

LIPSTICK *Diaries*



The Promise

TIYE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LIPSTICK DIARIES

THE
PROMISE



Tiye

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LIPSTICK DIARIES: THE PROMISE

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Love is an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person.

To love somebody isn't just a strong feeling...

It is a decision, a judgment, and a promise.

The Promise

The only thing missing in Rianna Murphy's life is the right man and a family. Tired of the status quo, she and her girls make a pact. They vow to be sexually fierce, completely open, and purposeful in getting what they each want from men.

Even marriage to a best friend.

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 shy of her 35th birthday, she and Kwon meet again unexpectedly after years of no contact. Both are still single. And Kwon is a man of his word. What's a woman to do when everything she's ever wanted is being handed to her on a sexy platter?

PROLOGUE

“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.”

My heart fluttered in anticipation, watching my cousin’s boyfriend tell our little group how he felt about her. *Was he about to pop the question? If he does, then can I announce I’m getting married too? Will that steal their thunder?*

Chris continued, “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 of us, his expression both earnest and anxious. My heart warmed even more towards him. Monie was blessed to have a man willing to express himself so openly. A sexy-ass man with the most infectious smile on top of that. After Zsa and I met him last night, we completely understood the five-year drought. We also agreed Monie got in her own way of love because a blind man could see that Chris was sprung, too.

He smiled. “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," Me and Zsa 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, and everyone seemed to be settling back down to enjoy brunch. I've been bursting at the seams, holding on to my news for the last few days and I couldn't go another day without telling my girls. It was my time to pounce.

"Yasss, I love Black Love." I clapped loudly before rubbing my stomach to settle my nerves, hoping to make a smooth segue. "Guess now is better than later. Think I may be getting married next month." I pushed up from my chair, intent on getting the hell out of dodge. "Alright, this was fun. Thanks for the delicious brunch, and glad you two found each other again." Real fear hit me by saying those words aloud. I sounded like a crazy woman. *Damn it. I shouldn't have made eye contact.* I thought Bea was safe, but her glare yelled volumes. So, I slid back down in my chair like a scolded teenager.

"Wait...what? Married to who?" Monie searched our faces for clues.

Bea started firing questions at me. So fast I couldn't clearly answer any question beyond wondering if I'd lost my mind.

The only man in our group, Chris, wisely rose from the table. "On that note, think I'll leave you, ladies, alone. I have some work to do anyway. Walk me out, Simone."

"Yeah...yeah." Monie threw her napkin on the table and prepared to walk him to the door.

Zsa, who sat closest to him, 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 and Monie flicked their tongues at each other. Those two were forever best friends since they were children. I envied their bond. “Keep making her smile, and we’re always good.”

“I think I can handle that,” Chris replied, looking at me with empathy shining through his brown eyes.

I hugged him and begged half-seriously, “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.”

He shrugged, and I petulantly landed back in my seat. “I’m not speaking until Monie comes back. Not about to repeat myself.” Monie was the youngest of our group, but somehow my sister made me feel like a little girl instead of a thirty-four-year-old woman.

“Do you, Bitch,” Bea commented as she sipped her pineapple mimosa.

“Why I got to be a bitch?” I asked, my voice more irritated than the occasion called for. We always called each other names, and it’d never bothered me because I knew these women loved me.

Bea rolled her eyes. “We said we wouldn’t hold back. You told us you had nothing going on in the last two months. No dates. No potential. No man in sight. Paid for our meals. How in the hell are you getting married? Make it make sense.”

“Because it’s her old best friend,” Zsa calmly replied while sipping on her drink, and to the average person, she appeared to be chill. I knew differently. My sister was the queen of facades.

Monie hurried back into the dining area after walking Chris to the door. “From college or high school?” She stood in

between a sitting Zsa and Bea. All were across from me, staring me down like I was on the gauntlet.

“High school. He goes by Kwon now. Do you remember Leroy?” Zsa asked Monie and Bea. Although Monie and Bea were two years younger than me, they had visited my house a few times, and we all hung out with him.

Bea looked blank, but Monie smiled. “I do. Thought he was sweet. Had the prettiest hair and eyes on a boy.” She then looked at me. “You’ve been holding out? Why didn’t you tell us about him?”

“I’m doing that now. And I did tell Z,” I added. “Well, not the married part. That just happened.”

“You’ve only been talking like three weeks,” Zsa crossed her arms. “I know you can do things without thought. Apparently, he’s the same way.”

Monie tapped my sister’s shoulder. “Z, leave her alone. I want to hear all about him. He’s probably a real cutie now. He had potential back then.”

“Still don’t remember him.” Bea finished her mimosa.

“He wasn’t dark enough for you,” Monie retorted.

“That.” I laughed. Bea had a type. The complete opposite of her Chinese-American father. Tall, dark-skinned, and thick. “And he’s grown into a beautiful man. An unassuming handsome one. Like it sneaks up on you. He smiles or looks at you in a certain way, and you can’t understand why you didn’t notice his beauty before. He has confidence, but it’s from within and not based on his physical appearance. We’ve spent every day together since we saw each other again. On our first date, he asked me to marry him.”

Monie rushed around the table and hugged me tightly. “I thought I had the fairy tale, but that’s amazing, Ri Ri.”

“I think so, too. Kwon makes me happy.” I hugged her while the two more cynical of the group, Zsa and Bea, continued to frown. “I know it sounds crazy. We made a promise the last day we saw each other when we were juniors in high school that we would get married without question if

we were still single and thirty-five. He's already thirty-five, and I'll be in a few months. We make sense, so we're getting married next month." I lifted my chin higher. "Lipstick Diaries says we're supposed to be supportive of each other. More importantly, to not let our hangups get in the way of love. I love him, and I'm not waiting to be his wife because you don't approve."

Monie sat down next to me. "I approve. Not that you need me to approve anything you do."

Bea's pretty face relaxed though she grudgingly acknowledged. "Nothing beats a failure but a try."

Zsa growled, "Monie, you're just so accepting because you're still hung over Chris's fine ass."

"That's probably true. I'm so fucking in love right now with that man." She laughed. "Still. Leroy's not a stranger; he was her ride-or-die for years. I say go for it. And if you have a wedding, I'm all in."

Bea tossed her napkin at Monie. "Thought you weren't going to be in anyone else's wedding?"

"I meant anyone outside of this group. Anyone else can kick rocks." Monie and Bea dapped hands, and I felt my sister's contemplative stare. We locked eyes, and she finally nodded. Until that moment, I didn't realize how much her approval meant.

I finally exhaled and held up my glass to Monie. "Two down and two more to go."

Bea smiled and commented, "I'm ready."

My sister turned her glass up and made no other comment.

I understand my sister's reluctance to believe in love or that it would happen to her. Until Leroy Kwon Mason returned to my life eighteen years after he left it, I would've agreed. But he did return, and he did ask me to marry him. All because of a promise we made when we were teenagers.

Chapter One

The promise.

Eighteen years ago

E Metal locker doors slamming. Students' loud chatter. A combination of relief, exhaustion, and elation at the end of another school day. Leroy, my best friend, leaned on the locker next to me. "I don't know why you take forever to grab your stuff. I'm hungry, and the sooner I get home, the sooner I eat." Leroy always rushed home after school to eat. He never had any extra money and received free breakfast and lunch from the school, so snack options were non-existent.

"I have a little extra money from babysitting if you want to share a burger from Ben's Chili Bowl with me. I can even order extra fries," I offered as I placed my pink backpack on my shoulders. I didn't want to go home yet. Wish I never had to go back home. Since my older sister, Zsa, had gone off to college on scholarship at Hampton, it'd been hard to deal with a depressed mother. Or whatever she was.

Leroy shook his head, the short twists on his head moving after he stopped. "I need to go home and give my Mama a break with the twins. Still don't know why she would go and have children with another deadbeat." Leroy had four-year-old twin brothers whose energy, like a tsunami and a hurricane, kept my friend miserable. "Now, I'm supposed to be their father."

I checked my watch. "Come on, eating with me will only take thirty more minutes. I'll add cheese just like you like it."

He frowned. "You hate cheese on your burgers."

