

Chapter 1

Lisa

It was another beautiful Sunday afternoon in my hometown of Oakland, California. I was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, and I loved every part of it: the people, the culture and most of all, the weather. During the spring, we are always blessed with gorgeous seventy-degree days, light breezes and only a few white clouds in the sky to softly accent the pale blue. Sunday afternoons like this were special for me, Portia Martin and Stephanie Watkins, two of my best girlfriends.

Every other Sunday, we would all meet at a local cafe or at one of our homes to sit back, relax and catch up with what was going on in one another's lives. This Sunday was no different. I invited the girls over to my house, cooked some of my famous jambalaya and peach cobbler and made a pitcher of raspberry cosmopolitans, so we could lounge around in my backyard, have some drinks and exhale. As part of our Sunday afternoon ritual, either Stephanie or I would always become the victim of a Portia Martin know-it-all lecture, and today just happened to be my turn.

"Lisa, you're killin' me. Why is it, you just can't be happy with a regular nine-to-five man? Somebody who's gonna treat you right, love you, respect you and treat you like the queen you are. But nooooo, your hot little ass always has to chase behind men you know are headaches and are gonna cause you more problems than their sorry asses are worth," Portia said as she rolled her neck, put one hand on her hip and snapped her finger in the air. With the help of a few glasses of cosmopolitan, Portia was ready to begin her lecture.

The infamous Portia Martin, my best friend and an uncontrollable spirit. Portia, Stephanie and I met about seven years ago at a pleasure party hosted by a mutual friend. Ever since that day, we've been inseparable. Portia is one of the most confident –some would say cocky –women I know. She is the poster child for fantastic at forty. She is barely five-two, but carries herself as if she is six-two. Portia is a cute little petite thing, with a deep mocha-colored complexion and the cutest dimples you'll ever see, and she always wears her dark brown hair short and sassy. She is never known to hold back her opinion regardless of the audience. She is very matter of fact, flippant and extremely blunt. If you ever wanted to know the painfully honest truth about anything, just ask Portia. Sometimes her directness is misconstrued as arrogance or just downright rudeness, but deep down she always has your best interest at heart and she is the most loving friend I've ever had.

Portia is very committed to her career, her family and her friends. Even when she has a man in her life, she never abandons her friends. Many times, women lose track of their girlfriends once a man comes along, but not Portia. She always keeps her priorities straight.

Portia has a fabulous job as a buyer at Bridgemont Department store, and she's a dedicated mother to my nine-year-old, little "nephew" Joseph, who I love tremendously. Portia is the type of friend I could depend on for anything. Nevertheless, as much as I love that girl, she gets on my last nerve whenever she steps up on her soapbox to give one of her "I'm warning you" speeches.

"Listen, Portia, I can't help what I like, and I damn sure can't help the type of men who like me." I really was not in the mood to hear anything negative she had to say.

"Here we go again," Portia said, rolling her eyes.

“I can’t help it, P. I’m attracted to men who are fine, powerful, a little bit arrogant, successful, funny –”

“And in the limelight with some sort of power or celebrity status,” Portia said as she rudely interrupted me.

“That’s not what I was about to say, P. You know me better than that,” I said as I sighed in frustration.

“Truth hurts, Lisa, so just deal with it,” she said as she shrugged and sat down on one of the lawn chairs in my backyard.

“Damn, P, why can’t you just be happy for me?”

“Because Kenneth Maxwell ain’t about shit, and you know it. He’s a player, Lisa, and everyone knows it except your dumb ass.”

“Yeah, but Portia, you have to give our girl props though for pulling a brother like Kenneth Maxwell,” Stephanie said acknowledging my accomplishment.

“Thank you, girl,” I quickly replied and nodded.

“Stephanie, don’t humor her. You know just as well as I do, Kenneth Maxwell is nothing but bad news.”

Kenneth Maxwell was one of the hottest new Black comedians on the comedy circuit. Many critics were already calling him one of the next Kings of Comedy because his comedic style was so unique. He had the charisma and old-school style of Steve Harvey; the hilarious, doing-the-dozens humor of DL Hughley; the funny, down-to-earth flair of Cedric the Entertainer; and of course a splash of “blue” humor like the infamous, Bernie Mac. Kenneth Maxwell, better known as K. Max, was the complete comedic package.

Now, in addition to his entertainment skills, K. Max just happened to be one of the most beautiful Black men I had ever seen. He was six-two, with milk chocolate skin, a baldhead, thin moustache and goatee, thick black eyebrows, sexy brown bedroom eyes and a well-defined basketball player physique. The man was fine.

