



# Dirty Laundry

1

**NESHELLE**

**WHORE.** I began spray-painting the word in large, red letters across the driver’s side of the white Montero sitting by itself in the dark parking lot. The sound of my heartbeat thumped hard and fast in my ears, muffling all other noises. I paused to violently shake the can of spray paint, while at the same time glancing over my shoulder and praying that no one would catch me. It seemed like a sin, praying to God not to get caught while I vandalized another person’s property. But this idiot deserved this – and everything else he got. I wiped the beads of sweat from my upper lip. It was midnight, but it was July and miserably hot in Houston. Part of the reason I was sweating was from the heat; the other part was that I was scared to death. If we got caught, we could go to jail for this craziness.

“Hurry up,” my best friend Imani warned. I knew she was busy on the passenger side adding the word **CHEATER** in huge, black letters. Julian, her pathetic excuse for a boyfriend, had made this easy by parking in the back of his apartment complex, away from all the other cars. He was always pressed over having anyone get too close to his precious SUV. *Asshole.* He’d done Imani wrong, and I really couldn’t blame her for doing this. When she called me earlier and told me the plan, I tossed my Sudoku puzzle to the side, threw on some dark clothes, and grabbed a can of leftover spray paint I had in my condo. I agreed to do whatever she needed to get over this fool. If this helped her heal, then I refused to let her roll solo. Now, two hours later, I found myself crouching behind Julian’s car like I was auditioning for a role in *Set it Off*.

Shielded by the cover of darkness, we worked swiftly in the back parking lot while Simone, our lookout, waited in our *get-away* car parked a short distance away. Just as I finished adding the “E”, a pair of blinding headlights cut through the near-empty parking lot. I could hear loud music thumping as what looked like a sports car made its way towards us. “Let’s go!” I shouted to Imani. I didn’t know if she was finished or not, but I knew it didn’t take that long to spray-paint a seven-letter word. I took off running and I heard the soft patter of her sneakers

behind me. We ran to the spot where Simone was parked and we jumped into the car, breathless from our escapade. As I slammed the door to the passenger side, Imani hopped in the back seat.

“Step on it!” Imani urged. Simone put the car in drive and sped away like a bat out of hell, her tires squealing as she flew from the parking lot. I gulped mouthfuls of air from the open window. My lungs were burning and my adrenaline was high. We didn’t know who was in the sports car, and we didn’t stick around to find out. As Simone peeled away, she burst into hysterical laughter.

I cracked a smile and my fear began to dissipate. “Mission accomplished!” I yelled. We all gave each other high-fives, even Simone who managed to steer her stick-shift Audi with one hand and slap our palms with the other. She was smiling hard. Her caramel-kissed skin glowed with excitement. I still couldn’t believe we’d done this. I looked at both of them in amazement. Imani was still breathing hard. She grabbed her inhaler from the back pocket of her jeans and sucked two quick bursts of air. When she pulled her black hoodie off, her long, dark curls came tumbling out. She brushed them away from her face with her hand. A middle-school teacher by profession, she normally wore her long hair wrapped in a tight bun. But with her petite, brown-skinned frame and those big, pretty eyes, she looked more like a student. With our identical coloring, we could have passed for twins, but my ample curves and short, cropped natural set us apart. I couldn’t imagine why any man wouldn’t be blissfully happy with Imani. Especially a man she’d been dating for ten years.

She seemed to be reading my thoughts when she spoke. “I’ll teach that bastard to cheat on me,” she said soberly. She had calmed down; her breathing returning to normal.

“That fool is crazy,” I said as I sat back and buckled my seatbelt.

Simone agreed. “He had it coming. You know, what goes around comes around.”

“Yeah,” Imani sighed. “I’m just tired of dealing with this.”

