

The Deal, the Dance and the Devil

Chapter 1

Five million dollars.

All I could do was stare at the check. To be sure, I counted again: Seven figures, two commas. Yup, this was definitely five million.

I could have stared at those numbers all day, but I had to look up and at my boss, Shay-Shaunte'.

My eyes asked the questions; she explained, "That's for you," and then she leaned back in what I called her throne - a snake-skinned upholstered executive chair with a back that was six-feet high. She smiled, as if she gave out seven figure checks on the regular.

That's when I started laughing - hard. There had to be a joke in here somewhere and I figured I'd get a head start before Shay-Shaunte' filled me in. But she didn't laugh; she didn't chuckle, she didn't even blink. Just smiled, as if she was waiting for me to get it together.

That's when my heart started thumping. Could this five million dollar check made out to me, Evia Langston, be real?

The thought made me weak. Made me fall into the leather chair in front of her desk.

Okay, keep breathing, I told myself. First, I inhaled, then did just the opposite. Deep inside I knew this was one of those too-good-to-be-true moments, but for a second I pushed aside the question of why anybody would give me five million dollars, and thought instead about how desperately Adam and I needed this money.

"Oh, my God!" I said under my breath. "This will save our lives."

I didn't mean to say that out loud, but I guess I did because Shay-Shaunte' said, "That's what I was thinking."

My eyes burned; tears were on the way. But just when I was about to get down on my knees and thank God and Shay-Shaunte', that ringing in my heart started.

Oh, no! I wasn't trying to hear that. I tried to shake it away, but it trilled all the way down to my soul.

When I was a kid, Big Mama told me that all God's children had His voice inside of them. Well, I didn't have a voice; what I had was more like an alarm clock; but however it sounded, my grandmother told me it should never be ignored.

"It's the love of the Lord, warnin' you when somethin' ain't right. Never turn your back on the Lord, chile, or you'll find yourself knee deep in the devil's trouble."

From the time I was ten 'til now, Big Mama's words had been nothing but the truth. Every time I heard that alarm, I sat

down and thought things through. But I didn't want to do too much thinking about this. It wasn't that I didn't want to listen to God; it was just that I didn't want Him to do too much talking right about now. 'Cause I was sure that if He spoke, it could mess up this whole five million dollar thing that I had going on.

"What is this?" I spoke with a calm I didn't feel. The check was still clenched in my palm; my plan was to never let it go.

My boss tossed her auburn-streaked hair away from her face. "I'm assuming you're not really asking me what that is since you know it's a check." She stood, did one of those model-sway strolls toward me, perched her butt on the corner of her glass desk, and stretched out her long legs. "Let's call this a fee...for services rendered."

What kind of services would have to be rendered to get a five million dollar fee?

I knew it; this had to be a joke.

I'd worked for Shay-Shaunte' for six years as one of two of her executive assistants. Basically, I was her right hand, in charge of numbers and anything else in her hair care empire that she didn't want to handle. In that role, I'd done lots of things - including putting together all the investor reports (since I'd been an accounting major in college) and working on

other stuff 'til the clock ticked way past midnight sometimes. Occasionally, I even traveled with Shay-Shaunte' when Rachel Stone, the other executive assistant couldn't.

But even with that plate-load of responsibility, in the more than two thousand days that I'd been employed by Shay-Shaunte' and her company, Ferossity, I'd never done anything that came close to earning five million dollars - not even if you added all two thousand days together and multiplied by three.

Then, Shay-Shaunte' explained, "My birthday's coming up."

Dang! Now I knew for sure that this check and I were soon going to be parted.

I knew that Shay-Shaunte's birthday was approaching - though I doubted if too many others knew. My boss was super private, almost anal in her secrecy; she never shared anything with anyone about the who, what, where of her life. Articles found on the Internet estimated her age because no one ever knew her exact birth date.

But I knew because of loan papers she'd had me deliver to the bank for her about a year ago. It wasn't like I was trying to be nosy, but there on the first page right next to date of birth: 12/31/1960. I remembered thinking, dang! There was no way in the world I would've guessed ol' girl was anywhere close to fifty. Maybe because of her achievements I should've known

that she had to be beyond the thirty years that she looked. But physically, no one could tell it - not from her six-foot, supermodel, size two physique. Not from her unblemished skin and distinct features that gave no real clue to her ethnicity. Her face was a representation of the world. With eyes slightly slanted, she could have been Asian. Below, was a nose as thin and upturned as any Caucasian. Then, there were her lips - full, heart-shaped, the pride of Africans.