"See the sacrifices I make for you." I slung my arm around his neck, which was easy because we were the same height which wouldn't be bad if I wasn't four inches over five feet. He was sixteen, and the likelihood of Leroy having a growth spurt decreased each month.

“Is Taisah coming too?” His face lit up. Leroy had a mad crush on our other best friend. We all pretended that he didn’t. Well, Taisah and I did. Leroy was too infatuated to hide his feelings. It happened over the summer. Taisah suddenly blossomed with big boobs and hips, and he’d been fascinated ever since. Unfortunately for him, Leroy would be forever stuck in the friendship box with Taisah. Outside of his height, he wore glasses he constantly pushed up and wore clothes from the thrift store. My family didn’t have much more than his. Still, I used money from babysitting and doing chores for my neighbors to buy him a red vintage graffiti-styled Michael Jordan t-shirt for his sixteenth birthday. He rocked that shirt at least twice weekly for the past three months.

“If I said she was, would that make you come with me?”

“Would you be lying?” he asked, hope and skepticism tinged his tone.

“Yep. She’s at SAT prep.” That’s one thing I hated about myself. I couldn’t keep secrets, and I couldn’t lie. Not my fault. Just that my brain is always racing, and sometimes stuff slips out. I don’t realize I messed up until I get a pinch, a slap, or a groan from my family or friends. The doctor said I needed medication. Mama told him that I didn’t since I earned good grades, and that was that. “Please eat with me. I don’t want to go home yet.”

Leroy’s chest heaved up and down resignedly. “Fine. But I want orange soda like Kel.” We loved to watch reruns of *Kenan and Kel*, our favorite show.

I grinned. “Done.”

As we left the school grounds, we started talking about college. Our favorite topic. We both dreamed of leaving DC for a better life, and higher education was our ticket out for a couple of nerds. We wanted to join Zsa at Hampton. Neither of us was athletically or musically inclined or remarkably talented. But we studied hard, and instead of parties, we hung out at each other’s homes or studied at the library. Taisah had been with us until she turned pretty over the summer. Now, she was gaining the attention of the more popular kids and being

invited to parties that didn't include us. We were still her best friends, but Leroy and I had seen the writing on the wall. Before our junior year ended, we predicted she would rise to another social class within our school and our trio would become a duo.

Suddenly, my back felt a shooting pain before I saw the small rock tumble at my feet. I looked back at Antwoine, a boy who liked to torment me, Taisah, and Leroy since elementary. We usually managed to avoid him because we took an alternate route when we walked home from school. Our trip to Ben's Chili Bowl put us directly in his path. He sneered, "You don't have big sis to defend you anymore."

"Leave me alone," I yelled before continuing my path. Leroy didn't move, glaring Antwoine down. "Leroy, come on. We can't let him get to us."

"Did he hurt you?" he asked without looking at me. Antwoine snickered and walked closer to us.

"It's just a little rock."

"Apologize to her." What sounded like a threatening growl spewed from Leroy's lips. My heart pounded, and my breathing increased. My body prepared to flee before Antwoine caught up to us.

Antwoine charged us, and I grabbed Leroy's arm. He shook me off. "I'm good." His voice which had deepened to a man's rich baritone over the last few months, scared me. "Apologize to her now, you son of a bitch."

The bully stopped short and scowled. "Did you just call my mama a bitch?"

"I did. But since I don't know your mama, I'll call you the bitch since you think it's funny to hit a girl," he said confidently, without fear. Much different than the Leroy I'd known since fourth grade, who avoided fights and conflicts like the plague.

Antwoine took three steps more, and before he could take a swing, Leroy stuck out his foot and tripped the still-moving boy. We heard the crack of his tooth as he hit the pavement

face first. Leroy didn't even bother to put up fists as he grabbed my hand, and we took off fast in the opposite direction to his house. Food forgotten. Adrenaline replaced our hunger.

We burst out in laughter the moment we stopped at the wire fence leading up to his small home minutes later. He leaned over, grabbing his knees while we caught our breaths.

"I...can't believe...you...did...that," I panted, holding on to the fence.

Leroy finally straightened. He looked handsome with his flushed face and bright eyes rimmed by long lashes. Or maybe because he defended me. Either way, I felt a tingle when he grinned at me. "I did, and it felt amazing."

"You know he's going to get you back." Apprehension erased the confusing tingle I'd just experienced.

Leroy glanced at the tiny house, desperate for fresh paint and a mowed lawn. "He won't be able to. I'm moving to Baltimore to live with my granny next weekend, and Mama needs me at home to pack, so I don't have to go back to school if I don't want to."

"What? You're leaving?" I gripped the fence, fighting back nausea. First, Daddy, then my sister, and now my best friend. "Why are you just telling me?"

He looked out into the street instead of me. "Mama told me last night. We're about to be evicted, and my granny said we could live with her until Mama gets back on her feet. I was going to finish the rest of the week, but I won't since Antwoine will be after me. I doubt he'll mess with you anymore. I humiliated him in front of you."

"I'll be all alone. Taisah barely hangs with us anymore. You can't leave me," I begged with a futile plea. We were pawns to our parents' manipulations. We didn't have wants as teenagers when it came to living situations. If I did, I would live with my younger cousin, Monie. She didn't have a daddy either. Yet my aunt and cousin seemed to be just fine.

“I’m sorry, Ri Ri. If I had a choice, we would be forever always. I don’t want to leave either.” He suddenly hugged me tight, and within his embrace, I realized his strength and his warmth. I also realized that he was all male and not just my best friend. His gaze fell to my lips when he pulled back, and I could feel his kiss. And almost like I imagined the moment, he stepped back. “I’ll find a way to visit. If we both end up at Hampton, I’ll see you there and will pick up being friends again.”

“And what if we don’t? Then what? I don’t have the money to visit you in Baltimore, and you don’t have it either. Neither of us has a cell phone.” I didn’t realize tears ran down my face until he wiped them with his thumb. “You were supposed to get a girlfriend, and I get a boyfriend so we can double date and make them jealous of our friendship.” I moved his hand and swiped at my tears impatiently. “Who am I kidding? No boy wants me.”

“That’s not true.” Leroy shook his head vehemently. “Antwoine does. That’s why he picks with us. He likes you and hates that I get to be close to you, and he doesn’t.”

I sniffed and touched the bottom of his Michael Jordan t-shirt. “Even if that’s true, why would I want a boy who’d rather hurt me than be honest?”

“Sometimes, if you like a female, dudes will do the stupidest thing to get her attention. Even bully her or pretend he likes someone else.” Leroy looked at me intensely before averting his gaze. “You want to hang out with me a little longer?”

“Yeah.” Mama wanted me home before dark, but I would risk punishment, knowing that today might be the last time I saw Leroy.

“Let me check on my brothers and make some bologna sandwiches. I would fry it like you like, but I rather spend more time with you. It’ll be dark soon.”

“You want me to help?” I asked, trying to stop crying.

“No. Stay out here. Mama and the boys will wonder why you’re crying, and I don’t want to make this sadder than it already is.” He jammed his shoe against the door before going inside.

I sat on the delapidated front steps to the porch and tucked my head in my knees. Willing the sadness to stop. Wondering how I would make it without him. I missed Taisah’s friendship, but not like I would miss Leroy’s. We were more connected. He stopped by my house every morning for us to walk to and from school. Sometimes we had dinner at each other’s homes. We also spent our weekends together, consoling one another about our family drama. We had absent fathers. I had a depressed and drunk Mama who barely worked, and he had a Mama that made terrible choices in men and couldn’t seem to hold on to a job.

He eased beside me and offered me a sandwich and a cup of red Kool-Aid. “Extra mayo and pickles since I didn’t fry it.”

His thoughtfulness touched me as it always did. “What am I going to do without you?”

Leroy nudged my shoulder. “We’ll figure it out. You always worry too much.”

“Can’t help it, growing up in my crazy house.” I stared at my dingy Keds, thinking how much lonelier I would be without him. Determined not to cry again, I nudged his shoulder back playfully. I didn’t need to make matters worse since I knew leaving was hard for Leroy too. Taisah and I had been his only friends. He’d been too focused on books and didn’t care for sports to make friends with other boys. Leroy kept himself invisible to avoid the gangs and the street life that too many boys in our neighborhood had already succumbed to. “Promise to call me when you get settled. Maybe I can scrape money together and visit.”

