

# ROUX



*A Novel*

TAMIKA CHRISTY

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North Carolina

*Roux*

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Published in the United States by BQB Publishing  
(Boutique of Quality Books Publishing Company)  
[www.bqbpublishing.com](http://www.bqbpublishing.com)

ISBN 979-8-88633-019-9 (p)

ISBN 979-8-88633-020-5 (e)

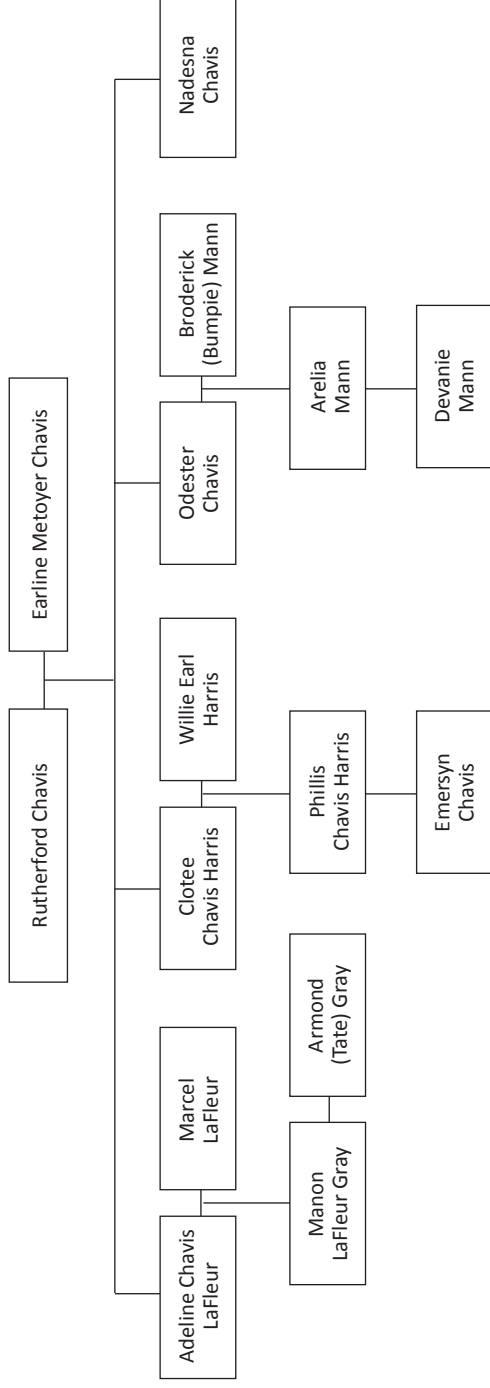
Library of Congress Control Number: 2023949152

Book design by Robin Krauss, [www.bookformatters.com](http://www.bookformatters.com)

Cover design by Rebecca Lown, [www.rebeccalowndesign.com](http://www.rebeccalowndesign.com)

Editor: Allison Itterly

# Chavis Family





## **To My Daughters**

Alegra, you taught me a depth of love that surpasses all boundaries. You will forever be in my heart.

Kamryn, your unconditional love and gentle soul taught me the beauty of compassion.. Your love fills my heart and inspires me to be better.



## CHAPTER 1

# Manon 2019

**M**anon rolled over and raked her fingers through her ginger-tinted waves. At forty-six years old, she was still childless and soon to be husband-less. She blinked against the bright Opelousas sunlight that filtered through her new plantation shutters. She was exhausted from a restless night of sleep, even more so lately because she still wasn't accustomed to sleeping in the house alone. She stretched her arms above her head and twisted her body from side to side. The first few minutes of the day were a bitter blend of brooding over her failing marriage and the dwindling hope that she'd ever be able to walk without pain again.

