

## Chapter One



“04673, you got a visitor.”

Michelle dismounted her cot and moved towards the cell bars and faced the correction officer.

“Who is it?” she questioned with a slightly raspy tone. She stared at the officer while waiting for a response. His lips twisted into a half-cocked smile exposing an exaggerated overbite.

“Chris Walker.”

The mention of his name brought pause. And why shouldn't it? She's been in this cage for ten years and it's been just that long since she's seen her daughter—their daughter. Chris vowed to her moments after her delivery that she would never see Ashley again. She held her daughter only moments before she was taken away from her for what would be forever.

“Yes or no, 04673?” he insisted, snapping her out of her trance.

“Yes. I'll see him.”

“Let's go,” he instructed manually opening her cell door. He escorted her to the awaiting female officer and she was taken to the shower to clean up. After a thorough search, Michelle quickly dressed and followed her escort to the visitor's room. This would be Michelle's first time having a visitor and she didn't know what to expect. When the doors were opened, the desk officer went over the rules and then directed her to her seat. This was better than she expected as she thought that she would have a Plexiglas between them and a telephone. She was seated at a table with four seats to it. Surrounding her was approximately a hundred other female inmates with their guests. Some were at vending machines buying prepackaged food while others were using the microwave. Officers were stationed throughout the cafeteria with direct eyeshot of everything.

After Michelle sat there by herself for more than twenty minutes, Chris walked in with a group of other people. They handed a

form to the officer at the door and were then instructed to their party. Michelle could feel her heart racing as Chris closed the distance between them. He was as handsome as ever. Time had matured him well. She could also see that he had put on a little weight, but in a good way. His muscles were bigger as well as his chest. He wore a grey, short-sleeve, nylon shirt that clung to every ripple of his tight stomach. The black, Italian cut pants fell seductively over his perfectly firm ass.

He stopped as he reached the table while taking in a full view of Michelle. Although ten years had passed, ten hard years, she still maintained her beauty. Of course, with the exception of the scar that lingered just above her right eyebrow, he could see that she had been working out on a regular and her body was a bit less feminine, but attractive nonetheless. She wore her hair in long braids that fell down her back and rested probably six or seven inches above her butt.

“Are you going to sit down or are you going to stand there and observe me all day?” A grin spilled across her face as she noted his embarrassment.

“Sorry. I’m going to sit down.”

“You look well,” she stated as he got comfortable.

He cleared his throat.

“So do you.”

Chris looked around observing all the women in the facility. He then focused his attention on the officers holding the guns at the doors.

“Not really a friendly place, is it?”

“It’s a prison, Chris. Did you think I was on vacation here?” she remarked no longer yielding her sarcasm and annoyance. “Why are you here? And where is my daughter?”

“Ashley is fine. She’s a beautiful young girl.”

“I’m sure. But that doesn’t answer my first question.” Her eyes never left his.

Chris shifted in his seat, leaned forward and rested his clasped hands on the table.

“Ashley has been asking about her mother lately. She wants to

meet you.”

His words were labored since the thought went against his wishes. But his love for Ashley was enough to make him go against his promise. He would give her anything she asked for to make her happy. Things were so simple when she was an infant growing into a toddler, but now that she is among older children and they talk about their parents, Ashley has become obsessed with knowing her mother.

Michelle narrowed her eyes at Chris. He was still that selfish bastard he was ten years ago when he disregarded her feelings for him.

“Did you think that you could take my daughter and turn her against me? No State paper can break the bond a mother has with her child. She was with me in the beginning and so shall she be in the end. That bond can not be broken, Chris. Maybe from your perspective it could be broken; I mean you did abandon yours.”

Chris' first instinct was to punch her lights out, but being surrounded by shotguns wouldn't make that choice prudent. He shifted back in his seat glaring at her. Michelle could see the tension building between them. Chris' once relaxed muscles became taut, making the vessels more pronounce including the ones in his neck.

“You know that look isn't appealing,” she added to his fury. “By the way, did you ever make partner? You know, at Goldman, Thurman & Sacs? You look like you're pretty well off.”

