

engaged
A NOVEL

K.L. GILCHRIST



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Second edition.

*In loving memory of my precious daughter, Jordan Niambi Broomes, who
loved these characters from the very start.*

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-14 (THE MESSAGE)

drone

I CAN HANDLE A LOT. For real. I've been through some serious situations in my twenty-something years. And not in a I'm-a-millennial-struggling-with-adulthood-but-I'm-stuck-living-with-my-parents-and-my-boyfriend-is-a-nut kind of way.

Nope.

I'm talking intense stuff: battle back from the edge of death, accept a new life in Christ, live independent and strong even with an occasional panic attack, conquer my toughest temptations, and win the heart of the dopest bachelor at Rise Community Church.

Been there. Done that. Got the pics on the Gram to prove it.

This afternoon, though? I am not in the mood to tangle with a ridiculous, whirring, midnight black drone hovering too close to me and my man, John. A minute ago, we turned down the concrete path through the park behind the Philadelphia Museum of Art. My only thoughts then were about how warm and rough John's fingers feel holding my hand, and how the air smells springtime fresh, and how those purple flowering azalea bushes look glorious.

See, this is our absolute favorite spot. We regularly walk or run through here on bright sunshine-filled days. Even if the sky is gray

and overcast, we might still stroll this jawn wearing our matching fleece hoodies. Cold day. Hot day. Doesn't matter.

Right by the parking lot, two sun-faded brown benches sit beneath a narrow wooden gazebo. My heart zings because that's where John and I experienced our first delectable kiss—in the center of the city like cool urban teenagers, except we're grown. We're in love and blessed in our cherished little patch of Philly, so we *should* continue to hold hands and grin and reminisce.

But we can't because that doggone drone zooms over and hovers above us.

So I do what any courageous queen would.

I make a break for it.

“Chablis! Get back here!” John hollers when I sprint away. “It's a machine. It won't hurt you. Come on, now!”

“It's a drone. So no!” I yell back, twenty steps closer to my goal—the safety of his black Jeep.

His long legs carry him to my side in a flash. He's not even breathing hard.

“Just so you know,” he says. “It'll be your fault if I have to wrestle you to the ground. If one of my contacts pops out, I won't see you good and you'll mess up the moment. Slow your roll, there's a reason for that drone.”

I squint at the sky, jump into a fight stance, and stare that whirring robot down like I'll roundhouse kick it if it flies any closer.

“Bae,” I point at the drone. “I think some weirdo teenager is flying that thing, trying to tape us.”

“A teen isn't flying that, but it *is* taping us.”

“You got a BB gun or something to shoot it with? You know I have issues.”

“No, now just listen. Will you please stand still?”

I'm bouncing around like I'm about to go six rounds with Manny Pacquiao. I stop.

John steps in front of me. His megawatt smile is everything. “Chablis, I love you so much—”

“I love you too—”

“And if you’ll have me.” He gets down on one knee and pulls a small black book from his jacket. “I would love for you to be my wife. Will you marry me?”

I freeze. I’m not breathing.

He pushes the book, a worn Bible, into my hands. A crimson ribbon hangs from the top.

“Open it.” The smile grows larger on his toasty brown face. Joy glows behind his eyes.

I do as he asks, and the ribbon is a bookmark for 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient. Love is kind. All that good stuff. In the middle of the crease, tied to the satin ribbon? An exquisite, sparkling, princess cut diamond and platinum engagement ring.

If God pressed the stop button on my life at this exact second, I’d be happy to launch straight into heaven, knowing my final earthly moment had been the most phenomenal one I’d ever experienced.

But I’m alive. My heart is still pumping.

John gazes at me, still with one knee planted on the concrete. He stays in place, even as a lanky, red-haired woman wheels a baby carriage past us and mouths, “Aw.”

Eyes on the ring again, I blink once, twice, then three times.

That promissory jewel shines like a star in the sky.

Forget a stupid drone!

“So? Will you?” John stands and gently takes the Bible from me.

“Oh my God!” I throw my arms around him so tight I’m probably cutting off his circulation. My face smashes into his shoulder, and he murmurs something and tries to pull my body to the side. I can’t stop squeezing him, though. *His wife! He asked me to be his wife!* Right here, in the middle of green grass, purple azaleas, and the smell of fresh mulch.