Last night, she'd dreamt of Leonard Dupree. Twenty years ago, little Leonard was just a week shy of his second birthday when he'd disappeared from his front porch on Bordelais Drive. Bordelais Drive was tucked away in the monied Clos Du Bois subdivision, close to I-10 and twenty minutes from the outlets. The families in Clos Du Bois were either old money or new money, but nothing in between. The police had arrived five minutes after Lulu Dupree reported her son was missing. No one knew Lulu was passed out drunk when her son toddled out the front door and across the street to the Lafleur house. Shortly after local authorities organized a search, Leonard showed up in Manon Lafleur's arms, giddy and clutching a chunk of pecan candy.

Leonard hadn't been missing long enough for the police to



arrest Manon, but certainly long enough that Lulu never looked Manon in the eyes again. Back then, folks rebuffed Lulu's claim that Manon had tried to steal her child, and twenty years later, mixed opinions still lingered about whether Manon tried to take little Leonard. A few folks from the neighborhood carried on the folktale that Manon kidnapped the curly-haired boy because she couldn't have children of her own. Others said Leonard's brief disappearance was a misunderstanding. After all, why would a light-skinned woman of Manon's prominence want a dark-skinned boy whose mama ran numbers at the juke joint? Leonard was in his mid-twenties by now, and he and his family had left Clos Du Bois long ago.

Some days, Manon would stay in bed for as long as she could hold her pee, like yesterday when she only got up because her personal assistant Celeste had forgotten her keys. Dr. Task called Manon's agonizing mornings "early morning paralysis," the period between latency and living where the unfulfilled psyche gets trapped. Whatever that meant. It was hard to keep up with all the diagnoses, afflictions, and medications her doctors hurled around these days. Manon missed pain-free Pilates and morning walks. She felt like a science experiment and didn't acquiesce to Dr. Task's depression diagnosis, and she outright rejected Dr. Boligard's prognosis that she'd never walk again. "This level of nerve damage is irreversible," Dr. Boligard had said after Manon's last surgery. "At best, you will use a walker for the rest of your life."

She sat at the edge of her bed and wiggled her toes. Her last pedicure was eight weeks ago, and her feet looked dreadful. Before the car accident, Manon never missed a routine maintenance appointment: biweekly mani-pedis, Brazilian wax every six weeks, Botox every three months, monthly facials, and annual teeth whitening. She stretched her neck and saw the photo of her

father on her nightstand. Manon missed Marcel: her best friend, greatest supporter, fellow documentary lover, and birthday twin. She shared his wide smile and warm undertones. Her father was the only person who understood her. She wasn't social like her peers, and she preferred books to people as a child. Marcel never berated Manon, and he enjoyed spending time with her. As a young girl, Manon would dash into her parents' bedroom in the morning and hop onto the bed. Marcel would sit up, open one eye, and say, "Now, here's the real sunshine."

She smothered a yawn and twisted the wedding ring on her finger. She and Tate were supposed to be together forever. Supposed to grow old and chill in the rockers on the porch. Now, they were strangers. The stench of crawfish cast veiled memories of last night's Netflix and Bordeaux binge. Whoever said one person couldn't finish a bottle of wine alone had lied or hadn't truly lived. *Laissez les bon temps rouler, let the good times roll.*

The phone rang, piercing Manon's ears. It would take too long to get out of bed to answer it. She had no doubt it was Serenity Village calling again. It was the third time this week the long-term care facility had reached out. Her mother, Addie, was probably requesting more thread count sheets or had another tantrum about the limited meal options. God bless the nurses who worked at the facility. Manon was never close to her mother, and their relationship further severed after Marcel died a year ago. Prior to the stroke, Addie was the epitome of a healthy geriatric: daily yoga, plant-based meals, and immense water consumption.

She made a mental note to call Serenity Village later in the day and half-listened to a news segment about the upcoming Assembly race. The current assemblyman had reached his term limit, and political aspirants were clamoring for his seat. The next

year would be a revel of prideful, power-hungry locals touting their resumes and soliciting contributions. *Oh joy.*

Manon wrapped a kimono around her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone standing in her bedroom doorway.

“Tate! How did you get in here?” she gasped, surprising herself at how quickly she sprang off the bed.

