

GULLAH GURLS

By Christina Taylor

CHAPTER 1

"Gurl, 'de ah *truly* breakin' me down."

The voice on the other end of my sleek new cell phone was heavy with the low drawl of Black country folks known as "Geechies" sprawled along remote Islands off the coastline of South Carolina and Georgia. I was all too familiar with it.

"I promise ya' Tal," Kristen my best friend since grade school and through college, always calls me Tal. She says Talez is too Nubian for her.

"If one more woman walks into my office with an *itch* she *knows* can't be cured with Monistat, I am going to pull out a can of "whup" _ _ _ s from my private collection."

We both laughed hysterically--me through tears and snot and she through experience and time.

Kristin Richey--Dr. Kristen Richey--my oldest and dearest friend, was taking a moment away from her busy OB/GYN practice to bring me back to earth.

"Look Tal, we've been through this time and time again."

The sistah can jump from one subject to the next without skipping a beat. The reception on my phone was getting sketchy, but it didn't matter. I knew what she was about to say.

"Vincent was no good last year, the year before that and the year before

that. And he's still no good! So what if he just closed on that overpriced condo in Venice Beach. And who gives a damn if he paid off that raggedy 2005 Range Rover. He doesn't value *you*. He values *things*.

“O.k., so he calls you out of the blue. *Twenty-four hours* before he's supposed to arrive in Chicago? Girl, please! He's just trying to get in where he can fit in!”

Inside I smile because it always amazes me that Kristen is so cool, calm and collected with her colleagues and associates, but can go "gullah-Fab" in two seconds flat.

It was raining in Chicago and the moon was staring brilliantly into the tinted windows of my silver glaze Passat. I suddenly felt homesick.

The phone line clicked and Kristen excused herself.

I began to think about how confusing it would be to see Vincent again. Two years, five months and six days had passed. No, I wasn't counting but my body was.

“Man, if this isn't a bummer. It's Friday night and I am on my way *back* to the office with no plans and no man! Just the rain and Monday morning fast approaching.

"This is Dr. Richey." Kristen returned in her most professional “pseudo” European voice.

“Girl, it's me!” I replied.

“Oh, O.K. You know I *still* can't work this call-waiting thing! Now back to what I was saying.

“You’ve accomplished *so* much Tal. I’d hate to see you throw it all away on Vincent. I mean it takes a lot to move from small town South Carolina to Chicago. You see I’m still here! Look at you! You’re a Sr. Editor with one of the *top* Publishing firms in the country. You’re still young, single, no babies so no baby daddy drama! The world is holding on the other line! Hello? Girl, click over and answer the dang phone!”

I paused for a moment taking in all the love that was penetrating through the phone line.

“Kristen, what would I do without you?” I asked sweetly.

“I don’t know Tal, I just don’t know.”

CHAPTER 2

The rain fell more steadily and the streetlights intensified the pulsing beat of the city. Chicago in mid-spring is extravagant. The building windows traced the moving silhouettes of folks still working or cooking or just hanging out. Brownstones and bridges outlined the on setting night sky perfectly.

Who could want more? Of course I missed my old sea-Island life back in Beaufort. But Kristen and I came to the conclusion that Chicago was *just* the change I needed.

Pulling up to the parking garage at Hewfort and Giles Publishing House, I reluctantly opened the driver side door and let my pink and white Keds hit the concrete, splashing the iridescent puddle below.

Sade was crooning in the speaker door. Something about a ‘lovers rock’, but I was not trying to hear that. With my umbrella in one hand and the most horrible manuscript I’d ever had the displeasure of reading in the other, I slowly lifted myself out of the car and into the world.

Suddenly, Jill Scott’s song “Golden” was blaring in my purse and the purse was vibrating. This new phone was something of a wonder. I could download all of my favorite tunes as ring tones. “Golden” was something of a personal mantra for me. Shoot, I “took my freedom” and no one was going to change that. Finally after rambling through peppermints, MAC high shine lip gloss, my checkbook and few lose pennies and dimes stuck to the bottom of my

purse, I found the phone. The number came up “unknown”.

I thought to myself, “Whoever this is must *not* know me very well. I rarely, *ever* answer unknown or private calls.”

“Hello?” I answered in my “who-the-heck-is-this-and-how-did-you-get-this-number” voice.

“Hey, baby girl!”

The voice on the other end was as smooth as fresh country butter and deep as the sharp throb it sent running to the pit of my stomach. Not a bad throb but an aching one.

It was Vincent. I hadn’t given him my new cell phone number. He could only have gotten it from one person, my sister Mizari. She would sell her kidneys for a lotto ticket and a pack of Newports.

“You still there babe?”

His thick West Indian accent was accompanied with a hint of genuine concern.