Chris didn't respond. He couldn't believe how cold and vicious Michelle had become. Did she feel any remorse for what she'd done? Or over the life she'd taken? How many years would it take for her to realize that what she did was wrong? She's got some nerve asking about his daughter, his Ashley, when she was so willing to let her be raised by the State. When the Social Worker called him and told him that his daughter would be turned over to the State, Chris immediately hurried to the hospital awaiting the arrival of his daughter. Shortly after she was born, Chris began the paperwork to get full custody of his daughter and remove any possibility of Michelle ever seeing her.

“Michelle to Chris. Are you there? It's not even fun talking to you. You're like a zombie. Well, since you didn't bring my daughter,

I think you should be leaving now.”

Chris stood from his seat and casually returned it beneath the table.

“I can't say that seeing you again was a pleasure.”

“Don't worry. You'll see a lot of me soon. My appeal is just around the corner.”

“I look forward to the battle. You will never have my daughter. And you will pay for your transgressions.”

“I've spent ten years here. I have paid for my transgressions.”

“No. I mean your transgression against me and my mother.”

“You have no proof that I killed your mother.”

“You did it. I know you did it.”

“Well, the court system found me innocent on that charge.”

“But I find you guilty.”

“Thanks for taking care of my daughter for me. I'll see you two soon,” she called out to him.

He turned and walked away. He returned to the officer at the door and retrieved his pass. After a few moments, he disappeared through the steel door where they checked for a stamp on his hand.

When Chris returned to the waiting area, his girlfriend Simone, and his daughter Ashley stood to greet him. Her hair was curly like her father's and pulled into two ponytails that bounced at the sides of her head. Ashley was excited because she knew that her daddy would be bringing her in to meet her mother. He told her to wait with Simone until he spoke with her first and then he would return to get her.

Chris took a seat and caught hold of Ashley's hands. He kissed both of them and told her how much he loved her and would do anything in this world for her. All of his emotions surged forward and his tears exposed the hurt he felt. He continued to hold her hands, never letting his eyes meet hers.

“What happened, Dad? Why are you crying?”

“Honey. Your mom...” he stammered.

Simone could see that something went wrong. Chris never told her the whole story about Michelle and how Ashley came about. He

only told her that her mother was locked up and that she was sentenced to ten to twenty years. Simone worked as a Social Worker and was the one who contacted Chris about his daughter. She helped him gain legal custody of Ashley. Chris was surprised at how easy the process had been for him to get Ashley. Simone was somehow able to get Michelle to sign the papers giving Chris sole custody of their daughter. Not long after, Chris and Simone began seeing each other. She reminded Chris so much of his ex-lover Keesha; sweet, gentle, caring and so desperately in need of love. Her companionship was so timely as Chris had no idea how he was going to raise Ashley by himself. Simone took to Ashley as if she was her own daughter. Strangely though, Simone never mentioned marriage after being together for seven years; they still maintained their separate places. Simone would spend some weekends with Chris and Ashley, and other times Ashley would stay with Simone for weekends. This was their bonding time to do their girl thing.

She rested her hands gently on Ashley's shoulders.

"Come on, sweetheart, let's wait for your dad in the car. We'll come out another day to see your mom. She wasn't feeling well today."

Ashley hesitated for a moment then followed Simone outside to the car.

While Simone escorted Ashley out, Chris could hear their conversation.

"Simone, how do you know that my mom is sick?" Simone responded by saying that Chris told her that she wasn't feeling well before they left, but he didn't know how sick she was. "Don't worry, your dad said hello to your mom for you and she knows that you love her."

Chris pulled himself together before getting into the car.

"How are my two angels doing?" he said forcing a big smile.

"Will mom be okay, Dad?"

"Sure, honey. She's just got a really bad cold and she told me to give you a big hug for her and tell you that she will see you soon."

Chris pulled Ashley into his arms and squeezed her tight.

“Mom's coming home soon? She's going to live with us?”

Instinctively, Chris' eyes met Simone's then he looked back at his daughter.

“Honey, your mom and I will have separate homes. She won't live with us, but you can see her from time to time.”

He started the car and they were on their way home. The ride was quiet. Chris asked Simone if it would be okay if he took her home because he needed some time alone to talk with Ashley. She didn't feel his request to be prudent, but she reluctantly nodded her head and focused her attention out the window until Chris entered her driveway.