“You’re walking.” It was Tate’s turn to gasp. His lean girth filled the doorway, and morning sun rays danced off his silver beard. His dark-framed eyeglasses and square chin reminded Manon of morning coffee chats and tiny kisses. How dare he come to her house unannounced looking fine as hell?

Manon frowned. “How did you get in here?”

“We designed this house together, remember?” He looked around the once familiar home. New floors. Modern window dressings. Knick-knacks that meant nothing to him. “Although it doesn’t look like the house we designed. I can get in here with my eyes closed.” Tate shoved his hands into his pockets.

Manon recalled the power of pause and deep breaths she’d learned in their many couple therapy sessions. *One. Two. Three.*

“Just because you can get in here”—she took another deep breath—“doesn’t mean you can come in unannounced.” She balled the edges of her kimono and stared at her estranged husband. The way his shoulders reared back was unfamiliar to her. He exuded more confidence, perhaps even a hint of pride. “And yes, I’m walking,” she added.

“That’s great.” Tate’s eyes passed from Manon to the gold-framed floor mirror and woven rattan chair. A canopy and ecru faux fur rug blended out the monotone of the remodeled bedroom they once shared. It was beautiful, resort-like.

“It looks good in here,” Tate admitted. “Different, but good. You still have the best decorating taste of anyone I know.”

Manon didn’t share her redecorating plans with Tate, but that

was par for the recent year. She also didn't share her recurrent nightmares about Leonard or that she was walking again. She didn't share much with Tate anymore, except to forward his mail and the recent exchange of financial information for tax-filing purposes. It was easier to pretend as if the last few decades never existed. Manon and Tate's mutual disillusion and matrimonial complacency led them to this place where even typical encounters like this were awkward.

"You can't just come here unannounced," Manon repeated.

"You're right, but you haven't returned my calls. I didn't know what was going on. Whether Betty was still coming to take care of you, or how you were getting along. I've been worried. I just wanted an update."

Manon's eyes traced Tate's bare ring finger.

"We're separated," she reminded him. "I didn't realize I needed to keep you apprised of my daily activities."

"That's not fair, and you know it," Tate said. "I still care about you. You can at least return my calls. We don't have to be enemies."

"Oh no?" Manon folded her arms. "So, do you propose we be best friends after your betrayal? That makes a lot of sense," she spat.

"Why are you so angry?"

That was the question of the year. In therapy, Manon had uncovered so many childhood traumas, she didn't know where to begin. She was angry for reasons that had little to do with Tate, yet he took the brunt of her fury. Manon liked to pretend she was unbothered by her father's death, her mother's indifference, and a secret that threatened her sanity. The accident was the rancid icing on a spoiled cake.

"I'm not." She pressed her palm to her forehead. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Well, among other things, Serenity Village called me."

“Why did they call *you*?” She looked into his brown eyes and remembered romantic walks on Jetty Beach for her fortieth birthday, and their tenth anniversary in Cannes. Their plan was happily ever after in a life with love, security, minimal family contact, and plenty of travel.

“I don’t know. Maybe Addie added me to the emergency contact list.” He shrugged.

“I’ll check in with them,” she said.

“The nurse said she tried calling you a few times. Something about Addie’s progress.”

“I’ll call them,” Manon said tightly.

“I understand.” Tate’s cologne folded the room like a warm blanket. “Just let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. I’m still here for you, you know.”

“Thank you, Tate.” Manon ran her fingers through her waves. “I have to get ready for an appointment soon, so . . .” Her sentence trailed off to nothing, much like their communication over the years.

Tate focused on the music box on her nightstand, one of the few things he recognized. “I know you have a lot going on and we’ve had our issues, but you’ve never been cruel.”

“So, I’m being cruel now? Manon rested her hands on her hips. “Because I’m setting boundaries?”

Tate sighed. “This is not about boundaries. It’s about not returning my calls and treating me like a stranger. That’s not us. It’s never been us. But since the accident, we’ve—”

“I understand, Tate,” Manon interrupted. She still wasn’t ready to discuss the night of the accident. It was too much to digest.

“We need to talk,” Tate matched her tone. “Even if we don’t talk about the accident, we can’t continue like this.”