Simone and I nodded in agreement. We’d both been the victims of cheating men in our pasts. It seemed no matter how good you were to a man they always ended up screwing around. And they always had a weak ass excuse for their behavior. My ex-husband was a member of that club. When I found out he had a woman on the side, I divorced him – after twelve years of marriage. I didn’t think about the house, the money he made, or the lifestyle I’d become accustomed to. I didn’t trust him anymore, and I wasn’t willing to put myself through the heartache of wondering what he was doing every minute he wasn’t with me. But I wasn’t bitter. I moved on, I moved out, I changed my phone number and refused to have any further contact with him. That was three years ago. And I have no regrets. He was the one who screwed up a good thing.

“If I had a dollar for every woman I’ve met who’s been cheated on, I’d be rich now,” I said.

“Yeah, but let’s not forget these women out here,” Simone said, steering the car onto the ramp to Highway 59. “Guys wouldn’t have anyone to cheat with if women weren’t willing participants. It takes two to tango.”

I shrugged. “I guess I didn’t look at it that way. But sometimes the women don’t know they’re *the other* woman.” I was thinking about the fling I’d had a few years ago with a married man. At first, I didn’t know he was married. But even after I found out, I still continued to see him. He told me his wife didn’t treat him right, so I believed that justified what we were doing. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. I finally ended it when I couldn’t stand to look at myself in the mirror anymore. I promised myself I would never do that again. To this day, I’d kept that a secret from Simone and Imani.

“Some of these chicks are rolling harder than the men,” Simone continued. “Sleeping with two and three guys at the same time. Girl, there are some bitches I wouldn’t trust within ten feet of my man. Those are the worst kind. They want what you got and they go after it with a vengeance.”

Imani spoke up. Her voice was sad and soft. “It doesn’t matter who’s cheating on who. It still hurts.” I watched as her bottom lip quivered, a tell-tale sign of what was coming next. She squeezed her eyes shut. I figured she was trying to steel herself against the tears that looked ready to spill any minute. She lost the battle and started crying softly in the back seat. I’ve never been one for tears, brought up in a family of all boys, but a deep sense of melancholy washed over me.

I tried to soothe her with my words. “Imani, I know it hurts, but you gotta move forward. You gotta be strong. You cannot let him have control over your emotions like this. He’s the one who messed up, not you. There are plenty of guys who will appreciate the good woman you are.” Imani and Simone had been my girls since they befriended me in the cafeteria of Klein Middle School twenty-five years ago. We were all flirting with forty, and we’d been through decades of problems together. Imani would get through this. She had to. “If you need to cry, we’re always here for you,” I promised.

“Don’t cry for that son-of-a-bitch,” Simone said with her usual bluntness. She never tiptoed around an issue. “He didn’t cry when he was creeping around on you.” She pulled into the driveway of our condominium complex and swiped her access card through the security gate panel. Doug, the skinny, red-faced security guard was on duty. He waved at us as we passed through. “Any man who would string you along for ten years promising to marry your ass and not even giving you an engagement ring, don’t deserve no tears. He deserves to be pistol-whipped.”

I had to agree. Imani had waited for this man for over a decade and she had nothing to show for it, except a letter from the Attorney General that identified Julian as the father of a six-month-old baby boy. If it hadn’t been for that, she would’ve never known about his cheating. I love Imani like a sister, but I always thought she was crazy for staying engaged for so long and waiting while Julian dragged his heels. I know what I would have done, but I try to stay out of folks’ business and only give advice when I’m asked for it.

“Can I stay with you tonight, ‘Shell?” Imani asked. “I don’t want to be alone.”

I reached toward the back seat and squeezed her hand for comfort. “Of course. You know you don’t even have to ask.”

Thankfully, we all lived in the same condominium complex. Simone parked in her reserved spot and we all climbed out of her car. The two followed me to my condo, as we took the shortcut down a pebbled path surrounded by tall, lush hedges. I love the privacy here. It’s pricey, but it’s one of the luxuries I afford myself each month. Some women spend their money on hair and nails; I spend mine on my home. Hey, if you don’t take care of yourself, no one else will.

“I need a drink,” Simone announced.

Simone could hold her liquor better than anyone I knew. “You always need a drink,” I teased as I took the stairs to my condo two at a time – something I could never do in the four-inch stilettos I normally wore. “Girl, I swear, where does all that alcohol go?”

