

Clark Accord

BETSY

Translated by Susan Massotty

(AN EXCERPT FROM THE QUEEN OF PARAMARIBO)

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The Buick slowly inched its way through the crowd. People only moved over when the car was practically on top of them. Anonymous faces peered in, hoping to catch a glimpse of the passenger. Betsy listened with satisfaction and pride to the cries of admiration that reached her in snatches through the rolled-down window. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the jade handle of her feather fan – all her tension seemed to be concentrated in her hands. The fan provided a welcome breeze on this hot and sultry April evening. The usual wind wasn't blowing in from the Surinam River, and the oppressive heat had driven people out of their houses. They swarmed over the road like ants on an anthill.

She had been looking forward to this evening for months. The birthday of Crown Princess Juliana was going to be celebrated in style – dancers were even coming from the Demerara!

“So, are you a little nervous about tonight?” the driver asked, flicking his eyes towards the rear-view mirror to watch her reaction.

“What’s there to be scared of?”

She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice, though she was fed up with his stares. It was all she could do to stay calm before the big event, and here he was, doing his best to rattle her. For all she knew he was a friend of one of the other girls who was going to dance tonight.

“Just think,” he said, “in a few hours you’ll be dancing with the Demerara’s famous Black Bottom specialist. That’s what I call a real honor!”

It was infuriating, watching the man trying to bite back a smile. But she wasn’t about to let him see how tense she was. “You mean it’ll be an honor for *him* to dance with *me*. At the Halikibe I’m known as the ‘Queen of the Black Bottom.’ Besides, I’ve spent weeks perfecting my style. I can dance better than any woman alive. The Black Bottom, the Charleston, the Rumba, the Tango – I can do ‘em all!” She tossed her head back challengingly.

“They say he’s the best Black Bottom dancer in the West Indies. He never stops bragging about how good he is. I hear he likes to make a laughingstock out of his partners. If they aren’t good enough, he ups the tempo and makes quick rhythm changes. The poor girl stumbles around in his arms, and the crowd laps it up.”

“Really? Well, I’m ready for him. Let him have a try. This twenty-six-year-old gal is gonna show him a thing or two! But there’s no need for you to worry. You concentrate on your driving skills, and I’ll see to the dancing.”

“I was just trying to warn you.”

Though she radiated calm, her stomach was churning. She was terrified at the

thought of being turned into a laughingstock. If she made one wrong step or couldn't keep up with him tonight, she'd be done for. So much for her fame as the star of the Halikibe. She knew that the other girls would grab at the chance to topple her from her throne. Not to mention that the men would no longer be lining up to dance with her. The ticket price would hit rock bottom. And of course they'd all laugh themselves sick.

She took a snowy white handkerchief from her bag and sprinkled it with Boldoot. Gently, she dabbed the cologne on her neck and cleavage and sank back into the soft cushions, enjoying the perfume's refreshing coolness. She checked her make-up in the rear-view mirror. The black stripe of kohl showed her eyes to great advantage – it made them look mysterious, an effect that had been accentuated by the use of taupe eye shadow. Blood-red lipstick had been carefully applied to her full lips, just inside the lip line. She had added a little blush just under the cheekbones to soften the angular shape of her face. Satisfied with what she saw in the mirror, she patted her face here and there to eliminate the shiny spots.

With a slight jolt, the car came to a stop outside the Halikibe. The driver drummed his fingers impatiently on the walnut dashboard while he waited for someone to open the car door for her. The path to the entrance had been cordoned off, and a row of burly young men had been stationed at intervals to hold back the overly eager public. Like vultures, the crowd descended on the car, and people bent over to stare in the window.

“She looks like a princess!” cried a woman in an awestruck voice.

Betsy's evening was complete. She was in seventh heaven. A compliment from another woman, no less.

Gallantly, one of the bodyguards opened the door for her. She thanked him with a

majestic nod. The crowd held its breath.

For one second you could have heard a pin drop. Then the silence was broken.
“Wow, what a dress! She sure is beautiful!”

“I’ve never seen a dress like that. There must be at least a thousand beads...!”

“Hey, she’s wearing gold shoes!”

There was a buzz of admiration. Those shoes had cost an arm and a leg. A whole seventeen guilders and fifty cents. And that was nothing compared to the dress, which was actually two dresses worn on top of each other. The under garment was made of gold satin, and the tunic that went over it was studded with colored beads. The entire outfit had cost a hundred guilders, but Mr. Fernandes had let her buy it on credit. When she’d heard the price, she had wailed, “But for that amount of money I could buy a building lot!

“Betsy,” he’d replied, “that dress is made for you. You’re going to look fantastic. Try it on.”

One look in the mirror and she was sold. “I’ll pay you every last penny, even if I’ve got to dance my feet off.”

