

## Chapter Two: The Weaker Sex

**May 11**

**Nikki**

... After my Date From Hell with Mitchell Stone on Friday, I was in no mood for male nonsense. I could feel and hear the raspy sound of my voice. That always happened when I was ready to explode. "So what exactly is this about, Colin? And you better make some sense, quick." As I twisted my neck, I felt myself slip into Sistah-speak. The gloves were off; if Colin wanted to act ghetto, I could show him the real thing.

"Nikki," Colin said as I returned to my seat, "I just wanted you to hear this from me. I was serious before about my interest in you. I'm attracted to you, but I realize this is improper. The only solution is to have you transferred to one of the divisions' promotion departments."

"What!" I couldn't help but leap out of my chair again. "You can't!"

Leaning forward against the glass desk, Colin smudged the glass desktop with his sweaty fingers. "Listen, love, you needn't make this difficult. I'm trying to avert any harassment or unfair treatment here. If you stay under my supervision, I can't be held accountable for what may happen." His nose started

to redden. I noticed it was also dripping with sweat. Clearly Colin had some major personal issues. "You see," he said, "I have a history of this sort of thing, and -- well let's just say Dear Old Dad won't stand for it anymore. So I must be proactive, and get you far away from me as quickly as possible."

I headed for the door, full blast. There would be no turning back now. "That's fine, Colin. You be proactive and try to transfer me. I'll be proactive and get myself an attorney." My forehead was on fire! As I stomped past Martha, who was lying in wait outside the door, my head swam in disbelief. This had not happened. *I could lose my job!* Why, I asked myself, did I lose my cool so quickly? It's not like I was some sheltered little girl. I had been hit on and harassed by men in every setting imaginable: nightclubs throughout Chicago; Bulls and Bears games; the sidewalks of Hyde Park, where I attended college; the offices of more than a few professors and high school guidance counselors; even on the job, although usually it was one of the artists I was working with, not someone in management.

Normally, I know how to figure out where men are coming from, so I can cool the situation off before it goes too far. Most of the tore-up brothers who try to come at me know they'll never land me; they just want a smile, a wave, an acknowledgement that a fine woman deems them worthy of some

attention. The professors and counselors are usually just middle-aged men trying to drown the depression of feeling over the hill. A few flattering words and the faking of a few skeletons in my closet (such as an abusive, alcoholic boyfriend who stalks all of my lovers) usually gets them off my back. So I usually know how to give men what they want, even when I have nothing to offer them. It's a gift that's won me more than a few promotions, as well as a few boyfriends.

So why had I lost it with Colin? I knew I did nothing wrong, but I also knew I could have handled this without putting my job on the line. As I stepped onto an elevator crowded with people headed downstairs for lunch, I decided to forgo the social hour. I was so upset, I resorted to one of my classic coping mechanisms, licking my lips like some goofy dog. I needed some privacy.

As I crossed the plush beige carpet of the lobby, my assistant Sylvia opened the glass door that separated our department from the outside world. "Nikki, we need to get ready for your three o'clock with James Martin. We promised Mr. Lee we'd get him in for that presentation this week!"

My mind was too crowded to think about that washed-up soul singer. I looked at Sylvia as she let the door shut and turned to face me. A couple of years older than me, probably knocking on thirty, Sylvia is a pretty little woman who could have been a

model for *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan* in her teens and early twenties. She's worked at Empire Records for six years, and word is she has her eyes on making it into corporate management someday. The girl's read a few too many stories of women who started out in the secretarial pool and wound up in the executive suite. Somehow, I don't have the heart to tell Sylvia she'll have to get a degree, one from a real college at that, if she's ever going to be somebody at Empire. Maybe I've never bothered because her gossipy comments about my sex life, my weight, and my faulty-ass father have all made their way back to my burning ears. Sylvia serves me well to my face, but I can't trust her as far as I could throw her. I'll admit, though, I could probably throw her pretty far.

I tried to keep my voice stern, so I wouldn't sound like a woman whose career was falling apart. "Sylvia, please clear my schedule until three. I'll meet with Mr. Martin, but that's it for today. Something's come up."

Crossing her arms over her white Ann Taylor pants suit, Sylvia eyed me with anticipation. "What's wrong?" She thought she sounded concerned, but she didn't.

I walked past my cube-sized office and headed to the conference room at the end of the hall. "No time to talk now. Later."

A minute later, I was hidden safely within the soundproof conference room. I reached for the phone and dialed up my girl Leslie Forbes on speakerphone. I slid out of my high heels and put a burning hand to my forehead as she answered the phone.

"This is Leslie." Leslie always sounded like a woman in command. With three crisp words, she reminded me that unlike most women I knew, she was in full control of her destiny, at least where her professional life was concerned. The girl was making her father's holding company richer with each passing day.

"Hey girl," I said, "it's Nikki." Without getting up from my cushy seat, I slipped out of my pinstriped jacket. All I needed was a tall glass of Zinfandel.

"What's up, Ms. Coleman? Didn't expect to hear from you so early. You alright?"

