

Chapter 3

Tiffanie

He was just a man. This was just an airport. But both that man and this airport had my blood pressure rising.

I jumped from the car and sprinted across the lot, even though I didn't feel stable running in these four-inch red bottoms. Really, I shouldn't have been running—I shouldn't have even been walking. Trey's behind should have met me at curbside, but Damon wanted Trey's homecoming to be more personal.

I slowed my steps and tried to pull back all the negativity that was rolling through my mind. The only reason I was upset was because this was Trey. I would've met any of my friends right at the gate if I could get past TSA.

It was crazy that I had these feelings for a man I'd never met, but I'd heard too many stories about him that I just didn't like. Now, of course, Damon had told me all about his role and the things he'd done. But a person only had to spend two seconds with my boo to know that he'd changed. It wasn't hard to see Damon's heart.

But Trey? He hadn't changed. I knew that because when Damon and I first met, I would hear him on the phone trying to school his friend, but Trey didn't want to learn. And so what happened? Prison! And he was probably harder now than before. That's why I felt he didn't need to be anywhere near my man.

But on some ole program for nonviolent criminals, Trey had been released, just in time for our wedding, and Damon wanted him to be there. It didn't make a lot of sense to me; seven years was a long time not to see someone and still call him your best friend. But Damon

explained to me that just because you hadn't seen your brother, no amount of passing time would ever take away the fact that you were brothers.

I tried to understand that, though if I had to explain it to anyone, it felt like Damon was trying to make up for the lost time to Trey, especially since it was Trey's idea to stand up for Damon.

All I could do was pray that Trey would stand next to Damon on Friday night, and then be on the first thing heading back to Atlanta on Saturday morning.

I rushed into the terminal, peeped at the screen, and released a deep breath when I saw that Trey's plane had just hit the tarmac.

I strolled over to the carousel where his bags would be and took a moment to calm down and focus my thoughts. There were so many things I had to do this week, and I pulled out my phone to review my to-do list. Today alone, I had to meet our wedding planner at the Willard to review the seating arrangements, and then run over to check on my grandmother's dress. As I scanned the checklist, my mind kept wandering back to my favorite subject, Damon King, and right away, I smiled.

Yeah, he had an attitude this morning, but how could I be mad at my baby? All I had to do was think about all that he'd done for me, from the fabulous gifts that he gave me—usually wrapped in one of those little blue boxes from a store that shared my name—to the credit cards I had for all the top designer stores. And then there were the gifts that really mattered—the thousands of dollars he'd given me so that I could finish my last two years at Howard, the opportunities he'd provided to help me polish my social skills in a Jack and Jill sort of way, the events he took me to: legacy banquets with Oprah, political fund-raisers where I'd even met Michelle Obama.

His goodness rained down on me, yet one of the best gifts was still a month away—because of this man, I was about to have my own business.

My grandparents always told me that my blessings began the day I was born; not that I ever believed them. How could I, once I became old enough to understand why I was living with them and not my mother?

But then, one day back in 2008, I began to feel that maybe God hadn't forgotten about me. I leaned back on the post where I stood, closed my eyes, and remembered. . . .

May 27, 2008. Howard University. The Blackburn Center. Waiting to speak to my financial adviser and praying that he could help me. I shook as I waited—not out of fear, just anticipation. Two years of college and every bill had been paid. But now there were two years in front of me, and even though I had walked by the faith that my grandparents had taught me, I couldn't figure out how faith was going to get me to graduation.

My grandparents had already scraped together what little they had, and without their sacrifices, I wouldn't have made it this far. Howard had done its part, too, with a partial scholarship that covered what my grandparents couldn't.

But now, facing my junior year, expenses were going to be higher by a third. Everything, from textbooks to housing, cost more. My grandparents told me to come back home to save money on room and board, but now that I'd tasted this morsel of freedom, there was no way I was going back to living under my grandfather's roof and rules. The lock he kept me under didn't even have a key. I knew it was because he loved me, I knew it was because he didn't want me to end up like my mother. But his love didn't let me breathe and I had come to love all the inhales and exhales of my life.

