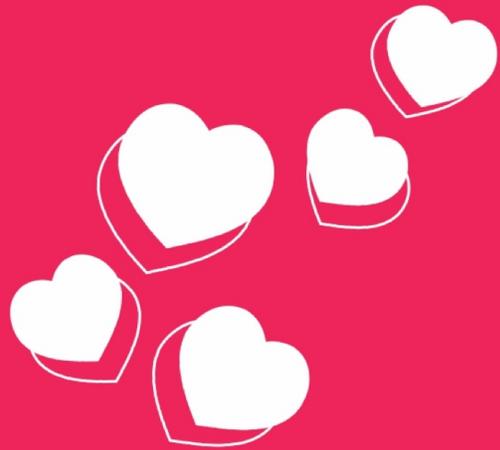


Soft



BARRACUDA



## **Soft Barracuda**

Abi Dore

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## Chapter One

When your baby sister threw a house party to celebrate the premiere of her glorified-porn-star music video, you deserved a little alone time. It should be a legal right, like bereavement leave. When that baby sister threw the house party in your living room, you didn't get any of that alone time. Instead, you spent the first half of the night - the half you would otherwise have spent wondering where you went wrong - fending off the drifting hands of a nasty blast from the past ex-boyfriend. You also watched your mother guzzle Carlsberg after Heineken after Stag, before taking to the dance-floor to embarrass herself and the family name straight into an impromptu dance routine. But no, embarrassment required at least an iota of self-awareness, so the out of control hip thrusting only embarrassed you. Your mother was in her element.

For the second half, you fielded telephone calls from pissed off neighbours alternating between complaints about noise pollution and enquiries into why they hadn't been invited to your latest fête. Standing out from the rest was a sarcastic reminder that until the government mandated otherwise, Tuesday was still a work night.

When out of the fawning multitude of men vying for the attention of the glorified porn star, one hopeful spilled stout on your new rug, you considered some choices. One. Kick the fool out. Two. String the fool up. Three. Make the fool pay. But you were resolved to play nice, you were avoiding making a scene. So you got as far away from temptation as possible in the confines of your tiny townhouse.

This carried Féyi Gordon past her front porch and out onto the sidewalk. Outside, the breeze cooled her skin and it felt good. The sky looked good too, bright with more stars than she'd expect for a cloudy night. Together, the pretty sky and the teasing breeze helped to create a placid interlude to the night's horrific proceedings.

The cars forming haphazard lines on both sides of the road all belonged to Zahra's adoring public and their owners were being too well fed and too efficiently plied with drink for any of them to consider leaving before midnight. Féyi wondered if all the cars would blow up, domino-style, if she set a torch to just one of them. Like maybe the tricked-out Honda across the street. It had some nice paintwork if you were into nude female airbrushing and it could either be poor street lighting, her four eyes, or for real, but the rims were still spinning a couple hours after being parked up.

Féyi continued to contemplate arson as she tucked her thumbs into the front pockets of well-loved jeans and tugged downwards, releasing some diabolical waistband pressure off her stomach. It was bliss. Only one other feeling could trump a liberated stomach, and that was when she returned home on evenings, kicked off her boots and undid the clasps to her bra. God, yes. Thinking about it, Féyi rocked back on her heels and inched the waistband down further.

At a quick guess, she had roughly three minutes to herself before Warren realised she was gone from the indoor festivities and came to disrupt her fragile peace with more groping. He obviously thought she was a sure thing for tonight because Warren never wasted any time on the chase. The first time around she'd fallen face down onto his crotch after a movie and popcorn but still, she couldn't imagine what screwed up signals he'd detected for him to think she'd be open to a repeat.

Before leaving her to suffer through the rest of the night alone, her cousin Sera had spent some time with Warren at the barbeque pit, doing a belated recon on Féyi's worst mistake. On her way out she'd laughed and called him harmless but Féyi could think of

more apt descriptions. Like sleazy, opportunistic, and bastard. Not that she was bitter. Ten years was more than enough time to spend healing, and she'd only needed twelve months. The following nine years had rolled by with him only a footnote in her life story. So what she felt now, with Warren parading about her house like he owned it and he owned her, was annoyance. Frustration.

In a different situation, she'd have dealt with him in a way guaranteed to put a smile on her face. But that was for dreams; for an imaginary place where she could flitter about unfettered and with no responsibility other than to herself. Around here in the real world, she had a sister to consider. And though there wasn't much to like about the porn star these days, she didn't know how to love her any less. This bred a crotchety type of tolerance where she made sure to register her disagreement as often as she could while allowing Zahra to do as she wanted.

Féyi had met Warren at a nightclub in New York back when she was in college. He'd introduced himself as a fellow Trinidadian and a talent scout for a start-up record company. Despite the perm and the toothy smile, she'd been drunk enough to be impressed. When he called the following morning, she'd been lonely enough to get excited about a date and about twelve hours later, stupid enough to wrap her mouth around his dick. But plain talk: she was lucky that one year of self-disgust had been enough to wash over the six months she'd spent being Warren's automatic fuck.

Now he claimed to have 'made it big'. He'd returned home to strut about with his stupid entourage, tossing glossy call cards in the air, and telling the gullible public that he was a big music agent. And Zahra was his first local catch.

Féyi kicked the back tyre of a Benz convertible. She didn't know anything about cars except what the advertisements told her, but it looked sleek, it looked fast and it looked expensive. If the whole 'set the place afire' idea went ahead, she'd torch this one first.

From further down the street, a pair of headlights cut a high-beam swathe across her small residential complex. Féyi figured its wattage wouldn't have been out of place at a stadium. She braved temporary blindness to glower directly at the oncoming vehicle and its clueless or careless driver. It could be no one else but Christian Quintero, the nation's Mr. Wonderful, and either cap, clueless or careless, would fit his big head.

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Christian remembered Zahra telling him she was moving out in a couple of weeks, to a place where she didn't have to clock back in at ten each night. It was half past the hour now and the townhouse at the end of the street was fully lit and the occupants, noisy. He thought her present set-up of free room and board and a sister who was more doormat than domineering was a cushy one, but Zahra liked playing damsel in distress so he'd never bothered to mention it.

Rolling his truck past a long line of parked cars, he decided thirty to forty-five minutes was enough time to show his face before heading back home. In the year he'd been back, his house had never won the battle between a hectic night out and a comfortable night in, so it looked like he'd officially lost his social vibe now that he had two acres of land in his name and a frantic agent hyperventilating down his neck.