“Seeing you dazzle them in that dress on your big evening is all that matters to me. The money’ll sort itself out.” His eyes unashamedly followed the contours of her body.

“You mean you’re coming?” she asked in mock surprise.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the world! I want to see the look on their faces when you make your entrance in that dress. They’ll be begging you to dance. Who knows, maybe I won’t even get a turn.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be left on the sidelines as long as I’m around, especially not now.” And with a tingle of excitement, she had held up the gold dress.

“Why, she could be a crown princess!” exclaimed a heavy-set man standing a few feet away.

“A Halikibe princess, you mean” replied an older woman with a face full of warts.

“Halikibe Princess!!” shouted someone else in apparent approval. The cry was taken up and echoed by the crowd: “Halikibe Princess! Halikibe Princess...!!”

Betsy reveled in the success brought on by her dress. The gold silk scarf holding her curls in place presumably added to her royal image. Halikibe Princess – she liked the name. From now on, that’s what she would call herself.

Clutching her purse firmly under her arm, she strode to the entrance with her head held high. Snatches of music from Buddel’s band drifted over the stone wall around the dance hall. Inside, things were already in full swing, with various couples doing a fiery rumba. Outside, the mob around the door pressed forward to get a better look at what was going on inside. Other people were simply enjoying their evening out – chatting with friends or buying food and drinks from the refreshment stands along the river.

Betsy had almost reached the entrance when Maxi Linder, accompanied by two naval officers, cut in front of her. Maxi spit demonstratively on the sand and rolled her eyes in Betsy’s direction. She was covered from head to toe in gold jewelry. Too bad it clashed with the tacky dress she had on. What’s more, her hair had been swept up in a ridiculous roll on top of her head, and she wasn’t wearing a bit of make-up.

Since Maxi Linder and her party were blocking the doorway, Betsy had no choice but to wait. With Maxi on the scene, the public had lost all interest in Betsy.

“You’re beautiful, baby!” a man called.

Maxi grinned and blew him a kiss.

Betsy seethed inwardly. This was just one of the many differences between her and that *motyo*, that whore. She might be beautiful, but she had no manners whatsoever.

“Hey, Maxi, when you get tired of that dress, can I have it?” a woman yelled.

“It’s too expensive to give away, but I’m sure there’s something else in my closet I could let you have. Why don’t you drop by my house sometime? It’s on Saramacca Street, in Bigi Spikri.”

The familiarity with which Maxi Linder addressed her public! Betsy wouldn’t dream of doing that. Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile. And as for giving her clothes to total strangers – it was out of the question!

For a moment it looked as if Maxi Linder was not going to be admitted to the dance hall. Not that Betsy would have minded. It wouldn’t be the first time Maxi had been refused the door. This was a respectable place, and the word “respectable” wasn’t part of Maxi’s vocabulary. The girls who frequented the Halikibe were expected to behave decently in public. But as everyone knew, Maxi Linder could swear like a trooper, and often did, regardless of the company she was in. Nor was she the type to wait until a man came to her. It made Betsy’s blood boil to think of such vulgarity.

Maxi Linder looked back at Betsy in triumph. Then, arm in arm with her two officers, she crossed the threshold.

Her good mood gone, Betsy took the last few steps to the door. “Why’d you let that tramp in?” she snapped at the doormen. “I thought this place had a reputation to uphold.”

“We had no choice. The two gentlemen are officers aboard the SS Haiti, which got in from New York yesterday. They had invitations.”

“If you think I look upon her as competition, you’re wrong. She can’t dance, and

she hasn't got an ounce of style..." With this, Betsy flounced into the room.

She wove her way across the crowded dance floor to her usual place near the stage, stopping occasionally to greet an acquaintance, chat with a friend, acknowledge a compliment on her dress. When she realized that Maxi Linder and her two companions were seated at the next table, she bit her lip so hard that it bled. While the bitter taste of blood spread through her mouth, she pointedly moved her chair as far away from them as she could.

Maxi Linder retaliated with a loud chuckle. Then she turned to the officer on her left and cooed, "Darling, let me have a sip from your glass."

"No, honey. Tonight I'm gonna take a sip out of yours," the officer replied. Nevertheless, he offered her his glass.

While she drank, he playfully pinched her waist. She squealed and pulled away as if she'd been bit by a mosquito. Then, laughing uproariously, she threw her arms around his neck. Once again, Maxi had managed to make herself the center of attention.

"Tell me, what's your opinion of that demonstration that took place down on Orange Square?" said Betsy to the man sitting next to her, in hopes of distracting him from Maxi Linder and her cheap tricks. It was a Dutch man in a dark suit with a garish bow tie. "I don't think I've ever seen so many Javanese and Indian contract laborers together in one place," she continued.