I immediately got back into my car and shut the door. If I was going to go *all the way* off, I didn’t want the nice “white folks” passing by to see.

“Yes Vincent, I’m here. How did you get...”

“Never mind that.”

He cut me off cold just like he always did.

My instant disgust suddenly became arousal.

“Calm down, Chica.” I told myself.

Besides this is the *same* man who two years earlier informed me that he

“just wasn’t ready” for a serious commitment. That was, of course, after he had moved me from Beaufort to Charlotte and stuck me with the rent on a high priced loft downtown that we had agreed to share.

“There’s been a change of plans. Chass Portland’s agent won’t be able to make tomorrow’s meeting so I changed my flight.”

Chass Portland was the sensational rookie quarterback for the Chicago Bears. He was from Georgia and was the number three draft pick for the NFL. Vincent was his attorney. Big names and high living was always Vincent’s thing.

I never really took to the life. I mean, you meet one superstar athlete and his crazy “baby momma”, you’ve met them all.

“Look Vincent,” he always hated it when I called him Vincent instead of Vince. “What are you saying exactly? You changed your flight? What does that have to do with me?”

My free hand was tapping the steering wheel impatiently.

“I’m at Chicago International. I wanted to surprise you.”

Sweet insinuation oozed from his words. This man was *so* predictable. The silence that hovered between his last word and my high sigh was apparent. As the rain began to let up slightly the stars gave way to a full moon sitting heavily above the city skyscrapers.

“I want to see you Talez. I *need* to see you. Give me your address and I’ll have the driver meet you at your place in say, an hour?”

I knew I couldn’t call Kristen for this kind of advice. She absolutely despised Vincent. This was one situation I would have to handle on my own, big

city-style.

CHAPTER 3

Two hours had passed and still no Vincent. No driver, no call, no nothing.

By ten, I had gulped down half a bottle of Franciscan red and sat despondently on my brown leather sofa. A chocolate suede afghan draped warmly across my shoulders.

The rain had completely stopped and the vanilla scented candles I'd lit two hours ago were dimming slowly.

“Who does he think he is standing me up?”

I pouted as I reached for the empty bottle lying on the hardwood floor. I picked the bottle up and allowed the last 3 drops to drip on my tongue.

Vincent was suppose to waltz through my door, standing 6'6 smelling of Dolce & Gabana, freshly shaved, teeth white as chalk, and see me. The *new* me thirty pounds lighter, acne-free. He was suppose to drop down on his knees and beg me to take him back.

“So much for that Arabesque dream.” I thought as the phone rang loudly.

I ran my fingers through my shoulder length dreads and caught a whiff of my own stank breath.

“Whew!” I said fanning my face.

I snatched the phone from its charger half mad, half irritated, all inebriated.

“Hello? Yeah.. yeah, o.k. Whatever Mizari.”

It was my sister, Mizari the Judas.

“Like I said, he told me it was very important that he contact you, so that’s...”

“Mizari, please. You *deliberately*..”

“See, see now *that’s* the crap I’m talking bout! You *always* throwing in big words..”

“No Mizari!”

Now, I was standing on my own two wobbly legs trying to gain some composure, though my head was pounding.

“You had NO right to give Vincent my cell phone number. No right whatsoever, what were you *thinking*? Did you think you were doing me a favor? Do you think I’m that desperate? Huh? Have you forgotten...”

“Hol’ it *right* ‘der.” Mizari’s tone had changed from sheepish and innocent to down right belligerent and mean.

Mizari could try as she may to escape our dialectical roots, but they would always show face in the mix of a heated argument. I imagined her lighting a Newport, while holding the phone between her shoulder and her ear, her too long acrylic fingernails with the diamonds on the tip, struggling to strike the light.

Mizari was 5’2 with reddish-blond dyed hair and freckles. She was the finest of us two, but never the brightest.

“No, I have NOT forgotten what he did!”

She coughed a draining throaty, smoker’s cough.

“And ssh! It looks like to me that *you* won’t either. You need to grow up,

Tal. The man just wants to make commends with you.”

“*Commends.*”

She apparently was *not* using the vocabulary cards I’d sent her last Christmas. The floor beneath my feet was still cold. I grabbed a pillow off the couch and sat Indian style in the middle of my living room.

Baby sister was right. It was time to forgive Vincent, time to move forward. Maybe he and I could be friends.

“Sorry I yelled at you.”

I said finally.

“Don’t bother me none. *You* ‘de one wit’ *no* man.”

We laughed and continued our conversation well into the early hours of the next day.

CHAPTER 4

Brice Fontane sat uncomfortably in the seductively lit private section of Mirot's Bistro.

