of everybody. "Did you lose weight?" I ask in amazement.

"You trying to be funny?" Keke asks, rolling her neck.

"You mentioned buying detox tea on the show. On the episode when you said you aren't made for the gym," I patiently remind her. "By the way – what's the name of that tea?" I know how to catch flies with honey when it's called for. Right now, I'm laying it on extra thick.

"You really think I lost weight?" Keke spins around in a painted-on dress fishing for compliments, working the cameras like a pro.

"I asked for the name of that tea, didn't I?" Keke's friends confirm my observation and she loosens up a little. "Follow me."

We walk up the stairs leading to the male stripper revue. I strategically planned the scenario after learning about Keke's surprise appearance, secretly gloating that the strippers are occupying the upstairs room the night of my event. Of course, someone tipped off Wordsmith, too. He authorized me to use his credit card and work my magic. Contrary to popular belief, nothing on reality TV is 100% real. Contrived situations are what truly make great ratings.

Keke whispers to her friends as we walk up the stairs. I can't hear what they're saying but I get the feeling the conversation is about me. "What you think about Nina?" Keke asks, enjoying my awkward position.

Wordsmith's new girlfriend, Nina, is a social climbing gold digger, willing to do anything for a quick buck or 30 second camera time. She's been staring at me all night with an - *I got your man, what you gonna' do about it* - smirk of superiority. She gained a fan base after popping out a baby for a football player, appearing in rap videos, baring her assets in men's magazines and acting, if that's what you want to call it, in low budget movies. She skyrocketed to instant fame after becoming Wordsmith's official girlfriend. You could call it perfect timing when she hooked up with Wordsmith a few weeks after his reality show deal was announced.

"Won't last," I say. "It's for TV."

"Did he tell you that?" Keke asks slyly. "We both know Brian has a problem telling the truth." She uses Wordsmith's real name he has forbidden us both from using in public. "He probably told you we haven't slept together since we broke up."

Her voice is drowned out by music rushing downstairs from the floor above us. I don't bother addressing her last statement. Truth is, I don't want to know.

The male revue is lit. Keke knows she's been played. Even so, she can't take her eyes off the onstage stripper, grinding a chair in a G-string. Half-naked hard bodies roam the room, gyrating on female customers. The women at the revue go crazy when Keke enters, like she's part of the show, too. They call out her name, taking pictures on their camera phones.

"This ain't the birthday party," she says in amazement.

"Can we take a selfie?" An excited fan asks. Keke happily agrees.

A waitress directs us to a VIP booth as the DJ announces Keke's arrival. She waves to the crowd enthusiastically. I sit next to her, shouting in her ear over the music. "Apologize for the misunderstanding at the door. Have to get a table ready for you downstairs. In the meantime, have a drink on me."

I lie about the downstairs table. There is none. And I don't plan on coming back for her. Not when she'll be throwing verbal jabs at me all night.

The waitress stands next to me asking, "What do you want to drink?"

Keke turns to me. "This on you, right?"

I smile. "My treat."

"I need four bottles of your best champagne," she directs the waitress.

"Bring them \$1,000 singles. You have my card on file," I tell the waitress. Then I hand Keke my personal business card. It happens so fast. I almost don't realize what I've done. Say she does need a publicist. Why would she hire me? As far as she knows, Wordsmith cheated on her with me, like he cheated

on me with Nina. She looks at me funny for a moment, nods and carefully places the card in her Louis Vuitton billfold. "Let me know if you need anything else," I say optimistically.

Back downstairs, I run into Wordsmith. He hugs me, then grabs me by the waist, pulling me close so his muscular body presses against mine. "Damn baby. Look at you! You know what're doing to me," he playfully accuses. He sucks on the edge of my ear, liquor heavy on his breath, running his finger over my earrings. "I remember these. Did you wear them for me?"

Wordsmith looks even better now than the first day we met. Feelings return suddenly and unexpectedly. I should be the girlfriend standing next to him while cameras roll. But I'm not. And he's not going to play me like a second-class side piece. I lean back, putting some distance between us with my hand, easing out of his grip. "You made your choice."

Wordsmith looks me in the eyes, his voice softening. "We need to talk."

"For what? So, I can get a watered down version of the truth?" I pause, memories rushing back like a flash flood. "You would never be where you are now if I hadn't pushed so hard to get you a record deal."

"I'm know, Alex. Listen. There's something I need to say." He grabs my arm gently.

I interrupt him when I notice a camera positioned on us. "Don't, Brian. Not now."

Wordsmith comes to his senses. He realizes the cameras are around and Nina is watching us with a hawk like glare. "I heard Keke showed up."

"She's upstairs with the strippers, as we discussed."

"You got some strippers for me? Where they at?" He eagerly scans the club for scantily dressed women in stilettos.

"They're male strippers," I emphasize.

"Ah, nah. They're definitely not for me."

"They're keeping Keke occupied. On your dime."

"Send me the bill. Just keep her away from me."

I notice Dave and Madison in a VIP section with some of our media contacts. I walk away from him, calling over my shoulder, "Get some good footage for the show."

I head towards my new boss, trying to put this morning's incident behind me, pushing the recent conversation with Wordsmith to a far corner of my mind. "Didn't think you were coming."

Madison serves up her famously phony smile. "The decorations are cute. Right, Dave?"

Dave shrugs. "It's a hip-hop event."

"What does that mean?" I ask indignantly.

"They have smaller budgets. Don't get so defensive," Dave responds tersely.

A cameraman interrupts us. "Excuse me. I heard Keke is here. Where is she?"

When I look up, I notice Jason, Wordsmith's manager, pushing his way towards me through the crowd. He raises his hand, making sure I see him. Doesn't matter that I was in a three-year relationship with his star client. Jason still hits on me no matter what runway model he's currently attached to. I'm relieved for a reason to excuse myself. "I'll show you."

Upstairs, the male revue has turned into the crazy Keke show. The cameraman pulls out his equipment, capturing the moment. Strippers are surrounding her table, dancing, while the room screams her trademark line, "It's the crazy Keke show!" A wad of money stuck in her bra pokes out the top of her dress. She is alternately tipping the dancers and putting money in her handbag. She murmurs, "A little for you. A little for my purse."

"Everything ok?" I ask, trying my best not to laugh.

"Oh yeah. I ain't ready for the party yet. Know what you could do? You could bring some more singles. This still on Wordsmith, right?" I start to disagree but she interrupts me. "Whatever. We both know who's paying me off to stay out of his way."

One thing about Keke, she's always direct and to the point. I turn to introduce the cameraman. "This is-

"Bryce. From TMZ. Keke, baby. I love you on the show."

"It's about time people noticed," she says with pride. "I'm a television personality. I'm more than just Wordsmith's baby mama."

“You mind getting on camera?” Bryce asks. Keke and her friends simultaneously dive in front of the lens.

Cynthia’s voice comes in my headset, hesitantly. “Um, Alex, I just found out . . . um, Wordsmith is . . . he’s . . . um . . .”

“He’s what? What’s wrong?” I ask, concerned.

She finally responds nervously. “He’s proposing to Nina.”

“He’s what?” I yell in disbelief. I heard exactly what she said. Somehow, the words refused to register.

“He has a ring and everything.”

“He’s proposing?” My body goes numb. After three years of dating, I should be the one wearing the ring, not some booty model and D-list actress! This publicity stunt has gone too far. I immediately run downstairs. It’s something I don’t want to see but can’t help watching in horror. My ex-boyfriend is proposing to another woman at the party I arranged.

Someone firmly grabs my arm. “We’ve been looking all over for you,” Shanice shouts.

The stage in front of us has a big screen showing current live footage of the club. We are just in time to see Wordsmith get down on one knee, proposing to teary-eyed Nina with a ridiculous rock of a ring. My eyes swell up and I cry involuntarily.

“Did you know about this?” Juanita asks.

“Are you okay?” Shanice asks quietly.

I can’t move. I can’t even speak. I feel another pair of arms consoling me. I look up. Keke stands next to me, shaking her head. She sounds truly sorry when she says, “I thought you knew.”

I don’t remember much after that. I think I pulled my headset off, threw it on the ground and walked out of the club. All I remember is stumbling into bed, curling underneath the covers in my party dress, crying myself to sleep.

I wake up to breakfast in bed and Juanita pleading with me to eat. Shanice assembles my clothes for the day and forces me in them. They walk me to the subway station like overprotective parents, staying with me until I’m on the train, the doors close behind me and they disappear in the distance.

Minutes later, I’m with Cynthia at our adjoining cubicles, sunglasses still on, hiding puffy red eyes, a copy of The Daily News laid out in front of me. Cynthia repeatedly asks if I’m okay in worried whispers. My lips are moving but I must not be responding because she asks the same question over and over. My eyes still hurt from crying and my pride has taken a near fatal beating. Wordsmith’s ringtone, his first number one song, plays on my phone. I decline the call.

“Is that him?” Cynthia asks sympathetically.

“He’s been calling since last night.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“No.”

“Forget Wordsmith for just one second,” she pleads patiently. “I have news that’s sure to cheer you up! Everyone is talking about the MADD event with Ashleigh Van Buren. PerezHilton.com says *Ashleigh Van Buren delivered a tear-jerking speech. If she wasn’t sincere, she damn sure deserves an Oscar for that performance.* You did that, Alex.”

I finally find my voice and return the compliment. “Your work wasn’t half bad either.”

“You mean *our* work. Who knew Keke would turn into the city’s ‘it girl’ from these photos?” I stare at the pictures of Keke and her girls getting lap dances, making it rain on the strippers like it was a rap video. “Dave will be forced to keep us around,” Cynthia continues gleefully.