However, as fine as he was, the tabloids had cast an ugly shadow on his character. There were many rumors circulating about him being extremely arrogant, egotistical and a womanizer. I never wanted to believe any of them because he always appeared to be so pleasant and personable every time I saw him perform live or during an interview. I once read he frequently gave donations to a community project developed to help single moms who were trying to go back to school. I thought that was so admirable and assumed because he was probably the product of a struggling single mother, this was his way to give back.

All of these things made it so hard to believe someone so giving and compassionate could be arrogant and egotistical. Then again, you can’t always believe everything you hear. Therefore, beyond the basic tabloid rumor mill; as far as I was concerned, Kenneth Maxwell was the epitome of Black male perfection...and I had managed to capture his attention.

“Aww, come on, Portia. He’s fine, he’s rich, and he seems to have an interest in Lisa. So why don’t you stop being so judgmental and be happy for our girl?” Stephanie said.

“You know what, I’ll give Lisa her props because K. Max is fine as hell, and yes he is ballin’ big time, but the problem is, he’s not just some regular player off the street. He’s what’s that word you use all of the time, Lisa?” Portia asked me.

“Playerific or pimptastic,” I said as I let out a deep sigh, rolled my eyes and shook my head.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. That fool is playerific. Also known as, a terrific player, and all those jokes he makes on stage are really about him. He tries to make it seem like he’s talking about other guys when he talks about running women, being a player and wanting to

be in a committed relationship with two women. By the way, what the hell is all of that about, Lisa?” Portia said as she looked over at me with a perplexed expression.

“What do you mean?” I said with a level of hesitation because I knew this conversation was about to take a turn for the worse.

“What’s up with K. Max, during his stand-up routine, always talking about wanting to be in a relationship with two women?” Portia asked as her voice started to slowly elevate.

“It’s called polyamory. I did some research about it on the Internet. There are many people choosing to live alternative lifestyles nowadays such as swingers, bi-sexuals and polyamory groups. Polyamory means loving more than one. It’s a lifestyle for people who are open to more than one relationship at a time. It’s responsible non-monogamy and –”

“Excuse me?” Stephanie and Portia said simultaneously. They looked at each other with confusion.

“It’s called a poly –”

“I heard what you said the first time, and I cannot believe you’re even subscribing to something like that. Girl please, Black women ain’t down with that type of bullshit, and you know it,” Portia said as she interrupted me again with a shocked look.

“Yeah, Lisa, it almost sounds like you’re okay with something like that. Are you?” Stephanie said with a blank stare.

“Well, I’m not necessarily saying all that, but I will say this. If I have a man who is loving me, taking care of me emotionally, financially, sexually and making me feel safe and secure in my relationship, I can’t say I wouldn’t be down with the situation, if it was done right. Besides, most men try to run this game on women anyway without us even knowing it. At least in a poly relationship everything is upfront, on the table and you can choose to play or not.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing from you, Lisa,” Stephanie said with a look of sadness.

It hurt my heart to see Stephanie’s disappointment. Stephanie is an attractive, thirty-eight-year-old sista with beautiful cappuccino-brown skin, a smile that would light up any room and beautiful long, brown naturally curly hair. Stephanie is a loan officer for a local bank and the mother of two badass six-year-old twins named Lance and Lauren. Oh my goodness, when I say those twins are bad, I mean bad as in bad as hell. Stephanie has her hands full with them, but always manages to squeeze out some time to hang out with her girlfriends. The only edge Portia had over Stephanie in the friendship department was her open-mindedness about most things, whereas Stephanie was extremely judgmental. Stephanie is so quick to pass judgment on the things we do if it doesn’t fit into her upper-middle-class norm. Portia, Stephanie and I all have our distinctive personality traits, but we still find a way to love each other tremendously.

“Lisa, you need to listen to what I’m saying because this type of foolishness is exactly what I’m talking about. Kenneth Maxwell has more games than Parker Brothers. You’ve gone to a few of his comedy shows, received some e-mails, talked on the phone a couple of times, had a few drinks with him in LA and now you’re down with this man-sharing bullshit. I’m telling you, he’s just straight scandalous, and worst of all, you’re falling right into his trap,” Portia said as she grabbed her half-empty drink.

“You’re putting a whole lot on this, P. I hung out with him one time, and I just want to get to know his fine ass better. What’s wrong with that? And last time I checked, I’m not the only one making the calls or sending e-mails. He’s showing a little bit of interest too.”

