

Lovers and Players

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Prologue



‘**Y**our father wants to see you immediately.’
‘Huh?’ Jett Diamond mumbled, rolling over in bed, almost dropping the phone as he groped in the dark for his watch.

It was four a.m. in Milan. Four a.m., cold and raining. He could hear the rain pounding down on the skylight in the bathroom.

The beautiful girl lying next to him stirred. ‘Who is it, *carino?*’ she murmured, flinging her arm across his chest.

‘Go back to sleep,’ he ordered, sitting up and automatically reaching for a cigarette.

Lady Jane Bentley was on the phone, his father’s long-time girlfriend, and she sounded like she meant business.

‘Do y’know what time it is here?’ he said gruffly, lighting up and taking a long, deep drag.

‘Yes, Jett,’ Lady Jane replied evenly. ‘And I repeat, your father needs to see you at once. There is a plane ticket for New York waiting for you at the concierge’s desk at the Four Seasons Hotel. Be here at the house in New York at nine a.m. on Friday.’ A long, meaningful pause. ‘And, Jett, make absolutely sure you do *not* let him down. It is to your advantage.’

Before he could say anything, she hung up.

Man! He’d never liked her. Lady Jane Bentley with her phoney English accent and so-called impeccable manners. She’d been his father’s constant companion for the last six years. The scandal was that she’d left her titled British husband, Lord James, for Red Diamond, the rambunctious, powerful,

controlling, four-times-married media billionaire. It had caused quite a few lurid headlines at the time.

Red Diamond. Jett's father.

Christ! What the *fuck* did he want?

* * *

Max Diamond, real-estate mogul, was in the middle of a dinner party when his cell vibrated. Max never went anywhere without his phone switched on. His team of trusted associates knew they could reach him at any time with any problem: that was the way he liked it. Besides, right now he was financially over-extended, and he needed to be available twenty-four-seven to deal with the crisis.

Discreetly he checked his cell to see who was calling him at eleven p.m.

Lady Jane Bentley. His father's paramour. What did *she* want? He hadn't spoken to either of them in months, even though they all lived in the same city. As family they were not exactly close.

Intrigued, he excused himself and hurried into the library where he called her back.

One thing about Lady Jane, she was precise and to the point. 'Your father wishes to see you at the house. Nine a.m. on Friday,' she said. 'It's extremely important, Max.'

'Concerning what?' he asked curiously.

'Be here and you'll find out.'

Max nodded to himself. 'I suppose I can make it,' he said grudgingly.

'Both your brothers will be flying in.'

Now it sounded serious. Was the old man dying?

If he is, Max thought grimly, *it won't be a moment too soon.*

* * *

Chris Diamond was working out in his home gym when he got the call. Home gyms were a definite status symbol in L.A. If you didn't have a Cybex-equipped home gym, you actually had to mix with the sweaty masses at the L.A. Sports

Connection, and that meant you simply hadn't made it. Chris Diamond liked to think that, as one of the most sought-after entertainment lawyers in town, he had definitely made it. Hence, his state-of-the-art gym with a spectacular sound system, high definition TVs on three walls, while the fourth was a huge sheet of glass overlooking the glittering lights of L.A.

He'd purchased the house at the top of Coldwater Canyon, perched on the edge of a magnificent hillside because of the incredible views. Then he'd proceeded to redo and rebuild until it was exactly the way he wanted it. Christ was a perfectionist: he liked things organized and in the right place. It gave him a feeling of security, something he'd never had while growing up.

'Nine a.m. on Friday,' Lady Jane said.

'Can't do it,' he replied, jumping off the Lifecycle and reaching for a pristine white hand-towel, which he threw round his neck.

'Why not?'

'I've got an important meeting in Vegas I can't break.'

'I strongly suggest you do,' she said calmly. 'Your brothers will be here, and your father expects you.' A long beat. 'I'm sure you wouldn't wish to disappoint him.'

Chris digested her words. 'Is he sick?' he asked at last.

'Be here. It is to your advantage,' she said mysteriously, and hung up.

