

## CHAPTER

### 1

“Hey, Brownie,” Keesha Smalls called, observing the dark, sweet, chocolate bunny nearing her. Each time she saw him, it was like seeing him for the first time. Her pupils took in the smoothness of Chris' skin, which reminded her of silk. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. She imagined muscles rippling across his chest. A slender man with bulges in all the right places.

Looking in her direction, with his sexy deep voice, he called out his greeting to her. His Barry White voice vibrated in her ear. She could see his pearly white teeth and those eyes, like Hawaiian sand. She continued watching him, yearning for him in the secret world of her mind. He was far too young for her, and his mother, her friend, would surely not approve.

Keesha was in love. At thirty-five, she found herself swooning over her neighbor's twenty-one year-old son. Yes, Chris' mother, Christine, had raised him correctly. Indeed he was the apple of her eye. Chris was one to be proud of, an achiever. Finishing high school two years before his scheduled time and completing his second year of college at an Ivy League school was another mark of achievement. Majoring in accounting was only a mere stone in the foundation of his life. His excellence had landed him a position at one of the largest and most prestigious accounting firms in New York; Goldman, Thurman & Sacs. His skills made a great deal of money for the firm and for that, he was rewarded with a home on the company's elegant property. Keesha had never had the pleasure of seeing it for herself, but people said it was beyond elaborate.

Keesha recognized their age difference, but he appealed

to her sexually. Although she knew Christine would not approve, especially since she was over-protective of her son, she anticipated being ravished by him. Seeing him daily only heightened her desire for him.

Chris, too, had feelings for Keesha. He wanted more than sexual gratification from her. He admired her beauty, intelligence and success. She had a remarkably unmarred almond complexion. It was as though none of life's iniquities had befallen her. This assumption was far from the truth. Keesha sheltered her fear of falling in love again after finding her once beloved in their bed with another woman. She vowed that day to never love another. Keesha's dancer's shape only heightened his attraction to her. Chris imagined her breasts would fit perfectly in his cupped hands, and he loved her petite waist and complementary rear. *God it's round*, he thought.

With all of Christine's boasting of Chris' achievements, Keesha's continuous nods of approval still didn't warrant Chris approaching Keesha. He did notice a special wink and pout of Keesha's lips, emulating a kiss, but he couldn't be certain enough to act on it.

"Chris, this is Keesha," Christine said with pride, introducing her prized son to her new neighbor. Although they were still new to the neighborhood, Keesha and Christine's friendship just clicked. There was something to be said about this chemistry since Christine was reserved with her acquaintances. Within a two year period, Keesha became like a daughter to Christine, and a wife to Chris, though she didn't know it.

Keesha was blind to Chris' physical changes. At least he thought she didn't notice. His fear of approaching her caused the past two years to be fruitless. Chris was still a child in Keesha's eyes, her best friend's young son. Why didn't she notice him? he wondered. She wasn't seeing anyone; it was as if she avoided relationships. For the two years Chris had known her, not once had he witnessed a man in her company. Who wouldn't want her?

During the time Keesha had known Chris, his body

developed into a mature sculpture of perfection. Women yearned for him, lusted at his very being, craved for just a mere touch of his flesh. Girls his age just were not mature enough for him. They had no ambition and no desire to reach the heights Chris was destined to reach. Chris had a handful of women but Keesha was the one he wanted most. Chris realized he was still smiling and waving at her. Keesha indicated her fatigue by holding her wrist while waving at him. Feeling silly, he joined her on her porch.

“How are you? Since I was passing by . . .”

“No explanation is necessary, Chris. You're always welcome. What's up?” She realized that his mother lived just a few houses away.

“Not much. What are you working on?”

“Just some figures for a client.”

“Need any help?”

“Nah. I've got it under control. Besides, I'm almost finished, anyway. But thanks for the offer.”

“Any time.”