"I didn't see it myself, but I read about it in today's paper. That Communist, De Kom, has got the workers all riled up. You've got to keep your eye on people like that – before you know it, they'll have the entire population up in arms against the government," the man said.

"Do you think it'll come to that?" someone else asked.

“Take a look at Russia, and you’ll know what I mean. The Reds have really messed things up over there,” said the man in the bow tie.

“Why on earth has De Kom let himself get mixed up with the Communists! There’s no need for that in a peace-loving country like Surinam!” Betsy’s interest had genuinely been aroused. Politics was her favorite subject. She read the paper every day – she never left the house without making sure she had the five cents she needed to buy *De Banier*.

Up on the stage, Buddel’s band had switched from the rumba to the tango. It wouldn’t be long before it was time for the Black Bottom.

“De Kom was exposed to all kinds of ideas when he was in Holland. He must’ve picked up that left-wing stuff from labor agitators, or from Indonesian students like that Hatta character,” said the Dutch man, plucking at his bow tie to loosen it a bit.

“But these are hard times. If you read the papers, you know there’s a world-wide depression. More and more businesses are having to close their doors. We’re even beginning to feel the pinch here in Surinam. The few plantations we had left are also going under,” said Betsy. She stole a quick look at Maxi Linder.

Maxi was all but sitting on the lap of one of “her” officers, while the other one couldn’t keep his hands off her thighs.

“She must think she’s in the Roxy Bar,” said Betsy in a low voice, nodding towards Maxi Linder.

The Dutch man leaned forward shamelessly to get a better view. “They seem to be enjoying themselves. Now there’s a woman who knows how to make a man feel good...!” Without taking his eyes off the threesome at the neighboring table, he fished a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the sweat from his brow and swallowed his beer in

one gulp. With the froth still clinging to his lips, he said, "This friend of mine told me that she has a refrigerator in her house." His voice was filled with awe.

"A what?" said Betsy. She raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"A refrigerator. One time I was... uh... I mean *he*," he corrected his slip of the tongue, "*he* was at her house. She has this nice, airy upstairs flat with a toilet and a bathtub and everything. He could hardly believe it when she told him she had owned the house since she was sixteen. That body of hers must bring in a fortune..." For the second time he mopped the beads of sweat from his upper lip and forehead. He stared at Maxi Linder in open admiration.

Betsy sucked in her breath with audible disapproval. "That house was left to her by her father. She doesn't make that much money! She's not as hot right now as Betsy Bama. And she can't carry a candle to Trude Labat or Freide Lemmers!"

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" asked one of the gentlemen at her table.

"Who have I left out?"

"Yourself."

"Who, me? I earn my money by dancing. If they want more action, they can go elsewhere. I'm a decent girl."

"That's what they all say! I bet Maxi Linder also claims she's a decent girl," the man with the bow tie teased. Without giving her a chance to reply he went on, "But you were asking me what a refrigerator was. When my friend first mentioned it, I didn't know either. But I recently read an article about it in *De West*. They described it as a kind of ice box. Some Swede thought it up. An ingenious system that generates cold without the use of any mechanical device. You can keep food in it without having to add preservatives."

"Imagine that! What a fantastic invention! How does it work?" Betsy's eyes were

opened wide in disbelief.

“If I understand it correctly, it’s based on the use of hydrogen and ammonia. You connect it to an electrical outlet and it produces ice for household use. It costs about twenty cents a day to run the thing.” He leaned back in his chair, enjoying the attention he was getting from his story.

“Twenty cents a day? Whew, that’s a lot! And you say that two-bit whore has got one of those things in her house...?”

“And to think you didn’t believe me when I said that body of hers had brought in a fortune,” he exclaimed triumphantly.

Up on the stage, Buddel’s band made way for the more popular Gilles Saxophone Jazz Band. The players enthusiastically struck up the opening bars of the Black Bottom, and Betsy was reminded of the reason for her presence in the Halikibe tonight. Her honor as the Halikibe Princess was at stake. And that was more important than getting wound up over Maxi Linder’s refrigerator.

The owner of the Halikibe headed towards her table with his arms outstretched and a broad smile on his face. “Papa Dan will be coming over in a minute to introduce himself. Are you ready? Don’t let me down! Lots of people have bought a ticket to dance with you. I hope you’re rested, ‘cause you’re going to need all the energy you’ve got for your dance with Papa Dan. We’ve had to temporarily suspend the sale of tickets...”

“You know you can count on me, Emile. Have I ever let you down?” Her words came out sounding hoarse – she was so nervous she could hardly swallow.

“No, you never have! But before I forget: you look gorgeous!” He ran an approving eye up and down her body.

“Hey, Emile, aren’t you gonna say hi to *me*?” called Maxi Linder, who had been

waving her arms around to attract his attention.

