

Chapter One

“Damn, I got it going on.”

The streetlight changed unnoticed as Donavin stood admiring his reflection in the window of an upscale boutique. His light brown eyes took in the cream linen shirt and black slacks that, although off the rack from a downtown New York boutique, hung as if tailored to fit his muscular 6’3” frame. “I’m gonna get so much play tonight y’all are gonna be left on the bench.”

Adam Witherspoon cleared his throat and stepped in front of his friend to get a better look at himself. “Surely you jest. You’re hardly as handsome and dashing as myself, my brother.” He confirmed that there wasn’t one strand of his curly hair out of place and smoothed his tapered sideburns. “Furthermore, as you’re well aware, Spoon scoops all the ladies.”

“Y’all some conceited bastards,” J.R. drawled in his unmistakable New Orleans twang. “Both y’all gon’ come up short. Us dark-skinned bruthas been in fuh da past nine, ten years.” J.R. stepped in front of Spoon and Donavin, easily eclipsing them both with his thick football player’s build. “Ladies love da chocolate, and da chocolate loves da ladies.”

Donavin and Spoon looked at each other and shook their heads. They moved around to stand on either side of J.R. “Whatever, man,” Donavin said. “We all look good like the Billion Dollar Playboys should.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Spoon dapped Donavin.

“Fuh sho. Deez breezies ain’t even ready fuh da BDP,” J.R. added.

The light changed, and they reluctantly left their reflections behind to cross the street. Although it was August, the cool Black men barely broke a sweat as they strode down Wall Street to attend the end-of-summer networking reception sponsored by the firms at which they’d interned that summer. In a matter of weeks they’d be back in Atlanta starting their senior year at Stratford University, the nation’s leading historically Black

university. In the meantime they had their minds on the honeys and the honeys on their minds.

Networking with established businesspeople was supposed to be the theme of the event. Instead the scene typically turned into one of people trying to make dates instead of business connections.

Holding court the way they were at the open bar was more than the three men could have hoped for. With the sea of fine, employed women parading around the room, they had their picks of tall, short, thick, or slim in shades of chocolate, caramel, butterscotch, and French vanilla. All thirty-one flavors seemed to be well represented.

“It’s an exciting day in the Big Apple, sports fans,” Spoon quipped in his best sports announcer imitation. He held one hand over his ear; his eyes scanned the room. “The Billion Dollar Playboys are about to put it on the working girls of New York City.”

“How right you are, sir. I’m glad I brought my A-game as usual,” Donavin added.

J.R. scowled. “Dawg, you steady be talkin’ dat junk. Please show me sumthin’. Put up some numbers on da court ’stead of talkin’ dat shit in da locker room.”

“When I see one who is worthy of the Donavin Jackson experience, I’ll be sure to let you know. Country muthafucka.”

“Why I got to be country, dawg?”

“Because of that thick ass accent you sport, *dawg*,” Donavin mocked.

“You a wild boy, D. You funnier than a one-legged man at an ass-kickin’ contest.”

“Fellas! You guys need to focus on the task at hand,” Spoon interrupted. “All these lonely women needing to be held and caressed and kissed and sucked and—”

“Okay, okay, too much information, Spoon.” Donavin threw up his hand to silence him. “You need to hold that down. Everybody doesn’t need to know how freak-nasty you really are.”

“Yeah, dawg! Have a drink and cool yo’ hormones, man!”

“Whatever. You two stand here and converse with one another if you like. I’m going to work the room if you can smell what the Spoon is cookin’.” Spoon strolled off with his Manhattan in hand.

“Why does Spoon think he’s The Rock?” Donavin shook his head.

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“He be watchin’ dat wrasslin’ every week, dawg. I can’t front. Dat shit be off da hook sometimes. Dem wrasslers be like modern day gladiators, bruh. Speakin’ a which, dat movie was so damn hard! Maximus was a straight killa.”

“Well, one thing he said is correct. We need to start stepping to some of these young ladies instead of talking to each other.”