This year, March brought pleasant weather, the usual lingering winter breeze was capitulated by the warmth of spring air. Even the flowers began their bloom early, and Chris believed the weather created the perfect setting for him to test the waters with Keesha. “What are your plans for this evening?” he asked.

“I'm just going inside to relax. Would you like to come in? I don't think you've ever been inside my home.”

“You know, you're right? Why is that?”

“I don't know. Why don't you come in now?” Keesha stood and opened the door.

Chris followed her in. “Wow, it's beautiful.”

“What's that, Chris?”

He wanted to say her butt, but indicated the layout of her home instead.

“So, have you set your eyes on anyone yet?” Keesha asked.

Taken aback . . . “No, I'm still waiting for the right girl to come along to match your beauty.”

His retort surprised her. "You'd better stop talking like that. I might just take you up on that offer one of these days." She watched him as he smiled slyly.

"That's what I'm betting on," he uttered under his breath, not wanting to move too fast. Her words gave him a new sense of encouragement. He sensed their shared attraction, and Keesha had finally admitted it. Keesha began patting her lap, drumming to the silent music. Chris, observing his surroundings, realizes that an uncomfortable silence came between them. Their inquisitive conversation turned into silence. "Why don't we pick up this conversation tomorrow, same time?" Chris offered.

"Sounds good to me." She escorted him to the door

"Good night, Keesha."

Returning his salutation, she closed the door behind him. Thinking over their suggestive comments, she asked herself, *What am I doing? This isn't right.* A long time had passed since she had been with a man, but Chris wasn't a man. He was just a successful boy who happened to be her neighbor's son. But he was gorgeous and sexy. *Damn, I can't do this!* Leaning against the bar, she picked up the invitation to a dinner party sent by Christine. *I've got to get rid of these feelings before Christine notices it. How can I attend this dinner knowing Chris will be there and I'll be panting over him?*

Monday evening, about the time Chris usually stopped by to see his mother, Keesha continued preparing the presentation for her client. This case held great importance because she would gain the respect of her client along with a hefty commission. The doorbell rang. The last thing she needed was an interruption. Hesitating for a moment, hoping the person would go away, the bell rang again before Keesha realized her car was parked right outside. "Just a minute," she called, hurrying to the door wondering who it could be. With all the work she needed to do, she had no time to spend listening to Michelle, the local gossip, or to catch up on old news with Christine. Living in a small residential area, with a radius of no more than four blocks each

way, there wasn't much room for gossip. Especially since the residents consisted of hardworking, money-hungry go-getters, who often didn't have enough time to say hello in passing. In fact, there were rarely any neighbors to be seen, unless someone's home caught on fire or worse, which was never until she met Michelle. Michelle made it her duty to generate her idea of excitement, which consisted of nonstop gossip, although she lived just outside of the community. Usually the neighbors ignored her, but at times Keesha would allow her to come in and chat awhile. Of course, that wasn't often, because she picked inopportune moments like this one to visit. Keesha opened the door.

"Chris!"

"I didn't see you on the porch today so I decided to check up on you to see if everything was all right."

"Well, come in," she beckoned him. "Would you like me to take your clothes off, I mean your coat?" She said while clearing her throat.

Chris considered the chances of her making a pass at him and discarded it as a misunderstanding. "Thank you. Yes, you may." He was answering both of her questions.

Keesha took his coat and hung it in the guest closet. Keesha became moist observing his physical attributes. A yearning she hadn't felt in a long time became obvious, giving her a feeling of uneasiness. She had to get rid of him. She had been a friend to his mother for quite some time and would never let this kind of thing come between them. Besides, he couldn't really be interested in her anyway.

"Can I offer you something to drink?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Orange, Coke, Ginger Ale, Sunny Delight?"

He smiled. "Coke, please." He answered her with a chuckle, recognizing her joking expression when she said Sunny Delight. He observed his surroundings as she escorted him to the kitchen. From the outside, the house seemed modest, but the inside was immense. Keesha had class, no doubt. Her home reminded him of someone who was absorbed in work. Purposely avoiding relationships,

sterile like.

