

"ANOTHER SEXY  
PAGE-TURNER."  
—New York Post

Jackie  
Collins

Lovers &  
Players

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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## Chapter 1

“What’s your name, dear?” the bald man with an abundance of hair sprouting from his ears inquired.

“Liberty,” the young waitress replied.

“What’s that?” he said, peering at her.

“Liberty,” she repeated. It’s written on my name tag, asshole. Can’t you see it?

“What kind of name—”

Oh, puleeze! You got any idea how many times I’ve had to go through this conversation? Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin named their baby Apple. Courteney Cox and David Arquette, Coco. What’s so unusual about Liberty?

Ignoring him, she refilled the bald man’s coffee cup and walked away. Moron! she thought. Like who does he think he is, commenting on my name? It’s none of his freakin’ business. When I’m a famous singer/songwriter I won’t question people’s names. I’ll be understanding and polite. I’ll get it.

She hurried behind the counter, still steaming. “I’m so not down with this waitresin’ crap,” she complained to her cousin Cindi, who’d gotten her the job in the Madison Avenue coffee shop and like her was an aspiring singer.

“Never forget it pays the bills, girl,” said Cindi, a buxom twenty-three-year-old originally from Atlanta, with gleaming black skin, thick ankles, an ample ass, huge breasts, and a wide, inviting smile.

“Singin’ should pay the bills,” Liberty said forcefully. “That’s what we do.”

“When we score a gig, that’s what we do,” Cindi pointed out. “So while we’re waitin’ ...”

“I know, I know,” Liberty said, frowning. “Gotta make a living. Gotta pay the rent.”

The furrowing of her brow did not affect her startling beauty. Biracial, the product of a black mother and what she assumed was a mixed father—a man her mother refused to talk about, let alone reveal his identity—Liberty was milk chocolate-skinned, with lustrous long black hair, elongated green eyes, thick

brows, impossibly long lashes, cut-glass cheekbones, full lips, a pointed chin, and a straight nose. Cindi was always carrying on about how Liberty looked like Halle Berry, which kind of irritated her, because she considered herself an original and did not care to be compared to anyone—however gorgeous and successful they might be.

Liberty was nineteen. She had plenty of time.

Or did she?

Sometimes she awoke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, her heart thumping. What if she never got discovered? What if nobody listened to her songs or heard her sing? What if she ended up like her mom, a failed singer cleaning other people's mess all day?

Man, she was almost twenty, she'd been out of school four years, and nothing big had happened for her. Oh sure, she'd made an amateur demo tape, scored a few gigs as a backup singer, but not as many as she'd like. And no producer had stepped forward and said, "Honey, you're it! I'm signing you to a contract here and now. You'll be the next Alicia Keys or Norah Jones. All you gotta do is name it."

Where the hell were Clive Davis and Diddy when she needed them?

"Miss!" A sharp voice brought Liberty back to reality as an irate female customer attempted to attract her attention.

She sauntered over. At least she had attitude; nobody could take that away from her.

"Yes?" she said.

"Do you know how long I've been waiting?" the woman demanded in a high-pitched voice. "Where are my eggs?" Sharp-featured, the woman was wearing a knockoff Armani suit and clutching a fake Louis Vuitton purse on her lap.

No style, Liberty thought. If you can't afford the real thing, then you may as well forget it.

The man with the woman had nothing to say. Apparently his eggs were not such an urgent matter.

"I'm sorry," Liberty said in an "I couldn't give a rat's ass" voice. "I'm not your table person."

She refused to say "waitress"—she found it to be demeaning—especially to this cow.

"Well, get me my 'table person,'" the woman said in a sneering voice. "I've been sitting here for fifteen minutes."

“Sure,” Liberty drawled.

For a moment their eyes met. The woman hated her because she was beautiful. It happened all the time.

They wouldn't hate her if she was Beyoncé Knowles or Janet Jackson; they'd be fawning all over her the way people did with stars.

Once Mariah Carey had come into the coffee shop with a full entourage in attendance and two massive black bodyguards who'd never left her side. People had freaked. Paparazzi had gathered outside, and within ten minutes a huge crowd had formed—almost breaking the plate-glass windows.

The owner of the shop, Manny Goldberg, had begun to panic, until his wife, Golda, decided it would be prudent to escort Miss Carey and her group into the kitchen, where the star graciously sipped a cup of green tea, signed autographs, and chatted amicably with the two Hispanic chefs.

Liberty had thought about approaching her but in the end chickened out. Cindi hadn't. Cindi had gotten the diva's signature on a paper napkin, which she'd stashed in her underwear drawer along with various packets of condoms in all colors and sizes. Cindi was into being prepared.

“Rude little bitch!” Liberty heard the woman mutter to her male companion as she walked away from the table. “Who does she think she is?”

Liberty was not bothered, she'd been called worse.

She was just about to go into the back when she spotted Mr. Hip-Hop himself walking in.