Up ahead, Fay Gordon made a theatrical production out of shielding her eyes from the glare of his headlights. Christian slowed the truck to a crawl, and took the opportunity to appreciate how well she filled out a cotton t-shirt and an old pair of jeans. She lowered

her hands and they found comfortable resting places on hips he'd wanted to get to know better since 1995.

He inched closer and passed a pink Volkswagen buggy parked just before Fay's driveway. From her vantage point on the sidewalk she gave him her evil eye but before she could truly ramp up on the nasty looks, he swung into the space left between the buggy and a silver Benz Roadster, put the truck into park and searched for Fay so he could beat at his chest and preen his feathers.

She'd snuck up on him during his Master and Commander of Parallel Parking exhibition and now stood right outside his cab door. Instead of looking appropriately impressed, she made a tight gesture with her right forefinger and he obeyed, lowering his window. Cool night air and loud soca music whipped into the cab but the scent of cocoa butter and jasmine took its time wafting over from his best-kept secret. When it arrived at its destination, it wasted no time wrapping itself around his balls and holding on tight. She spoke to him like he had a dunce cap shoved on his head.

"Quintero, you're blocking my driveway."

Chris contrived to look apologetic. "I know, but be nice. I'm late and I don't come bearing any gifts for Her Highness." As he replied, he opened the door and stepped down in an attempt to cut short any argument.

Fay, in her boots, came up to his shoulder. Tonight she stood close enough for him to fantasise about touching the trio of beauty moles resting high on her right cheek. They seemed to dance as she talked and usually when the talking involved him, they boogied to the rhythm of a set-down.

"How long do you plan to be a fire hazard?" She eyed his truck with the distrust he felt sure she reserved for American-made left-hand-drives. It was a look he recognised from experience.

"An hour, tops. Did I miss anything?"

Fay barked out a short laugh and turned towards the house. "Other than the *video*?" she asked over her shoulder, pushing the words through lips curled in distaste.

"Yeah, other than that."

She waited for him halfway up the pathway, an event in itself. Fay wasn't normally given to such charity but tonight he had her all to himself, his personalised welcome wagon of cheer.

"About ten minutes ago," she began as he drew closer, "they finished the Mrs. Christian Quintero competition. I can't remember who won but the talent segment went by pretty quickly."

He made a face. "I thought I said be nice."

"Contestant Number Two, that's who it was. Don't worry; the judges made sure she could spell both your name and her own. That round was a killer."

She pushed open the front door and stepped aside for him to enter. Inside was chaos and he got a tardy kick of adrenaline as heavy bass thumped its way up his body. Fay's townhouse was small, but they'd set aside most of the furniture in her living room to create space and lots of guests had taken their drinks outside to the postage stamp backyard.

He'd been here twice before but had never gone past the living room and the airplane-sized toilet on the ground floor. Both times Fay had been home but out of sight upstairs and he wondered why she was here tonight, weaving in and out of the dancing

crowds when, as Zahra told it, they were, at best, on cool terms. However, Zahra, if not the Queen, was a loyal disciple of melodrama and he noted the relationship was warm enough for the younger Gordon to have her way with the house.

The woman of the hour was holding court on the far side of the room for a crowd six men strong and her trademark laugh, a raucous belly-deep number, was in working order. He started towards her but she caught his eye midway there and swirled over in a blur of blue denim and sunshine yellow.

“Finally the party can start!” She shouted it across the room so her captive audience could hear. To most men her voice sounded like honey-coated gravel and reminded them of straight sex, but he still heard the toothless lisp of a six-year-old tag-along every time she opened her mouth.

Like her sister, she came up only to his shoulder in heels but her smile was seductive, the deep dimples on both cheeks deceptively innocent and the heavy lashes she batted up at him, unrepentantly flirtatious. He kissed her forehead and she stepped back so he could admire the barely-there top and where-is-it skirt that was her outfit. After he made mildly appreciative noises, she shoved a red Solo cup into his hands and dragged him over to a massive flat screen that appeared to have been wheeled in for the night’s premiere.

“You lucky you’re good-looking enough to get away with being late, mister! It’s time to watch what your money paid for.” She threw her head back and laughed again, loud enough to attract more looks, as planned. A little quieter, she leaned into him and said, “People loved it. I’m in love with it myself.”

He took a sip from the cup and the rum went down well with the Coke. “I saw it already remember?”

“But not with an audience.” She fiddled with the remote for a while. The video was on loop but the sound was muted. After giving the machine a thwack, she looked to someone behind them.

“Warren, come help me here.”

Glad to have avoided I Man, I Fix Everything duty, Chris turned to watch Zahra’s new personal manager approach. He’d spoken to Warren on too few occasions to form a decided view on him but the first impression had been favourable. Greedy, materialistic shit-talkers did well as agents. He had one himself. This one, Zahra had brought home for a family dinner three months ago and introduced as the man who was going to make her bigger than Beyoncé. He’d been in Boston at a comic convention and missed the surprise announcement but her cousin and his best friend Johannes said it had gone down well enough with everyone but Fay.

So it surprised him to see her standing in the archway leading to her kitchen with Warren’s hands on the hips he’d decided, armed with serious determination and probably some unavoidable begging, could be his. The agent whispered something in her ear before swaggering over to the screen and Chris took a tense moment to decode Fay’s crossed arms. She hadn’t recoiled from Warren in disgust but she didn’t look loved-up either. It meant he still had a chance to beg.

He met her gaze and raised his plastic cup in appreciation of the night’s true host. Fay tapped her watch in response and looked meaningfully towards the front door, before disappearing into the kitchen, leaving him to grin at an empty archway. When he turned back, the sound still hadn’t come back on but now the screen was filled with a slo-mo

shot of Zahra's ass in the middle of a twerk. Everybody in viewing distance paused to admire the sight but the agent looked to be deriving some extra-special enjoyment.

The jury was out on Warren Miller.

## Chapter Two

Jeremy was white, male, and had the incomparable architect Rawle Douglas for a father. They both decided those three factors accounted for a rough seventy percent of their firm's client work to date. The remaining thirty, Jeremy attributed to Féyi's hustle and their good fortune.