It wasn't just her features that held her secret. Her golden-tinted skin suggested that some East Indian...or maybe even Hispanic blood flowed through her veins.

But she was a sistah-girl; I knew that 'cause Black people knew Black people. And when Shay-Shaunte' opened her mouth and got to twisting her neck, and rolling her eyes - she told me what her face did not.

So, I knew the big birthday was coming up - the big five-oh! In three weeks. On New Year's Eve.

I guessed that since this was the big one, she'd decided to come from behind her private curtain and celebrate in public.

As visions of five million dollars in my bank account danced right out of my head, I wondered what kind of party Shay-Shaunte' wanted for this kind of money.

"So," I began. "This check is for your birthday? For a party?"

"Yes."

I waited for her to say more; she didn't. So, I said, "You want me to plan it?"

She tilted her head, as if she had to think. Then with a smile that looked kind of sly to me, she said, "You could say that." Then, nothing else.

Okay, this was beginning to feel like some kind of game - which was strange 'cause Shay-Shaunte' didn't play. She was always about business.

After a deep breath, she explained more, "My life has been pretty hectic."

I shrugged. "Yeah," was all I said to that understatement. Of course her life was busy - how many multi-millionaires didn't have full schedules?

And truth? I only called Shay-Shaunte' a millionaire because that's what had been reported in the media. But I would bet all kinds of money that there was more than one Black female billionaire in the country.

I didn't have a thing to substantiate it, but I guessed that Shay-Shaunte' had come from humble beginnings; she'd had to grind her way to the top, and never wanted to look back.

It was a guess; I didn't know for sure.

When Ms. Givens, from the employment agency, told me about this position, I'd had three thoughts. The first: What kind of

name was Shay-Shaunte'- since Ms. Givens told me that was her full name and that she never allowed anyone to shorten it.

Second: What was up with the funny spelling of the company name - Ferossity? And third: If Shay-Shaunte' and Ferossity were so huge - Ms. Givens said Ferossity was a twenty-year-old company with \$30 million in annual sales - why hadn't I ever heard of her or the company especially since she specialized in black hair care?

But, I'd tossed away all my questions and taken the interview once Ms. Givens told me that I'd be earning \$50,000. I'd gotten the job the next day when Shay-Shaunte' hired me on the spot.

Working for her had been a complete pleasure; so anything she needed me to do to make her birthday a great one, I was willing to do.

"Okay," my boss said, "I'm gonna say this straight out." Shay-Shaunte' strolled away from me, returning to her high-back chair. "I've been too busy to plan anything special."

I grabbed a notepad from her desk. "That's okay. Rachel, and I are on it."

"You won't need Rachel's help."

I frowned a little. With all that was on my plate - especially standing by for holiday replenishments that any of our accounts needed - there was no way I was going to be able to handle Shay-Shaunte's party alone...it was already December 2nd.

Shay-Shaunte' went on to say, "Don't worry; you won't need help," as if she read my mind. "The thing is, with the way my life is going right now, I don't have anyone special to share this birthday."

I got it - she was trying to figure out how to have a mandatory party - probably right here in her corporate building, where she could strongly suggest that all of her six-hundred employees attend.

She said, "You probably don't know this, but I'm turning fifty."

I wasn't going to admit to being a snoop, so I said, "Fifty? Wow! Dang! No! I didn't know. You look...." When she frowned, I closed my mouth.

She said, "Well, fifty is a special birthday and I don't want this milestone to pass without some kind of celebration."

I felt a tinge of an ache in my heart for the mogul. She may have been giga-gorgeous, super-sexy, and mega-rich, but she was alone. She was single, childless, and as far as I could tell without any relatives at all since the only personal thing she'd ever shared was that her parents had passed away when she was young.

The only calls she ever got were from celebrities who wanted to thank her for one product or another. Though friendly, none seemed to be her friends.

Shay-Shaunte's life was a constant reminder to me that money wasn't everything because no matter what Adam and I were going through, we had each other.

Shay-Shaunte' said, "So, after really thinking about this...I want to pay you...for a weekend...my birthday weekend...to spend that time...with your husband."

Okay, clearly, I had mentally checked out for a moment. Or maybe the fact that I was still holding onto this five million dollar check had me delirious. I placed the back of my hand against my forehead to see if I had a fever; to see if that was why my ears weren't working.

Shay-Shaunte' continued, "I know about the problems you and Adam are having. I know this money will help."

So, I *had* heard her correctly. It must've been the way I sat there, staring, that made her continue, "I don't *want* your husband, Evia. At least not permanently."

Was that supposed to make me feel better? "I only want him for a weekend," she kept on like we were just girls, just talking. "To help me celebrate."

