

Dare I Say No?

When the man of your dreams
is from the wrong side of the tracks, and
everyone's counting on you to stay on the right side...

What...

Do...

You...

Do?



a novel by

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Chapter 1

The Center of Confusion

“Leave me alone! Please? Can’t you at least do that?”

Chrisney Courtland was dying inside. Her chest heaved. Her beautiful face twisted. Regret tore through her very soul. What the hell was she thinking? How gullible could one person be? As the leader of the massive celibacy group in one of Atlanta, Georgia’s biggest churches, it was her job to keep the sheep from falling prey to the wolves. Yet there she was, wounded like a prized lamb fit for the slaughter. Genius I.Q., stellar reputation, access to God’s bank account, blinged out and designer labeled head to toe. Privileged. Sheltered. Adored by the masses. Yet, broken. Torn. Reduced to a sobbing mass of pent up emotions and lack of common damned sense. How sad was it that the woman who’d saved so many couldn’t even save herself?

Through tear filled eyes she glanced towards the far side of the oversized, private, hospital suite, glad that her outburst had not awakened her younger brother. But, she was nowhere near done. There was a point she had to get across, so lowered her voice to keep from disturbing his broken, pain stricken body’s much needed sleep, boldly turned back to the culprit of her torn spirit and laid it all on the line.

“This can’t be my life. I won’t let it. Everything I’ve done, my parents, my church, was to prevent this. But, now...?” The tears gushed unchecked. “Dammit! Why did I let you? Why? Even after the pool? Oh, my God. The pool? I wish I could erase it all. The playground. The funeral. The emergency room. Daddy should’ve kicked you out. I begged him to, but no! He wouldn’t listen. Nobody ever listens when it comes to you!”

Visions of model-fine females crowded her head until she thought it would burst. At the library. On the parking lot. In the swimming pool. Good lord, the swimming pool. That incident alone should’ve sent her packing, yet there she was. But no more, she determined. Slowly, she backed away. She would escape his overwhelming charm, quick comebacks, and street wit, then avoid that spawn of Satan at all costs.

Chrisney bumped into a firm body and stopped dead in her tracks. She didn't realize anyone had entered the room. Who could it be? How much had they heard? She prayed it wasn't her parents then turned to find her brother's nurse and sighed with relief. As the nurse lit into her tormentor, she decided that was as good a time as any to get the hell outta dodge. She turned to run, but after a few steps, her trembling hands went weak and everything in them dropped to the floor. She didn't give a damn about leaving her favorite purse, or her new phone, but she wasn't getting anywhere without those keys.

By the time she bent to pick them up, he was right there, standing before her in all of his God given glory, and boy had the Almighty been generous. She tried to go around, but he blocked her path, refusing to allow the one woman who'd captured his heart to get away. Chrisney's mind reeled. He'd gotten so deep she could barely find room to think even a little ways straight. Mad as hell, she pushed against his rock-hard chest. But, instead of moving the mountain, her shapely frame flew backwards and by the time he caught hold, her entire backside had smacked against a wall that seemed to pop up out of nowhere. Chrisney winced, but the pain was a welcomed change. She was glad to finally hurt somewhere other than the heart that cracked more and more with each passing moment.

Again, she cried out, begged him to leave her alone. She needed so desperately to forget. Instead, the rush of memories returned even stronger, flooded her entire being. Every aspect of their horrid past became the present. In her dazed state, the room began to spin, and as her life unfolded before her, everything seemed to go black.

Chapter 2

The Homecoming

Chrisney closed her eyes. She could no longer look into the casket just below the stage's edge. Her cherished, Aunt Helen could not be gone – her mother's only sister and the baby of the family of six. No time was a good time to die, but Helen's death had been way too soon. There was so much life to be lived, a wonderful husband, two grown sons, and a humongous, Courtland clan who all loved her dearly. But, when had cancer ever given a damn about treasured things like that?

The downpour of snow blocked the picture window's view of, "Millionaire's Haven," the name given to one of Atlanta, Georgia's most beautiful suburbs. As Chrisney fixed her face and belted a song towards the two-story ceiling, a nine-piece band played behind her, jamming more like they were at an R&B concert than a funeral. The mass choir standing off to her left matched her in harmony, strutting their stuff like the Pips behind Gladys Knight.

"Leeeen on him in your tiimes of struggle, for he will sustaaain you. Trust in Jesus! Lord, Lord, Lord, for he will maintaaain you. Rock~~~ with the saint of the ages! I said, rock~~~~ with the, with the, with the – with the – with the, saaaaint of the aaaaa - jus!"

