

LIPSTICK *Diaries*



Chemical Reaction

TIYE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LIPSTICK DIARIES

Chemical Reaction



TIYE LOVE

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

CHEMICAL REACTION

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Written by Tiye Love.

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Other Tiye Books.

O *ne Week Blurb:*

Nia Winston, stands in a line at the Essence Festival in New Orleans, hoping to get Justin Ray, the hottest R&B singer, to donate to her non-profit. When they meet sparks fly, or maybe it was just Nia's imagination. Until Nia has a surprise meeting with Justin, a month later while she's in Atlanta and Justin asks her to spend one week with him no strings attached. Wanting to escape her own problems back at home, she agrees and has the most passionate time of her life.

As real love develops inexplicably between Nia and Justin, she can no longer hide the truth. And when her truth threatens to harm Justin's white-hot career, she leaves him one night with only a goodbye text. Two years later, Justin unexpectedly comes back in her life, demanding answers. All her emotions come rushing back, but is she ready to give up everything she cherishes for a man she knew for only one week and a world she never wanted?

Purchase [One Week](#)

Unforgettable Kiss Blurb:

The beautiful and free-spirited Raini Blue is a struggling artist with aspirations to have her own gallery. Believing she is content, she's comfortable with her job at a local bookstore and selling her wares in the New Orleans French Market. But her world is about to shift when Tre LaSalle, the man with whom she shared her first kiss as a teenager, comes back into her life.

Between his new role as mayor of a world-renowned city and being a single father to his eight-year-old daughter, Tre has little time for relationships. Until Raini Blue. Intrigued by her beauty and her resistance to his charms, he is determined to win her over.

Tre ignites her passions and awakens desires long dormant, but Raini wonders if he can truly accept her bohemian lifestyle, whether or not her family's checkered past will hurt

his political aspirations, and ultimately, can she trust him with her heart?

Purchase [Unforgettable Kiss](#)

In the flush of love's light

we dare be brave
and suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.

Yet it is only love which sets us free. –Maya Angelou

LIPSTICK DIARIES...WHERE KISS AND TELL IS REQUIRED.

FOUR SINGLE VIBRANT WOMEN. ONE PACT. FOUR
SENSUAL LOVE STORIES.

Chemical Reaction: Second Chance Romance

Five years ago, Simone Austin walked away from Chris Alexander, the possible love of her life. Their mad chemistry still haunts her, and no other man has been able to live up to the man she left behind. Tired of being single, Simone, two of her cousins, and her best friend make a pact. They vow to be sexually fierce, completely open, and purposeful in getting what they each want from men.

Even second chances.

After a thirst-trapping pic of Simone is posted on IG, she receives plenty of male attention, including a private message from Chris. Simone can feel the heat through his words and decides to reconnect. Soon old insecurities seep in, and Simone questions if she's too afraid to get burned again to take another risk on Chris.

****These are characters from Chemistry and the beginning
of Lipstick Diaries****

Chapter 1

Love comes in waves.

“If you really loved me, you would’ve chosen a place we could drive. I don’t know why we’re going to Vegas for Valentine’s Day. Can’t we just go to a casino in Biloxi?” I complained for the umpteenth time as we waited at the gate to board the plane. I was frightened out of my mind and couldn’t sleep the night before though Chris did his very best to put me to sleep. Three times to no avail.

He held my hand and smiled as he flipped through a magazine he had bought for me at one of the airport shops. I barely acknowledged the magazine when he presented it to me. “I do love you, which is why we’re here. How can you be a pilot’s girlfriend and scared to fly?”

“If I knew that was your profession, I wouldn’t have slept with you,” I retorted. I tried not to be annoying, but I was terrified to fly. I know it was irrational since I’d only flown twice as a child and hadn’t had a bad experience. Yet, I was one step away from a full-blown panic attack. When he first suggested Vegas two weeks ago, I vetoed it. I had no idea he’d already bought us tickets and booked a hotel.

Chris raised his thick brows. “You didn’t really give me a chance to tell you what I did for a living when you jumped me in your office.”

“Shh...” I lowered my voice, tingling and warm at the memory of our very first hot encounter. “People may hear you.”

He smirked. “I noticed you didn’t dispute me.”

“You hit on me first. I just followed your lead,” I protested weakly. “Okay, the least you can do is talk to me instead of ignoring me by reading the magazine.”

“I tried that, but you got all crazy on me.” Chris turned a page. “I figured it best to leave you alone.”

“I didn’t go crazy...I just told you to be quiet,” I protested. “You were talking stupid, arguing that Biggie is better than Tupac. I’m already irritated that we’re going to Vegas on a plane, and then you start with your nonsense.”

“You were just caught up in Tupac’s looks. Biggie was raw talent, and Tupac was pop.”

“OMG! Are we starting this again? I swear this is almost grounds for a breakup,” I said, throwing my hands up, although I recognized this was his way of distracting me.

He shifted in his seat and asked, “You really would break my heart over Tupac?”

I tapped his nose. “In a heartbeat. Just be glad he’s dead, or he’ll give you a run for your money.”

“Simone, that man would’ve been at least twenty years older than you if he lived. I thought you were into younger men?” Chris chuckled.

“You’re not quite two years younger, and right now, I’m thinking I’m over juniors.”

“We are now pre-boarding for flight 2423 to Vegas,” announced the United Airlines attendant at the nearby counter.

Ire replaced by fear, I quickly buried my head in his shoulder. Chris rested his head against mine and consoled, “Don’t worry, baby. I got you. You’re going to be fine. Hold my hand as tight as you need, okay?” His sudden gentleness and patience soothed my fraying nerves.

My stomach remained in knots as we searched for our first-class seats. We were the last to board, so we wouldn’t have to prolong our time waiting for everyone to settle in their seats on the plane. When Chris told me he’d bought first-class tickets, I asked if he could afford them. He said he received a discount because he was a pilot but would have paid full price for the expense of my comfort.

Chris’s loving care and consideration for my needs only made me love him more. We’d been going strong since he landed on my doorstep for New Year’s, spending time either at his place or mine. If we wanted a date, we traveled to New

Orleans or Hammond. We were homebodies and enjoyed spending our nights and weekends cozy at home, so keeping our affair a secret wasn't challenging. Spring semester had begun, and we had to be careful not to seek each other on campus though he would pop over to my office when I worked late for a quickie. Our relationship was perfect...if I could forget about Janine, his estranged wife.

I tried to ignore that he was still married and that she refused to divorce him. They would argue and yell whenever he called her and reminded her that the papers weren't signed. He sought legal advice in Baton Rouge and was informed that he could get a default judgment. Chris would have to go to Nebraska to force the divorce in court, which could be lengthy. I still hadn't told my mother that he was married because she would tell me to leave him alone until he was legally free to be with me. As much as I wished I was strong enough to leave him alone, I couldn't. I missed him terribly when he wasn't around, which had been rare these past two months. We spent every moment we could together, and I didn't foresee that changing anytime soon. We just fit and were perfect for each other. I'm almost certain we would've been discussing marriage if he didn't have a wife. His situation prevented me from fully relaxing in our relationship.

His marriage had been a thorn in my side, and though I loved him, I couldn't ignore my guilt that we were somehow wrong. Insecurity about Chris's feelings for his ex also troubled me, and I half-expected him to say he wanted to go back to his wife. No matter his protests to the contrary that he no longer wanted Janine, I believe that emotions for your spouse don't just disappear.

"Hey, as soon as we're in the air, you should order another drink to help relax you," Chris said, interrupting my thoughts as we sat down, and he reached over me to pull down the blinds. "You're definitely not ready to look out the window."

"I already had two strong drinks." My lungs squeezed as tight as my shut eyes when the motor started and announcements were made. "Okay, I need two more."

Chris signaled and received a blanket from the flight attendant. He threw it over our laps and wrapped his arm around me. “Remember what I said I would do to keep your mind off flying?”

I frowned. “Yeah, but you were joking, right?” My pussy throbbed at his reminder.

“What do you think?” He removed his arm from around me and placed it under the blanket on my thigh. I opened my legs slightly in anticipation.

“We’re about to have fun, and we can be out in public everywhere holding hands, loving each other. I love Vegas, and I get to share it with you. This flight will be so worth it,” he whispered near my ear. “But right now, I want you to focus only on me and how much pleasure you feel when I touch you. Promise me you won’t moan or make any noises, no matter how good it feels. Can you promise me that?” The flight wasn’t packed, and no one was across or behind us.

“Yes,” I whispered back, and his hand slipped inside my jeggings. I clutched the armrest nearest the window and sucked on my lip to keep from crying out when his finger found my clit before his other finger pushed inside me. I glanced to see if his hand movements were noticeable, and he’d adjusted the blanket so no one could tell he finger fucked me.

“The scariest and most dangerous part of a flight is always take off, and once we’re at a certain altitude, we’re good.” His tone resumed to normal and conversational. “You feel the shakiness of the plane and can hear the busy chatter of the other passengers. The propellers and the motor picks up speed, and you feel your heart going faster and faster as the plane rises higher and higher. Then the plane levels off. Baby, there’s nothing to be afraid of unless you’re afraid of life. And what I’m giving you right now is life.”

My eyes were still closed as I was lulled by his rich, deep voice and his rhythmic fingers that played with my pussy. I bit his hard bicep instead of screaming when the plane ascended at the same time I climaxed. Although Chris winced, he

continued thrusting his fingers in and out until my breathing slowed. I finally opened my eyes and realized we were now at altitude, and the initial unease drifted away to comfort. All because of Chris. I kissed his cheek. “I can’t believe I’m flying. I feel like I can do anything now. Thank you.”

“I know the feeling. You’ve made me feel like that since I met you.” He brushed my lips with his lips, and I melted into his side.

The flight attendant started asking passengers for their snack and drink requests, and I rested my head on his shoulder. He didn’t move his hand from between my legs. “You plan to keep your hand there?”

“I’m trying to be preventative in case there’s turbulence. My hand is ready.” He winked.

I enjoyed the heavy comfort of his hand on me, but we were in a public place. “Move your hand, please.”

“Would you like anything?” The attendant asked.

Cringing, I quickly looked down and started breathing again when I realized that we were still covered, and she couldn’t see where his hands were. We appeared to be a couple trying to snuggle together.

“Yeah, I want a Sprite. She needs your strongest drink. This is her first time flying. She was a little nervous, but I think she’ll be alright,” Chris replied with a bright smile as if his hand was on his lap instead of in my panties. His finger gently rubbed my clit as he spoke. I could kill him if I wasn’t fighting the urgent need to move against his hand. My panties needed changing as is, and this negro wouldn’t stop. “She’ll drink whatever you recommend, right, honey?”

I gritted my teeth before responding, “Yes, dear.”

The pleasant, pretty flight attendant frowned. “I can see you still need to relax. We want you to enjoy yourself while flying with us. Your drink is coming up. I’ll be back.” She tapped his shoulder as she moved to the next passenger.

I removed his hand, placed it back on his lap, and bumped his erection. I looked over his shoulder before I leaned close to

his ear. “Why you so nasty? You were getting turned on knowing she had no clue you were fingering me.”

“I couldn’t resist.” He laughed while I grabbed sanitizer and tissue from my purse and cleaned his hand underneath the blanket. “What are you going to do with me?”

“Fuck you as soon as we are alone,” I responded calmly, loving that our chemistry remained so strong and we were insatiable for each other.



ALMOST THREE HOURS and one strong drink later, we waited for a rental. We would be in Vegas for three days, and he wanted a car in case we ventured off the strip. I sat with the luggage, texting Bea and Tam that we’d made it to Vegas safely. I stretched my arms and smiled, looking at my handsome man standing at the counter. Now that we were here and the terror of flying had passed, excitement fluttered in my stomach about my very first romantic getaway. I hadn’t traveled in my previous relationships. Too busy with work and school. Usually not enough finances to travel beyond an hour to visit another city.

“Simone, can you get my Mastercard out of the side pocket of my bag? I thought it was in my wallet,” Chris called out.

“Okay.” Bending down near my black Converse, I checked the side pocket of his brown leather satchel. As I reached inside, I felt his card and a photo. My hand froze.

“You found it?” he asked impatiently.

“Yeah, I think so.” I grabbed the card and hurried to him. “Is this it?”

“Yep. Thanks.” Chris took the card and gave it to the Budget Rental rep.

I slowly walked back to our luggage, contemplating whether to return to his bag and see if it was a photo. My stomach now fluttered with queasiness as I stared at his bag. I

didn't believe in snooping through men's things because if you're looking for something, you'll usually find it. I rubbed my hands together and glanced back at Chris, who was still busy. I picked up my cell so I wouldn't be tempted, and I checked one more time for Chris. He was still talking and unaware of me. The side pocket seemed to be calling me, and curiosity overwhelmed me. "Fuck it."

I pulled out the photo, and my heart thudded painfully against my chest. It was Janine. She wore a man's black shirt, probably his, that barely covered her ass. Her long hair was tousled from sleep. She had one leg tucked under her other on a sofa, smiling at the camera. His wife looked beautiful, happy, and in love, and based on the intimacy of the pic, I knew he took the photo.

"Hey, we have to catch a shuttle to pick up the...." Chris's voice trailed off when he noticed my pained expression as I held the picture. "Shit."

Oh, shit...indeed.

Chapter 2

Happy Valentine's.

I remained coldly silent during the twenty-minute drive to our hotel in Vegas. I didn't acknowledge all the beautiful sights of the world-famous strip as we drove past. I'd been so excited about our first major trip together and even more proud that I'd managed to fly without freaking out. And then he had to be stupid and forget his so-called ex's picture was in his messenger bag. *How can he really be over her if he still carries her picture?*

Breaking the silence, he uttered, "Look, we came here to have fun and not argue."

I glared at him before returning to blindly stare out the window. "I have no intention of arguing or doing anything else with you. In fact, I'm trying to decide if it makes sense to even be here. The practical side of me is warring with the pissed side."

He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry. I already explained at the airport that I didn't even remember that the picture was there. She put the pic in my bag after we'd just gotten into our millionth fight. I hadn't used that bag to travel in a long time."

"The sofa in the picture looks like the same sofa you have now, and she's wearing one of your shirts."

"A sofa and a shirt I've had for years. If you didn't tear up the photo, I would tell you to look in the background and see that's not my current apartment." He tugged on his goatee. "It was an old photo, and it means nothing."

I hit the armrest nearest to him. "Are you angry that I tore it up? Are you hurt you don't have a picture to remember her by?"

"Fuck no. I told you to tear it up. I left Janine because I was tired of her shit. She may still want me, but I really don't give a fuck. I'm with you now, and I love you, and only you."

I folded my arms. “You only left because your wife wouldn’t change. Maybe you’re trying to make her suffer now that she’s ready to get her act together.”

Chris bellowed, “You think I’m trying to make her suffer by being here with you. She doesn’t know shit about my life anymore, and she sure doesn’t know anything about you except that you are my woman now. Simone, we both have pasts.”

I snapped, “I didn’t lie about mine.”

“You never told me about Akil, and you only broke up with him because you thought he wasn’t ready for marriage. He may come back into the picture, and then what? Let’s not forget Derek still calls you.”

“He knows about you and rarely calls. Besides, I didn’t expect our relationship to get so serious so fast.”

He pulled up in front of the hotel. “I didn’t either.” Chris suddenly entwined our hands and placed them against his fast-beating heart. “Give us a real chance. I love you.”

I tried to pull away, but he held firm. I shook my head. “Do you know the pain I still feel when I think about that awful day, I stopped by your place, and she was there? And then to find that...that picture with her only wearing your shirt looking at the camera like she just fucked you, knowing that you took the pic is messing with me.”

Chris closed his eyes for a second. “I know, baby, and if I could take that painful moment away or remember I had that stupid photo, I would, but I can’t. Please tell me you still believe nothing happened when she stopped by my place unannounced and that nothing ever will.”

“I believe in signs. Maybe everything is telling me to leave you alone. You still have unfinished business.”

When the hotel staff walked up to the car, and as Chris prepared to open the door, I tugged my hand again. “No. I don’t want to be here with you anymore. We shouldn’t even check-in. I know you spent a lot on this trip. I can pay you back for my half.”

He gestured to the valet to give him a minute and then looked back at me. “Don’t do this. We both wanted this trip. I believe in signs too. When you stopped by my place, as hurtful as it was, it confirmed that she pales compared to you. Yes, she hurt me, and I left. But when you left me, I was destroyed.”

“I don...” Chris cut off my protest with his tongue, kissing me deeply. Damn, his kisses always got me. His hand drifted to my breast, and I pressed his head closer, the negative energy changing into a sexually charged one.

He pulled back enough to stare at my lips. “Let’s go upstairs. If you still want to leave after I show you, you’re the only woman in my heart and mind, then we’ll leave.”

Still unsure, he took my silence as consent.

Chris held my hand tight while we checked into the hotel and rode the elevator. I hadn’t said another word to him, though he’d attempted light conversation. He expected our chemistry and insatiable desire for one another would resolve our current argument. Sex would only quench our bodies’ thirst, but our mad crazy physical connection could never satisfy the need to trust him. And that hurt to the core because I did love him madly.

