

# **Shake Down the Stars**

Renee Swindle

## Chapter One

It's two in the afternoon, and I'm already nursing a bottle of scotch I took from the banquet hall where my sister's engagement party will take place. I've spent the last thirty-two hours with my family and figure if anyone deserves an early-afternoon drink, it's me.

Mostly I've been hanging out in one of two libraries. Margot's party is being held in an actual mansion: a now-defunct gentleman's club high up in the Oakland hills. The place is straight out of *The Great Gatsby* with its expansive lawns, indoor swimming pool, smoking room, the aforementioned libraries, and lookout tower covered in ivy. There are thirty rooms in all, two stadium-sized banquet halls, and a twenty-four-hour butler for VIP guests like my sister and her football player fiancé.

After filling my glass, I go to the window and spy my sister outside on the lawn, bitching at the gardener and his assistant. It's late September, and the sky is turning a foreboding gray; the wind is in a foul mood, lashing out at all the carefully placed freesias and gerbera daisies strung around the gazebo and attached to the back of every single chair on the lawn—all three hundred of them. Margot has it in her head that her guests will be distracted by the lopsided bushes just behind the gazebo, when, frankly, I suspect they're going to be more distracted by the rain that will surely fall on their heads if a storm breaks out.

Whatever.

I turn from the window and begin scanning the library's massive leather-bound collection until I decide on *The House of Mirth*. I'm about to sit at a small table near one of the stained-glass windows when a man the size of a troll walks inside. He steps directly up to me with an expectant

grin on his face as though we know each other, but I've never seen him before in my life and have to assume he's with the wedding party that's rented the east wing of the estate. He's built like a wrestler and wears a silver suit that strains against his Popeye-like biceps; his chest bubbles out from his shirt like a growth. He looks, in fact, like a baby shark standing on its dorsal fins.

He runs his tongue over his upper lip while staring at me. "You. Are. Lovely."

"And you," I say, waving my hand at the alcohol-induced stench rising between us, "are. Shit. Faced."

"No shame in it. I'm here to celebrate, after all. I see you're not holding back either," he adds, nodding toward my scotch.

I raise my glass and take a sip. "Touché."

"Name's Selwyn. And you are?"

"About to read my book, if you don't mind."

He points at me with the same hand that's holding his glass. "You've got spunk. I like that."

"*Spunk?*"

"Yeah. Gotta little fire going on."

I look him over while taking another pull from my drink. He's not exactly troll-sized, probably five foot seven at best, but I'm five foot nine and in heels, so from my vantage point he may as well be a Lilliputian. An Oompa Loompa. A hobbit. "How tall are you exactly?"

"Five-six-and-a-half and proud of it. Never let a man's height fool you. Height is never an indicator of a man's sexual prowess."

"I'll try to remember that."

He studies my face briefly. "I don't remember seeing you at the wedding rehearsal last night. You a friend of the bride or the groom?"

"Neither."

"Neither? You with the other wedding party?"

"Yeah. But it's an engagement party."

“Wooooo. Having an engagement party up here? Must be some engagement. So, you gonna tell me your name or what?”

“Why should I?”

“Because I’d like to get to know you better. Seriously, girl, I’m here all alone, and I have a feeling we’d hit it off. I’m the groom’s cousin. I’m here for the wedding tonight, and I’ll be on my way home tomorrow morning. I’m a good guy. I live in Livermore. I work for the mayor. No kids. No wife. What do you say we spend a little time together before I leave? Celebrate this weekend of . . . *amore* . . . with a private celebration of our own. You. Me. A bottle of Dom?”

I stare at his finger as it’s making its way up and down the side of my arm. I can only hope that he’s behaving like a throwback to 1970s bachelorhood because he’s high or drunk—or both. Otherwise, there’s no excuse.

“We can take advantage of my room,” he says. “The view is something to behold. Come on, baby. You look like you could use a little fun. And trust me; Selwyn P. Jones is a whole lotta fun. Ow!” He jumps back with a yelp.

Startled, I jump back, too. “How drunk are you?”

“You like James Brown?”

“I—”

“I *love* James Brown. Check this out.” He kicks his leg and jumps into a furious spin. “*Ow!*” he yelps. “Hit me!”

I consider doing just that—hard over his head—but instead I look around the room for hidden cameras. Surely Margot is playing a joke on me. But no. No cameras. Just me and a drunk troll imitating James Brown.