“Hell yeah, he’s showing some interest. Wouldn’t you? If I were a man and I had some woman who was fine, smart, not after me for my money, fun to kick it with, wasn’t sweating me and if I even thought the pussy was halfway good, hell yeah, I would try to hook up with her too.

That's just common horse sense, Leese."

"Whatever. You know I'm not looking for another husband or to settle down with anyone right now. I just want someone to spend a little quality time with, hang out on occasion, and if possible, have some great sex. That's all, damn."

"Lisa, don't get me wrong. I hear what you're saying. Yes he's funny, and yes, he's most definitely fine as hell, but damn, girl, I don't want to see you go through this same type of shit over and over again; or do I have to remind you what happened when you went out with dude who played for the Raiders?"

"Or that guy who played for the Warriors?" Stephanie said as she decided to put her two cents into our conversation.

"No, you don't have to remind me, but thank you two very much for bringing up those two painful memories...again," I said sarcastically.

"See, this is exactly what I'm talking about. Messing around with Negroes like that is why your ass is always left crying and depressed. You know what the worst part about it is?"

"Nope, but I'm sure you're about to tell me." I exhaled while rolling my eyes.

"The worst part is you know their trifling asses ain't about shit before you even get involved with them," Portia said as she gulped down the final swallow of her cosmo.

"Look, Lisa, I don't want you to be mad at me because you know I love you and I always have your best interest at heart, right?"

"Right, P," I said because I knew this meant our short talk was about to turn into a long lecture.

"And you know I'm always here for you, right?"

"Right, P," I said as I leaned back, put my hands behind my head and reclined on my longue chair.

It was becoming obvious after all of these years I've known Portia, she still can't seem to recognize when she is getting on my last nerve. I knew it was time for me to go inside my house to get another drink, because I could tell this was the start of a long afternoon.

"I don't care what you think. He's a professional comedian, he's fine, successful and has my name written all over him," I said as I slowly arose from my longue chair, snapped my fingers at Portia and started walking toward my back door.

As much as I hated to admit it, Portia was right; I have made some poor decisions when it came to men. Now let me be clear about this issue because I never have problems meeting men. It's the ones I choose.

I have always considered myself a total package. Through hard work, eating right and the love for male attention, I make sure my five-nine, 140-pound, light brown skinned, 38-27-38 frame stays a perfectly fit and well-tuned engine. I'm also a graduate student at the University of San Francisco and the director of marketing for one of the largest radio stations in the Bay Area. So, I don't care what Portia says; most of these guys should be lucky to have me on their arm and not the reverse. Besides, I can't help it; I'm just a sucker for attractive and powerful men. I'm just hopeful the time has finally come for a change because I need a good man in my life, and my ten-year-old daughter, Nia, needs to have a positive male role model to compensate for my sorry-ass ex-husband, her father, Phillip.

"Lisa, it's rude as hell to get up and walk away when people are talking to you. Anyway, I really think you need to consider some professional counseling to figure out why you keep allowing yourself to fall victim to this type of madness."

"And on that note, I'm going in the house to get another drink. Stephanie, do you want

something else to drink because it's obvious Portia has had enough based on how she's continuing to curse and run off at the mouth," I said as I continued walking toward the back door.

"Blah, blah, blah, just bring me another cosmo," Portia said.

"Yeah, okay, you just hold your breath waiting on that cosmo," I said as Stephanie laughed.

"You can bring me another glass of chardonnay," Stephanie shouted as she turned up the radio to listen to Cameo's classic hit, "Candy," which was playing on KHTT, the radio station where I worked.

"Oh, that's my jam. Hey, Steph, turn it up louder, I'm about to get my groove on," Portia slurred as she started dancing with a drunken sway.

"I'll turn it up louder, P." Stephanie snickered as she watched Portia do more stumbling than dancing.

Stephanie knew, just as well as I did, if Portia had too many more drinks this get-together was about to go to a completely different level. Our girl talks always seemed to get even more out of control once Portia had too much to drink.

Stephanie could tell by my attitude I for damn sure was not up for Portia's psychological analysis and because she was the most levelheaded one of our crew, she would always manage to keep the peace.

"Lisa, will you bring me some peach cobbler, too, on your way back out please?" Stephanie yelled as she strolled over to start dancing with Portia on the grass.

"No problem, Steph."

"So Stephanie can get a drink and some peach cobbler, and I can't even get a refill on my cosmo?" Portia started huffing under breath just loud enough for me to hear.

"P, you know I'm gonna bring you another drink, damn. Stop trippin'."

"Thank you, Lisa. You know I love you, girl," Portia said as she started doing the electric slide with Stephanie.

