

Chapter 1

My sweet, innocent daughter raised her cherubic face to me and blurted out a question that startled me. "Mommy, if babies die without souls do they go to hell?"

I glanced into the bathroom mirror for a distraction. A black speck just under the lower lid of my left hazel-green eye caught my attention. A smudge marring my tawny skin. I raised my pinkie to my face and wiped the stain away.

"Honey, why do you want to know that?"

"Benny says babies killed before they're born got no souls," Tenisha informed me, "and only souls go to heaven."

It was such inquiries from my daughter that made me question whether my decision to enroll her in a Christian school--more to mollify my parents than due to any deep

convictions--had been in our best interests. Not only was I not a "believer," but I was an unmarried, Black woman, and the school was largely devoutly and Whitely married. But I had to admit the school was really good in spite of it all; however, I was not about to expound on the intricacies of abortion with my seven-year-old daughter. I was grateful we had been spared too deep a look at the subject of death altogether so far.

I gazed directly at my daughter, straight into her unwavering brown eyes. "I don't know, Nisha, but hell sounds like a pretty bad place." I wondered how I had ended up with such a precocious child. "I really don't believe a good God would send babies there."

Tenisha's face screwed, and her eyes shifted focus. I watched her take a breath, preparing her response, and was spared by a distant rapping.

"I got it! I got it!" Her piercing screech carried throughout the house as she raced out of the bathroom. "Nancy's here. Yeah, Nancy's here."

How I was raising a daughter with that much energy, I would never know. I was sure I was a much quieter child. I'd have to ask my mother about that again.

I set the eyeliner brush down and grabbed a Kleenex to remove any makeup from my hands before stepping out from

the bathroom. I walked down the hall to the front door to meet the newcomer, whoever it would be, but allowed Tenisha time to give the official greeting.

"Nancy! Nancy! Nancy!" Tenisha proclaimed with exuberance and joy. Nancy Norton was a high school senior who I often called to babysit. Tenisha idolized her.

Nancy flipped her luxurious auburn hair from her eyes and smiled like a guardian angel toward my daughter. "Hey, cutie, glad to see you, too," she said as if they were best friends, not fully aware that I was watching them. "I got a movie that I know you'll just love. Have you seen Shrek 2 yet?"

I stood back a bit and watched as Nancy kneeled down to engage my daughter in their secret conversation, treating her as an equal cohort. It reminded me again how glad I was to have found Nancy as a regular sitter for Tenisha.

Nancy noticed me observing their casual chitchatting, and smiling, she winked to me. "The movie's rated PG, but it should be--"

"Nancy, I trust your judgment," I assured her. "You've never led me to doubt you. I'm sure the movie will be fine."

"I'll take this into the family room." Tenisha impulsively grabbed the DVD out of Nancy's hands.

"Gently, Nisha," I chided. "That DVD's not going to run away."

"Sorry." Tenisha's ephemeral apology wafted away. "I'll go to the kitchen and get our snacks ready for the movie."

"Okay," Nancy said with bright eyes and cheery voice. She tenderly squeezed Tenisha's arm. "I'll be right there to help."

Tenisha skipped and jumped her way toward the kitchen, humming to herself.

Nancy stood to her full five-foot-nine height, and I marveled at what a beautiful, young woman she was becoming. "I can see you've been working out."

"Got to keep it up year round for swimming and track." She ran her fingers through her hair, tracing the shimmering streaks down to her shoulders then letting the strands weave together like finely woven silk down to between her shoulder blades.

I certainly was not heavy, but I had gained the freshmen fifteen in college and had not entirely lost it all yet. "How's the math coming along?" I tutored Nancy in pre-calculus, an arrangement encouraged by her math teacher when Nancy had discovered my aptitude for math after babysitting Tenisha for a few months.

"Good. I got an A on the quiz, and I really understood it." Her eyes radiated the warmth of a soothing cup of cocoa. "We're still on for Monday, right?"

I nodded, glad to know I would soon get to share time with her again. We had known each other for just shy of two years, but with the babysitting and tutoring, we spent a fair amount of time together and had bonded quickly. I enjoyed her energy and vitality, and she appreciated my alternate perspective on life. I was older by nearly a decade, of another race, and from a poorer upbringing.

Nancy sized me up. "That dress looks good on you."

"Tenisha selected it for me," I said, lightly touching the green matte jersey gown. Nancy's family had more than enough wealth to acquire the necessities of life and to fulfill many desires so she had developed a good eye for fashion. Tenisha picked up on what was important to Nancy and emulated whatever she could. "Ever since learning that Seattle is the Emerald City, she can't seem to get enough of the color green."

"Perhaps I should have brought the Wizard of Oz." Her smile underlined her wit.

I laughed. "No, please don't. I'm certain Tenisha would want ruby slippers after seeing that."

"I assume she picked out the earrings as well."

I fingered my marquise-cut, gold-backed, emerald earrings. "They are emerald after all."

Tenisha called out for Nancy from the family room just as my cell phone started playing the Black-Eyed Peas, "Let's Get It Started." Nancy waved permission for me to answer the phone and left to seek out Tenisha. I flipped up the top and glanced at the caller ID before connecting and putting the phone to my ear.

