

CHAPTER ONE

Friday, June 6, 2008

5:40 AM

“You’re on your period, now? Really?” Karen turned her back to Armando in bed. He didn’t know why she would even bother telling that lie. *Was a time when I’d fuck that pussy out of place and ol’ girl would be so tired, she couldn’t talk mess or ask a lot of questions*, he thought to himself. Now, Armando was getting nonsense excuses but no sex. He wondered if he was losing his touch.

Karen wasn’t drop-dead gorgeous, but she was cute to look at. Medium brown, with long-lashed, warm eyes. She kept her hair done—always permed and together. None of that new-growth-busting-through stuff.

There was a gap between her two front teeth, but it didn’t make her teeth look wrecked. You had the feeling her smile wouldn’t have been as beautiful if she ever got her teeth fixed. God must’ve skipped out on her in the self-esteem department, though. It seemed like everyone but Karen knew she was a good woman. Sure, she’d tell you that she was, but it’s not like she really believed it. Every time Armando stroked her hair, he was stroking her ego.

He was a good man who'd found his good woman. He was just waiting on her to believe it too.

"So, I guess I can't get none before work, huh?" Armando asked, his thick arms crossed, his gray eyes seductive.

She sat up in the bed, intentionally allowing the bed sheet to fall from her breasts. "Boy, you better stop playing with me," she said, unfazed by his eyes' magic. She'd seen them before.

Armando jumped from the bed and stared at Karen with both anger and lust in his eyes. His boxers fell to the floor. Karen couldn't help but steal a glance of him stroking his girth. But it changed nothing.

Determined to remain strong she asked, "Have you given any more thought to what we talked about?"

He stopped stroking. "Karen, don't start this again, all right?"

"No, Armando. I'm going to keep on it. I'm getting tired of hearing my mama suck her teeth, telling me how I'm living in sin."

"I don't know why you gotta tell your mama everything in the first place," he said.

"Because she's my mama!"

"Oh, please. Y'all don't even get along."

"Don't try and change the subject," Karen said, shaking her always well-manicured hands and rolling her neck.

"When are we getting married?"

"I gotta go to work."

"Yeah, that's right. Take your black ass to work. But we ain't finished with this conversation. Believe that. But I know one thing; I better not find out that you're screwing

some other woman, Armando. Because if you are, you better take a good look at that ding-a-ling of yours, baby.”

“What, you’re gonna go Lorena Bobbitt on me?” he asked with a chuckle, trying to lighten the mood.

“Hell yeah. But in your case, they won’t find it in no bushes.”

“Why is it every time you hear something you don’t like, I gotta be messing around?”

Karen didn’t care how many times he claimed his whoring days were over. He hadn’t proposed to her yet, so he must be out laying every female who would let him. She gave him the iciest of stares, her arms folded, like she was expecting a full confession to some bogus crap he’d been doing.

Instead, Armando went to the bathroom; his jet stream of piss turned the toilet water yellow as Karen stood in the doorway. Her words began sounding like Charlie Brown’s teacher’s “*Wah wah wah wah, wah wah wah wah!*”

Armando flushed the toilet, hearing her say, “Enough of the dumb shit!” He slammed the door in her face, which was met with angry pounding. He locked the door and turned on the shower, jumping in quickly. She didn’t deserve his ding-a-ling anyway.

After his shower, Karen had quieted down. But he wasn’t going to risk starting her up again, so he avoided eye contact and put on his underwear, undershirt, black work pants, and white golf shirt in record speed. Karen sat on the side of her bed with her back toward him.

Karen had told him a thousand times—she felt used and abused. He got it. And he was sorry she felt that way, but it wasn’t going to change who he was. He did want to marry her...someday. But since leaving home at eighteen

to get away from his mother and her boyfriend drama, he'd been in survival mode, always thinking, "Be loyal to yourself. Everything and everyone else comes after." Freedom pulsed through his blood, and Armando wasn't ready to give that up.

Why couldn't she just relax and enjoy the orgasms he put on her? But maybe that was the problem. Maybe she wasn't strong enough to handle the sex. It spun her around and left her out of breath...and paranoid.

Armando walked up to Karen, kissing her on the side of her temple. "I'll call you later," he said.

"Whatever."

He left for work, not feeling too badly about any of it. She was twenty-seven, just like him. They were both grown and she knew how he was. Armando had to do things on his own timetable. He had told *her* that a thousand times.