Straightening his shoulders as if he suddenly wore expensive clothes, he smiled. “Going to get me a job once we move. Then I can come back and visit or send for you.”

I squealed and hugged him from the side. “That’s even better. Only been to Baltimore once years ago.”

Leroy rested his head on my shoulder and sighed deeply before he next spoke. “Um...you think you can promise me one thing?”

“Yes,” I replied promptly.

His head jerked up as if surprised. “You don’t know what it is yet?”

I shrugged. “Figured you’ve been the best friend I could have all these years, and you defended me today. The least I can do is say yes to any promise. So, what do I need to promise you?”

He shifted to face me, his right knee touching my left one, and without wavering, replied, “Promise me if we’re thirty-five years old and not married, that we get married. No questions asked or doubts raised. We just do it.”

“What? That’s years from now.” I scoffed and waved my hand. “I plan to be married way before then.”

Leroy continued, “I did say if we’re not married. Hoping we both are happily in love with our spouses when we’re thirty-five. But in case we’re not, promise it’s you and me.” He held his hand out.

Ignoring his hand, I opted to kiss his cheek. Blushing, he asked. “Why did you do that?”

“We’re making an agreement about love. Shouldn’t it be sealed with a kiss?” I asked, suddenly wanting him to kiss my lips.

A slow smile crept across his features, and he said softly, “Ri Ri, as much as I want to kiss you for real right now. Thinking we should wait until we see each other again. Don’t want to start something we can’t finish. We’ve been friends way too long to kiss before I move.”

“I promise.” Gritting my teeth against disappointment, I nodded in agreement. Leroy’s friendship meant more than a kiss because we were being sentimental.

My heartfelt vow seemed to lift the sad mood between us. We sat together on that porch, laughing and talking about

everything much as we'd always done, afraid to leave each other. Too soon, streetlights flooded the neighborhood, and I had to go home. I refused to let Leroy walk me because I wanted to cry without him seeing me. The eight-minute walk home felt more like hours by the time I opened the door with a drenched shirt wondering how I would make the last two years of high school without my best friend.

Chapter Two

Who needs therapy?

Present Day

Present Day
“It sounds like you felt abandoned by Leroy too. Did you ever hear from him again?” Dr. Cosgrove, my psychologist, asked. Her black leather chair was positioned directly in front of me. Sturdy, cherrywood bookshelves full of self-help, psychology, and the greats like Harper Lee, Edgar Allen Poe, and Maya Angelou. A comfortable yet professional office. I’d been seeing her a couple of times a month since February.

“He called a few times once he moved to make sure that Antwoine wasn’t still bullying me.” I smiled. “Antwoine had a messed-up smile, so he kept his distance. That was the best part of the last day.”

“And not the promise?”

I shrugged. “We were just kids that made plans that never happened. Taisah became popular as he and I’d predicted, and I spent the rest of my high school life hiding out in the library or being active in clubs. I never had another friend until I started college at the University of DC because Hampton was too expensive for my sister and me to attend. Plus, Mama needed me at home.”

She asked again, “Did you feel abandoned by him too?”

I shrugged, tears pricking the back of my eyes. “I know he couldn’t help it, unlike my father and Taisah....”

“And your mother and sister,” she added softly.

I chuckled and shook my head. “If Zsa knew I put her in the same category as our parents, she would curse me from here to there.”

She clasped her hand together and smiled. Dr. Cosgrove always appeared stern and plain until she smiled. Then I saw the vibrant, black woman from the wedding picture on her

desk. “It doesn’t matter if she can’t see it. It’s about how you feel. I’m sure your sister has issues with your parents, maybe even with you. But I can only speak to what you tell me and help you determine how it affects your life.”

Thinking of my sister and Leroy, I slowly nodded. “They left me alone with a sad drunk who never recovered from my father leaving the family for the last time when I was eleven.”

“How does that make you feel?”

I couldn’t help the eye roll that time. “What do you think? For two years after my sister left for college, I had to budget the little money from my mother’s disability to pay bills. Thank God for checks for her depression, or I don’t know how we would’ve made it. Then because my mother miraculously got clean and sober during my last year of college, I’m supposed to forgive her?”

“She’s been clean for almost fifteen years and has asked for forgiveness. Why do you still harbor resentment?” Dr. Cosgrove asked gently.

I perched on the edge of the cloth chair and retorted, “Because she stole years of my childhood that I’ll never get back. That she only got clean because she fell in love again. I wasn’t enough. My sister wasn’t enough. But a man, who was a stranger to her at first, held the key to her happiness. I’m glad he’s been good to her, but Zsa and I had been amazing to her.” Frustrated with old wounds and hurts, I lashed out. “What does any of this do with my wanting to be a mother? I’ve taught kindergarten since I was twenty-three years old, and now I’m thirty-four. Receive awards and recognitions from my school, the district, and my parents. Children spend more time with me than with their parents. I know how to care for them like my own.”

“Like your own isn’t your own. Though it requires patience and care, being a teacher is not being a mother, which we both know is a full-time job.”

“I know that. My point is almost everyone I know has issues and can be a mother. But because I haven’t met a man worthy enough to be my husband or father to my children, I

have to go through this to adopt and be a mother.” Afraid my emotions would get the best of me, and I would piss off my therapist, I excused myself and rose. “I need to run. Have a prior appointment.”

Dr. Cosgrove remained seated although she spoke urgently, “Rianna, please don’t leave angry. Sometimes we must push through the pain to get the joy we all seek.”

I picked up my yellow Chanel. “I know how I am, and I respect you, Doctor. My school year starts in two weeks, so I’m about to get busy. Technically I finished the required sessions back in May. Take care.”

I left her office and bypassed the receptionist without scheduling another appointment. I hurried to my car, grateful it was in a parking garage after hours. Placing my forehead on the steering wheel, I practiced deep breathing. Trying to gather all the negative and hateful thoughts about myself, my family, and my life and place them back in a locked safe in the recesses of my unconscious, never to return. After a few minutes passed and I continued to struggle, I grabbed my cell out of my purse and called, Jaquis, the forty-year-old father of two I’d been seeing off and on for the last few months. Writing my experiences with him down in my lipstick diary, thankfully, I realized early on he was simply a situation.

“Hey, I know it’s been a while. You busy?” I asked the moment he answered.



I GRIPPED THE BACK of the sofa, my breasts bouncing, my head hanging in midair while his hands grasped the sides of my hips. I could barely feel his thrusting, my chaotic emotions numbing my whole body. I wanted to fuck to numb the pain and not the other way around.

Jaquis grabbed my locs, and I reached behind to slap his hand. He panted, ‘My bad.’”

I closed my eyes tightly, wishing he would hurry up and come or that his dick would magically penetrate the numbness. Zsa's voice popped into my head. Be sexually fierce.

“Hey...hey...” I looked over my shoulder at a still-humping man. “Let me try something.”

He stopped to wipe the sweat off his head. Jaquis was a nice-looking and intelligent brother with dark chocolate smooth skin. Unfortunately, he remained embroiled in a custody battle with his ex-wife, who he hadn't yet gotten over. “What's wrong?”

“Let me try something.” I led him to his leather coffee table, pushed him down, and climbed on top of him. Sliding down his rubber-covered dick, I straddled him. My hands pressed down on his chest, and my feet planted on the floor. I rode him like a horse. Being powerfully on top, and his loud guttural pleasurable noises penetrated through the numbness. Finally, I felt the friction and thrill of a man inside me. The pleasure of two bodies fucking. And soon released all those painful emotions from therapy through my screaming orgasm.

Let's just say Jaquis was still prone on the table, too weak to walk me to the door or say goodbye. I strolled to my car with a skip in my step. My past life may be fucked up, and I might not have a man, but my pussy puts men to sleep.

Chapter Three

Unexpected surprise.

At the start of each school year, I'm always excited to see the fresh faces of children embarking on their educational careers. The primary years are when we learn to read so that when we're older, we read to learn. I couldn't be prouder of my contribution to shaping young minds. Is it tough being a teacher? A resounding yes, but I can't tell you about the rewards when a child's face brightens with enlightenment when they've figured out or discovered something for themselves.