She held her breath for a few seconds; this was the third time he'd been in this week. He always sat at one of her tables and left a massive tip, although he never spoke to her other than giving her his order.

Today he was with another man, a white man who seemed to be all business. They were talking animatedly, with a lot of arm waving going on.

She knew who he was. Damon P. Donnell, hip-hop mogul supreme, head of Donnell Records. His new offices were less than a block away, and he'd obviously picked the coffee shop as his breakfast stop-off.

She knew other things about him. He was thirty-six, dark skinned, with cropped hair and a killer smile. He usually wore tinted designer shades, a diamond stud earring, Nike running shoes, and a cool suit with a silk T-shirt underneath. He was known for encouraging new talent—although almost all of his label consisted of male rap artists. He'd once been a performer himself but had given it up except for the occasional charity event. He was married. Damn! No chance of getting him that way, because Liberty drew the line at playing with married men. His wife

was an Indian princess from Bombay and a consummate consumer. The two of them lived in a sixty-sixth-floor sprawling West Side penthouse with panoramic views of the city, and according to Vibe, his wife had converted three bedrooms into her own personal closet. They'd been married two years and had no children.

The first time Liberty had seen him she'd had no idea who he was. "I think I'm in lust!" she'd muttered to Cindi. "That dude is the bomb!"

Cindi, who was up on everything showbiz, soon filled her in. Cindi devoured *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, *People*, *Us*, *Star*, and *The National Enquirer*. She watched *Access*, *ET*, *Extra*, and *E!* every single day. "That dude is famous, married, rich, an' way outta your reach," Cindi had informed her. "Forget it, girl, 'cause this big boy ain't lookin'."

Sometimes Cindi got on her case a little too much. Her payback was an attempt to never mention him again, not an easy task.

Just as she was about to go over to his table, Cindi materialized and gave her a knowing nudge. "Mr. Wonderman's back—again. Mebbe I was kickin' it wrong, little cous', could be you do have a shot. If I was you, I'd go for it."

"The knockoff queen at table four is screaming for her eggs," Liberty said, ignoring any mention of Damon. "You'd better get over there before the cow throws a shit fit."

"I'm on it," Cindi said, totally unconcerned. "Think I forgot to order 'em. Ain't that a shame!"

Liberty approached Damon's table.

He didn't look up. "Coffee," he said, studying the menu as if he'd never seen it before. "Large O.J. Egg-white omelette, bacon on the side."

"I'll have the same," said his friend or business associate or whoever the other man was.

She hesitated a moment, willing Damon to at least give her a quick glance. He didn't, but the other guy was sure giving her a thorough going-over with his beady little eyes.

"Certainly, Mr. Donnell," she said, making him aware that she knew who he was. "Coffee and O.J. on the way. Omelette and bacon to follow. Crispy, right?"

Finally he looked up, taking her in, his eyes—visible through his tinted shades—resting on the hand-written name tag above her right breast. But still he didn't say a word, merely gave her an imperceptible nod.

She moved off to get them both coffee. And maybe her demo CD?

No! Too soon. I've got to develop a relationship. Like a cool waitress—customer kind of thing.

Oh yeah, now you can use the word “waitress.”

That's because he's not some whiny white woman who thinks she's better than me.

“Waitress!” screamed the woman in the knockoff Armani. “I'm getting nowhere here. Where are my eggs?”

She was tempted to say, “Stuffed up your dried-up old snatch where nobody's gonna find 'em.”

But she didn't, because Manny and Golda wouldn't approve and, as bosses go, they were decent people and she didn't want to get fired. Besides, she needed the job; so did Cindi. As usual they were late on the rent, and bills were mounting. It was hard keeping up; they could never seem to get ahead.

Before working in the coffee shop Liberty had tried a variety of jobs. All horrible. Being a waitress was the best of the bunch, although it was murder on her feet. Usually she took the day shift, leaving her evenings free to write songs and hang with her musician friends, including her current boyfriend, Kev, a guitar player. She'd been seeing Kev for a few months—he was a nice guy—but nothing serious. She didn't believe in serious, not before she'd forged a career.

“They're on their way,” she yelled across the room at the hateful woman.

“I should think so!” the woman huffed, raising her painted-on eyebrows to let everyone know how pissed off she was.

“Excuse me, Liberty,” said an older regular customer sitting by himself at a corner table. “Might I get a refill?”

This one never gave her any trouble and always tipped well.

She flashed him a smile and her most used words: “Coming right up.”

Grabbing a pot of freshly brewed coffee from behind the counter, she filled the man's cup, and headed for Damon's table. Only before she could get there, a young boy playing with a toy car scooted it in front of her, and bam, she tripped over the toy, taking a fall—coffeepot smashing to the ground, hot liquid burning her arm, while her right ankle twisted beneath her.