“To my big ass,” she quipped. “Or can’t you tell?”

We both laughed. Simone had more curves than a winding country road. She was what most guys would call *thick*.

“I hope you have Belvedere,” Imani cut in soberly. “I just wanna get drunk and forget this whole thing ever happened.”

I glanced at Simone. “Don’t worry,” she whispered to me. “I’ll stay up with her.”

I knew we all would be up late tonight consoling Imani. She was my girl, so I didn’t mind, but it would be hard getting up in the morning. They both knew I couldn’t be late to my new job at Nichols Underwriting and Tax Services. I’d only been working there for three months, but my friends had nicknamed the place NUTS. So far, it had been the worst job I’d ever had the displeasure of working at: Nasty gossiping employees, managers sleeping with their subordinates, and totally screwed up work ethics. Who knew working at an accounting firm could be so treacherous?

## 2

### IMANI

When a man cheats on you, it has a profound effect on your mental state. At first, you’re pissed off. Then, you’re angry. Then, you start questioning yourself. Even though that bastard was running around on me, I started to doubt myself as a woman. What was wrong with me? Wasn’t I good enough for him? Wasn’t I good enough *to* him? How could I have prevented this? Could I have given him more sex? Should have given him less sex? Was I too hard on him? Was I too accommodating?

Then you get even deeper. You ask yourself: Should I forgive him? Can I trust him again? Would I be stupid to take him back? What will my friends think? How can I go on with life? How can I go on without him?

It’s like I somehow need his approval. I need him to validate me. I need him to say it was his fault and not mine. That I was perfect and he took me for granted. That he doesn’t deserve my love that I gave unselfishly and unconditionally for ten years, waiting patiently for him to make up his fucking mind and decide if he wanted to marry me or not. Ten years! During that time, I’ve never strayed. I’ve never even thought of being with another man. I was happy with what we had. But apparently he wasn’t.

I have to admit, I feel kinda lost right now. For days, I’ve been moping around, not sure what to do with myself. I’ve put so much into this relationship and into pleasing him that I’ve really lost myself in the process. You know how you get to the point where you’ve been a couple for so long, you start to lose your individuality? That’s what I’m dealing with now.

Fat meat is greasy. That’s what my grandma used to say. “*You don’t believe fat meat is greasy? I guess you just gonna have to learn the hard way.*” I never knew what that meant until I was grown. Now, I’m six months shy of my fortieth birthday and I finally know what grandma was trying to tell me. Some things you just have to experience for yourself to believe. I’ve been living in my fantasy world believing Julian would put a ring on my finger one day. And now, my bubble has been burst. I caught that bastard red-handed. Well, I didn’t exactly catch him. The Texas Attorney General caught him. DNA is a trip.

The mother of the child he created (while dating me and laying between my legs every night) sent me a copy of the letter as proof. Apparently, she knew about me, but I had no inkling she even existed. Remember, I was in my own universe, head in the clouds, nose wide open, eyes drinking in the stars. In all the years we've been together, I've only suspected Julian of cheating once. But when my frantic searches of his cell phone's call log and the *Sent* items on his personal email account turned up nothing, I backed off. I was ashamed for prying into his business. And now this. It was like a slap in the face to me. Me, a woman who'd discouraged other women from male-bashing. Me, a dedicated sistah who loved and supported her black man with every fiber of her being, even helping him pay his rent when he was laid off for a year. Me, a down-to-earth Scorpio who agreed to every freaky position Julian's wicked mind could conceive of in bed. And so this is how I'm repaid?

That's why I vandalized his Montero. I should have known not to trust a man who drove a Montero. Nobody buys a Montero. Not even an old school Kappa who still keeps his red and white cane hanging in rearview mirror. That was Julian. Mr. Kappa. Mr. Clean-freak. Well, he'd made one hell of a mess. I'd like to see him clean this up.