I also can't wait to meet the parents. I can usually size up if the parent values education and their children's learning or see school simply as a requirement of living in this country. I work at a Baltimore public school in a diverse ethnic and income area ranging from poverty to six figures. My students' faces spread across the rainbow though mostly were of color similar to mine. Call it the transition of regentrification.

As I placed cookies, a fruit tray, and plates on the table for my first group of families, I heard children's voices outside my door.

"Daddy, come on. Go to my class first."

"But mine is right here." This voice I recognized. Kiley Mason was a quiet girl who wore glasses and had the cutest dimples. She rarely spoke and played alone on the playground. She didn't seem lonely, just used to playing by herself. This was only the second week of school. As a rule, I didn't intervene with children on the playground. I observed and learned about their energies and personalities. The aggressive, potential bullies, the leaders, the followers, the popular ones, and the shy, reserved ones like Kiley. The type of child I gravitated toward naturally.

"We'll go to your class in a minute, but Ki's class is right here." The father's voice sounded clear and strong. Friendly

and warm. Probably a good husband and dad.

I walked closer to the door to greet the family, and Kiley ran into the room straight to me. The brightest, cheery smile graced her small chubby face. She hugged my waist tightly and looked up at me. “Hi, Ms. Murphy.”

“Hey, Kiley, Kile. Happy to see you, too.” I patted her back. “You can show your family the table where you sit.” I felt the heat of someone’s stare, and I looked up at the man who stood near the door watching me, dressed in gray slacks and a white polo. His young son leaned against him. Kiley’s father stared as if he saw a friendly ghost. He was a handsome man with thick, dark wavy hair he could brush down when he needed a haircut. Bronze skin that probably lightened in the winter. One who pulled off wearing glasses and made it look sexy instead of nerdy.

“Hi.” I moved closer to him and gestured. “You can come in and visit. You’re my first parent and...”

“I can’t believe it’s you.” He smiled, pushing up his glasses.

And I froze at the familiar gesture. “Leroy?”

This time he met me halfway, and we embraced like the long-lost friends we were. My head rested against the middle of his chest. Apparently, he had a serious growth spurt after he moved away. Judging from the strong arms that held me, he’d grown in other ways. We pulled back at the same time, both of us grinning. “Ri Ri, I thought I would never see you again.”

“Me either.” My eyes were glued to his face. A face that I wouldn’t have been able to pick out of a line-up if I had been asked to identify Leroy Mason. He had the type of beard and mustache I loved on men, full, soft, and trim. Leroy also grew into his nose and ears as his face filled out over the years. His eyes. His eyes were what hadn’t changed. Dark brown with hints of gold, framed by long lashes that seemed to peer into my soul. The wrinkles around his eyes and etched on his forehead spoke of wisdom earned from a past hard knock life.

“You look amazing.” He finally stepped back with my hands in his admiring me openly from head to toe. For a second, I wished I had a sexier dress that emphasized curves I didn’t have when he last knew me. Then I cleared my head of that notion. I was at work, and he was a parent of one of my students. A friend who I hadn’t seen in almost twenty years. My black jersey dress covered with a pink cardigan would have to do.

“Ms. Murphy, can I show my daddy my artwork?” Kiley tugged on my sweater.

We both looked at the little girl who was the spitting image of her father down to the twin dimples.

“Can we not?” Her brother said, clearly annoyed with being in the classroom. My heart rattled at how I would have seen him in his son if I didn’t recognize Leroy. As much as I thought Kiley looked like her father, he was the Leroy I met in the fourth grade. Unlike his father at that age, he exuded a boy well-cared for with a fresh haircut and crisp Nike sweats and Jordans.

“Khalil.” Leroy tapped him against the back of his neck. “Be patient. Your class is next.”

“Sorry, Daddy.” His son rubbed his neck before joining his sister at the dry-erase board, where I placed markers so the children could draw.

“Leroy, your children are beautiful,” I complimented sincerely.

“Thank you. My pride and joys would be an understatement.” He beamed proudly, and I could see his physical beauty that I couldn’t see when he was a child. Poverty and a broken home had robbed him of the hopeful energy that sprang eternal from his children.

“I’m happy for you.” More of my students bounced in and hugged me, followed by their parents. I smiled apologetically at him before addressing everyone. “I’m Rianna Murphy. Feel free to walk around the classroom. I’ll get started on what you should know about kindergarten and your precious children.”



AS MY FIRST GROUP WRAPPED up and I readied for the next set of parents by straightening up chairs and tables, Leroy approached me again. His children were already at the door waiting impatiently to leave. He spoke for my ears only. “Hey, I don’t want to schedule a parent’s conference to see you again.”

I laughed. “Is that your way of asking me out?”

He glanced at my bare left ring finger. “If you’re married, I only ask to catch up with an old friend. If you’re not, then yeah...I’m asking you out.”

“The Leroy I know wouldn’t be so bold,” I teased, flattered at his forwardness. “Kwon. I go by my middle name now. I never liked Leroy.” I didn’t know if he meant he didn’t like his name or who he used to be. “Kwon is not the boy you remembered.” He placed both hands behind him, widened his stance, and smiled.

“Hmm...I don’t think I ever knew your middle name, which fits the man I see before me. I hope you’re not one of those who get mad because I might forget to call you by your preferred name?” I could see more children and parents trickling in the front of the classroom. We probably appeared to be doing just what we were doing because I don’t think either of us had stopped smiling since he recognized me.

He turned away from me and said over his shoulder. “As long as you call me.”

“My number is in the welcome email, Mr. Mason.” I tried to sound professional as I moved to the front of the classroom.

When he and his children walked out of my classroom door, Kwon peeked his head around the corner with a charming wink. “Talk to you later, Ms. Murphy.”

Chapter Four

My sister.

Anxious to tell someone about Ler...I mean, Kwon, I barely pulled out of the school parking lot before calling Zsa.

“Guess who walked into my classroom, fine as everlasting fuck?”

“That’s pretty fine.” My sister replied drily. “Who?”

“Leroy Kwon Mason.”

My sister gasped. “Seriously? Your old friend? Wow. The world is tiny.”

“It really is. His daughter is in my class, and check this out. He wants to go out.”

“I thought that was illegal or something.”

“Z, not illegal, is not something recommended because it can confuse the children involved. Besides, I thought you didn’t care about rules like that.”

“I don’t. But you do.”

“Lipstick Diaries, remember? No holds barred. Whoever and whenever we want to date, we will.” The Lipstick Diaries was an agreement between my sister, cousin, my cousin’s best friend, and me to write our dating experiences in a journal and share them with each other. It was our way of ensuring we did our all to have the type of men we wanted. The Lipstick Diaries started the night of one of my other cousin’s weddings six months ago. So far, we have dated more, but only one had a man that stuck. My cousin, Simone, and an ex-boyfriend rekindled an old flame that still burned. Now, I’m supposed to meet Chris at a party in a couple of weeks, and Simone positively glowed whenever I saw her.

“Is he married?”

“I’m assuming not. He didn’t wear a ring and asked me out.”

“And?” Zsa snorted. “A man can be fucking his wife an hour before he meets you and pretend she doesn’t exist if you pique his dick.”

“True.” I laughed. We may fight like cats and dogs most days, but she was my big sis. The only one who understood how hard it had been growing up and to forgive our parents for their transgressions against us. “I like to think of Kwon as a man who wouldn’t do that.”

“Who the fuck is Kwon?”

“Leroy. That’s his middle and preferred name now.”

“Aw shit. Changing his name sounds suspect.”

“Or he wanted a fresh start, like you and your locs.”

Zsa replied, “I do miss my locs. Never had to worry about my hair.” We both started growing locs in our twenties. My locs had grown down to my lower back, and I loved the versatility that I hadn’t had before locs when my hair didn’t grow. Last year on her thirty-fifth birthday, Zsa cut them. Now she changed her hairstyle based on her mood, from blow-outs to weaves to wigs and braids.

“Well, my thirty-fifth is coming next year, and these locs are staying. I can’t be concerned about my hair with me working out again and running around after my babies.”

