

Chapter One: If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em**May 8****Mitchell**

The night I decided to become a Dog, Nikki Coleman reached over our table and slit my chest wide open. As her razor-sharp nails took root, she gripped four smooth fingers around my heart. Gaining the traction she needed, she skillfully maneuvered the still-beating, pulpy mass from its place and let it thud onto the red tablecloth at Luigi's Fine Dining. A veteran of these attacks, I swayed to and fro on my side of the mahogany booth, awaiting the death blow. I knew I wouldn't be disappointed.

Nikki thought she knew how to let a brother down easy. As my heart flopped around on the table, she said, "Mitchell, you are so sweet. I'm enjoying our friendship too." Her wide eyes beaming with detached warmth, Nikki smiled at me like a nurse comforting a dying patient. "Thanks for sharing that with me."

Thanks for sharing that with me? As I processed Nikki's response, my brain began to spin like a barbecued pig on a spit. What was she talking about, *Thanks for sharing that with me?* I'd spent many hard-earned dollars taking this woman to restaurants, theaters, symphonies, and comedy clubs throughout the Windy

City. God only knows how many gallons of gas I used up. The drive from my pad in Hyde Park to her overpriced digs in downtown Lincoln Park can be a real killer. I had probably spent close to fifteen hundred bucks on Nikki, and only tonight, after three months of sexless friendship, had I laid my feelings for her on the line. Nothing overblown, just the truth: I was interested in being more than friends. *Thanks for sharing that with me.* The words stabbed at every nerve in my brain. What the hell kind of response was that?

Even in that moment, as my heart flopped around on the table, my eyes rested on the curves of Nikki's fleshy lips as she smiled innocently. "Mitchell, are you OK?"

Before I knew what was happening, the words escaped my mouth. "Did you, uh, understand me, Nikki? I just said I've been infatuated with you for years, and after getting to really know you, I have real feelings for you. *I want to make you happy.*" Aware my voice was a bit louder than necessary, I leaned forward and placed my elbows on the tablecloth. "I didn't tell you how I felt so I could be patted on the head."

The woman of my dreams had taken a sudden interest in the details of the tablecloth. "Mitchell, just let me --"

"Could you ever feel the way I do? Yes or no. I deserve a real answer."

The sudden arch of Nikki's back told me she wasn't expecting this. A woman of her quality probably broke a new heart every day. I suppose that's why I never had the courage to rap to her back when we were classmates at Martin Luther King High. I could tell I had thrown Nikki off, but she was struggling to keep her cool. She mussed the edges of her hairdo and looked at me with eyes of suspicion. "I -- don't know what you want, Mitchell. I just thanked you for your honesty."

"A 'thank you' isn't going to cut it, Nikki," I said. "How do you feel about what I told you? Do you even care?" I refused to break eye contact with her, despite the fact that I felt a good pitch hike building up in my throat. I never was good at hiding my emotions.

Nikki glanced around the room, seemingly hoping we'd be interrupted by our waiter. She managed to keep a crisp, sweet air to her voice. "Mitchell, this is really not the time or place for this discussion. Besides, I'm not ready for anything serious right now."

My mind whirred in frustration at the familiar sentence. I get this type of bull from women all the time. Always in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you're me, the woman says she needs a break from relationships right now. But if you're a Brother who's been with every woman in town and treats them all

like trash, the same woman will suddenly make room in her schedule.

I wasn't buying what Nikki was selling. I think she expected me to meekly accept her verbal pat on the head. She probably even figured the evening would end in a civil fashion, the way it normally does between two grown adults. She was mistaken. "OK, sister, no hard feelings. It's cool." Knowing full well that our dessert had yet to be delivered, I decided to fast forward through the evening. "So how shall we go about splitting this bill? I can pay for the appetizers, but you'll need to handle your own entree, drinks and half the bottle of Chablis."

It took every ounce of my manhood not to crack up *hard* at Nikki's reaction. Beautiful as she was, shock was not a look this woman wore well. Her jaw plunged into her firm, buxom chest. Her right eye twitched violently and looked ready to drop from its socket. I swear her hairdo frayed and melted around the edges.

"Mitchell, is this a joke?"

I told her no.

"You're out of your mind, Mitchell. *You* invited me out tonight."

"Yes," I replied in a cool tenor, "but that took place under a separate set of circumstances. You knew when you stepped

out that door how you felt about me." Shifting in my seat and staring Nikki down, I leaned in again. "Based on your condescending reaction, I'm guessing I never had a shot with you."

Nikki waved a hand dismissively. "Mitchell, has it ever occurred to you that maybe I haven't thought about it?"

I was having none of it. "Please, Nikki. You were morally obligated to diss and dismiss me a long time ago, sister. You know how many other women I could have been pursuing these past weeks?"

