

Losing Control



Dedication:

To all those in search of honesty and love, be true to yourselves in your quest.

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Losing Control

by Cheril N. Clarke

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Chapter 1

Her eyes were closed but she was awake. Facing the wall with her back against his, she debated slipping out of bed but remained still. She didn't want to wake him, nor did she want to chance catching a glimpse of herself in one of her bedroom mirrors. Guilt and shame made her feel ugly. Her breathing was deliberately soft, almost undetectable before she took a weighted breath as if to relieve the pressure that had been building for so long. It was three o'clock in the morning and Brianna had barely slept an hour since she had lain down at eleven.

Opening her eyes, she stared at the clock on the nightstand, blinking, thinking. She turned to face him and kissed his smooth, dark brown shoulder. He sighed peacefully and reached for her arm to place it around him. A tear slid from her right eye onto the pillow. With her hand against his chest, she could feel his heartbeat. She could feel the warmth radiating from his athletic, 5'9" frame. Brianna inched closer to him so that her bare skin was against his, closed her eyes, and again tried to sleep. Lately, this had become a routine, although he had no idea. It was always in the middle of the night that her deepest feelings gnawed at her from within. She kept it all inside, as if telling someone about them would cost her everything she'd worked for. It might have.

Franklin and Brianna had become friends during their years at Rutgers University's School of Law and remained so after they had both graduated with honors. Although he had gone on to become a powerful businessman in Philadelphia, she had moved forward with her interest in local politics, using her law degree as

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padding for her already bulging résumé. Over the last six months, they'd become intimate, something they hadn't done since a one-time experience during their schooldays. Unable to stand the lonely nights in her home, Brianna occasionally invited Franklin to spend evenings with her. He was a strong, handsome, and incredibly intelligent man—a rarity, especially in comparison to the men whom she saw on a daily basis in the gritty southern city of Rockville, New Jersey. Franklin lived one town over in Cherry Hill, not very far away but starkly different with its shopping malls, trendy restaurants, and roomy homes on big lots of manicured lawns. He lived in a high-rise condominium. Brianna cared for him, but the way she'd been using him was wrong and she knew it.

As the night began to turn into early morning, she finally fell asleep. Their bodies were closely spooned together under soft, sea-green sheets. Two hours later Frank woke up and turned around to kiss her on the forehead before easing out of bed and into the bathroom to begin his morning routine.

“Bri,” he lowered his tenor voice to a whisper after returning to her side and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Hm?” She opened her eyes slowly to see a half-smile on his face. She managed to return one of her own.

“I'm about to head out.” He ran his hand down her arm and, admiring her soft, medium-brown skin, took her hand in his. “I umm...” Franklin hesitated, unsure if he should say what he was thinking. He decided against it. “I'll call you later, okay?”

“All right.”

He leaned in to kiss her again, softly grazing her bottom lip with his tongue before pulling away. She smiled, feeling a tingle in her body. Franklin's touch was somewhat comforting. She got up to walk him out and then crawled back into bed for a few more hours of shuteye.

Brianna scrolled through messages on her PDA as she waited in a drive-thru for her coffee. Thoughts of Franklin ran rampant in her mind, but she pushed them aside. Because of him, her personal and professional lives were merging. She felt terrible about it but

knew she needed him if she was going to win the election. Franklin was connected to a lot of influential and well-off people. Now that she was running for city council, she had to tap every resource that she had.

After getting her coffee, she headed toward her storefront headquarters. Her cell phone soon rang.

“Good morning, Sheldon.” She could see from the caller ID that it was her campaign manager.

“Morning, Anderson. I hope you’re on your way in. You have a tight schedule today.”

“I am. I am. I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay. Let me brief you really quickly anyway,” said Sheldon.

“Go ahead.”

“You have two ‘Meet the Candidate’ appearances with Smith.”

“Ugh.”

“I know you hate those, Anderson, but they’re a must.”

“Mm hm,” she sighed. “Next?”