I pressed my head against his muscular back and circled my arms around his waist as he tried to get the key to work, thinking that maybe I would stay this weekend and let this be our last one. That I would give him all my love while we were here and end things once we returned home. I reasoned we were here now, and that kiss in the car had enflamed my desire for him.

Once he opened the door to our suite, I covered my mouth in surprise at the most romantic scene I’d ever seen. The entire room had been lit by candles. Red, white, and pink rose petals created a pathway to a large white bed littered with red and pink petals. I strolled ahead, amazed that he’d been so thoughtful to have arranged all this for me. “Wow...”

Chris embraced me from the back, and I kissed the space between the side of his face and his neck. “Everything happens

for a reason. I didn't remember that picture was in my bag, and you found it looking for something else I'd asked you to get. I wanted to use this weekend to show you how much you mean to me." He chuckled. "I was going to ask 'if you can picture it, you and I together forever' when I opened this door. I had no idea that we would be talking about another picture."

I hugged him closer to me. "I can't believe you did this."

Chris turned me in his arms and looked down at me with his beautiful eyes. "I want to give you the world. This is just a taste. You're it for me, and I'll keep doing whatever it takes for you to fully trust me. I'm not mad you found that picture. Your hurt tells me that I still have more work to do. And I'm willing to work for us...for our future. I just need to know if you're willing, too?"

My face beamed brighter than the flickering candles surrounding us.

Chapter 3

Always a bridesmaid.

Five Years Later

“Earth to Monie,” Bea pinched my wrist.

“Ouch,” I complained a little too loudly, causing censure from Mama in the front pew. I quickly glanced around, making sure I didn’t disturb anyone else. After all, my cousin, Tamela, and her groom, Sam, were exchanging vows as I held her bouquet as her Maid of Honor. A role I didn’t really want since it felt like a reminder of my current single status. That my special day seemed to slip further and further away as the years passed. My thirty-second birthday was slowly making way for thirty-three. My last significant relationship ended because my ex was still married to a woman who refused to let him go. And that happened almost five years ago. Yet every morning, my first thought remained of Chris Alexander.

The rest of the wedding sped by in a blur. Tam and Sam were husband and wife. I finally stopped laughing when I said their rhyming nicknames out loud because they were meant to be, and their names symbolized that for them. I fought the heaviness of regret and sadness during the reception that I hadn’t yet discovered my own love. Smiled just as wide as the blushing newlywed couple in the pictures. I ate, danced, and even managed to say a lovely, sentimental speech in which I could shed a tear or two in public and not be judged. I had to maintain my composure because my entire family was in attendance. It was just my mother and me in my immediate family. But my extended family was large and believed in marriage. I hated the inevitable questions about my current dating status. So I avoided any meaningful conversations blaming it on my “Maid of Honor” status when I rushed away from nosy relatives. Thankfully, the reception had to end at precisely eleven. My room was upstairs, and I didn’t have to make a forty-minute drive home. I couldn’t wait to escape and cry myself to sleep.

Hugging Mama goodnight, her dark brown eyes assessed me intently. “Monie, your time will come too.”

“I know, Mama.” I patted her back lovingly. She could always see through any facade. “You better go before Aunt Val makes you walk home. She’s been ready to go home.”

“She’ll wait.” Mama glanced toward the exit where her older sister had her arms folded and a grumpy expression. “Monie, I know you. Don’t go to that room all sad. Hang out with the girls. That was the point of getting a hotel for the weekend.”

An arm slung around my neck, and I looked to my left, and my cousin, Rianna, smiled. “Auntie, I got her. We’re going to be up all night in her room. No time for sleep.” Rianna was two years older with the energy of a rabbit. She really could stay up all night with no trouble. Even now, she moved to the music in her head.

Internally, I wanted to scream at my cousin’s suggestion. Externally I smiled. “See, Mama? I’m good. Text me when you make it in.”

Mama’s eyes brightened, and she hugged my cousin. “Glad Monie has you.”

“Glad we have each other.” Zsa, Rianna’s older sister, walked up and added. “We all need to wild out after this last week dealing with Bridezilla.”

“Shh. Z.” Mama admonished, “You don’t want that woman to hear you.”

We all quickly looked around. Hoping our Aunt Liz didn’t hear us talk about her daughter, who had already gone upstairs to her honeymoon suite. The happy couple would leave in the morning for Ocho Rios for a week and then return to Baton Rouge to live. Aunt Liz was in the corner of the hall, wrapping the night up with the wedding planner. We all sighed in relief. Tam had been a demanding bride and had pushed us to curse her at one point. Aunt Liz would curse us royally for speaking one word against her precious daughter, even if it was the plain truth.

Mama snickered at our behavior. “My sister-in-law makes us toe the line. Maybe I need to start cursing people out.”

“Stay the way you are, Auntie.” Zsa rested her head on Mama’s shoulders. Mama was the favorite aunt and sibling of the seven children. The only person she ever challenged was me. And even then, I only wanted to please her and rarely resented her. Since I missed Mama and had a broken heart, I decided it was time to return home and be around family and my best friend, Bea. I found a job at the University of DC, the other HBCU in Washington, DC. I also taught adjunct at Howard, stacking money so I could buy a house. It’d been refreshing to teach on a black campus after being on a primarily white one.

Bea walked up, holding a bottle of Ciroc and Apple Crown Royal in each hand. “Think the turn-up about to get real. I managed to steal this away from the bar.”

Mama laughed. “On that note, let me get out of here and let you young folks have your fun.” She strolled to her sister, who waved at us, and they walked out of the hall together laughing, probably going to gossip about the wedding on the ride home.

“So, get our PJs and meet in Monie’s room?” Bea asked.

I shook my head and smiled at the other three bridesmaids. My two cousins and best friend. All completely single, in our thirties, and have no kids. This wedding may not have been easy for any of them. Maybe I did need to surround myself with laughter and fun instead of the cryfest I’d planned. I snatched the Crown Royal from her hand. “I heard this is good with cranberry juice.”

Chapter 4

The pact.

About forty-five minutes later, the four of us, decked out with pajamas and nightgowns, crashed at my suite. I sunk to the carpet, and my cousins found a spot on the sofa and chair. Bea kneeled in front of the coffee table and started mixing cocktails. I propped my hands under my unwrapped head, uncaring that my curls would be shit in the morning. “I love all of you, but I’m not going to be in anyone’s else wedding until I have a man. It’s too fucking depressing.” I received a not-so-gentle kick in the side from Bea. “Weddings obviously bring out the aggression in you.”

Bea poured the juice into a shaker and started mixing. “Bitchhh...you will be in my wedding, and you’ll be cheeing the whole time. And it won’t be a Joan jealous of Toni moment if you don’t have anyone, okay? So, stop all the dramatics.” *Girlfriends* used to be our favorite show when we were younger, and we would compare Toni and Joan’s friendship to ours.

Rolling my eyes, I reluctantly agreed. “I would be so happy for you. It just gets frustrating when you hate dating as I do. How often can you wonder if this is going somewhere and asking someone their likes and dislikes?”

“It’s not easier when you actually like dating. People always tell me I’m too picky because I have had several relationships and no ring yet. Don’t forget I’m knocking on forty. Fucking tired of the lies and the games,” Zsa added with a flip of her long ponytail before she reached for the first cocktail Bea finished. “Ooh, delish. You should’ve been the bartender instead of the guy Tam used.”

“In four years, Zsa,” Rianna reminded. “Don’t rush getting older. We’ll get there soon enough. I’m right behind you two years later, sis.” Rianna and Zsa were my older cousins and sisters who didn’t spend time with me until I was in college when the age difference no longer mattered. The three of us

had grown closer since I moved back home from Baton Rouge. And unlike Tam, who didn't quite gel with Bea, Rianna, and Zsa loved and enjoyed hanging out with Bea. Sometimes more than they enjoyed me.

Zsa continued, "My point is that we're all tired of the rat race of love. Hell, most women tire before they hit thirty if she isn't already married."

I pushed up to rest on my elbows. "Since when do you care about being married? You and Bea are my role models when I get down about being single. You two really don't give a fuck."

"I ain't never said that," Bea interjected. "I want my own man to wake up next to every morning too. I just can't let my love life be my whole world when there are other parts of life."

"And I'm tired of getting to know a new man, his ways, his attitudes, his scent, his kisses, and his dick." The corner of Zsa's cupid-shaped lips curled wickedly. "Well, I don't mind the dick. Shit, that's the only motivation I have to keep going. I hope one day to find the man that can lay the pipe like no other." She slapped her thigh. "That's when I know he's my husband."

"I already had one of those, and he lied about being married." I collapsed back on the carpet, slinging my arm over my head. "That man got it out of me before I could blink."

Bea passed Rianna a drink. "He kept getting it out of her without any commitment. Wished I had met this mystical man that convinced this fairytale-believing girl to enjoy the moment. She still couldn't do it past five months."

"Well, if he was married, I get it." Rianna threw a pillow at me. "And why have I never heard of this 'mystical' man?"

"Yes, why haven't we? Bea is your girl, but we're your cousins. She gets the tea first, but we at least should be next. I thought you've been in a drought since that last man you dated last year."

“I have been in a drought. Chris was years ago. So, I’ve been thirsty longer than you think.”

“Wait a minute. How long since you had sex?” Sza asked.

“Almost five years.”

“Damn,” exclaimed my cousins simultaneously.

Zsa asked incredulously, “Please don’t tell me you haven’t had sex since that nigga that lasted five months? His dick can’t be that good that you give up other potential dicks?”

“It’s okay if she decided to be celibate.” Bea rushed to my defense. I was the youngest girl cousin in my family and an only child, which sometimes could be frustrating. And my best friend was aware of that fact. “She falls hard once sex is involved, so she’s been chill on the whole sex scene.”

“Umm...I am right here.” I reached for my glass. “Though I appreciate the backup, Bea. I didn’t decide to be celibate; I just hadn’t met anyone I wanted to have sex with.”

“Oh, I just assumed that’s what you were doing. Like making a conscious effort to not have sex again until someone serious.” Bea shrugged. “My bad.”

“No one?” Rianna asked as she pulled her long locs in a bun while she tucked one leg underneath her thigh in the tiny chair. As a kindergarten teacher, she had to be flexible. “I get that the brother may not be right for a relationship, but you haven’t met anyone you weren’t attracted to in five years?”

“Of course I have. At the very least, if I’m going to go out with you, I’m attracted. But you can tell by the second or third date. Sometimes the first if he’s going to get some. Then I’ve been working extra hard to get tenure with research projects and administrative work since I left LSU before I earned tenure. It’s not like I planned it or even wanted to be celibate. Time just passed.”

Zsa plopped down next to me on the carpet with renewed energy. “Please say you have a picture of this man, or you stalk him on social media. I need to see what he looks like to have you all closed up and shit.”

“He’s not on social media, or if he is, he’s under another name.” I picked up my cell. “I have some pics of us that I saved in the cloud.”

Bea and Rianna squealed and joined Zsa and me on the carpet. Bea added, “She never even showed me a pic.” We now sat in a tight circle, like teens having a slumber party talking about boys instead of the thirty-something career women we were.

I found a selfie of us in our hotel room in Vegas. We were about to go out to catch a show and have dinner. Our smiling faces glowed, and the back of my head rested on his chest. I hadn’t looked at pictures of him or us in a long time. We only had seven. Lucky number seven. Seeing him and how we seemed in love in these photos made me question my decision to leave him, so I stopped looking at the pics long ago. Now when I looked at us, it seemed like a distant yet happy memory. However brief, Chris made me happy.

Zsa commented, “Wow. You look good together. Definitely understand why you were hung up. You can feel his big dick through the picture.”

I hit her shoulder. “You play too much.”

Bea added, “Naw...she’s telling the truth. Look at his shoulders. So broad and strong. Your mama said he was easy on the eyes, but that’s an unjust description. Get why it was hard to trust him too.”

Rianna peeked over my shoulder, her long locs almost hitting me in the eye. “Oops...yeah, we say we want fine men, but with men who look like him, come every Mary, TaKeisha, and Kiwanna waiting to slip in and steal him. So, what happened?”

“He was one of my students, only two years younger than me before you say another word.” I shot my cousins a threatening glare.

Rianna pointed at me. “You see, this is why I teach five-year-olds. I would be fired every other day if I had to be tempted by fine black men every day and couldn’t touch them.

I remember how they used to look when we were in college. Yummy and could fuck all night. Thought black men were plentiful and had my pick back then. Now the pickings are slim.”

Zsa commented, “Your ADHD ass can’t focus worth shit. Let Monie finish because I need to hear the rest of this story.”

“He told me he had a crush on me, and I’d been attracted since he walked into my class. One thing led to another, and we were secretly dating since I’m not supposed to be with students. He’d been in the Air Force and married, and his wife didn’t like it when he decided to leave the military. They were separated when we met. He just neglected to tell me that he had a wife in the first place. When I stopped by his house, I found out that she wanted to be wifey again.” I left out that Janine popped up again after I gave him another chance. Familiar hurt, I thought faded resurfaced.

“Shit. He would be so fucked up. She would be too if she jumped in,” Zsa promised. She took her role as the oldest granddaughter of twelve and the oldest in her immediate family seriously. A protector and a fierce warrior. Always ready to defend and fight when we were children. Headstrong and stubborn as an adult. Thick and tall for her age as a child and teen, Zsa’s thickness shaped into the curves others paid for, and her height leveled off as she grew older. She didn’t take shit off anyone, especially not a man. A man would have to be strong in spirit and mind to handle my cousin.

Rianna nodded. “That happened to me once. The crazy woman approached me about her husband, and I had to check her.”

Bea leaned closer to Rianna, egging her on. “What did you check her with?”

“My fists.” She swung her long locs behind her back proudly. “That bitch left me the hell alone. Shit, I didn’t know he was married. He couldn’t fuck anyway, which I made sure she knew.”

“That’s the part that pisses me off. Like, why are you coming after me? He’s the one that’s cheating. I ain’t married.”

Bea snapped, “I hope if my future husband ever had the motherfucking gall to step out on me, he deals with a smart bitch.”

Zsa laughed aloud. “She definitely doesn’t want none of your Kung fu shit.” Bea’s Asian side of the family had taught her martial arts as a young child though she’d been reared primarily by her black mama.

“Nope, she really don’t want these hands,” Bea bragged before she looked at me. “Seriously, it’s time to have sex again. Find a reasonably attractive dude and do the damn thing. You may find that Chris wasn’t all that and will free you from his sex web.”

I reminded, “Bea, he had me in my office and bent over in my classroom before we even had a first date. And you know how I am. He brought that fire.”

The sisters exclaimed again, “Damn.”

“You two definitely grew up in the same household.” Bea laughed before downing the rest of her drink. “Fine, he was the best sex of your life. He may be divorced now. He may not be. The bottom line is that you must do something to get out of the rut. What are you going to do about it?”

I sat up and hugged my knees to my chest. “This is not about to be an episode of fix Simone’s life. All of us have issues with dating. We should all be on the hot seat if I’m on the hot seat.”

Rianna snapped her finger. “She’s right. Let’s hold each other accountable and ensure we get what we want and deserve. Guarantee a year from now, we’ll all have good men.”

Zsa held her half-empty glass in her hand high. “I like the idea, but what would be different than what we’re doing now?”

“I propose we all meet for lunch once a month. During that month, we have to show what we’ve done towards our goal of being with men. It doesn’t matter if it’s just good, dirty sex. We need to be having fun and remember that we’re all

gorgeous, sexy, and brilliant women who can get any man we want. We can't let our own hang-ups get in the way of being with these men." She snapped her head towards me. "Are you listening, Monie? Enjoy the journey. The destination doesn't matter. And who knows, by breaking free of our self-imposed or society's rules, we may end up exactly where and who we want."

I rolled my eyes. "Again, not the only one in here single."

Bea downed her glass, nodding the whole time. "I like it. We should each keep a journal where we write about our exploits with these men. Honest about how we feel, whether we want to continue with him, and why."

I raised my hand. "Um...just said I didn't like dating."

"How else you're going to meet your future husband?" Rianna asked reasonably. "There's a free app I journal in for my therapist. Yes, I have a therapist, and we'll discuss why at another time." She quirked a brow at her sister. Zsa averted her gaze. I looked at them and then at Bea, who shook her head. Another time.

Rianna continued, "Dating will be different because our goal is to be free and open while we do it. We'll write down anything related to who we're choosing and why. We also have each other to keep going when we get discouraged and to encourage us when we're about to fuck up and miss out. Even think we should revisit any men from our past. Just because the relationship didn't work out then doesn't mean it won't now."

"I don't have anyone like that," Zsa argued. "There's not one man from my past that I want to revisit." Then a sly smile spread across her pretty, round dark chocolate face. "Then if it's about sex too, then yeah, I have a couple I wouldn't mind calling and getting my back blown out again."

Bea closed her eyes for a long time. "I'm thinking hard over here. Shit, I dated some real losers."

I shrugged. "My exes were all decent. Guess I can see what they're up to now."

Bea's eyes flew open. "Leave my cousin alone."

Zsa chimed in, "If Akil's single, why not? They were cute together. We already know him."

"Because she didn't really love him, and I don't want her to break his heart again."

"I did love him," I countered louder. "You can't keep us from seeing each other if that's what he wants, too."