One thing was certain, he loved Karen. On a good day, he loved that she encouraged him not to be afraid to dream, and seize opportunities. But as he drove to work, he was reminded of just how many of these opportunities he'd allowed to slip through his grasp: journalism scholarships offered by the Urban League, offers to learn a trade at Job Corp, work as an apprentice with a landscaper, and even modeling. He knew he had an intelligent mind but he was lazy. He'd gotten off easy with his looks. With gray eyes that contrasted brilliantly against his caramel skin, and hair fro'd-out like Lenny Kravitz, Armando knew he was a gift for the ladies. But it only took him so far. After working everything from janitorial to McDonald's, Armando was now a busboy at the Peterson Hotel. He hadn't exactly set the world on fire.

He pulled into the employee parking lot of the hotel.

When he stepped out of the car, the Minneapolis humidity hit him so fiercely, he was bleeding sweat. Entering the employee entrance, Armando found no relief from the heat. The back corridors were just as hot as it was outside, which meant the AC system was busted again. *Great, I'm gonna be sweating all damn day long! They need to invest in a decent system that works,* Armando thought to himself, though for a brief moment he thought he'd said it aloud. This is what he'd been reduced to; passing time in a dead-end job. There had to be a better way to make money.

Even if he were ready for marriage, how was he supposed to marry the woman he'd been blessed to have if he was always living hand to mouth? Day after day, bussing dirty dishes, cleaning up busted sugar packets, and scraping cereal from a carpet wasn't going to provide them with any kind of decent life. Maybe Karen didn't mind, but Armando was a man. He minded a lot.

By the end of his shift, Armando was so drained he walked out of the hotel without the obligatory good-byes. The heat outside was as strong and determined as ever, and his skin was already damp and rubbery. He got into his car, pulled out into the street and made his way toward home.

At the corner of Franklin and Hennepin, his cell phone rang. It was Karen. The light at the intersection turned green, he made a right turn and found a spot on the neighboring city street to park so that he could take the call.

"Yeah," Armando said, impatiently.

"You need to stop off and get something for dinner," Karen told him.

"I wasn't planning on stopping."

“Look, I just walked in the door my damn self, I’m tired, and I’m not cookin.”

“What do you want?” Armando was getting agitated.

“I want some chicken.”

“Karen, I’m almost home. You better think of something else to eat because I’m not searching high and low for chicken.”

“Boy, you asked me and I’m telling you. Bring me some chicken!” Karen screamed as Armando hung up on her.

The phone rang again and Armando ignored it. He checked around to see if anyone was coming. When he pulled out to head to the nearest KFC, he heard the chirp of his voicemail. He knew it was Karen, calling to curse him out for hanging up on her.

Once he pulled up to the restaurant, he realized he didn’t know what Karen wanted. So he ordered a 10-piece bucket with biscuits and mashed potatoes. If she didn’t like it, too damn bad. She should’ve gotten the food herself, he reasoned. After picking up the chicken, he stopped at a gas station for cigarettes. The woman cashier was cute, he thought.

“How you doin’?” she asked him.

“I’m cool. Just trying to get home, ya know?”

“I heard that,” she said. As she scanned the price of the cigarettes, she leaned in coquettishly and said, “You know you need to leave these cigarettes alone. Didn’t your mama tell you they’re bad for you?”

“We all need a vice,” he said, smiling back at her. He could feel himself falling into flirt mode.

Just then, the manager stepped out from the back area. But the cashier didn’t see the manager when she said,

“Just be glad you ain’t my man. Cause I wouldn’t kiss any man with stank cigarette breath.”

“Benita, what did I tell you about your mouth?” the manager admonished.

Armando paid the cashier, tossed her a parting wink and left quickly, not wanting to get her into more trouble. When Armando got home he found Karen in the kitchen on the phone. He walked over to her and set the bag of food down in front of her. She looked up, telling the person she was on the phone with she would call them back and promptly hung up.

“I’m sorry, baby.” Karen looked at him with doe-eyed innocence. She wrapped her arms around his waist and planted the side of her face to his chest.

“Next time, get it yourself,” Armando said, pushing her away.

“Armando, come on now. I’m trying to be nice so quit trippin.”