She was inclined to agree but tried to spend as little time possible talking about her hustle because it upset her. Or in sailor terms, it was a fucking offence. Six years spent studying her ass off in New York, three years working for an architectural firm in Atlanta, all to return home to sweet, *sweet* Trinidad to cold-call prospective clientele and play second fiddle to some blonde hair, a penis and a silver spoon.

Thanks to the caprice of whichever smarty-pants had placed D before G on the alphabet, Douglas Gordon LLP was plastered all over their stationery instead of the - she had intelligently and impartially argued - more lyrically pleasant Gordon Douglas LLP. As if that weren't enough, some clients insisted on referring to Jeremy as Mr. Douglas Gordon though, *dammit*, they should know better. Earlier that year Jeremy got a 'Dear Douglas' letter framed and it still held pride of place next to his BArch certificate.

She'd kill him but apart from the fact that he had Daddy Issues to work out, he really did bring in seventy percent. And it was keeping them afloat. Except, 'afloat' had a positive ring to it making you think cute little toddler and his cherry red plastic boat bobbing along some kind of non-threatening, gurgling stream. Their ship was taking in shit-loads of water and fighting a losing battle against waves the size of the fucking Himalayas.

"You cussing again? This is an office."

Her partner-in-almost-bankruptcy crunched on a Golden Delicious and folded his six foot three inch frame into a nearby swivel chair. She turned from her laptop to give him a dirty look and pretend he'd interrupted some serious CAD drafting. "I haven't said anything."

Grinning through mashed-up apple, Jeremy propped his long legs on her thighs. "Fay, my dear Fay, who needs to hear the words when you've got an eye tic that's just as eloquent?"

"Bullshit. I'd know if my eye was jumping up and down like a crazy man." She grabbed hold of one of his boots. "And your shoes are nasty, get them off me lame-o."

The saddest thing about this descent into childhood was the lack of witnesses; witnesses they couldn't afford because they only had enough income to pay for one employee. What she wouldn't give right now for a third wheel.

Deep in useless thought, Jeremy shifted his right leg to a more comfortable position and said, "Why can't your eye jump like a crazy woman? Or a crazy It?"

"Because I have a man-eye. I mean it Jeremy, get off."

"Your crazy-man-eye. Intriguing." Intrigue continued unabated while he swivelled closer and his crunching, by pure vocal output, took on a life of its own. Féyi raised her eyes heavenward and prayed for a well-placed lightning bolt, but Nobody was home or Someone was very disappointed, so she cleared her throat and pointed at the computer screen instead.

"You see this? This is what I call work. *Work* gets us money. *Money* gets us food."

"Tarzan no understand," he snickered then carried his short attention span elsewhere. "By the way, you've got a walk in."

Her crazy-man-eye ticked. “You’re not serious. You couldn’t be serious.”

Jeremy showed her his pearly whites.

“Let me make sure I understand this. A potential client is outside waiting on me...” He nodded. “And you’re in here talking shit.” He nodded again.

Fay closed her right hand into a fist and thumped it against his ankles. Jeremy lowered both legs in delayed recognition of her emotional overload and rolled his chair an arm’s length away. In the safe zone, he got brave enough to wave his apple core at her before she disappeared around the corner.

“Don’t rush Fay. Something tells me he’ll keep.”

She wiggled both middle fingers in his general direction then closed the door to their lone office toilet behind her. People didn’t expect their architect to waltz out in a pinstripe, but a little ironing always went a long way, and a quick check in the mirror confirmed her suspicion: pre-pressed linen was a nasty gimmick. But there was no time to splash herself with hot water and steam dry because Jeremy had kept someone waiting outside. This man that would ‘keep’ could help push her contribution to the halfway point.

Jeremy didn’t understand, she never told him, but God, *God* this was humbling. Féyi gripped hold of the sink, focused on her reflection and dished out some tough love wrapped in blue language because for eff’s sake she chose the most inopportune moments to get emotional. She bared her teeth in a practice smile and laid out ground rules numeros uno through diez. No more cussing.

When she opened the door a few seconds later Jeremy was gone, but she heard the tinny voice of Crystal, the receptionist they shamefacedly hired on minimum wage, out front. She’d engaged the walk-in in a complex discussion about her erudite theory of using the hole in the ozone layer as an energy source. Apparently there was one right above Trinidad.

“And the machine will jus’ harness all dem UV rays an’ bam! Solar charged batteries. But I have to act quick because is like every time yuh blink that damn hole closing up.”

“It sounds promising.”

Féyi’s steps faltered when she heard the voice. It sounded like Mr. Wonderful but the thought of Christian Quintero standing twelve feet away and chatting up her receptionist struggled to take hold.

“It not no promise - is a done deal!”

Crystal was usually on the rude side of forthright when it came to discussing her soon-to-be-patented invention but today her words tripped out in breathless gushes. After a few more giddy giggles from the receptionist, Fay was pretty sure it was him. She entered their front room before Crystal had chance to whip out the PowerPoint.

Her eyes sought out his ass first thing without waiting for any go-ahead approval from her brain. Satisfied that it was still round, tight and performing at its best in jeans, they flicked up to his shoulders but only had time for an appraisal of the vitals (still wide, still powerful, still looking damn good) before he turned to face her and she had to fix her gaze on more cowardly areas. Like his nose. Or his chin. Or his shirt collar.

Because what she really wanted to do was get closer. Reach up and nuzzle at Christian’s neck; place her lips there, then her tongue. There, against a pulse point, to feel it beat steady, then erratic. For her.

What she really wanted to do was slide her hands around his waist, and up that back, then back down, back around with no rush but yes rush because lots of time but no patience and then yes, there, sliding down till she got to where she wanted to go. To cup him softly. Slowly. Hear him muffle noises in his throat. Feel the heat of him. Feel his tongue lick at her own neck, flick at her own ears, grab at her own ass and squeeze. *Yes*. Like she wanted to squeeze him.

She wanted to touch and be touched. She wanted to rip off his pants, wrap her legs around his waist and feel him push up inside her once, twice. Three times. Please. Four. Harder. Five. Six. More Faster Harder till yes God please yes *thank you*. Now. She wanted him.

It was a fucking nightmare. Noun, verb and adjective.

On the Good Idea ten-point scale, wasting wet dream, daydream and any other kind of in-between dreamtime on Christian barely charted at one. She would be better off slipping into sleep by giving a nameless, faceless Chippendale the raunchiest cowgirl ride of his life because he'd be nothing more than a vehicle for sex. She wouldn't have to worry about feelings, expectations or any of that crap. He wouldn't be real.

