

Chapter 1

Tatiana

Friday night during the Central Precinct's annual Christmas party a conversation with my best friend Anyah stopped mid-sentence when I intuitively felt the heat of a stare. Hoping to confirm the suspicion I turned my head slowly to the left and at the same time allowed my eyes to scan the large dimly lit room. Two adjoining ballrooms had been decorated with artificial Christmas trees, garland and strings of multicolor lights to host the annual employee event. No one among the energetic guests on the dance floor whose movements seemed robotic against the strobe light seemed distracted. Head bobbing onlookers leaned against the far wall while other guest formed small conversation groups. Identifying anyone would be a challenge. Then my eyes stopped. The observer, who happened to be a splitting image of Morris Chesnut, was seated at the bar and winked to identify himself. Determined to remain composed regardless of his charm and apparent good looks I glanced away, took a sip of wine and grooved to the music. Using my peripheral vision I noticed when he stood from his seat and walked toward our table. Like a black panther on the prowl his shoulders rose and fell in sync with each step as he moved fluidly through the crowd. Even though I purposed to remain calm watching him glide across the floor made my heart skip a beat. I inhaled slowly.

“Would you look at that,” she mumbled below her breath as she fanned back the linen table cover to pinch my thigh. Anyah's boldness hadn't changed in all the years I'd known her. In college we took a few basic courses together. Our initial interactions were

no more than your casual hellos and good-byes until we pledged the same sorority sophomore year. Because of our acquaintance she persuaded me to leave campus without our fellow line sisters and attend a step show at another college. All was going well until someone tapped us on the shoulder.

“Enjoying the step show?” Our Big Sister Rule Maker asked wearing a smile so wide she looked like the Joker from Batman.

“Yes Big Sister Rule Maker,” we replied in unison knowing our evening would be one we would never forget. And it was. Our new line names became Monkey See and Monkey Do. After all of the humiliation we became best friends.

Watching him get closer I playfully smacked her hand away then moved my legs to one side before she could pinch me again. What she didn’t know was that I had already made eye contact.

“Good lawd,” Anyah said through clinched teeth sounding as though she was making love but suppressing a climax. “Xavier, better be glad I’m married.”

She’d been happily married to Xavier for the past eight years and believed a little eye candy was harmless and good for the longevity of their marriage. When asked if he had the same flirting privileges she’d quickly respond ‘hell yeah because baby when it’s all over he’s coming home to sex moma up.’

“Yum, yum. They say the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice and he’s a black one,” she said sensuously then traced the rim of her wine glass with her index finger.

“Anyah please don’t go there.” After her last comment I began to visualize sweet juices flowing from his black berries then couldn’t help it as my eyes moved downward toward his crotch. His dress slacks were baggy but even they couldn’t conceal the bulge.

To hide the mischievous smirk that followed my thought I lifted my glass and took another sip of wine. For a moment and only a brief moment was I ashamed. “You have a husband at home to tame your tiger. All I have is Hercules, a ten pack of double d batteries and my imagination.”

“Girlfriend, put on your sexy face. His eyes are on you.” To keep my attention she rapidly tapped her fingernails on the table.

“Are you surprised?” I playfully quivered my eyelashes at her.

“I’ve never seen him around the precinct before so if he is a cop remember what I told you in the car,” she said using a serious tone to remind me of an earlier conversation then nudged me on the elbow instead. “They’re good to look at but you can’t trust ‘em.”

Hearing how fast she’d transformed from best girlfriend to the ‘overprotective sister’ I rolled my eyes to the top of my head. “That’s so like you,” I said sternly after making direct eye contact. “Lead me to the end of the rainbow, unveil the pot of gold then forbid me to touch the treasure.” Whether she knew it or not I’d already decided he was worth an introduction before the night was over.