"Hey, Sheryl. What's up, girl?" I chirped into the mouthpiece. Sheryl was the married woman in my close circle of friends. Naturally she was excited that I was going on a date. My best friend Jacquie and I had discussed my date earlier in the day, and she must have mentioned it to Sheryl. Sheryl, Jacquie, and I had known each other since high school days--Sheryl was a year younger than Jacquie and me--and had managed to stay tight throughout the years.

I stepped down the hall, back to the bathroom to finish primping.

"So who's this boy taking you away from us tonight?" Sheryl asked. Her tone sounded in mock offense. "I thought you didn't go on dates."

"He's not a boy," I replied. "He's a man, and a successful one at that. I know what you're thinking. I've

surprised myself a bit, too. I just thought--you know, let's give this a try. He's not like the boys I've run into before."

Sheryl, Jacquie and the fourth of our circle, Denita, had been begging me to start dating again. Jacquie and Denita wanted to have another sister with whom to trade stories and to go out on double dates. Sheryl simply hoped for all of us to experience the joys of marriage as she knew them. I was wary of the dating scene, in general, and of men in the dating scene, in particular. But spring had put me in the mood to try again.

Sheryl laughed with the enthusiasm of an agitated pug. "Ooh, you go, girl. You know I'm happy for you. I was hoping you would find a man someday. Not that I think you need a man, but they're so nice to have around from time to time. Just don't you stop hanging out with us. Call me tonight?"

"If I don't get back too late." I held on to the last word and stressed the t. After hearing Sheryl's understanding squeal, I continued. "If not tonight, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

"Girl, you be good," crooned Sheryl. "Don't give it all out tonight. You got to string the guy along a bit. Make

him prove himself before you go to the next level. You remember how to play, don't you?"

"I still know how to and when to give a man what he wants. Don't you worry 'bout me. Tonight's just for getting to know each other a little bit. Nothing more."

"Well, you have fun. And I want to hear all about it later, Kell. This girl's gonna' want a full report. We're all gonna' want a full report. Girl, we're so excited for you."

"Thanks, Sheryl." In the mirror, I noticed Nancy approaching in the hallway. "Catch you later. Say hi to Jacquie and Denita for me."

Nancy's face peeked at me from around the corner of the doorway. "What are you and the girls up to tonight?"

"The girls are meeting over at Sheryl's tonight, and I might drop by there later," I replied, adjusting the spaghetti straps on my shoulders. I paused for effect. "I'm going out on a date first, though."

"No." Nancy stared at my face in the mirror in disbelief. "Seriously? I thought you said--oh, but never mind that. That's great! Who's the guy?"

"A professor at the school where I'm taking a night course." I turned my body and demurely fluttered my

eyelids. "I think I've been a bit of a distraction in his class." I winked.

"Kelly, look at you. Doing the teacher." Nancy swiveled her hips to her own internal salsa beat. "That would get you expelled at my school, along with the teacher. Not that that would stop anyone."

"Oh, you're bad, girl. You keep talkin' like that, and they are gonna' throw you out of that school." I cocked my hip to the side, placed my hand upon it and mockingly wagged my other finger at her. "College is not the same as high school. We students are more mature there." I turned back to the mirror and smiled furtively at her reflection. "And this is just a first date, for now. We're nowhere near any 'doing.'"

"It's not just talking, but we can talk about that later. Maybe if you're not out too late." I noticed the sly challenge in Nancy's eyes, purposely clandestine.

I caught the serious intent and wondered if perhaps I had pushed the joke a little too far. But then the moment passed, and Nancy said, "But don't bother with that." Her eyes lost the wild glint and became soft again. "Tonight is your night. You have a good time, and do not even think of your little Nisha. She will be perfectly safe and happy with me."

"That's why I have you watch her. I won't even give her a thought tonight, knowing there is nothing to worry about." Of course, I would still worry anyway. And now I would be wondering about Nancy as well. "Now, I'd better get finished getting ready, or I might miss the date altogether."

"That would be a bad start to a relationship." Nancy laughed once to herself as if catching her own humor then headed down the hallway. "I'll keep Tenisha occupied."

"Thank you, that will be a big help," I said and returned to my preening. Sadly, our arrangement would change the next year. Nancy was in her final year at King of Kings Christian High School and had only a few months left until graduation. I was already dreading the babysitter-withdrawal I would have to endure.

Within several minutes, I had completed my ensemble. I felt fairly put together as I grabbed my coat, said my farewells for the evening, and climbed into my silver Honda Accord to drive to Union Square Grill, where I was meeting the professor for the date.

It was late enough that I missed the rush-hour traffic, but in Seattle, no matter what time of day or night, you could never really avoid all traffic. What should have only taken fifteen minutes by distance took a little over

thirty. Being native to Seattle, though, I was accustomed to the caprice of local traffic. I had learned to budget in the extra minutes or hours, depending on the trip, to ensure that I arrived where I wanted with a little bit of time to spare. I was ready and set for my first date in a long time, and the night was going to belong to me.