With most people, I couldn't have been so blunt. But this was Leslie, so I got right to the point. "Leslie, why are men so weak?"

"You're asking the wrong person that question, sister girl. You know I haven't swung that way since my freshman year at Brown."

"No, uh, that's why you should be best equipped to answer that question. What tipped you off that they weren't worth all the effort?"

Leslie's background noise interrupted our conversation before she could respond. I could hear the frantic shouts of her office employees. It sounded like they all wanted a piece of their Boss Lady. Leslie sighed. "Hold on, girl." She yelled back at the mob of voices, which just set them off again. Whatever news they were delivering, it wasn't good. Leslie sounded pissed. I could see the scene in my mind: Leslie, tall and bulky in her favorite leather pants suit, seated at a massive teakwood desk in an apartment-sized office. She was probably surrounded by inventory samples, financial statements, and bankbooks. I guessed she was yelling at either her Controller or her Marketing Manager. Probably both.

"Oh come on," she shouted, "not the Homewood branch again! That place has caused one headache too many. Mark, you tell Sarah I said they hire one more person who rips off the inventory, I close the muthafucka down! Except don't curse at her." I heard her office door slam shut. "Sorry, girl. We had another case of employee theft. Apparently no teenage hoochie in Homewood can work at our shop without helping herself to free shampoo and conditioner. Thank God for insurance!" Her crisis hadn't taken her mind off my welfare. "So what happened, girlfriend?"

I recounted my experience in Colin's office, second by second. Jomo Hayes, my Part Time Lover, would have cut me off

halfway through; men can be so impatient. My girl Leslie, on the other hand, sopped up every sordid detail. When I finished, I was more pissed than I was when I burst out of Colin's office. "I don't know whether to quit, or sue his British pants off!"

Leslie groaned. "Girl, you need to get some more informed opinions on this one. Me, I'd step, but I can't relate to *having* to work for a living." Leslie is as honest a person as I'll ever know. Even though she's built Leslie's House of Style into the largest Black hair care, beauty and barbershop chain in all of Chicago, she knows she has it good. She had great ideas like a lot of us, but most of us don't have a father who leaves behind a fat trust to fund your business ventures. Franklin Forbes was an Australian of old money and few scruples. She put his money to work in ways he never would have dreamed, but Les knows she's no expert on dealing with adversity. "Have you talked to your Mom yet?"

"She doesn't need to be burdened with this crap," I said. "Her blood pressure's sky high these days. My father is trippin' again -- wait, that's another story, another day. Forget I said anything. No, I haven't told her."

Leslie cleared her throat. "I shouldn't even fix my mouth to speak it, Goddess help me. But what about Barry? His law practice is booming, you know."

The mention of that name took me into another world. I stared aimlessly at the swarming goldfish in the small aquarium on the other side of the room. Barry Roberts. The one and only love of my life. Barry wasn't my first lover; that would be Chuck Spencer, aka Lowball, the eighteen year-old dope slinger who taught me all the positions over the course of twenty-three afternoons in the basement of his grandmother's home. That was ninth grade, one year before Barry came along.

Barry wasn't my first, and I can't even say he was the best; that honor definitely belongs to Jomo. But none of that really mattered. Barry was the one I connected with deep in my innermost being, my thoughts, my heart. He's the one who could anticipate every sentence and meet every need before I could even articulate it. He was also the most pretty man I've ever dated: tall and solidly built (a prerequisite for any man where I'm concerned), soft curly hair that fit his oval head like a frame, and a wardrobe featuring the latest offerings from the stores on the Magnificent Mile. Every woman's dream, at least before light-skinned brothers went out of style. When he got his "best friend" pregnant in our junior year of college, shock was an impossible reaction. There had never been any question that women threw it at Barry nonstop; the miracle, in my desperate imagination, had been that he was man enough to be faithful.

I didn't really need Leslie to bring Barry up just then. As if I didn't have enough shit to deal with. Barry was just another reminder that my search for Mr. Right had been off the tracks for far too long. "Leslie, why are you going there? You know I don't need Barry in my life right now."

"Oh," Leslie said, "and you *do* need someone like Jomo? Okay, Nikki, whatever. Had your weekly HIV test yet?"

Leslie knew she wasn't right. I told her about the HIV test I took last year, and she hadn't let me live it down since. "Leslie, I'm still clean, as always. Why you gotta go there? I told you about that in confidence --"

"Forget I said anything, girl. You don't need me tripping. On a more pleasant note, what happened on your outing with young Mitchell Stone? You were pretty coy yesterday."

Leslie's question provided some much-needed comic relief. "Oh, you'll like this, Les. I've been nice enough to spend some of almost every weekend with this Negro for the last few months, right? You know, just kickin' it."

"Yeah, I thought it sounded like things were working out well. Thought you might be kicking Jomo to the curb and making a go of it with ol' Mitchell."

I didn't even try to fight the chuckle that built up in my throat. "Uh, no. Come on, Les, this is Mitchell Stone we're talking about."

"And?"