* * *

Red Diamond reached for a dark-coloured cigarette with his gnarled right hand, and lit it with a gold Dunhill lighter.

Red Diamond was seventy-nine years old and looked every year of it. His craggy face was lined and wrinkled, his sunken blue eyes faded and darkly shadowed. An aquiline nose and strong jaw-line gave hints of the imposing-looking man he had once been.

'Are they coming?' he demanded, his eyes raking over Lady Jane Bentley as the impeccably groomed woman entered his bedroom.

She nodded, wondering what he was up to this time, for Red Diamond never did anything unless he had an agenda.

‘You’re sure?’ he barked, blowing a stream of acrid smoke in her direction.

‘Absolutely,’ she said, waving away the smoke with a pained expression.

‘All three of them?’ he rasped.

‘Yes,’ she answered coolly. ‘I contacted them as you requested, and they *will* be here.’

‘Excellent.’ A crafty smile spread across his weathered face. ‘And so it begins . . .’ he muttered, almost to himself.

Lady Jane nodded again. When Red Diamond wanted something, nobody dared argue, not even her.

What was he up to now? That was the question.

She was curious to know, but smart enough not to ask; Red never revealed anything until he was good and ready.

Like everyone else she would simply have to wait and see.

Chapter One



‘What’s your name, dear?’ the bald man, with an abundance of hair sprouting from his ears, inquired.

‘Liberty,’ the young waitress replied.

‘What’s that?’ he said, peering at her.

‘Liberty,’ she repeated. *It’s written on my name-tag, asshole. Can’t you see it?*

‘What kind of name—’

Oh, puleeze! You got any idea how many times I’ve had to go through this conversation? Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin named their baby Apple. Courteney Cox and David Arquette, Coco. What’s so unusual about Liberty?

Ignoring him, she refilled the bald man’s coffee cup and walked away. *Moron!* she thought. *Like, who does he think he is commenting on my name? It’s none of his freakin’ business. When I’m a famous singer-songwriter I won’t question people’s names. I’ll be understanding and polite. I’ll get it.*

She hurried behind the counter, still steaming. ‘I’m *so* not down with this waitresin’ crap,’ she complained to her cousin, Cindi, who’d gotten her the job in the Madison Avenue coffee shop and, like her, was an aspiring singer.

‘Never forget it pays the bills, girl,’ said Cindi, a buxom twenty-three-year-old originally from Atlanta, with gleaming black skin, thick ankles, an ample ass, huge breasts, and a wide, inviting smile.

‘*Singin’* should pay the bills,’ Liberty said forcefully. ‘That’s what we do.’

‘When we score a gig *that’s* what we do,’ Cindi pointed out. ‘So while we’re waitin’ . . .’

‘I know, I know,’ Liberty said, frowning. ‘Gotta make a living. Gotta pay the rent.’

The furrowing of her brow did not affect her startling beauty. Bi-racial, the product of a black mother and what she assumed was a mixed father – a man her mother refused to talk about, let alone reveal his identity – she was milkchocolate-skinned with lustrous long black hair, elongated green eyes, thick brows, impossibly long lashes, cut-glass cheekbones, full lips, a pointed chin and a straight nose. Cindi was always carrying on about how she looked like Halle Berry, which kind of irritated Liberty because she considered herself an original and did not care to be compared to anyone – however gorgeous and successful they might be.

She was nineteen. She had plenty of time.

Or did she?

Sometimes she awoke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, her heart thumping. What if she never got discovered? What if nobody listened to her songs or heard her sing? What if she ended up like her mom, a failed singer cleaning other people’s mess all day?

Man, she was almost twenty, she’d been out of school four years, and *nothing* big had happened for her. Oh, sure, she’d made an amateur demo tape, scored a few gigs as a back-up singer, but not as many as she’d like. And no producer had stepped forward and said, ‘Honey, you’re *it*! I’m signing you to a contract here and now. You’ll be the next Alicia Keys or Norah Jones, all you gotta do is name it.’

Where the *hell* were Clive Davis or P. Diddy when she needed them?