From the front door into the corridor, the floors were covered with egg-white carpet. The walls were also egg-white with a sculptured ceiling. The detail was lovely. "What's this?" Chris asked acknowledging the first room to his left.

She ushered him into that room, delaying her response.

Her study was admirable. Two walls were covered by cherry-wood bookcases and filled with different kinds of reference books. Another wall was filled with literary material and financial guides. Keesha's desk was situated diagonally at the far right of the room. It, too, was immense and constructed of fine cherry wood. Everything suggested power and greatness. Parquet floors, perfectly polished and partially hidden by a large Oriental rug in front of her desk.

"This is my study," she offered, noticing his amazement. "This is where I see my clients on occasion. Rare, though. I prefer to meet them at my Madison Avenue office."

Just beyond the study was an empty room, a gallery, Chris presumed. He only saw paintings and sculptures. "You do these yourself?" Her expression encouraged his question.

"Yes. Rarely does anyone come in here. Most of this was done when I was younger."

Chris started toward one of the sculptures.

"No," she called out to him, surprising herself as much as him. "These are personal to me."

Chris, not understanding at first, took one last glance at the sculpture and realized that it was a woman grasping a man's leg, crying. The man seemed to be pulling away.

"Someone hurt you didn't they?" he questioned while searching her eyes.

"I wouldn't have brought you through here, but I'm having work done through the corridor, and I didn't want you to get paint on your clothes," she offered, avoiding his question.

"I didn't smell any paint."

"I know. It's probably dry. I'm just being cautious."

“No need to explain,” he offered, feeling embarrassed about his intrusion. Continuing to the living room, Chris was surprised at the furnishings. “Simple.”

“Excuse me.”

“I’m sorry. I was just noticing that your style changed in here. It’s the complete opposite of the other rooms. This one gives me the feeling of tranquility.” A bone-colored Italian leather sectional, which had about six parts to it. Looking at the center of the room, he asked “Is that real?”

“Sure is. I had it preserved, petrified and imported from the Caribbean.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“This plant grows deep in the sea. Of course, the glass was specially made here.” Keesha paid special attention to spacing, as everything was placed with an obvious purpose in mind. There was a fifty-two-inch color TV built into the wall, with a hidden control panel. A bone-colored bar was off to itself on the other side of the living room, with four leather stools flanking its mirrored front. The floors were carpeted with a rose-colored flokoti. The living room was lighted by two rose sculptures with softly lit balls on the end. Chris could see that the adjoining room was for dining. There was a large cherry-wood case displaying fine China, crystal goblets and wine flutes. In the center of the dining room was a large, well-polished cherry-wood dining table. To the left of that room was the kitchen with an island in its center. A four-person table was positioned in front of the window. Finally, just outside the kitchen was a wide stairway, which formed an arc that led to the bedrooms, he guessed.

“You have a very beautiful home, Keesha,” he offered after his observance. “I love it. I’m rather impressed.”

“Your mother tells me that your house is even nicer than mine. I would love to see it sometime.”

“You can stop by whenever you like. I’ll be happy to give you the full tour,” Chris said, rocking back and forth on his heels, smiling proudly as he thought of his own accomplishments. While pouring the Coke, Keesha could feel

Chris undressing her with his eyes. She experienced an unusual tingling at the back of her neck. The magnetism that he was giving off was strong. Turning, she said, "Ice?"

His lips locked with hers. They were soft yet firm, gentle yet sweet. She knew that she should stop before things got even more out of hand. She tasted his aphrodisiac as he waxed it into her tongue. His tongue traced her neck, lingering for just a moment, causing flutters of emotions to chill her soul.

Fear clouded her mind, as she thought of what his mother might think. After all, she and Christine were friends. How could she betray her this way? Pulling away from Chris, Keesha said, "Chris, this isn't right. We can't do this."