“A fundraising dinner,” he paused, “and speaking of fundraising...”

“I know, dial-for-dollars.” She didn’t know which task she dreaded more: appearing with her opponent, Colleen Smith, or personally calling people to request donations to her campaign.

“Sheldon, I’ll be there in a few minutes, okay?”

“All right, I’ll see you in a few then,” he said and they hung up.

“I guess I’d rather ask for money than be next to Smith,” she muttered to herself.

The last time Brianna had been in the presence of Smith, there had been an aura of disdain and jealousy emanating from her rival. After they were out of the public eye and Brianna had extended her hand to Smith, she was taken aback by her reserve. Smith walked out of the room without a word to Brianna, her silence coming off as snobbish and condescending. The closer it got to Election Day, the more tense things became.

Brianna thought she had a good chance of winning, but in reality, no one who was currently in office backed her because she

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was different—a young hotshot who, though a Democrat, had ideas that were more conservative than the current leadership in the crime-infested city. She wanted to take over the fifth district, a first step toward taking over the city. Rockville resonated deeply with Brianna because it reminded her of the shoddy East New York section of Brooklyn in which she had been born and raised. The eyes of the people were the same. The mix of despair, fatigue, and complacency within them made her think of the many days she had looked around East New York wanting to change things but being too young and ill-equipped to do so.

The day that she'd made up her mind to make a difference in a poverty-stricken neighborhood was a day during which she had barely escaped being hit by a stray bullet. It had killed an innocent child instead. Brianna never forgot the earsplitting sound of the fired shots and the scenes of chaos as people darted for cover. A burning desire to escape the trap of living in housing projects pushed Brianna to become as educated as possible. She had excelled and risen to become a force to be reckoned with. While pursuing her undergraduate degree, she had spent a semester working as an intern for New Jersey's Senator Buckley at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. It was there that she had taken a serious interest in New Jersey's local politics. Long before she had even moved to the state, she had begun learning about its cities and its people. Rockville caught her attention as a place where she could make a difference for the residents, as well as make a name for herself. Brianna Anderson, City Councilwoman; she said the title over and over in her head. She wanted it badly and would stop at nothing to obtain it.

Chapter 2

An audience of about twenty people sat inside the small community room of a senior citizens home. Four of them were asleep, two of them were staring out a window, and one man was digging in his ear. The rest were barely paying attention, but Colleen Smith went on with her speech anyway. It was her third stop of the day and she didn't seem a bit tired. Time felt as though it were going by quickly, and she was giving her campaign all she had.

Having won previous elections by wide margins, Colleen was now uncomfortable with Brianna's candidacy, but she tried to hide it. She didn't like the change that Brianna represented. Colleen was born and raised in Rockville. She'd seen it in good times and in bad. She could remember when it flourished, before blue collar work suffered a miserable death at the hands of a crippled economy. As factories closed one by one and work began to disappear, the city began to tumble into reckless neglect. But Colleen had lost her compassion for Rockville a long time ago. For the latter part of her career, she had been part of a small group of people who had a stronghold on the city. She was guilty of retaining her power through corrupt pay-to-play systems, accepting large contributions from professionals in return for awarding them no-bid contracts. She had a number of other tricks up her sleeve that help offset the meager salary of a councilwoman. Colleen only cared about herself.

"Listen, I want you to dig up some dirt on Brianna Anderson," she said to her campaign manager, Tony, after they left

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the senior citizens' home. She brushed her thin, dark brown hair from her face.

He looked at her without giving a response.

"I'm serious. I don't care how you do it, but find some dirt and leak it to the press!"

Tony restrained his impulse to talk with reason and nodded in acknowledgement. "Consider it done."

She placed her hand on his arm. "Don't let me down."

He relaxed. "I won't. I know a guy who can find anything on anyone. Just give me a little time."

"You've got it," she said and pointed her finger at him sternly, "but not too much time. I want this done."

He nodded positively. "Don't worry."