“Speak of the devil.” I answer Dave’s call dryly. “Be right there.”

“He probably wants to congratulate you.” Cynthia says eagerly.

I take off my glasses and walk to his office, convincing myself to be upbeat. “Morning, Dave.” He doesn’t say anything. He just slides a white envelope across the desk. “What’s this?” I open it slowly. There’s a check for \$52,000 inside.

“Severance pay.”

“What are you saying?”

“Your services are no longer needed. After careful analysis I’ve decided to axe the urban department. My resources would be put to better use going after bigger clients. I appreciate the time you have spent with this company. However, we are now moving in a new direction.”

“That’s it? After 15 years, this is how you fire me?” I notice Madison standing by the doorway, pretending to be busy. Then the room starts spinning. First Wordsmith. Now this?

“If you want to get paid for the next two weeks, stay in the office and get Madison up to speed on your remaining events.” My fists clench by my side. “This isn’t personal, Alex.”

“That’s a damn lie.” There’s a lot of things I could say and do right now. But I’ve worked too hard and came too far to ruin it all. Besides, success is the best revenge. When I put my mind to something, nothing and no one can stop me. Experience has taught me that. I pull myself together until I am cool, calm and collected, remembering revenge is a dish best served cold. “You’re going to wish you never fired me.”

I bump into Madison as I storm out of the office, nearly knocking her to the ground. I keep going, grab my things, walk out of the building and never look back.

CHAPTER 2

I'm standing in the Louis Vuitton store fixated on the latest handbag. My mouth is practically watering. I deserve some retail therapy. I'm about to lift the \$2,500 bag off the shelf when a familiar voice behind me asks in a slight Spanish accent, "Do you work here?"

I turn around facing Lorena, the best friend of my 18-year-old sister, Charlie. She's as surprised to see me, as I am to see her. I desperately want to lie but the nametag on my non-descript black uniform gives me away. "Uh, what are you doing here?"

"Shopping." She sounds confused. I can't tell if it's because she ran into me here or if it's because I asked a dumb ass question. I mean, what else would she be doing in the mall?

"Where's my sister?" Charlie and Lorena have been inseparable since they met in grade school. When you see one of them, the other isn't far behind. She points to Charlie, examining handbags by the door, under careful observation of the store manager.

Charlie looks in our direction, dropping the bag, horrified. "Alex? You work here?" She says it like it's the worst thing in the world I could be doing with my life. I want to sink into the floor. She rushes over, assaulting me with a bevy of questions. Monica, the ever-suspicious manager, promptly strides over to fix the merchandise. She watches my embarrassing moment unfold with unconcealed disapproval. "This is your new job? How long have you worked here? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Can you get us a discount?" Lorena asks eagerly.

Monica pops up next to me, jumping in. "We have a strict policy. Friends and family are not allowed to visit at work. Discounts are for employees only. Are you looking for a job?"

Lorena shakes her head, laughing. "Me? No. I'm good."

"Then I have to ask you to leave," Monica says firmly.

"You're kicking us out?" Charlie asks in disbelief.

I can't believe this is happening my first week on the job. I plead with them to accommodate her request. "Please. Go!"

"Is this how you treat paying customers?" Lorena asks loudly. "Someone needs to get this on camera. She's telling me to leave the store, everybody! Like I'm not a customer. Like I don't have money."

Charlie grabs Lorena's arm, pulling her towards the door. Lorena resists. They whisper to one another. I can't make out what they're saying because Monica is directing me to help other customers. Whatever was said, Lorena wins the argument because she returns victoriously.

Lorena yanks me towards the opposite end of the store while I am mid-sentence with a potential purchaser. "I want this bag." She points to the large handbag I was drooling over earlier.

I stare at the bag then back at her. Lorena is a high school senior living with a single mom supporting five kids. She and Charlie work as servers at a local restaurant. How could she come up with that kind of money?

Lorena glares back, as if reading my mind. "I saved up for this. I'm the first person in my family to graduate high school. I want to do something special for myself."

"Put the money towards college. You have no idea how expensive books are. Come back when you have a job with a salary."

"I know you're not talking, you label whore. Everything you own has someone else's name on it." She thrusts the bag in my hands. I put it back on the shelf.

"You get commission here?"

I gulp and nod.

"I'm getting this bag. Today. Either you take the credit or I'll give her the sale." She motions toward Monica. Lorena defiantly places the bag back in my hands and we stare each other down. "So?"

I sigh and position it back on the shelf.

"It's like that?" she asks, amazed.

"You don't buy the display," is my tense response. "I'll get a new one from the back."

“Is the discount out?” I shoot her a loaded look and she quickly backs down. “Wait! Charlie didn’t tell you which one she wants.”

I spin around searching for my sister. “Charlie!”

“Huh?” She’s digging her heels in the floor, pretending she didn’t hear our conversation.

“Are you planning on buying something, too?”

“Tell her what you want,” Lorena says hurriedly. “You’re going to come back when Alex isn’t here, anyway. Let her get the sale.”

Charlie caves under pressure. “Fine. Whatever.”

If I can’t talk Lorena out of it, I won’t be able to convince my sister, either. I don’t bother trying.

Monica is stunned when I ring up their purchase. She looks at each and every bill I slide through the counterfeit money scanner carefully. “How old are you two?”

“Eighteen,” they answer in unison.

She turns her head to the side, giving them a once over. “That explains it,” she remarks dryly.

“Am I missing something?” I ask.

Monica is suddenly smug. “You’re due for a break. I’ll let them explain. Be back in an hour.”

“Since you two have money to blow, it’s your treat. We obviously have some catching up to do.”

Walking through Lenox Mall to the California Pizza Kitchen, watching grown men stare them down, I realize my little sister has become a full-fledged woman. Charlie and Lorena look alike, with sun kissed skin, full lips, curvy thighs and big balloon shaped backsides. They both have thick, dark, wavy hair, double D cups and an unmistakable urban sensibility. My sister is wearing light blue slightly faded 7 Jeans with the occasional strategic tear. Her off the shoulder t-shirt has a picture of a pussycat drinking from a bowl of milk and one word underneath: Power. Her red heels match the words on the shirt. It’s something I would have picked out for myself.

Is she spending all her money on clothes? Am I responsible for turning her into a shopaholic? Charlie looked up to me when she was growing up. She copied everything I did, from what I wore and how I wore it, to how I styled my hair and nails. Now there is a grown-up version of me staring anxiously across the table and I don’t know what to say or where to begin.

“Answer me!” Charlie demands, in the same tone Mom gets when she’s annoyed. “Why didn’t you tell me about your job?”

“It’s not something I want to talk about.”

Lorena adds her two cents. “LV discounts, dope boys cuttin’ checks for no reason-”

Charlie interrupts her, breaking into song. “It’s that season where niggas cut checks for no reason.”

Lorena joins in, chanting, “Time to blow a bag, time to blow a bag.”

“Alright City Girls,” I yell over them. “If you think it’s so great, why didn’t you take an application?” I question.

“I’m not the retail type.” Lorena takes teeny tiny bites of pizza, trying to keep her lipstick intact.

“I’m not either.” I suck on my straw seeped in sweet tea. “When you’ve been out of work six months, you take what you can get.”

“You could have stayed on unemployment,” Charlie comments.

“It doesn’t pay half of what I made before. I have student loans to think about. And credit cards. How do you think Gucci, Louis and Prada found their way to my closet?”

“Wordsmith?” Charlie asks.

“Well, yeah. But I bought things for myself, too. Only I didn’t have cash like you do.”

My sister looks at her cell phone, checking the time. She throws some money on the table to cover the bill and stands up. “We have to go to work.”

Lorena digs in her Betsey Johnson handbag, pulling out the keys to a BMW.

“Not so fast. Tell me how you really got that money,” I say inquisitively.

Lorena sighs. “The truth is, we worked for it. And saved and saved than saved some more.”

“Is that the truth, Charlie?” I press.

“We’ve been working a lot,” Charlie responds, her eyes locked on Lorena’s.

“You can work more when you turn 18,” Lorena comments with an unsettling smile.

“Lorena, whose car are you driving?” I throw out the question quickly, catching her off guard.

“Mine,” she says as if I should already know.

Charlie shoots her a menacing look. “We really have to go. Don’t want to be late. See you at home.”

I sit at the table alone, slowly sucking in sweet tea. Don’t know what is going on with those two but I’m going to get to the bottom of it. I always do.

I glance at my watch. Ten more minutes before I return to my new life. Reality sucks. Everyone says I should be grateful for having a job when so many people are out of work. Only I don’t feel grateful. I’m mad as hell.

I didn’t think I would have trouble finding another job. I have years of experience, a proven track record of success and an excellent reference from Ms. Perlman, herself. Unfortunately, the competitive job market kicked my ass all the way back to Atlanta.

I would have stuck it out in New York until another opportunity came along if I wasn’t addicted to retail. I relied heavily on my six-figure salary to offset the cost of my lavish lifestyle. The longer I was out of work, the more time I spent buying things to make me feel better. Food became the anecdote to my depression. I ate at restaurants I could no longer afford, packing on 35 pounds in the process then buying more clothes to fit my rapidly expanding body. I reluctantly left New York for Atlanta after 6 months without work, moving back in with my parents. It’s every college graduate’s worst nightmare come true.

When I get back to the store, Monica has clocked out for the day and assistant manager, Karen McIntyre, has taken over. Karen had been my only friend throughout my senior year of high school in Atlanta. Like me, she moved to the city a few months earlier, coming from Memphis, Tennessee. Besides my family, she was the only one I kept in touch with from the A. She helped me get the Louis sales job and for that, I am forever grateful.