So, if I wanted to graduate, if I wanted to stay on campus, if I wanted to continue living this life . . . I needed cash money.

I picked up the current issue of *The Hilltop* and flipped through the pages, hoping one of the articles would keep my attention until Mr. York called me into his office. But then, something caught my eye, and it wasn't anything in the school newspaper. Actually, it wasn't just my eyes that were distracted. It was more like—all of me; like a feeling swept over, then hovered above me. I looked up to search for what had upset my equilibrium and at the front door, there stood this brother.

Even though he was feet away, I could tell that he wasn't a student. He was way too distinguished-looking in that tailored suit, looking like a model in an ad for life after graduation. As he strolled closer, I saw the diamond earring that glittered from his lobe and the gold diamond-laced watch that peeked from under the hem of his sleeve.

But what really gave him away besides all of his sophistication and apparent money, the real reason why I knew he was a full-fledged man, was because of the way he moved. He strutted like he knew all about life.

My lips parted as I watched him, and I hoped that he didn't think I was gawking. It was just that I couldn't take my eyes off what looked like power personified. I was impressed with his importance.

As he turned toward the information desk, his eyes met mine. He stopped. He stared. He pivoted. And then, without speaking to anyone else, he came straight toward me.

He stood just a few inches outside of my personal space and said, "I can fix it."

I blinked and even turned to my right and left because I couldn't figure out a couple of things: number one, was he speaking to me? And number two, if he was, what did he mean? "What?" I asked.

"Whatever you need, whatever you want," he said, with his catlike eyes laser-focused on mine, "I'll give it to you."

Then he sat down next to me. At any other time, I might have gotten up and moved, just because I didn't want to be pulled into a conversation, but with the man who'd introduced himself as Damon King, I wanted to stay.

"And your name?" he asked.

"Tiffanie Cooper."

He held his hand out and I shook it, remembering all the things I'd learned about being professional: keep your handshake as strong as your eye contact.

"So, what is it that you need?" he asked. "How can I help you?"

I hesitated, because for a second I wondered if he were some kind of pervert. But then, if he were, why would he be so dressed up and hanging out in the financial aid office of a college?

"I don't think you can help me; I'm here to talk to my adviser."

"So, you're a student here?"

I resisted the urge to say, 'Duh,' and just nodded. "I'm a rising junior, and it's time for me to get a job."

He grinned. "See? I told you I could help you. I'm looking for an intern to expand my company and you're the woman to help me."

The word *pervert* came back to my mind because his response was a little too convenient. "What kind of company do you have?"

“Oh, I do a little of this and a little of that.”

What in the world?

“I really have several small companies all rolled into one,” he said, explaining further.

“Entertainment, real estate, anything that can make money in this new millennium.”

“So you’re looking for an intern?”

He nodded. “And like I said, you’re the woman who can help me make this happen.”

I tossed the magazine I’d been holding back onto the table and shook my head. “I’m not looking for an internship; I need a paying job.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Internships. They give you experience, but no money.”

“Who would work for no money?”

“Exactly!” I said.

“Well, my internship pays.”

Once again, this man had my attention. “How much?”

“How much do you need?”

I laughed out loud and he grinned. But he didn’t get it because he asked, “What’s so funny?”

“You . . . asking me . . . how much money I want to make.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

When I’d first laid my eyes on this brother, I thought he was the sophisticated, intelligent type. Now, I didn’t know if he was playing me or had just gotten off some kind of boat. But if he were playing, I was gonna play him. I decided to give him a number—around the minimum wage and then increase it by two dollars. “I’m looking to earn about eight dollars an hour.”

Not a beat passed before he said, “I’ll give you twenty.”

I had to look stupid with the way my mouth opened as wide as my eyes. “An hour?”

“What? That’s not enough?” he asked, though I could tell he was amused. “Do you want twenty-five?”

“No, no . . . I mean, yes, yes. I mean, I’ll take twenty or twenty-five. Either one. That’s more than enough!” But then I pushed pause and rewound my excitement.