I take two swigs from my drink as I watch him dance. It’s probably the alcohol distorting my judgment, but from the little footage I’ve seen of James Brown, Selwyn’s imitation seems pretty good. After another gulp, I’m smiling.

“Good gracious me,” he says, “look at that smile. Baby, you’ve got a five-hundred-kilowatt

smile.” Seeing that he has me, he speeds up—pushing his pelvis out and back, swiveling his small hips this way and that. “Ow!” he yells. “Hit me two times.” He kicks, but, suddenly winded, he bends over at the waist with one hand resting on his knee while clutching his stomach with the other.

“You okay?”

“I sure am feeling those crab cakes I had earlier.” He pauses long enough to gaze up at me. “Come on, baby. What do you say? Let’s spend some time together.”

I kind of half shrug and half smile. “Okay. Sure.”

“*Really?*”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah, I’m serious.”

“Serious *serious?*”

“Is there another kind of serious?”

“Wow,” he mutters. “I can’t believe my luck. Hey, we don’t have to stay here, you know. We can go into the city if you want. Have a real night together. This is great. What time should I pick you up?”

“I think you misunderstand. I’m not interested in a date, but if you want to come up to my room, you’re welcome to.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m in the Queen Anne. Give me ten minutes and you can come up.”

“Hold on, now. Let me get this straight. You’re inviting me . . . up to your room?”

“Yes.”

“*Now?*”

“Yes. Now. Only thing, you have twenty minutes from the time you arrive. After that, I want you out.” I go for the bottle of scotch on the table, leaving him with a dumbfounded expression

hanging off his face. Four years ago, during my short stint in therapy, my therapist told me that my drinking and sleeping around served as nothing more than a Band-Aid that would only cause deeper pain in the long run. She added that my wounds ran deep and were crying out for my attention. I dumped her soon after, telling myself that I couldn't take another second of her banal metaphors. Deep down, though, I know she must have been right on some level. I'm not an idiot, after all, and know perfectly well I'm acting out. What I don't know is how to make myself stop—or even if there's a point to stopping.

Selwyn claps loudly. “Goodness gracious. I am one lucky man. I have to tell you, though, twenty minutes isn't gonna be nearly enough. You're gonna want more soon as I—”

I hold up my hand. “Twenty minutes, and then I don't know you and you don't know me.”

“Okay, okay. Fine, baby. But I should warn you: The ladies go crazy over Selwyn P. Jones, and you're gonna want way more than twenty.”

I pick up the bottle and head toward the door. “Doubt it.”

I change into a pair of short sweats and an old Cal T-shirt and take another look out the window. The sky is still storm gray, but the wind has died down. Margot stands on the lawn, talking to the manager of the club while staff members adjust the flowers laced around the gazebo. The gardener and his assistant work on trimming the bushes. *Margot: 1; Gentleman's club: 0*

The football player sits in the last row of chairs doing his best to . . . teeeext aaaaa meeeeeessssage, his massive fingers pounding Frankenstein-like against the tiny keyboard. The width of his back and small, peanut-sized head give him the shape of a walrus. Ask him a question about the meaning of life and the exchange goes something like the following:

**Me:** So, tell me, Curtis, what's the meaning of life?

**Curtis:** I don't know about any of that. I just try to stay focused on the game and my team.

I'm a Christian, though, if that's what you mean.

**Me:** Do you fear global warming will destroy life as we know it?

**Curtis:** I don't know about any of that. I just try to stay focused on the game and my team. I believe in God, though, if that's what you mean.

Curtis is the Oakland Raiders' star quarterback and is slated to help them win the Super Bowl. If that's not enough, he made a chart-topping R and B album last year and earned a recent book contract; plus there are the countless endorsements coming out of his football player's ass. It's been a recurring dream that I can somehow get ahold of a mere quarter of his earnings and give it to the fledging school district where I teach.

I hear a cautious knock at the door, and assuming it's the troll, tell him to come in. When he sees me in my shorts and T-shirt, he gawks as though I'm wearing a negligee. "You look amazing."

"Could you do us both a favor and drop the gigolo act?"

"Who's acting? You look good, girl." He claps his hands together and steps farther inside. "Nice digs. I likes."