“Sunshine?” He uses his special nickname for me, then lands a moist kiss near my hairline.

My mouth stays smashed against his body. “Yeth, honey. Yeth, I wilfth be your wife. Foreverth and everth!”

“I love hearing those words, and I need your hand. Let’s do this right.”

I let him go, and tears fill my eyes. My hand shakes when he grasps it. He pulls the ring from the ribbon and slides it on my finger. Smudges of MAC Viva Glam lip gloss decorate the front of his jacket, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“You just told me yes and I don’t believe in divorce.” He leans down and kisses me softly on one dimple, then the other. “Whatever happens between us from this day forward, we’re going to work it out. No matter how hard it gets. Promise me?”

“I promise.”

“Good. Now can you do one more thing for me?”

“What’s that?”

“Give me a Hollywood-style kiss for Facebook and the Gram.”

John moves in close and I breathe deep with his face next to mine. His fingertips stroke my cheeks. I tangle my fingers in his bushy beard. When my mouth meets his soft lips, a magical feeling rises inside me, like I’m saying yes all over again, but differently. *Yes. I’m yours. Yes. You’re mine. Yes. We will take this journey together.*

He tastes like peppermint Trident because he’s always chewing gum. But this may be the best kiss of my life.

Only the one I get at the altar can top it.



Calm is John’s middle name. With no frenzy at all, he sends a pic of the ring on my hand along with a *SHE SAID YES* message to all his loved ones. Then he climbs inside the Jeep.

Look up the term ‘act a fool’ and that’s me after the proposal. One picture from me? Oh no no no no no. Uh-uh. That won’t work. I take multiple shots of the ring, my face, John’s smile, and the two of

us posing together and send them to my favorite folks with a two-word message: *WE'RE ENGAGED*.

We speed away from the parking lot and by the time we reach the first stop light my phone chimes with back-to-back return messages.

Wow.

I'm riding along feeling like every sentence of every happily ever after paragraph at the end of a chick lit novel. Chablis Charmaine Shields, the Jesus chick with purple highlights through her wild hair, gets to marry her best friend and the love of her life, John Leonard Gerald.

Eleven months of steady dating led me here, strapped in the passenger seat of John's Jeep while we drive to the Northeast to tell his mom we're jumping the broom.

"Hey?" I scan texts. "Nikki wants to know how long before the wedding."

He merges us onto I-95 North. "You busy next month?"

"Next month?"

"All right. What about next week?"

"For real, John?"

"You know we can do this tomorrow. That good for you?"

"Ha ha ha. And I thought I was the funny one in this relationship." I finger-comb my curls. "Seriously, man. When?"

"I don't want a long engagement, that's for sure. What works for you?"

Wedding timing. Hmm? We'll need enough time for event planners to work their alchemy for our special day. It's late March. A summer wedding? No. Too soon for what I'm envisioning. Philly will still be warm in early October, though. My ladies can wear strapless gowns. And the fellas won't overheat in their tailored designer suits.

Oh yes, we can pull this off in less than a year.

"Six months?" I tap my calendar app. "First weekend in October?"

"Six months it is." He shows me that heart-stopping smile again.

My thumbs text that answer to Nikki before I slide my phone into my bag and finally sit still. Nikosia Perry is my closest buddy besides John. It goes without saying that she's my maid of honor, but in case she has any doubt, I'll message her again later.

Inside, I'm still shaking. I gotta calm down. I need to be cool, and collected, not crazy emotional, when we see John's mother. Her name is Patricia Gerald. I call her Ms. Pat. I hope she'll be happy for us because she acts snooty whenever we visit her. On my end? Well. It's hard to have warm fuzzies for a woman who calls me 'John's church friend'. On Valentine's Day I overheard John talking to her, keeping his tone respectful when he told her to please stop mentioning his former fiancée's name because it's disrespectful.

But anyway.

After we see her, we can take our engagement tour to my parents' house. And after that, some of my friends and family will be at eatLARGE restaurant down in South Philly tonight. I'll ask John if we can flash the ring over there.

Then.

I don't know what we'll do after that.

Maybe we'll do what we haven't done?

I shift around and take a good hard look at John. Butterflies perform Simone Biles somersaults inside my belly.

"You all right, Sunshine?" He asks.

"Uh, yeah." I crack my window. Fresh air pours in. "Six months, huh?"

"Six months."