“Ashley, sweetheart, come give me a kiss.”

Ashley sat up in her seat, puckered her lips and gave Simone a big kiss.

“I'll see you tomorrow or over the weekend, okay?”

“Dad, why isn't Simone coming to the house? I don't want her to go home.”

“I know, honey, but your dad wants to spend time with you and talk to you about some really important stuff that can't wait. Simone will come over tomorrow and she will be around for a very long time. How is that?” he asked while winking at Simone in an effort to make light of a very tense situation.

“Okay, Dad. See you tomorrow, Simone. Love you.” she called out to her as she closed the door and stepped out of the way of the car.

“You want to sit up front with your dad?”

“Sure.”

Chris waited for Ashley to come to the front seat. When she had buckled herself in, Chris waved to Simone then started toward home.

He pulled into the driveway of his mother's home. After all that had happened, it became his sanctuary. Although Christine was gone, he could still feel her presence upon entering what was once her home, his home. He did, of course, modernize some things Christine neglected to repair or update. It made a suitable home for him and Ashley. So many memories remained that he wanted to share about

his mother, her grandmother.

Upon entering, Ashley raced upstairs to her bedroom. Chris had decorated it with pink wallpaper with tiny pastel hearts on it. The square room was filled with teddy bears, Barbie dolls, and a canopy bed with Barbie accessories. She also had Barbie furniture, including a vanity, where she often sat and imagined growing up to look like her mother. Chris didn't talk much about her mother and neither did he want to. He only told her that her mother had gone away and would be gone for a very long time.

She sat at her vanity looking at herself in the mirror while clutching a teddy bear her dad had given her on her third birthday. The fur was so soft and plush. Today was disappointing. She had told her classmates that she was going to see her mother this weekend and that she was going to live with her and her father. Why didn't mommy want to see me? she wondered. Why would Dad not let me see her?

Ashley felt empty inside. Although Chris went over and beyond to make her happy, and Simone was like a mother to her, the desire to be with her real mother still existed. She thought of Simone as a really cool person. She was fun to be with, but she was not her mother. She found that out on her seventh birthday during an argument she had with her father. A lot changed between them since that argument. Simone didn't keep Ashley overnight as often as she had in the past, but she did come over on a regular and they still enjoyed the mall during the day. Chris was overprotective of Ashley and he seemed to be afraid of losing her.

Chris climbed the stairs quietly. He knew that Ashley was upset and that now was the time to explain to her where her mother is and why. He looked into her room and remembered the day he brought her home from the hospital. As much as he hated Michelle, he could not live with himself if he let his daughter be placed in a foster home for ten years until her mother was released from jail and able to care for her. She was adorable the moment he laid eyes on her. She had a head full of dark curly hair that seemed overwhelming for her tiny face, but nothing that a brush couldn't tame.

He silently walked over to her and knelt by her side. When she

lifted her head, her eyes were soaked with tears. The sight melted his heart. What am I going to tell her to help her understand? I can't tell her that her mother is a crazed killer or that the grandmother she never had is dead because her mother ended her life. I also can't tell her that I want to kill her for ruining my life.

“Hey, what are all the tears about?”

“The kids at school won't believe me if I tell them that I have a mother.”

“Of course you have a mother. How do you think you got here? Huh? Come here.”

Chris cuddled her for a moment and then walked her over to her bed. He sat her down beside him then turned her chin to face him. It was like looking into a mirror. She was a total replica of him. She had his eyes, his nose, his complexion, his hair, his lips, everything.

“Honey, there are some things that I need to tell you. I don't want to because it is something that I wanted to protect you from, but I'm afraid that if I don't tell you, I may lose you.”

“You can never lose me, Daddy,” she comforted him.

Chris was the only thing real to her. He was the only true family she had. Without him she would have no life. Ashley was quite perceptive and her reasoning skills were advanced for a child her age. He found it difficult sheltering her from things. She understood his relationships, especially the one he had with Simone, and she knew that there was something he was hiding about her mother because he avoided talking about her.

“And I don't want to, but honey, you're growing so fast. Everyday when I look at you I can't believe how fast time flies.” He paused for a moment. Acid scorched his stomach as he sifted through the things he held inside for so long. He glanced around the room at the décor. How innocent and free she was. What he needed to tell her would take that innocence away and probably make her now hate. It could potentially make her hate him or even hate herself. He squeezed her hands.