The man placing a quick kiss on her cheek was as real as the hundred grand he'd loaned her sister; as real as the tasteless clothes, tasteless songs and tasteless video the money had bought. Féyi looked up into his smiling face and gave him one of her own. It was time to hustle.

Their office was open plan so she led him into the conference room down the hall that they shared with a struggling attorney and an animal rights activist. The lights were off but the schedule hanging from the door said Kevin was booked for an all-afternoon meeting. She wished him all the best with what appeared to be his first client of the week but it was two pm, there was no sign of Kevin Maurier Esq. and she had her own ass close to the bread line.

Chris accepted her offer of a drink and while she chased ice cubes round a bucket, took a seat at the table. A minute ago, she'd been otherwise occupied with thoughts of rubbing her breasts against his chest but during the short walk to the conference room she remembered she had a firm to run and rent to pay.

"You're thinking about renovating?"

Fay hoped not. Chris lived in what she liked to call the Grande Dame of all colonial era, chattel-style houses in the city. It didn't stand on concrete blocks like the real deal but some hundred years earlier, an architect had managed to incorporate most every beloved feature of that time into the petite, two bedroom structure.

The distinctive jalousie windows, lovingly detailed gingerbread fretwork and ornate carvings on the wood banisters made for a proudly feminine piece of art, but six months ago Chris had parted with an undisclosed and probably outrageous sum, and the Grande Dame, the poor Grande Dame, was now enjoying the twenty-first century as a bachelor pad.

"No, I've spent enough money on that house to keep me quiet for a few more years."

When she turned, he was flipping open a glossy packet. He laid five photographs out on the table.

"I bought some land recently and I've spent the past couple of weeks driving up there to watch the grass grow, but the plan is to live on it."

Féyi crossed the room with two drinks in her hand, passed one over to him and looked at the pictures. The first to catch her eye was a brilliant orange sunset taken from the top of a sloping hill. The bit of valley caught in the picture was awash in burnt ochre and gold. The sea beyond shimmered a metallic pink. She picked it up for a closer look.

“This is the view?”

“I hope so. I was thinking the verandah could run the length of the western side.”

Her head popped up and he laughed again. She watched his dimples work overtime.

“Johannes told me you specialised in plantation style villas when you worked in Atlanta. That’s what I want to recreate.”

She fell into the nearest seat and their knees bumped as she scooted closer. The other pictures were as beautiful as the first, with the scenery doing all the hard work. She doubted the photographer had done little more than point and click. Oh Thank You Lord.

Féyi made to push her glasses further up her nose but met with nothing but skin. Today had apparently been a contacts day, not that she remembered much of what she did on mornings. They usually went by in a blur of alarm clocks, cussing, cold showers and more cussing.

“How much land are we talking about here?” She couldn’t look up from the pictures just yet. In the bottom right hand corner of one in particular, she made out a snake of pitch curving between dense foliage. It looked like the North Coast Road and she was surprised Chris had plans to live that far removed from the city.

“Two acres but I’m working with a lot size of about twelve thousand square feet.”

“That should give you just enough leg room.” She met his eyes full-on for the first time since they’d entered the room and found them crinkled at the corners in amusement. In her less charitable moments, she’d described them as effeminate but now that he seemed to be dropping a beauty of a residential project on her lap, Fay was woman enough to acknowledge that brown sugar eyes set against thick blunt lashes the colour of soot, when trained directly on you, were hypnotic. In a yes-let’s-go-to-your-house-and-overdose-on-sex-we-can-take-my-car kind of way.

She sat back and gave them both some space.

“You’ve definitely caught my interest. Have you been to other firms with your plans?”

“Just you.” He shifted in the chair and reached for the pictures with long fingers. He had the hands of an artist though she’d never thought of him as one, preferring instead to label him a star, which held connotations that were less high-brow and didn’t necessarily indicate any true talent.

He said, “My mind is made up if yours is.”

The hustler in her wanted to run naked through the streets and declare a national holiday. Chris was the media’s darling and the country’s golden boy; she doubted Gandhi dropping by from the Great Beyond to discuss an urban regeneration project would be higher profile. But early on in life she’d been forced to perfect her built-in bullshit-o-meter and it was taking some heavy readings.

Fay knew damn well what she could deliver on a project like this. It was more than her forté, it was her passion, and she’d spent two years in Atlanta making clients very happy. She could also bore dirt discussing the million ways to vary the villa theme. But given that she’d spent the past eighteen months renovating kitchens and designing annexes, why he was so damned certain about using her was unclear.

The best friend duo of Chris and Johannes went back to primary school. As her cousin told it, he'd taken it upon himself to befriend the pitiful new boy, the one with the knobby knees and a nasal American accent that did him no favours. And because Jojo had always been popular, Chris in turn became vicariously cool, the two of them proceeded to run the place, went on to run high school, and the rest was beautiful history.

Embellishments as to their puerile power and celebrity aside, she'd never known the two of them as anything other than tight and the seal of approval from her cousin would have gone a long way. But even though she would prefer to deal with all brawn and no brain, Quintero wasn't stupid. Entrusting her with his multimillion-dollar residential project without bothering to see a portfolio was not the action of a man who about fifteen years ago, would have gone ahead and touched the sun if she'd been the one to say it was hot.

Féyi knew fifteen years was a long time but people only changed under duress. And since he still lived in the centre of attention while she continued to toil at its outskirts, forgetting the truths of years past would give dating Warren some serious competition in the race for her worst mistake ever. If Chris had walked in here to offer the conceptual equivalent of a hundred thousand dollar loan, she'd string herself up naked to the nearest lamppost and sing Hakuna Matata before she accepted it. Pride was a bitch.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence but why exactly is your mind made up?"

She had been shooting for pleasant enquiry but it came out more watch-your-step-bucko because shit, the last time she'd checked, 'charity case' wasn't stamped on her forehead. Testament to his thick hide and, in some things at least, pea brain, he didn't take offence. Instead he smiled at her like he'd read the script beforehand and laced those artist's fingers together.