"What about that brother of yours? Is he off-limits?" Zsa tapped Bea's foot with hers, clearly trying to cool the room back down. "I love a man with pretty eyes like yours. I still like light skin and curly hair. Your fine-ass brother has all of those."

Bea practically yelled, "Write this down in your lipstick diaries. Rule number one. You can't date any family members."

Rianna snapped her finger. "I love it. That's what we'll call our journal or our group. Lipstick Diaries." She shook her head at Bea. "And that won't be rule number one. Between the four of us, we know half the eligible men in the DC and Baltimore area."

"Agreed about the name. Also, that rule of not dating each other's family made sense when we were teenagers, but we're grown. We all have cousins or brothers that are dateable. Hell, a couple of my cousins were looking good tonight. If I wasn't scared, I would go to hell or have crazy children. I might have hollered." Zsa snickered.

I pointed at Bea. "You said you would love to fuck my cousin David a few hours ago."

"Ugh, girl, not David. He's the worst of them." Rianna laughed out loud. "Now, Roland and Mario are decent. See that can't be a rule, and if your brother is free, I'll fight Zsa for him."

We all laughed except for Bea.

She crossed her arms. "Whatever. Just don't tell me anything if you decide to date anyone in my family."

“Get over yourself, Bea,” Zsa sighed loudly before raising her glass. “I want to add that if there’s anyone in your life right now you remotely think is attractive, you make a move. No waiting for a certain amount of time to have sex if you want it now. No more catching feelings for an unworthy man. We’re fearless in this bitch, and we’re taking no prisoners. Whatever that means.”

Rianna giggled, inebriation settling in. “I never knew what that phrase meant either.”

Zsa frowned. “I’m not finished.” Rianna placed a finger over her own lips, and Zsa continued, “I want to add that whoever hasn’t made any moves with a man each time we meet has to pay for everyone’s lunch. You know how I love my cocktails.”

“Shit.” I shook my head. “I’m about to be broke.”

“No, you’re not.” Rianna pulled out her phone and quickly snapped a pic. “I’m posting this right now and tagging you.”

“Can I at least see it?” I looked down at my white shorts and thin-strapped tank. “I have on pajamas, Ri Ri.”

“You looked sexy and natural, and you’ll find fifty million things wrong with it. I’m posting it. Watch how many men respond.” She quickly snapped a pic of a still frowning Bea. “I’m posting this and captioning it ‘Bitter Bitch.’”

Bea lunged to snatch the phone, and Rianna scrambled away, holding the phone. Then it was on. Two grown women chasing after each other. Rianna yelled, “Bea, I did like the name Lipstick Diaries. Don’t hurt me, please. Can one of you heffas help?”

“Nope.” I finished my drink.

“No,” Zsa responded.

“Give me the phone.” Bea hopped over the chair, and Rianna managed to evade her, holding her cell high, and ran into the bedroom.

Zsa and I refilled our glasses and tapped them together.

I said, “To Lipstick Diaries.”

Zsa smiled. "Lipstick Diaries."

Chapter 5

Thirst-trapping.

Five days later, I sat in my office grading papers and received a notification on my cell. I put the pen in my bun and checked my IG. I had to admit the pic that Rianna posted had garnered attention from many people, especially men. She'd captured a sexy, natural pose. I had been resting my chin on my folded knees. My eyes were looking away from the camera, loose curls swooped over my forehead, and my lips were parted slightly. Only hints of my bare legs, arms, and shoulders were seen in the shot. A perfect #thirsttrap picture.

I'd gotten several comments and hearts to my pic. Bea's cousin, Akil, had commented with emoji eyes and messaged me about meeting up for dinner. I agreed to have dinner with Rianna and Zsa's blessing, and we were meeting up tonight. We all thought it best not to tell Bea unless something came out of us having dinner together again. I'd only seen him once since I returned from Baton Rouge at Bea's mother's birthday party a year ago. At the time, he had a woman. He was now single again. Admittedly I looked forward to seeing him again. We had been together with no real issues, and I broke up with him because I thought he wasn't ready to marry. I found out later he was ready but believed I loved the idea of marrying him more than the reality. That was seven years ago; maybe we've grown since that time.

I scrolled down to see the latest comment, and my stomach dropped. Chris Alexander had commented.

Simply and forever gorgeous.

He'd also messaged me. I wasn't ready to read it. He would see that I did, and if I didn't know how to respond, I didn't want to hurt him. I shook my head. Even after all these years, I was concerned about his feelings. I received several messages from men I knew and didn't know. And I had no problem reading without a response.

I called Rianna. “Your photo worked. Everyone is coming out of the woodwork. Guess who else commented and messaged me?”

Rianna exclaimed, “Not the man with the good dick?”

“Chris. Chris is his name. We can’t go around saying the man with the good dick?”

“Was it big?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we can call him Good Big Dick Chris. GBDC for short.” Rianna chuckled.

Despite her foolishness, I laughed too. “I swear if the parents knew how dirty you really were, they would remove their children from your class.”

“Hey, I have a right to my life outside my babies. I don’t do anything illegal. Wait...well, not illegal in some states.”

I laughed. “Are you still at work?”

“No. I’m actually waiting for a friend for happy hour.”

“Ooh...is it for the Lipstick Diaries?”

“Possibly. Will fill you in when we meet up again to tell you what happened. I’m not trying to pay for Z’s cocktails. She’s a fucking lush.”

“So is Bea. We have to make sure we keep supporting each other. Dating for those two has never been an issue like you and me.”

“Agreed. But at least this time, we’re in it together. You already have a date after a few days and a potential date once you respond to Chris.”

“What if he’s still married?”

“Then don’t see him.”

“Ugh...my thoughts are racing. I don’t want to go back to that headspace.”

“At least see what he has to say. Wait...I thought he didn’t have social media? He must have a page now. Click on his

profile to see if there are pictures with his wife or a new woman.”

I clicked on his handsome face. “Private, and I’m not about to follow him.”

“Well, check the message and, at the very least, like the message if you don’t know what to say.”

“Good idea.”

“Keep me posted. Got to go.”

“Bye. Have fun.”

“You, too.”

I ended our call and stared at the phone for a long time. I would just read it at home. After receiving communication from Chris in five years, my brain was fried. No more work would happen until I read and processed his message. I also didn’t want to fuck up my date with Akil. I pushed Chris to the back of my mind with all the memories of him as I gathered my belongings to go home.



THE MINUTE I PULLED into the parking space next to his, Akil waved and smiled from his white Beamer. He’d been my everything once upon a time, and my stomach would flutter whenever he smiled. Tonight, a cozy warmth spread through me at seeing him again.

Akil rushed to open my car door, dressed in dark slacks and a burgundy sweater. Once I stepped out of the car, he hugged me. “It’s been a long time.”

His embrace was nice and sturdy. Comfortable. I smiled. “It has.”

He held his arm for me to take, “Shall we?”

I took it. “Yes.”

Akil had made reservations at Pineapple and Pearls, one of the most expensive restaurants in DC. A far cry from the chain restaurants and fast food we frequented when we were both struggling students. Once we placed our orders, he settled back in his chair, watching me. “I swear you get prettier the older you get. How are you?”

“Thank you. You’re aging well too. Like that goatee on you.” He had always been clean-shaven when every other man I knew had mustaches and beards. Akil was a legitimately good man. Nice looking, well-groomed, ebony skin, pretty teeth, and a trim body. He is caring and respectful of the women in his life. Doubtful he’d ever cheated on anyone. One of three children with loving parents, he believed in marriage and family. “I’m good. Teach at UDC and Howard. I still like my condo though I’m considering buying a home in Silver Springs.”

“I heard about your teaching from Bea. Glad you came back home. Got a position on the Hill in Congressman Graves’s office.” He’d earned a political science graduate degree and always wanted to work at the Capital. “Live in Alexandria now.”

I raised my water to him. “I heard you’re working on the Hill now. Proud of you.”

Akil grinned. “Only thing missing is my own family.”

“I hear that. For me too.”

He straightened in his chair and pulled on the edge of his sleeves. “Umm...did Bea ever tell you I bought a ring?”

“Not until I lived in Baton Rouge. I called you and apologized when she did.”

He frowned slightly. “I’d wondered why you called then and didn’t ask anything of me. You told me you loved me and apologized for not making me feel you loved me. I wanted to talk to you more, but I was in a relationship then.”

“I know, and I didn’t expect you to say anything. Just wanted you to know how much you meant to me. I was overly

focused on marriage and should've allowed our relationship to flow. If it ended in marriage, it did."

"That's the thing. I knew you were the woman I wanted to marry. I just wanted more time. The time you were unwilling to give. I bought a ring a year in and planned to give it to you on our second anniversary. But you put so much pressure on me that it turned me off. I wanted to see if you could love me for me," Akil's voice raised earnestly like he'd been waiting to say this to me.

I put my glass down and tilted closer to him. "I wanted marriage, and I also wanted you. To me, the two weren't different. Wished we talked then like we're doing now. Maybe we were just too young to describe how we were feeling. We were barely twenty-four when we started dating. Seems so young when I think about it." The waitress placed our plates of food in front of us. Once she walked away, I picked up his hand. "Can we agree that we made some mistakes when we were young and hopefully learned from them?"

He squeezed my hand. "I like that."

By the time we finished our meal, I felt we had real closure to our failed relationship. There weren't any sparks. Yet there was a comfort between us that could be the basis of a solid relationship. We promised to stay open with one another. Maybe have another date in a couple of weeks. Akil admitted that he was still healing from his last relationship and didn't want to treat me like a rebound. I respected his honesty, and when he kissed my lips softly, I felt a slight stirring of hope.



WHEN I FINALLY CLIMBED into bed that night, I flipped through the channels until I found Bravo. *Atlanta Housewives* became my background noise, and I picked up my cell. My stomach fluttered like butterflies in a meadow. How is it possible that just the idea of reading a message brought such emotion?

I started a profile again on IG just to message you. I kept it private because there were no photos. Got rid of social media a couple of years ago. You don't post a lot, so whenever I see a post of you, it makes me smile. It's been five years, and after seeing that picture that's so uniquely you, I had to reach out to you. Anytime you were in deep thought when we were together, you would look just like that. Beautiful. Sexy. Perfect. I don't know your situation. I can tell you mine. I've been divorced for four years and haven't remarried. Still no babies. Would love to see your face. To be in your presence. Or just to talk if you are in a situation. We're not that far from each other. I live in New York now. I hate messaging you, but I didn't know if your number was the same. Guess I was too afraid to text you. Miss you. If you want to talk, call me anytime. It's the same number; if you forgot, it's 225-555-7389.

With unbridled joy clouded by trepidation, I opened my journal app needing to process.

11:56 pm

Dear Lipstick,

It's Saturday night, and I just had dinner with a man I thought I would love forever and wanted to marry. He's still handsome, successful, and available. Probably could have slept with him if I wanted. Ending my five-year drought with a man that could at least make my big toe bend. Yet tonight, I only caught friendship vibes. Not saying that it couldn't be more if we spent time together. But I left him tonight with no urgency to connect again. I know that the minute I hear Chris's voice, it will be urgent like a motherfucker, and if I see him, we're fucking. Just his message got me yearning, and I never yearned for any man. Does that mean we're destined? Or is the chemistry between us blinding me to the truth that we're better off as lovers rather than life partners. I know, I know I'm supposed to be different, and if I want to fuck him, go for it. Not let me get in my way. But I can't ignore that he captured my heart with an iron fist that won't loosen its grip.

I swiped back to his message and reread it until my vision blurred from exhaustion. I finally responded with a like, knowing it was all up to me now if I wanted to see Chris

again. Up to me if I wanted to be drawn into the flame and pray I don't get burned again.

Chapter 6

No fairytale.

Five Years Ago.

Once we returned from Vegas, I spent every night at his place. We were discussing giving up my lease. He had the bigger apartment, and we both could slash our expenses. He wanted to cut down his hours flying helicopters for offshore companies, so he could complete his studies sooner. I wanted to build my savings for a home and to travel more. I hoped his ex would resolve their divorce soon. He clarified that he was with me and wasn't returning to her. The night he told her I was moving in with him, I could hear her foul mouth through the phone. He ended up hanging up on her.

"We have one more week in the semester. Maybe we could spend some time in Nebraska, and you could meet my family, and I can force her hand through the courts."

"Did you forget I'm teaching the second summer, late June? I can probably go for a couple of weeks. What if it takes longer?"

"It probably will. Figure I can at least get it started, and maybe I have some idea of how long it'll take once I get there. I can travel back and forth once we start proceedings. Another reason to move in together. Flying ain't cheap. Legal fees not cheap." He rubbed his head in frustration, and I moved behind him on the sofa and massaged his shoulders. "She's so full of shit. We would still be married if she fought this hard while we were married."

Weariness, hurt, and frustration made me react aggressively. I shoved him away, causing Chris to almost fall off the sofa.

He grabbed my arm. "What's wrong with you?"

My chest heaved up and down. "Did you hear what you said? You still want her."

Chris's eyes blazed. "How often do I have to tell you I don't want her anymore? Why would I go through all this drama if I still wanted her? I was pointing out that she's fighting for this marriage like she wants it when she doesn't. She hates losing because she knows you and I are together."

"She didn't know that when she came here."

"Yes, she did. I've been asking for a divorce, and the last time I told her was after we started dating, and I told her why. That's why she popped over to my mother's house and came here to plead her case."

"She left you, and then you filed for divorce."

"You didn't want to break up with your ex, but you did because it wasn't right. If that man had asked you, you would've married him in a heartbeat. Whether those two were right for us in the long run, at the time, we thought they were." He dropped my arm and stood up. "I don't need your shit on top of everything else in my life."

That was the first night he slept on the sofa, and I slept alone in his bed.



A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER, I walked up to his apartment as Janine knocked. Pins and needles pricked me from all angles, and I stopped moving. Damn it to hell. She looked amazing. Supermodel, unique beauty, amazing. Her long hair was thick and wild down her back. Tall red heels. She wore tight jeans that encased her muscled and toned calves and thighs. Her Angela Bassett arms were fully displayed in a white tank top. I don't know which time I saw her was worse. Seeing her in his shirt or seeing how beautiful she looked in a simple outfit of jeans and a tank. She was the kind of woman men didn't leave. And she was back again to reclaim her man.

Chris opened the door and crossed his arms, blocking her path. "I told you to never come back here." He would have to

angle himself more from where I stood to see me. “Unless you came to sign the papers, then we have nothing else to talk about.”

She only smiled, placed her hands on his forearms, and stood on tiptoes to kiss him. He frowned, and for a second, he responded before pushing her away. “That shit don’t work on me anymore. Sign the fucking papers and put us both out of this misery.”

“But we had fun the last time, and just now, you forgot you’re supposed to be mad with me and kissed me back.”

“Last time?” He looked puzzled, and then his expression turned to apprehension when he noticed me standing nearby, trembling in anger. “Baby...Simone...come here, please.”

Janine turned around, face twisted into ugliness, and she rushed me at his endearment. My anger kept me from being surprised. Instead, I clocked her in the face before she could land one punch. Chris picked me up as my arms still flailed, trying to hit him and her. She held her busted mouth, still trying to hit. He brought me inside and locked the door. Janine banged like a wild woman. He shouted, “I’m calling the police, and I’m fucking serious. Go back to wherever you came from.”

She yelled through the door, “He told me he wanted me back. I’m having his baby. Did he tell you that?”

Chris dumped me on the sofa and slung open the door. “You a mothafucking lie. We haven’t had sex in over a year.”

I watched them curse, and she hit him a few times. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, and I heard nothing like I turned down the volume on the TV. Janine was lying. Of that, I was sure. I’d been with him too much and overheard too many conversations to know the truth. She wanted to break us up, and I wouldn’t doubt that she saw me and kissed him to piss me off and drive distrust between us. Suddenly sirens sounded in the distance. Someone called the cops. We had disturbed the peace in this quiet apartment complex. And as much as I loved Chris, he disturbed my

peace. I hated drama, didn't believe in fighting, and definitely not over a man.

I grabbed my purse and pushed past them. Done with the drama. He was married. Plain and simple. I had no place or right to be with him. He tried to stop me, and I jerked free and ran to my car. I saw him a couple of times over the next month at his plea to talk and to pick up my things from his place. He could see in my eyes that we really were over and that his love wasn't enough. Chris soon left me alone, and by the time the fall semester rolled around, I was starting my new teaching position at UDC.



PRESENT

The following morning, I rolled over, reached for my cell, and stared at the message again. He missed me. I wondered if he thought of me as often I did him. Wondered if we still had mad chemistry in person. I wanted to see him, to feel him again. For the rush I felt whenever I saw him in class. The wetness between my legs from a simple look. The way his body seemed meant for mine. I opened my journal to jot down my thoughts. After dinner with Akil and Chris's message, I did feel hopeful about dating again, which was the point of the Lipstick Diaries. Before I could change my mind, I replied to Chris's message.

My number is the same, too.

Chapter 7

Why is he so hot?