Mirot's was an elegant establishment centered in the historic downtown Houston area. It hosted many a graduation, wedding and now break-up affair.

He fondly recalled the first time he met Leslie Sheridan, the Councilman's daughter.

"Our first meeting was divinely appointed." Brice concluded.

His best friend, Carl had introduced them one night after a singles' outing at First Baptist on Congress. Leslie Sheridan was wearing a sheer white, sleeveless blouse and a pair of the most complimenting jeans Brice had ever seen on a woman. He was captivated by the way she situated her long brandy colored hair behind her ear, as she smiled shyly looking his way. She was the most intelligent, creatively divine creature he had laid his eyes upon.

The woman was everything he could have wished for--educated at Hampton University, a petite sorority girl with a great finance career and a beautiful, athletic body. And to top it off, she was a Christian.

Three dates later Brice's mother, predicted that they would have "beautiful babies with good hair".

Brice hated that his parents were still so country and shallow.

"Sir, would you like to order now?" The waiter appeared from out of nowhere.

“No, not yet.” Brice glanced at his watch, again. “I’m still waiting on someone.”

Brice surveyed the room looking for Leslie to come bouncing through the door. Her upbeat, giggly ways were what had drawn him to her in the beginning. As time progressed, however, they became extremely annoying. The mood swings, the constant questioning, “Do you *really* love me? What do you love about me?”

Brices’ head began to hurt recalling the many instances when Leslie became irate and babyish if she didn’t get her way. He always considered himself one of the “good guys”. He was patient, dependable and honest.

Brice Fontane was not only a scholar but a very attractive man with long brown limbs and soft greenish eyes to match. He’d played college football, but decided in his senior year to pursue his PR career and not go pro.

“Where is this girl?” he thought.

He had told her *exactly* 8:00 pm. Of course, that was another thing about Leslie “the princess” (as she often referred to herself) Sheridan, she had no concept of time. It was exactly 8:35 pm when, the glass double doors of the Bistro opened up. There stood Carl, his best friend; Carl’s wife, Tiffany; Brice’s mom and dad, and two of Leslie’s best friends.

They were all dressed rather after “five-ish” and Carl was carrying a bouquet of red roses. Laughter and chatter could be heard as family and friends filed in one by one and were directed to the private section where Brice, who by now was in complete shock, stood mouth open wide, utterly confused. Carl entered the room first.

“Man, I got to give it to you. When you go out *you go all the way* out!” Carl grabbed Brice by the hand and pulled him in for the traditional “brother-to-brother” hug.

“You tried to keep us in the dark. Good thing Leslie called Tiffany and told us what time to be here.”

“Be *here*? For what? Man, I’m confused.”

Brice was in the midst of church members, parents, some of Leslie’s co-workers and some of his co-workers *too*. Something was very wrong with this picture and his soul began to hurt when he turned to see Leslie, as radiant as the morning sun, receiving congratulatory hugs and kisses in honor of their engagement.

“*Engagement?*” He was sure that he hadn’t heard the words correctly.

But soon enough more and more friends and family were patting him on the back, encouraging him to go ahead and do the honors. Leslie was sporting a silk champagne-colored, knee length wrap dress that showed just enough cleavage to keep her in the “good girl” club. Her long hair had been coiffured into a chic up-do with little ringlets extending from both sides of her head.

For a moment Brice almost forgot what he had actually gone there to do. Grinning from ear to ear, Leslie was hugging and “blessing” everyone in the room. She was even thanking them for showing up on such short notice.

“Ah, sweetie, come.” She was beckoning Brice toward her with her newly French-manicured nails.

“Did you speak to-“

Brice quickly cupped Leslie by the elbow and ushered her to the farthest table away from the crowd. He was trying anxiously not to appear the least bit upset by all the confusion. She seemed taken aback, but in the true form of a “lady” she kept her composure.

“Leslie, what’s going on here? What are all these people doing here?”

“Babe.” She paused giving Brice that “boy-you-better-quit-playing-with-me-look”.

“Seriously. Did you think I would allow such an occasion as this to happen without our parents and friends here to witness it? I could hear it in your voice when you called the other day saying it was important that we have a “talk”.

She gestured “talk” with the quotations.

“It wasn’t hard to figure out when you wanted to meet here at Mirot’s. This was where we had our first official date! You remembered!”

“Leslie...” Brice began to speak.

“Tsk! Tsk!”

She placed her finger on Brice’s baby soft lips.

“Don’t thank me honey. I was just helping speed up the process.”

She wrapped her slender arms around his neck and he could smell her perfume as it rose to meet his nostrils. It was official. Brice Fontane had successfully crossed over into The Twilight Zone.

“Look. We need to talk.”

Brice removed her hands from around his neck and held them tight in his.