"You're a damn fool, do you know that?" She grabbed her sequined purse. It was clear she was ready to go.

I decided to discard any remnants of shame. "You got that right, I am a fool. I'm a fool for thinking we'd ever be more than Buddies. Nikki, Buddies don't buy each other extravagant, expensive meals. You better be glad I got those Milos tickets for free, otherwise you'd really be in debt." I extended my right palm as she reached for the coat rack behind our booth. "Now pay up."

That line got me an eyeful of ice water and a string of four letter words. Nikki had completely changed personalities now. "Like it's *my* fault nobody wants your dull ass!" As she struggled into her black wrap, she slammed three twenties onto the table, threw her maroon Coach bag over her shoulder, and

stepped. *Better her than me*, I thought, *at least she can hail a cab in this city*. I'd be kickin' it solo in my Accord tonight.

The first few minutes after Nikki stormed off into the cool night air, I was a little embarrassed by the stares and snickers of couples at the surrounding tables. When a red-nosed man in a loud aqua suit caught me staring at him, he stopped laughing long enough to apologize. "Tough break, Bub. I hope you drove tonight!" As he slapped a meaty palm against his knee, I turned back to Nikki's empty seat. I accepted a pile of napkins from my waiter and began to dab at the plaid pattern of my Hilfiger suit. It took just two minutes for my embarrassment to turn to liberation. I faced up to the ugly truth: I didn't seem to be the type of man most women wanted. Now, finally, I was going to do something about it. As I started to construct a battle plan, I settled back into my seat and asked the waiter to bring the Italian ice desserts Nikki and I had ordered.

"Sir," the waiter asked, "you still want me to bring *both* desserts?" I guess he figured Nikki wasn't coming back.

"My good man," I said as I stuffed a twenty into his hand, "bring 'em both, along with another glass of the house wine." When he brought them, I downed the delicacies in minutes. Dessert never tasted so good.

Four hours later, I walked through the door of my apartment and joined my older brother Marvin on the L-shaped leather couch

in our living room. I packed my mouth with a wad of strawberry Bubblicious and tried to explain the evening's disaster to Marvin. A former star wide receiver at Ohio State, Marvin has massive shoulders that shuddered in amusement as he lounged on the other end of the couch. "My little brother, I think it's safe to say you pushed a little too hard. God don't like ugly, Mitchell."

I turned over onto my stomach and buried my head in one of the puffy cushions. *He'll never understand*, I told myself. As much as people think Marvin and I are two peas in a pod, we couldn't be more different when it comes to our attitudes about women. Marvin's already been married and seen a woman bear what he thought was his child. It may not have lasted forever, but he knows what it is to experience a long-term romance. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever taste such pleasures.

Even though I knew he would never get it, I tried to educate him. "Marvin, what you're hearing is raw emotion. I am a *good* man, can't nobody tell me different. For years, I've been cutting these sisters a break. '*Sorry, Mitchell, you're just not my type.*' '*Sorry, Mitchell, I already have a boyfriend.*' '*Sorry, Mitchell, I'm not ready for another relationship right now.*' You know what? I'm through taking the blame for the way these women treat me. They got the problem, not me."

Fiddling with the remote control of our Sony wide-screen, Marvin paced the floor of the dimly lit room. "You know what, it's too late for one of your 'anti-Oprah', woman-bashing rants. I've gotta be on a plane to D.C. in the morning." He tossed me the remote and stood over me with a look of concern on his face. "Bottom line, Mitchell, are you okay? It's almost two in the a.m.. Get some rest. So what if one sister rejected you? There's other fish in the sea." He leaned over and popped me on the shoulder before turning towards his bedroom.

As my arm throbbed, I resisted the urge to whimper like a schoolgirl. My brother always forgets I'm not quite at his fitness level. At six feet tall and one-ninety, I'm at least ten pounds heavier and three inches thicker than I was as a baseball star at Georgetown. I bit my lip in pain and yelled, "Oh, there's fish out there, but most of them aren't worth catching!"

Marvin turned back suddenly and gripped me in a headlock. "Mitchell, you need to stop running sisters down! Have some patience, man. You'll get your woman one day. In the meantime, just treat the sisters right. It'll come back to you some day, trust me."

Once Marvin finished his little sermon, he released me from his grip. As I caught my breath, I lay back against the couch and chuckled in disgust. Like Marvin had to preach to *me* about respecting sisters.

Who did he think he was talking to? I, Mitchell J. Stone, had always respected women, always played by the rules. From Ms. Tasha Parker, who was kind enough to relieve me of my virginity, to Ms. Carmen Usher, the last serious relationship I had, I had always been the perfect gentleman. I never slept around, never forced unsafe sex on anyone. I never sullied a girl's reputation in the midst of locker rooms teeming with sexcapade stories. And I never, ever had more than one partner at a time. I was the ultimate Good Man, Nice Guy, Mr. Right, you name it. I was the man you could take home to Mama.