Karen stands in the doorway, pushing blonde hair falling across a freckled face out of her blue eyes. “Heard about your big sale.”

“Six months ago, I would have bought *both* those bags for myself,” I confess.

“Are you jealous of your sister?” Karen asks.

“No. I just don’t agree with it,” I say softly.

“Agree with what? Spending thousands of dollars to wear someone else’s name? I tell you the same thing all the time. You don’t listen. That’s hypocritical.”

I cut my eyes. “What’s hypocritical is you pushing these high-priced items on people when you think it’s so wrong.”

“I don’t push them on anybody. The products sell themselves. People believe wearing a designer label makes them someone special. Including you.”

She addresses a woman in a business suit holding a large Prada bag as if proving her point. “May I help you with something?” Karen swiftly rings up a \$3,000 sale. “See what I mean?”

I sulk in response.

“Oh! Snap out of it! This is temporary. You’ll find a job. Then you’ll leave me and move back to New York.”

“Sure,” I say, unconvinced.

“Let’s go out after work. Get a few drinks,” she suggests.

“I don’t know.”

“Please. For me. I can’t remember the last time I went out,” she begs.

I exhale loudly. “Fine. I can’t say no after you helped me get this job.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she quips.

A smile slowly spreads across my face. “So ... when I ask you to let me off early to change into something sexy for our night out, I’m appealing to my friend, not my supervisor.”

“Your friend says: you can leave at seven. Your boss says: help this customer.” She gestures towards a man with a Gucci fanny pack browsing through the wallet collection.

“You’ve got it, boss.”

I leave at 7:00 PM, walk through the parking deck, and stop in front of an old, beat up Honda Civic. My parents bought it for me when we first moved here. It was my one consolation prize for relocating to the south. Years later, the paint is chipped and it needs an upgraded stereo with Bluetooth and a USB connection. At least it gets me where I need to go. No point in buying my own car. Karen's right. As soon as I find a job in New York, I'm gone.

I slide Louis onto the passenger seat, swinging Manolo Blahnik's over the doorframe. I start the ignition, rolling the windows down until the AC kicks in. I notice a group of guys standing in between a black Escalade with white rims and a tricked out gold Maserati, diagonally parked across three spots. The Maserati's scissor doors are lifted high, blaring a bass heavy hip-hop track through the speakers. The 20 something's surrounding the car are draped in jewels and everything designer from t-shirts, jeans, shoes, even the boxers peeking out of the waistband of their jeans.

It's embarrassing enough to work in the mall. Now I'm forced to drive out of the parking lot in a little putt-putt car with some cuties watching my every move. Can life get any worse? And suddenly it does.

The tallest and loudest guy in the group locks eyes with me. He turns to his boys, cuts off the music, and starts talking – about me!

“The problem with the women in Atlanta is they don't have their priorities straight.” The others mumble in agreement. “She has \$1,000 handbag with \$500 dollar shoes. You see what she's driving, man? She got into that run down hooptie. Look!” His friends come closer, stopping behind my car, doubling over with laughter. “That's just wrong.”

I'm as mad I'm driving around in a clunker as he is watching me get in it. What does he know anyway? And why should I care? But I do. He keeps pointing at me and laughing like I'm the funniest thing he's seen all day. I'll show him funny.

While everyone else is walking away, loud mouth is still posted behind my car, cracking jokes. I shift the gear into reverse, gently bumping into him, knocking him to the ground. He scrambles out of my way in shock while his friends catch the action. My eyes lock on a large cup of melted McDonald's dollar sweet tea in the cup holder. I back up next to him so he's lying underneath the driver's window.

“You think that's funny? I've got something funnier.” I pour the entire cup on him, letting it splash down over his face and onto his shirt.

Through the rearview mirror, I see his friends laughing at him harder than they were laughing at me. I'm cackling like a hyena as I'm driving away replaying the scenario over and over. That damn sure felt good. It's the best thing I've done all day.

“You did what?” Karen yells into the phone.

“Just meet me at the restaurant. I don't want to pull up to the club in my car,” I answer.

“Did you forget you're back in Georgia? It's legal to carry weapons here,” Karen reminds me.

“I'll remember that next time someone is blocking me in.” I park and walk into the Latin restaurant, Mojitos, where Karen and I worked in high school. “I'll meet you inside. I need a drink.”

After today's victory, I squeezed into a body shaper, covered with a knee length BCBGMAXAZRIA dress hiding the cellulite that has somehow popped up on my thighs and highlighting my altered curves. I sashay into the bar in open toed BCBG sling back heels, propping myself onto one of the high stools. I order a pitcher of pomegranate mango mojito, enjoying the homemade guacamole, salsa and chips.

Something on the bar TV screen catches my attention. There's a clip of socialite Ashleigh Van Buren entering a rehab program, Dave and Madison by her side. A reporter is catching us up on the case, updating the audience on her progress. I stuff a chip laden with guacamole into my mouth. My one-time client took my advice after all and these bastards get the credit. *Life isn't fair.*

I expect to see Charlie and Lorena running orders out of the kitchen behind the bar. After ten minutes pass, without them in sight, I scan the workers in the restaurant for familiar faces. The only person I recognize is the owner's son, Jose. “Jose! Como estás?” If I practiced my school learned Spanish more frequently, the words wouldn't sound so funny coming out of my mouth.

He greets me with a kiss on the cheek. “Wow! You look amazing. Is it date night?”

“Meeting Karen for girls' night out.”

Jose's face lights up. "She's coming? Here?" He looks down at his grease stained shirt. "I've got to change."

I laugh. "Tell Charlie I'm here."

Jose becomes suddenly serious. "Charlie and Lorena don't work here anymore. Charlie called me a few weeks ago. She said your parents were coming by. She begged me not to tell them. I told your parents our Buckhead location was understaffed. I lied and said I sent her there. Don't know what's going on but I can't keep covering for her."

"What happened?" I ask. "Did you fire them?"

"They quit. Sometimes they come here to hang out and eat. And everything they have is so fancy. They drive around in Lorena's Beamer. I don't think the rumors are true but I don't know where they're getting this money."

"What rumors?" He hesitates and I ask the same question again. "What rumors?"

"Heard they've got drug dealer boyfriends. Someone else said they're . . . they're . . ."

"They're what?"

He whispers one word so softly I almost miss it. "Escorts." After it slips out of his mouth, a look of shock plays over his face. It would have been comical if we weren't in the middle of a conversation about my sister turning tricks. "Oh no!" he gasps. I follow his gaze to the door of the restaurant where Karen is standing, searching for me. "I have to change." He runs towards the back.

Karen finally notices me. She looks super sexy, ready for a night out in a form fitting pantsuit with a backless top. "You know it's a busy night when Jose takes off without saying hello."

"He'll be back," I respond with a snicker. I pour her a glass from my pitcher and fill her in on our conversation, from everything to the stain on his shirt, to my elusive sister.

"You don't really think she's an escort, do you?" Karen questions.

I give it some thought. I left home 12 years ago. A lot has happened since then. I know Charlie as my sister. I don't know her as a woman. "I don't think so. One thing I do know, we are going to have a long talk when she gets home and I'm going to get some straight answers."

"Oh, my goodness!" Karen cries suddenly, staring at something behind me.

"What?"

"Time to go." She practically pulls my chair out from under me.

That's when I realize what she's looking at. My heart jumps out of my chest and I sink back into the chair, frozen in disbelief. The latest episode of Rap Royalty is on TV. Apparently, I am the main attraction.

Jose shouts over my shoulder. "Hey! That's you." Karen and I simultaneously hiss at him to be quiet. "Hey, Karen," he says sheepishly. She hushes him again and he mutters a soft apology.

I'm watching the TV; watching *myself*, escort Keke into the club at Wordsmith's birthday party. I mean, *engagement party*. The camera cuts to a solo shot of Keke commenting on the situation. "That's the last person I expected to see. I didn't know she organized the party – which makes it even worse. Wordsmith told everyone she's just his publicist. That's not who she really is."

The words, *Coming Up Next*, flash across the screen. They're followed by shots of Keke with the male strippers, shoving dollars into G-strings. There's a clip of Wordsmith hugging me while Nina lurks in the background, watching. Wordsmith says, "I have to tell you something." Finally, there is an argument between Wordsmith and Nina. She shouts, "Who is she to you? Tell me the truth!" Then the show cuts to commercial break.

"This is why I love reality TV!" Jose exclaims.

"Jose," Karen chides.

"My bad," he says apologetically.

"I need another drink," I say to no one in particular.

Jose goes behind the bar and makes another pitcher, serving it up before the show comes back on. We sit in silence watching to see what will happen next.

The scene with Keke and the strippers is hilarious. Even I can't help but let out a tiny laugh. The laughter subsides when my scene with Wordsmith is broadcast. Jose reaches for the remote, turning off the

music playing through the bar. He turns up the volume on the TV, despite the words in closed caption running along the bottom of the screen.

The audience gets a clear view of the action from Nina's vantage point. She's visibly upset when Wordsmith fingers my earrings. The camera couldn't pick up our conversation so the producers are acting as mouth readers, filling in the blanks with words running across the bottom of the screen. *I remember these. Did you wear them for me?*

I'm expecting the shot of me to come next, when I push Wordsmith away and tell him it's not that type of party. It never comes. Instead, he's whispering, "We need to talk."

The camera cuts to Nina's friends trying to calm her down and keep her from whooping my ass. *Like that would ever happen.*

She's saying, "What was that? She's his publicist."