“Yes, of course.” Manon walked toward the foyer. “Call Celeste and schedule a time this week. I simply can’t today.”

Tate followed Manon through the newly decorated home to the front door. They planned to retire, raise kids, and spoil grandchildren in this house. When Tate first found the house, Manon wasn't interested in a home that needed work. She didn't care about the "character" the real estate agent had gushed about. The double roof octagon gazebo was atrocious, and the window grilles were dated. Manon wanted to move into a new home with shiny, new appliances, where all she had to do was paint and decorate. But Tate wasn't having it. He insisted on purchasing a home together—one they could both afford, rather than relying on Manon's trust fund. And, to Manon's chagrin, the Bordelais house was in Tate's budget, so she reluctantly agreed. In the first few months, Manon sulked and complained about ripping out carpet and busting down walls. But the fixer-upper eventually became their dream home after a lot of work, time, and love. Now their dream home was Manon's personal utopia. Since Tate moved out, she had decorated the home yet again. Minimalism described Manon's updated décor. She replaced ornate accents, Marge Carson chairs, and heavy, luxurious fabrics with austere colors and laconism. Six months of selecting fabric, new paint, and sourcing unique pieces, Manon had transformed their former dream house with the decorative sorcery of a professional designer.

"Okay." Tate surveyed her legs again. "I'll call Celeste to schedule a time."

"Perfect," Manon softened her tone. "I have so many things going on and don't want to double-book." She opened the front door, and the warm morning greeted her.

"I understand," Tate said. "It's good to see you walking."

"Thanks." She ushered him out of the door. "We'll talk later this week."

She closed the door, relishing his dwindling scent. She missed him more than she cared to admit. His laugh, the way he tilted his

head to the side when he was confused. He wasn't perfect, but he was her husband, and life was different without him around.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her cell. Manon hobbled to retrieve the call. The pain wasn't as excruciating but still very apparent. In the accident, her leg had been pinned between the door and her driver's seat, so even in moments of pain, she knew what the alternatives could have been. She was sad about her injuries and often frustrated, but she always tried to keep gratitude first.

"Morning, boo," Gwen said.

"Morning, boo," Manon said as she settled back onto her bed. She leaned back against her pillows. "Are you in town?"

"I am for now." Gwen sighed. "Trying to decide if I want to go to the Boule's Community Service Gala."

Gwendolyn Artiest was Manon's legacy friend. Their moms were best friends in high school and raised the girls together. Gwen and Manon were similarly close growing up. After high school, Gwen headed to the East Coast to pursue a career in design, and Manon stayed in Louisiana and married Tate. Gwen and her now ex-husband moved to Opelousas to care for Gwen's ailing mother and to be closer to his family.

"And why wouldn't you go?" Manon bit into a hangnail and tried to ignore the scent of Tate's cologne that lingered. "That event has been a staple on your calendar for years."

"You know why," Gwen said. "Tom will be there with that girl. It's traumatizing."

"That 'girl' is his wife," Manon reminded her friend.

"I know, Manon," Gwen seethed. "But why did he marry someone so much younger? It's degrading."

"Why is it degrading?"

"Uh, because I'm not a thirty-year-old woman, Manon."

"First of all, he's your ex," Manon said. "Second, who in their

right mind would want to be thirty again? All of the insecurity and mediocre credit scores. Not me. Listen, G, if you spend your life comparing yourself to other people—especially a thirty-year-old—you will come up short every single time. You are a well-preserved forty-eight-year-old woman, and that’s good enough. Besides, you didn’t like Tom when he was your husband. You called him petty and controlling. You said his own kids didn’t like to be around him.”

“That’s true,” Gwen said. “He had to make them come visit.”

“Well, there you have it. When your kids don’t want to spend time with you, there’s a problem far greater than you. You know this stuff, G. We’ve talked about it so many times. It’s time to open yourself up to meet someone.”

“I *have* someone.” Gwen sucked her teeth. “Jason completes me.”

