The Kingdom Prison Wife

A Novel

By Cherry Sha'Ron

Chapter One

Good People Bleed Too

Paris Renee Holloway had a gift that most people in her family looked at like a weakness — she loved hard and gave without condition. In a family where everybody had an angle, where every hug came with a hidden motive, Paris was the one who gave just to give. She didn't know how to be any other way. God had wired her different. And the same streets that made her family cold made her warm.

She grew up watching her people use each other like chess pieces. Saw her aunties smile in faces and talk trash the second the door closed. Watched uncles pass debt around like it was a family recipe. The manipulation was so normal in her household that Paris used to think something was wrong with her for not being that way. Like maybe she had missed the orientation where they handed out the cold.

But she hadn't missed anything. She had just chosen not to pick it up.

By twenty-nine, Paris had built something real for herself. She had a small tutoring business out of the Eastside, a two-bedroom apartment that she paid for herself, and a walk-close relationship with God that kept her sane when the world around her didn't make sense. She wasn't rich. She wasn't untouched by struggle. But she was standing, and she was standing clean.

That alone made her an anomaly in the Holloway bloodline.

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The first time Paris met Kezia Brooks, it was at her Uncle Darnell's cookout — the same Uncle Darnell who had been married three times and cheated in all of them. He had just brought home a new wife, a woman with a wide smile and too-long lashes and a way of watching people that Paris clocked immediately.

Kezia noticed Paris watching her from across the yard and walked straight over like they were already friends.

"You Paris?" she asked. "Darnell talks about you all the time. Says you the good one."

Paris smiled but kept it measured. In her family, being called the good one was either a compliment or the setup for a request. She hadn't figured out which yet.

"He exaggerates," Paris said.

"Nah." Kezia tilted her head, studying her. "I can see it. You got this energy. Like, I don't know — peaceful. People like that are rare."

Paris thanked her and meant it, but filed the interaction away. There was something deliberate about Kezia that she couldn't name yet. Not evil, exactly. More like calculated. Like everything she said was selected before it left her mouth.

They exchanged numbers that day because Kezia asked and Paris was too polite to refuse. She didn't expect to hear from her. She did.

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Three weeks later, Kezia called with a proposition wrapped in a story.

"I got a brother," she said. "His name is Marcus. He's been having a rough go — just got out of a situation, trying to find his footing. I feel like you're the kind of person who understands people."

Paris almost laughed. Almost. She knew exactly where this road went. She had grown up watching the women in her family get played by the men in other people's families. She knew the script. Brother-in-a-hard-situation was chapter one of a story that usually ended with an empty savings account and a bunch of excuses.

She was about to say she wasn't in a position to meet anyone right now. She had it all laid out in her mind — the polite no, the graceful exit.

But then Kezia said something that stopped her cold.

"He asked me about you first. After the cookout. He saw you from across the yard and asked me who you were. I told him he didn't have a shot." She laughed softly. "He said, 'I don't want a shot. I just want to know her name.'"

Paris pressed her lips together. That was different. That was a different kind of line.

"What's his name again?"

"Marcus. Marcus Brooks."

* * *

They met for the first time at a coffee shop on Crenshaw — neutral ground, public, Paris's idea. She had rules about men. Always had. But she also had a heart that she had never quite been able to fully lock down, no matter how many times the world gave her reason to.

Marcus was tall and brown and quiet in a way that felt intentional. He didn't overspeak. Didn't try to perform. He looked at her like she was the most interesting person in the room and didn't make a production of it. That unnerved her more than the loud ones did.

"Kezia says you tutor kids," he said.

"Yeah. Mostly elementary, some middle school."

"That takes patience."

"It takes love," Paris corrected. "Patience runs out. Love keeps showing up."

Something moved across his face. Something real. She saw it and then watched him pull it back, tuck it somewhere behind his eyes.

"I like that," he said quietly.

They talked for two hours. He told her about growing up without much, about choices that had cost him, about a case that had landed him with a sentence he was still waiting to begin. He was facing eighteen years, he said. Federal. He said it plain, like he was reading the weather.

Paris didn't flinch. That surprised him — she could tell by the way he went still when she didn't move.

"Most people hear that and get gone," he said.

"I'm not most people."

"No," he said, looking at her. "You're not."

She drove home that night with her hands tight on the wheel and the Holy Spirit loud in her chest — that familiar feeling she'd learned not to ignore. It wasn't fear. It wasn't dread. It was more like a nudge, soft but persistent, like God pressing one finger to the center of her forehead.

Be careful, baby.

Paris turned up her gospel playlist and let it ride. She didn't know yet what careful was supposed to look like here. She just knew that Marcus Brooks had gotten further past her walls in two hours than most men had in years.

And Kezia Brooks had made sure of it.

Paris just didn't know that part yet.

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