I buried my head in my hands. Leslie had been out of the game a bit too long. There are two types of men: those who make you want to hop into bed, and those who don't. Mitchell has never quite fit into Class Number One. I'm very selective about who I sleep with, but the one thing you can bet on is when I give it up to a guy, it's because my body demands I do so. Now if the brother has no job, more than one gold tooth, a Jheri curl, cuttin' breath, multiple babies, or an abusive streak, then those bodily demands are denied. But Nikki Coleman doesn't give pity sex.

Not that giving Mitchell some was always out of the question. I remember seeing him for the first time, sophomore year at MLK. Already close to his current six-foot height, he was playing a pickup basketball game with Barry and a few other shorties. His brother Marvin was already a legend for his football exploits, and known for being "Fine" too, despite being a religious nerd. I remember thinking Mitchell looked a lot like his brother. They shared the same height, broad shoulders, rich caramel complexions, and wide eyes that demanded the attention of any admirer. That said, Mitchell fell a little short of Marvin's photogenic quality. He was handsome, but imperfect: lips a bit too big, ears almost nonexistent, nose a little too big for his face. Regardless, I was a little intrigued,

intrigued enough to ask my girl Angie Wright about him as we sat by the court that day. I only remember one thing between the time I asked and the time I lost interest -- she told me he was a straight A student. I was already being run down by my friends for being a bookworm back then; I was not adding to that by dating another egghead.

I tried to make the picture clear for Leslie. "Leslie, I downgraded Mitchell back to Friend status after our fourth date, you know that. The times we went out, we never did *anything* physical. He treated me like a porcelain doll, like he couldn't breathe on, much less touch me."

Leslie's voice dropped an octave in confusion. "What, he didn't have any moves? He was stiff?"

"No, he seemed to be comfortable with his body. He's not a nerd or anything; he just didn't have that "way" about him. You know, like the way Barry has that fluid ease about his walk that screams 'I Am the Man'? Or the way Jomo, whatever you may think about him, moves with a hard, macho flair that *tells* you he can throw down in the bedroom!" I realized I was chuckling a bit too much for the workplace. God forbid Colin might be having my conversations tapped. "Les, Mitchell was just too much of a gentleman. A woman likes to feel she can drive a man out of his mind."

"Nikki, he was Most Likely To Succeed at MLK, not Most Desirable Male. You expected him to paw your gear off on the first date?"

"Well, it makes a girl wonder. You know, now I think I understand those gay rumors Sheila Bivins tried to spread about him senior year." I paused, realizing I was on sensitive ground. "Not that there's anything wrong with being gay, but I know Mitchell was upset with Sheila over that. But when he acts like he's too good to go for a good night kiss, what's a girl to think?"

Leslie sighed in what sounded like resignation. "So you wrote him off a long time ago. What was the big deal about the other night then?"

I recounted the experience, the way Mitchell orchestrated Friday night like some staged production: the Milos concert, the boat ride on the Chicago River, and a late dinner at Luigi's. Leslie oohed and ahed at every step, like she didn't know I'd been treated to these antics by more brothers than I can count. By the time I detailed Mitchell's profession of love and his sudden loss of good sense, she almost dropped her phone.

"Girl, you have driven a good man to his knees! Not now, Mark." I heard her office door slam shut again. "Whoo! So Mitchell *is* losing his mind."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, my cousin O'Dell said Mitchell reserved his entire restaurant for tomorrow night. Told O'Dell the restaurant would only be open to a select group of brothers. Most of them are folk O'Dell knows -- Tony Gooden, Malik Samuels, Bobby Wynn, Brian Winands --"

Now I was really confused. Leslie had just named some of the most heartless, shallow Players we attended high school with. With the exception of Tony, the men she just named were responsible for a total of twelve illegitimate babies. "I know Mitchell used to be tight with Tony, but what's he doing with those other losers?"

"That's what O'Dell's trying to figure. All Mitchell said was he's looking for an 'instructor'. Is that strange or what?"

A voice on the other side of the conference room door called out for me. "Nikki!" It was Sylvia. Reality began to creep its way back into my brain. "Leslie, I've gotta go. You hear what that nut's up to, I'd like to know. I need a good laugh these days."

"Call me tonight, girl."

"Alright. Later." I slipped my feet back into my heels and opened the door. Sylvia whirled through the door. Her hands were a blur as she ran down all my phone messages from the last thirty minutes. I let them all float in one ear and out the other, until she mentioned James Martin again. Apparently he was

coming in early, so he could make another meeting with a rival label across town. I went over the list of materials we needed for the meeting, and reviewed my draft of the promotional plan. If James Martin really thought another label would be better prepared to help him get back on the charts, he was a bigger fool than my father.

I finished my review of the plan and rushed back to my office. I hit the speakerphone and ordered a bagel and salad from the cafe, before throwing myself into another proposal draft. I had to push my encounter with Colin to the side until I had time to make a clear-headed decision about my next step. I knew immediately that I was going to have to raise some hell, but I decided to figure out how to raise the hell once I got off work. There was only one problem: I had a burning, sinking feeling I was going to start by calling Attorney Barry Roberts, Esquire.