“You look better with your locs than I ever did,” she said softly. Compliments from my sister were rare. She had an edge, a hardness that I didn’t share though I arguably had it worse in our household. Cynicism was her middle name. “So, Leroy...I mean Kwon... I see why he prefers Kwon. At least he won’t get the Bruce Leroy jokes anymore.

“No, he won’t.” We both snickered because she was the only one to call him that when we were young.

“So that little boy, and I do mean little, is fine now?”

“Yeah. He has height now and muscles, and you know how we always thought he had pretty hair and eyes? Well, let’s just

say that he grew into his looks better than I could've ever imagined. Hell, the way he looks and carries himself now, I still would have agreed to go out even if he was a stranger. There was definitely chemistry between us.”

“Please don't let Monie hear you. You'd think that way she talks about Chris; they invented Chemistry.”

“She's just in love.” I defended. “And I'm happy for her.”

“Of course, I'm happy for her. That's the point of the Diaries anyway, for us to support each other while we date. I can't deny I'm jealous. I mean, she's our youngest cousin.”

“She's thirty-two and not a baby, Z.”

“I know that, but she messed things up with Chris. From how she talks about him, it sounds like they would already be married if she'd waited a little longer. It was easy for them to reconnect because she left him, and he never stopped wanting her. That's not been my experience with men. My past is my past.”

“That's because you're too hard on men.”

“That's because I had to be. Men will break your spirit. Make you feel stupid for loving them, although they did everything in their power to make you love them in the first place. I can't let a man hurt me like that again.”

“If you think all men are bad and will hurt you deep down, why even try?” I asked. My sister may have ninety problems but getting a man had never been one. Keeping them was another story.

“Guess, there's a tiny part of me that hopes that even if he may have fucked up in the past with other women, he's good to me. I can't be naïve to believe that at my age that any man I meet now hasn't fucked over some woman.” She paused. “I can hear the excitement in your voice about the possibilities of Kwon. I don't have that thrill when I meet men anymore. Don't get me wrong, I can look at him and judge if he's fuckable. Just don't get the giddy feeling that Monie has or how you sound on this call, and you only saw Le...Kwon for a short time.”

“Because I do feel hope. I’m not ready to give up on love yet. Still want babies, and I plan to be a mother no matter what.” I still hadn’t told anyone about my plans to adopt. I didn’t want the inevitable questions about my decision to do so alone.

“I’m not giving up on love, or I wouldn’t be writing in a diary,” Zsa protested loudly. “I want you to be an Auntie too.”

“Then stop messing up my vibe and be happy for me. Kwon may not be the one, but it will be fun catching up and fucking.”

“Done deal? Doesn’t matter if he annoys you?”

“Um...the man that walked in my classroom is worthy of at least one fuck. I’ll find out soon enough if he’s annoying or married.”

“I like that. Keep me posted. Don’t worry about me. Just in one of my moods. Trying to work through some stuff.”

“Maybe you can come to a session or two with me. Therapy has helped me.” I didn’t add that I hadn’t rescheduled. Despite my hasty exit, therapy had been working. I might still struggle with demons, but the Gods were winning now.

“Naw...you know how I am. I don’t really like people in my business.”

“I know. But it’s more than that. We went through hell growing up with Mama and then Daddy popping in and out whenever it suited him. Fucking our lives up every time he did. That shit affected us, Z.”

“I don’t need to pay someone to tell me what I already know.”

“Come on, Z, it’s more than that. I wouldn’t suggest you do it if I thought it was a waste of time and money.”

“You do shit like that. Always wanting to try the latest gimmick, buy the latest toy. Staying broke because you’re too impulsive.”

“Therapy is not a gimmick, and I’ve learned to think before acting long ago.”

Zsa snorted. “That’s a laugh. Say that to the expensive ass car you can barely afford right now.”

“I better go before I say something *you’ll* regret.” I clicked off my cell before I said anything else. She hated whenever I ended our calls this way and probably wouldn’t talk to me for a while. Yet I wouldn’t allow her bitterness to erode my progress. I’d come a long way from that girl who didn’t belong and didn’t like herself. And I would be damned if I allowed anyone, including my sister, to bring me back to that dark and lonely place.

Chapter Five

And it begins...

Kwon called me later that night. “Hey, is it too late to talk?” My bedside clock flashed ten, and I was half asleep.

I tore my satin cap off my head before I realized he couldn’t see me. “No...I was up watching TV.” No need for him to know that I was in bed by nine most weeknights. Teaching exhausted me and aged me. I’d been going to sleep by nine since I was twenty-three. Only staying up later on weekends and when invited to a party or dinner.

“What were you watching?”

“Um...*Golden Girls?*” I replied weakly, unable to think on the spot. *Shit.*

“Really? Thought you might be watching something ratchet like *Love and Hip Hop.*”

Exactly the shows I would watch, and instead of agreeing, I asked, “What are you watching?”

“The Cooking Channel.”

I chuckled. “I don’t know why I expected you to say *Martin*, *ESPN*, or some cop show. You never were like other boys.”

“No,” he replied quietly, his tone rather somber. “Still really not. Have a couple of friends from college and work.”

“Oh, what do you do?”

“A chef. Why I called so late. Had to go to work for a bit.”

“Impressive. You used to hook that fried bologna sandwich and Kraft mac and cheese up.” We both chuckled. “That’s why you’re watching the Cooking Channel?”

“Yeah, I watch and critique what I would’ve done better or differently. Preparing and plating food fascinates me.”

“What happened to wanting to be an engineer?”

“Third year of college, I realized I hated my major. One of my roommates suggested culinary because he loved the food I cooked. His father had some connections. Before I knew it, I dropped out of Morehouse and started my career. A career that I love.”

“You got accepted into Morehouse?” I asked in awe. My friend had been wicked smart and would’ve graduated top of our class had he stayed. I shouldn’t be surprised he was accepted into his dream college or any college he desired.

“I did, and leaving behind my scholarship was a hard decision. But I wasn’t happy. I took it as a sign that as broke as I was back then, I’d been offered another free ride into a more promising future. I haven’t looked back since.”

“One day, you’ll have to cook for me.”

“Hoping I can cook for you this Saturday. I would ask you to meet up for dinner or for coffee....”

“Except that’s not private enough.” The comfort that we always had with each other seemed to flow now. He’d been my best friend for so long. I didn’t want to share him with the public. Just wanted to talk.

“No, it’s not.” We both grew silent. Sounds of food sizzling in the background of his phone.

“Ler...I mean, Kwon...it’s going to take a minute to get used to saying it.”

“It’s cool. Like I said, whatever name you call me is fine.”

“I like Kwon. Wish I called you that back then.”

“Me too.” We let silence drift over our conversation again.

I twirled my locs around my finger. “So, what time on Saturday?”

“Want to come over for breakfast or lunch if dinner is too soon?”

“I’m free, and breakfast is my favorite meal.”

“I know. Come for ten. My kids will be with their mother, so it’ll be just us.”

“Divorced?” I hoped he couldn’t hear the smile in my voice to know he wasn’t married or didn’t live with a woman.

“No. We never married, and it’s a long story.”

“I have time.”

He sighed, “I hope I don’t seem rude, but now that I know I’m going to see you on Saturday, I rather see your face as we talk about serious stuff. So much I want to say, and I want to hear all about you. Right now, we don’t have to say much. Please say you understand?”

“Okay. We can catch up then.” I understood and remembered he’d never been a phone person, always preferring to talk in person.

More silence on the phone. A good silence. One in which I didn’t feel the need to fill in the quiet with my bubbly personality. I turned on my TV and switched to the Cooking Channel. *Beat Bobby Flay* filled my screen.

“Why haven’t you asked me if I was married?” I finally interrupted the quiet.

“Your last name didn’t change, and you’re the type of woman who’d want her husband’s last name, and it’s late on a Thursday. I know my wife couldn’t answer another man’s call this time of night.”

“Maybe I didn’t change my name, and my husband is away on travel.”

“I don’t care if you are. Still want to see you,” Kwon said firmly. “Whether you believe me or not, I missed you. So, if you are married, be sure to tell him. I mean no disrespect. Just need my best friend for a moment.”

How could I argue with that? I pulled the covers tighter over me and said, “I’m going for the black woman to win. She looks like she can cook.”