"I know Paul Carter. I was at his house-warming some years ago and his wife spent the whole night rhapsodising about how much she loved their new home and about Gordon, one of the members of their architect team who had made it all happen. It would have been too much to handle if I hadn't been as much impressed with the house as she was. When Jojo told me about your work, I put two and two together. Lucky for me you've moved back home, so now I get the chance to wax poetic about *my* architect."

Hmm. Huh.

His pea brain made him chuckle then he said, "Hopefully."

The wife in question, Regina Carter, was a twenty-something Black American Princess with a forty-something doctor husband, a penchant for all things grandiose and a potty mouth that had Féyi taking notes. She claimed throughout the months they worked together that an island villa had always been her dream but her husband didn't want to leave Atlanta and she had to make do with the next best thing.

Despite that, she would call on weekends with 'great' ideas that included Grecian columns next to the wood banisters and stucco effect on the walls. Féyi considered the end result one of her best designs. And make no mistake, it had been all her design.

Oh, he was good.

He even dared to look smug and she wanted to tell him that nobody liked a wise ass. Instead, they returned to the office so that he could look at her portfolio, remain impressed and make it official. As she watched him flip through the pages, the hustler was seconds away from ripping off her bra and using it as a lasso to corral him up against

the nearest wall, hussy-style. It was a good thing Jeremy had returned to keep her in check.

They spent the next hour discussing how Chris imagined the house, which turned out to be a hazy vision consisting mainly of a huge kitchen, an entertainment room large enough to do justice to his surround sound, and enough outdoor space dedicated to a five-a-side football pitch.

The boys had a meeting of the minds after that last revelation, and while she took a quick bathroom break, they made manly plans to visit the plot on the weekend. She floated back over to them on a cloud called sublime ecstasy. Life was good and it was a damn relief.

Féyi didn't consider herself a pessimist by nature; hell, she made concerted efforts to see the glass half full like every other Pollyanna. But with a family like hers it was a surprise she wasn't pacing a busy downtown street with a cardboard placard around her shoulders, dishing out doomsday prophecies to the fools who walked by slowly enough.

So just in case she'd managed in the past ninety minutes to forget how friggid her personal life was, on his way out, while her eyes had been ogling his behind, Chris made a casual reference to some early morning negotiations between Zahra and her real estate agent.

Not that she'd known her sister was capable of waking up before noon. Not that she'd known about any plans to move out.

Pollyanna of the first water that she was, his fly-away comment slapped itself across her face. All credit to Chris, he caught on fast but instead of rushing off with an 'oopsie' and a giggle, he stood in the doorway, frowning at her as she fought to compose herself. Frowning at *her*. She must not have looked pathetic enough.

"Fay." He placed a hesitant hand on the left sleeve of her pre-pressed linen. Before she could make up his mind for him, he thought better of the move and raised it, but by only an infinitesimal inch, off her arm. Staring past him and out into the tiny parking lot, Féyi thought that inch was the teasing difference between the solid, sweet heat of his fingers against her skin and the unwelcome tension she felt in anticipation of it. But enough. Zahra was leaving her and Chris was a distraction. As if in agreement, he lowered his arm.

"I thought you knew. She told me -"

"It's OK." She didn't want to shoot the messenger but if he said anything else, cracking a few ribs and pushing him down the steps would be easy.

Zahra told him this; Zahra told them that. She was tired of hearing, second-hand, what her sister had been telling people. She wanted to hear it from Zahra herself, to watch her be a goddamn woman and say it to her face, without the benefit of an audience and without her goddamn melodrama.

She had already wasted a whole lot of hours wondering whether she'd idealised her sister during their years apart but no; Zahra had been born precocious. She'd learnt to flirt with those baby doll eyes of hers before she'd learnt to walk and speaking her mind had always been something to apologise for; never seek permission. But now, the resentment that lurked in shallow waters behind Zahra's smile and the impatience that fuelled every word between them; that Féyi could not recognise.

She chanced a look at the distraction and was surprised to see the frown had evolved into a full-on scowl. She could also have cracked a coconut against a jaw that clenched.

Apparently, her cluelessness and all-round stupidity had insulted him. Well, what the hell? Féyi focused on silently cussing him ten ways from Sunday so she wouldn't have time to throw her head back and cry herself a river.

Because how many clients wanted to see their architect fall apart on the job? On day one. And Chris was worse than a client; he was practically a member of the family. The kind who got invited to dinners where the table was formally set for guests but in reality it was a gathering of friends.

The kind who'd run high school with one cousin and for five crazy months, had dated the other.

The kind who loaned your sister money though everyone knew it was more of a gift.

The kind who'd called your aunt for her birthday ten years in a row.

The squealing kind.

"It's OK," she repeated. "Saturday at ten. I'll be here." She tried to close the door but he didn't move and the tinted glass pressed against his left shoulder.

"Chris, it's OK. Go." She looked up and their eyes held. The frown was gone now but Féyi preferred it to the woe-is-you replacement gaze. She'd obviously managed to paint a sufficiently pitiful picture. Incompetent attempts at blinking back tears could do that.

But thank God, he turned away before her self-preservation called for his bodily harm. She watched him walk down the steps and over to his beast of a truck. Chris wasn't that tall a man, five ten she'd give him at his most hopeful, but his legs ate up a lot of space in a short time. She busied herself closing the door. It was serious work making sure the bolt connected with the notch just so.

A deep breath aiming for calm hitched its way through her lungs but while her brain sought peace, her body clamoured for war and she wanted, damn it, she *needed* to hit something. To get hold of the nearest cricket bat and smash it against a wall, once maybe twice, then whack it against her joke of her mother, three times, but why not four, and then, just for being him, just for being there, let it loose against Warren, no quantity restrictions required.

But more than anything she wanted to grab Zahra and shake her, slap her until the bitch fell out and only her sister remained. Because she hadn't raised her like this. She hadn't *left* her like this.

Out of the corner of an embarrassingly misty eye, Féyi noticed a concerned Crystal looking around the empty front room as if for guidance so she hurried across the office and slipped into the bathroom before Jeremy was called to play comforter.

Dropping heavily onto the toilet seat, Féyi jabbed the heels of her palms against eyes she scrunched closed against the overhead, fluorescent light. Her bed was calling for her and she returned the favour, longing for it. Nothing got rid of family problems like her four-poster. She'd rest her head flat against the mattress and allow the shitty cocktail of her frustration, her anger, her goddamn disappointment, to slip out. They mixed it up inside her head often these days but the King-sized expanse of her bed did a good job of capping it all and swallowing them whole. God bless Serta.