He wears a patterned silk robe and brown slippers; his calf muscles bulge beneath the black trim of his robe as he struts around. "I try to work out at least four times a week," he announces before disrobing. He flexes his muscles. He's naked except for the slippers and a pair of black silk boxers. "May I?" he asks, eyeing the various bottles of booze on top of the antique bar.

"Help yourself."

He pours a shot of bourbon and downs it with a quick shake of the head and smack of the lips. He then flicks off his shoes and leaps kiddie-style onto the bed, giving the empty space beside him a few pats. "We don't have much time, baby. I want you to experience what many have said is the best love they've ever had."

I take a sip of my own drink, and then another. "I'm sure I'm about to experience something."

I keep my eyes trained on the ceiling as he kisses me. He's a surprisingly good kisser, but I realize I'm not drunk enough to do what we're about to do, and all too soon his tongue feels more like a wet mass of wiggling flesh, and my own tongue, horrified, begins to retreat.

"What's wrong, baby? You seem a little tense."

"I think I need another drink."

"You don't need another drink; you need to relax. Why don't you smile for me? If I see that kilowatt smile of yours, I'll be able to turn on the magic and you'll feel good in no time." He snaps his fingers to a beat only he can hear. "You wanna have a good time, don't you?" he says, going into his James Brown. "I say, 'You wanna have a good time?'" When he juts his elbows out and starts bobbing his head, I smile. He actually has a sweet face. Nice long eyelashes. Big brown eyes. Soft lips.

"There's that smile." He grins. He stares down at me and touches my chin with his finger. This time when we kiss, I find myself thinking about a certain activity that would help me relax even more. I turn away so that he can no longer kiss my face. I then push his shoulders, nudging him southward.

It doesn't take him long to get the hint, and he begins to wiggle his way under the sheets like an excited seal. He stops just before his head is about to disappear. "I've been told I'm the best there is when it comes to certain oral delights."

"You certainly talk a lot."

He gives me a wink and disappears under the blankets. I'm feeling better and thinking that things just might work out, when there's a tap at the door followed by Margot bursting into the room without the prerequisite "Come in."

I immediately use my thighs as a vise, willing Selwyn not to budge. I then quickly tuck his robe behind my pillow and rearrange the blankets into a huge mound over my knees, clutching a second pillow to my chest for good measure.

"I can't believe this weather," she says. "Why me? Why today?"

One good thing about narcissism: Margot doesn't notice my erratic behavior for a second; nor does she notice the pile of blankets. Honestly, she's just that self-centered.

"Haven't you ever heard of waiting for permission before walking into someone's room?" I give my thighs a firm squeeze and speak loudly enough that Selwyn will get the point—*Do not move!* He responds by surreptitiously lying flat on the bed and shaping himself into a motionless blob.

Margot takes long, elegant steps across the room. She spent most of her childhood on the beauty pageant circuit and still moves as though balancing a book on her head. She soaked up every pretty feature from Mom and her father, and now serves as a perfect composite of the two: doe-eyed, high-cheek-boned, worthy of every double take she receives. I, on the other hand, took after my father: long-limbed and angular, with a wide mouth and deep-set eyes. No one has ever mistaken us for sisters—half or not.

She stands directly next to the bed and peers out the window. "I guess I shouldn't complain about the weather when I have so much to be grateful for. I must be one of the happiest women alive."

"Lucky for the rest of us, your humility remains intact."

"Seriously, P, I'm truly grateful. Last night Curtis was so sweet. After kissing me all over my face, he fell down to his knees and kissed my—"

"Too much information! I keep telling you, I don't need to know every detail of your sex life."

"I was going to say he fell to his knees and kissed my *hand*, stupid. He proposed all over again."

"How many times is the man going to propose?"

"As many times as he wants, thank you very much. I can't believe how God has blessed me. He's handsome. Rich. Kind. What more could a girl want?"

"Intelligence?"

She cuts her eyes.

I feel the troll give my ankle a shake. Message received, I ask, “So, what do you want, anyway? I was about to take a bath.”

“I wanted to talk. I’m a little down, I guess. I wish Grampy were here is all.”

She sits next to me on the bed. I worry briefly that she’ll catch on to the fact that there’s a man under the covers, but no surprise, she’s completely oblivious.

“I keep imagining how happy Grampy would be if he knew I was marrying the one and only Curtis Randolph.”

