

## The Cleaners

### Chapter one by Tjai Abdullah

The holidays swell with forced cheer, gifts wrapped in expectation, the new year dangling promises like nooses. For this Philadelphia family, joy was a stranger long before December's frost bit deep. Their unraveling sparked in late autumn's hush, a slow burn that lit the whole kin ablaze.

Shanice, called Sha-gunna, the youngest daughter, stands in the gutted storefront, air thick as betrayal. Charles Greyson, her man—lover, partner in their crooked dry-cleaning hustle—reaches for her hand. She snatches it back, a reflex born of too many lies. He lifts his palm to her face, tear-tracked and raw, strokes her cheek with a tenderness that rings false as fool's gold. Their eyes lock, his heavy with the weight of secrets chambered like rounds. "I know this terrifies you," he murmurs, voice low, scripted. "And yeah, it looks like I always put me first. But baby, in this mess, I chose you. Swear it—from the love I got left."

Shanice scans the empty space, captors hulking in the corners like judgments unspoken, then back to him: the cheater, the fool who'd drag them both under. Words rise in her throat, bitter as lye. "I know," she whispers, pressing his hand to her skin. "You had no choice."

"I fucked this up bad, Neesy. Real bad. But... you still love me?" His eyes, bruised plums, beg mercy she can't summon. She studies him—Charles, deceiver in a cheap suit—and forces the lie. "Of course." Cold as the wind rattling the windows. He leans in, desperate, lips crashing like a last plea. She lets him, tasting the end of it all.

"That's enough." The boss's voice cuts clean, a blade through silk. Guards haul them apart, rebind wrists with rough cord. The lovers crumple to knees on the grit-strewn floor. Shanice holds silent, a statue carved from fury; Charles scrabbles for words, a plea half-formed. But the man in the crisp suit rises, scriptural in his calm. "For these sins..." Four guards answer, clips emptying in symphony—Charles first, body jerking like a puppet cut loose, then her shadow on the floor. Bullets whine, but the boss signals halt. He crosses to Shanice, lifts her gentle, checks for the bloom of real wounds. None. She meets his gaze—dark, knowing—and nods: I'm whole. He unties her with care, a conspirator's touch. They slip out together, door swinging shut on the charade. "Stupid muthafucka," she mutters, the word a exorcism as the door swings shut behind them.

The guards holster their weapons, roll Charles's betrayed body into a threadbare carpet, and haul it out the back. Outside, Shanice crosses to her sister's apartment. The boss slips into his waiting town car, gliding past a cheerful couple unloading Christmas bags and a Santa suit from their trunk. They lug it all to the corner crosswalk, oblivious to the alley where guards load the rolled-up carpet into a van.

Jakil aka Jay K, the Youngest Son

"Sha, you wild—a real gunna, for real," Jakil Cleaners chuckles into his phone at his younger sister Shanice. "You know you could've just gotten a divorce."

He laughs at her retort. "You're right, he would've dragged it out. But you know Daddy's gonna flip when he finds out who you used." A pause. "Yeah, I know, but you're playing with fire, sis." The train bell clangs. "Aw, man, I gotta go. Nah, stop—it's really my train. Yeah, you too. Catch you at Karen's. I'm heading there now."

Jakil hangs up and bolts down the stairs to the subway platform. He swipes his keycard and dashes toward the train, squeezing through the doors just as they hiss shut. They pop open again; a woman rushes in behind him. Still replaying his sister's tale, he steps back—right into her.

"Excuse me," comes the sweetest voice, like honey over gravel.

"Oh, my bad, shortie." He turns, gripping the handrail, and his breath catches. Hazel eyes meet his—the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

"I'm nobody's shortie, sir."

"You're right. My apologies." A grin flashes his diamond fronts. She's unmoved, and he feels it. Recovering, he tries again: "So, I'm Jay K. Mind if I ask your name?"

"You can ask." She smiles, admiring his blonde locs framing a caramel face.

"So... what's your name?"

"Have a good night, Jay." She whispers it, drifting to an empty seat. Out comes a book; she dives in, hoping for a chapter before her fertility clinic appointment.

Jakil can't look away, peering through the subway glass. She's reading *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison—he files that away. Doors open; rowdy kids pile on, boasting about a brawl. He pops in earbuds, nodding to Kendrick Lamar's "Loyalty." Tinasae overhears him mumbling lyrics, fumbling lines until his favorite hook hits. She smiles.

A few stops later, an empty seat opens near her. He moves for it, but she bookmarks with her Temple ID and rises, skirting the rowdy crew by the far doors. Her hand brushes his—warm, electric. "It's Tinasae," she murmurs, smiling as she exits.

Jakil savors the touch, steps back—and crushes the fresh Air Max of a kid from the group shuffling through. The train lurches off; they swarm him, fists itching.

Karen aka KC, the Oldest Daughter

Asleep on the sofa in post-coital haze, neither Preston nor his lover hears the bedroom door creak. Karen Cleaners sets down her decoration bags, glides to the bookshelf. She punches the safe's combo, extracts the family gun—loaded, heavy. Crossing to the couch, she cocks it, the glare from the window above forcing her to angle low. Nozzle to his forehead, she taps. "You might want to wake up."