She could sense that something was amiss. The room was slowly becoming quiet. Councilman Sheridan had ordered the wait staff to bring everyone a glass of Pinot Grigio for the toast.

“Please everyone, excuse us for a minute.”

Brice led a visibly bewildered Leslie to a small room sectioned off near the cigar lounge. In his mind he was praying to God for strength to do what he knew he should have done long ago.

“Leslie, baby, have a seat.”

He pointed to a chaise lounge. As he took his seat he noticed that the overly confident woman that had waltzed in the door, late, just ten minutes earlier was morphing into a confused little girl right before his eyes. Brice knew that she was nervous because she did that weird thing with her neck, scratching it with her fingernails, slowly, methodically. Stretching it as far as it would go.

“What’s the problem Brice? Is it the people? Too many, huh? I should have known...”

“Please stop! The people aren’t the problem Leslie.”

He paused.

“We are. You are, without a doubt, the most wonderful woman I know.”

Leslie’s neck began the stretching ritual. Brice, undeterred continued, looking deep into her eyes.

“The last year and a half has been absolutely amazing, but amazing doesn’t sustain a relationship.”

“Is this about that PR job in Chicago? Honey, trust me. Saying no to that job, was saying “Yes” to us. Besides, you know daddy needs you here to help with the upcoming elections. Let’s continue this conversation after our guests have left.”

Leslie walked toward the door hastily. She turned to him.

“Let’s go. *Now* Brice, people are waiting on us.”

Her face was turning bright red and her cheeks were flushed.

Brice grinned softly and caressed her forehead with the back of his hand. How could he have ever entertained the thought of letting her go? He mused. Instantly he knew what he had to do.

CHAPTER 5

They emerged from the other room arm and arm, both smiling, though Leslie was recognizably disconcerted. Most of the guests held half empty glasses of white wine and others had begun snacking on the h'ordourves. Brice grabbed a glass, raised it and began to speak.

“Leslie and I would like to thank each of you for being here tonight.” His heart began to beat very fast.

“You all have come here tonight at the urging of this lovely woman.” He turned and looked at Leslie.

“This is a momentous day for us. Our families are gathered here and our closest friends are here too.”

Tears began to well up in the eyes of the women, while the single men were hoping Brice would hurry it up. The last thing they needed was for their women to get the crazy notion that nuptials were on the horizon for them too.

“Each of you has shared in our lives together in some form or fashion and we appreciate your love.” Brice’s hand began to tremble.

Leslie kissed him on the cheek and gave him a slight pat on the back, one of encouragement.

“Oh my man, so sensitive yet so strong.” She thought.

A wave of emotion instantly took over the crowded room and Brice saw his mother reach into her purse and extract a crumbled up Kleenex.

“I have to do this.” Brice resumed his speech.

“That is why Leslie and I regrettably must part ways.”

The entire room let out an enormous sigh and the sniffing stopped.

Councilman Sheridan’s glass fell to the floor as he attempted to catch Mrs. Sheridan who nearly fainted at the news. People began to whisper amongst themselves questioning.

“Did he just say what I think he said?”

“Brice Theodore Fontane!” Leslie screamed as she lunged for his throat. *“How could you?”*

Her girlfriends were attempting to remove her stubborn hands from around his neck. They all went down when Brice slipped on the shoe that Mrs. Sheridan managed to take off and throw at his head.

Carl rushed to Brice’s aide, blocking Councilman Sheridan’s fist from fast approaching Brice’s face.

“Man, you gotta get out of here.”

Carl's words were barely audible with all the cuss words flying between the Fontanes and the Sheridans.

The guest, most of whom were confused and embarrassed for poor Leslie, began to leave the room. They finally escaped Leslie's swinging claws and Mrs. Sheridan's failed back jump.

Once outdoors in the humid night air Carl could no longer contain his laughter. Though he felt terrible for Brice, he knew that this was one night they would not soon forget. He placed his hand on Brice's shoulder.

"Bruh, just what were you thinking?"

Brice was sitting on the curb with his designer shirt torn and tie completely undone trying to catch his breath. He shook his head. It had become clear to him the mistake he'd made. There was certainly a right and a wrong way to do a "thang." He recalled the words of his grandma.

"She forced my hand Carl. You know I would have married Leslie, but we're just going in two different directions. There are some things that can't be compromised."

Brice could hear in the background the dying down of the chaos. They sat in silence for a few minutes more.

"Dude, Mrs. Sheridan ain't no punk, look at my eye."

Carl pointed to the cut along his brow. Brice couldn't deny that Carl was one who could find humor in just about anything. He laughed a deep hearty secure laugh.

“Let’s get outta, man.” He said before waving down the first cab that crossed his path.