“Dat’s real, playa. I’ll holla at yo’ ass later.” J.R. picked up his Jack and Coke off the bar and made his way to a chatting group of ladies.

Donavin began to case the room to see who would be the object of his attention for the evening. He sauntered about like he owned the place and enjoyed a private chuckle when he overheard three women admiring him as he passed.

“Damn!”

“He is *foine!*”

“Girl, you ain’t neva lied.”

Donavin continued his self-confident stride until *she* walked in. His smile was knocked off balance. He stopped and did a double take. He had only taken a few sips of his Thug Passion, a concoction made of Hennessy and Alizé, so he knew he wasn’t drunk. His eyes drank in the leggy caramel beauty. She wore a fitted business suit that stopped mid-thigh and accentuated all of her curves. Her face, framed by long jet-black hair, was angelic. There was something familiar about her, but he couldn’t place it. Where had he seen her before? In a movie? On TV? In his dreams?

Donavin contemplated his approach. The sista was banging, but he had to see what her teeth looked like before he spit any game. He was very particular about his women. He valued intelligence along with drive and determination. Beauty and a great physique were definite pluses, but above all else she had to have good teeth.

In his experience he found that fine women with plenty of T and A came a dime a dozen. But a woman with all of those positive traits and nice teeth to boot would make him consider marriage. He’d had too many bad experiences where he’d meet a good-looking woman only to have his hopes dashed when she opened her mouth to display tobacco road.

Donavin stayed about ten paces behind to appear inconspicuous as he followed her around the room. After a few minutes of his trailing her, she still hadn’t turned around.

He maneuvered around her, orbiting like a satellite, to get a full frontal view. Several minutes elapsed with Donavin's patience.

"Will you smile so I can see your damn teeth, woman!" Donavin tapped his foot on the carpet.

Finally it happened. She ran into someone she knew, and the gates of heaven suddenly opened before his eyes.

"Yes! Thirty-two straight pearly whites." Donavin grinned. "Okay, Donavin, let's show that A-game you were talking about earlier." He strolled over to introduce himself as the other woman walked away.

Before he could drop one of his stellar first lines, she turned and said, "Donavin Jackson, I presume?"

He masked his surprise. "Very good. I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"I guess a proper introduction would be appropriate. My name is Jasmine. Jasmine DeRoche." She extended her hand and Donavin enveloped it in both of his.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Jasmine DeRoche. I noticed you when you arrived. You're a very beautiful woman."

Jasmine smiled once again, opening the gates of heaven solely for Donavin this time. "Thank you. I've always heard that you're quite the charmer."

Now it was Donavin's turn to display his impeccable Billion Dollar Playboy smile. "I feel I'm at a disadvantage. You know my story, but I don't know yours. Where do we know each other from?"

"You're a senior at Stratford. I just graduated from there in May. You and your little crew are famous, or should I say infamous. I think I saw the other two in here when I came in. The Billion Dollar Playboys, right?"

Embarrassed that Jasmine had just told him the part of his business he would have preferred she not know, Donavin offered a sheepish grin. "That's just a little inside joke. We're just a small group of gentlemen who live life to the fullest. I believe, however, we do it with a tad more style than most."

"Style, huh?"

"Clearly I think one should live with a little *je ne sais quoi*, a little *joie de vie*, if you will."

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Jasmine laughed. "You are too funny. So, what are you doing in New York this summer?"

"A little internship in private banking at Proctor and Proctor," Donavin said nonchalantly.

"Nice."

"Yourself?"

"I'm a consultant at Simon and Rothstein."

"Impressive. So, Miss Jasmine, what do you do for fun?"

"Is that a proposal, Mr. Donavin?"

Donavin was slightly taken aback. He didn't think that it would be this easy with a woman this fine. "Why, yes, Jasmine. I'd love the opportunity to entertain you for an evening."

"Just an evening?" Jasmine raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Is that honestly all you can handle?"

