

LEARNING CURVE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Ashton Clarke moved smoothly through the sea of swaying bodies. Music pounded through large speakers hanging from each wall of the Triangle Club. Strobe lights flashed a rainbow of rapidly changing hues, giving the dance floor a psychedelic resemblance to a life-size kaleidoscope. She was wearing a loose-fitting pair of faded blue jeans and a skintight black T-shirt that hugged every muscle in her torso. As she wove her way across the room and up to the bar, in a single glance, she took in her surroundings and the women rocking to the beat. Quite a crowd for a Thursday night in Roosevelt, Ohio.

“*Hola, Pantalona,*” she greeted the soft butch behind the bar.

Lupe was probably in her early fifties but looked older. The corners of her mouth were creased from years of smoking, and flecks of gray speckled her close-cut dark hair. Lines rimmed her sparkling eyes, a product of her frequent and hearty laugh. She gave a slight bow and replied, “*Buenas noches, Don Juana.*”

Ash perched herself on an empty stool and slapped her hand on the bar. “Hey, Lupe, one bottle of Corona, and don’t forget my lime.”

“My, my, someone’s feeling festive tonight.”

“You betcha. It’s a gorgeous night, I’ve got money in my pocket, and I’m surrounded by beautiful women.”

The bartender snapped the top off a bottle of Corona. “Ah, looking for a wife for the night?”

“Who isn’t?” Ash laughed. “A Miss Right Now would suit me just fine.”

“Well, not that you heard it from me, but there’s a hot mamacita checking you out from over in the corner.”

Ash didn’t even look. “The femme in the short red dress?”

“Damn, how did you know?”

“I noticed her when I came in. What’s she drinking?”

The bartender indicated Ash’s Corona.

Ash grinned. “Well then, my friend, make that two Coronas.”

A moment later, drinks in hand, Ash strolled toward the dark-haired beauty sitting alone at a tall table in the corner of the bar. She looked the woman up and down, letting her eyes travel up a pair of deeply tanned legs and a smooth torso to the soft curve of her breast, past her slender neck and full lips, right into her coffee-colored eyes. Ash felt her libido kick into overdrive as the woman held her stare and gave a subtle nod of recognition.

“I’ll trade you a drink for a seat,” Ash said.

“That sounds fair,” the woman replied. “I’m Rita.”

“Ah, lovely Rita, meter maid.” Ash claimed the seat next to her. “Is that a family name or was your father a Beatles fan?”

“My mother was the Beatles fan.” Rita’s gaze drifted from Ash’s mouth to her chest, in a blatant appraisal of her physical attributes. “And you? Do you have a name?”

“Ashton Clarke at your service, but you can call me Ash.”

“Is that what you tell all the girls?” Rita asked coyly.

“No, not the girls, only the beautiful women.”

“Well then, I have no choice but to be complimented.”

Ash waited patiently as they made small talk for a few minutes and sipped their drinks. Then she leaned closer and fixed her eyes intently on Rita’s. “Lovely Rita, may I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.”

Ash smiled to herself. This woman was falling right into the palm of her hand. “Would you like to dance with me?”

Rita smiled broadly. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Ash led tonight’s easy conquest out onto the crowded dance floor. The song was fast and they started to move to the beat, eyes locked. They moved closer as the song continued, so close Ash could feel the heat of Rita’s body mingling with her own. She could take her in her arms anytime now; she knew Rita wanted her. But she wanted to make sure Rita knew it, too, so she waited. Rita could come to her.

As one song faded into another, Rita finally stepped in, placing a hand on Ash’s shoulder and aligning their bodies. Ash slipped her arm around Rita’s waist and applied some gentle pressure to the small of her back. Their movements coincided beautifully and Ash slid one of her knees between Rita’s legs and gently rocked back and forth to the beat. Rita let out a small moan and clung tightly to Ash’s neck, breathing faster. Ash held back, not wanting to give in to the urge too soon. She felt Rita sigh at the withdrawal.

Just then the music slowed. A soft ballad wafted through the room. Confident that she had Rita right where she wanted her, Ash slowly caressed her back through the thin material of her dress. Rita responded with soft kisses. Along her neck, up her jawline, across her cheek. When she began nibbling on her ear, Ash returned the favor, bending down to drag her lips across Rita’s neck. Rita turned slightly and their lips met, softly at first, but as the pressure increased, Ash parted her lips and allowed her tongue to flash into Rita’s waiting mouth.

It took them a moment to realize the song had ended. Ash opened her eyes slowly to meet a seductive stare.

“Maybe we’d better take a break,” Rita said, stepping back.

“Sure, would you like another drink?”

“That’d be wonderful.” Rita almost purred. “I’ll go freshen up. You get the drinks, and I’ll meet you back at the table.”

With a grin, Ash walked back to the bar.

“Two Coronas?” Lupe asked.

“Nope, just one. You’d better make mine a Coke.”

“A Coke, already?”

Ash nodded. “I think I may need to drive pretty soon.”

Lupe popped the top of the Corona and poured a Coke. “You must be on fire tonight.”

“When you’ve got it, you’ve got it.”

“Yeah, yeah, rub it in.”

Ash threw a five on the bar and said, “Keep the change.”

She and Rita reached their table at the same time. Ash pulled out a chair for her, and then scooted her own in close enough that their legs were touching. Holding her Coke in one hand, she let the other slip from the table to rest gently on Rita’s thigh.