Margot’s father raised me from the time I was eleven. His father, Grandpa Wright, or Grampy, died two years ago. My own father, the deadbeat, left when I was barely two months old. He sent Mom money from time to time, but never with a return address. By the time I turned three, he’d disappeared altogether, turning Mom and me into characters from a Dickens novel. Mom worked two jobs, as a waitress and a sales clerk, but money was as elusive as that person you’ve always had a crush on but who never notices you.

After years of life on the poverty line, Mom met Charles Wright, Margot’s father. Charles was a banker at the time, and like some kind of economic superhero, swooshed in, married Mom, and moved us three rungs up the socioeconomic ladder. Margot was born a year into the marriage, and suddenly Mom had the life she’d always wanted: a man, a home, a little girl she could afford to spoil rotten. I, meanwhile, gained a sister eleven years my junior. Then, sometime while I was in high school, Charles announced that he’d been called to serve God. He started a church in a small movie theater, and now that same church is some one thousand members strong.

“I know you miss Grampy, Margot,” I say, “but you should be grateful that your father is alive and present in your life. Try to focus on that.”

“You’re right,” she says, taking my hand. “You’re right. I wish more than anything that someone else could be here, too.”

I lower my gaze. “Margot.”

“Dad is going to say a few words about Grampy, and I’d like him to say a few words about Hailey, too. I think it’s important that they *both* be remembered tonight.”

“*Margot—*”

“I want tonight to be about family. I think we should honor her.”

I pull my hand away. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Just leave her out of it, okay?”

“But it’s a blessed event, and we need to have her presence here.”

“Blessed event? What makes an engagement party a blessed event?”

“It’s blessed to me. Curtis and I are making a holy promise to each other. Daddy agrees. I think it would be nice if he said a few words. Just a few, that’s all. I want everything to feel spiritual, and I want my niece to be with us.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “This isn’t about Hailey, Margot; it’s about you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Look at all the money you’re throwing around, and it’s not even your wedding yet. Everything is out of control.”

“And so what if it is? Curtis and I have been through a lot, and now we’re tighter than ever. I want this party to represent that.”

“Been through a lot” meaning Curtis has *cheated* a lot. Only eight months ago he was caught messing around with a groupie. Margot forgave him, spurred by his tearful apology and the pair of diamond earrings he gave her. The marriage proposal followed soon after.

I feel the troll’s breath on my thigh, slow and labored. I wonder if he’s passed out under there, but there’s nothing I can do. I need to make sure Margot doesn’t sabotage me. “It’s your engagement party,” I say. “Your marriage, your life. Just whatever you do, please leave Hailey out of it.”

“She was my niece, you know. I miss her, too. We all miss her. We will *always* miss her.”

“I don’t want her mentioned during your party, Margot. I don’t.”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“Why do you have to be so selfish? Just leave her out of it, okay?”

Resigned, she rises from the bed. She glances at the drink on the nightstand, then makes a point of staring at Selwyn’s drink on the opposite table. “You need help, Piper. You really do.”

“Okay,” I say. “As soon as you leave, I’ll get on it. Thanks. See you later.”

She saunters to the mirror in response. “I just need one more thing.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“The girls aren’t feeling well. H el ene says it’s a mild fever. I just checked on them, and they seem fine. Anyway, she says she has some family thing she has to go to—a christening or something—and has to fly to LA. She says she told me, but I swear she didn’t. Of course she gave me one of her voodoo stares. I’m certain she’s put a curse on me. *That’s* why it’s so cloudy today.”

“You really need to quit with the stereotypes.”

“I wanted everyone to see the girls in their chiffon dresses, but now I’m not sure.”

Margot’s ten-year-old twins, Sophia and Little Margot, are the product of her relationship with the hockey player no one speaks of. Like my own father, the hockey player disappeared after he learned he was going to be a father. Unlike my dad, he’s been sending monthly checks since the girls’ birth—enough money that they attend one of the most expensive schools in the Bay Area, have a nanny who may as well be their surrogate mother, and are set through college.

“Just how sick are they?”

“Sophia’s been throwing up, and Margot has a mild case of diarrhea.”

“Margot!”

“*Well.*”

“Did you call the doctor?”

“Of course I called the doctor. She said to watch them overnight, make sure they get their fluids, and if they’re still under the weather, bring them in on Monday.” She shrugs. “I think they’re making a turn for the better, but I can’t see forcing them to participate. And I can’t ask

Mom to watch them—*I need her.*”

“So you want me to watch them.”