Armando rolled his eyes. “Do you even know why you’re sorry? Just eat your bucket of grease and leave me alone,” he said, leaving the kitchen to go into the bedroom. Karen got up and followed him.

“Armando, I know I’m acting crazy. It’s just that I love you and I’m scared you’re gonna mess around and find a better offer with someone else. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You’re too insecure, and it’s getting old, okay? The way you talk to me is foul. And I’m getting tired of coming up in here and not knowing which mood you’re gonna be in.”

“I know, baby, and I’m sorry. I promise I’ll work on that.”

Karen ran her hands along his chest, and down his stomach, resting them on his crotch.

“You gonna give me some later?” she asked suggestively.

Armando turned to look at her. *Now she wanted the dick? Typical. They’d argue one minute, and then behave as though nothing happened the next, usually after her mood shifted. Things between them had always been spicy and explosive. He remembered their fourth date...*

“I saw you staring at that bitch in the movie theater,” Karen said once they’d made it back to the car.

“Wow, Karen. How in the hell was I gonna be checking out another female when it was pitch black in the theater?”

“Boy, you had all that light coming from the screen. You could see.”

“Babe, you need help,” Armando said, putting the key into the ignition.

“You think that bitch can do this?” Karen said, reaching over to massage his crotch.

Armando’s body jolted at the sudden touch. He nervously looked around the garage to see if anyone was watching them.

“We’re parked back here in the corner. Ain’t nobody gonna see us. Now, you tell me if the bitch would do this,” Karen said as she pulled Armando’s growing girth from his unzipped pants. He watched helplessly as his hardened inches disappeared into her mouth. He pulled his underwear and pants down farther to give her easier access.

“I asked you a question,” Karen said, stroking him suddenly. She looked up at Armando, who appeared lost in a dream.

“Hell no, she can’t. You got this, girl!” Armando

sounded out of breath, his voice thick with anticipation for Karen to place her heavenly lips on his manhood once more.

“Yeah, I know this,” Karen said, secure in her skills. She may not have known if this man was truly hers, but she knew enough to introduce him to her inner freak. She judged by Armando’s response that he was glad to make its acquaintance.

She reclined back into her seat, hiking up her skirt. She pulled her panties off and threw them in Armando’s lap.

“Smell ‘em,” she instructed. Armando did so obediently. He sniffed her panties deeply as though he were taking in oxygen; her natural scent mixed with the jasmine and vanilla body spray. While his face was buried in her panties, she jumped on top of him, taking her panties from his face and tossing them into the passenger seat. She forced her tongue into his mouth, kissing him hungrily.

“Recline this seat back,” she said.

Armando fought with the side latch to get the seat to fall back as far as it would go. When it did, he turned to see Karen had unbuttoned her blouse. Her breasts were firm, nipples hardened by her own desire. He grabbed them and began to suck on them. She threw her head back, enjoying the pleasure. Then she lowered herself onto his dick, which had been aching for her. She rose and fell on it, at first slowly, throwing in a few pelvic swirls just to get used to him being inside her.

“Naw, girl, you’re playing with me,” Armando said, his voice filled with the same wanting as before. He grabbed her ass and brought her down hard on his dick. She screamed out.

This wasn't the way Armando had envisioned their first time together. He assumed Karen would've wanted more from the experience...perhaps a little romance. He respected her waiting until their fourth date. Most women he'd been with had thrown themselves at him on the first night.

Karen's riding him in that driver's seat would set the tone of their relationship: they'd love as hard as they fucked, buffered down by the commonality of having wrecked home lives with mothers who didn't understand them.

"Armando, you hear me talking to you," Karen said, drawing Armando back into the present moment. "I said, are you gonna give me some later?"

Armando smiled as he thought about the miles traveled in their relationship. He drew her near him. They stood in the middle of the bedroom, admiring themselves in the mirror across from the bed. Armando knew the sex with Karen was off the charts. As usual, all was forgiven. He knew her heart. She wasn't perfect, and neither was he.

"Go eat, baby. Afterward we'll take a nice, hot shower, and then I'm gonna lay it on you," he said, his eyes sparkling.

She could be in the world's worst mood as she often was, but all he needed to do was smile, and all of their problems faded away at least for a moment.

Karen went back into the other room to eat her chicken, leaving Armando to relish the thought of becoming one with her. They had cleared the air just enough so he could enjoy being with the woman he loved, and the happiness she brought to his life.