They soon were in the meeting room of a neighborhood association. The residents greeted Colleen warmly. *Smile, shake hands, compliment. Smile, shake hands, compliment.* Over and over, she went through the same motions with everyone after formally introducing herself. She worked the entire room; most of the people in attendance already favored her over Brianna. She was in one of the few sections of Rockville that wasn't downtrodden by violence and poverty, one where she'd recently gotten a state-of-the-art recreation center built for children. The residents loved her, willingly placing campaign signs in their lawns. *Smile, shake hands, compliment...pose for a picture and keep smiling.* Colleen was a hit.

In the Anderson headquarters, Brianna's eyes were fixed on the television. Breaking news: An entire family had been shot execution style in a row house that had been set on fire in an attempt to cover up the killings. A toddler and newborn were among the dead.

"Can the district look anymore unsafe?" She sighed and bit her bottom lip. "This is bad. This is awful timing."

"It's bad for the families, but only awful timing for you if you make it," Sheldon said. "You have a speech tomorrow morning before your fundraising luncheon. I'm going to tweak it to show

compassion for the victims while reinforcing your stance that Rockville needs new leadership.”

She ran her manicured hands through her hair while nodding in agreement. “I need to have that speech for review tonight.”

“I’m on it right now.”

“I appreciate you, Shel.” Brianna flashed her dimple-accented smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, before stepping away to work alone.

Brianna’s cell phone vibrated. It was Franklin. She sent the call to voice mail, making a mental note to call him when she had privacy.

“Is Yesenia back yet?” Brianna asked the question aloud to no one in particular but waited for a response. Yesenia was a young, cute, Hispanic volunteer.

“I haven’t seen her,” answered Asad while typing rapidly.

“Thanks, Asad.” Brianna smiled at him and quickly turned her attention to a wall that had a large district map taped to it. Next to the map was a sizeable calendar that had all of her important dates marked in red.

“Anderson.” Sheldon called her.

“Yes?”

“I’ve made the revisions to your speech. Why don’t you take a look?” His eyes were large and prideful as he handed her the pages. Sheldon was a smart man in his mid-fifties, short, balding and slightly overweight.

“All right, Shel. Just give me one minute.” Brianna set the papers down and continued to scan the calendar.

Yesenia walked into the headquarters empty-handed with a grin on her face. She’d gone door-to-door to distribute literature about Brianna and to try to drum up more volunteers to help with a mass mailing that was coming up.

Brianna looked toward Yesenia. “I was just asking about you.”

“Sorry, I stopped to grab something to eat on my way back.” She smiled apologetically. “Did you need something?”

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“I just wanted to know how it went for you today. Were people receptive and taking the literature or did you just end up leaving most of it on doors?”

“Well, some people took the info and said they’d read it later, a hand full of people asked me questions about you, and I did end up leaving some at houses where no one answered the door.”

“Thank you so much.”

“It’s cool.” Yesenia smiled.

Brianna returned her attention to the revised speech. After making a few minor changes, she gave it her stamp of approval.

The day passed quickly. She had a staff meeting with her team and then left for several meetings with ministers and civic organization leaders. She was also scheduled to have dinner with Terrence, a close friend of Franklin’s. The two men had grown up together in Rockville and even pledged to the same fraternity in college. Together, and with some of their other frat brothers, they’d started an adopt-a-street program in an effort to clean up Rockville. The streets they had chosen happened to be in Brianna’s voting district, and Terrence was leading the project.

Terrence had a personality that drew people to him. In addition to his adopt-a-street program, he owned a barbershop and was known for changing the lives of young men who were open to listening to his advice and guidance as well as that of his older, life-experienced barbers. Before becoming an entrepreneur, Terrence had been an investment banker in New York. He’d simply grown tired of Corporate America and had branched out on his own in a way that provided more meaning to his life. He tried to train and employ as many people as he could. He even employed kids to sweep up the shop when they were out of school, but they had to prove that they did actually go to school. Terrence wanted to give back to the community from which he had come.