Silence descended while everybody turned to stare at the crash site. After a few seconds, conversation resumed, and she was left sprawled on the floor looking and feeling like a clumsy idiot.

For a few seconds she didn't know what to do; then she heard the horrible female customer laugh in a rude fashion. Quickly Liberty got herself together,

even though her arm was burning from the scalding liquid and, when she tried to stand, her ankle gave way under her.

Fortunately Cindi and Mr. Regular Customer came to her aid. The older man helped her to a chair, while Cindi began cleaning up the broken glass and spilled coffee.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Regular Customer asked, genuinely concerned.

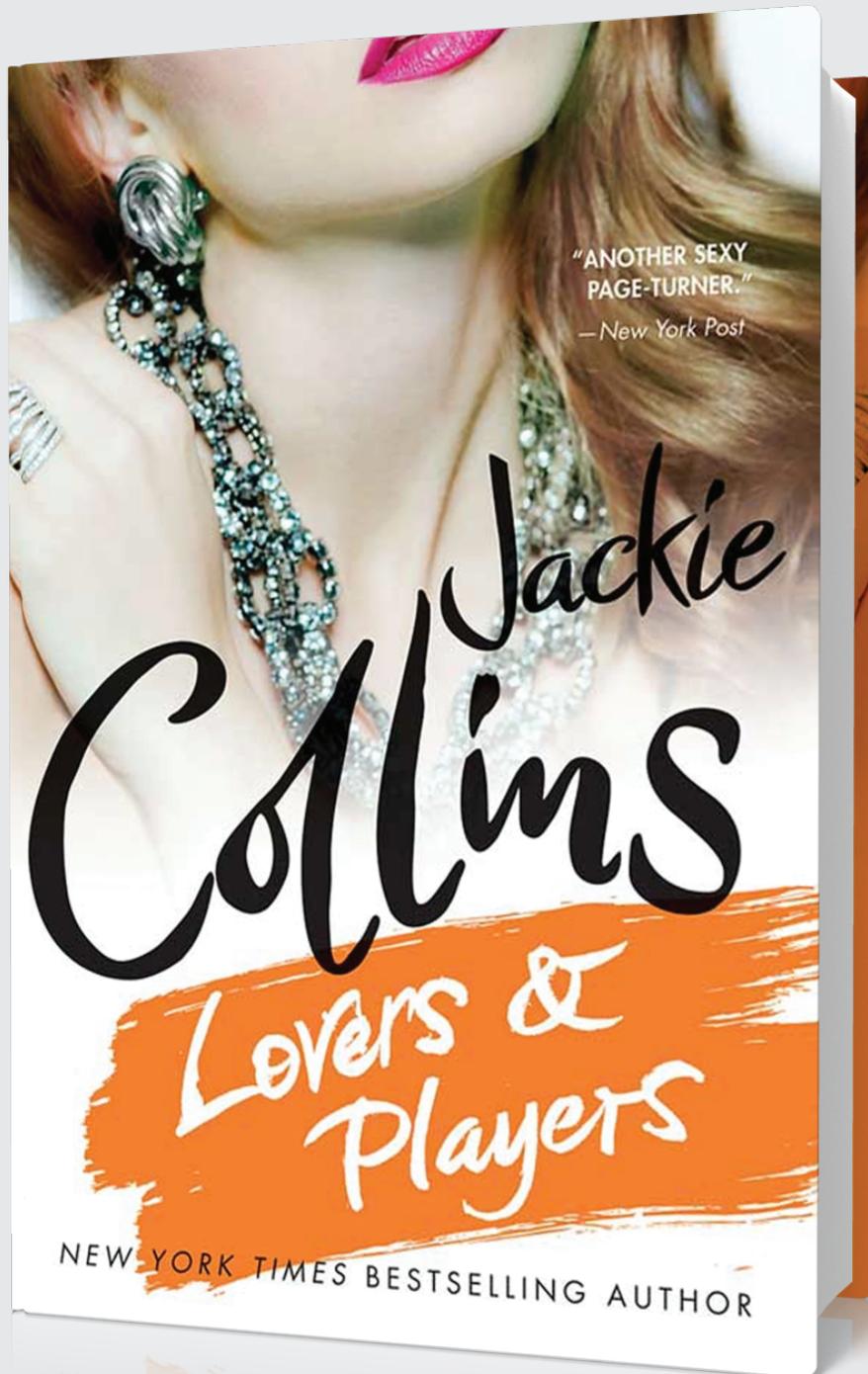
She nodded tearfully and shot a look across the shop to see if Damon was watching.

He wasn't. He was carrying on talking, gesticulating wildly, his diamond stud earring flashing against the fluorescent lights.

She suppressed the urge to cry in earnest. Her arm was on fire, her ankle throbbed, and Damon P. Donnell hadn't even acknowledged her existence.

Was anything ever going to go right for her?

Man, she needed a break and she needed it desperately.



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