The sea of wealthy mourners jumped to their feet, raving and rejoicing like mad. This was the tradition of The Temple of Divine Healing. When God has blessed you with such abundance, every day was a celebration, even in death. Though an additional five thousand seats had been added to the already massive church, along with a state-of-the-art recording studio, bowling alley, skating rink, an all-new everything, K through 12 school, daycare, and lots more, the recently renovated building was filled beyond capacity. Those who didn't get there early enough to find a seat were happy to stand in the double wide aisles. The rest crowded out the spacious areas in the rear near the lightly tinted, floor-to-ceiling, glass walls and exits.

Headed by the highly lauded, Bishop Stanley, the church had served as the Courtland family's place of worship for a century and no Courtland, by marriage or birth, had so much as thought to go anywhere else. It was the

one place besides the Courtland mansion that Chrisney called home. A child prodigy with an off-the-charts aptitude for math, the sheltered, daddy's girl and beloved "Songbird" stayed close to her circle of protection. Like Aunt Helen, Chrisney's mother Betty, and generations of Wellingsly women before them, Chrisney, was a good girl - a virgin, sworn to uphold the family's legacy of celibacy until marriage - a pledge she took as seriously as the cancer that stole away her Aunt Helen. Many of the mourners, most of whom were also members of the church, watched over her as if she were their own. They were determined to help their perfect little Chrisney keep her vow - to succeed in that area as she'd done in all others. Now that she'd *become of age*, they watched her even closer.

The long line of mourners made their way down the aisle doing an old version of the electric slide. As the procession reached the casket, the gentle hand of Deena Scott – a Jill Scott twin – kept Chrisney from breaking down. Deena was Chrisney's best friend – a fourth grader when three-year-old Chrisney was in second grade. They'd met at church and had been inseparable since. They both knew how much the masses needed Chrisney to carry them through. The church had depended on her since she was five and lifted her voice in worship and praise for the first time. Too advanced for the youth choir, she'd been moved up to co-lead the adult choir and adult mass choir the following year. Her gentle soul and angelic voice had pulled them through all kinds of losses and bad times and had won them every musical competition they'd thought to get into. And there were many. There was healing in the gospel and no one sang it better than Chrisney. Their Song Bird had never failed them before, and she was determined to keep it that way.

On the conductor's cue, the band brought it down a notch and the choir hummed softly to allow Chrisney to mourn. But, Chrisney was more worried about her mother. One look at Helen's beautiful face and Betty burst right into tears. Reddi, Chrisney's father, held his wife close, protecting her as always. Betty smoothed a hand over the top of Helen's lavender and white gown. It was both their favorite colors. The long line of the remaining Courtland clan stood waiting their turn.

As Chrisney returned her father's reassuring smile, mourners shouted words of respect and praise.

"We miss you, Helen. You were our rock, gurrri!"

"Rest in peace, Helen!"

“Be with him, baby girl. Take to his bosom. You are home now.”

Drawing strength from the masses, Chrisney led into Helen’s favorite song, one she’d written just for her aunt called, “Place and Peace.” The crowd went wild. For several moments, Chrisney’s voice and the band’s soulful accompaniments could barely be heard above the roar. Once they’d settled a bit, a large group of older women began shouting their personal praises. These were Chrisney’s play mothers and, as usual, they took up a quite a few seats and sat only a few rows from the stage.

“That’s *MY* MENSA baby right there. Mines!”

“Ours, Ms. Thang.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Ain’t nothing that child can’t do. Sannng, Chrisney, like only *you* can.”

“Whew, Jesus! Praise the Lord on this evening for the multitude of blessings he has bestowed upon that child.”

“Yesss, Chrisney!”

“Your play mothers love ya, girl. We’re right here, honey. Right here.”

The women stood and applauded. Again, leaping to their feet and raving in praise, the crowd joined in. Chrisney wiped at the flood of fresh tears. Hands together as if in prayer, she smiled and curtsied gracefully. The overhead microphones delivered her trademark, honey dripping, melodic tone and the crowd finally calmed. Some even sat back down, but not many.

“Awww,” another play mother began, swiping at fresh tears, “voice so beautiful she makes you forget your sorrows. I forgot this was a damned funeral. Poor Helen. Poor, poor Helen.”

“Yes. I hope Chrisney can make it through. Helen was that child’s world and she was hers.”

“Yes, Lord. Be with her, Jesus!” another shouted to the rafters. “Oh, she needs you now more than ever and so do we!”