“Jason? You need someone who knows what a sommelier is.”

“He misheard the guy,” Gwen defended. “I told you that. He knows what a sommelier is!”

“He knows *now*,” Manon muttered and pulled the duvet over her feet. “My point is, don’t settle out of desperation. You won’t pine after Tom if you date men who are up to your standards.”

“I don’t have time to pine after Tom. Taking care of Ma takes up all of my time.”

“And how’s Miss Holly doing? I miss her.”

“Good, I suppose,” Gwen said. “She can’t remember most of her problems these days. Namely me. The other day, our neighbor caught her walking down the street with the house phone and a butcher knife in her bag. Said she was going to see my grandmother. My grandmother has been dead for over thirty years.”

“Oh, G. I’m so sorry. I know that’s gotta be tough. Miss Holly was so feisty and strong. I remember how she and Addie wreaked havoc on our teenage lives.” Manon let out a small laugh.



“I think it was the other way around,” Gwen corrected. “Anyway. I can’t leave her alone anymore because she’s in the wandering stage. A nurse comes during the day, but I’m thinking about hiring someone full-time.” Gwen sighed, then said, “But enough about my crazy life. How are you? Have you been able to get out of the house?”

“There have been opportunities, yes,” Manon muttered. “Have I taken advantage of all of them? Not as much as I could, but I’m a work in progress. One day at a time. One step at a time.”

“Therapy much?” Gwen said. “What time is Celeste coming? Maybe she can ride with you to run errands instead of doing them for you. You’re cleared to drive, so get out of the house.”

“Celeste will be here this afternoon, and driving is overrated. I hated driving before the accident. That hasn’t changed.”

“Fine. Just think about it,” Gwen said. “I don’t like you isolating like this. I’m surprised that head doctor of yours hasn’t said anything about it.”

“Speaking of my head doctor, I have an appointment in a few. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you, bye,” Gwen said.

Manon hung up and lit a Newport. She tossed the lighter aside in mannered protest of her recurring habit. She turned on some jazz music and picked up the framed photo on her nightstand. Eight-year-old Manon, with a big, goofy smile, sat proudly on her daddy’s lap. “Here’s the real sunshine,” she said to the photo. Soon, irritability was replaced with Monk’s laconic improvisations. Manon recalled her father and her *pépère*’s frequent disagreements about Thelonious Monk.

She smiled at the memory and made a quick call.

“Hi,” she said into the phone. This is Manon Lafleur returning your call. I know my mom, Addie, is probably asking for new sheets, and I will get them there as soon as possible.” Manon paused and

listened as the nurse explained that Addie didn't need new sheets because she had progressed quicker than expected and would be ready for release soon. Manon hung up the phone dazed and scuttled to her laptop.

Two years ago, no one could have convinced her that she'd be doing online therapy with an Iranian woman from New York, but every Tuesday at noon, Manon logged in and let Dr. Task guide her through life issues.

"My apologies for being late," Manon turned on her laptop camera.

Dr. Task was the fourth therapist she interviewed. Initially, Manon was uncertain about doing therapy online, but Dr. Task made it worth it. Each week, she met with Manon from her home office. They started off talking about simple things—creating boundaries, getting organized, things that weren't too serious. It wasn't until recently that Manon decided she needed to take her life back and stop pretending that her life was perfect.

"No worries." Dr. Task's eyes were probing. "Is everything okay?" Dr. Task's small head briefly disappeared from her virtual background. The Zoom beauty filter softened her pasty skin, and she blinked a lot when she talked.

"I'm okay." Manon had stopped lying to Dr. Task months ago, but she revisited her old ways today. She didn't want to talk about Tate's visit or the call from Serenity Village. The last thing she wanted to hear was how she needed to care for her mother.

"This is a big week for you." Dr. Task sounded like a kindergarten teacher rewarding her student for reciting the alphabet.

