



AN EXCERPT FROM
SPEECHLESS

Chapter 13

Cynthia

WHEN CYNTHIA EMERGED from the café that afternoon, she saw Brandon and his new woman standing together in a corner of the lobby.

The sight of them caused a hot surge of jealousy to tighten in her chest, the emotion so intense it almost suffocated her.

She crossed to the bank of elevators, but didn't press the button to go up. Instead she stood there covertly observing the couple while she pretended to wait for the next car.

Brandon's new girlfriend had the curvy body proportions that drove black men crazy: large breasts, small waist, thick thighs, and a perfectly round ass. She wore a pinstriped gray blouse tucked into a high-waisted black skirt with Jimmy Choo peep-toe pumps. The stylish outfit made her look sexy yet professional. But her designer clothes and shoes couldn't disguise what she so clearly was: a ghetto hood rat who didn't deserve a man like Brandon Chambers.

Cynthia's eyes narrowed as she watched the couple. Brandon stood over the woman as she leaned back, one foot casually propped against the wall. He was smiling and

staring down at her with a look of tender amusement that sent a dagger of alarm through Cynthia.

Over the past two years, she'd seen Brandon with plenty of other women. But he'd never looked at any of them the way he was looking at this one.

When he gently touched her cheek, the hussy gave him a melting smile that made Cynthia want to smash something.

Moments later a man stepped off the elevator, startling her.

Feeling like a pathetic idiot for spying on her colleague, Cynthia entered the empty elevator and viciously stabbed the button for the forty-ninth floor.

The brass doors were in the process of closing when a man's large hand suddenly slid between them.

When Cynthia looked up and saw Brandon, her heart jumped into her throat.

"Hey, girl," he said, stepping inside the elevator.

She swallowed hard. "Hey, yourself."

As the doors closed, Brandon straightened his silk tie and adjusted his shirt cuffs to show just an inch below the jacket's sleeves. He was wearing a charcoal Armani suit that perfectly accentuated his tall frame, broad shoulders, narrow waist, and elegantly long legs. He looked so handsome he took Cynthia's breath away.

She plastered on a friendly smile. "Have a good lunch?"

"I did." He had a satisfied grin on his face as he stared up at the electronic monitor above the doors. "It was very good."

I bet it was, Cynthia thought darkly.

She pointed to him. "You have lipstick on your face."

"I do?" He touched his cheek. "Where?"

"Lower. Right...there."

He rubbed off the smear of red lipstick.

"You got all of it," she told him.

"Thanks." He grinned, dimples on full display as he tucked his hands into his pockets.

In that moment, Cynthia hated him intensely. Him and that trashy whore who'd left her mark on him.

"New girlfriend?"

He glanced at her. "You could say that."

"Figured. I saw you with her in the lobby." Cynthia strove for a casual tone. "So what's her name?"

"Tamia," he said with a smile that turned Cynthia's stomach.

"Tamia? Like the singer?"

"Yeah." His dimples deepened.

Cynthia forced a smile. "Well, congratulations. I hope you and Tamia will be very happy together."

"Thanks, Cynthia." He was all but bouncing on his heels.

When the elevator stopped on the twentieth floor, a group of suits got on, laughing and talking among themselves. Cynthia recognized the men from the investment firm located a few floors below Chernoff, Dewitt & Strathmore.

She stepped back to make room for them, and found herself standing directly behind

Brandon. Her pulse quickened as she stared at the back of his head, admiring his tight fade and the absence of razor bumps that plagued so many black men's skin. She wanted to run her hands over his broad shoulders and down the hard muscles of his back before cupping his round ass.

But they were only supposed to be friends, so all she could do was stand there soaking up his body heat and the woodsy scent of his cologne. He always looked and smelled so damn delicious. Was it any wonder practically every woman at their law firm wanted to fuck him?

When his cell phone buzzed, he pulled it out of his breast pocket to check the message. Unable to resist, Cynthia leaned up on tiptoe to peer over his shoulder.