Chrisney lifted her face and brought the melodic hum to a high pitch. Instantly, the calm ended. The crowd raved and danced about in grand fashion. Eventually, they settled, but not a soul sat. As Chrisney and the choir hummed along, they swayed side to side, some locking hands in solidarity. It was right about then that Marie Springs reached her boiling

point. It was a wonder she'd held her peace that long. That's if you could classify anything Marie did as "peace."

The feisty, shit starter turned to her equally attractive and stylishly dressed, best friend, Janey Rhimes, and spat, "Oh, so what, the bitch can sang. That make her Jesus? She gone walk on water too? Thank she better than er'body."

"You're saying she's not?" Janey countered. "She's a darn genius for Christ's sake." Getting in Marie's face and counting on long, neatly manicured fingers, Janey rolled off the accolades. "Mastered calculus before middle school? Graduated high school at how many years ahead? Two bachelor degrees and one master and months away from getting a second masters at what, all of twenty-four years old? And, after all that? Look at her. The woman is flawless. Face of an angel, body of a goddess, *and* she's the songbird? Thee voice for this entire, mega-thousands huge church? So, again, you're saying she's not?"

"Okay, *Bishop Stanley's Echo*. All he ever talks about is *Chrisney this* and *Chrisney that*. *Chrisney, Chrisney*, mo damn *Chrisney*. Now here you go. His echo. She ain't shit."

Janey smirked. "Alright, *Janet, Have You Done Ann nee thing Lately*. Get *one* degree, then maybe Bishop will talk about you."

"Fuck you, Janey."

Janey couldn't help but sniggle. "We *are* in church, Marie."

"This a funeral. It ain't service."

"It's still church. Your no degree having behind is going straight to hell. The dumb side."

A few of Chrisney's play mothers turned and shushed Janey and Marie. Attitudes on ten, both women swiveled their necks, rolled their eyes, and smacked their lips. Pissed, the play mothers waved them off and turned back around. The ladies continued, but in more hushed tones.

"If I'm going to hell, your Ms. Perfect Chrisney Courtland won't be far behind, *Number One Fan*."

"Who wouldn't want to be a fan of greatness?"

Marie snapped her neck, "She ain't great."

“Even Whitney said crack is whack. You sure you aren’t fiending?”

Chrisney expertly hit a crescendo of high notes. As the crowd revved back up, Marie hunched the equally tuned-in Janey in the side a lot harder than she needed to get her attention, then gave a determined look several rows behind them. Janey shoved Marie back, then followed her friend’s gaze. As she did, both jaws dropped. After a good gasp, she finally swallowed the knot in her throat.

There stood Treyell Corbin, the most sought after man in ATL - twenty-nine years old, tall, ridiculously thick in all the right places, dressed to kill, and looking like a statue carved from the finest stone. Neatly twisted dreadlocks hung loosely about his shoulders, their glistening, black strands accenting his chocolate skin and hazel, bedroom eyes. Janey tried to blink, but couldn’t. The man was simply too fine for words, so she didn’t try to come up with any.

Instead, she checked out the tailored suit, gators, and ensemble of jewelry that was lightyears away from the price range of anyone she knew besides the Courtland’s. The Temple of Divine Healing had acquired the nickname, “Millionaire’s Praise,” but this man took it to a whole other level. Without doubt, he had to be swimming in ga-millions of millions, dipping at the deep end of the pool and doing it with much style. That rich and that fine? Janey didn’t realize she was fanning herself until Marie kicked back in.

“Exactly! Been staring *Ms. I’m All That* Chrisney Courtland down since she showed up on that stage. ‘Fore Bishop could finish the eulogy good. Gone hawk smash dat uptight, shining example, virgin ass fa sho. Smack the hell right on up outta all a that family tradition. Greatly too. How ‘bout dat?”

Janey laughed. “Hawk smash? She isn’t food, fool.”

“Every fine ass woman is a meal to him. He got platters full all up and about town and ain’t been one yet to turn him down. This I know fa sho, *fool.*”

“Someone’s salty ‘cuz they didn’t get an invite to da *Too Gorgeous For Words* man’s parr-tee.”

“Well, she will. And, *she will.* They all do. I’ll be just fine after that.”

“Hater in the midst, Marie,” Janey said into the air. “Just a hater in the midst. Ain’t no man tapped that and none will, not even him unless he’s going to put a ring on it *and* wait until the honeymoon. Sang, Chrisney!” Janey yelled, waving her arms and grooving with the rest of the crowd.