“Well it’s just a warning. Most of them here are married with children.” She crossed her legs, placed her elbows on the table and leaned closer to my ear. “I’m telling you the majority of them are notorious every year for leaving their wives at the house. Sergeant Clark over there is a prime example.” She paused to clear her throat. “He’s the middle aged gray headed man sitting to your left.”

Not wanting to be obvious I didn’t turn my head but took a glimpse from the corner of my eye while she continued to talk.

“From what I hear his wife is ten years younger than him and looks better than

Halle Berre.”

“I don’t see anybody,” I said sure it wasn’t the chubby partially bald man whose legs dangled from the bar stool giving the appearance he was taller sitting than standing.

“That’s his girlfriend. Some females will do anything to secure a man with a title and a few extra benefits,” she said using her sista girl tone of voice to emphasize ‘man with a title and a few extra benefits’.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” From disbelief I turned my head to take a better look at Romeo. Not only was he short but wore a light gray pin-striped suit with wide legs that looked like a throw back from the sixty’s. Amazed that anyone closely resembling Halle Berre could stand the sight of him every day or night I shook my head in disgust then looked toward Anyah.

“Does that woman wearing the black strapless nylon dress sitting beside him look like Halle Berre to you?” She turned up her top lip to touch her nose.

“In her dreams,” I spouted unable to stand the sight of him or the pencil thin female with bad weave any longer.

“I feel your girlfriend ‘cause I know exactly what you’re thinking. She looks like Halle scary. Now pick up your bottom lip our new friend is getting closer. So do yourself a favor Lil’sister and check for tan marks on his ring finger,” she said quickly as my admirer approached the table.

“Hello ladies.” His deep baritone voice sent a chill down the back of my neck.

“Good evening,” Anyah said boldly before I could part my lips to speak.

“Good evening,” I responded as he looked toward me then lifted one eyebrow.

Up close his ebony skin proved to be a perfect canvas for his sensual brown eyes, long

eye lashes and full lips that once licked would look like LL Cool J's. He was at least 6'2" with chiseled biceps and pecs that protruded through his dress shirt.

"If my stares appeared rude please forgive me," he said apologetically.

"Staring? Were you staring? I'm sorry but we didn't notice." With a sly grin Anyah looked around the room letting him know he was only one of many admirers. Anticipating a room full of men and outfit critiquing women we spent hours in clothing boutiques the day before. Just for the occasion Anyah purchased a long red dress, with side slit and sheer flesh tone bodice. I purchased a knee length silver halter dress with a fitted bodice that flared around the hemline. Of course neither of our outfits was complete without matching earrings, purses and shoes. Anyah was a shop-a-holic who'd spend her last dime on a unique designer outfit and coordinating shoes to avoid a female look a like. I on the other hand knew if a woman did have on the same outfit a real man looked at the candy and not the silver wrapper.

"Excuse me?" I asked him over music that had transitioned from a slow jam to a Mary J. Blige house mix making his next comment difficult to hear. Before speaking again he placed his hands on the table for support and leaned down closer. I inhaled to smell the scent of his cologne.

"What are your names?" He asked again pointing at me first then Anyah.

"I'm Tatiana and this is my friend Anyah," I said then discreetly inspected his ring finger and was relieved not to see tan marks or an impression of a wedding band. Then I only hoped he wasn't a cop.

"It's a pleasure to meet both of you. My name is Courtney Wilkes."

"Hi Courtney Wilkes," Anyah sang flirtatiously then extended her right hand like

a princess awaiting a kiss.

“No disrespect but are the two of you alone or waiting on your dates?” He asked looking toward me as if ignoring her royal gesture.

“None taken,” Anyah volunteered, leaned her head to one side then pulled her hand back slowly. “Tonight is for the girls.” Not volunteering too much information either way she flashed a cover girl smile. If he became a nuisance we could have used the infamous put down line ‘we have husbands waiting at home.’

“What are you ladies drinking?” He asked while pointing at each of our empty glasses.

“My girl Tatiana and I are drinking Moet.”