Donavin leaned close to whisper in Jasmine's ear. "How about you slip me your number, and we'll see *just how much I can handle.*"

"Touché." Jasmine reached into her Kate Spade purse to retrieve her business card case. She jotted her home and cell numbers on the back of the card and handed it to him. "I don't like to waste cards, so I expect you to call and not just brag to your boys about how many numbers you got tonight. Are we clear?"

"So cynical. We'll have to work on that."

Jasmine looked Donavin up and down then met his eyes once again. "We have a few things to work on." She smiled and walked off without so much as a goodbye, but her body language said all that needed to be stated.

"Damn," Donavin mumbled, "did that just happen?"

J.R. and Spoon walked over just in time to watch Jasmine walk away.

Spoon smiled widely. "Action Jackson has done it again."

"Fuh sho. Dat's a hot ass girl," J.R. chimed in. "What did she do? Ask you if you knew me?"

"That, gentlemen, was Jasmine DeRoche. Says she graduated from Stratford this year. I don't know how I missed a woman that fine. Do either of you remember her?"

“You know, as a matter of fact I do,” Spoon answered. “She used to sing in the glee club. Remember I was the treasurer freshman year. You guys remember, right?”

Donavin and J.R. shot a “who gives a damn” look at one another.

“Anyway, she was rather plain jane-ish back then, but she must have started drinking milk or something.”

“Dawg, did you git da digits? Wait, lemme rephrase dat. Dawg, tell me you got da digits,” J.R. probed.

“Would I be a Billion Dollar Playboy if I didn’t?”

Chapter Two

Donavin was used to being in control when he approached a woman. Although Jasmine had definitely turned the game around on him, he knew he would have pursued her even if she hadn't willingly given him her number.

He tapped his fingers on the desk. A spreadsheet stared at him from his computer screen, but his focus was on the business card lying on his blotter.

It had been two days and Jasmine occupied every corner of his thoughts. He hadn't called her at home that Friday night like he wanted to. Although eager to connect with her again, he wasn't going to play himself. He had a reputation to uphold. Obviously a skilled player as well, Jasmine had won round one, but Donavin was determined to come back strong for round two. He picked up the phone and dialed her number.

"Simon and Rothstein, Jasmine DeRoche speaking."

"Good morning, Simon and Rothstein Jasmine DeRoche speaking."

Jasmine knitted her eyebrows; it was too early in the morning for telephone games. "Who's calling, please?" she asked stiffly.

Donavin chuckled. "This is Donavin Jackson. How are you this beautiful morning?"

"Oh hey, Donavin." Jasmine softened. "Woo, I'm so tired. Mondays are a beast. Thank the good Lord for coffee."

“You’re a coffee drinker?”

“I’m trying to cut down, but on Mondays I’m just like fuck it.”

She said that curse word and scored major cool points with Donavin. He hated women who were so prissy, prim, and proper that they thought cursing was beneath them.

“I’m not a fan of Mondays either, but I usually shake off my fatigue by the evening. Would you care to join me tonight to check out an open mic at a coffee spot in the Village?”

“Very smooth how you took my appreciation of coffee and turned it into a date opportunity. You are as impressive as your reputation suggests.”

“We’re going to have to talk about this reputation thing. I think that someone has been giving you some false information on the kid.”

“Anyway, what time should I be ready?” Jasmine ignored his last comment.

“So you accept?”

“Yes, keep up with the conversation, sweetie.”

Donavin smiled into the receiver. He always appreciated a good game of verbal fencing and liked the challenge Jasmine offered.

“How about producing yourself at eight o’clock? Can you handle that or will you be preparing more of your little one-liners?”

This time Jasmine was taken aback. Most of the guys who approached her were only into kissing her behind and telling her how wonderful she was. It was refreshing for her to encounter a man with a backbone.

Jasmine laughed. “No, I prep my one-liners on Sunday night for the entire week. I usually get off at about six. I work in the financial district downtown, so I’m close to my apartment in Brooklyn. I can be ready by eight. Are you picking me up or are we meeting in the Village?”