‘Miss!’ A sharp female voice brought her back to reality as an irate female customer attempted to attract her attention.

She sauntered over. At least she had attitude – nobody could take that away from her. ‘Yes?’ she said.

‘Do you *know* how long I’ve been waiting?’ the woman demanded in a high-pitched voice. ‘Where are my eggs?’ Sharp-featured, the woman was wearing a knock-off Armani suit and clutching a fake Vuitton bag on her lap.

No style, Liberty thought. *If you can’t afford the real thing, then you may as well forget it.*

The man with her had nothing to say. Apparently his eggs were not such an urgent matter.

‘I’m sorry,’ Liberty said in an I-couldn’t-give-a-rat’s-ass voice. ‘I’m not your table person.’ She refused to say waitress, she found it to be demeaning, especially to this cow.

‘Well, *get* me my “table person”,’ the woman, sneered. ‘I’ve been sitting here for fifteen minutes.’

‘Sure,’ Liberty drawled.

For a moment their eyes met. The woman hated her because she was beautiful. It happened all the time. They wouldn’t hate her if she was Beyoncé Knowles or Janet Jackson, they’d be fawning all over her the way people did with stars.

Once Mariah Carey had come into the coffee shop with full entourage in attendance and two massive black bodyguards who’d never left her side. People had *freaked*. Paparazzi had gathered outside, and within ten minutes a huge crowd had formed – almost breaking the plate-glass window.

The owner of the shop, Manny Goldberg, had begun to panic, until his wife, Golda, decided it would be prudent to escort Miss Carey and her group into the kitchen where the star graciously sipped a cup of green tea, signed autographs and chatted amicably with the two Hispanic chefs.

Liberty had thought about approaching her, but in the end she’d chickened out. Cindi hadn’t. Cindi had gotten the diva’s signature on a paper napkin, which she’d stashed in her underwear drawer along with various packets of condoms in all colours and sizes. Cindi was into being prepared.

‘Rude little bitch!’ Liberty heard the woman mutter to her male companion as she walked away from the table. ‘Who does she think she is?’

Liberty was not bothered; she’d been called worse.

She was just about to go into the back when she spotted Mr Hip-Hop himself walking in.

She held her breath for a few seconds. This was the third time he’d been in this week. He always sat at one of her tables and left a massive tip, although he never spoke to her other than to give her his order.

Today he was with another man, a white man who seemed

to be all business. They were talking animatedly, with a lot of arm-waving going on.

She knew who he was. Damon P. Donnell, hip-hop mogul supreme, head of Donnell Records. His new offices were less than a block away, and he'd obviously picked the coffee shop as his breakfast stop-off.

She knew other things about him. He was thirty-six, dark-skinned with cropped hair and a killer smile. He usually wore tinted designer shades, a diamond stud earring, Nike running shoes and a cool suit with a silk T-shirt underneath. He was known for encouraging new talent – although almost all of his label consisted of male rap artists. He'd once been a performer himself, but had given it up except for the occasional charity event. He was married. *Damn!* No chance of getting him *that* way, because Liberty drew the line at playing with married men. His wife was an Indian princess from Bombay, and a consummate consumer. The two of them lived in a sixty-sixth-floor sprawling Westside penthouse with panoramic views of the city and, according to *Vibe*, his wife had converted three bedrooms into her own personal closet. They'd been married two years and had no children.

The first time Liberty had seen him she'd had no idea who he was. 'I think I'm in lust!' she'd muttered to Cindi. 'That dude is the *bomb!*'

Cindi, who was up on everything showbiz, soon filled her in. Cindi devoured *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, *People*, *Us*, *The Star* and the *Enquirer*. She watched *Access*, *E.T.*, *Extra* and *E!* every single day. 'That dude is famous, married, rich, an' *way* outta your reach,' Cindi had informed her. 'Forget it, girl, 'cause this big boy ain't lookin'.'

Sometimes Cindi got on her case a little too much. Her payback was an attempt never to mention him again, not an easy task.