I arrived thirty minutes earlier at the Starbucks near my home to settle my nerves and to see him before he noticed me. Peach tranquility tea would be more calming than my usual white chocolate mocha. I practiced breathing, wondering why my body and mind were all out of sorts for a man I had known for a few months. I didn't even ponder long on my outfit for my date with Akil. It had been so chill between us, and I had planned a life with him. Yet, Chris... Well, meeting with Chris was the complete opposite of chill. I spent hours debating what I should wear and made an appointment to get my hair and nails right though neither needed to be done. Finally, I decided on brown vegan leather leggings, knee-length suede boots, and a cream turtleneck sweater that hinted at the skin of my midriff. Perfect for an early day in March. My light brown, relaxed hair had grown past my shoulders, and I wore gloss and eyeliner the way he preferred.

Chris finally pushed open the door, wearing casual painter dark khakis, brown boots, and a loose thick blue jean shirt with a white tank underneath. I swear the air pressure dropped, stunting my breath. The sponge-style haircut and trimmed beard were meant for his handsome face. The reddish undertone gave his brown skin a summer glow year-round. Curved indentations at the corners of his lips appeared when least expected. With the broadest smile, Chris approached the table, pulled me into his warm embrace, and held me tight. We remained locked in each other's arms for an interminable time. I finally tapped his still-firm chest to back away. His arms reluctantly dropped, and he placed his large black leather backpack on another chair at the table before he sat across from me.

“Still mad at me,” he accused softly.

I shook my head. “I made peace about us long ago. Your touch and hugs always affected me, and I didn't want to be

caught up all over again. You're like this storm that takes anything in its path. Full of energy, determination, and, quite honestly, aggression. It was hard to deny you."

"I haven't seen you in years. I think you can deny me just fine." He leaned back in his chair, watching me with his intense dark eyes. "I flew from New York to be here. We could've spoken over the phone, yet you insisted that whatever we said to each other needed to happen in person. Since you think I'm aggressive and determined, let's cut to the chase. What do you want?"

"I don't know," I answered quickly.

Chris sighed. "You know what you want. Still the same frustrating Simone. Too afraid to live. To enjoy the here and now. It's a Friday afternoon, and I'm here for the weekend. Can we be real for once?"

Incensed at his bite, I hit back. "Really? From what I remember, I was always real. You were the one pretending." I pushed my chair back. "If I'm so frustrating, you can take your tired ass back to New York. Sorry for wasting your time."

He quickly put his hands up. "Simone, calm down. Please. Sorry. Guess I've been wishing so long to talk to you, I'm about to blow it because I *am* demanding and determined when I want something." Chris admitted sheepishly, "Might even be a little aggressive when it comes to wanting you."

I ducked my head slightly to hide my blush at his honest admission about still wanting me. "Let's not forget impatient."

"Oh no, that's you." He pointed with his fantastic smile, softening his retort. "I would've waited forever to be with you."

Not quite able to meet his eyes, I replied quietly, "Sometimes I wonder if we confused lust for love. Everything escalated so fast for us."

"Never for me. I wanted you since that first day of class. I've been with women, been in love a time or two, even had a wife, but you affect me like no one ever has." He placed his hands under the table but not before I caught the trembling.

“Affect? Not affected? Not past tense?” I shook my head and moved my cup to the side. “After all these years, you can’t possibly still feel the same?”

He searched my face earnestly. “Why is that hard for you to believe? You wouldn’t have asked to see me if you didn’t feel something for me. Like you said, it’s been years.”

I lifted one brow. “Are you still married?”

“I told you....” He stopped and said, “I wouldn’t have wasted your time if I had a wife.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

Chris grinned. “I plan to after this weekend.”

I wagged my finger. “You’re not going to get me caught up anymore.”

“Then why am I here?”

Thinking of the Lipstick Diaries and what they would tell me to do, I inhaled deeply and glanced around the half-empty coffee shop. I knew exactly what I wanted when I noticed he liked my pic.

“Why am I here, Simone?” His brow furrowed deeply. “Did you ask me here to tell me you’re getting married or some crazy shit? If that’s the reason, you didn’t have to bother. Figured that would happen for you sooner or later since that’s all that seems to fucking matter to you.”

“Who’s the one still mad, now?” I leaned closer, his anger making me even hotter for him. “I want you one last time. This weekend. You and me. Nothing but sex.”

“Simone, we haven’t spoken in years, and all you want from me is sex?” Chris’s frown lifted, he bit his lip, and his jaw tightened. A sure sign he was probably hard or on his way.

I shrugged. “You’re still the best I ever had, and I realized we ended because I struggled with enjoying what we had.”

Chris jabbed the table. “I wanted more than sex, and you damn well know it.”

“Maybe you did. But you couldn’t offer me more than that in your situation at the time.”

He glanced away and then back at me. “Okay. I’m free now, so what’s stopping us from trying?”

“Five years of distance from you. I’m a different woman now. Trust has become hard for me. I’m dating until I can trust again.”

“And you’re blaming me for that?”

I replied, “Yes. You were the first man to break my heart.”

Chris’s eyes narrowed. “Then why do you even want to have sex with me? Why not keep me in your rearview?”

“I already told you why.”

“It doesn’t matter to you that I want to try again?”

I lied. “No.”

Chris snorted. “You can’t be that changed.”

“Take it or leave it. I understand if you don’t, but you wouldn’t have traveled hundreds of miles to leave without being inside me at least once more.”

“Damn. Maybe you have changed. And I’m not sure it’s for the better.” Chris stared at me for a long moment, and I refused to lower my gaze. “It’s a shame that you believe I did this to you after only five months. That I made you distrust men. I thought you were stronger than that.”

I fell back in my seat. “Wow. Now I’m weak because I’m taking control of my emotions. My heart.”

“If you’re settling for less than you deserve because of me, then yes.”

Scoffing, I folded my arms. “Oh, you think I only want sex from other men? No. I want a relationship and marriage. I still want the fairy tale, just not with you.”

Chris’s head jerked as if I had shot him, and when I stared unflinchingly at him. He pushed back from the table and grabbed his backpack. I could see the hurt in his eyes as he

rose from the chair, and I almost relented. “Take care, Dr. Austin.”

Before I lost my composure, I waited until he walked out of the door. Grabbing my purse, I hurried to the unisex bathroom and gripped the sink. *What the fuck was I doing?* Help me. I still loved him. I knew seeing him would bring back feelings. I’d just forgotten how electric our connection had been. How the fire between us had always been dangerously addictive. Made me foolish. Made me come off as angry. I wiped my falling tears impatiently. Trying desperately to curb my tears before my eyes became red or puffy so I could walk out of this restroom, past customers, appearing unaffected. I kept inhaling and exhaling until my tears stopped threatening to drop. I pulled my phone out of my purse. Debating whether to reach back out to him and tell him we could try again. Anything to remain in his presence. I thought he would be cool with just sex. Apparently not. Instead of being happy, he wanted more with me. After all this time, trepidation prevailed. *Could my heart handle another round with Chris Alexander?*

When I opened the door directly across from me, Chris leaned on the wall with his hands in his pockets and quipped, “Déjà vu is a bitch.”

Unable to stop my tears, he quickly moved one arm around me, his free hand wiping the wetness off my cheeks. I looked up at him, my need for him overriding any fear. “I thought you left...can we just do things my way, please?”

He cradled my face in his hands and brushed my lips with his before he murmured, “Whatever you want. I owe you that much.”

Through blurred vision, I smiled in relief, and he entwined our hands and led me out of the coffee shop.

Chapter 8

Lust is real.

“Where’s your car?” Chris asked as we walked on the busy sidewalk. I hooked my arm on his elbow and leaned on his strong shoulder.

“It’s the blue Maxima on the left.” I’d been lucky to find a spot not far from Starbucks.

“From here, it looks clean. Did you change that about you as well?” He teased as we approached my car. Chris held his hand out expectantly for my keys. I never drove when we were together. I used to think it was his chivalrous nature. After some space and time, I began to think he drove because he didn’t entirely trust me behind the wheel.

“I’ll have you know that I’m quite capable of driving my own car.”

“I know. Used to being the driver, especially don’t want my woman to ever drive if I’m with her.”

Ignoring his charming words, I held my keys in between us. “And your driving isn’t about not trusting the way I drive?”

Chris smirked. “You can’t handle the truth.” I quirked a brow as I placed my keys in his palm. “Appreciate that you get to chill and enjoy the scenery when I’m around.”

“I should feel insulted, but I don’t want to drive.” He opened my door for me, and before I slid in, I asked, “Where are we going?”

“Do you have any plans this weekend besides sexing me?” Chris moved his hand to my other side, touching the car’s top and leaning closer. His nearness caused the air around me to thin.

“No.” I refused to lower my eyes from his intense dark gaze. I needed to exorcise his heady effect on me.

“Then let’s spend the weekend in New York. I want to show you my new world. Don’t worry about clothes. We can buy whatever you need when we get there.”

“Chris...” I warned. “You just said whatever I needed, you would give me. I want a carefree weekend. Don’t want a rehashing of what went wrong with us and how apparently, we both have some unresolved issues.” I fingered the ends of his shirt. “I want nothing but laughter, good food, and amazing sex, and in that order.”

“I want that too. Why can’t that happen in New York? I’ll pay for your flight on Sunday night and bring your car back to you later if you don’t want to drive back.” In DC, I couldn’t guarantee a disruption-free weekend. His gaze dropped to my lips and five years of missing each other and longing became tangible between us. Maybe being with him uninterrupted could finally ease my nagging ache since I walked out of his life.

“Because I love New York....” I tugged on his beard and sidled in the car. He closed the door, and I watched a smiling Chris cross in front of the car and get in the driver’s seat.



WE LISTENED TO MY SPOTIFY playlist of R&B hits of the 2000s, mellowing out to the likes of Jasmine Sullivan, Keyshia Cole, and Miguel as we drove to New York. We picked up snacks and drinks for the impromptu trip and fell into an easy rhythm of small talk about current events. With traffic, we wouldn’t arrive until after ten tonight. I’d sent a quick text to our group chat to tell them I was spending the weekend with Chris in New York. Zsa sent an eggplant emoji. Bea told me she was proud of me. Rianna told me to get it good all weekend, but she needed to know his info in case I went missing. I laughed at her last text.

“What’s funny?” Chris glanced at me with a warm smile.

I shifted in my seat, adjusting the belt to explain. “We’re calling ourselves the Lipstick Diaries.”

“You sing or something now?” He squeezed my thigh. “You have many talents, singing not one.”

His hand left a searing invisible print when he returned it to the steering wheel. I stared at my thigh, imagining his hand in between my legs before returning my focus to him. He had to be affected by me in this small space. Yet, I sensed he enjoyed my company, and his mind wasn’t where mine was.

“Simone?” He looked at me again. “Oh wait, did I insult you? I mean, if you have a singing group now, I...” His words faltered, and he looked so worried. I leaned and kissed his cheek.

Giggling, I reassured, “No, Chris. Can’t sing and have no aspirations to sing. It’s a group consisting of my best friend and two cousins. After Tamela, who you met, got married last month, we decided to give men another shot and be there for each other. We keep journals in which we write about our dating experiences and meet monthly to discuss them. My cousin, Rianna, took my pic and posted it before I could stop her, hoping I would get the attention of men.”

His jaw tightened. “The way you looked in that pic, I bet several men slid in your DMs.”

“They did. Wasn’t trying to thirst trap, but apparently, I did.”

Chris shook his head. “I forgot you tell me the craziest shit in the name of honesty. I don’t want to know that other men did what I did.”

“You also said you liked that about me. If you’d rather I kept information like that to myself, I can.”

He looked at me. “It’s just about sex, right?”

“Right.”

“Then you can keep it to yourself.”

I poked his shoulder. “Oh, you can’t handle other men wanting me? Last time you saw it as a challenge.”

“No, I hated it then, too. The thought of another man’s hand on you eats me up inside.”

“Still using the present tense.”

“Because everything I felt for you back then is the same.” He looked at me pointedly. “But this weekend is not about exploring deep feelings that we still have for each other.”

I didn’t bother to contradict or counter his argument about my feelings because it was true. We had been apart for five years, and the chemistry between us was and still is electric. The current that flowed in his presence topped the deepness of our connection. Question answered. We hadn’t confused lust for love.

We drove in silence on the New Jersey Turnpike for miles. Lost in our own thoughts. Or, in my case, lost in my own horniness. Being this close to him, his arm resting on the console so temptingly near my thigh heightened my yearning. My body urgently reminded me that I hadn’t had sex in five years. The first time we had sex in my office, it had been a two-year drought, and he didn’t have to do anything but make the first move, and my legs were open. I’m almost scared to see what happens this time from his intimate touch. My nipples tightened against my turtleneck, and the throbbing down below increased. My pussy might combust in flames or something wild. Mm.

Then Kelly Rowland’s *Motivation* entered the speakers, and I heard his breathing hitch, although his eyes remained on the highway. We still had at least another three hours, and I needed him right now. Deciding to take matters into my own hands, I pushed down my leggings and opened my legs. Then I pushed up my top and bra, my nipples puckering harder hit by the air. To his credit, Chris maintained control over the car when he turned his head and saw my nakedness in the lights from the Turnpike. His hand found my nipple and twisted the rigid button between his fingers. The pleasure outweighed the pain of his rough touch, and I moved his hand to my pulsing center. I quivered when his finger grazed my clit, and his palm rested against my mound. He dipped two fingers inside me as he drove with the other hand. Closing my eyes, I wrapped both

arms around the back of my seat, indulging in his masterful probing while I let the warm heat blowing from the vents kiss my breasts.

Knowing that passing drivers could see my bare chest only turned me on more, and I undulated to the beats of the music and the rhythm of his fingers. Masturbation didn't come close to the real thing. Even if Chris and I parted ways indefinitely after this weekend, I needed the reminder that my sensuality was integral to me. I wouldn't lock it away again.

“Keep your legs open,” he whispered, and before I could ask why he asked that of me, he inserted another finger, and I closed my legs against the tightness. “Open, you can handle it. Pretend it's my dick.”

He continued pushing his fingers in and out until my pussy adjusted, and I complied. My panting and moans were now louder than the music. I dipped my head and lifted my breast to suck on my own nipple. Chris cursed, and he swerved before righting the car. “I got to get off at the next exit before I kill us.”

Within seconds, I came loud as he exited the highway, and I slowly floated back to Earth as he stopped in the back corner of a gas station parking lot. He looked around the car, noting my papers and books on the backseat. “Fuck. It's not enough room for me to fuck you.”

I unzipped and pulled off my boots. “Get in the backseat, knock that stuff to the floor, and I'll ride you. I know it's not what you want, but it's what you need until we get to New York.”

He looked around, making sure no one saw us before getting out of the car and using the back door. I maneuvered to the backseat from the front without stepping outside. Gas stations at the Turnpike were usually packed. He pushed down his pants and quickly slipped on latex. Damn it, if I didn't almost come just from the glimpse of his dick. Wet and ready again, I climbed on his lap and gleefully slid down his thick and long shaft, grateful that his fingers had already stretched me. Five years and fucking him like this would've hurt.

Chris captured my lips in a torrid kiss. His tongue opened and explored my mouth while his hands massaged the soft flesh of my breasts. Mmm. He tasted of mint, chocolate, and sin. Such a delicious combination as we panted in between our lips and tongues mating. Chris dipped his head to suck on my right nipple, and I hissed loudly. “You feel so damn good.”

He looked up at me, my nipple still in his mouth, and in his eyes, I saw desire. Need. Love. Unable to tear my gaze from his, Chris lifted his head as he gripped my hips. I pressed my hands against the ceiling, allowing him to have my body in any way he desired, as I’d done in the past. Taking control of our rhythm, Chris fucked me over and over. Faster and faster. The car shook from the sheer force of his fucking. Even if cops knocked on the window, I would risk arrest, begging Chris not to stop until I squirted. He pressed his head into my chest when the crescendo built inside us. I flung my head back as the building pressure demanded an immediate release. The fire soon coursed through and out of my body as it exited his body, and we screamed each other’s names.

Chapter 9

Love inspires.

We were quiet and held hands the rest of the drive, both anticipating getting to his place where we could explore our bodies again. What we did at the gas station had been a temporary fix to our permanent problem. Our constant need for one another. I'd forgotten how much we yearned to be in each other's presence. Sex only solidified what I'd been missing in the five years. The feeling of completeness. The feeling that there was another soul meant for me. Maybe out of self-preservation, I'd minimized my feelings for Chris to just chemistry and fantastic sex.

After being with him again in only a few hours, everything came back with a resounding slap. I'd risked dating him when he'd been married because of how right it seemed. And now he was utterly and totally free to be with me. This time though, I would do my best to live in the present and enjoy him. Truly enjoy him without all the inner insecure thoughts and whether he was supposed to be my husband.

I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes, he was parking the car in front of a large building on a college campus. "Where are we?"

"NYU," he replied. Pride evident in his response.

"Is this where you work?"

"Yes. I'm in the fourth year of my business doctoral program and work as a teacher and research assistant." He curved his palm to my chin and kissed me softly. "You inspired me to get my doctorate and to teach. Outside of my crush on you, I really enjoyed your class and witnessed firsthand how you made your students love chemistry. I want to do the same in my field."

"Are you serious? What about your plans to own a charter plane company?"

“I still plan to do that one day after earning my doctorate and teaching for a few years.”