Manon took a deep breath. In order to move forward, she needed to heal from the past. She hated thinking about what happened to her as a child, but she knew she had to address it to save herself and salvage what she could of her remaining relationships. It was the hardest thing she'd ever have to do, but

she had no choice. Recuperating from the car accident isolated her in ways she'd never experienced, and she was forced to deal with her issues. She was angry at her mother, Addie, for not protecting her as a child, and angry at Tate for betraying their marriage.

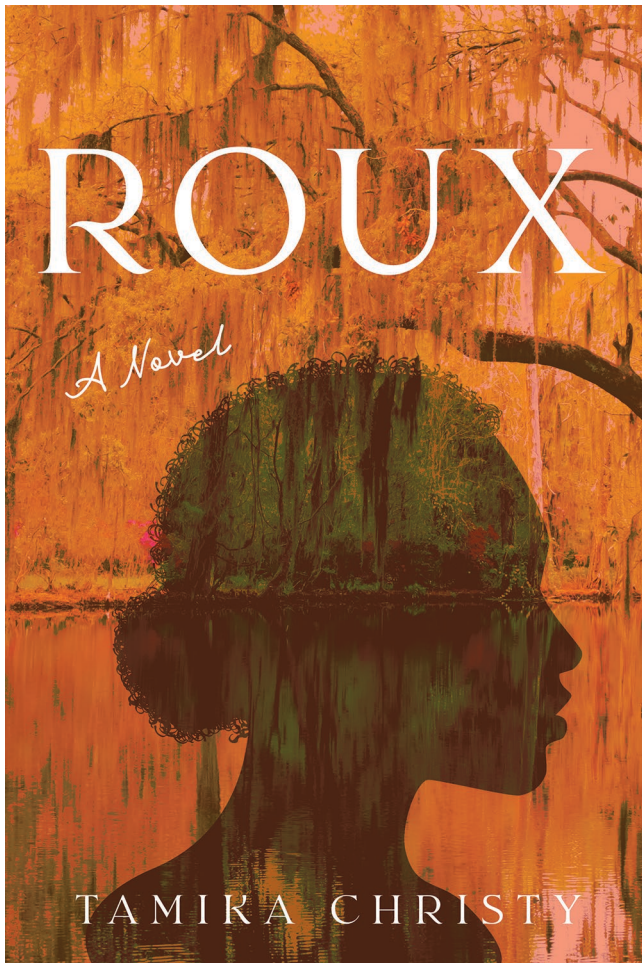
“Beginning this week, the plan is for you to face yourself and deal with your pain. This is huge for you.”

After the accident, Manon's resentment toward family and friends festered, and she cut most people out of her life. But working with Dr. Task allowed her to realize that her resentment was misplaced. She didn't like the isolation but didn't know how to reconnect.

“Okay.” Manon rubbed her eyes. “Where do we start?”

# Roux

Written by Tamika Christy



**A story of southern African American families, their unique hardships, triumphs, culture, and values.**

## About the Book

Roux is a novel that brims with family, secrets, and love.

Award-winning author Tamika Christy writes about the devastation of loss, the difficulty of relationships, and the family ties that bond.

Written in the vein of *Steel Magnolias*, the story takes us into the lives of African American families with their unique hardships, triumphs in relationships, culture, and values. It is relatable, comforting, and challenging.

## About the Author

Award-winning author and Bay Area native, Tamika Christy has published two books, *Anytime Soon* and *Never Too Soon*. She began writing at an early age, prompted by the gift of a journal for Christmas. With pen in hand, she continued writing throughout college where she realized her talent for creating intriguing plots and multidimensional characters.

Tamika continued to nurture her love for writing while attending law school, where she gave birth to her first novel. Now as a practicing attorney, Tamika still devotes time to her love of writing. She describes her writing as urban prose---funny, warm, soulful with blunt dialogue and familiar realism.

Tamika resides in the Bay Area.

**ISBN 979-8-88633-019-9 (Paperback)**

**ISBN 979-8-88633-020-5 (eBook)**

**Retail Price: \$19.95 (Paperback);**

**\$8.99 (eBook)**

**African American Women's Fiction**

**6 x 9, 340 pages**

**Publication date: January 9, 2024**

**World Distribution**

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