Annoyed, Marie sighed heavily and folded her arms across her chest. But Janey was nowhere near done. Filled with the joy that only the Song Bird could bring, she smiled from ear to ear and rattled on.

“Chrisney is sealed in the Holy Ghost, filled and sanctified. She’s holding up their family’s long tradition of celibacy until marriage in grand fashion. Every man, including your no good husband, has been trying to get to her, but she hasn’t so much as turned to look in their direction. That woman’s a saint. A rock. She’s serving God, honey. Satan does not have a chance no matter how well disguised.”

Marie smacked her lips and tightened her arms. “Okay, Missouri. Guess showing is better than telling, huh?”

As the crowd roared over another of Chrisney’s melodic responses to the band’s riffs, both women turned back towards the stage. Unable to resist, Janey glanced back at Treyell, then blushed like crazy when he flashed a generous, perfect toothed smile. “Whew, Jesus!” she mumbled under her breath, “might need to double up on them Holy Ghost security guards. Good Lord!”

The choir hummed along. Chrisney waited for her cue, then easily let go a verse with a series of notes that would trip up most professional singers. That jumped the crowd off once again, stomping, clapping, shouting – the works. Marie nudged Janey, but she was lost in the Song Bird’s delivery right along with everyone else. After a third nudge, Janey elbowed her back. The women’s antics were so over-the-top they caught Chrisney’s attention. As she lifted her voice to the rafters, her genuine smile was met by Janey’s huge grin and short wave, then stifled by Marie’s evil glare and, just as Marie had planned, Chrisney followed the woman’s deliberate gaze back in Treyell’s direction.

As she revved up for another run of show stopping notes, her eyes locked onto the sexiest, lust filled orbs imaginable and she missed that note, the next, and the one after that. Chest heaving, body pumping a new kind of sweat against the perfectly set temperature of the room, Chrisney began to tug at the wrists of her long-sleeved gown. Moments passed

before she could force her eyes away, but it was impossible not to look back. The entire church became so quiet you could hear an ant farting on a cotton ball.

“Gotcha!” Marie gloated with hushed words for Janey along with a joyous fist pump. “Song Bird never misses a note. It’s on and poppin’.” Singing into the air, she did a smooth, Holy Ghost dance. “Real world, baby. Gone get you a taste,” then finished up in Janey’s face with, “Shining example my cute, black ass.”

Janey rolled her eyes. Marie’s hatred of Chrisney had grown by leaps and bounds. If she had to guess why, she figured it to be a seed none other than Ella Mae Ellisburg, Marie’s partner in crime and Janey’s sworn enemy had planted. Either way, it wasn’t right and she’d have no part in it. She turned back to the stage, and this time her jaws dropped for a very different reason. She’d sworn her own heart had fallen clear through her body and was thumping in her recently pedicured feet.

Still standing at center stage before her mass of staunch, *any and everything Chrisney* supporters, Chrisney was squirming something awful. The heat generated by the promise in Treyell’s glare was so new it was as if her thighs had caught fire. And, considering it was Satan Jr. holding the torch that had captured her entire soul, along with damn near every other female in the room, Janey could only imagine they had.

Highly pissed, the roomful of mourners turned a hard eye at Treyell. The eyes of everyone old enough to figure what was taking place, and even those too young to understand, but knew Treyell was the reason for Chrisney’s discomfort, threw daggers right through the chest of his tailored suit. But, used to being the center of attention for the wrong and right reasons, he didn’t so much as blink. Like a prized eagle, he’d zoned in on his prey and was not about to be denied. The entire room sighed in unison. Like robots in sync, every head turned back to Chrisney and every face wore it’s own version of a stern, *you better the hell not*, kind of look.

Chrisney knew she’d better come up with something fast. Eyes still locked into Treyell’s, the rhythm challenged princess broke out in an awkward attempt at the latest dance, rolling her hands in front of her body and bending one knee then the other, before bouncing around in the most comical version of this era’s running man. And just as she’d planned, it all worked in her favor.

Finally, the mourners exhaled. Some laughed and copied her moves. Her play mothers applauded loudly, relief brightening their wide grins and cheek to cheek smiles. Others laughed and hi-fived, exhaling a second, much needed time.

Their coveted baby was back. Fun loving in the face of adversity, not letting anything get her down, and, as always, standing firm in the eyes of the Lord. But, little did they know, the scrunching of Chrisney's beautiful face and show stopping antics was anything but a sign of strength.