I stared at him in wonder. “You are amazing, do you know that?”

He gazed back at me. “Not as much as you are. The only regret I have in this life is losing you.” Chris opened the door before I could respond, walked over to my side, and held the door open. “I want to show you my department.”

The vast campus was dark and empty. “It’s late.”

“I do have a key to the building. Teachers and grad students always have access to the buildings.” Chris took my hand. “Come on. We won’t be here long, and then we’ll get a couple of slices of pizza and head to my place. I don’t live far from here.”

“Such a beautiful campus.” We walked past a stone building on a cobbled pathway. “I always wanted to visit NYU. Tuition was way out of my league.”

“Well, you have your personal tour guide. We can come back tomorrow if you want. Tonight I want to show you where I teach.”

I leaned on his shoulder, and he wrapped one arm around me as we walked to his department. Once we made it to the small auditorium where he taught undergraduate students, he stepped down to a front-row seat as I walked around his classroom and strode to the front. He smiled, watching me. “Seeing you again is so nostalgic. I used to be so excited to see you in class. Like I hurried my days just to see you again. It didn’t matter whether you wore sexy dresses or baggy pants. I had to fight to not get hard.”

“I imagine you have the women in your class, hot and wet, watching you teach. Boy, you’re fine as fuck without trying. Wish I had a teacher who looked like you.” I giggled and sat on the table in the front, swinging my legs. “This is surreal to me. I can’t believe you’re pursuing a doctorate and teaching because of me.”

“Isn’t that what most professors hope, that somehow they influence their students’ path in life?” Chris stretched his arms before draping one of them over the back of the chair next to him.

“Yeah, I know it was my chemistry teacher in high school who made me want to pursue chemistry as a major.” I shrugged. “Back then, you loved being a pilot and only wanted to use your degree to help you run your business. And now you’re like this cool, sexy graduate student because of me. When I woke up this morning, I had no idea I would be sitting in a classroom on NYU’s campus in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t know if you realize that I’m structured and like to plan out everything. Military kind of puts you in that mind space and is hard to break except when it comes to you. I like being spontaneous with you. I had no intention of bringing you back here. I thought I would spend the night at your place in DC.”

Nodding vehemently, I agreed. “Um. You’re very structured and demanding until you love on me. Then you’re like this cuddly man.”

Chris straightened in his chair. “Cuddly? Like a stuffed animal?” He rose from his chair and strode towards me. “Think I need to show you another adjective.”

My stomach flipped at the seductive gleam in his eyes. “Are there cameras?”

“No and no windows. Like your classroom at LSU.”

“Ooh...I hope we’re about to fuck.” I squealed and beckoned him with my finger until I wrapped my legs around his middle. His erection pressed urgently against my center.

“Yep.” He grinned.

“Is that why you brought me here?”

He nodded, gazing intently into my eyes. “I’ve had dreams of fucking you on this table. Never thought it would come true.”

“Then let’s make that dream a reality.” I pulled his head down to kiss him, and within seconds my legs circled his waist, and we were fucking again. My nails scratched his back and ass as he plunged inside me, stroking me hard and thoroughly, more than making up for his limited hip action in the car.

Chapter 10

And so, the story begins...again.

“At least let me walk you to the car.” Chris watched me pack my large leather backpack we purchased yesterday while shopping briefly for an outfit, lingerie, and toiletries. It was Sunday evening, and we had been fucking all weekend. Once we made it to his cozy apartment in a brownstone, Friday night, sleep had been non-existent. Preferring to talk, have sex, and eat.

“No. Saying goodbye now is easier.” I held my arms out to him. “Plus, I get to give you the biggest hug and kiss while you’re naked that I wouldn’t be able to give if you walked me downstairs.”

“You sure you good with driving back alone this late? You must be tired. I can miss class tomorrow and fly back.”

I shook my head. “I’m good. I need the drive. Process this impromptu weekend we shared.”

He quirked a brow. “Still scared to fly?”

“Nope.” I beamed. “You cured me of that... come here.”

Chris rose out of bed, naked and semi-erect, and pulled me into his arms. I hugged him tight, inhaling his scent, trying to imprint the feel of his smooth muscled skin to memory again. He commented, “This can’t be our last time seeing each other. If all you want from me is sex, then I’m down. Whatever you want. Just don’t want to lose you again.” His voice sounded resigned and defeated. This man did love me, and whether we would ever be together again in this life, I loved him too.

I whispered against his chest, “It’ll never be just sex between us. We’ll always have love. This weekend was amazing. Feel like I can breathe again. I never liked how we ended. This was so much better.”

“So, this was closure for you?” Chris’s jaw tightened. An edge tempered his sadness that would soon turn to irritation,

possibly anger, and I didn't want to ruin our time together.

"The closure of what happened between us in the past. I don't know yet if we should have a new beginning. Long distance is tough. We're both young educators on the grind with crazy busy schedules."

"We can make time for us." His hand smacked my bottom not so playfully. "It's about other women. Admit you still don't trust me?"

"There's something inside of me that makes trusting you hard. Not in the sense that I believe you would fuck me over purposely, but life happens. You're in this beautiful city, a sexy graduate student, teaching impressionable young women, and you pilot helicopters for extra cash in New York. You're a fucking romance novel walking. A heroine is waiting around the corner. And why would you ever give up a possible position at NYU to move to D.C.?" I covered his mouth with my finger stopping his protest. His tongue swirled around my finger, arousing both of us. Giggling, I removed my finger to avoid being swept up in his allure. "Fine. I don't want this to be the last time, either. Can we see what happens? Make no promises we may not be able to keep."

Chris rolled his eyes though I could see the humor in them. "Go with the flow."

"I want to show you I can be different too. I want to trust in you and trust in this process."

"Then let's do it."

"Cool." I tried to pull away, and his arms tightened. "I have to go."

He grinned wickedly. "I meant, let's fuck before you leave."

"I got to go," I whined as I allowed him to unbutton my jeans. "I can barely walk as is."

"All I need is five minutes. Give you something to hold you over until we see each other again." He swooped down and captured my lips in his, and I let myself drown in his love one more time.

Chapter 11

Lipstick diaries is official.

“Check-in,” Rianna announced. We were having our first Lipstick Diaries lunch, and Rianna decided to host it at her apartment in Baltimore. She’d made strawberry and peach margaritas with black bean and chicken burritos. “Well, we all know what Monie has been doing. Traveled to New York for GBDC.”

“What?” Bea asked.

“You don’t want to know.” I shook my head.

Zsa licked the salt off the rim of her glass before speaking, “Was he good as you remembered?”

“If possible, better. Or maybe it’s because I hadn’t had a man between my legs in five years,” I acknowledged. “We had an amazing time. He’s a doctoral student and teaches at NYU because of me.”

“You inspired him. I love it.” Bea clapped her hand. “He might be the one, after all.”

“Slow it down. We’re being chill. No commitments. Just fun and companionship.”

Zsa arched one of her perfectly sculpted brows. “How often do you communicate with him since you left New York a week ago?”

I averted my gaze and mumbled. “Every day.”

“Mm...hmm...”

“He kept me on the phone until I made it home because he didn’t like me traveling alone after dark. And we’ve been talking every day since.” I shrugged my shoulders as I added sour cream to my plate.

Bea laughed. “She gone already. When will you see him again?”

The comforting thought of seeing him again made it impossible not to smile as I replied, “This weekend. I have spring break, so I’ll stay with Chris in New York for a few days.”

Bea asked, “Any negatives so far?”

“Besides the long distance and that he’s always around beautiful and smart women, no.”

“Well, you have that love glow. Enjoy it, Cuz. Don’t get too caught up in your head, and you will miss precious moments. Good times with men always come to an end,” Zsa commented.

Rianna, still bringing dishes to the table, frowned. “I thought we were approaching men differently. Not allowing our hang-ups to interfere with dating. What’s eating you?”

Zsa waved her hand. “Nothing, really. Fucked an ex and regret it already. He’s too clingy for me.”

“Clingy or actually likes being with you? You’ve always been hard on men,” Rianna chimed in. She placed a platter of green leaf lettuce, tomatoes, shredded Monterey jack cheeses, and pico de gallo to garnish our burritos. “If I’m at your house for more than two hours, you’re ready for me to go. So, I ask you again, clingy or likes spending time with you, and you’re not feeling him?”

“Fine. I’m not feeling him that way.”

I asked, “Did he do anything wrong?”

She sipped on her drink. “No. He didn’t then or now. Missing something and can’t define it. Wrote it down in the journal and couldn’t describe what was wrong with him. Bummed me out a little. Pay me no attention. I’m good.”

Bea placed a burrito on her plate. “Got ya. I’ve been chatting with this engineer and construction worker on Tinder. They both seem cool. Have a date with the construction worker Saturday. I’m keeping my mind open, although both are already annoying me. Can’t stand when a man starts calling me ‘baby’ when we’ve only had two conversations. Let me have a taste of your dick or something first.”

“That.” Zsa and Bea slapped hands in agreement.

I laughed. “I hate that too.”

“Giving it a shot with both since I couldn’t think of anyone from the past, like lovesick over here.” Bea took a bite of the gooey burrito and spoke with a full mouth, “Ri Ri, this is better than any restaurant. Glad you made us drive all the way up here.”

Rianna placed a pitcher of margarita on the table. “I don’t mind making this our regular meet-up.”

“Well, I do,” Zsa interjected. “You’re almost an hour away from me.”

“Each month, we’ll take turns choosing the spot. I’ll do it next month,” I suggested. Zsa was in a mood. Suspected it was more than what she was telling us. But she was very private, and I’m not sure she truly confided in anyone. The closest one would be Rianna, and even then, those two argue like cats and dogs if they spent too much time together.

Bea wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Sounds good. Then it’ll be me. And after Z, we’ll start all over again, and if you always want it to be at your house when it’s your turn, it’s your prerogative. We’re meeting up at the Washington Harbour when it’s my turn. Got the hookup at some of the restaurants. Guarantee we won’t have to pay for a thing.” Bea was recently promoted to district manager of Victoria’s Secret and had unbelievable perks in her new role.

“If that’s true, we should go there every month.” I grinned. “Not that these burritos aren’t to die for. A blend of flavors with every bite.”

Rianna beamed, took off her apron, and finally sat down to join us. She loved hosting and always had dinner parties with family and friends. My pretty, bubbly cousin would make a good wife and mother in the traditional sense. The type of woman who would work hard all day and take pride in getting dinner on the table every night. “I went to happy hour with one of the counselors who floats at several schools. We had a good time.”

“Did it end in the bedroom?”

“Not that night,” she squealed.

Zsa’s cocoa-brown face brightened. “You did the do. Please say it was good? It would make up for my mood if this man made your toes curl.”

“He really did.” She grinned. “It wasn’t a sex fest like this one over here, but we definitely had fun, and we’re hanging out this weekend. He’s a divorced father of two, forty, and fine.”

Bea commented wryly, “Looks like the Lipstick Diaries are working out for the two who don’t date much.”

Rianna tossed her locs behind her ear. “Ironically, yes. And Monie had dates with two men in the past month.”

If looks could kill, my cousin would be floating down the Potomac River. Belatedly realizing her error, she announced, “Let’s put some music on. It’s too quiet in here.”

Zsa murmured, “Don’t think it’s going to be quiet for much longer.”

“Yeah, put on some Beyonce. I want to dance.” I rose from the table with the rest of my burrito in my hand. Hoping to distract Bea from Rianna’s mistake. Which I already knew wouldn’t last. I told Bea everything first. She would’ve known I went out with two men before anyone else.

I snuck a glance at Bea, and she tapped her sculpted nails on the table. She might be petite, but she was fierce, and I hated being on her wrong side, which had been rare in the twenty-five years we’d been friends.

Zsa started, “In our defense, you said you didn’t want to know if we dated any of your family members.”

“You went out with Akil, knowing you were also going out with Chris?” Bea’s golden bronze skin steamed red. “You broke my cousin’s heart, and now you’re playing with him. Did you sleep with him too?”

“No. Bea, I promise I didn’t. He reached out to me because of the pic. I’d already agreed to have dinner before I heard

from Chris. We had a good time and talked about the past. It's been almost a month, and we've only spoken once and have made no plans to go out again. I care about Akil. I wouldn't lead him on."

"I know my cousin, and I know you. Holding on to him in case Chris fucks up again. Leave Akil alone."

"That's so unfair. You act like I dogged him out or something. If he and I are cool about what happened years ago, you need to be too."

Bea got up, snatched her purse, and walked out of the door.

I grabbed the back of the dining chair. "Thanks a lot, Ri Ri."

Zsa slapped her sister's shoulder. "I swear this is why I don't tell you shit."

"Ow...it slipped out." She looked at me with sad eyes. "Sorry, Monie. I'll call her later when she calms down and explain what happened."

Zsa picked up her glass. "No, I will. She likes me better."

"Well, that is true," I conceded.

"Really?" Rianna feigned hurt before she broke out in a grin. "Yes, she does like Z better."

We all settled back down, grooved to the music playing, and commenced eating and drinking. Then we heard the door open, and within a few seconds, a subdued Bea stood there. "So none of you bitches came to stop me?"

Zsa raised her hand. "I volunteered to call you later."

"You stubborn like the Taurus you are. I didn't want to waste my time. I would've called you tomorrow," I replied with a smile.

She grunted before picking up her margarita and dancing to the music. "I didn't want to leave without Ri Ri's homemade strawberry shortcake."

I tilted my glass towards her. "You know I wouldn't hurt Akil like that. I wouldn't and have never led him on. We

good?”

She rolled her eyes and downed her glass. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Rianna added, “Another rule of the Lipstick Diaries, ladies: We don’t leave mad.”

We all raised our glasses.

Chapter 12

This is love.

“Businesses have been hiring industrial psychologists for years now. Their role is to analyze and understand human behavior in the workplace. How to keep employees happy, efficient, and productive as well as factors impacting consumer buying.”

I sat in the back of the auditorium, observing Chris teach. I'd had my own TA cover for me so I could attend his class. The faces of his student, especially the women, were enthralled as he walked back and forth, confident in his lecture.

I raised my hand with a smirk. Chris frowned slightly before he called on me. “You have a question?”

“Yes. I'm a chemistry major, wondering how knowing chemistry works in the business or industrial psychology world?”

Chris smiled. “Good question...Ms.?”

I replied, “Ms. Brackenshire.”

He bit his lip to stop his laughter. “Um...Ms....sorry, what is it again?”

“Ms. Brackenshire. First name, Liza.” There were at least sixty students. A few students murmured in the class, probably trying to determine if I was playing with the professor or if I was a student speaking up for the first time.

His dark eyes danced as he responded, “There's a quote by Carl Jung, a psychologist who likens the meeting of two personalities to the contact of two chemical substances. He argues that if there's any reaction after contact, both are forever transformed. Suppose a company treats its customers and employees well. In that case, both are changed for the better, which should be the goal of a successful company.”

“Like meeting and falling in love with the right person.”

Chris folded his arms and held my gaze. “Yes. That person is forever changed.”

Aware of all the eyes on us, I nodded. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He glanced around the auditorium. “Any other questions?”

When his class ended, he beckoned me to join him, and I noticed three women glaring at me, waiting to speak to him. One twirled the end of her hair, one kept adjusting her fitted t-shirt, and the last stared unabashedly at Chris as he addressed the concerns of two male students. He told me he’d been hit on by a few students since he’d been teaching for the past two years and hadn’t been remotely tempted.

Watching Chris...Mr. Alexander today, instead of the expected jealousy and insecurity, a pride that he was adored by his students and that he loved me centered me. Although this was the fifth time in two months that we’d spent time together, we hadn’t spoken love. Our actions demonstrated deep emotions, which seemed enough for now.



WE STROLLED HAND IN hand across the historic Brooklyn Bridge on one of the prettiest and coolest days in May. The kind of day where the brightness of the day lifts the darkest mood. Birds flew overhead, glad to be home from the South. Families, joggers, and couples appeared to have sunny dispositions as we passed them with a head nod. My flight would leave in a few hours, and Chris wanted to share one of his favorite things to do in New York.

He chuckled. “I swear I wanted to laugh my ass off. You thought of that name so quick. I had to ask you again to see if you remembered it.”

“I used to give fake names to men all the time, and I would make up crazy names or names no black person would ever be called to throw off Bea or my cousins when we met men. Trying to see who would laugh first.”

He looked down at me, his brown eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “You’re full of fun surprises. Glad we’re taking time to get to know one another again.”

“Me too. Speaking of getting to know one another, is this where you bring all your dates?” I asked impishly, knowing he hated when I asked him about other women.

“Yep. I bring them here, sauce them up, and then fuck them.” He laughed out loud when he noticed my frown and tugged me into the comfort of his arms. “I had to...you keep trying to go all around the moon and back to just ask if I’m seeing someone besides you.”

“I’ve enjoyed these past two months, and I don’t want to mess it up,” I admitted with a pout.

“Nothing you can ask me will mess us up. I wake up with a smile because I know I get to talk to you. When I know I’m going to see you, I’m like this big kid who can’t sleep, Christmas Eve.” He turned me around, and we moved to the side of the bridge where we could admire the East River and the Manhattan and Brooklyn skylines. He hugged me from behind, his chin resting on my head. Viewing the historic boroughs and the splendor of this bridge built in 1883 from this vantage point amazed me. I love New York, and spending time with Chris here made me love the city more.