I miss u already, Tamia had texted him.

Cynthia rolled her eyes so hard they almost fell out of her head.

Brandon's long fingers flew over the keypad as he texted back: **Miss u too. That was the most amazing lunch I've ever had.**

Cynthia frowned, her insides twisting with jealousy.

Me too, Tamia wrote back. **I hope we can do it again soon.**

Brandon grinned. **Which part?**

All of it, came Tamia's wicked reply. **Right down to that cream-filled dessert...**

Cynthia must have made some sort of noise, because Brandon suddenly glanced over his shoulder at her, one brow cocked.

She quickly looked away, pretending to stare at the electronic panel above the doors.

When the elevator stopped on the forty-fourth floor, the suits got off, leaving Brandon and Cynthia alone again. She moved forward to reclaim her spot beside him.

"So what does she do?"

"Who?"

"Tamia."

"She works for an advertising agency," Brandon answered.

"As a secretary?"

"Account executive." He smiled, oblivious to the shade Cynthia had just thrown. "She's very talented."

"Really?" Cynthia tacked on a fake smile. "How nice."

The elevator dinged, signaling the end of their ride. Like the gentleman he was, Brandon gestured for her to step out first.

As they headed down the long corridor toward their offices, she said brightly, "I'm looking forward to attending the governor's state dinner next weekend."

Brandon's steps faltered as an "oh, shit" look crossed his face.

Cynthia raised a brow at him. "Don't tell me you forgot."

"Nah. I just, uh..." He shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck.

She forced a laugh. "You can't bail on me, Brandon. I already canceled my plans and spent a fortune on the perfect dress."

"I know." He nodded distractedly to two colleagues who greeted him as they walked past, completely ignoring Cynthia.

She was too preoccupied to mind the snub. "I swear to God, Brandon, if you uninvite me—"

"Relax," he said. "I'm not uninviting you."

Relief washed over her. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “We’re good.”

She beamed at him.

“There you are! I was just looking for you.”

Cynthia turned her head, then scowled at the sight of a tall brunette coming toward them, her hips swinging in a too-tight charcoal skirt. Her green eyes were trained on Brandon with a single-minded purpose that reminded Cynthia of a circling shark bent on devouring her prey.

“Hey, Addison,” Brandon greeted the woman.

“Hey, yourself.” Addison stopped in front of him, grinning as she gave him an appreciative once-over. “Look at that. We’re color coordinated.”

Brandon glanced down at his charcoal suit and smiled lazily. “So we are.”

She winked at him. “Great minds think alike, eh?”

He chuckled.

When Cynthia rolled her eyes, Addison smirked at her. “Sorry you didn’t get the memo.”

Cynthia snorted derisively. “Don’t get too excited. His new girlfriend was wearing the same color. So if anything he was matching with *her*, not you.”

Addison’s smug expression faltered.

Stupid bitch, Cynthia thought with satisfaction.

Brandon discreetly cleared his throat. “You said you were looking for me,” he prompted Addison.

She cut her eyes away from Cynthia to grin at him. “Yes, sir, I *was* looking for you.”

“Wassup?”

“I wanted to pick your brain about something. Got a minute?”

“Actually,” he said, glancing down at his watch, “I need to return a few phone—”

“This will only take a minute, I promise.” Addison smiled coaxingly.

“All right,” Brandon acquiesced. “We can talk in my office.”

“Sounds good,” she purred. “Lead the way.”

As he started off down the corridor, Addison tossed her hair over one shoulder and smirked at Cynthia before following Brandon.

Gnashing her teeth together, Cynthia trailed after them.

When Brandon stopped to unlock his office door, Addison stood close behind him, practically rubbing her breasts against his back. It was all Cynthia could do not to snatch her by her hair and fling her pasty ass to the floor.

“Mind if I close the door?” Addison asked, following Brandon into his office. “What I need to discuss with you is confidential.”

As Brandon murmured his consent, Cynthia reminded them, “Don’t forget our department meeting at—”

The last thing she saw was Addison’s spiteful grin before the door closed in her face.