I leaned back a little to get a clearer view of this joker. Now that he was sitting down, I noticed the diamond studs in *both* of his ears, big and bright. A quick glance at his watch gave me the same impression. Who was this guy and what did he do to be able to offer me that kind of money? And . . . what did he want *me* to do for twenty or twenty-five dollars an hour?

“I’m not looking to get caught up in anything that’s not legal,” I told him, thinking that he was just some drug dealer. But I told him this with attitude so he’d understand I wasn’t some naive little girl.

“Do you think I’d be here—at Howard—looking for an intern if I wasn’t legit? If I wanted just anybody to do just anything, I could find that girl anywhere.”

Okay, he had a point. But still, some kind of catch had to come with that kind of offer. “And, I’m not interested in . . . you know . . .”

“What?” he said. When I didn’t respond, he added, “You’re not interested in . . . something sexual?”

The way he said it made heat rise to my cheeks but I said, “Yeah,” as boldly as I could.

He laughed. “Sweetheart, if I were looking for sex, there are easier ways for me to find it instead of coming down to the Student Office. I’d just head straight to the dorms.”

Okay, he had another point. But, I needed to make my points, too. My voice was still strong and solid when I told him, “I’m just sayin’, I do everything on the up-and-up. I’m straight.”

“That you are.”

It was more than just needing the money that made me say, “So, if you are, too, then you got yourself a new intern.” I felt like I could trust him.

I never saw my financial adviser that afternoon; no need, since I started my new position as Damon King’s personal assistant the next day . . .

The sound of people—their chatter and their movement made me open my eyes. I must’ve had one of those “Damon grins” on my face because folks were giving me those what’s-got-you-so-happy stares. Whew! They just didn’t even know.

There was just one blip in my wonderful life.

Our lovemaking.

I wanted to slap myself for thinking about that. Everything else was beyond good—why couldn’t I just be satisfied? And it wasn’t like I was an expert on good or bad sex, since I’d had no experience before Damon.

With a deep sigh, I looked up and my eyes settled on a man. And my glance got stuck right there. He strutted toward me wearing a smile—no, it was more of a smirk that said, *I can make you happy*.

I inhaled a quick breath. And then another when he walked right up to me.

Now, it wasn’t that I didn’t know who he was. Damon’s description had been spot-on: six-three, 220 or 230 pounds.

“He’s about my complexion,” Damon had told me. “And the last time I saw Trey, he was sporting a bald head.”

Damon was right on every single count, though there had been no need to give that complete description. He could have just told me to find the finest, swaggiest man in the airport.

Because that’s what Trey was. It was more than his looks, it was the way he moved, with a little dip in his strut. With confidence so cool it made me weak, and I’m not talking about in a laughing kind of way.

Without any real conscious thought, I crossed my legs and squeezed my thighs together. I had never done that before—not even while reading the sexiest scenes in a book. But something was going on south of the border and I had to get it under control.

As Trey came closer, my focus shifted from his swagger to his eyes. His golden-brown eyes were piercing, as if he could see right through . . . my clothes. That scared me—could he see my yearning?

“You must be Tiffanie,” he said in a deep, melodic voice that tore straight through to my center.

He wrapped one arm around my waist, pulled me into his chest as if he knew me, and pressed his lips against my cheek.

His lips lingered and lingered and lingered.

And after about the third second, I shuddered.

And shuddered.

And shuddered.

Then I wilted.

After that long, slow, earth-shaking moment, he released me and I prayed that he hadn't felt the way I trembled. But he must have because he stepped back, searched my eyes like he was one of DC's finest, and then broke into a little chuckle.

"Let me go get my bags," he said as if he'd just done his job and now he was on to the next task.

My eyes followed him as he strutted away and I tried to wrap my mind around what had just happened. A man I didn't know said my name, kissed my cheek, and a tremor went through my body like that?

I inhaled a couple of deep, quick breaths, but I never took my eyes off him.

"What just happened?" I whispered.

And then, as if he'd heard me, he twisted around. And winked.

And right there, I shuddered and wilted again.