“A true gentlemen always picks up a lady.”

“I live in Brooklyn at . . . hold on one second.” She placed him on hold briefly and finished telling him the address a moment later. “Do you know where that is?”

“No, but you’ll find that I’m extremely resourceful.”

“Hmm, if you say so. Listen, I’ve gotta run, but I’ll see you later.”

“Yes, you will. Eight sharp.”

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“Bye, Donavin.”

Jasmine hung up on her end, and Donavin rested the receiver in its cradle on his. For the first time in a long time, Donavin was excited about a prospect. Jasmine’s ability to tantalize him physically and mentally was rare. He didn’t want to get too caught up, but he had a good feeling about her—one he hadn’t felt in a while. He picked the phone back up to share his progress with Spoon.

“Good morning. Dillon Capital Partners, Adam Witherspoon speaking. How may I be of service?” Spoon answered in his best corporate Negro voice.

“Hey, man, it’s D. I just set up a date with old girl from the reception last Friday.”

“Kudos, my friend, kudos. What you plan on getting into?”

“A little open mic at the Nubian Winds Poets Café in the Village. Not quite sure what to do afterward, though.”

“Myself, being a man of our town, would be most honored to give you some suggestions. After the open mic, I’d stop by Justin’s. It’s a cool spot to have a drink and you might see Puffy or P. Diddy, whichever you choose to call him. Then you simply must take a horse-and-carriage ride in Central Park. After the carriage ride, she’ll be more than ready, believe me.”

“What’s with this ‘man of our town’ stuff? You’re from Long Island. Not exactly the same thing. I appreciate the help, though. You’re truly a wealth of information.”

“Glad to be of service, my good man. I expect a full report in the morning. Represent the BDP to the fullest.”

“Always.”

Donavin rushed to finish his work so he could mentally prepare for the date. He would have to get some gear and find out where the hell she lived. He was, however, a member of the BDP—they never stress; they adapt.

The day seemed to drag on and on, but six o’clock finally came and Donavin hurried uptown to Spoon and J.R.’s place. They lived in student housing at Columbia University’s East Campus dorm on West 116th Street, as did most of the summer interns. He kept a few extra clothes there so that he wouldn’t always have to go home to Short Hills to change. Donavin chose to stay at home with his parents in the affluent New

Jersey suburb during the summer because he liked having someone else do his laundry and he loved his mother's cooking.

After taking a taxicab to Columbia, Donavin paid the driver and made his way into the building. The security guard in the lobby allowed him to enter, and Donavin walked up to his friends' suite. He impatiently knocked on their door and J.R. answered seconds later.

"What up, dawg? What brings you to da neighborhood?"

"What's up, playboy? I need to grab some of my gear for the evening."

J.R. stepped aside to let Donavin in. "Where you goin' tonight? I ain't say you could go out."

"I'm going out with that girl from the other night."

"Da one wit' da big ol' donkey ass? You win so big! You a straight-up pimp!"

"Tell me something I don't know, Big Country."

"Hey, bruh, you ain't got too many mo' country jokes left befo' you get some *Smackdown* laid on ya."

"You've been watching wrestling with Spoon again, haven't you?"

"Hell yeah, man. Dem story lines be so good. Best thang on TV. Guaranteed. You need to git down wit' it."

Donavin shook his head. "Hmm. Let's see. Beautiful girl? Wrestling? Beautiful girl? Wrestling? Now if it was beautiful girls wrestling it might be different. You lose; I gotta get dressed."

"Good. I got company comin' anyway. Don't need you over here blockin'."

Donavin showered and dressed. He put on a pair of black Perry Ellis pants, a gray short-sleeved Armani shirt, and black Kenneth Cole shoes—his trademark style from head to toe. A splash of Ralph Lauren Romance and he was ready to go.

Donavin said his goodbyes to J.R. "All right, sir, I'm out. Enjoy the wrestling match, and I don't mean the one on TV."

They gave each other dap. "Aight, playa, do yo' thang and make da BDP proud. I know I will."