“You still root only for the black people? For the record, they’re all chefs. Technically they all know how to cook.” He

chuckled.

“Of course. Always down for my people.” I put a fist in the air.

“Me too. Though I don’t know if she can beat Bobby though. The white guy with the locs looks like a better match.” He paused. “Can I say your locs are gorgeous, just as you are? Take my breath away, damn gorgeous.”

“Thanks.” I wanted to tell him how fuckable he was. Instead, I kept it G-rated. “You’ve grown up very nicely yourself. Can I say it’s weird that I’m talking to you again after all this time?”

“Thank you. And it’s strange that we’re on the phone like we used to be. In bed, watching the same TV show. Kiley always talks about you, and I never made the connection that her Ms. Murphy was my Ms. Murphy.”

“I’m not your Ms. Murphy,” I said, keeping my tone light.

“No, you’re right. You would be....” Kwon cut himself off.

“What were you about to say?”

“I’m a pretty basic man. No filters. Kind of how you were when we were young.”

“That was my ADD. My mouth got me in trouble way too much. I think I manage it better now.”

“Whatever it was, your way kind of caught on. I hid so much of myself from everyone, including you. Not healthy, and I don’t want to be that way anymore. I say how I feel now.”

“And how do you feel?”

“Happier. My kids make me happy seeing you today made me happier. You were the one piece of my life missing. Shit.” He chuckled more to himself. “I wasn’t supposed to go deep until Saturday.”

“Alright...alright...we can wait. Except tell me what you were about to say, and we’ll save the rest for breakfast.”

“After I say this, I’m getting off the phone,” he warned.

“I’m tired anyway. What?”

“I was about to say you would already be my Mrs. Mason if life had gone differently.” He let his words sink in before he quietly bade me good night.

The television continued to play, filling my bedroom with sound as I cradled my cell to my chest, lost in what could have been had our paths crossed sooner.

Chapter Six

Is he serious?

Row houses were the hallmark of Baltimore. Other cities have them, including DC or Philly, but unlike Baltimore. Harlem and Brooklyn are known for their brownstones, similar appearance, and structure. Here in Baltimore, it's the row house. The type of home that required a second income. The type of home I've wanted since I moved here six years ago and settled for an apartment inside of one. I admired Kwon's neighborhood as I parked a couple of houses down the street. These homes were at least half a million. Leroy Kwon Mason had done well for himself even if he only leased his home. I walked up a few steps and rang his doorbell.

A few seconds later, Kwon opened the door wearing a red Nike shirt, sweatpants, and socks. My heart fluttered at how comfortable and handsome he seemed in his skin. His glasses were in his hand, and he must have gotten a fresh shave and haircut. The broad grin that graced his full lips brought tears to my eyes. His smile faded, and he pulled me into his arms.

"Hey...hey...it's okay." He soothed and rubbed my back as he moved us inside and closed the door before holding on to me again. "Shh...I know...I know..."

The years of using my natural energy to push down the hurt, betrayal, regret, and deep-seated pain of abandonment rushed to the surface. His chest became my tissue, his arms my blanket as my body emptied buckets of tears until I couldn't anymore. I don't know how long we remained in the entryway of his home, but my spirit wouldn't let me move into the present until I let go of the past. Somehow, he knew it, too, because he never tried to urge me into his home. He would've remained locked in this cathartic embrace for as long as I needed.

When I finally looked up into his face, his cheeks were wet. Not like mine, but enough to know he had his own baggage to unload. He lowered his head and pressed his lips

against mine. A sweet, pure, comforting kiss. I wanted more though he gave me what I needed right now. I giggled and tucked my head against his chest.

“My kiss makes you laugh?” The tremble in his voice and spike in his heartbeat belied the humor he tried to affect.

“No. I laughed because even when we were kids, you always knew how to care for me. What I needed even before I knew it.” I tapped his chest and moved out of his arms, already missing his heat, although it was a hot September day. “Your kiss couldn’t be more perfect. I want more, to be honest.”

“Good to know.” He smiled again, grabbed my hand, and led me into his home. Cardboard boxes littered his living area. Paintings were still on the floor that would soon adorn the brick walls. “Excuse the mess. Just moving back to the city.”

“It’s a beautiful mess.” That explains why I never saw him at school. “Where were you?”

“I’ve been in Atlanta since I left for college. Head chef at a couple of restaurants. I moved back here because my kids were with their mother, and I didn’t want to miss out on their lives anymore.”

“Do you have your children full-time?”

“No. I want full custody, but a battle wouldn’t benefit them. She would fight me tooth and nail just to spite me. So instead of pursuing sole custody, settled for joint. I moved back here and now work at Harmony on the Harbor.”

“Ooh, nice restaurant.” We walked up polished cherrywood stairs to a kitchen on the second floor. An exquisitely designed gray and silver chrome kitchen. Digital refrigerator, double oven, and wine glass rack over his island that centered the room. The sink was built into the white and black marble island, and four coordinated wooden stools on one side.

“You’ve been there?” He pulled out a stool for me to sit at his island.

“Not yet. Just heard good things.” I admired his gourmet kitchen. “I love that the kitchen is on the second floor. Wow,

Kwon. You've come a long way from where you started."

Kwon shrugged modestly. "I work hard so me and my family can have what they need and want. I also bargain-hunted. The government seized this house, and I got a crazy deal. Way below market value. This row house used to be three apartments, and the last owner remodeled it this way. I wanted to live closer to my kids, but this kitchen stole my heart. This whole floor is the kitchen, dining room, a guest bathroom, and my office is in the back. Downstairs is the living area, Master bedroom, bathroom, and half bath. The third floor has a bathroom and two bedrooms, and I converted the third bedroom into a play area for the kids. I'll show you around once we eat."

"This is like my dream house," I admitted as he passed me a wine glass filled with sangria. "I live in an apartment in a row house about twenty minutes from here."

"It's mine too." He smiled as he took a sip out of his own glass. "You're welcome to visit me anytime." Colorful veggies were already chopped. A batter in a glass bowl with smaller bowls of strawberries and blueberries waited. "Okay, figured I would ask what you wanted instead of assuming. You were a picky eater, and I refused to spend time preparing a scrumptious breakfast, and your nose stayed scrunched up."

Kwon stood across from me, his hands gripping the sides, making his veins and biceps pop. Damn, the brother was fine with a capital F. His eyes sparkled from either desire or the sunlight as he asked, his voice now huskier, "Tell me what you want."

Okay. Desire. I shook my head, blushing. "Can't ask me like that."

His eyes lit flirtatiously though he feigned innocence. "I'm simply asking what you want."

"This is not a *Love Jones* moment."

Kwon frowned. "*Love Jones*? I never saw it."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I reached across, pretended to go into the pocket of his sweats, and pulled out an

imaginary card. “You have to earn your black card back.”

“Because I haven’t seen *Love Jones*? I can see if it was *Friday* or *The Color Purple*, but *Love Jones* is a chick movie.”

I gasped. “No, it’s not. Couples watch that movie together.”

He bit the corner of his lip, and I imagined the temperature in the room rose higher. “Then maybe we watch it together after we eat and talk.”

“You have nothing to do on a Saturday but be with me?” His ease and comfort in spending time with me only turned me on more. My mouth hurt from smiling so wide.

“No. Cleared my schedule for the rest of the weekend. We can do whatever you want if you’re free, too.” He arched an eyebrow and displayed his dimples. “I mean, I don’t know when hubby is coming back and need you home.”

I popped a strawberry in my mouth instead of answering.

Kwon picked up my left hand and rubbed the ring finger. “No discoloration from where a ring would be.” His gentle touch thrilled me, and I wondered if the inevitable sex would be today.

“Rings are proof for the world. We don’t need that.” I ate another strawberry with my right hand.

Still holding my hand, Kwon asked, “When did you get married?”

“November 3 last year.” I smiled impishly.

His head went back, and his rich laughter filled the room. “Glad to see you can lie better.”

“You don’t believe I’m married, do you?”

“Not at all. Trying to figure out why you’re playing this game with me. If you have a man, tell me. We’ll figure it out.” He released my hand and ate a blueberry.

“What do you mean, figure it out?” I watched as he poured himself a glass of Sangria.