But it didn't pay to think too fondly on omniscient powers because it was God, fate or luck that had given Danica Gordon five years to get her act together, five years to guide, support and be a mother to Zahra. Five years to feel just a portion of the fierce 'I

created this; I love this' emotion that was supposed to be every mother's gift. It couldn't be that hard.

Féyi had forced herself to be grateful that Danica had returned home; she'd been happy that her sister would receive the love she had never gotten, never wanted for herself. But Danica had taken those five years to turn a seventeen year old, straight-A student; sexed-up and brain-dead.

Fuck it.

## Chapter Three

“It’ll look better if I take off the jacket. And if I go barefoot, too. Like an earthy, sexy, raw sort of thing.” Zahra jiggled her breasts in earthy, sexy, raw movements. “More like me, you know. Because I would never wear this. Warren, nobody would ever catch me wearing this. I’m taking it off - Warren, you listening? I’m taking it off!” She gave the agent just enough time to verbalise agreement then said, “Damn straight it’ll look better. Damn straight.”

After kicking off the leather sandals, she dropped her denim jacket in the sand and raised her bare arms skyward. A soft sea breeze teased at the dark brown locks off her shoulder and with her chin tipped towards the clouds, she made a pretty picture. The photographer snapped off a few rounds.

Someone rushed forward to retrieve the shoes and save the jacket, kicking up sand and spoiling the frame. Zahra turned when the photographer swore, and saw him standing next to the ravaged remnants of her wardrobe. An assistant muttered from behind that this would be her sixth outfit change.

Despite the breeze, it was a humid day but her face was well made up and not showing any side-effect sheen. Beautiful Zahra. With arms still overhead she clapped her hands once, pleased to see him, then waved. “Chrissie,” she called over, “What are you doing here? What do you think? Too much clothes for the beach?”

He walked closer till she was able to swing an enthusiastic arm around his waist. She smelt like pineapple and looked basted in its syrup. Now that the jacket was gone, a thin lime green strip of silk across her breasts was all that kept her decent. The jeans went down to her calves but were skin tight and started below butt dimples and just above butt crack.

“I think the jacket is a good idea.”

“It looks stupid on the beach. I’ve got to be one with my surroundings, you know?” She crossed her eyes at him and laughed but then frilled her lips.

“Look at you, so serious. What’s happened?”

Chris pulled together his big-brother face and modulated his voice for two-thirds disappointment and one-third disapproval. It worked on and off with Zahra.

“I thought Féyi knew you were moving out so I mentioned your condo drama this morning. Imagine my surprise when she needed a two month update.”

Zahra ignored his frown. She slapped a hand to her eyes and groaned. “Lord no, she found out? I didn’t want to deal with this right now. The video didn’t go down too well with Mother Teresa you know. We’re barely civil these days.”

“Zahra.” He paused. Her hand dropped to her waist and this time she looked to be considering his big-brother face. Chris decided the trip up to the coast had been a bad idea, fuelled as it was by sympathy for Fay; an emotion he wanted scuttled back to its usual spot, covered in dust in the farthest corner of his brain.

He could spend a comfortable hour looping thoughts of running his hands down Fay’s legs or, a personal favourite, kissing her trail of beauty moles down to those that dotted her chest; but forty-five minutes charging towards the Mayaro coast on his white steed of misguided rage left him with a disturbing tightness around his chest. He needed to rein in this new Sir Lancelot before he did something stupid.

“Right now you’re the only person lacking in bare civility.”

Rein him in, dammit. Corral the beast.

He'd shocked them both into silence for the two seconds it took Zahra to get indignant.

"I'm barely civil? *I* barely civil?" Her hand pivoted upwards to point in his face. "Chris, you gone crazy or what? I civil enough with Féyi Gordon not that is any of your goddamn business. I civil enough to feel like a blasted fool every time she curls her lip or shakes her head."

She jabbed at her own chest with the acrylic nail of her right index finger. "I civil enough to leave a place where I made to feel like I just taking up space, where every fucking move I make is like a goddamn disappointment. I -" Zahra stopped to inhale but on the next breath much of her initial ire skated away on the sea breeze. She looked at him, upset and confused.

"You drove all the way here to tell me I'm a bad sister? I hope somewhere in your two month update to Féyi you told her the same thing."

"You're not a bad sister." The response was automatic but Lancelot felt obliged to qualify, "But this isn't your finest moment." He reached for one of her wrists and held on until she wrenched it free and hid it behind her back. Chris wasn't immune to the hurt he'd heard in her voice but however masterfully rendered it had been, Zahra had done nothing more than trip out the same old sob story she'd been feeding the world about Féyi ever since her older sister had learnt to say 'no'.

"You can make things right Zee. Go to her tonight before she can come to you. Tell her when you're leaving and where you're going. This is your sister we're talking about. Fay." When she sucked her teeth and snorted, he closed his eyes briefly. "If you feel extra guilty, apologise for acting like a little shit."

"I'll apologise for fuck all." A finger found its way, once again, near his nose. "I don't know when you and Fay turned best friends but as far as I'm concerned you can kick your ass up out of my photo shoot. Then you can call *me* and apologise for stepping the hell out of line."

He ignored the finger that now poked his chest. She was angry and no doubt considered herself betrayed, but her eyes, wide and kicked high enough at the corners to look exotic even in this island full of mixed beauty, held uncertainty. He latched on to that glimmer of insecurity but still took a physical step back. "Deal with this when you're finished smiling for the cameras and don't be stubborn for the hell of it Zahra, because petulance doesn't look good on you."

"Shut up. Go away." Zahra spun around shouting for Warren who stood just in front the spotlights, straining the muscles in his ears to eavesdrop like everybody else.

"I'm leaving but remember to apologise. I bet you'll feel lighter afterwards."

"Vomit will do that to a person." She didn't look at him but as Warren neared, tripping all over himself to get an in on the action, she spoke loud enough in an equal opportunity move for all gossipers on set. "You better talk to your woman Miller and do it quick. Get her busy scratching your back so she could blasted get off mine."

"Everything OK?" Warren's eyes knocked between Zahra and Chris. Shifty eyes you called those. Chris frowned while Zahra sucked air through her teeth.