“Would you mind?”

“Of course not.”

“Thanks. I knew you’d say yes. I just don’t want you to be upset because you’ll have to miss the ceremony. But I’ve already thought it out. You’ll be able to watch the film version, and it’ll be even better. You can pause and rewind.”

I imagine fast-forwarding for long stretches.

I feel a weak hand squeeze my calf and think of all the brain cells Selwyn must have lost by now. “Sounds good. And if that’s all you need, I think I’m going to take a bath now.”

“We need you upstairs by four o’clock. If I’m not there, tell the voodoo priestess I want her back by Monday morning.”

Satisfied, she gives a ta-ta wave—“Thanks, Sis!”—and is out the door.

I wait a few seconds. “All clear.”

Hearing he’s safe, Selwyn crawls out from beneath the covers like a man recently shipwrecked, clawing at sand and inhaling massive doses of air.

“Are you okay?”

His eyes roll upward as he offers a weak nod.

I get out of bed and lock the door. Selwyn, though, remains on his back, still trying to catch his breath.

“You sure you’re okay?”

His chest rises up and down in great heaves. He covers his forehead with his arm as he stares into the ceiling. It takes him a while, but then he suddenly jerks his head in my direction. “Hold on now. Wait a second. Your sister is marrying *Curtis Randolph?*”

I nod.

“*The Curtis Randolph?*”

I nod again.

“Curtis Randolph of the Oakland Raiders Curtis Randolph?”

“Yes, Selwyn. Curtis Randolph of the Oakland Raiders.”

“Curtis Randolph,” he murmurs. “*Curtis Randolph*. That man . . . That man is the top quarterback in the country! He’s going to take the Raiders all the way to the Super Bowl! Damn, girl, I just might have to dump the wedding. I’m going to and check out your sister’s engagement party. What time does it start?”

“None of your business.”

“But it might be fun to—”

“You’re not invited.”

“Damn,” he mumbles. “Curtis Randolph. What if I just stop by for a second?”

“You’re *not* invited.”

“Okay. All right. *Damn*. Curtis Randolph. That man is a wizard with the ball. A genius.” He eases himself up with a grin and kisses my shoulder. “Lotta love between you and your sister, huh? You two are like *this*.” He crosses his fingers and chuckles.

“Shut up.”

I refuse to look at him but feel his stare and big goofy smile all the same. He takes a finger and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Mmmmm. You sure are pretty when you’re pissed,” he says. “Which is a good thing, ’cause I get the feeling you get pissed a lot.” He laughs to himself.

“Not funny,” I say, giving him a playful slap near the shoulder.

“Aw, come here.” He takes me in his arms and kisses my temple. “Shall we continue?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not, baby? We’ll find our groove in no time. I have a feeling it’s just around the corner.”

“More like the next state.”

“Aw, come on. Don’t be like that.” He smiles and lets his fingers do a little dance on my

shoulder.

I push him away.

After giving his head a scratch, he sighs and falls back against the bed. “Curtis Randolph. Damn. Curtis Randolph.” He sucks in a breath and adds, “Well, I should probably get ready for the ceremony anyhow. Would you like to be my date?”

“Can’t. You heard—I’m watching my nieces.”

“Well,” he says, “can’t say I didn’t try. You’re a lovely woman, Kilowatt.”

“Thanks.”

He pauses, eyes locked with mine. “May I ask what your sister was talking about? What you need to move on from?”

“Absolutely not.”

He raises a hand in surrender. “I understand. I do. I just want to say, though, if you ever need anyone to talk to—well, I understand pain. Me and pain? We go *way* back.”

I see how sincere he is and take his hand. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

He kisses my cheek and climbs out of the bed. After finding his slippers and robe, he goes to the door. “So I guess this is good-bye, huh?”

“Looks like it.”

“Well, if you’re ever in Livermore, promise to look me up.”

“I will never be in Livermore.” I’m not even sure where Livermore is, actually. Not to mention the ugly sound of it—makes me think of various organs like kidneys and spleens.

“But if you are. I’m an attorney. I work in the mayor’s office. City hall. Can’t miss it. Now what do you say you give me one more smile before I leave.”

I toss my shoulder up, as Margot might, and smile as if posing for a picture.

“Beautiful,” he says, shaking his head. “Just beautiful.”