Just as she was about to go over to his table, Cindi materialized and gave her a knowing nudge. 'Mr Wonderman's back – *again*. Mebbe I was kickin' it wrong, little cous', could be you *do* have a shot. If I was you, I'd go for it.'

'The knock-off queen at table four is screaming for her

eggs,' Liberty said, ignoring any mention of Damon. 'You'd better get over there before the cow throws a shit-fit.'

'I'm on it,' Cindi said, totally unconcerned. 'Think I forgot to order 'em. Ain't *that* a shame?'

Liberty approached Damon's table.

He didn't look up. 'Coffee,' he said, studying the menu as if he'd never seen it before. 'Large OJ. Egg-white omelette, bacon on the side.'

'I'll have the same,' said his friend or business associate or whoever the other man was.

She hesitated a moment, willing Damon at least to give her a quick glance. He didn't, but the other guy was sure giving her a thorough going-over with his beady little eyes.

'Certainly, Mr Donnell,' she said, making him aware that she knew who he was. 'Coffee and OJ on the way. Omelette and bacon to follow. Crispy, right?'

Finally he looked up, taking her in, his eyes – visible through his tinted shades – resting on the handwritten nametag above her right breast. But still he didn't say a word, merely gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

She moved off to get them both coffee. And maybe her demo CD?

No! Too soon. I've got to develop a relationship. Like a cool waitress – customer kind of thing.

Oh, yeah, now you can use the word waitress.

That's because he's not some whiny white woman who thinks she's better than me.

'Waitress!' screamed the woman in the knock-off Armani. 'I'm getting nowhere here. *Where* are my eggs?'

She was tempted to say, 'Stuffed up your dried-up old snatch where nobody's gonna find 'em.' But she didn't, because Manny and Golda wouldn't approve and, as bosses go, they were decent people, and she didn't want to get fired. Besides, she needed the job, and so did Cindi. As usual they were late on the rent, and bills were mounting. It was hard keeping up – they could never seem to get ahead.

Before working in the coffee shop she'd tried a variety of jobs. All horrible. Being a waitress was the best of the bunch,

although it was murder on her feet. Usually she took the day shift, leaving her evenings free to write songs and hang with her musician friends, including her current boyfriend Kev, a guitar player. She'd been seeing him for a few months, and he was a nice guy, but nothing serious. She didn't believe in serious, not before she'd forged a career.

'They're on their way,' she yelled across the room at the hateful woman.

'I should think so!' the woman huffed, raising her painted-on eyebrows to let everyone know how pissed off she was.

'Excuse me, Liberty,' said an older, regular customer, sitting by himself at a corner table. 'Might I get a refill?'

This one never gave her any trouble and always tipped well. She flashed him a smile and her most used words: 'Coming right up.'

She grabbed a pot of freshly brewed coffee from behind the counter, filled the man's cup and headed for Damon's table. Only before she could get there, a young boy playing with a toy car scooted it in front of her, and *bam* – she tripped over the toy, taking a fall, coffee pot smashing to the ground, hot liquid burning her arm, right ankle twisted beneath her.

Silence descended while everybody turned to stare at the crash site. After a few seconds, conversation resumed, and she was left sprawled on the floor, looking and feeling like a clumsy idiot.

For a few seconds she didn't know what to do, then she heard the horrible female customer laugh in a rude fashion. Quickly she got herself together, even though her arm was burning from the scalding liquid, but when she tried to stand, her ankle gave way under her.

Fortunately Cindi and Mr Regular Customer came to her aid. The older man helped her to a chair, while Cindi began clearing up the broken glass and spilled coffee.

'Are you all right?' Mr Regular Customer asked, genuinely concerned.

She nodded tearfully and shot a look across the shop to see if Damon was watching.

He wasn't. He was carrying on talking, gesticulating

wildly, his diamond stud earring flashing against the fluorescent lights.

She suppressed the urge to cry in earnest. Her arm was on fire, her ankle throbbed, and Damon P. Donnell hadn't even acknowledged her existence. Was *anything* ever going to go right for her?

Man, she needed a break and she needed it desperately.