I stared at the collection of zebra and leopard print pillows scattered across the foot of my bed. I was feeling sorry for myself. I had every right to do so. I don't know what was the hardest part of this for me: Knowing Julian had cheated or knowing he fathered a child with this woman. I've been trying to get pregnant for years with no success. Of course, Julian didn't know that. When he didn't proposed to me, I took matters into my own hands and tried to force his hand by having a baby. Only it didn't work. I finally went to a few fertility specialists, but it was no use. A woman only gets a certain amount of eggs in life and when they're gone, they're gone. On the other hand, a man produces over a million sperm a day. They can go on spreading their seed for decades. Yeah, I know – life's a bitch.

My cell phone rattled to life, startling me. I glanced at the caller ID. For a second, I felt my breath catch. My asthma was flaring up again. When God was passing out internal organs, I got the short end of the stick. I had bad lungs and a heart murmur. I shook my head and flattened my palm against my heart, willing the feeling to subside. I talked myself out of reaching for my inhaler. *Oh, no you don't. Not this time. Breathe. Breathe. Work through it, girl.* I can handle this. I need to handle it. It was the call I knew would come eventually. I was ready. I had a lot on my chest and now was the time to unload.

### 3

## SIMONE

Ain't nothing better looking than a fine ass, well-dressed brotha. You know the kind? He's dressed impeccably, got bulges in all the right places, and he smiles at you with big, thick lips that you just know have a Master's Degree in *going Downtown*. But he ain't no nerd. He still got that swag that can make your breath catch and your panties wet. It's not often you find this delectable combination. And if you do, the fool is usually married or gay – or both!

Well, if you do stumble upon this rare gem, you better watch out. ‘Cause that’s the most dangerous type of man there is. Shit, if you snag a brotha like that, ain’t no telling what you’d do to keep him. I knew this full well, but all that logic went flying out the window the day I met Carlos Rivera.

Usually, I like my men chocolate. Not just any flava of chocolate. A Blair Underwood shade will do nicely. But Carlos, well, Carlos was different. His toffee-colored skin stretched tightly over his biceps. He had serious eyes, the color of Molasses. And he had a smooth bald head. Not every man can rock a baldy. Believe me, I’ve seen enough ringworms and razor bumps to last a lifetime. Carlos was perfection on two legs. From the moment he approached the table where I was having lunch at Ruggles, I was hooked. I didn’t give a damn that I was knocking on Forty’s door: I decided right then and there, I wanted to have his baby – and this was all before he even spoke one word!

When he did speak, it was the voice of a confident alpha male. His words wrapped around me like a velvet blanket in winter. “Hello beautiful. Mind if I join you?”

That was two months ago. I didn’t even try to play hard to get. The second we made eye contact, we knew we wanted each other. And I was right about those lips, after all.

Today, I lay naked and flat on my belly, sprawled on the plush carpet on the living room floor of my condo. I closed my eyes and relaxed as Carlos’s hands gently caressed my ass. “Umm,” I moaned, encouraging him to continue. Carlos had large hands, and every one of his fingers felt good stroking me in my secret places. He’d learned all of my hot spots in a matter of days. And now, he catered to me in every way.

“You like that baby?” he asked in his deep, baritone.

“Yes.” I was breathless. “I love it.”

“Yeah, I know how to make you happy.” One of his big fingers slipped inside me and he softly pushed it deeper. “Does this make you happy?” he asked.

I moaned in response, my hips already undulating upwards, grinding against his hand. The second finger followed and instantly, I was filled up as he probed erotically inside me. Pleasure shot through me and I felt a dizzying pressure building for the third time today. We’d already screwed in the bathroom and in the kitchen of my condo. We’d done it doggy style, froggy style, and every style in between. Carlos was insatiable. I wasn’t no slouch either.

Carlos didn’t need no instruction. He knew exactly what to do. Every time was like the first time with us – only better. Because he knew my body and he handled me with skill. My screams mingled with his deep grunts as my body shamelessly surrendered to his commands. I came easily, my body submerged by wave after wave of intense pleasure. The muscles of my coochie squeezed and pulled at him until I’d milked every last ounce of fluid from him.