Next, Nina and her friends are in a backstage dressing room discussing what happened. *Is he cheating on her? Has she ever caught him with another woman?* Wordsmith's cousin Weasel butts in and tells Nina Wordsmith wants to speak to her. Wordsmith pulls her onstage and makes the proposal. I feel my eyes swelling up with tears, reliving the painful moment all over again.

Then I'm on the TV screen with tears streaming down my cheeks for real. Juanita and Shanice are there. So is Keke. Then comes another commercial.

I can't see the TV through my tears. I don't know if I'm crying because I still miss Wordsmith or because I got played on national TV. Maybe it's a little bit of both. "Steve, the show's producer, told me he was setting up Keke. Looks like I was the only one who got set up. Fuckin' asshole." I bury my head in my hands until the show comes back on.

Wordsmith and Nina are back at his house, the same house I used to sleep in. Nina takes the ring off her finger, placing it on the kitchen table. "Who is she to you?"

"She's just my publicist," he says. "You know that."

"Just your publicist!" I yell out loud, unaware everyone else is watching the show, too. After my outburst, some of them put two and two together. The irate woman at the bar is also the woman on TV.

"Ssshhh!" A lady in an ugly flowered dress hisses at me, without taking her eyes off the screen.

She apparently does not know who I am.

Nina folds her arms. "I heard differently. I heard she's your ex-girlfriend. I heard she helped you get your record deal."

"Thank you!" I scream to no one in particular.

Flower Dress hisses again, then realizes who she's hissing at. "That's you!"

"I didn't want to embarrass you and turn you down in front of all those people," Nina says slowly. "But you should have told me. How can I trust you to put this ring on my finger?" She picks up her Gucci bag and walks out the door, leaving Wordsmith stunned and speechless.

My phone rings. Wordsmith's face and name are sprawled across the screen. I stare at it for a few seconds, then decline the call.

A small part of me feels vindicated. The show ends after another preview plays, encouraging us to tune in next week for the reunion episode.

Jose keeps me freshly supplied with complimentary pomegranate mango mojitos while I entertain the bar with stories from my days as Wordsmith's girlfriend. Everyone crowds around asking questions and friends blow up my phone, curious if I've seen the show.

"How did you meet him?" This comes from Flower Dress who hushed me earlier.

I think back to my college days when everything seemed simple. "I had to pick an obscure product and promote it for my senior thesis. I went to a club with my girls and they had an open mic. That's where I met Wordsmith. His music was good. More importantly, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I decided he was going to be my thesis project."

"Did you really help him get his deal?" a waiter with cornrowed hair asks.

I think about it for a moment, then smugly reply, "Yeah. I did."

"How did you do it?" Cornrows asks.

“I took everything they taught me in school about product promotion and applied it in real life. I made sure everyone knew about Wordsmith from the influencers to the fans. I created his buzz. I aced my thesis and got Wordsmith a record deal.”

“Can you do that for me?” Cornrows asks eagerly.

“When did you let Wordsmith taste them cakes?” Flower Dress interrupts.

I shrug and laugh uncomfortably. “It just happened.” My head is starting to spin from the liquor.

“How long did you date?”

“Did you know about Nina?”

“Have you been with other rappers?”

The questions come flying at me from around the room. “I haven’t *been* with any other musicians. I don’t make a habit of getting involved with clients.” I start swaying in my stool.

Karen stands up and shouts, “That’s it, y’all! Enough questions for tonight.”

The small crowd mumbles with displeasure, slowly dispersing as Jose motions for them to leave. “Show’s over.” Jose turns the volume on the TV back down and cranks up the salsa music on the restaurant’s sound system. He turns to Karen, pleading, “Dance with me.”

“Go ahead.” I lift up another glass. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Karen and Jose step onto the small dance floor, loosing themselves in the music. They twist, turn, dip and sway, never missing a beat. Karen is glowing. I haven’t seen her look this happy in a while. It takes me back to the way things used to be. The song ends with Karen in Jose’s arms. A server interrupts, asking for an override. Jose leaves and Karen practically floats back to the bar. She’s still smiling.

“No one dances salsa better than you. Not even my mom and she can dance all night.” Karen dreamed of becoming a dancer and renowned choreographer. I dreamed of taking over Perlman someday. Now here we are, college graduates working at the mall. “Whatever happened to us?”

“What do you mean?” Karen inhales a glass of cold water.

“Six months ago, I was doing PR for rappers, actors, athletes. I’m talking red carpet premieres; invite only events, summer in the Hamptons. Now look at me. Laid off and living with my parents. I’m moving backwards.”

Karen sets the empty glass on the bar. “It could be worse. Be grateful you have a job.”

“I wouldn’t consider working in mall retail something to be grateful for. I can’t even afford to buy what I’m selling.” I snort.

“I’ve been there a year and now I’m the assistant manager. The money is okay. If you stick with it you could be where I am now.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” I sneer.

Her face wrinkles into a frown. “What do you mean by that?”

I exhale. “Do you remember what we were like in high school?”

“Yeah. You were a stuck-up snob.”

“I was your only friend,” I remind her.

“I was the only one willing to put up with your whining.”

“You liked me because I was as ambitious as you. I get what I want because I go after it. I know you. Selling handbags for a living isn’t what you planned for your life, either.”

Karen takes a pregnant pause before answering. “Unlike you, I try to make the best of things.”

“How? You are not doing what you were meant to do.”

“What I imagined I was meant to do didn’t work out as planned. So ... I moved on to plan B.”

“Having a plan B is like planning to fail,” I practically scream. “You were a back-up dancer for Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry. You danced in videos, in Broadway musicals. What happened?”

“When I booked gigs everything was cool,” she snaps. “Do you know what happens when dancers aren’t working a gig? They get regular jobs. Then my agent calls about the next big tour. I get lucky. They pick me. I tell my boss I’m going on the road. He says don’t bother coming back. When that tour ends, I have to start the process all over and find another job. And every interviewer asks the exact same questions. *How long do you see yourself working for this company Miss McIntyre? We’re looking for people willing to stay and grow with us. Don’t think I haven’t tried.*”

“You have to keep trying,” I encourage.

Karen sounds worn out when she finally responds. “We’re 29 years old, Alex. You have to grow up sometime. I did. It’s time you do the same. This here is real life. Don’t know about you but I’m going to thank Jose for this real drink, that is really making me forget how disappointing my real life is.”

She walks away, leaving me alone. I lay my arms on the bar, carefully placing my head on top of my hands. I want to run after her, scream at her, inspire her not to give up. I would follow her if my legs didn’t feel so heavy. After what seems like an eternity, I hear Karen and Jose talking over me.

“Is she okay?” Jose asks.

“I’m fine.” I try to get off the barstool but I sink back down like a rag doll.

“I’m taking you home,” Karen commands, grabbing my keys.

I would take them back if everything wasn’t so fuzzy. Maybe it’s not a good idea to drive. I can’t afford a publicist to clean up my image like I did for Ashleigh. Ashleigh! I recall the drunk driving scandal I helped her through months ago. “On second thought, you can drive.” I poke Karen in the chest, emphasizing each word. “Night, Jose.”

Karen helps me outside, propping me against her Camry while she opens the door. I’m enjoying the warm summer air until she shoves me inside. “Easy!” I yell.

“Don’t even think about calling out of work in the morning,” she scolds.

“You’re mean.” I roll the window down. The breeze feels so good I lean my face out of the car.

Karen turns up the volume on the radio, singing the song out loud. I join her, loudly and off key, until a commercial comes on. “Calling all pole dancers.” I reach for the radio to turn the station.

Karen swats away my hand. “Wait.”

“Enter the Club All Starz \$1,000 pole competition this Thursday and every Thursday at Club All Starz. Brought to you by the number one pole fitness studio in Atlanta, Vertical Dimensions.”

“You want to be a stripper,” I laugh.

“No. I want to try a pole dance class.”

“Same thing.”

“No. It isn’t.”

“You’re swinging around a pole. Right?”

Karen exhales deeply, shaking her head like I don’t know anything. “Strippers take off their clothes for money. Pole dancers train and compete like any other athlete.”

“Now you’re comparing stripping to a real sport. Seriously?”

“Pole dancing is a sport. It’s going to be included in the Olympics soon.”

“Stop! I can’t take anymore.” I laugh until my sides hurt. “You want to enter the stripping ... I mean ... pole dancing contest?”

“Maybe. After I take some classes.”

“I’ll save you time. It’s Thursday, right?”

“Yeah.”

“This contest is at a strip club, right?”

She nods again.

“Let’s go,” I say with drunken abandon. “I’ll personally give you \$1,000 if these *pole dancers* aren’t all butt booty naked swinging around the pole.”

“You don’t have \$1,000 to bet,” she counters.

“Maybe I do.”

“I don’t want your money,” Karen says dryly. “If I’m right, which I will be and the pole dancers don’t take off their clothes, you have to come with me to a pole dance class.”

“Fine. And if they do take it all off, you have to enter next week’s competition. And get naked with the rest of them,” I say gleefully.

“What! That’s not fair,” she protests.

“We can go back to the original bet,” I offer.

“Nope. We’ll stick with this one.”

“Deal.”

Karen swings the car around, changing directions, heading for Club All Starz.

The Club All Starz parking lot is packed. A large sign on top of the supermarket-sized building is lit up with golden neon lights. The who's-who of Atlanta and everyone else wanting to be seen, head straight for the valet. They jump out of expensive sports cars with super-sized rims, skipping the line and heading inside.