He stepped away from her, still holding her hands, looking into her eyes. "I have waited an eternity to do this. I have been suppressing my love for you for longer than I can handle. Let's not allow age to come between us." He lowered his lips to meet hers again, caressing her back with his hands. Keesha felt the firmness of his arms tightening around her. Hugging her, Chris declared that he would never let her go. Somehow she knew he meant it. After staring down into her eyes, he picked up the glass of Coke, then took a seat in the living room. Stunned, she followed him. Their silence was thick enough to cut.

Chris broke the silence, reciting his goals and aspirations. "I hope that I will someday become a partner of Goldman, Thurman & Sacs. I'm working my butt off, showing my skills, hoping that the partners will take notice of my talents and realize that I am a valuable asset to the company." Sighing, he gazed at the ceiling, remembering the words of his accounting teacher during his sophomore year in high school. "Son, you've got potential, all you've got to do is apply yourself and go for what you want." He enrolled him in the co-op program, allowing him to work every other week. In fact, his accounting teacher had found him the position at Goldman, Thurman & Sacs investment banking. "Asset Management and Private Client Services is my field.

I started off as an analyst, then moved to project leader, and now I'm climbing the ladder to VP or maybe to even make MD." Chris graduated high school at the age of sixteen but that was just the beginning. One incident changed everything for him: After four years with the company, he had developed and maintained high-profile clients and earned \$200,000 base with hefty bonuses. His inexperience and limited education allowed him to be more innovative than an entire staff of older, well-seasoned account executives with more designations and initials before and behind their names than he could shake a stick at. One of the company's largest and most prestigious foreign clients had been saved because of his simplistic eye. Now, he alone handled that account by the request of the client.

Chris graduated high school earning \$45,000 a year, which was a hefty salary for a sixteen-year-old, but was nothing compared to his current \$200,000 base. He believed that with his competency he should make partner, but in the meantime, he would have to settle. Of course, four years with a company did not entitle him to the position nor the property that was given to him as a status perk.

"Stopping by sounds wonderful, Chris. I'm sure things will continue in your favor. I'm rooting for you."

"Right now, the partners seem to be impressed. I have been holding down some important clients for them and so far, things are working out well. Of course, having a black man on the board might cause problems with the other board members."

"Don't think like that. The bottom line is what they think about your work. Keep that in mind."

"I know, it's just that when it comes to African Americans, no matter how hard we work or how important we are to them, they fail to give us the recognition we deserve. Of course, they pay me quite well. They don't mind paying the salary, it's the title they hold back on."

"Keep hope alive, Chris. Keep hope alive."

He smiled at her as she held her right fist in the air, chanting the familiar slogan. She told him about what she

did to build her business and how, with hard work, it proved to be lucrative. "Life was not easy for me, Chris. I had to work hard for everything that I have. You keep your head up and continue in the way you're going and no one can stop you, no matter how hard they try."

Chris couldn't believe she was giving him inspiration. Most women wouldn't even think he needed it. This woman really cared for him. Chris could feel nothing less than impressed by her declared success, and her home was proof to those who had any doubt that it could actually be done. Right then, he knew that she was indeed the woman for him.

"It's not often you see businesswomen advance in society as rapidly as you have. I like that in a woman." They talked for another hour. "I should be leaving now. Can I see you again or have I ruined the opportunity with my advances?"

Keesha gave a smile of dismissal. "Don't worry about it. See you tomorrow."

He had a long day ahead of him tomorrow, not to mention he had to get out of her house before his feelings caused him to become more aggressive than was appropriate. Chris was afraid of tainting this opportunity to win Keesha's love. He wanted to prove that he could give her all that she wanted, satisfy her sexual desires and take care of her emotional needs. She would never want another after him.

"Good night."

"Good night." She ushered him to the door. He turned and kissed her on the cheek before making his exit. He decided that he would pay his mother a visit before journeying home. He walked down the block to his mother's house and attempted to compose himself before greeting her. His mother was good at reading him.