That was when it hit me - what she *really* meant. Now, I couldn't move - I stopped blinking, stopped breathing, stopped everything!

I stared, no, I glared at her as if she had lost her dang-
blasted mind. Then, I started to laugh again and she stared
back at me as if I'd lost mine.

"Girl, that was so funny." I stood up. "And today's not even
April Fool's. Whew!" I reached out to give her back the check.

"Well, I've got to get back to work."

Shay-Shaunte' made no moves to take back the money. So, I laid
the check on her desk.

Her shoulders were stiff, her face solemn, her eyes small,
focused, and intense - like she was stalking her prey. I'd seen
that stance in so many meetings - when she was up against
formidable opponents - when she always won.

"This isn't a joke, Evia. That five million dollars is
yours. If you and Adam agree...to take this deal."

Now, I was mad. Because I had given her a way out. We could
have treated this like a joke and neither one of us would have
mentioned it again.

But, no. She had to keep it going - like she meant it.
Well I meant it too, when I told her, "You have lost your mind!"

She settled back, crossed her legs, not at all fazed by my
outburst. "I know this is unusual," she began in a tone that
sounded like she was just discussing her schedule. "But there
is nothing usual about my life."

I kept my anger inside because, after all, Shay-Shaunte' was my boss and I needed this job. But I also needed to make my point. "Well, my life is not so unusual that my husband and I rent each other out."

"I know you need money, Evia."

That was another thing that was pissing me off at the moment...how did she know that? As private as Shay-Shaunte' was, Adam and I were the same when it came to what we'd been going through.

Not that it mattered what she knew or how she found out. "We don't need money that badly." I may have kept the anger from my tone, but attitude was all over me as my head swayed and my finger pointed like I was fourteen-years-old and living back in Barry Farm where I grew up.

She tilted her head like she doubted my words.

So to make sure that she understood completely, I said, "This will never happen."

"Never say never."

No she didn't throw that tired cliché in my face. "I can say never to this!"

I was steaming; Shay-Shaunte' stayed calm. "You and Adam need that money."

Which was the only reason why I didn't tell Shay-Shaunte' to take that check *and* this job and shove it anywhere - up her nose, up her behind; I didn't care where.

"This could be a good solution for all of us," she had the nerve to persist.

"Look, I don't know where you got this craziness from, but we don't even need to talk about it no mo'. It ain't gonna happen." I forget every English class I'd ever taken. "If you want a man, you need to find another one."

"I want yours."

Where I grew up, those were fighting words. I saw girls get beat down so bad over boys, they had to transfer to other schools. That's what I wanted to do to Shay-Shaunte' right now - beat her until she crawled out of the city.

But I was sixteen years out of high school and a long way from the place I once called home. I couldn't go back there, especially since I desperately needed this gig that had become a sixty-five thousand-dollar-a-year job.

So, I took a deep breath, found my decorum, and smiled. "Thank you so much for the offer, Shay-Shante'. But my husband and I will pass." Then, I spun around so fast, I got dizzy. Surely, there was a trail of smoke billowing behind me as I stomped across the wide office because I was hot!

Before I got to the door, Shay-Shaunte' had the audacity to add, "Think about it, Evia. Talk to Adam. I think after you two consider your options, you...."

I didn't hear another word once I slammed the door, totally disrespecting the woman who signed my paychecks. But Shay-Shaunte' needed to be disrespected. She needed more than that, but like I said, I needed my job.

"Hey, girl, what were you doing in there so long?" Rachel asked as I stumbled by her desk.

I waved her away as I made my way into my office.

"Evia!" Rachel called after me.

Once I closed my door, I didn't have to worry about my colleague following me. She knew that whatever had gone down, I'd share the dirt with her later.

As I fell into my chair, I thought about all the days when I'd been so glad that Shay-Shaunte' had given me - her most senior assistant - my own little space in her empire. This was one of those days because I needed to be alone to figure this out. Had Shay-Shaunte' really offered me five million dollars? For a weekend with Adam?

My fingers curled into fists. Glancing at the clock, I moaned - it couldn't be only two-thirty. I never left the office before six, but, I didn't have another minute in me today.

I grabbed my purse and down coat, then tiptoed to my door. Rachel would be waiting on the other side, so I had my lie ready.

But when I peeked out, Rachel's desk was empty. I rushed into the hall, past the elevators, straight to the stairwell. It didn't matter that I was on the twelfth floor. I would've scaled down the side of the Washington Monument if I had to. Anything to get away from that crazy woman and her dang-blasted deal.