I'm getting out of the car when I feel my previously chewed food rushing up my throat. I hurry to a dark corner of the parking lot where no one can see me let it all out.

After ten minutes of intermittently hurling, I wipe my mouth with a napkin from Karen's glove box. "We can go home if you want," she says patiently.

I pull a small bottle of mouthwash out of my handbag. "Nope." I gurgle and spit. "Let's do this!"

As we walk around the building, I'm surprised by how many couples are here. Like it's a date or something. Don't know how I would feel if my man told me he wanted to take me out for the night and brought me to the strip club. "Guess we're not the only female customers," I say, amazed.

"You thought we would be?" Karen asks.

"Um . . . yeah."

"Have you been to a strip club?"

"No. Have you?"

"Yeah," Karen says coolly, like it's *the thing* to do. "I live in Atlanta."

I nod, finally understanding. Atlanta is widely considered to be the home of the strip club. Every guy I know who's been to Atlanta can't stop talking about the strip clubs when he comes home. Tonight, I find out what the hype is all about. "First time for everything," I say softly.

"You were a rapper's girlfriend. How did you *not* see the inside of a strip club?"

I shrug wearily, propping my body against the side of the building. We're at the back of a very long line moving slower than a 90-year-old driver. "I can't believe I'm in line waiting to get in a strip club. I didn't know strip clubs have lines. Or valet parking. I don't do lines. I never had to wait in lines in New York. I was VIP everything."

"This ain't New York," she snaps.

"C'mon." I step away from the crowd, locking my arm around hers. "You're going to experience VIP treatment."

We're strolling towards the door when the same pimped out Maserati I saw earlier screeches to a halt in front of the valet. It feels like pins and needles are pricking my stomach. This has to be the only Maserati in the city that looks like *that*. So . . . the person in the car is either the guy I poured the drink on or one of his friends. I flash back to Karen's earlier warning. "*It's legal to carry weapons here.*"

"I'm not paying \$400!" Karen is saying. I was so busy staring at the car I didn't realize she was discussing entry prices with the bouncer.

"If you're not buying bottles, you need to wait in line," he says firmly.

I look back at the Maserati. No! This cannot be happening. The guy stepping out of the driver's seat *is* the same guy I poured the drink on. Just my luck. I wouldn't have been so quick to flip out if I thought I would see him again. What is he going to do to me? Pour a drink on me? Swing a champagne bottle at my head? With dozens of line-backer sized bouncers a few feet away this has to be one of the safest places for us to run into each other. Then again, you never know.

What were we arguing about anyway? Oh, yeah. That's right. He was making fun of me for trying to live above my means. And here I am at the front of the VIP line getting tossed back into general population. This will definitely give him another round of jokes at my expense. Only this time, he'll have a bigger crowd.

I turn to the bouncer. "It's \$400 for bottle service, right? Not \$400 to get into the club."

"That's what I told you the first time," he huffs.

"That's fine," I say quickly. "Where do we pay?" I pull out my ID.

"This better be on you," Karen says.

I interrupt her urgently. "You know the guy I poured the drink on today?"

“What about him?”

“Don’t look now, but he’s right behind us.”

“Where?” She immediately turns around.

“I said don’t look!”

The bouncer holds the doors open for us. I sneak a peek at Parking Lot Guy. He’s with one of the guys I saw today. Parking Lot Guy’s friend notices me the same time I notice him. He points to me quizzically as the doors shut behind me.

The door girl at the counter stops us. “Hi, ladies. It’s \$20 each.”

“We’re doing bottle service,” I say quickly.

She calls for a waitress on a handheld radio. “Next time, call ahead for your table. The VIP entrance is down there.” She points to the right.

We walk down a long dimly lit hallway with black marble floors, red walls and a mirrored ceiling. The door at the end of the hallway is opened for us by a pretty smiling waitress in a red bustier, sparkly black boy shorts and black fishnet stockings. “Are you here for bottle service?”

“Yes,” I say, taking in the club.

“Follow me.”

She leads us up a flight of stairs into the VIP section. Booths with red leather couches provide a certain snob factor, as you look down on the little people seated below on black and red chairs surrounding round black tables. Three circular stages are in the middle of the club and chairs are pushed against the stage. There’s at least one stripper on each stage, bouncing to the music while customers make it rain, throwing money in the air.

The first VIP booth is huge, with its’ own personal stage. We pass some smaller VIP booths, all with naked women dancing on top of hundreds of dollars carelessly scattered along the floor. The biggest booth is filled with attractive, well-dressed female customers and plenty of bottles. But there are no dancing women. No bricks of plastic wrapped money. No dollars on the floor.

“That’s Jasmine and Sheila from *Celebrity Wives Atlanta*,” Karen says. “Don’t you know them?”

“I’m not as far out the loop as I thought.” I turn my head, hoping they don’t see me.

“Oooohhh! Did you see the episode where they started pole dancing class?” she squeals.

What’s with Karen and this pole dancing thing? “I saw it.”

“I didn’t know pole dance studios existed until I watched the show.”

“Isn’t that their pole teacher?” I gesture towards a short, thick and amazingly toned woman with hair falling to the middle of her back.

“That’s her,” Karen says excitedly. “That’s Pole Junkie. We’re taking classes with her.”

“You mean, *you* are taking classes with her.”

“*We* are taking classes together,” she says, smiling confidently. “I already won this bet.”

“We’ll see.”

The waitress gestures to us to have a seat when we come to the last section in the row. “This is the last booth available. You have to share it with the next party who comes in, since it’s just two of you.”

“Start us off with a bottle of Patron and two bottles of water.” I hand her my credit card. “Can I get singles with my card?”

“How many do you need?”

“\$1,000.”

“No problem,” she says eagerly. “By the way, my name is Stacy.”

I didn’t plan on spending this much money tonight but you can’t half ass when you’re in VIP. Karen and I lean back, settling into the soft booth, watching the scene. We see everything and everyone in the club from our section. I finally relax, listening to the base heavy southern hip-hop blaring through the speakers. “Parking Lot Guy won’t see me here.”

Karen isn’t paying attention to me. She’s staring at something or someone down on the floor. I follow her gaze. “What are you looking at?”

“That stripper looks familiar.” She points to a naked girl below us.

I lean over to see who she's talking about and my head spins. I sink back into the couch before getting a good look. "Probably someone we went to school with. Had the right idea long before we did."

"Now you're interested in pole dancing?" she teases.

"I'm interested in being a stripper," I joke. "You see all this money flying around? She's got more money on that one stage than I make in a week."

I spot Waitress Stacy walking away from the main bar. She looks behind her, gesturing to someone obstructed from my view. When the figure steps out of the shadows, I have a clear view of Parking Lot Guy. He's with four other people. Where is she leading them? Didn't she say this was the last booth available? That we were going to have to share? Does this mean I have to share my booth with *him*? *This is not my freakin' day.*

The DJ's voice comes through the speakers excitedly, amping up the crowd with one simple statement. "Chris Carver is in the building!"

Karen is suddenly antsy. "Chris Carver is coming this way."

"Parking Lot Guy is coming this way," I say fearfully.

"Which one is he? You never showed me."

"He's behind the waitress. In the blue shirt."

"He's with Chris Carver?" She asks in shock.

"Who is Chris Carver?"

"The football player." She continues, when my face shows no signs of recognition. "You need to learn your celebrities."

I pound the air with my fists. "What am I going to do?"

Karen shrugs reluctantly. "Tell the waitress to move us."

I glance at Parking Lot Guy, steadily approaching. "It's too late. He's going to see me." I notice another flight of stairs next to our booth leading to the main floor. That's going to be my escape route until I figure out another plan.

I'm heading towards the stairs when the DJ says, "Rosa and Reina to the main stage. Let's go!"

A gorgeous girl in a teeny tiny bikini flooded with rhinestones shoves a basket filled with money on stage then steps up behind it. Another equally well-dressed dancer, just as pretty as the first, follows behind her. They stare into the VIP, following Chris Carver's movements, simultaneously shaking and bouncing to the beat. The first girl freezes when her eyes eventually land on mine and she catches my pointed gaze. If I didn't see it for myself - I never would have believed the girls onstage are my little sister Charlie and her best friend Lorena.

CHAPTER 3

I'm frozen at the top of the stairs, surveying the situation in shock. My little sister is in front of me. Parking Lot Guy is behind me. I wish I could rewind my day like Tree in Happy Death Day. I wouldn't have agreed to come this stupid club. I would never have watched Rap Royalty and I wouldn't even think about throwing a drink on Parking Lot Guy. Unfortunately, this is real life, not a movie.

Waitress Stacy sets my bottle and bucket of ice on the table. "It's your lucky day. You're sharing a booth with Chris Carver!"

I've had more than my share to drink but this calls for another shot. Straight up. No chase.

Chris slides up to us with ease while Karen and I are taking shots neither one of us needs. Karen giggles like a schoolgirl. "Did I ever tell you he's my celebrity crush?" She whispers. She introduces herself with a toothy smile. "Hi. I'm Karen."

He presses her tiny hand between his giant palms. "Hey baby. What's your name?"

It takes a moment to realize Chris is addressing me. I've been staring behind him at Parking Lot Guy and his friend. They must be talking about me because they keep looking in my direction. "Me? Oh. I'm Alex." I give his hand a firm shake.

He jumps back, surprised at its force. "Don't hurt me!"

I study his monstrous biceps. "It would take more than a handshake to do that."

Parking Lot Guy comes over, butting in on our conversation. "We met earlier. I didn't get your name." He extends his hand towards me.

I stare at his palm as if it were a venomous snake waiting to strike. Karen nudges me. I roll my eyes and reluctantly take it. "Alex. Still interested in meeting me? After our parking lot encounter?"