‘That’s my girl,’ I thought to myself as I watched her look him in the eyes and answer without blinking. Both of us were drinking White Zinfandel.

“I’ll be right back.”

I crossed my legs and leaned forward for a better view once he turned and walked towards the bar. Anyah knew from my body language exactly what I was thinking. Only she was bold enough to stretch out her arm and pretend to grab him. Together we laughed and validated the thought with a wink of the eye. “I didn’t see a wedding ring,” I sang blissfully into Anyah’s ear.

“What if he’s a cop?” She asked sarcastically reminding me of her earlier warning.

“There wasn’t even the hint of a tan line on his ring finger,” I added with a ‘never mind what you said because he’s so fine’ tone.

“Remember what I said,” she reiterated.

“I guess it’s hard to believe a man that fine isn’t married or in a serious relationship.” Desperately hoping neither was true I had a flashback from a recent experience. Married men with or without children shouldn’t play the field until they’ve learned and mastered all of the game rules. Rule number one never give a woman a business card with your home phone number marked through with a black sharpie. A little manipulation against bright light makes the number visible. “My bet he’s married,” I said sadly while confirming my own thought.

“Shhh...here he comes,” Anyah whispered then flashed him a ‘we really weren’t talking about you smile as he approached the table.

“May I join the two of you?” While maintaining eye contact with me as he placed our wine glasses on the table.

“Sure have a seat.” Anyah made a hand gesture to suggest he sit next to me. No sooner than Courtney sat down a male who looked like he stepped directly off of a muscle and fitness magazine cover page approached her for a dance.

“Girlfriend, watch my drink. You know I love me some Mary J.” I winked as she took a sip of wine, stood then switched away from the table leading him on to the dance floor.

Courtney moved a chair closer to mine then sat down. “I’ve worked several shifts and have never seen you around the station.”

“Anyah is a 911 dispatcher.”

“And you?” He asked quickly making it obvious she wasn’t the one he was interested in.

“I teach Elementary art,” I answered briefly then took a sip of wine.

“Oh, so you’re a school teacher?”

“I’m an artist teaching until I can open my own art studio,” I said, visualized my opening night and was unable to suppress a smile

“You’ll have to show me some of your paintings one day. Hopefully soon,” he said then moved his chair closer to mine.

“How long have you been an officer?” I asked, inched my chair away while changing the subject to imply his looks weren’t so mesmerizing he’d be seeing my artwork that night. It had only been nine months ago that I ended a three year relationship with Christopher. We met at a local art exhibit. Just like me he was an aspiring artist teaching school until he saved enough money to open a studio. Our initial encounter was surreal and seemed like love at first sight. Our passion for art was obvious and allowed us to connect on a different level.

“Almost seven years,” he said then used his body weight to yet again slide his chair closer to mine. “I just transferred to the north precinct three weeks ago.”

“Really?” I responded keeping my guards up and preparing myself for his big let down. That moment I remembered the brief but heart wrenching note Christopher left on my nightstand. I glanced away.

My dearest love,

Life is filled with choices. Some are good while others are bad. But remember they all lead us to the same place in time. You choose to love me and for that I’m grateful. The moment came for me to make a decision and I chose my first love, art. My love for you is real and I will remember you always.

Forever your love,

Christopher

The initial shock of him moving to New York without notice was inconceivable. But the heartache and pain that followed left me numb to the emotion of love. So I vowed to never lose sight of my dreams as an artist to pursue a relationship.

“I was ready for a change,” he said nodded his head affirmatively then took a drink.

“Change is good.” Unwilling to ruin a good evening with prejudgments I turned my attention back to Courtney.

“Ever dated an officer before?” He placed his index finger over his top lip then looked around the room.

“No,” I responded curtly not knowing whether to take his question or body language offensively.

“No?” He asked then turned his head to make direct eye contact. “You said it like there’s something wrong with dating a man of the law.”

“Oh I have my opinions about men of the law. I think ninety-five percent of you are arrogant assholes.”