"Hi, Mom. How are you today?"

"Just fine, Chris. What brings you to the neighborhood today? You seem exceptionally happy. What's new with you? Let me guess: You met the girl of your dreams, and she's agreed to marry you?" Chris could never keep any-

thing from his mother. If he was in love, his mother knew. She reminded him of the time when he was in junior high school and he had a crush on his teacher. When his mother went to open house, from the moment she walked into the classroom, she knew that the lady waiting to speak with her was the apple of her son's eye.

"How did you guess? Well actually, you're partly right, however, she didn't agree to marry me yet. But I'll win her with my charm. Hmm, what's that pleasant aroma?" He was evading any further questioning.

"I made your favorite dish today."

"Barbecue ribs?" he asked.

"Yeah, come in the kitchen, and I'll fix you a plate."

Chris followed her into the kitchen, taking his usual seat.

"Were you expecting company?"

"No. You know how I like to be prepared all the time."

She placed a plate of barbecued ribs, a baked potato and mixed vegetables in front of him. She cast an endearing glance at her son who had made her proud from the day he was born. "I made sweet potato pudding, too."

The food was all too welcoming. Christine was content with her guileless living. All of the other houses in the neighborhood had been remodeled by interior decorators, their lawns treated by the best local landscapers, but not Christine's. She had even refused Chris' offer to pay to have the work done. She enjoyed the obvious dissimilarity her home displayed.

They talked about her day, and how he should visit with her more often. The usual stuff he heard whenever he visited. "So, tell me about her. Anyone I know?"

Chris didn't respond. This wasn't the right time to reveal his beloved. "I can assure you, you'll approve. She's smart, beautiful, successful and very easy to get along with." Christine considered questioning him further but realized that perhaps she shouldn't press him.

"She sounds great. I would love to meet her! I take it that she's not one of those local girls. You know how I feel about them, she said, frowning at the thought. She knew

that Chris was smart and hadn't dated a great deal, thus her concern for her son's choices. "Son, there are a lot of wolves in sheep's clothing."

"I know that, mom. You don't have to worry. This woman is really nice and I know that you'll like her. Trust me."

"So when can I meet her? Not to kick dirt, but remember that girl I told you to leave alone after your father died? Didn't I tell you that she would bring you grief?"

Chris resented the memory. There wasn't a day Chris didn't regret meeting Rhonda. She was not the ideal woman for him, and it didn't take him long to realize that. It took Rhonda a while to grasp the fact that things were over between them, but she finally did let go. He could still remember his first love. He had never been attracted to younger women.

"Soon, but not yet, Mom. I want to wait until things are official and going the way I hope they will."

"So, you've finally found someone who's mature enough for you?"

Chris avoided the question. "Mom, I've got to be going. I'll stop in later this week. How's that?"

"Okay, son, but I know you're just avoiding the question. We'll talk later. You just be careful." Christine was very perceptive and would continue to question him until he would have no choice but to tell her about Keesha. He leaned forward to kiss her before leaving. Chris took a deep breath, recognizing the close call he had just encountered.

The drive home was especially long, but Chris knew that he had to stop in to see his mom at least twice a week. She still had not gotten used to the fact that he was a man now and their lives would be different. He would always be her little Chris.

Chris' mind was occupied by the thought of loving Keesha. His mother always said good things do come to those who wait and Chris would wait. He wanted Keesha to be the mother of his children. Chris would work hard and take care of her. Taking care of the woman he loved is all

he'd ever wanted, and no one or anything would come between them.

Chris pulled up to the gate at the Enclave Town Houses where he resided. Charles, the gate attendant, buzzed him in, and he drove up to his designated spot and parked. The residence was quiet and peaceful. Fumbling with his keys, he finally located the ones needed to unlock the door. It was late and he desperately needed sleep to be fresh for the next day's events.