Fuming, she stalked down the hallway to her own office and kicked the door shut behind her, then leaned against it with her fists clenched at her sides.

Addison was always looking for any damn excuse to get Brandon alone. It was infuriating. But as much as Cynthia despised that thirsty white bitch, she wasn’t

worried about her stealing Brandon. Addison wasn't his type, so she wasn't a threat.

Tamia, on the other hand...

Cynthia frowned.

Forget Addison, she thought darkly. I have bigger fish to fry.

Pushing off the door, she marched across the small room and sat down behind her desk. Ignoring the blinking red message light on her phone, she dug her cell out of her Louis Vuitton handbag and speed-dialed her mother.

"Hey, baby," Coretta Yarbrough greeted her warmly.

"Hey, Mom," Cynthia said.

"Uh-oh." Her mother could always decipher her moods. "What's wrong?"

Cynthia sighed, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs. "He has a new girlfriend."

There was a brief silence. In it she felt her mother's sympathy and concern. "I assume you're talking about Brandon."

"Who else?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I really am." Her mother paused. "But this isn't the first time Brandon has dated someone while you've known him. Wasn't he seeing some massage therapist not too long ago?"

Cynthia sighed. "Yes."

"And before that it was the community organizer."

"Councilwoman. He dated a councilwoman and *then* the community organizer."

"I stand corrected." Her mother chuckled dryly. "The point is, he never keeps the women around for very long. They come and go, and so will this one."

"I don't know," Cynthia said uneasily. "Something feels different about this one. You didn't see the way he looked at her."

"Oh?" Her mother's voice was tight with displeasure. "How long have they been dating?"

"Not long. I overheard him on the phone with her about two weeks ago, but I couldn't bring myself to ask about her. I saw her today when she came up here." Cynthia frowned bitterly. "Brandon hardly ever takes personal lunch breaks. But there he was, returning from a leisurely lunch with his new woman."

"Is she pretty?"

"I suppose," Cynthia grumbled.

"Is she light skinned?"

"Not really. She's more of a medium caramel. Not what I'd consider light skinned."

"But she's lighter than you."

"Yes." Cynthia's lips curled into a nasty smirk. "She looks like a stripper."

"Oh, goodness." Her mother laughed.

Cynthia smiled a little, absently staring at a framed photograph of her and her sorors at a black-tie gala last year. She'd had so many eligible bachelors hitting on her that night. Too bad none of them were Brandon.

"I've been thinking," her mother said hesitantly.

"What?"

"Well...maybe you shouldn't have waited so long to tell Brandon how you feel about

him.”

Cynthia scowled. “Gee, you think?”

There was a startled silence.

Then her mother said chidingly, “There’s no need to take that disrespectful tone with me.”

Guilt assailed Cynthia, and she blew out a heavy breath. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to lash out at you like that. I’m just really frustrated, and what you said didn’t make me feel any better.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have said it.” Her mother’s voice gentled. “Is he still taking you to the governor’s state dinner next Saturday?”

“Yes.” Cynthia smiled wryly. “He’s too much of a gentleman to rescind his invitation. But I’m sure he’d rather take his new girlfriend instead of me.”

Her mother clucked her tongue. “You and Brandon were meant for each other. You have to make him see that.”

“How?” Cynthia demanded in frustration. “I thought it was enough to befriend him, to show him how compatible we are and how good we’d be together. I’ve been nothing but wonderful to that man, and where has it gotten me? Stuck in the friend zone.”

Her mother sighed. “I suppose it’s better to be his friend than nothing at all.”

“I suppose.” Cynthia leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. “I’m going to lose him for good if I don’t do something soon.”

“Don’t worry,” her mother assured her. “What God has for you, no man—or stripper—can take away.”

Cynthia couldn’t help laughing. “I’m pretty sure that’s not how the scripture goes, but thanks, Mom.”

“Be encouraged, darling daughter. We’ll think of something, I promise....”