“Husband and a boyfriend are two different things. I’m getting too old to stop my flow because a woman has a boyfriend. Relationships end for all kinds of reasons. So, if you have a man, tell him it’s over because you realized you were meant for someone else.”

“That someone else being you?” I tapped the edges of the marble island. His words didn’t scare me or freak me out as they should. Friend or not, it’d been practically two decades since I laid eyes on this man. Yet, this was the most genuine and welcoming conversation I’d ever had with a man.

“Why not? We spent almost every day together for eight years. You loved me for me and when I had nothing,” he reasoned.

“Because you’re not Leroy. Looking at you, all I see is Kwon.” I lifted his glasses briefly. “In your eyes, I see a little bit of my best friend, but this home, this body, this face, this confidence is all Kwon. I know I loved Leroy. I don’t know about the man you are now.”

“You know the real me, and I know the real you. Who we were as kids are the core of who we are as adults.” He conceded, “You loved me as a friend. And we started considering each other as more the last day we saw each other.”

“No. You were crazy about Taisah.”

His jaw tightened as he pushed his glasses on his nose. “I was in lust with her because she changed up on us and threw my hormones out of wack. But you were the one I thought about all the time back then and over the years. The reason I busted Antwoine’s mouth. The reason I hated my mother for not handling her shit, so I wouldn’t have left you and we wouldn’t be forced to live with a man who didn’t want us,” he said the last part bitterly and then as if coming back to the present, his tone lightened. “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 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 we would get married if we were thirty-five and still single. 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, and then I 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 tended to live for the moment rather than wait for an unpromised future, so why was I freaking out?

Chapter Seven

The perfect date.

The reminder of the promise we made years ago doused our respective fires into embers. We gave each other curious looks and kept touching each other while we caught up without going too deeply about our lives. As he prepared crab benedicts and mixed berry crepes, I enjoyed his delicious Peach Sangria. He told me that his mother had lied, and they moved in with his mother's boyfriend instead of his grandmother's house. Moving far away from his mother became his motivation. He spent every spare time studying and applying for scholarships and eventually moved to Atlanta without his mother's blessing on a full ride. I told him that although I was accepted at Hampton, my mother's alcoholism worsened. I attended the University of DC and remained at home.

"At the end of my senior year of college, my mother fell in love. Got herself together and has been sober and with her husband ever since."

"Sorry, you had to give up your dream. At least it wasn't in vain." Kwon carefully topped the poached egg with lightly grilled lump crab. "Happy to hear your mama won that battle. Love has a way of making miracles happen."

"Yeah." Talking about my mother annoyed me, and I wrinkled my face. "Guess love for her children wasn't enough."

His eyes softened. "Some people need intimate love to survive. It has nothing to do with how much she did or didn't love you. I've accepted my Mama for who she is and was. It took years of physical and emotional abuse from men for my mother to be okay with being alone."

Picking up my glass, I looked at the pale peach liquid instead of him. "I guess. Just hurt that she finally got it together when I was grown."

“I get that too.” He added two crepes to my plate. “So what happened after graduation?”

“I taught in DC for a couple of years while I worked on my Master’s in Educational Leadership before I decided to start fresh in Baltimore.” I poured more sangria into my glass. The need to numb after talking about my mother.

“Hoping to find me.” He winked.

I contemplated his words while I nibbled on a strawberry picturing this being our every weekend. Enjoying each other while one of us cooked. Having a man to walk through this life together had been my dream, even as a little girl. A man who knew and loved me at my worst and could see me at my best. Sure, our relationship had been different, but in all the ways that a man would care for me outside of the sexual he had done when we were young. And from the little I knew of the man before me, he appeared to be the same. His genuine love for his children was evident in his eyes, and he smiled whenever he mentioned them. The way he held me in his arms without question instead of running because of my tears told me he wasn’t afraid of emotions. More importantly, he instinctively knew what I needed. Yet a nagging question remained.

“Honestly, yes. I thought I would bump into you at the grocery store or restaurant one day. Meanwhile, you were in Atlanta, not thinking of me at all. Guess the person who gets left behind gets forgotten.” I didn’t try to hide the hurt in my voice because he needed to know how much he mattered to me.

His hands that prepared our food stilled, and his eyes watered. “I never forgot about you.”

“Then why didn’t you reach out to me? I had no one for a long time. You might not have found me initially because we finally moved once my mother remarried. Still, I’ve been on social media for years. I looked for you but found nothing.”

“I know. I’ve always been lowkey. No time for social media. But I quietly stalked you, too afraid of rejection.”

Kwon forked a piece of crab and put the food in front of my mouth. "Please eat."

"Answer my question."

He quipped, "No. We need to eat first."

I bristled at his tone and moved away from the offered food. "I don't even have an appetite."

He continued to hold the fork toward me. "Eat, Rianna. Let me take care of you."

I opened my mouth reluctantly, and he fed me the morsel. The succulent, flavorful mix of lemon, pepper, butter, and basil melted on my tongue. Once I swallowed, my stomach growled. "Fine. We eat and talk at the same time."

"Follow me." Kwon garnished my plate with lemon and orange slices and placed it on the polished round wooden table that held a summer mix bouquet of flowers in the adjoining room. "Sit."

"You're bossy in your old age," I complained as he pulled out the red cushioned chair for me to sit. Once I did, he kissed the top of my head.

He soon joined me and sat across from me. "I want to see your face and answer your question."

"Okay. Now talk," I mumbled, mouth half-full with the flakiest, most delicious, honey-flavored, berry crepe I'd ever tasted. "This is fucking otherworldly." Too busy chewing, I gestured with my hand for him to begin.

"No, we say grace first. Then, take at least three bites of your benedict and crepes."

I wanted to argue, but how can you fuss with God and a man who wants to pray. So, I allowed him to pick up my hand. We bowed our heads, and he thanked God for our food, his continued grace, the health of his children, and for placing me back in his life. I smiled, wondering about his thoughts on church and whether he would be open to joining mine.

Three bites of each ended up an empty plate before I uttered a word. I glanced at his half-eaten plate. "Great, now I

feel like a pig.”

He grinned wide. “Don’t feel like that. I enjoyed watching you gulp down my food like a starved prisoner.”

“Can’t deny you cook your ass off, and I don’t even like eggs benedict.” I poured water from a glass pitcher into a glass he’d placed before he finished cooking. “Ugh...I forgot how slow you eat. I’m not waiting for you to finish eating to talk.”

He cleared his throat. “Not sure how to start.”

“We can start with why you were afraid to reach out to me.”

Kwon settled back in his chair. “Alright. When I left home, I had no intentions of coming back. My mother’s boyfriend was abusive. Not all the time. Mostly to my Mama. Only when he got drunk did he try to hurt my brothers or me, and I always fought him back before he got to them. I usually won. I hated my life and the man I thought I was becoming. Depressed, bitter, angry. Violent. I never wanted you to see me like that. Before I left for college, my granny finally stepped in and took my brothers, and I didn’t have to worry about them. As time passed, I could breathe and became the man I thought I could be. By then, I started believing you wouldn’t care about seeing me again because I’d been MIA for so long. The day I became head chef, I wanted to connect and deal with whatever anger you may have had. I found you on Facebook, and you were hugged up with some dude in Jamaica. Although I was jealous as hell, you looked happy, and that was enough for me. Then I got into a relationship and had my son.”

“Denny.” I scoffed. “That may have been the only time he made me happy. Trust me, we lasted all of six months. How old is your son?”

“Will be nine in January.”

I reached across the table and forked a piece of his crepe. “What happened between you and their mother?”

His gaze slid away from mine, almost guiltily. “All I can say is that the children are the best things that happened with that relationship. We were happy with Khalil and not with

Kiley. She pressured me about marriage before we had Kiley. I needed more time. We argued about it constantly. I was no longer a believer in marriage, which she knew. We were already living together and had a routine. I thought we were fine. Then my teenage brothers became too much for my grandmother, and I went and got them.

She hated their intrusion. I would understand if they were bad or disrespectful. But from the moment they lived with me, they thrived. Both played sports and earned good grades. They adored Khalil, and he loved being around them. She left me before we knew she was pregnant again. She was supposed to be on birth control and stopped without me knowing. She thought for sure I would marry her once she got pregnant with Kiley and moved back in with us. I did some soul-searching to understand why I couldn't give her what she wanted and if it was best for the family.