Even in high school and college, I had learned this was nothing to be proud of. I was no fool; I could see the brothers who got over were those with the slickest raps and the baddest reputations. And I wasn't in the club. So I endured my romantic life and took it as it came. A couple of girlfriends sophomore year at MLK, baseball and basketball groupies who just wanted to be on my arm for the exposure. Getting picked up by Tasha at a party junior year and learning the temporary joys of sex. Pulling some reasonably attractive dates for proms, Turnabout dances, and Homecomings, although they rarely returned my calls afterwards. My teens and early twenties were an occasionally thrilling, largely disappointing experience where dating was concerned. But I endured those hodgepodge years by clinging to a

bold prediction my father pronounced the day I left home for college.

After calling me into his office den and offering me one of his fat Cuban cigars, he handed me an industrial supply pack of Trojan condoms, the same size and brand I had seen him plop into Marvin's lap two years earlier. My father, a moody journalist of limited words on his bad days, sat before me with that box and probed my eyes like a concerned physician. "Mitchell, you're going to need these." He held up an ebony hand as I tried to protest. "I know you haven't been as lucky as you like with women, but you need to watch out -- you're going to get up there on campus, and eventually, things will change."

Even at seventeen, I was already a cynic. "Yeah right, Dad. Whatever."

"Ah, ah -- women don't like what's good for them when they're young, son." He lowered his gold wire-rimmed frames and peered at me in a way that demanded my respect. "Pay attention to me, Mitchell. This is serious stuff. When they're your age, girls want someone who offers danger. Someone who sends a chill up their spine and strikes a little fear into their heart. Personally, I don't think they can help it." I tried not to tune out my father's stiff East Coast accent completely. I'd already heard his academic hypotheses about why women went for "bad men" more times than I could count. I didn't ask him to expand. "One

day, son, usually as they near graduation from college, something changes." He grinned at me like a kid with a secret.

I kept eye contact with my father and tried to keep a straight face. I decided not to remind him for the umpteenth time: Times Had Changed.

"Mitchell, at some point women start thinking about how to find a man who brings home the bacon. Someone who'll be a good father to his kids, or to the kids she may already have by Joe Blow. They learn they need a clean-cut, responsible straight arrow who works hard, cares for his family, and limits his romantic yearnings to his wife." He ran a hand over the shiny slope of his bald head. "That's where you'll come in. When women you know reach that stage, they'll be beating down your door. And that's when you'll need these," he said, patting the box of Trojans.

That was nine years ago, and my father's predictions have yet to come true. In fact, I only recently threw out the remainder of that Trojan pack. The number of condoms that were left is a secret I'm taking to the grave. Sure, there've been a few women in my life since then, but I always end up in the same place: the Friend Zone.

... It's been a full six hours since Nikki broke my heart. As I leave the past behind and stare blankly into my TV screen, I realize MTV is having a Janet Jackson marathon. Right now

they're showing "If", that old video where Janet whips her unbelievably toned body into too many positions to count. Before I give in and unzip my pants all the way, I reach for the remote and cut the boob tube off. When your appetite is wet for steak, ground beef just won't do. No sense fooling around. It's time to figure out how to deal with my women problems.

I turned twenty-eight in February, meaning I've been trying to win girls' hearts for fifteen years now. Fifteen years, at least at my age, is a pretty long time. Fifteen years that haven't exactly paid off yet. Women pay me about as much respect as Rodney Dangerfield. I'm not exactly a spring chicken anymore, either. A few blinks of an eye, and I'll be thirty. I do *not* intend to still be single and childless in two years. I may not have walked with God these years, like Marvin, but I've treated women right. I should not have to end up alone, nor should I have to settle for someone I don't love, just to have a partner. I deserve better.

Apparently I can't compete with the men my Black Queens most want: the Dogs, Players, Roughnecks, Casanovas, Studs, the Ladies' Men. Well, I didn't get where I am in life by taking defeat lying down. It's clear that I can stay on the path to nowhere, or I can carve my own. I've decided my path will be that of the Dog. If Bill Clinton could reinvent himself at will in the name of political survival, why shouldn't I be able to do

the same, in order to give my sisters what they want? I can't beat the Dogs out there, so I'm joining them.

I suppose the devil will be in the details. Adapting the ways of the mysterious, sexually-charged, hot-tempered Hound will be hard work, but as a pragmatist, I'm up for the challenge. As I flick the living room lights off and head toward my own room, I am filled with a sudden sensation of peace. I'm gonna sleep good.

This should be one of my last nights alone.