“Whew such hostility.” He smiled, held up both hands then leaned away from me. “Well there’s still the other five percent because all of us aren’t arrogant assholes,” he said innocently then pointed at himself.

“And I’m not trying to find out either,” I said matter of factly then rolled my neck. By then Anyah had returned to the table with her dance partner. Sweat was dripping from her face as she took no care in the way she sat down. I shook my head as her arms fell to each side of her seat. After taking a few deep breaths she reached for a napkin and

wiped her forehead.

“Before you form an opinion about me let’s dance,” Courtney said as he stood, held out his hand and waited on my response.

“Girl, don’t be bothered by me. Go ahead and get your groove on,” Anyah waved her hand as a gesture for me to leave the table as her partner sat down.

I looked up and accepted. ‘Whether he’s married or in a relationship how harmful is a dance?’ I thought to myself as we walked side by side onto the dance floor and worked our way through the energetic crowd.

“Whew, dancing has changed since the last time I went out,” I said trying to glance around for the latest dance moves.

“Dancing hasn’t changed as much as you think,” he said then extended both hands with the palms up. I smiled then placed my hands inside of his. Together we began to move eventually bouncing our shoulders to the music. It wasn’t long before I was lost in the bass beat and making circles around him.

“Thought you couldn’t dance,” he said into my ear after grabbing my waist from behind mid-spin and pulling me into him.

I gracefully raised my right hand and giggled as he spun me around to face him. “That’s not what I said. I said dancing has changed.” I smiled then challenged him with another dance step. Finally, the upbeat tempo slowed giving me the perfect opportunity to exit the dance floor.

“Excuse me,” he said then grabbed my hand. “May I have this dance?”

“Can you?” I asked after turning to look at him. With a humble facial expression he extended both hands making the invitation irresistible.

“Do you attend the Christmas parties every year with your friend?” He asked making small talk as we closed our embrace and began to sway from side to side.

“Believe it or not this is my first one. Her husband couldn’t make it this year.” I leaned my head back to look up at him then smiled.

“Wow, you have a beautiful smile,” he said then tightened his fingers around my hand.

“Is that what you tell your girlfriend?” I asked taking the chance to probe into his personal life.

“I would if my girlfriend had a beautiful smile like yours.”

“Thanks for the dance,” I said sharply knowing all along it was too good to be true then loosened my grip on his hand. With an attitude of disappointment I was ready to make a straight line across the dance floor back to our table.

“Tatiana, it was a joke.” He never let go of my hand. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

‘Whew,’ I thought to myself ready to abandon him on the dance floor.

“All jokes aside. You do have a beautiful smile.”

“Thank you.” I leaned into him allowing myself only to relax a little. His words sounded sincere.

“So tell me how long have you been painting?” He said, wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me even closer.

“As long as I can remember,” I said then thought about my mother’s refrigerator art that included the first turkey we painted in pre-school using our hand as the template.

“Your beautiful smile makes your love for art obvious.” He tickled my ear with his lips as he spoke. “Maybe one day I can make you smile that way.”

“Humph, I love to paint,” I said then leaned back to look into his eyes.

“You love to paint?”

“More that I love to eat.” When the music changed from a love ballad to an upbeat tempo I twirled to break away from his embrace. Still hand in hand we continued to dance using any opportunity to share personal information.

“Think you can use this,” Anyah said after tapping me on the shoulder. She was holding a glass of water and a napkin.

“What time is it?” The transitions from one mix to another were so smooth that neither of us realized how long we’d been on the dance floor.

“One o’clock,” she said then pointed toward the long line of people exiting through the door. “I already have your coat and purse.”

“I guess that means it’s time for you to go?” He asked then frowned to show disappointment.

“Yes it is and I had a great time.” Careful not to remove what little makeup left I patted my face with the napkin Anyah had given me. Together we walked toward the bar and stood as I took a couple of sips of water.

“It doesn’t have to end you know?” His tone became serious.