“Dad, that hurts.”

“Honey, I'm sorry,” he said rubbing her hands. This was all too

difficult for him. There had to be some other way around this, some way to avoid speaking this ugly truth.

“Honey, I want you to know that I love every ounce of you and I wouldn't trade you for anything in the world.”

“Are you my real dad? I know that Simone isn't my mother.”

“God, yes. You are my daughter and I couldn't deny you if I wanted to. Have you looked into the mirror lately?”

She laughed for a second then her face turned serious again.

“Then what is it?”

“Your grandma would have really loved you if she were still here. She would say that you remind her so much of her Chris. But she's gone forever.” Chris' eyes began to bulge as they fought to hide his pain. “Your mother took her from me. She took her from you. She killed her. She tried to kill the only woman that made me feel complete and I ended up losing that woman to another man. Honey, your mom is in prison. She isn't in a hospital as I've always told you. She did a really terrible thing and she is being punished for it.” Without knowing it, all of the anxiety and the pain he harbored was finally being released. Chris could feel her tensing up, but he continued.

“Your mom had become jealous of my relationship with Keesha.”

“You mean Aunt Keesha and Uncle Jamal?”

“Yes. She tried to hurt Keesha and punish me for loving her. The police realized that she was bad and put her away. That's when I met Simone. She called me up and told me that you were about to be born. I stopped everything I was doing and raced to the hospital. You were so beautiful. I loved you so much. I knew that moment that I had to do whatever it took to make you all mine. I would never let anyone come between us or hurt you. Not even your mother.”

“Mommy would hurt me?”

“She would hurt you to hurt me by trying to take you away.”

“Why can't you share me with mommy?”

“Because your mommy doesn't want to share. She wants to use you as a weapon to hurt me. If your mommy takes you from me, I will die.”

Ashley grabbed him tightly by the waist as if to never let him go. Her little arms trembled as she clung to him.

“I won't ever leave you, Daddy. I won't ever let mommy take me away from you. You are my daddy and my best friend.”

She pulled away from him and looked at him sincerely. Her big, brown eyes looked deep into his for truth. Chris could see that worry and concern were written all over her face.

“What's wrong?”

“Does that mean that I won't ever have a mommy? I mean a real mommy that lives with me like the other kids in my class?”

Chris grabbed Ashley by the face and placed a big kiss on her lips. He caught hold of her hands and led her out of her room and into the hallway. He took her to his bedroom and told her to close her eyes and she did as he said. She could hear him shuffling around and shortly after he returned to her side. He stooped in front of her and began to whisper.

“Remember the story of Prince Christopher and Princess Kiana?”

Her face lit up with a big broad smile as she remembered the story her father used to tell her before she went to sleep.

It was about a beautiful woman who fell in love with a very handsome prince. They loved each other so much that the thought of not being together forever made them sick. Unfortunately for them, the queen wouldn't hear of their relationship and they soon parted. The prince was very sad until one day, another beautiful princess came along. She was as beautiful as the first princess. Prince Christopher couldn't believe it so he waited seven long years before he realized that she was the one. One day, when the new princess came over, the prince went into his closet and pulled from it something that he cherished more than anything in the world.

Chris opened Ashley's hand and placed the cold, shiny ring into her palm. She opened her eyes and beheld the beauty of the twinkling diamond solitaire. Ashley began reciting the remainder of the story.

“A diamond ring. Not just any diamond ring, but one that she

would wear forever and ever. That princess would become the mother of all of his children and they loved each other forever and ever.”

“That’s right, honey, so you don’t have to worry about having a mommy. Daddy is going to give you the perfect mommy and she will love you just like a real mommy.”

“And make babies?”

“And make babies,” he emphasized.

She held him tightly around the neck.

“So, are you going to help me find our princess?”

“I know who would make a great princess?”

“Who?”

“We could give it to Simone. She would make a great mommy.”

“You think so?”

“I do. I like her a lot and she likes me too.”

“Well then, let’s go ask her.”

Chris and Ashley went downstairs, got the car keys, and went outside to the car.