At the restaurant, Brianna looked him directly in the eyes as she spoke. “Thanks so much for meeting with me tonight.”

“It was my pleasure. I really think you can do some good in Rockville. I’m behind you one hundred percent. I’ll do what I can to help.”

The waiter interrupted. “Sir, madam, how was everything this evening?”

“Fine, thank you.” Terrence and Brianna answered simultaneously.

“Would you care for dessert or coffee?” The waiter continued as he cleared the table.

“Actually, I’m fine. Thanks.” Brianna answered and then looked at Terrence.

“Just the check,” Terrence added. The ring that he wore on his pinky finger glistened as he reached for his glass of water.

The waiter left and returned quietly with the check as Brianna and Terrence wrapped up their conversation. Terrence was willing to donate \$1500.00 to her campaign, call upon his friends to do the same, and post her signage in his shop. She studied his mannerisms, his polished, matter-of-fact way of speaking, and even noticed his Philadelphia Eagles personalized license plate when they walked to their cars. He was well dressed with a black jacket and a starched mint green button-down shirt tucked into black slacks that had razor sharp creases in them. His bald head suited his boyish good looks. She could see how he and Frank were good friends. They were similar in a lot of ways.

“Get home safely,” he said after giving her a hug. She caught a drift of his cologne, masculine, but not too strong.

“And you do the same. I’ll be in touch.”

“Sounds good.”

When Brianna finally decided to call it a night, she phoned Franklin while she was on her way home but he didn’t answer. She tried again when she got to her condo but still got no answer. She brushed it off and placed her phone on its charger before deciding to pour a glass of wine. An hour of sipping her drink and reviewing her speech had passed before she decided to take a shower. Her house was quiet. Lonely.

Brianna had never been in a truly fulfilling relationship. She had come close to it once, however. *Sadira*. The name wafted through her mind plenty of times over the years although they hadn’t spoken to each other. Sadira was the one who got away. After a few months of dating, Brianna had relocated to pursue her internship and vowed that for the sake of her career, she was no longer going to date women. She thought if she was going to make it in politics as a

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Republican, which she was at the time, she had to conform to the mainstream. She didn't realize that her true political beliefs were aligned closer to center-Democrats than Republicans until her experience as an intern, which eventually led her to switch parties. Republican ideals sounded good in theory but when implemented, often proved to never be able to hold their own and offer trickle-down help to people who come from environments like the one from which she had come. She had also naively thought she could work around the religious drive of the party, but it was too difficult. Some of the people she had worked with unabashedly used Christianity to drive public policy, regardless of if it trampled people's freedom of religion. From viewpoints on marriage equality and aid to the poor, Brianna found herself disagreeing with her party as she matured. Things weren't as easy or black and white as Republicans made them seem. Immersed in her work, Brianna experienced a lot of political growth from that summer on. Her constant problem, however, was her lack of an ideal personal life. Though she acted as though she was content, she was not.

Besides Franklin, she wasn't intimate with anyone else. He was better than a vibrator and she did care for him, but she wanted... needed, and *craved* a woman. She wanted the emotional attachment that only a woman could give her. Every day her suppressed feelings made themselves more apparent as they fought to reach the surface. She began to wonder how long she could deny herself the connection she so badly needed.

After a long, hot shower, she changed into her black silk pajamas, climbed into bed under a thick comforter and turned off the lights.

"Mmm." Franklin's deep moan was a ballad in Yesenia's ears as he felt himself reaching a powerful climax.

"¡Sí, Papá, sí! Damelo!" Holding on to him tightly, Yesenia spoke in her native tongue as she too approached a sexual peak. It was her second escapade with him that evening. The stack of literature that she was supposed to distribute for Brianna was outside in the parking lot sitting on the passenger seat of her car.

“Frank...” Yesenia whispered his name as she lay beside him, pleurably exhausted.

“Yeah?”

She used an index finger to trace the contours of his chest and abs. “That was so good. I could make love to you all day.”