“Oh yes it does,” I said defensively, let my smile turn upside down into a frown then sat my half empty glass on the bar. Sure he was used to having his way with women I immediately let him know with my tone and body language I wasn’t going ‘there’.

“Didn’t mean to offend you but that wasn’t an invitation to my bedroom,” he said sounding apologetic as he took my coat off of Anyah’s arm and motioned for me to turn around. I slid my arms in, waited as he pulled it up on to my shoulder then turned to face

him. "I wanted to know if you'd like to go somewhere and have breakfast. You did work up a sweat on the dance floor," he said then wiped a small bead of sweat off the side of my face with his finger.

"Thank you but I think I will pass on this one." To take a final snapshot of Mr. Fine before leaving I glanced at him from head to toe.

"May I get a rain check?"

"Sure you can," I said hopeful that we would see each other again.

"How can I contact you?"

"Give me your cell phone," Anyah volunteered and waited with her hand out as he reached inside of his leather phone case. She opened it, made a few keystrokes then handed it back. "She can be reached at that number."

"Can she?" He asked, closed it and put it back into the case.

"Can she?" I asked, placed a hand on my hip then looked at Anyah sideways.

"I'm sure of it," Anyah said, locked her arm in mine and mischievously pulled me away before he could say anything else.

"Work it lil' sister. Shake what your momma gave you. I ain't mad 'cause it took her nine months to make ya," Anyah joked speaking rhythmically referring to the sway of our hips and sound of our high heels against the pavement as we strutted out of the hotel and across the parking lot. "You know your friend is watching," she said then snapped her fingers in a circle formation.

"You're working it enough for the both of us." I laughed but never missed a beat while mentally keeping up the unspoken tempo.

“Bet ten dollars he’s standing in the door right now drooling like a puppy,” she said then coincidentally dropped her keys on the ground. “Ooops.” She fanned her fingers across her mouth. Then in one motion she stopped, bent down and picked them up.

“I don’t believe you sometime.” I only slowed my pace and didn’t stop for her theatrics. After the way we connected on the dance floor I had no doubt he was watching but didn’t need her to prove it.

“Humph, men are sooo predictable.” She took a couple of steps to catch up with me then tossed her keys in the air.

“Well, was he standing in the door?” I asked out of curiosity but not wanting to turn around and look myself.

“You can treat me the next time we go out.”

“Whatever.” I laughed as she unlocked the doors and we both got inside.

“Let’s drive to the casino,” Anyah said referring to the Southern interpretation of Las Vegas once we drove off of the parking lot and turned on to the street. “I’m feeling lucky. Look, my right eye is twitching.” She adjusted her rear view mirror to take a look. She looked at me then pointed at her eye that in my opinion never twitched. “See, there it goes again. Isn’t that a sign for good luck? The dollar slots should be good and loose by now. After that we can have the all you can eat breakfast buffet.”

“Remember, this is me you’re talking to.” I pointed toward the clock on her dashboard. “I think your right eye is twitching because it’s after one o’clock. So stop pretending like you don’t go to bed every night at ten.” I turned up the volume on the radio when I heard the last slow jam Courtney and I danced to. The coincidence made me smile. “Take me home.” I pointed in the direction of my condo.

“Home? You ain’t acting like someone who is ready to go home.”

“I’m exhausted and you’re faking like you don’t have a husband to check-in with,” I said never missing a beat as I swayed from side to side.

“While you were on the dance floor I eased into a private restroom for a little phone sex. He’s good for the night so never mind me or my husband. I’m going to the casino,” she said then yawned.

“Like I said, take me home.” I laughed when I barely completed my sentence before yawning.

“You should be exhausted after squirming against Courtney for hours like a Jeannie in a bottle.” She placed both hands on the steering wheel then gyrated using her upper body.

“Girl, I hadn’t danced like that in months.” I closed my eyes then snapped my fingers to the music. “Thanks for the invite. I hate to sound selfish but I’m glad Xavier had a conference in Atlanta.”