"Yeah, whatever, P," I said as I shook my head and walked into the house.

Before I could reach the refrigerator to open another bottle of chardonnay, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned and saw it was Stephanie. She knew I was a little irritated by Portia's comments, and as to be expected, she decided to come in to try to calm me down.

"Lisa, don't pay attention to anything Portia is saying, girl. You have to do what you feel is right for you; not for me and definitely not Portia," she said as we both started to lightly chuckle.

"I know, Steph, but he's just so fine and so fascinating to me. I just want to get to know him and hang out a bit – no strings attached and no emotional involvement."

"No strings attached and no emotional involvement, huh?"

"Steph, I'm telling you, no strings attached and definitely no emotional involvement."

"I hear what you're saying, but just make sure you're gonna be able to live up to that."

"I already know who and what I'm dealing with. This is not meant to be the beginning of some sort of love thang. I'm not stupid, Steph. I know better."

"Lisa, I never said you were stupid. I just want to make sure you don't get caught up."

"I know. Besides, Kenneth lives way on the other side of the country in New York and is too far away for me to get caught up."

"Yeah, okay, too far away to get caught up. What about LaShanda's brother who you met out here last summer who lives in the Bronx?" she said with a smirk as she cocked her head to one side.

"Whatever, Stephanie. You and Portia both get on my last damn nerve when you bring up

old shit like that,” I said and started laughing because once again she was right.

“I just want to have a good time, because Kenneth has been so cool to me; and I already know messing around with a man who lives in New York would only amount to a one-weekend-a-month romance and booty call, which is not necessarily a bad idea with the way my life is nowadays. Besides, we’ve only hung out once, and I’m not even sure if he’s interested in me like that. He might just be looking for a cool new friend to hang out with on occasion.”

“Yeah, okay, Ms. Friend on occasion. Isn’t this the same man who invited you to come and see him perform at The Punch Line in San Francisco this weekend?”

“Yeah, it is,” I said with a girlish smile.

“Just be careful, Lisa, okay?”

“I will, girl, but I can tell there’s something different about him. So, stop worrying. I’m gonna go to the comedy show, have a drink or two and just have a nice conversation with Mr. K. Max after his performance, and that’s all.”

“Are you sure about that?” she said with doubt in her voice.

“Yes, that’s all, even though in the back of my mind you know I’ve been wanting to try and tap that,” I said as I made a spanking motion with my hand. However, before I could finish my statement, Portia interrupted me by stumbling through the back door.

“Lisa, I know you think I’m drunk, but please hear me on this. I have a bad feeling about this whole situation. If you let your guard down with this one, he’s gonna break your spirit. He’s different from the rest, girl. I know his kind, and I can feel it in the depths of my soul,” Portia said, as she looked me straight in my eyes with more love, concern and sincerity than I had ever seen from her.

“I love you, P, and I know you have my best interest at heart, but stop worrying so much. I’m just going to the comedy show.”

“Just don’t let him sell you the fantasy, girl, and get you all caught up,” Portia lovingly said as she kissed me on the cheek and rushed off toward the bathroom.

I dropped my head as I slowly absorbed Portia’s words. Maybe she was right and I was walking into yet another bad relationship. I couldn’t see it though; it just seemed like the perfect situation for me.

“Lisa, don’t pay any attention to her. You have to do what you feel is best for Lisa because in the end you know we’ll be here for you regardless.”

“I know, Steph, but it’s just been such a long time since I’ve met a man as charismatic as Kenneth Maxwell. Most of these knuckleheads I’ve met recently are broke as hell, have half a job looking for a suga momma, want to date me and half of Oakland or spend more time primpin’ in the mirror than I do.”

“Amen to that, girl. Go ahead and take the opportunity to spend some time with him because in the end, you’re not going to listen to anything Portia and I have to say anyway. Once you set your mind on doing something or getting someone, you don’t stop until mission accomplished.”

“That’s cold-blooded, Steph, for you to make fun of your girl, even though you do know I got it like that,” I said as we both started laughing and giving each other high-fives.

“Yeah, I know, playaya-playaya, it’s one of those flirtatious, competitive, never take no for an answer Scorpio thangs I’ll never understand.”

“I second that motion,” Portia said as she walked back into the kitchen.

“Listen, Lisa, we love you, and you know we’ll always be here for you regardless of what you decide to do. So, have fun on your date, but just be careful,” Portia said as she once again looked deeply into my eyes with a maternal-like concern.

I reached over and embraced them both. “Don’t worry, you guys. I got everything under control,” I said.