“You’re a good dancer,” Rita said.

“I had a good partner,” Ash came back quickly.

Rita studied her as though trying to decide whether she wanted to take the next step. Ash had seen this situation enough to know the woman’s mind was likely telling her to be cautious, while her body was telling her something entirely different.

“You’re smooth,” Rita said. “I don’t know whether to be flattered or suspicious.”

“You’re in control of this situation. I’m following your lead here,” Ash answered, but at the same time she fingered the hem of Rita’s dress, making it ride up slightly on her thigh.

“So if I wanted to shake hands and say good night right now, you wouldn’t try to stop me?”

“Not at all.” Ash leaned in and whispered in her ear. “But I don’t think that’s what you really want.” She could feel Rita softening to her touch, so she continued moving her hand slowly up her thigh. “I think you want the same thing I do, but I’m going to leave that up to you. We could talk, we could dance, we could say good night right now.” She paused for emphasis and felt Rita’s body rise and fall with each breath she took. “Or we could move on to something else, but the choice is yours.”

She allowed her words to linger a second, then sat back,

breaking all contact between their bodies. As she took a long drink of her Coke, she watched Rita's face, reading the mix of doubt and lust that battled within her, each emotion trying to steer the night in opposite directions. Ash waited patiently. She didn't have anything to worry about. She knew exactly what the end result would be. There was no need to force the issue.

She finally got the green light she'd been waiting for when Rita set her drink firmly on the table and asked, "Your place or mine?"



Ash struggled to keep her balance as they fumbled up the stairs to Rita's apartment while simultaneously undressing each other. They paused only long enough for Rita to unlock the door, then rushed inside, kicking off their shoes and stumbling over to the couch.

"The bedroom's on the other side of the kitchen," Rita said breathlessly.

"That's too far away." Ash buried her face in the nape of Rita's neck. "I'm going to take you right here."

Their already scarce clothing gave way to bare skin as Ash pulled the appropriate strings on Rita's dress and it fell to the floor. She kissed Rita's lips before allowing her mouth to travel down her neck and over her shoulder. Just as she was about to take a dark nipple in her mouth, Rita sat up and pushed her down backward on the couch. She tugged at Ash's belt and then the buttons on her jeans. As soon as she slid these over Ash's hips, she lifted her hands to Ash's face. For a moment, she gazed into her eyes, then she ran her fingertips up through Ash's hair.

Ash closed her eyes, surrendering to the physical. No more need for thinking, no more calculations, there was nothing left to do but react. Her pulse quickened and her breathing became more shallow as Rita softly caressed a path down her chest and abdomen, teasing the sensitive flesh. As she inched down, Ash

felt her body tighten, her muscles contracting with anticipation and arousal. When Rita zeroed in on her thighs, Ash rolled over, and they tumbled onto the floor. She swiftly took Rita's wrists in one of her hands and held them over her head.

"So you like to tease?" she whispered in Rita's ear. "Then turnabout is fair play."

She ran her tongue down Rita's neck, taking her time, moving steadily downward until she was between the deeply tanned thighs. As she licked and nibbled at the soft flesh, inching ever so slowly toward her target, Rita lifted her hips trying to hasten the process. Each time Ash drew back, she heard a sigh of frustration. She could feel Rita's desire mounting and wanted to keep her on the edge for as long as she could.

Rita clutched at Ash's neck and back. "I can't wait anymore."

"Patience is a virtue, my dear." Ash chuckled softly.

"Please," Rita begged in a moan that was more of a command than a request.

Ash bowed her head, and with a few deliberate flicks of her expert tongue, she felt the woman beneath her shudder as waves of pleasure swept through her body.

"Oh, my God," Rita panted. "That was amazing."

Ash crawled up next to her. "I do what I can."

With a smug grin, she rolled onto her back and closed her eyes, allowing herself to rest for just a moment. When she felt the soft strokes of gentle fingers caress her body, she knew it was going to be a long night.



The bank clock on the street corner flashed 4:23 a.m. as Ash quietly slipped out of Rita's apartment. Stopping to collect the garments scattered on the front steps, she breathed in the crisp fall air and decided she was close enough to walk home. As she trekked through the empty downtown streets, she couldn't help

but hum the Beatles' "Lovely Rita." It had been a good night and she looked forward to dreaming about it when she finally crawled into her own bed.

Her large, rustic loft was located above an old warehouse. The space, like the neighborhood, was bare bones, a typical bachelor pad. It was open, uncluttered, and unrefined, and Ash liked it that way. She unlocked the door and crossed through the kitchen and living area on the way to her bed. The light on her answering machine was blinking, and she pushed the button to play her messages as she shed her clothing.

"Ash, it's Mary. Call me when you finally stumble in. Sharon has to work tomorrow, so I thought you might like to join Annie and me at the park. Call me either way and let me know you're home safe. Love you."

Ash smiled and picked up the phone. She had known Mary since they were teenagers. She wasn't sure exactly when her best friend had started checking in on her so frequently, but it happened so often they seemed to take it for granted.

"Hey, Casanova," Mary answered sleepily.

"I'm home safe."

"What time is it?"

"Almost five," Ash said.

"Time to get up."

"Time to go to bed."

"You never cease to amaze me." Mary yawned. "See you at the park at one?"

"We'd better make it two."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you, too." Ash was asleep almost before she got the phone back on the table.