“Me too. I don’t get much sleep when I know I’ll see you the next day. Even with you, I don’t want to waste time sleeping.” I leaned into his warmth and strength.

“I can’t wait until you let me fly you over this bridge at night.”

Apprehension crawled at the mere mention, and I shivered. “That’s a negative. I just got used to planes, and if you’re piloting, who will take away my fears?”

“I can arrange a buddy to fly while I help you relax.” He kissed my ear. “We wouldn’t be the first couple to come in a helicopter.”

Chris lived in this romantic city as a virile, single man for four years. I doubted he’d restrained from sex for five years as

I had. “Have you been serious about anyone else since your divorce? Are you seeing anyone besides me?”

“No, and no.”

His simple answer was sufficient for me, and I believed him. “You don’t want to ask me the same question?”

“I learned long ago to not ask questions if I don’t want to know the answer.”

I angled my head to kiss his bearded chin. “I’ll tell you anyway. I haven’t, and I’m not, either. With everything going on at work and family, even if I wanted to, which I don’t, I couldn’t date you and another man.”

“My sentiments exactly.” His hands curved to my waist, his pinky fingers grazed the bottom of my braless breasts under my sweater, and I grew moist instantly. “You’re a handful alone.”

“Don’t get me hot yet. Still want to talk.” I jabbed him in the chest with my elbow, and he grabbed my right breast and massaged it, distracting me. His biceps and jacket protected me from the view of others.

“Too late for me.” He pressed himself into me, and I could feel his erection.

“Never too late. Just think of something else. Like after we ended things, did you try again with Janine before you divorced?”

“My dick thanks you for the cold water.”

Twisting my body slightly to look at him, I asked again, “Did you try?”

He gazed down at me, his eyes were slightly hooded from this view, and I sensed he had a story, and I promised myself to listen without anger or judgment. “Both my parents have been married more than once, and my father multiple times. They have the right to find true love, but it was hard on me as a child, getting used to new adults who always had a different way of doing things than my parents. I swore that whenever I married, it would be forever. None of this divorce bullshit. I

tease you about your fairytale love, but I had the same vision. There would be one woman for me, and we would be happily ever after.

The military thrives and survives on order, structure, and systems. Friendships. Relationships. Marriages. Families. All encouraged. Civilian life is quite different from military life. Everything is taken more seriously, we have more responsibilities, and we're asked to grow up quickly. Most of us join at eighteen, knowing shit about life, yet we make life-and-death decisions daily. If I'd gone straight to college, which my mother wanted, I wouldn't have gotten married until now.

When I knew that emotionally, spiritually, and financially I could take care of a wife. But I didn't, and while still fresh behind the ears, I married a woman whose beauty was skin deep, unlike yours. I realized marrying her was a mistake early in, but I didn't want to break that promise to myself. I didn't want to be like my parents. I kept thinking we would get better and then assumed the demands of the military were the issue. That only made matters worse, and then she packed her shit one day and left. Although I knew she made the right call, deep down, I was devastated and fought for us until I didn't."

He squeezed me tighter and bent his head, so his lips touched my temple. "You were right that had I not been with you, I would've tried again when she came back. Not because I had this great love for her. It was simply because I still held on to my dream of being married to one person forever. She knew that about me, which caused her fixation on you and stubbornness to sign the papers. She caused trouble in my life, lied about us sleeping together again, and having my baby to get you out of the picture. When you broke up with me, I told her what happened. She promptly asked to move in with me and work on us. I reiterated that I would pursue going through the courts until I was no longer legally bound to her. She'd sent the signed papers by courier by the time I bought a ticket to fly home to start divorce proceedings. Janine finally believed we were done because I still didn't choose her. Loving you freed me from holding on to a dream which was as futile as Stevie Wonder holding on to his hair."

I laughed. "I love that analogy."

“It’s a good one.” The vibrations of his chuckle coursed through me. “Believe me when I say that though there have been a few women, I haven’t met anyone I wanted to date seriously. I’m usually studying, preparing a lecture, or working on my research. Very little time for social life and the demands of a relationship. I’m not going anywhere, and I’ll keep showing you until you believe me, Simone.”

The breeze blew past us, and he warmed me with his embrace.

“Why didn’t you call me once you got divorced?”

“Everything went down so bad between us. The fight with Janine and the police being called to my place, I could feel your love slipping away. And it started after Janine called me that night that we slept apart. I figured I had lost you forever. You’d blocked my number. When I called your department to speak with you, I was told you no longer worked for the university. You never reached out to tell me you were relocating like I didn’t live five minutes away, and I took it as a sign you never wanted to hear from me again.”

“I honestly thought you and she would get back together. Baton Rouge didn’t fit anymore without you in my world, so I came back home. I missed you terribly. I wanted to call you, but I was afraid that you would tell me you were still legally married or that you had reconciled. I started to second-guess our relationship and left wondering if we really loved each other. That we’d confused love for lust. I don’t believe that anymore.”

“I never believed it.”

We fell silent, still pressed against the rail. One hand slipped between my skirt, and the other cupped my breast. Chris’s thumb slowly and achingly rubbed my hardened nipple. “Keep your eyes open and focused on the beautiful cities. Don’t move against my hands, and no one will guess you’re being finger fucked.” He growled near my ear, “If I thought we wouldn’t be arrested, I would bend you over and fuck you so hard, you’ll forget your mothafucking name.”

I gripped his bicep hard as his index finger caressed my clit, and his middle finger dipped in and out of my slick, pulsing walls aching slowly. His other hand continued to pleasure my nipple. I stared out over the East River, keeping my body still. Steady fingers worked my pussy from embers to a raging explosion. He never increased his rhythm despite my low moans and shallow breathing. Oh, how I longed to feel his hard dick that pressed against my lower back inside of me.

“Time to come, Simone,” he whispered. Chris withdrew his fingers to toy with my other lips and began rubbing my clit and mound with the palm of his hand until orgasmic passion blinded me. He grasped me to him the moment my legs collapsed.

I rested the back of my head against his chest and panted, “God... I... love you.”

“I love you, too.” He turned me around and kissed my lips. “Next time, tell me how you feel before I make you come.”

Wrapping my arms around his strong neck, I professed, “I can repeat it by staring into your eyes. I love you, Mr.- Soon – to – be – Doctor - Alexander.”

His luminous smile warmed me better than the bright sun that shone overhead, and he swung me around playfully before taking my hand in his again. “Let’s go back to my place and make love before you head home.”

I yelled as I started running, “Race you to the street.”

“Hey, you cheated.” He took off and raised his arms in victory like Rocky when he passed me up.

Chapter 13

Mama knows best.

On the drive to my mother's house, I thought about my burgeoning relationship with Chris. We'd both matured over the five years. Rarely argued and understood one another. He did get caught up in his research even when I was there, and I would feel neglected. I had to remind myself how demanding being a graduate student had been. That was one of his faults that I could live with because he could be singularly focused.

Despite his sexiness, swagger, and gorgeous looks, he wasn't the player I initially believed him to be. Although he had a best friend who still lived in Lincoln, a couple of military buddies, and a few graduate students he befriended, he was mostly a loner. I had misjudged him because our relationship started off sexual. He'd been so aggressive in wanting and having me that I assumed he made a habit of toying with women's emotions. Kat, the woman who stopped by his apartment in Baton Rouge unannounced and his ex-wife, didn't help matters in my false opinion of him.

We shared the same values: education, loyalty, spirituality over religion, honesty, and hard work. Chris believed in commitment and families. Regarding rearing children, neither of us believed in corporal punishment, and he thought boys should be allowed to cry and express their emotions. He still hated my messiness, and I chided him about his orderliness. But loved every moment we shared.

Now I just have to tell my mother why Chris and I broke up in the first place. We were going to the movies later, and I figured we could talk and she could get all her questions and reservations out of the way. Chris wanted to spend time with her again the next time he visited DC, and I needed to prepare her.

Bea called as I parked my car in my mother's driveway. "Just checking on you. Haven't heard from you since you

came back from New York.”

“I’m good. Just got to Mama’s.”

“Tell her I said ‘hello.’ I would tell you to get my mail I left at my Mama’s house, but she’s not home.” Bea grew up next to me, and our mothers continued to live next door to each other. “I know we have the Diaries, yet, I had to ask, have you been able to stay out of your head with Chris this time?”

“A part of me wants to know if I can trust him and where this is going. But I don’t obsess over that like I used to. I jot down different things in my journal that keep me open when I feel like I’m spiraling. I like the place where he and I are right now. Enjoying each other with no expectations.”

“Okay...okay.” Bea sounded pleased. “Lipstick Diaries is working because you used to be a hot mess with these men. Too worried about a future instead of dealing with the present, especially with Chris.”

“I am rather proud of myself. On your end?” I walked up the four steps to my mother’s modest three-bedroom home in the Northeast.

“Engineer was a snobby asshole. The construction worker is still cool. Sex is decent. Swiped on a white guy who’s a broker. Having lunch next week. Figured I would step all the way out of my comfort zone. Hell, I might even date an Asian since that’s half my blood anyway.” She laughed heartily because we both knew how she felt about men. The darker, the better. She loved black men even when she hated them.

“Go for it, Bea,” I encouraged. “And I’ll live vicariously through you. Love me some Thor.”

“You’re so fucking stupid. Bye.”

I walked inside the home I grew up in and immediately went to Mama’s refrigerator. I pulled out strawberries and whipped cream, my favorite snack as a child, which she kept just for me. She yelled from her room, “Monie, don’t eat too much. We’re eating at the movies.”

“Mama, that’s at two, and it’s eleven. I’ll be hungry again.” I scooped out the whipped cream while looking out the

window at Bea's mother's house. My parents brought our home when I was three years old, and Bea and her parents moved next door five years later. By then, my dad had died, and I'd been excited to discover that there was a little girl next door my age. She had an older brother three years older than us, and he made friends with other boys in the neighborhood. Our mothers became close friends, especially when Bea's Chinese father left the family a couple of years later. Both mothers still lived in the houses we grew up in, and when I needed comfort the most, I slept in my old room.

My cell rang, and I answered it with a smile, "Hey."

"Hey." Chris's voice made my body hum. "What you doing?"

"At my mother's. About to go to the movies." Suddenly a man popped in front of the window, and I screamed.

"Simone, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I cradled the phone on my ear and pushed the window open. "Bo, that's not funny. If I died of a heart attack, you would've felt real bad. Imagine being arrested for killing me."

Bea's brother laughed out loud. "Your mean ass can handle a scream. You'll still be alive, causing havoc long after I'm gone." He would be thirty-six, his next birthday, and looked at least ten years younger. With his exotic almond light brown eyes, dark curly hair, and sun-kissed skin courtesy of his mixed heritage, women had never been an issue. Although he wasn't a tall man, he was taller than most women and kept his body right. I might be the only one of Bea's friends who never saw him more than as an annoying yet protective older brother. His marriage a few years ago had been short-lived, and his eleven-year-old daughter lived with his ex-wife.

"Simone?" I heard Chris's voice again.

"Oh, sorry, baby. It's Bea's brother trying to scare me."

"Trying? I forgot how loud you can scream." Bo grinned and walked toward the front of the house.

"Chris, I'll call you back in a few minutes."

“Okay...” He paused before clicking off.

“Why did you scream?” Mama came down the hallway as Bo walked through the front door. She looked at him and sighed, “Boy, when will you grow up and stop playing tricks on this girl?”

He kissed Mama’s cheek. “Never.”

Bo ruffled my hair, and I knocked his hand out of my loose strands. “Between you and Terrick, my hair never stayed neat.” Terrick was Bo’s best friend, who I used to crush on when I was thirteen, and they were sixteen. Luckily, I overcame that phase because the tall, sexy, and dark man’s middle name was Ho. “How is he?”

“The same,” Bo commented. “He asked about you the other day.”

“And what did you say?” If I hadn’t reconnected with Chris, Terrick might have been a short entry in my Lipstick Diaries.

“I said you’d grown a hump in your back, and life hadn’t been kind to your face.” He chuckled, and I punched him dead in the chest. “You still hit hard. Seriously, I told him you were good. Who’s *baby*?”

“Huh?”

“The dude you talked to on the phone a few minutes ago.”

Mama tilted her head. “You’re dating again?”

I glared at Bo before smiling at Mama. “I was going to tell you today. It’s Chris. The guy from Baton Rouge.”

Mama’s brows formed a deep V, and she added with one hand on her hip. “The reason you moved back home?”

Bo cleared his throat. “Um...I haven’t heard that tone in years.” He kissed my and Mama’s cheeks before backing up. “I have to help Ma move furniture around anyway. Just wanted to mess with you when I saw your car. Good luck with that new guy...old guy... and tell my sister her niece wants to see her.”

“Are you and Bea not talking again?” I asked as he opened the door.

“Not at the moment.” He shrugged and left.

Mama stared at the door. “Badu worries so much about her children. They can’t seem to get along for longer than a minute.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll call Bea later and find out what’s happening this time.” I hugged my mother, bending a little to do so. She just reached five feet and kept her natural soft coiled hair short. “What’s the latest?”

She moved her quilt to the side before sitting on the sofa. “I want to hear about Chris. When did you two get back together?”

“We’ve been dating for the past three months. He lives in New York now.”

Mama patted the space next to her. “I knew there was a reason you kept traveling so much. Why the secrecy?”

Kicking my sandals off, I shifted until my back was against the arm and placed my feet on Mama’s lap. She laughed when I wiggled my toes, wanting her to rub my feet like she used to whenever we had our talks. “You’re not ten. I like the green on your toes, though.”

“Thank you.” I inhaled and exhaled. “We haven’t defined what we’re doing. We’ve been getting to know each other again and seeing where it goes. I didn’t want to say anything until now.”

“It must be going well.” She pressed my right foot in her hands.

“It is.” I smiled. My life had become much brighter with him in it. “He’s working on his doctorate in business at NYU because I inspired him.”

Mama nodded. “Sometimes the second time around works. However, more often than not, relationships end for a reason. It depends on why you and he ended on whether it’ll work this time.”

Might as well pull the band-aids off. “Ours ended because Chris was separated from a wife who refused to divorce him.”

Her eyes widened, and she asked, her tone sharper. “Was he at least separated when you met him?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know at first.” I proceeded to tell her everything, including the second time Janine popped up. After I finished, I watched her expectantly, wondering about her verdict on my situation.

Mama continued to massage my feet and stared in front of her instead of at me. “What’s the major issue you have now?”

“It’s only been three months, but my main complaint is the long distance.”

She looked at me. “Have you discussed moving there or Chris moving here?”

I hugged the throw pillow. “Mama, it’s too soon.”

Mama then tapped my feet so I could move them from her lap. “Not for people who are serious about each other.

I folded my legs under me. “I told you that we haven’t defined anything.”

She tilted her head. “His idea or yours?”

“Mine. He wanted to couple up the weekend we hooked up again.”

Her forehead wrinkled, and she shifted slightly to face me. “Why not? If he’s single, and you still have strong feelings?”

“Don’t want to rush.”

“You don’t trust him.” Mama pointed at me. “The issue is you don’t trust him. You’re afraid he’s going to break your heart again. And he did hurt you. You didn’t leave a job you loved just because you missed me. Monie, you can’t move forward until you acknowledge how much he hurt you.”

Flopping my head back, I lamented, “I don’t want to dredge up the painful part of us. Leaving him was the hardest thing I ever did.”

“So, you’re just going to keep seeing him until what? You love that man. Are you waiting for him to get frustrated and move on? Because if he wants more than what you want, he’ll eventually give up. You can’t punish him forever.” She tapped my leg.

I replied defensively, “I’m not punishing him.”

“Then, if you want more, talk to him and stop being afraid.”

This talk was going much smoother than I anticipated. Mama had been hard on the men I dated. Except for Chris. And he was the only one who hurt me. I assumed Mama would react differently, especially because she had a good marriage and trusted my father implicitly. “You’re not mad he was married?”

“Five years ago, I would’ve been pissed. But I realized you’re more than capable of choosing who’s right for you. Maybe this time apart happened so your relationship can be even stronger. The bottom line, you have to live with the consequences of whatever you decide. It’s your life. Your relationship.”

“I hear you.”

Mama pointed her finger at me again. “You better bring that pretty man to see me when he returns to town.”

I smiled. “He’s already asked me about seeing you again.”

“I knew I liked him for a reason.”

Chapter 14

Every good deed deserves a reward.

When I finally called Chris back that night, he was perturbed. “Did you make it home yet?”

“Just walked through the door. What’s wrong?” I pulled off my sandals in my living room, pushed them to the side of the sofa, and walked to my kitchen to grab a bottle of water.

“Long day. Working on campus all day. Trying to get writing on my dissertation done, and too many annoying students needing extra credit. You know the drill,” he replied.

With a water bottle in hand, I went to my pantry for a granola bar. “I do. Wish I could be there to cook you something and massage your shoulders.”

“Do you? Because you could’ve come here this weekend and been with me tonight. You’re already done for the semester.”