“Hah, so was I. This was the first year I got to dance. Xavier is the fire in the bedroom but on the dance floor he has two left feet.”

“Really girl, me too.” Just that fast my mind drifted to a moment on the dance floor when the highly charged bass beat mellowed and the lights dimmed. After making eye contact he reached for my hands and placed them on his chest. Slowly, he lowered his hands to my waist then gently moved me closer. Caught up in the moment I closed my eyes as we began to sway from side to side then relaxed when he leaned down and barely touched the side of my face. The touch was so affectionate that I could only imagine a kiss not being any different.

“Earth to Tatiana. Earth to Tatiana,” she said then snapped her fingers across my face. “Did you hear a word that I said?”

“What did you say?” I asked only hearing her say something about Xavier’s feet.

“Never mind. You’re in la-la land. Excuse me I mean Courtneyland so I’m taking you home.”

“What did you think about him?” I asked temporarily coming out of my trance knowing she would give me her honest opinion.

“Physically, he was all that and then some.”

“Dah, I could see that with my own two eyes. Now, what did you think?” I asked referring to her overall impression.

“He was a’ight.”

“A’ight?” I folded my arms across my chest then looked at her. “Why did you give him my number?” I asked with an attitude.

“Who said it was your number?” She asked as she looked over her shoulder before merging into the turning lane.

“Honestly, I didn’t know if it was my number or not.”

“For real. I gave him your cell phone number,” she said after making a left turn on to the next street but never making eye contact with me.

“Oh you did?” I asked then allowed my arms to unfold pleased she did.

“Yes I did. That guy I was dancing with, Mr. Marvelous, remember him? His name is Lance and he gave me the 411 on Courtney.”

“I’m listening,” I said then braced myself for the truth. Just my luck I’d been dirty dancing with a man that had been married fifteen years with three or four children at

home.

“He transferred to the central precinct about three weeks ago. Single and stays low key around the station. All the blood sucking vultures have been hot on his trail. Rumor has it no one has been lucky just yet.”

“So, he isn’t married?” I asked then sighed from relief.

“If he was I’d found you another dance partner hours ago. Girl after all these years you know I got your back.”

“I don’t know what made me think otherwise,” I said then remembered numerous times we’d given men we weren’t interested in the number for late night pizza delivery.

“What did you think about Courtney?”

“From first impressions he seemed nice, easy to communicate with, a very good dancer and you saw how handsome he was.” I held back my true thoughts.

“This ain’t the damn Cosby show.” She waved her hand for me to say more. “I’m your girl not Claire Huxtable now tell me what you really thought about him.”

“Girl, he was sexy as hell,” I said then pressed the palms of my hands into my inner thighs. “His voice, his body not to mention the way he grooved on the dance floor. There should be a law that prohibits a man that fine from leaving his house after dark. You saw him.”

“Thank you,” she said after briefly letting go of the steering wheel and lifting both hands into the air.

“Anyah, I don’t know,” I said quickly leaving fantasy world and snapping back to reality. “Think about it. Thirty-six year old male, never been married and has no children. How odd is that? Most people our age are either married, divorced or have at

least one child. Don't you think he maybe too perfect? Something has to be wrong," I said wanting to close my eyes and erase any skeptic thoughts.

"Hell, what's wrong with your ass?" She asked almost breaking her neck to look at me. "You're a beautiful thirty-four year old, never been married and you don't have any children."

"I dated Christopher three years. Close enough."

"Girl, you're special and it will take a helluva man to meet all of your needs. God knows it," she said after turning on to my street.

"Yeah, and it suits me just fine," I said then twirled a lock of hair around my finger.

"My point exactly. Now get your special ass the hell out of my car." She turned into my driveway then slammed on the brakes.

"I love you too," I said sarcastically, got out of the car then blew her a kiss before turning to walk up the sidewalk to my front door.