But instead of going over to her table, he stayed where he was and wiggled his fingers at her with an uneasy smile plastered on his face.

“Ooh, what’s the matter? Scared to come closer? That’s not how you act when you’re in bed with me...!” And to add insult to injury, she flung her arms around the neck of one of her escorts.

“Wilhelmina, this is a respectable establishment. Behave yourself, or I’ll be obliged to ask you to continue your evening elsewhere.”

“You mean you’d chuck me out this joint? Don’t play games with me, Emile. Before I’m finished with you, you’ll be sorry you were ever born.” She kicked back her chair, which clattered against the wall, and glared at him, with her hands on her hips and a murderous look in her eyes.

“Wilhelmina, behave yourself! You’re impossible when you’re like this. Some day, your big mouth is going to get you killed!” Then, with his face flushed a deep red, he vanished into the crowd.

“What are *you* looking at?” the *motyo* snarled at Betsy.

She knew that Maxi Linder was capable of anything when she was in a mood like this. The sensible thing to do was to avoid provoking her any further, so she turned her head without answering.

“A person can’t even enjoy a quiet evening out on the town,” she said to the man with the bow tie. “If you ask me, that woman is just plain trash.”

But Maxi wasn’t ready to call it quits. “What makes you think you’re better than I am? We both do it for money. Except that you dance with ‘em, and I fuck ‘em. And believe you me, I fuck a lot better than you dance! Just ask any man in this room.” Maxi

was looming over Betsy's table, her eyes spitting fire. She was clearly out for blood.

Betsy, keeping her eyes fixed on Maxi, reached for her handbag. She wouldn't hesitate to use her razor if she had to. She'd settle this for once and for all, scarring that bitch so badly that no man would ever take a second look.

Two bodyguards suddenly appeared out of nowhere and placed themselves between the two women. A third one gently steered Maxi Linder towards the exit. The band had stopped playing. The couples on the dance floor stepped aside to let them through.

"Why they even let her in is beyond me!" a blond woman remarked acidly. "It's the same story wherever she goes – she's always looking for a fight...!" And the woman recoiled from Maxi in horror, as if she were a mad dog.

"You wanna know why they let me in?" Maxi snapped at her. "Ask your husband. I've let him in a lot of times."

The blond theatrically clutched her chest and gasped for air.

Within minutes the evening, which had started out so promisingly, had turned into a nightmare. Actually, Betsy had seen it coming from the moment she had run into that whore at the entrance. Maxi liked to kick up a fuss. The problem with that *motyo* was that she couldn't stand to have other women around.

It was the men that puzzled Betsy. What did they see in such an ordinary slut?!

After Maxi and her companions had finally been ushered outside, the room filled again with the rousing intro to the Black Bottom. The dance-happy couples rushed onto the dance floor as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly Papa Dan was standing beside her. She had been so wrapped up in the

incident with Maxi Linder that she hadn't even seen him coming. He swept off his hat with a flourish and bowed deeply.

She couldn't help noticing how incredibly broad-shouldered he looked in his impeccable dark-gray Grimaldi-stripe suit. The waistband, held in place by wide suspenders, came up to his chest. His skin was the color of ripe bananas, and the thin, clipped moustache on his upper lip gave his pointy face the look of a predatory animal, an impression that was reinforced when he curled his fleshy lips into a cunning smile and revealed a row of gold teeth...

"Who was that gal you was jes talkin' to?" he asked in *beyan*, the heavily accented English of the Caribbean. Before she could even answer, he added, "I love them wild gals...!"

He gently pushed her towards the dance floor, which in the meantime had been cleared of people. The musicians upped the tempo. The firm pressure of his right arm around her waist and the intertwining of their fingers made Betsy forget the time and the place. Their bodies flowed rhythmically together in one motion. As if drawn by an enormous magnet, her pelvis pressed against his. Effortlessly, she followed his steps. Flawlessly, she made his tempo her own. The music surged through her veins. As if in a trance, she saw the room whirling around her...

The loud applause brought her back to reality.

"Tell me, before we start the next dance. Do you have any plans for tonight?"

She could see by the rise and fall of his chest that he was having trouble controlling his breathing. There was a sheen of perspiration on the yellowish skin of his face.

"I have to dance tonight."

“You have to dance. Well then, my lady, I’ll wait and watch you all night.” Once more he bowed deeply and tipped his hat, and once more she felt his masculine strength as he swept her into his arms, while the lucky ticket-holders waited impatiently on the sidelines with their tickets in their hot little hands.

As far as she was concerned, nothing could spoil her evening now. Not even the prospect of being led across the dance floor by a bunch of idiots who had plunked down ten cents for the privilege of dancing with her. Not to mention that she’d managed to shake off that obnoxious *motyo*...

Calabash

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