“Woah. Didn’t we decide that we wouldn’t see each other when either of us has a ton of work and meetings?” Searching for a granola bar, I saw a bag of hot Cheetos left over from Chris’s last trip and decided to eat that instead. My stomach would pay, but I needed to stress eat if this conversation continued.

“No, you decided *that* because you hate, I still have to work when you’re here. I look at it as life. If we lived together, every day wouldn’t be having fun dates and snuggled up watching movies,” he reasoned.

As I headed to my bedroom, I countered, “Because we don’t live together or live in the same city, whatever time we spend should be about us. Not me waiting all day in your apartment alone because you’re working. I can be home for all that and get things I need to get done.”

“Well, this is my life for at least another year.”

“I know.” I picked up the nightgown I wore last night off the bed. Ready to change out of my sundress. “I was in your shoes before, and my social life sucked.”

“You had a full-blown relationship while you were in school, and I’m sure every moment wasn’t dates and sex.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Not wanting to fight with him, I suggested, “Can I call you tomorrow when you’ve had some sleep?”

“Why? So, you can go out with whoever else you’re seeing?”

“I’m not seeing anyone else.” I sank to the edge of my bed.

“All I know is you’re flirting with Bea’s brother, and you tell me you’ll call me right back. That was hours ago.”

“Flirting? He’s like my brother. I was at my mother’s, and he was visiting his mother next door. We spoke for less than a few minutes, then movies with Mama, followed by a meeting with some of my students from the Honor Society. I’m from DC, and I know a lot of men. Most are family, friends, or friends of the family. No reason to be jealous.”

Suddenly my doorbell rang. The unexpected intrusion and our argument caused my heart to race.

“Okay, then, who’s ringing your doorbell this time of night?” Chris hissed.

“I swear I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting company. I’m about to shut it down for the night.” *Who would stop over here on a Saturday night unannounced?*

I hurried to the door with Chris still on the line, wanting to reassure him that whoever it was, I didn’t ask or want this visit. A smiling Chris waved at me when I looked at my security camera near the door. “I swear I’m going to kill you.” I hurried to open the door and jumped on him, kissing him all over his face.

He grinned even harder, practically holding me up with one arm. “Can I at least come in?”

“No.” I planted my feet, blocking his entrance.

“No?” His forehead furrowed.

I poked his chest, feigning anger. “How you just come to my house unannounced...without telling me you love me.”

Chris’s face relaxed, and he dipped his head to whisper against my lips. “I love you.”

I grabbed his hands and pulled him inside. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“I woke up this morning missing you. I found a cheap last-minute flight and worked hard to get a lot of writing done so I could be here and chill.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve picked you up at the airport.”

“I called to tell you that, but when you didn’t call back, I thought I would just surprise you.” He dropped his bag and lifted me. I happily wrapped my bare legs around his waist, and he carried me to my bedroom. “I needed you after the fucked-up week I had and didn’t want to wait until next weekend. I don’t have office hours until Tuesday afternoon. Figured you might not mind me working while I’m here on Monday.”

I caressed the nape of his neck, “I don’t mind at all.”

“Didn’t like hearing another nigga’s voice, but before you think I’m checking up on you, I really did buy the ticket early this morning.”

“I really don’t care if you were checking on me.”

Chris, still holding me, looked at my unmade bed, and my clothes were strewn everywhere. “Glad I came. I need to help you clean. Don’t know how you work in this mess.”

“It’s my mess.” I kissed his neck.

“You were about to eat my Cheetos in bed, too. The food you claim is the stupidest in the world.” Chris tapped my ass. “Yep, I caught you. Pretending you keep a neat home and never eat stupid junk.”

“I know how you love a clean home, and that phone call stressed me into eating your nasty chips.”

Chris gazed into my eyes. “Always be authentically you in every way. Promise I’ll still love you.” He lowered us to the bed, and I straddled him at the edge.

His words and his unexpected presence should be all I needed. Yet, doubt about us lingered, and I needed to address it as Mama suggested.

“These past three months have been amazing. Getting to know each other over again.”

Chris frowned. “Why do you sound like you’re about to say something I’m not going to like?”

“You might not like it, but I’m still dealing with it.”

“What?”

“When you decided to surprise me, was there any part of you that thought it possible I would have a man here?”

He shrugged. “A tiny part.”

“Well, I don’t have that same confidence. I don’t care how much I wanted to surprise you in New York. I wouldn’t just show up on your doorstep.”

Chris closed his eyes and tucked his head against my neck.

“No, listen. I had three different experiences with you and surprise visits, which affected how I see you every time.”

He lifted his head. “How you see me?”

“Yes...” I paused to find the right words, and he squeezed my waist reassuringly. “I didn’t see you as potential initially. We were too spicy, too sexual. It seemed that that’s all you were about.”

“You do remember placing me in that role,” he commented.

“Again, it was how I saw you. The incident with Kat confirmed my perception. I saw myself as another Kat.”

“You were never Kat.”

“Can I finish, and then you can question me or say whatever you want?” Chris nodded though I could feel his growing frustration. I curved my hands to his strong jawline.

“Then you asked me to stop seeing anyone else, and though I still had some doubts, I was too crazy about you to deny anything you asked. Mama said she thought you were the one for me like I did. Chris, happiness had a new meaning with you in my life, and I anticipated a future with you.” Tracing the contours of his face, hoping my touch soothed him as I continued, “A week later, that dream turned into a nightmare just like that. I saw it as a sign that we were not meant to be. Finding out about Janine and everything that happened after that was a blow, and I realized I hadn’t quite resolved within. A part of me still waits for the other shoe to drop.”

Chris’s eyes held regret and sadness. “I can’t change the past, Simone. We can only move forward.”

“I know, baby.” My eyes filled with tears, hating that I couldn’t fully let go of the past hurt.

“Do you really know?” He suddenly flipped me on my back and rose above me. “I am committed to you and have no intention of being with anyone else. You can call or see me anytime you want. My life is an open book. There will be no more Kats or Janines. It’s just you and me for however long you want it to be. I love you and only you.”

The depth of my love for him swelled within, threatening to suffocate me if I didn’t release it. Sensing my need, Chris pulled off his t-shirt. My eyes hungrily roamed his brown chest and abs that had thickened slightly with age. Wetness at the sight of imprint visible through his grey sweatpants. I slipped my fingers between his waistband and pushed his pants over his firm ass. Then I pushed up on my elbows to intercept his hardened flesh with my mouth when I released him.

He immediately fistfisted my hair with one hand, pressed his hand against the headboard with the other, and ground against my mouth. “Fuck...your mouth is so good.”

I loved his dick, cherishing its length and girth with my tongue. Gag reflex was not an issue while I stroked him and used my jaws to squeeze tighter than my pussy walls. His guttural moans were my reward as his thrusts matched my movements. I wanted to show him how much I appreciated him, and I massaged his balls, bringing him to a higher fever pitch.

Chris groaned, “Don’t want you to stop, but I need to go deep inside you. Remind you who owns your body.” I continued to suck him, ignoring what he wanted, loving my power over him as he appeared helpless to pull himself out of my mouth. My jaws and neck would be sore, and it would all be worth it for him to explode down my throat.

When his moans and curses became more frequent, and his dick tightened, I prepared to suckle harder. Chris had other plans, and he reached under him to slide my panties to the side. Chris pulled out of my mouth and entered me. We rarely went raw because we enjoyed the journey of sex. The indescribable sensation of his naked dick inside me always ushered a quick climax. This time was no different as he pounded me viciously, my body quickly spiraling with every forceful thrust. Within seconds we were both riding the tumultuous waves of orgasm.

Chapter 15

I hate long distance.

Bea threw her mother an engagement party at her townhome in early September. After years of singledom, her mother finally found love again with a man she met when she tried swing dancing, and he had been assigned to be her partner. We were all happy for her. Unlike my mother, she had a marriage from hell and had sworn off men. Cupid had other plans, and she was getting married again at fifty-eight to a man younger than her.

As I placed the baked salmon I'd prepared on a platter in the kitchen, Bea asked, "When is Chris supposed to get here?"

"He should be landing now. Expecting a text at any moment."

She stood on the other side of the island, dicing carrots and celery for a veggie tray. Some guests had already arrived, including our mothers and her mother's fiancée. "Glad Chris is coming tonight. I think he'll fit in with everyone." Bea met Chris the last time he visited me. The three of us had gone to brunch, and we laughed and talked like old friends. Rianna and Zsa would be meeting him tonight for the first time. I'd also spoken with his mother and one of his sisters over the phone. I looked forward to spending the holidays with his family.

"Me too. I'm so glad Akil is out of town. Not sure how cool it would've been with both here."

Bea chuckled. "The party would be more lit, though. Seeing two men glowering at each other over you."

I took a piece of leftover celery and threw it at her. "You like all that drama. I'm good on that."

"We need more drinks." Bo and his best friend, Terrick, blew into the kitchen, much like they used to when we were teens. Boisterous and loud, their presence was always known. The air coiled when Bo passed Bea without speaking and

grabbed a couple of bottles of wine. Terrick and I exchanged nervous glances. We'd both intervened over the years when they had their skirmishes. I've tried twice to discuss her issues with Bo, and Bea remained tight-lipped. Whatever was going on between them, only they could resolve.

Bea gripped the island. "Hey, I don't want those bottles out there until we toast."

"I thought you were toasting with champagne, and there's no alcohol out there."

"This isn't one of your parties. We don't plan to get drunk. It's a classy party," Bea snapped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" The air coiled tighter as Bo moved closer to Bea.

Suddenly, Terrick flirtatiously grabbed Bea's hand and twirled her around. "Dance with me, Shortie." Before she could protest, he dipped her and kissed her neck.

Blushing, Bea popped his arm. "Get off me, T."

"Whatever you say, Shortie." He pulled her up, a broad, mischievous grin across his handsome face.

"Take the bottles, Bo. I'll run to the store and buy more." I pushed him out of the kitchen. When those two argued, it could get ugly. Today was supposed to be a happy occasion, and I would make sure it remained that way.

Terrick still held Bea in his arms and said in a low drawl, "If you weren't so feisty, I might wife you."

"Not interested in being one of many." She pressed her hands against his chest and bent back to look up at him. I mused their height difference was so significant that he would have to lift her for them to kiss. I chuckled to myself. Hell would have to freeze over for that fire and ice to mix. Bea had fought with Terrick almost as much as she fought with her brother growing up.

"I'll be right back. Be good, you two." I grabbed my purse and went out the backdoor to prevent the early arrivers, like Mama, from stopping me.

I finally checked my phone as I started my ignition.

Sorry, babe. Think I'm going to miss my flight. Got caught up on campus. Catching the next flight. Hope I still make the party.

“So, fucking annoyed,” I groaned. Chris texted about the time I thought he would be boarding the plane. I checked my watch. Although the party was just starting, most people would be gone by the time his plane landed, and he caught a ride there. He was supposed to meet all my people tonight. I urged him to fly in last night or this morning, and he insisted he wanted to finish some assignments before his flight and would be here on time. Damn him. That man could be as stubborn as a fucking goat.

I called him, and it went to voicemail before I texted him.

Call when you land so I can tell you if it makes sense to come here or meet me at my place. I told you to come last night. Tonight was important to me. This is why I hate this long distance.

I fumed all the way to the liquor store and back to Bea's home. While bending over in the backseat to grab the bags out of my car, warm hands grasped my waist. I turned around with a grateful smile expecting Chris, and it was Akil.

My smile faltered, and my stomach roiled as we hugged. “I thought you were out of town.”

“Hello to you too,” he replied. A mixture of hurt and acceptance trickled across his face.

“Hey, Akil. How has everything been?” Now I was overjoyed that Chris would be late. Now, I hoped that he would miss the party.

He reached past me to pick up the two bags from my seat. “I'm good. Got in early and figured I'll stop by and give my congrats to Aunt Badu. Hoped to see you here. Are you here alone?” I'd told him about Chris the last time we spoke about two months ago. Told him we were seeing what happens, and he told me he had someone too. We promised to do better about connecting, and that was that.

“For the moment, he’s on his way here from New York.”

“Good, I get a chance to meet him,” he commented.

Internally I groaned, almost sure Chris wouldn’t feel the same way.

We walked together through the back of the house, where Bea and Rianna were preparing plates. Both looked perplexed.

“Guess who I ran into,” I started and pointed at Akil.

He immediately greeted and hugged his cousin, Bea, and kissed Rianna’s cheeks. Once he left the kitchen, the two women stared at me.

Rianna broke the silence. “Umm...what time will Chris be here?”

“Not sure. I called and texted him. Probably not for another couple of hours.”

Bea’s hazel eyes sparkled. “This party is about to get interesting.”

I plopped my forehead against the refrigerator door. “Help me.”

The party had been in full mode, some guests inside and others in the backyard, and I kept checking my cell. Still no word from Chris. Mama called everyone outside to line dance with the DJ that Bea hired. I danced next to Mama, laughing at her moves as she added twists to the steps. Then Akil, who had been skilled at dancing, added intricate movements to the music and tried to get me to join. I smiled at him, shaking my head. One of his aunts nudged my shoulder, encouraging me to move with him. I glanced at Bea, and she shrugged, so I attempted the steps while most guests watched in amusement.

He took my hand and swung me around, and I fell into him, giggling at my clumsiness. He looked down, and I saw a glint of desire in his eyes that I didn’t reciprocate. I tapped his chest and put distance between us. Unfortunately, I didn’t in enough time because when I looked toward the back door, Zsa stood next to Chris. She led him down the steps into the yard.

His greeting smile didn't reach his eyes as he first hugged my mother and Bea.

I glanced at Akil, who still grooved in place, though his attention was on the man who headed toward me. "Hey." I hugged Chris, pecked his lips, and stepped aside to introduce him to Akil. "Chris, this is Akil."

"Heard about you. Good to finally meet you." Akil held his hand out first, and Chris took it with a small smile.

"Likewise," Chris replied and looked down at me. "Could use a drink after all the traveling to make it here."

I nodded and took his hand, pulling him away from my past. Although the party was almost over, my night was far from over.

Chapter 16

Stop playing with my heart.

Although Chris was polite and cordial as I introduced him to family and friends, he wasn't the charming and amiable man I'd known him to be. I felt the tension whenever he touched my elbow to guide me away from someone. It didn't help that this was Akil's family, his territory, and he continued to dance and mingle happily, which I'm sure grated on Chris's nerves. An hour into his entrance, I navigated our exit. Most of the guests had already left. We told everyone he was exhausted after working and traveling for most of the day and bade everyone goodbye.

We walked around the backyard to my car silently. His stride was a step or two longer when he'd always made sure we moved together.

The street was quiet and empty, and before he walked to the driver's side of my car, he stopped and accused, "Is this your way of getting even? Inviting me to a party to make me jealous?"

I shook my head vehemently. "Not at all. I don't play those types of games. This was a family party, and Akil is Bea's cousin..."

He jabbed the air in front of me. "I know who the fuck he is. Why was he all up in your face?"

"He had too much to drink, and we were all dancing. It meant nothing."

Chris's nostrils flared. "That man still wants you."

His accusatory and condescending tone set my teeth on edge. I retorted, "Like Janine still wanted you, and you told me it didn't matter."

Almost baring his teeth, he snarled, "You won't let go of the fucking past."

The quiet echoed our fight. Amplified our words, our frustrations, and our anger. I spread my arms wide. “No, just using an example that you should understand. I tried to prepare you, but you popped up and saw my ex dancing with me. An ex who will remain an ex, especially since you’re back in my life. So, when I say it meant nothing, you should have no problem accepting that.”

Chris’s jaw tightened, and he moved close enough I could smell the alcohol and cake on his breath. “Did you try again with him?”

“I did have a small ray of hope.” I’d always been honest with him, and though I risked his wrath, we had nothing if I couldn’t be truthful. “But we went out, and I realized we were best as exes.”

“When did you date him?”

“It was one date. Dinner only. Two weeks before I met up with you.”

“What the fuck, Simone?” he yelled so loud I quickly surveyed the area, making sure no one else heard. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what? That I went out on a date before we started spending time together again?”

Chris nodded. “Yes. You loved him and wanted to marry him at one point. You should’ve shared that with me.”

“You said you didn’t want to know anything about my dating life when we first hooked up.”

“Were you still planning to date him after we hooked up?”

“It was a possibility until you and I spent our first weekend together. And I realized being with you one more time wasn’t enough.”

“Did you fuck him?”

“No.”

He chuckled derisively. “That’s right. You only wanted to fuck me. He could have a future with you.”

“I’ll always love him, but I don’t want to be with him.”

“Or maybe he’s still not ready to marry.”

I taunted, “If I still wanted to marry him, I probably could.”

Chris bellowed, “Then why not go for it. He lives here and still wants you. Might as well do the damn thing.

“This is why I didn’t want to get committed living in two different cities.”

“Because you want to fuck other men. Leave your options open. Lead me around like a mothafucking punk,” he circled me, watching me.

I wanted to hit him. Instead, I took a steadying breath. “I hate this. Too much distance between us for distrust to grow no matter how hard we fight it.”

Chris stopped pacing. “You don’t want us to work out. I got your text saying you hate long distances, like you were telling me something. I’m not about to let you leave me hanging again.”

“I didn’t leave you hanging.” My head started throbbing. How did a night that was supposed to be the best end up the worst?