Afterwards, I lay exhausted in his arms, silently watching him. He was beautiful. His nose was sloped just right. Not too pointed, not too pug. His lips were full, slightly red and engorged with blood from kissing me all over. The hair on his head and his goatee was a baby-fine, curly texture – a product of his half-Black, half-Columbian heritage. As my body lay entwined with his, I couldn’t help but compare our skin tones. They were practically identical, and it was hard to tell where my body ended and his began. I wondered if he had ever been teased unmercifully when he was a child like me. The other kids made fun of my complexion, calling me names like bright light, banana leaf, and ivory. Kids could be cruel. I’d gotten in too many fights simply for being light-skinned. Like I could control my color. Shit, I was born this way!

He was watching me too. As I caught his stare, he gave me a lazy smile. Then, with no warning, he said, "Let's move in together."

I giggled, thinking he was just drunk on the after effects of our lovemaking. I was still basking in the glow of our *after-sex*, the scent of his manly odor lingering in my nostrils.

"I'm serious," he told me. "I don't wanna be alone anymore."

"Really?" I looked to his dark irises for signs of dishonesty. Years ago, I'd taken a body language course and learned how to tell when someone's lying. A person's eyes could be a dead giveaway. Eyes that moved up and to the left meant somebody was making up shit. Lots of blinking or no eye contact at all could also indicate a liar. Carlos looked me dead in the eyes and didn't blink and didn't look away. He was being truthful with me. "You're tired of being alone? What does that mean?" I asked.

He wrapped me in his arms. "I guess I'm just trying to say ... I know you're the one I wanna be with and I want to ... be with you every day. We spend all our time together anyway."

His face was uncertain, afraid of my rejection. I put him out of his misery. "Okay. When were you thinking about doing this?"

"I can move my stuff in tomorrow."

I laid my face on his chest. Carlos had a palatial home in The Woodlands, Texas. It was laid out with marble floors, a winding staircase like the one in *Gone with the Wind*, and six spacious bedrooms. When I first saw it, I couldn't believe it. If he hadn't told me he was a retired pitcher for the Florida Marlins, I would have thought he was dealin'. "Why would you want to leave that mansion for my little condo?" *Shit, my fifteen hundred square feet was a drop in the bucket compared to his crib.*

He pulled me closer, and gently caressed my face. "I want us to be cozy together, just the two of us. We don't need all that space."

I hadn't known Carlos for long, but I'd learned a lot about him already. At thirty-four, he was wealthy and successful. His rock-hard body had suffered no ill effects until he injured his shoulder in a game six years ago and he was forced to quit professional baseball. His parents died when he was a teenager, leaving him a trust fund that would turn any gold-digger into a serious stalker. But I ain't no gold-digger. I got my own money. And even if Carlos didn't have all that money, I would have still liked him for other reasons. I like his style. I like the way he makes me laugh. I like that fact that he's a Democrat. I like the way he lets me win when we play two-handed Spades. I even like the way he sometimes smacks his food when he's eating – like it's his last meal or something.

I've heard women say that coochie rules the world. Meaning: a man will do anything in hopes of getting and keeping the love of a good woman. But I gotta tell you, the power of the penis ain't no joke either. Right now, all that mattered was that I had this beautiful man and this good lovin' all to myself. And he actually wanted to be with me. *Me!* Not that there was anything wrong with me. I know I'm a catch. Most men can't resist my green eyes, my voluptuous curves and my long, weave-less hair. I have my own condo, an Audi 7 series (courtesy of my ex-husband), and a job as an office manager at a car dealership. What man wouldn't want all this?

I can't put my finger on it, but there was something pulling me towards Carlos. While most dudes were busy playing cat and mouse, Carlos was constantly up under me. He was always on the phone with me, and when he wasn't on the phone, he was at my house. To tell you the truth, it was flattering. Now, he was telling me he wanted to move in together and have a serious relationship. What more could I ask for?

Before I could give him my answer, he leaned over and started softly kissing my nipples. Then he licked each one until they both puckered up hard against his tongue like budding blackberries. I felt a rush of warmth wash through me and settle right between my legs. Damn, now I knew how men felt to be *whipped*. After this encounter with Carlos, I am now officially, the victim of *dicklash*.