"Does everything look OK? We're starting to lose natural light, the blasted photographer still hasn't managed to put together a decent shot, I'm wearing denim on the fucking beach and now I have to deal with some seriously shitty news from straight out of fucking nowhere!" She poked Warren in the chest, giving her acrylic nail a

workout. “Nothing is *okay* because your ex-girlfriend continues to sour everything worth having in my life!”

She kicked up some sand of her own now, executing a thespian pirouette before exiting stage right towards the shore. Chris remained unimpressed. “You’re like a badass without a cause Zahra. Don’t disappoint me,” he shouted at her retreating back.

Warren didn’t follow her but flicked his fingers in Zahra’s direction. “Anything I should know about?”

“No.”

Even in the fading sunlight, the diamonds on the agent’s watch face glinted. Chris had been thinking about it over the past few days but still couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea of Warren and Fay as a couple. When he came close, his stomach heaved.

“I could talk to Faybaby about whatever it is, calm her down,” Warren insisted.

Chris resisted the urge to shove the agent’s face into the sand. “You do that.”

Snuggles under kitchen archways and back-scratching references aside, he could only hope *Faybaby* would kick Warren’s ass when he broached the topic. Like she’d have his ass if she found out about his role in this whole mess.

God save the world from heroes.

\*\*\*\*

When he got home it was dark, but the lights were on in his house and his sister Josephine’s ‘I’m a mother hear my SUV roar’ four-wheel drive was parked in the driveway. He left his truck in the street and jogged up the steps to his front gallery. Sephy’s strappy sandals were toe to wall beside the double doors and next to them was a cute kiddie version in red dyed leather. Another sandal lay propped next to the rest but with its rubber sole facing the ceiling. He could just see the tip of the other camped out underneath his late grandmother’s teak rocking chair.

Chris slotted his key in the lock and from inside, his sister attempted to take control of a mini uproar when ten-year-old twins and a five-year-old dog rushed to greet him.

Sui-Regina drew the curtains first, pressed her face against the lightly frosted glass and did a passable imitation of a puffer fish. His dog Mason tried to follow suit but was overcome with excitement and could only doggy-prance on the spot, swotting Maya-Rose with his furiously pumping tail.

Chris rapped on the glass. “Who are you and what are you doing in my house?”

Rosie giggled but Reggie gave him the most recent incarnation of her bad-girl pose. Bony hand on skinny hip, she rolled coffee black eyes and he heard as she rammed the deadbolt home.

“Get off our porch!”

“Did I sell the house in my sleep? This is my porch woman and I’m calling the police.”

“We’ve called them already.” Rosie chimed in and giggled some more. He winked at her but she surprised him with a sudden look of implacable weightiness. “You should feel real shame trying to break in like this,” she said.

Chris gave them his incompetent villain laugh (mwhahaha cough cough mwhahaha) “All I have to do is say the word and my guard dog will rip you to shreds,” he said.

Sephy walked over just in time to hear his latest threat and mother and daughters laughed at the idea. Mason laughed with them, rolling onto his back and cycling legs in the air.

Some additional threats later, which included a child-kidnapping one that drew a disapproving look from his sister, Reggie undid the lock and yanked the doors open, letting the smell of baking bread dance outside into still muggy early evening air.

He kissed his sister then swung a screeching Rosie over his shoulder for her earlier insolence. Bad-girl Reggie and trained killer Mason abandoned the front doors to pummel at his back and run circles around the commotion. He dropped one twin onto the nearest couch and reached behind him to capture the wrists of the other but they played this game often and she was wily enough to evade him.

“Gina called for you today.” He followed the big pouf of her ponytail into his bedroom while Mason returned to the position he usually took up when Sephy and the girls came over - curled up by the kitchen, panting with greed.

“Gina? Did she leave a last name and a number?”

The pint-sized feminist was unimpressed. She plopped onto his bed with a glower. “I told her you wouldn’t remember. She said you would but you hardly ever remember your girlfriends. I told her that too.”

“Reggie, do me a favour and never answer my phone again.”

“Even if I’m the only one in the house?”

“Let it ring.”

“I wrote down her number anyway. She said she was running out of phone credit so maybe she’s hard up for cash.” Reggie flipped onto her stomach and reached for the TV remote as he headed towards the bathroom door. “She also sounded like she had big boobs, so she’s probably one of your music video girlfriends if *that* will jog your memory.”

“Aye, you!” Chris backtracked to the bed and thumped her with a pillow. “Don’t be rude. And what do you know about big boobs?”

“Hello? I’m a woman.” He looked at her, sceptical, and she took serious umbrage, “I am! Chookie says age ain’t nothing but a number.”

“Who the hell is Chookie?” He removed his shoes and carried them over to the rack his sister had given him as a Christmas gift last year. Sephy never let her girls enter the house with their shoes on but it was his place so he got to make his own rules. Behind him, Reggie jumped off the bed and her small feet tapped on the wooden planks. She joined him by the wardrobe.

“Sascha’s big sister. She went to Cambridge in England and she met the Queen and she does Tae Kwon Do and she’s a yoga instructor at Mummy’s gym and she started this humongous group for women and she says she’s going to rule the world with a gentle fist. She’s *real* smart.”

She sounded *real* scary.

Someone knocked on the open door. “Uncle Chris, would you like white or wholewheat?” They turned to face Rosie standing at the entrance to his bedroom. His sister and her husband seemed to have decided to raise just one of their children to be polite, well-mannered and a lady. The other they’d left to run wild. It was like a research project.

“We talking homemade here?”

She smiled and nodded. “It just finished baking.”

“I’ll take both, baby girl.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” the untamed hellion pitched in. “We used the last bread Rosie made to knock out this boy in the school courtyard.” She teeheed like a real devil, “It was hilarious.”

Her long-suffering sister had Job’s patience and the grace to laugh. “Stop fibbing,” she said then swanned off to set the table.

Chris crossed the room and locked the bathroom door behind him because, as he’d found out on numerous occasions, Reggie didn’t appreciate the concept of personal space. When he returned, she was sprawled in the centre of his bed; legs kicked up and crossed, watching a cartoon. He held on to her cotton candy ponytail and gave it a light tug. “Where’s your Dad?”