“The minute it got tough, you left me. Maybe I have my own doubts you’ll stick it out through thick and thin.” His dark eyes pierced right through me. “Never mind, Simone. I can’t do this anymore.”

“You can’t do what anymore?” I shut my eyes, praying he wasn’t breaking up with me. Or whatever we were.

“Live by your rules. The low expectations you set forth for us. We’ve been seeing each other for six months. Spending more time over the summer, meeting each other’s families and friends, and you still don’t want to say we’re committed. Deep down, no matter how right we seem, you don’t trust it.”

“That’s not true. I’m simply pointing out why long distance is hard. If we were in the same city, you would’ve been late to Bea’s party but not almost three hours late. And

based on how inseparable we were in Baton Rouge... we would probably be living together by now if you lived here. You would know all the players in my life. Even Akil because he's my best friend's cousin. Tonight was about meeting my family and my friends in one place. You already met Bea, and we had lunch with Mama twice since we've been seeing each other. Why would I have invited you tonight if I didn't want us to work? You would've never even known about tonight if I didn't want us to work out." I tentatively placed my hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat race and his lungs expand and retract. "I love you. There's no one else for me. Why do we have to have a label for what we are?"

"Because you have men like your ex still believing they have a chance." He removed my hand from his chest and gripped it. "I don't want him around you. Make it clear to him you have a man."

"Chris, he knows about you and has known since he asked to go out again. I don't see him often. I've been home for five years, and tonight was the third time I've seen him. He was supposed to be out of town tonight but returned early. I'm not around Akil, but we'll see each other again sooner or later because he's like family."

"Knows about me or that I'm your man?" He held my hand tightly in anger and not love like he wanted to hurt me physically. Chris was not that man to ever hurt me. Yet I knew every person had their limits. Especially if he believed that I stepped out on him.

"I don't tell anyone you're my man. I tell them that you make me happy, that I hope we figure out how to live in the same city and make it to the end."

"To the end?" Chris frowned.

I pulled his hand up to my chest. "That we marry and have a family one day."

He shook his head and dropped my hand. "You make no fucking sense. If you don't want to claim me as your man now, you must not want the title of being my wife."

I screamed in frustration before I uttered, “Fine, Chris. We go together. Let’s go back and tell everyone you’re my boyfriend.”

Chris backed up and spread his arms wide. “Let’s not.” He turned on his heels, lifted his backpack higher, and walked away.

“Chris! Where are you going?” His strides were long on the sidewalk, and I watched him until he turned the corner, and I didn’t see him anymore.

Tears threatened to burst. “You will not cry. Go back in there with your head held high.” Hugging myself, I tried to take a step, and my knees buckled.

“Woah.” Bo’s strong arms caught me. “Monie...”

His comforting voice broke the dam, and I sobbed into his shoulders. He rubbed my back soothingly. “Shh. Shh. He left, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Don’t think he’s coming back.”

He settled us against my car, his arm around my waist. “He was pissed about Akil.”

“Yeah.”

“I would’ve been too. Felt bad for the man, actually. He doesn’t know us. Imagine walking into a party where you don’t really know anyone, and your woman’s ex is there who knows everyone. Did you give him a head’s up?”

“Akil was supposed to be out of town. And I called Chris a couple of times, and it went to voicemail. I wanted to tell him. I thought he would call or text once his plane landed. Not just show up.”

“He was blindsided.” Bo whistled. “Does he think you’re cheating on him?”

“I don’t know. Main thing is he’s pissed because we haven’t officially claimed each other.”

“Get the fuck, Monie. You brought him around fam, and he’s not your man? Stop playing with that nigga,” Bo snorted.

“I’m not playing,” I snapped. “He’s the only man I want and love.”

“Then fucking stop being stubborn and go after him.” Bo jammed his hands in his pants. “Shit, women don’t get how fragile our hearts really are. Once we’ve been hurt, letting the next one in is even harder, and he’s divorced like I am. Being married and it ends fucks you up. Even if ending it is the right thing to do, it leaves a hole. And if he’s willing to open his heart again, don’t take it for granted.”

I wiped my cheeks. “What about my fragile heart?”

Bo pushed off of the car. “You my fam, so I’m a keep it one hundred. Real love ain’t for the faint of heart. Every couple has trials, and the couples that last make it past those trials. Keep believing in that bullshit fairytale that love is supposed to be smooth, Monie, and you’ll end up by yourself.”

He then went to the driver’s side of my car and opened the door. “Let me know when’s the wedding.”

My chest expanded as I digested his words and strolled to him. I ruffled his hair. “Glad it was you that came to check on me. Thank you, big brother.”

“Anytime.”

When I slid into my seat, I looked up at him. “Stop fighting with Bea. She loves her big brother, too.”

Bo’s jaw tightened, and he averted his gaze for a second, nodding. “I love her too.” He closed my door, and instead of returning to the party, he headed to his silver Ducati, placed his helmet on his head, and rode off.

Chapter 17

Only want to be a Mrs.

I called Chris while I started my car. He didn't pick up. I had no clue where he would go, so I drove around the neighborhood hoping to see him walking, and then I drove to my place since he knew my code. From the street, I could see that the apartment was dark. I scrolled through United's website to find the next flight out to New York. It was late, so there wouldn't be too many flights. I drove like a mad woman and paid valet just to run into the airport, hoping I could stand by the security gate and see him. I would fly to New York if I had to.

Searching the crowd, I prayed I would see him. I didn't care about pride or being hurt anymore. I needed him. He was the air I breathed. I'd rather die of suffocation than not give him my all. Then I spotted Chris. His expression grim, buds in his ear, he ducked into the restroom a few feet away from me. I smiled at my luck and rushed to stand by the door.

When he walked out, I called to him, "There's something about us and public restrooms." He looked back at me, wearing a frown and mouth slightly agape.

My love turned towards me, lines appearing around the curves of his mouth. "Apparently so."

"Were you really going to leave me just like that? After everything, one argument and you were done?"

Chris looked up at the ceiling and back at me. "I didn't have any place to go." He sighed and admitted wryly, "I finally understand how you felt back then. Seeing how he looked at you and your hands on him cut me deep, knowing you once wanted to marry him. It did make me see you differently. Made me doubt us."

"And now?" I asked, taking a step closer carefully. "Do you doubt us?"

He studied my face, his chest rising and falling heavily. His hands formed fists by his side as I watched him battle his thoughts. I'd been in his shoes. I know how painful it'd been to not believe in him when my very being longed to do so. Chris needed me to show that I trusted and believed in him and in us. Only one solution remained.

I smiled and pressed my right hand against my heart. "Let's get married, baby. You're here until Tuesday. We can go to the Justice of Peace on Monday and make us official. I don't need a wedding. All I need is you. You still want to cuff me, then I'm ready."

"You serious?" The incredulous look in his eyes quickly changed from confusion to pure joy, like the beauty of a rainbow after a storm forever erased any more doubt. If I ever disbelieved he loved me, I didn't anymore.

Closing the small gap, I circled my arms around his waist and confessed, "Did you know that you were the last man I slept with? For five years, I hadn't had sex. Bea and my cousins encouraged me to really get back out there. I only contemplated Akil because I had at least been with him for two years and was comfortable with him. But the morning of my date with him, you messaged me. And all that mattered was Chris Alexander."

His eyes softened. "No one else in five years?"

"So, if you want me to prove how much I want us to work, let's get married."

"Then what happens after we marry?"

"You tell me. I trust you, and I'll take your lead." I stared defiantly at him. I loved this man with every fiber of my being. "I don't want to be a girlfriend anymore. I want to be your wife. So as far as I'm concerned, I don't want a label until the label says 'Mrs.'"

"You okay with a long-distance marriage?" He moved my arms around his neck, tugging me closer.

"No. I want to wake up to my husband every fucking day."

He grinned. “No, you want to wake up to me every fucking day. Ain’t no other nigga about to claim you as his wife. Get that shit out of your head.”

“You are and have been who I pictured when I think of my husband. It’s why I haven’t been able to be with anyone else.”

“So glad Janine kept her maiden name.” He lifted me up slowly until our lips were even. “You’re the only woman I ever want to wear my name.” And Chris sealed our love with the softest and sugary sweetest kiss in the bustling airport.

Chapter 18

The announcement.

The next day we were scrambling around my kitchen preparing an impromptu brunch for my Lipstick Diaries. He asked if we could have an intimate meal at home with the women who meant the most to me. He wanted to make up for the standoffish man he'd been at Bea's party. The ladies happily agreed, and we were all eating, drinking, and talking by mid-afternoon. Chris fell in with them, and the awkwardness from last night was nonexistent.

Chris tapped his fork against the glass. "Can I please have your attention?"

The light conversation and chatter ceased, and expectations veiled the table. Even I wasn't sure what Chris had to say. Bea and I exchanged glances, and I shrugged slightly. Rianna sat forward with her hands clasped, waiting. A slight smile graced Zsa's face. They probably anticipated a proposal. I held no expectations because our love and future had been cemented after last night. Whatever he had to say would only make me love him more. So, I settled in my chair with my Pineapple Mimosa to hear what he wanted to say.

"I wanted to apologize for my behavior last night. You met a jealous man and not the man I am. Let me rephrase that. When it comes to that woman sitting across from me, I'm crazy. Crazy in love, crazy in how thinking of her consumes me. Crazy that after only knowing her a few months, I couldn't let go of her. So, you did meet who I am when another man steps to her. It's just not all I am.

I'm being honest as I can be with you because, as you all know, I didn't step to her correctly five years ago. I knew I was married, and I should've told her that. Gave her the option to be with me. Maybe she would've closed the door on me, or perhaps she would've given me a shot. Maybe she would've trusted me more, and we would already live as husband and

wife. But I didn't and destroyed her trust in men, which saddened me.

She believed in black men and fairytales, and my lie and cowardice stripped her of a dream love. A love that she deserved. Still deserves." Chris glanced at each woman. "I am so grateful for you. If it wasn't for you pushing her to date and experience love again, we wouldn't be here today. I'd given up on ever being with this woman. Comparing every woman, even my ex-wife, to her, hoping one day I would meet someone who makes me feel like she does. I just wanted you to know that I plan to restore her belief in black men and fairytales and that we'll be married one day when it's right for us. Preferably in the same city."

"Damn," Zsa and Rianna exclaimed loudly, breaking the moment's seriousness.

Chris may have laughed the loudest before he held up his glass, and once we all did, he toasted. "To the Lipstick Diaries, may each of you find the love you desire and deserve."

We took turns clicking each other glasses in agreement and sipping. I smiled across the table at Chris. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

"Yasss, I love Black Love," Rianna replied with a shake of her head. "Guess now is better than later. Think I may be getting married next month. Alright, this was fun. Thanks for the delicious brunch, and glad you two found each other again." She started to rise, and Bea shot her a withering look and slid back down.

"Wait...what? Married to who?" I asked. Rianna had to pay for the last two meals because she hadn't made any notes in her diary after it didn't work out with the counselor. Now, she was getting married?

Bea and Zsa started firing questions left and right. Chris pushed back from the table. "On that note, think I'll leave you, ladies, alone. I have some work to do anyway. Walk me out, Simone." Our semesters had started again, and we vowed to see each other at least twice a month, no matter how busy. He

had another year of school and planned to move to DC once he graduated.

“Yeah...yeah.” I rose out of my chair.

Zsa, who sat closest to him, quickly stood and hugged him. “Thank you for giving me faith again that decent *and* fine men are out there. Do you have a brother or a friend?” She winked.

He laughed. “All married, and if I can think of a friend worthy of you, I’ll let you know.”

Bea stood next and hugged him. “The same. You won me before I even met you. I didn’t want her with my cousin anyway.” She flicked her tongue at me, and I flicked mine back. “Keep making her smile, and we’re always good.”

“I think I can handle that,” Chris replied.

Rianna hugged him next, and when she backed away, implored, “Take me with you, please.”

“Nope. You have some explaining to do. I’m sure this is about Kwon.” Zsa placed her hands firmly on her hips. “Sit back over there.”

Rianna sighed, waved to Chris, and plopped back in her seat.

I took Chris’s hand, and he grabbed his workbag from the nearby sofa. I pulled his head down when we reached the door and kissed him deeply. Tongue thrusting and mating type of kiss. He smacked my ass and broke the kiss. “Do you really want to be fucked with all your friends around?”

“Maybe.” I pecked his lips again.

He groaned. “Don’t tempt me. When you know, all you want to do right now is go back and see what Rianna is talking about. Shit, based on everyone’s reactions, I want to know, and I just met her.”

“I’ll tell you once I find out.” I tapped his chest. “Seriously, today was more than I could imagine. Thank you for knowing me, for getting me, and most of all for loving me just as I am.”

“Thank you for forgiving me and giving us another shot. And for loving me for who I am.” His eyes blurred, or maybe it was my own vision.

Chris opened the door. “I’ll be around the corner at Starbucks. Text me when it’s time to come home.”

“Okay.” I leaned against the door once he left. That was the first time Chris called my place home. He said it naturally and without thought. He also didn’t mind that my impulsive cousin changed the focus from us to her and gave me space to be with my family without question. Chris was definitely what I wanted and needed. He and I really would make it this go around. All doubt and uncertainty about our commitment to one another were replaced with trust and security. And that was the biggest dream he restored in me and in us.

I headed back into my dining room, happy that my part of the journey was over for now and eager to see what would happen with Rianna, Bea, and Zsa’s quest for love. I just hope their love stories don’t take as long as mine did for my happy ending. Then again, I have no regrets about the five years of growth. Chris and I are exactly where we are supposed to be. Building a foundation for everlasting love.



I HOPE YOU ENJOYED Chris and Simone’s journey to love in *Lipstick Diaries: Chemical Reaction*.

Next up is Rianna and Kwon’s story in *Lipstick Diaries: The Promise*. Keep reading for an excerpt.

THE PROMISE (Excerpt)

When Rianna and Kwon were teenagers, they promised that if they were 35 and still single, they would get married without hesitation. A few months before her thirty-fifth birthday, they meet again after years of no contact and both are still single. And Kwon is a man of his word.

“Hey...we have time to talk about everything. Now that we found each other again, not trying to let you go.”

“Same.” I did a half-twirl. “I missed my friend. But seriously, I’m hungry for food. I’m not as picky as I used to be. Cook whatever you want. Promise I’ll eat it.”

Kwon took off his glasses, leaned across the island, and cupped my cheeks to kiss me again. His lips were soft, his kiss perfect. Open mouth with no tongue. Instead of backing up, he gazed into my eyes. “Do you keep all your promises?”

I grabbed his bearded chin. “Yes.” This time his tongue opened my mouth, and while kissing me deeply, he took my hand and pulled me around to press our bodies together. He held my hand by his side while my other hand slipped under his shirt to feel him. Abs of steel, hard pecs, rigid nipples under the smooth skin. His erection pressed into my stomach. The length and width were evident through his loose pants. Hunger for food became a hunger for each other. Unbridled need for each other had been unleashed. I wouldn’t be satisfied until he was deep inside me.

When I began to lift his shirt, he broke the kiss, his chest slightly heaving. “Even the promise we made the last day we saw each other?”

Reaching for his lips again, I panted, “The one where we said we would get married if we’re both single?”

Kwon nodded. His expression was solemn.

“Wait...what?” The sexy music playing in my head came to a complete stop.

“We said that if we were thirty-five and still single, we would get married. No questions asked. We would do it.” He lowered his head to kiss me again, slowly, the stroke of his tongue matching the clenching of my other lips. Oh, how I wanted him. Kwon lulled me into forgetting what he said until he whispered against my lips, “I’m thirty-five and single.”

I gulped and looked up into his face. “You’re serious? You’re proposing we get married without getting to know each other again?”

“There are people who’ve dated for years and get divorced a year after marriage and people who knew each other a few days and are still kicking it years later. I’m saying let’s just do it. Not saying today or tomorrow but soon.”

“How soon?”

He nipped the corner of my lips. “October twenty-eight.”

“The last day we saw each other.” Touched that he remembered I smiled, and then gasped, “That’s next month.”

“Closer to two months.” He placed tiny kisses on my cheek, my chin, my neck, and my lips. “Please say yes.”

“Can we at least have breakfast before I make the biggest decision of my life?” I teased, although internally, I was scared out of my motherfucking mind. This highly intelligent, creative, warm, and sexy...I repeat, sexy man... was offering me the prize of this whole insane dating game without the winding journey that so far had not ended up in my favor. I tend to live for the moment rather than wait for an unpromised future, so why was I freaking out?

One-click to order Lipstick Diaries: [The Promise](#).
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About the Author

Tiye recalled reading romance ever since she was a young child and would sneak and read the Western love stories her grandmother kept on her bedside table. Although she didn't understand half of the words, she read at the time, something about those books captured her attention. As she grew older, her love of romance expanded to other genres, and she became a fan of anything remotely related to reading and books, such as libraries, bookstores, and the coffee shop around the corner.

She loves to travel and has lived in several cities, including New Orleans, Washington D.C., and Houston, and finds inspiration for her stories from every place she has had the fortune to visit or inhabit. When Tiye is not obsessed with her latest characters, she spends time with herself, family, and friends doing whatever she can to create her best life possible.

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