He laughed nervously and kissed her in response.

Guilt. Brianna crossed his mind after hearing Yesenia’s statement. Even though he and Brianna weren’t exclusive, he felt like he was betraying her. He tried to push her out of his mind to rid the heavy feeling. Eventually he and Yesenia fell asleep with their backs turned toward each other.

Franklin didn’t know what he was doing with Yesenia. She was beautiful, but he didn’t care about her. Deep down he was lonely. He wanted companionship, a partnership that Brianna was unable to give him. Sometimes he thought that being with the two of them would make up for what he wanted from one individual, but it wasn’t working that way. He was unfulfilled and the only difference between Yesenia and Brianna was that he actually cared about Brianna. Their friendship had been firm for years, but he was skating on thin ice by sleeping with someone who was on her staff. Of all the people he could be with, he felt incredibly idiotic for getting into a physical relationship with someone who worked for Brianna. His stupidity haunted him and every day he woke up telling himself that he should break things off with Yesenia for the sake of his friendship with Brianna. He just never got around to doing it.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Brianna talked about the race and looked over her speech as she rode to a rally site with Sheldon. She was concerned that her name recognition wasn't what she wanted it to be at that point in her campaign.

"Don't worry," Sheldon told her repeatedly. He was ever confident that she would emerge triumphantly in the end. He had been watching her grow from unknown to known in just a month and knew that her feelings were attributable to first-time campaigning jitters.

"I'm okay." She lied. She had had a restless night and was actually very tired, but she didn't want it to show.

At their destination, Frank, Terrence and a few of their fraternity brothers were getting things in order for Brianna and the other invited guest speakers. She had about 15 minutes before she was due to address the crowd and took the time to look over her speech once again to memorize it as much as she could. She didn't like reading directly from the paper because it cut down on the time she could make eye contact with the audience.

"Okay, it's time." Sheldon patted her on the shoulder. "Knock em' dead, Anderson."

She smiled and straightened out her navy blue skirt suit. "I will." Wearing very light make-up, Brianna purposely played down her looks. She didn't want people to think she was all beauty and no

brains, but she didn't want them to perceive her as was frumpy either. She always managed to find a proper balance.

The audience applauded after her introduction. "Thank you very much," she said and paused briefly to glance around the room. She took in its white walls and the empty white plastic chairs in the back. A slender man wearing a black shirt and gradient red tie sat up front along with a few women and a journalist who held a recorder in one hand and a notebook in the other. She was happy to get a good turn out on a Saturday morning.

"It is a pleasure and an honor to be with you all today. This morning, we're going to talk about change. We're going to discuss becoming politically mature and taking control of our city." She moved from behind the podium.

Two people walked in late.

"Now, I'm sure you all have heard about the horrific shooting and fire yesterday," Brianna continued.

"Terrible, just terrible. We shouldn't have to live like this!" Someone from the audience added her own comments.

"Yep!" Another person in the audience responded immediately. Murmurs and whispers began to fill the room but quieted when Brianna started speaking again.

"I know," Brianna responded. "I watched the news just like you. And I live in Rockville just like you. We're facing very serious problems. Problems that the current leadership has done nothing to help alleviate. Sure we've heard about agendas and initiatives, but I have yet to see results."

People in the audience began to lean forward in their chairs.

"The truth is Rockville doesn't need another band-aid, more government aid, or leaders masquerading as saviors of the poor when they really only care about themselves." She paused.

"Rockville needs a change in leadership, a change in its direction. It needs its pride restored and jobs created so that the people who live here can have a sense of dignity. An increase in jobs will equal a decrease in crime!"

"That's right!" someone in the audience yelled.

"Together we can make the changes we need, changes that will lead us into a better future."

People nodded in agreement and applauded. She noticed a woman in the back of the room whose face was familiar, but she

couldn't place her. They locked eyes for a moment, but Brianna stayed focused on her speech.

"Tell me, how many of you voted in the last election?"