She raised her eyes in thought. “Australia? Or no, no, Singapore. I don’t know. He’s coming back next week then we’re going on a trip for Mummy’s birthday and I’m getting some more dolls for my collection and maybe a go-kart if I behave. I haven’t done anything too, too bad so far so I think I’m going to get everything I want.” She rolled onto her back and switched topics. “Mummy’s scared because she heard a noise last night that sounded like a burglar with one leg scratching at the side door by the kitchen.”

He laughed. “How does a one-legged burglar sound? For that matter how does a big-boobed woman sound? Your mother’s unhinged and you’re getting pretty loose yourself.”

“Whatever. So we came here right after school and she and Rosie got busy baking. For you.” Reggie paused so he could let that sink in. “Don’t tell them I said this but...” She sniffed. “Chookie says the kitchen is the woman’s cage.”

Chookie was spreading some dangerous messages. He slit eyes towards his niece and she seemed to be waiting for either rebuttal or vindication. Rosie saved him with a lady-like shout that dinner was ready and he hurried on out of there. The four of them took their seats around the table and at her mother’s prodding Reggie volunteered to say grace. They crossed themselves and waited for the prayer.

“Grace!”

Chris shook his head and didn’t bother to open his eyes. For a grown woman she still had a lot to learn. His sister launched into a mother’s rant on respect for God and religion and mothers while Reggie squirmed in her seat, Rosie gave long-suffering sighs, Mason whimpered for some food and his stomach acids churned feverishly towards an ulcer. The rant ebbing to a “no dessert for you” and a “now say it properly”, his niece meekly blessed the food. He abbreviated the sign of the cross to a vague slashing about the forehead and the chest; then reached for the bread, the butter and hollered for some stew.

Reggie didn’t waste much time sulking. “I told Uncle Chris about Chookie. I think they should be boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“Huh?”

“Sui-Regina, we discussed this on the way here. You’re annoying me.”

“You said we couldn’t talk about *girls*. Chookie is a *woman*.”

“Huh?”

“Girls are women. End of conversation. Pass the knife please. Handle facing me, handle facing - Sui-Regina.”

“Huh?”

His sister laser-beamed discontent across the table and he shut up. They ate to the sound of Mason slopping at his bowl of stew until Rosie taught them the rudimentaries of

dinner protocol and mentioned the weather. When that petered out, she asked him about his work and he admitted both the drawing table and his computer screen remained as bare as they had been on the weekend. She looked worried but in the interest of all that was proper, was going to save it for when they had a private moment.

Reggie piped up, “You haven’t done anything new in a long while Uncle Chris. I think you don’t have any more ideas. Either that or *too much partying*.” She licked brown stew off her fingers and flirted with danger, “Somebody, I can’t remember who, says that men who go out all the time are running from themselves and don’t make good life partners.”

She smiled almost beatifically. He knew in that moment that *someone* would have been very proud.

Sephy ignored her daughter and asked, “What have you been up to today?”

Eager to leave ball-busting Chookie behind, he sat back and patted his stomach. “I got myself an architect.”

“You did? Who?”

“Douglas Gordon.”

Her brows knitted. “Never heard of him.”

“Her. They. Féyi Gordon and Jeremy Douglas.”

His sister’s husband, Marcus ChiWong, was a high profile real estate magnate. Even when they’d only been dating, Sephy had taken the Who’s Who of Trinidad seriously. Now she could probably set up a Wiki on the topic.

“Jeremy Douglas? That’s Rawle’s son. He’s got his own firm now? I had no idea. I wonder why? Hmm.” From behind her glasses she fixed all-seeing all-sensing orbs on him and he experienced a small moment of panic when she asked, “Why did you choose him?”

He’d already tagged this as a high-pressure situation and resolved to tread carefully. Josephine was a ‘you-can-hide-but-you-can’t-run-so-I-will-wait-you-out-I-will-smoke-you-out-do-not-fight-my-omniscient-power’ sort of sister. Their mother had raised her that way.

“I didn’t choose him. I chose her.” Shit. Sometimes he just didn’t think.

“Really? *Hmm*.” Three females and a dog were looking at him, very interested.

He barrelled on. “She’s Jojo’s cousin, you know her. She worked in Atlanta - remember I told you about Paul? She’s Zahra’s sister. You know her. They do good work.” And segueing right into his escape plan, “I think I’ll take another slice of bread. Rosie dahlin’ you’re a chef.”

Rosie beamed and her sister snorted which triggered the discovery that their mother was a camel and Reggie was the last straw that broke her back. The Wild One was soon exiled to the cage to start washing the dishes.

After they cleared the table, Rosie dug around in her backpack and pulled out a comic sketch she’d been working on so he could “critically review” it, which in addition to “hard up for cash” was apparently how ten year olds talked in the twenty-first century. The sketch was set out in seven frames and the characters were all big heads and little feet. In the first frame a kid Potato Head wearing nothing but a hair bow sat in a garden swallowing an ice cream whole with a happy look on her face. In the next three frames, she ran from a Mr and Mrs Potato Head who were more self-aware and had covered themselves up. Finally, they got the slippery bugger to sit at a desk and open her

homework in the fifth frame. In the sixth, she grumbled while she wrote but in the seventh, she was back in the garden with another ice cream.

“This is really good dahlin’,” he said, hugging her close. “I feel Reggie was your inspiration.”

They laughed but then she shook her head. “The girl is you!”

Well. He sucked in a horrified gasp and flipped her over his shoulders for the second time that night. “You don’t play you have some boldfaced cheek! Mason c’mere; it’s time for dessert.” She screamed when he let her slip far enough for Mason to trot over and happily lick at her upside down face. Then Reggie returned to pummel at his back; Mason ran circles around the commotion and just like that, it was time for them to leave.

Outside, as Reggie hunted around for the right side to her pair of sandals, Maya-Rose kissed him goodbye and told him she’d left the sketch to stick up by his bathroom mirror. “I agree with Reggie. No more partying until you finish your strips.”

“Yes sir, drill sergeant sir!”

He promised to call them at random hours that night so the one-legged burglar (“he makes a shh-shh sort of noise”) would think twice about compromising their security system. When they were all buckled into the SUV, he stepped back and Sephy reversed out the driveway. As they drove off, Reggie’s unruly shroud of hair poked out the passenger front window and she shouted at him, “Drop and gimme twenty!”

####

I hope you enjoyed the first three chapters of Soft Barracuda. Fay is a tough customer, but Chris can handle her.

You can find Soft Barracuda on Amazon.

Thank you for reading.

*Abi*