Chris laughs. "This is the one? My brother's been talking about her all day." He gestures towards the man I saw with Parking Lot Guy earlier, if you could call him a man. He's about Charlie's age, probably not old enough to legally be here, in the club.

"That was hilarious!" Chris's brother yells.

"She who laughs last laughs best." I loosen up a little, realizing I'm the only one taking it seriously. Still, I don't let my guard all the way down. In case he gets any ideas.

Parking Lot Guy seems surprisingly amused. "Guess I started it. But I didn't see that cup coming. Um . . . I owe you an apology."

"You do." Karen nudges me even harder than last time. "I apologize, too," I say begrudgingly.

"I'm watching you tonight." Parking Lot Guy says playfully. "Too many glasses around for you to throw."

"What are your names?" Karen politely moves the conversation away from potential hot topics.

"Cameron Carver, baby." Chris's brother relays his name with over the top swag. As if we should already know who he is.

"Ryder," Parking Lot Guy says, quietly confident.

That's all I get out of him. Ten strippers rush the VIP, clinging onto Chris and his friends, clamoring for their attention. Karen and I are left unoccupied but it seems like Parking Lot Guy, I mean, Ryder, is more interested in me than the half-naked women parading in front of him. He's talking to them and sneaking peeks in my direction.

"You've got his attention," Karen comments when Ryder looks over his shoulder at me for the twentieth time.

"He's probably scared another drink will land on him," I snicker. My light-hearted mood changes when I think about Charlie. "The stripper you saw earlier, the one you thought looked familiar . . . well, that's my sister and her best friend."

"No!" Karen shrieks. "Look at the bright side. At least you know she's not an escort."

My gaze darts to Charlie. She's hesitantly stepping on the first VIP stage butt naked. Her eyes are locked in my direction and she's reluctant to move.

I turn my back to her. I'm not going to cause a scene and drag her off stage. She's an adult. Technically, anyway. She's not doing anything illegal. Even so, I'm not comfortable watching my still in high school 18 year-old sister, dancing in front of leering strangers examining every crack and crevice of her naked body.

"Got your singles," Waitress Stacy says cheerfully. She lays a plastic wrapped brick of money on the table in front of me. The dancers are momentarily confused.

Chris looks at me than back at the money stack lying on the table. "Y'all going in like that?" He plops down on the couch in between me and Karen. "I might need to order more singles to keep up. What's the occasion? Whose birthday is it?"

"Girls' night out," I say casually. As if the unanticipated expense isn't hurting my pockets. Like throwing money in the strip club is something I'm prone to do at any given time.

"I need to start going out with you" he says with a wide white-toothed smile. When \$5,000 dollars arrives a few minutes later, it's obvious he's doing more than keeping up with us. He's winning.

"I hear you're from my hometown," Karen says.

"You're not from Memphis," Chris responds in disbelief.

"I am so," she insists. They rattle off a list of streets they grew up on, schools they went to and people they know.

I'm sipping cranberry juice when I notice ten pairs of eyeballs glaring at us like lasers, cutting through my skin. The dancers who rushed over when Chris first sat down are agitated. Karen is occupying his time and they aren't making any money.

Cameron comes over, as if to remind him why they're here. "I'm ready to go in," he says eagerly. He's salivating over the girls who would kill Karen and me with one look, if they could.

"In a minute." Chris doesn't even look in Cameron's direction.

While I'm watching Cameron, Ryder is watching me. He picks a money brick off the table, unwrapping the plastic, as if he's done this dozens of times before. The dancers surround him like piranhas swarming their prey. I watch the scene with renewed interest. Chris's own brother has to ask for money and Ryder doesn't. Whatever Ryder does and whoever he is, he's clearly not a flunky.

Ryder hands \$500 to Cameron and the strippers twerk on cue. Ryder walks away while girls tug on his shirt, pleading with him to come back. He politely brushes them off and continues walking. He's coming towards me! He sits next to me on the edge of the couch. "Do you want a dance?"

"From you?"

"You know what I mean."

I look at him. I mean, I really notice him for the first time. Ryder's tall with a husky build. His muscles aren't as defined as Chris. But whatever he's got going on – it's working. His honey colored face is framed with large soft brown curls and light brown eyes that stare into mine inquisitively. Rolex watch. Balmain jeans. Gucci shirt and sneakers. He looks good and he's well put together.

"Pick one. Or two." He smiles at me and sits \$2,500 in my lap.

I can't help but smile. "Already have singles." Not that I really want to spend it. I just know how the game goes. Men with money love a woman who has her own.

"Then think of this as your warm-up."

I like his style. "Alright. Thanks." I shrug off-handedly, trying not to appear too eager. Inside, I'm screaming, I wish we had gotten off to a better start.

Charlie and Lorena are making their way off the middle VIP stage and walking towards us. Completely naked. Actually, it's more like Lorena is walking and dragging Charlie behind her.

"They're pretty." I gesture to Charlie and Lorena. "I'm going in for a closer look."

Charlie is mortified. She stops dancing, grabbing the pole for support. Lorena is surprised but regains her composure when she notices the money in my hand. "Is that for us?" She asks giddily.

"Yeah," I respond coolly. I direct my next question to Charlie. "Were you going to tell me?"

Charlie shrugs her shoulders up and down, staring at the ground.

Lorena glances at Charlie than back at me. "Are you with Chris Carver?" She asks excitedly.

I look back at Chris and Karen still caught up in conversation. "I guess." Ryder is watching me with amusement. I give him a reassuring smile. "Anyway, his friend gave me this to spend. I'd rather give it to you. Even though I don't agree with what you're doing," I quickly add.

"Don't tell him she's your sister," Lorena says. "Some guys don't like that. Your friend is coming." She turns to Charlie and hisses, "Start dancing."

Ryder comes up behind me. "Looks like you could use some help."

I lean in close to him as if confiding some big secret. "It's my first time ... in a strip club."

"Really?" He asks.

I nod. "Really."

"Doing it big for your first time."

"Don't believe in half-stepping."

"Lesson number one: Don't talk them to death. They're here to work. You're here to spend."

I fumble with the bundles in my hands, shifting them under my armpit. I slide the band off 100 singles, slowly letting them hit the floor.

Ryder laughs. "Like this." He takes \$100 from me, pops off the paper band, throwing money high in the air. The dollars drift to the floor one by one, landing in scattered patterns on the ground, like leaves do in the fall. "You try."

The dollars I throw land in clumps at the foot of the stage.

"Excuse me." A naked dancer stands behind us with a basket full of money balanced on her hip. Charlie and Lorena spot her and get down on all fours, pushing their singles into a pile.

"Thanks. It's her turn." Charlie eagerly scoops money in her basket, hurrying off stage.

"Thank you both!" Lorena shouts.

"Come dance for me. Unless you have another stage to go to," I add.

"Huh?" Charlie is stunned.

"We don't," Lorena says quickly.

The DJ's voice booms through the speakers, drowning out the music. "The Club All Starz Pole Competition presented by Vertical Dimensions pole studio is coming up. Next song!"

I walk back to my seat, Lorena and Ryder beside me, Charlie following reluctantly behind. I tell Karen quietly, "Pretend you don't know them."

Karen is confused but plays along. "Good choice, Alex. What are your names?"

"Rosa," Charlie says quietly.

"Reina." Lorena openly flirts with Chris, his attention shifting from Karen.

Karen shoots Lorena a funny look. She reels Chris back in like a fish on a hook, sliding her hand over his inner thigh like it's completely natural. "I want them to dance for me after the pole competition."

"I almost forgot!" Chris jumps up, slapping Ryder on the back. "Have to show you the one I've been talking about." He turns back to Karen, "Are they dancing for you or for us?"

"What do you think?" Karen asks seductively.

Chris grins. "I'm going to enjoy watching you, watching her."

"All dancers clear the stage," the DJ announces firmly.

Lorena slides up to the rail, money bucket squarely positioned in between her legs while Charlie puts her clothes back on. Ryder grabs the remaining money off the table, tossing two blocks to Chris. We all press our bodies against the railing, looking down on the crowd below, which is now looking up at us. I forget about my own money laying on the table until Ryder points it out.

I sling my plastic wrapped brick into Charlie and Lorena's basket without giving it a second thought. "Watch that," I direct them. Ryder looks at me quizzically. "What?" I momentarily forget I'm playing the pretending game. "It's not like they're going anywhere." I lean into Ryder's arm. "Karen and I have this bet. She says the pole dancers don't take off their clothes. I say they do. If she wins, I have to go to a pole class with her. If I win, she has to enter the contest next week and get naked."

He laughs. "You lost. Get ready for pole class. They don't take off their clothes. Contest rule."

"What?" I reach behind Ryder and Chris, poking Karen in the back.

"Ouch!" She cries, jumping.

“You knew you were going to win the bet,” I accuse. “You knew they don’t get naked.”

“That’s why I felt bad taking your money. But you are coming to pole class.”

I roll my eyes and notice Charlie sulking. “You okay?”

Her voice says, “I’m good.” Her body language says something completely different.

“We are going to talk about this when we get home. In the meantime, I’m going to help you make some money. I’m throwing you \$1,000 of my own money. But I want it all back tomorrow. Every dollar.”

“How does that help me?” She asks suspiciously.

“I’m also giving you all of his. You can keep that.” Her eyes widen and she nods in agreement.

The idea came to me quickly. This way I can pretend I’m giving away my own money without actually giving it away. I’m off the hook, no longer obligated to spend what I can’t really afford trying to keep up a façade. In the meanwhile, Charlie and Lorena earn money from actual customers with money to blow. It works best for everybody. I think so, anyway.