Brianna looked around the room, mentally noting that only about a third of those present raised their hands. Without wasting time, she resumed.

"The media says that hopelessness has stifled Rockville. They say that despair has it by the throat. People say the city is forgotten, especially the 5th District, that it's run down, too riddled with poverty and crime to be restored. I say that's untrue. I say that with a change in leadership and the teaching of the importance of politics as well as the role it plays in all of our lives, the city can be restored."

"That's right, that's right!" someone shouted.

Brianna made eye contact with one audience member after another as they applauded her. The response she was getting reminded her of that what she was accustomed to hearing in church. She scanned the room, her eyes meeting again with those of the woman all the way in the back.

"Don't let yourself be taken advantage of and manipulated. You've got to care enough about change to vote. Your vote does count. Your voice can be heard..." Brianna continued with her speech until she had everyone in the room riled up, awakening their emotions, and embedding in their ears her political views and daring them to vote—for her of course.

After she stepped off the stage, she made her way towards the back of the room, meeting with people individually, shaking hands, accepting compliments, and answering questions. With a closer look she knew exactly who the familiar-looking woman was. Her name was Pamela Thompson and she was the recently appointed treasurer of Rockville. She had taken over after her predecessor had been busted for illegal activity and ousted from his post. Pamela seized Brianna's attention.

"Hi." Pam had walked over to Brianna and introduced herself. "Pamela Thompson, city treasurer."

Brianna nodded and they shook hands. "Brianna Anderson, soon to be councilwoman." Their handshake was coupled with a soft gaze that lasted seconds longer than it should have. Their release lingered.

“So I heard.” Pamela smiled. “Wonderful speech.”

“Thank you.” Brianna grinned while admiring how beautiful Pam was. She noticed that Sheldon was handing literature to people as they walked out. The room was nearly empty.

“Well, I have to get going. I just wanted to formally introduce myself.” Pamela reached in her purse and handed Brianna a business card. “If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

Butterflies. Brianna felt a whir inside that she hadn’t felt in a very long time. “Thanks.” She didn’t know what else to say. It could have been subtle flirting or it could have been networking. It could have been nothing. “It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“Likewise.” Pamela smiled and turned to walk out.

Brianna and Sheldon were among the last to leave the building. On the way to her next stop, she was only half listening to him. Her mind traveled back to Pamela. Brianna was intrigued by the woman who appeared to be older than she was but beautiful no less. Pam had been wearing a soft pink silk blouse under a light grey pant suit. Her smile was flawless.

“And don’t let Smith get to you, Anderson.” Sheldon was saying something about Colleen. “Just smile and be polite.”

“I will.” She snapped back into focus, redirecting her thoughts back to her campaign.

End of Excerpt.

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Biography

Born in Toronto, raised in Miami and now living in southern New Jersey, Cheril N. Clarke is the author of five novels, *Foundations: A Novel of New Beginnings* (2001), *Different Trees from the Same Root* (2003), *Intimate Chaos* (2005), *Tainted Destiny* (2006), *Losing Control* (2009) and one play, *Intimate Chaos*. She has been featured in *Curve Magazine*, the nation's best selling lesbian magazine, *The Princeton Packet*, *Philadelphia Gay News* (PGN), *About.com*, *Out IN Jersey*, *EURweb*, *Burlington County Times*, *Phillyburbs.com*, *Clik Magazine*, *Sistah2Sistah* online magazine., *247gay.com*, *Femmenoinre.net*, as well as *Crain's New York Business* newspaper, among others. Her editorial work has appeared in *About Magazine*, *GayWired.com* and on *247gay.com* and her opinion columns have been featured by the National Black Justice Coalition.

Clarke was a keynote speaker at an African Asian Latina Lesbians United conference and has performed at events organized by African American Lesbians United for Societal Change. She is simultaneously working on a new script, *Asylum*, in addition to researching for her sixth novel. She is also getting ready for the Philadelphia production of *Intimate Chaos* the play (May 2009).