The music fades as Pole Junkie steps on the main stage with another woman. Pole Junkie is wearing pink booty shorts with the words, “Pole Junkie,” in white lettering. A simple pink and white sports bra and clear 5-inch platform stilettos complete her outfit. Her make-up is minimal and her hair is pulled back into a smooth ponytail.

The woman beside her looks familiar, although I can’t figure out how I know her. She’s exotic, like most of the eye candy in rap videos with waist length fire engine red hair. She has a ridiculously unnatural looking body with a supersized ass and surgically enhanced breasts. She’s dressed like the strippers parading around the club. Her black booty shorts and bra top are flooded with red rhinestones and she has red open toed leather ankle boots.

Pole Junkie speaks first. She’s super energetic, like a cheerleader at a pep rally who drank too much Red Bull, enunciating every word. “Thanks for coming out to the weekly Club All Starz Pole Competition presented by the Vertical Dimensions fitness studio. I am The Pole Junkie, owner of Vertical Dimensions.” The crowd applauds so loudly her last words are nearly drowned out.

“Hey Atlanta.” The other woman speaks in a deep, southern drawl. The crowd goes wild, clapping and screaming with such intensity, she’s forced to wait until they calm down before she continues. Swagger seeps through her pores effortlessly, like she was born to perform.

Chris motions to Ryder. “That’s her.” The woman notices Chris watching her and nods her head with a slick smirk.

“I don’t need an introduction!” she continues. “Y’all know who I am; Exotic entertainer, magazine cover girl, pole perfectionist. What’s my mutha fuckin’ name?” She holds her microphone out to the audience as she walks around the circular stage, hyping up the crowd.

“Drama!” They chant.

“I can’t hear you,” she taunts.

“Drama! Drama! Drama!” They shout louder than before.

Pole Junkie attempts to reign the crowd back in. It’s pretty much a lost cause once someone throws \$100 on Drama. Next thing you know, money is flying from every direction while security guards slide it towards the stage. Only Chris doesn’t flinch. He keeps flashing that multi-million-dollar smile though, clutching his money underneath his arm. Drama takes it all in with the amusement of a seasoned professional, heightening the mood of the crowd with every movement. And they love her.

Pole Junkie meekly attempts to gain control of her audience. “Ok, everybody.”

“Thanks for the love!” Drama shouts. More money starts flying.

Pole Junkie signals the DJ to turn up her microphone. She ignores the rainstorm and noise from the crowd as she continues with her prepared speech.

“Tonight, we have 10 competitors battling it out for the \$1,000 cash prize. We select 10 pole dancers each week from around the country. One of these ladies will win \$1,000 tonight. Next year, we’re bringing each of our 52 winners back here, to Atlanta, to compete in the Vertical Dimensions All Star Pole Competition! The winner will receive a \$10,000 cash prize, a pole and a lifetime supply of pole grip. If

you're interested in signing up for the weekly competition, anyone with a Vertical Dimensions t-shirt can help you. They also have tickets for the pole recital this Sunday."

"We're performing our version of Cinderella – on the pole," Drama adds.

Many of the female customers and a few of the dancers make a beeline for anyone associated with the pole studio. Karen buys two tickets, stuffing them into her handbag. "I'm holding onto yours."

Charlie digs into their basket, pulling out enough cash for two tickets. "We learned all our tricks off YouTube. We were waiting until school ended to go to a real pole studio."

"Which college do you go to?" Ryder asks. I didn't realize he was paying attention to our conversation.

"Clark." The lie rolls off Lorena's tongue effortlessly.

I shake my head in disbelief and turn my attention back to the stage. Ten women walk onto the main floor in a single file line. Some are wearing plain sports bras and boy shorts. Others dressed it up with sexy corsets and mini tutus. A couple of contestants have on customized costumes like Drama.

Drama is saying, "Some of our contestants are exotic dancers."

"Some have never been in a strip club before," Pole Junkie adds.

"Just because you're a stripper, doesn't mean you're a pole dancer," Drama continues.

"And vice versa," Pole Junkie says. "It's hard to get up here, especially for the first time. So please be nice."

"And if you see something you like, throw some damn money!" Drama amps up the crowd again.

"After the competition, we have a special show by the Vertical Dimensions professional pole team," Pole Junkie notes.

"Save some ones for me!" Drama shouts.

Drama and Pole Junkie exit the stage, allowing a clear view of each contestant as they walk by. They introduce the contestants one by one, calling out their names and where they're from. Atlanta, Houston, Las Vegas, New York, Charlotte, Miami, DC, Virginia Beach, Kansas City and Myrtle Beach are all represented. It's hard to believe some of these people traveled so far just to enter a pole contest.

The contestants perform a choreographed routine to their pre-selected song on the main stage. Then Contestant A moves to the second stage and freestyles to the song Contestant B is dancing to. When Contestant C gets onstage, Contestant A hits the third stage, Contestant B takes the second stage and Contestants A and B freestyle to Contestant C's song. The contestants finally get a breather after the third stage when they can sit down, relax and watch everyone else tire themselves out.

The first contestant, from Miami, has an abundance of energy. She's all over the pole. Climbing it, flipping upside down, hanging from it, sliding down it and climbing back up again. I figure she should have saved some of that energy for the next two songs. I'm right. By the second song, she's worn out and out of breath. A few people come to the stage and toss her money but it's not half of what Drama made just for standing on stage, bumping her gums.

Charlie laughs. "She's not a stripper. We do a six-stage rotation, two songs on each stage. She can't even make it through one."

Lorena gives Miss Miami's plain sports bra and boy short combo the screw face. "Look what she's wearing."

A tacky outfit would normally distract me. But the way Miss Miami is hanging from the pole by the back of her knees, suspended in mid-air, is the only thing that has my attention. "Can you do that?"

"No," Lorena responds.

"Guess there are some things pole dancers do better than exotic dancers," I say pointedly.

Charlie folds her arms across her chest. "We're working on it."

I tilt my head to the side, watching Miss Miami flip off of the pole with controlled strength. "I could never do what she did."

"We said the same thing when we started," Charlie says. "It's not like you pop out the womb swinging around the pole. It takes time and lots of practice."

“Wonder how much time and practice it takes to do that.” I point to Miss DC, the next girl up. She’s flat on her stomach, the pole between her inner thighs, left arm extended behind her, tightly gripping the pole. Her right arm is straight out in front of her. She looks like she’s flying through the air.

“That’s the Superwoman,” Charlie says. “I can do that.”

Miss DC ends up running on empty like Miss Miami. Third contestant, Myrtle Beach, did herself a favor by choosing slow music. Her movements are elongated, drawn-out and relaxed. When fourth contestant, Miss Atlanta, plays something guaranteed to move the crowd, Myrtle Beach is ready to turn up. Myrtle Beach brings it back down a notch when Las Vegas takes the stage, while Atlanta surprisingly keeps the momentum going.

“She’s alright,” Charlie admiringly refers to Myrtle Beach.

“She’s dressed better than the others,” Lorena admits.

“Someone needs to throw Myrtle Beach some real money,” Charlie exclaims. “She’s only got \$200 on stage. She’s working that pole for real.”

I remember the money Ryder gave me. I’m about to pop off the paper band when Lorena stops me. “Don’t unwrap it. Throw the whole thing so all the money gets on her stage. Like this.” She eases the \$100 stack out of my grip, tossing it so it lands on the edge of her stage.

Myrtle Beach looks around eagerly to see where the money came from. We wave at her. She waves back. She climbs the pole sideways, flipping upside down, holding the pole between her thighs. She opens her legs so she’s in an upside-down split. She looks at us and smiles. Suddenly, as if by accident, her body falls through the air, quickly dropping. She doesn’t stop until she’s inches above ground. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest. I could have sworn she was going to fall. Money rains down onto her stage from every corner of the room.

“You started a rainstorm,” Charlie jokes.

Another stand out contestant is the girl from Charlotte who hangs upside down from the monkey bars on the ceiling. I’m expecting her to get down when her first song ends. She doesn’t. Instead, she crawls along them like a bikini clad Spiderman until she reaches the second stage. She lowers her legs, finds the pole and drops from the ceiling to the floor, landing in a split. The crowd goes wild. She has to make at least \$300 from that trick alone. I add to the weather report, making it rain another \$100.

Charlotte wins. Myrtle Beach takes second and Atlanta comes in third place.

After a two-song intermission, Pole Junkie and Drama reappear with friends; all in matching colorful studded out sports bras and boy shorts. Pole Junkie and Drama get on the first stage. Two mixed girls with blondish brown hair coiled like curly fries takeover the second stage. A young Asian girl and a petite bleached blond take the third stage.

“Get your singles ready,” the DJ announces. “This is what y’all been waiting for.”

He shines the spotlight on the third stage. “Vertical Vixen and Robin Bird, time to show and prove!” They yell back at him enthusiastically as the audience crowds their stage, singles in hand.

The spotlight lands on the second stage. “Show Out and Show Off, are you ready?” The DJ asks. As if in response, Show Out and Show Off grab opposite sides of the same pole with both hands, arms outstretched in front of them, bodies leaning away from the pole and each other. They kick their legs in the air, sending them in an open “V” high above their heads, twisting their bodies up and away from the pole. “Oh yeah! Y’all ready,” the DJ shouts. Dollar bills fly onto their stage.

When the spotlight lands on the third stage, the DJ says, “Pole Junkie. Drama. It’s show time!”

The club goes dark. When the lights turn back on each dancer is posing in a different position on the pole. The music plays and everyone goes crazy, chanting the words to a song I’ve never heard. “Moving back to Atlanta is culture shock in more ways than one.”

Ryder picks up on my confusion. “This is Cameron’s song,”

“He’s a rapper?”

“He’s got the hottest song in the A. We’re working this track at radio.”

It figures. I don’t work in entertainment anymore. Somehow, I manage to attract someone who does. I swore off industry guys after Wordsmith. There is a reason I threw that drink on Ryder after all. He

would never take me seriously now. Or would he? Maybe he's sadomasochistic. He doesn't look like he'd be into that kind of thing. Then again, you never know.

"That's Cameron Carver?" Charlie whispers anxiously.

Ryder taps Cameron on the shoulder. "Say hi to your fans." He points to Charlie and Lorena.

Cameron's eyes widen. "Damn! How did I miss you two? Save a dance for me."

Chris unwraps \$1,000, passing half to Cameron. Chris and Cameron turn all the way up, throwing money at the stage, bouncing to the beat, rapping the words to the song.

Ryder passes half of his money to me. "Ready to practice?"

Pole Junkie and Drama are at the top of the same pole. Pole Junkie is on her back, stiff as a board, the pole between her legs. Drama squats on top of her, arms straight out on each side. She pushes Pole Junkie's body up and down with her feet. Drama looks like a surfer riding the waves and Pole Junkie is her surfboard. The other dancers are doing the same thing in synchronization.

"Think you can do that?" I yell to Karen.

Karen shakes her head. "I'm sticking to the basics."

Drama climbs higher up the pole, flips upside down and wraps her right leg around the pole, suspended in the air only by her inner thigh and calf. She slides down, head first, straightens her arms and holds a handstand on top of Pole Junkie. Then Drama wraps her leg around the pole and pulls her body up. She plops down on Pole Junkie's lap, wrapping her legs around Pole Junkie's waist. Drama rocks up and down, like a child on a seesaw. Then she leans back, resting her feet on Pole Junkie's shoulders, arms folded across her chest. Pole Junkie places her feet on Drama's shoulders and folds her arms, too. Their bodies are outstretched so they're lying in the air, suspended only by their inner thighs and the weight of their own bodies.

"Look ma! No hands," the DJ yells.

The entire club flips out. Money is everywhere. I'm screaming along with the rest of them, throwing green paper bills. "How did they do that?" I watch breathlessly, as they perform more death-defying tricks, I've never known were humanly possible. It's a rush, exhilarating to watch.

"When are we going to pole class?" I ask Karen when the performance is over.

"We can sign up for class after their show this Sunday. That is, if you're up to it." She adds the last part hopefully. She has no clue I'm already sold.

"Sounds good to me." Ryder only has \$1,000 left and I remember the side deal I made with Charlie. "I didn't forget about my dance. Let's go! You coming, Ryder?"

"Why not?" He follows me to the couch.

Charlie gives me back my unwrapped money. I'm about to open it when Ryder drops the rest of his cash on my lap. "Have fun."

Is he trying to make me forget what a jerk he was when we first met? Is he using monetary funds to buy my forgiveness? If that's what he's doing, it's definitely working.

Cameron sits on the edge of the couch, ready for the show. "I didn't forget about you two!"

I smile at Charlie, dancing in front of me. She looks at me strange and mumbles something to Lorena. I'm still feeling myself, thanks to a heavy night of alcohol. I almost forget what I'm doing and who I'm doing it with until my sister's bottoms hit the floor.

Are my sister and her best friend really dancing in front of me naked? If I flip out now and tell them to stop will everyone think I'm crazy? Am I going to mess up their money? Will Ryder want his money back because the girl dancing for me is really my sister? What was I thinking?

"You ok?" Ryder asks.

"I need water." He passes me an unopened water bottle from our table.

"Feel better?" He asks after I take a few sips.

"Yeah. Long night. Lots of drinking," I say with a sigh. "Those were some crazy pole tricks. Have you ever seen anything like that?"

Ryder laughs. "Like that? No."

"It's like doing gymnastics in the air."

“We’re shooting Cam’s video next month. Chris wants to use pole dancers. That’s why we’re here. We came to check out the show.”

“It’s definitely a club track. Banging beat, catchy hook, solid lyrics. You have a fan base. Everyone here knows the words. Are you using this song as leverage to get a record deal or do you already have one?”

“Someone knows what she’s talking about! What do you do?” Ryder asks curiously.

“Nothing important,” I say with a shrug.

He gives me the side eye. “Don’t believe you.”

“I used to work for a PR company in New York,” I answer reluctantly. “I got fired when the new owner took over. Been out of work six months. Couldn’t afford to sit around and do nothing anymore. So ... I - I moved in with my parents and – I took a job at the mall.” I hang my head, embarrassed.

He raises his eyebrows. “How long have you been in Atlanta?”

“Couple weeks.”

“So that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“The car. It isn’t yours? Is it?”

“It was. When I was in high school.” I laugh, understanding what he’s getting at. “If I planned on staying here permanently, I would have bought a car.”

“You don’t plan on staying?”

“Still looking for jobs in New York.”

“What if I could help you get a job here?”

I stare back at him, my face clearly conveying my lack of faith in him helping me do anything.

“You never know who you might meet. Or who you might pour a drink on. I’m an entertainment lawyer,” he says, suddenly serious. “Some of my clients need publicity. Shoot me a resume. I’ll look it over and we’ll take it from there.” He hands me a business card with the name, Ryder Blackstone, Esq.

I stare at the card, taking everything in. “Thanks. By the way, if you’re looking for dancers for the video, Karen is a trained dancer and choreographer. She’s worked with everybody who’s anybody. She’s done it all from Broadway to music videos and toured with music artists.”

“There goes that PR training!” Ryder nudges Chris, interrupting his conversation with Karen. “Did you know you’re sitting next to a professionally trained dancer?”

I cradle the bottled water to my chest and smile. Maybe tonight wasn’t a waste after all.

“Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?” Charlie hisses.

“Huh?” I wasn’t paying attention to a word she was saying. I’m still stuck on Ryder, our brief yet interesting powwow and the weird but incredibly cool events of the day.

“Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?” She repeats each word so slowly you would think I’m a kid forced to ride the short yellow bus to school.

“Nope. I let you make your money. Even helped you make some. You’re going to need all you can get since you owe me \$100.”

“For what?” Charlie asks in disbelief.

“Keeping my mouth shut.”

“That’s blackmail!” Lorena cries.

Charlie shakes her head. “Uh-uh. That is not happening.”

“Alright. Have it your way. I’ll tell Mom and Dad you’ve been lying to them all along. Imagine what they’ll do when they find out your tips don’t come from waitressing.

“She wouldn’t,” Lorena says to Charlie.

“She would,” Charlie says dryly.

“We’ll talk later. In the meantime, make that money. Don’t let that money make you.” I smugly recite everyone’s favorite line from *The Player’s Club*. I throw \$100 in the air while Charlie gives me the evil eye.

“What’s the problem?” I ask. “I helped you make \$2,000 tonight. You have the nerve to give me the screw face when I ask for a petty little \$100. Come to think of it, I should have made you give me \$100

for Karen.” I’m getting more and more annoyed with my sister by the minute. “Matter of fact, give me \$100 for Karen!” I snap.

“Are you serious?” Charlie acts like I’m speaking a foreign language and she can’t comprehend the words coming out of my mouth.

“Shut up before she makes you give her more money,” Lorena reasons.

“Before she makes *me* give her more money?” Charlie asks in disbelief.

“She’s your sister. That \$200 is coming out of your cut.”

“No, it isn’t,” Charlie argues. “If my sister didn’t come, we never would have made this money in the first place. We’re going to split her \$200 down the middle like we do everything else.”

“Fine,” Lorena says, with an attitude.

It’s funny how money changes a situation. I’m arguing over money with my sister. She’s arguing about money with her best friend. All this cash flying around is making me think about becoming a stripper my damn self. No wonder Charlie was able to sashay through the Louis store and leave with a bag. She made back half the money she spent. In one night!

My inner monologue is interrupted when Drama approaches, swaying her hips from side to side so hard she could knock someone out. Pole Junkie and the other dancers in the showcase follow behind her. Chris clears his throat. He puts some distance between him and Karen like he was a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Charlie and Lorena suck their teeth and roll their eyes all the way to the back of their heads.

“Here comes Drama,” Charlie says wearily.

Lorena takes off her earrings. “If she says anything to me, it’s gonna’ be a problem.”

Charlie takes off her over-sized hoop earrings, sliding them into her money basket. Her actions speak louder than words. I’ve never known my sister to get into many fights. When she did, they were always warranted. Drama must have done something foul to really piss her off.

“Weren’t you admiring her pole tricks a few minutes ago?” I ask. “What happened?”

“I’m going to learn to do what she does. Only I’m going to do it better,” Charlie answers.

“What were you going to do when you get to the pole studio? Fight her?”

Charlie stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. “I’m not taking classes with Drama. I’m only going because Pole Junkie is there.”

I have no idea what happened to set them off but this isn’t the time to ask. When Drama reaches our booth, my hands automatically find their way up to my ears, removing my diamond hoop earrings, slipping them into the small inside pocket of my Louis Vuitton. I haven’t been in a fight since my senior year of high school. Even so, fighting is like riding a bike. Some things you never forget. Nobody is going to touch my sister. If fists fly, I’m prepared to rock out Harlem style.

Want to Continue Reading?

We don't blame you!

[Click here](#) to see what your new
favorite pole dancer
is up to next!