Our love was convenient, and our son tricked us into believing it should be more. I knew our marriage would be for the children's sake, and the buttons she pushed scared me. She would curse, scream, destroy our things, and get violent with me. Although I never put my hands on her, I worried one day I might. More importantly, our children and my brothers didn't deserve to grow up in chaos like you, and I did. I told her I would always support her and the children, even raise them if she wanted to be the weekend parent. Marriage would only worsen our situation. Not make it better.

She snatched them away and moved to Baltimore, where her parents live. Again, as a way to force my hand to marry her. She was here with them for two years and barely let me see them. Until she met a man and needed help with them. My brothers had finished college and living on their own by then. I told her I would move here only if I could get joint custody so she couldn't take them away from me again out of spite. Papers were drawn, and I came back in July. Their mother still didn't communicate well with me, and I didn't know anything about their teachers or school. I wanted to meet their teachers, so I came to parent night. Had no idea it would bring me back to you.”

I'd been observing him as he spoke. His eyes dulled whenever he mentioned the mother of his children; it couldn't have been easy for either of them. I understood her frustration. Most women want to be married and to the father of their children. And if he steadfastly said he didn't want to despite sharing a life, a bitter woman that would make. I also agreed that marrying or staying married for the sake of children wasn't the right move. Impossible to live a façade of happiness from day to day. Parents who aren't in love with each other and stay together may teach children that sacrifice is a part of the commitment. But at what cost?

"Say something," he spoke softly.

"Did you know I lived here?"

"I knew you lived in Baltimore. No idea you were a teacher." He smiled. "You keep your professional and personal life separate as you should. You would have all the fathers making excuses to see you if they saw some of those sexy pics you're so fond of posting. I only found you because I looked up Ri Ri and not Rianna. When I saw you the other day, I knew it was our chance to finish what we started."

Crossing my arms on the table, feeling the weight of our lives coming full circle, I wondered if we were about to embark on a miracle or an epic fail. I asked wearily, "What did we really start? We were a couple of sad kids who became friends because we were stuck with fucked up parents. That day you left me was probably the hardest day of my life. I lost my life jacket. The one person who kept me afloat. The first boy I ever really loved."

He studied my face. "I should've kissed you that day. I had no idea that would be the last day we saw each other. I figured we would still find a way to hang out, and I didn't want the first time we kissed to be out of pity or because you were already missing me. I wanted our kiss to be special and the start of us. With the joy I saw in your eyes the other day and the pain I felt in my arms today, I realized I was wrong. You felt just as strong as I did, didn't you?"

I nodded. “Sometimes you don’t realize what’s in front of you until it’s too late.”

“I’m in front of you now, and it’s not too late. I meant what I said. I want to marry you.”

I sighed, feeling more hopeless than hopeful. “You have children. They need to get used to me before we make such a big decision.”

His face relaxed as he spoke with confidence. “Kiley is already crazy about you. My son will soon follow. They know their mother’s boyfriend already. They have no illusions about their parents getting back together.”

As some of the gloom lifted, I whistled. “Their mother is going to be pissed. She wanted to marry you for years, and you want to marry me after a date.”

Kwon corrected with a sly grin, “Actually, it was the beginning of the date. Let me worry about her.”

My brain raced for excuses. “We haven’t even had sex yet to know if we’re compatible.”

He leaned back in his chair. “That’s going to be the best part of us. You’re not going to get enough of me.”

“Aren’t you cocky?” I tried to hide my smile. Nothing made my panties wetter than a confident man.

“In more ways than one.” His dimples flashed before he picked up his cell. “Stand up.”

“What? Are you trying to snap me for the gram? At least let me make sure I don’t have food in my teeth,” I teased partially to stop the fluttering in my stomach at the intensity of his voice.

“Stand up,” he repeated firmly.

As I rose slowly, I uttered, “Lucky, I like your bossy ass.” Anticipation replaced the lingering gloom at the glint in his brown eyes and the mischievous smile that curved his lips.

He pushed back from the table and pressed a button on his cell. *Dilemma* by Nelly and Kelly Rowland blared through the

speakers.

“Our song!” The nostalgia of the sweetest memory caressed me as I squealed and swayed my arms.

Kwon approached me, grooving to the music. “Remember the routine?”

Taisah and I would make up dances all the time. When she wasn't around, I would try to get him to dance with me, which he refused. Until this song came out. We were freshmen in high school, and he was a Nelly fan. Even rocked a Band-Aid under his eye for a thankfully short phase. Kwon could rap, and I could sing. We performed our asses off like we were Nelly and Kelly at the school talent show. We came in second behind a popular senior who saang Luther Vandross's *A House is Not a Home*.

“Of course. The question is, do you?” I lifted my hair, preparing to put it in a bun, and he pulled my hand down.

“Leave it. You're beautiful.” He bent to kiss my neck right under my ear. My sweet spot.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and sang the lyrics that matched my feelings. Telling him that I loved him and needed him and how I always thought of him. Words that were just for show when we were fourteen took on a deeper meaning at thirty-four. We gazed into each other's eyes. When he started to rap, overcome with the yearning to be one with him, I grabbed the back of his head and slipped my tongue in his already open mouth. Song forgotten, he deepened the kiss before he picked me up and carried me down the stairs to his bedroom.

The fever grew and spiraled inside my body, threatening to explode with every touch of his lips to mine. I don't remember how we ended up naked in his bed. Or how Kwon's face ended up between my legs, his tongue savoring every inch of my pussy a mere two hours after he opened his front door.

Chapter Eight

This needs a journal entry.

Dear Lipstick

I am in love. Like certifiably in love with my former best friend. I guess he still is my best friend since no one ever replaced him. The way we fell back into each other was crazy. The laughter, the comfort, the need for each other like eighteen years hadn't passed since we laid eyes on each other. And the dick, the dick was everything. I've always known of my weakness for men. I love their strength, dominance, charm, and sexuality. I have had several men in my life. All good in the bedroom. Different levels of goodness, but still worth another round. I don't know if it's because I love the friction of dick entering my pussy that I gave props to men who didn't deserve it. What I know for sure is that I don't care how much or how many men have disappointed me: Sex with women will never be an option. Writing it loud and clear. I LOVE DICK.

And Kwon. He is the best lover I have ever had. His dick is perfect. I even love the way it smells. SERIOUSLY. If I'd known he had all that going on back then, which he claims he did, I would've been a teenage mother. Mmm...when I think how he had me spread-eagled, his hands massaging my breasts as he licked every crevice, fold, and hole of my pussy and ass.

I never imagined how freaky he could be. He whispered all sorts of nasty shit while he fucked me over and over. His words, an aphrodisiac, told me how he wanted his cum to flow down my legs. How he wanted to give me a pearl necklace. How I had the perfect body for fucking. Even smacked my ass with his large hand until my bottom stung, and I begged him to plug me. He promised me a lifetime of sexual satisfaction, willing to do or try anything to fulfill my fantasies. If the last twenty-four hours are any indication, he will keep this promise too.

Maybe love happened so quickly because we were halfway there when we were kids. We haven't said it to each other, but in every glance, kiss, soft caress, and smile. Love finally caught up with us. And I have no intention of losing Kwon or love again.



THE MINUTE I FINISHED my entry, Zsa called, “Did you fuck him?”

“Damn, Z. No, hello, or how are you?”

“My bad, sis. Hello...did you fuck him?”

“Yes, yes. A thousand times, yes.” I kicked my feet up and down while I rested in his comfy King-sized bed.

“Are you home?”

“No, I’m at Kwon’s house, and this place is mad expensive.”

“It’s Sunday evening. You’ve been there since yesterday morning?”

“Yep. Been naked for the last two days. He won’t allow me to wear clothes in his presence.”

“Where is he?”

I boasted, “Went to the store to pick up some Oreos and milk just because I asked.”

“Impressed with Mr. Kwon.” I could hear the approval in her voice. “Good in and out of the sheets.”

“Yes. He really is. We connect in ways that seem unreal, like the years we were apart never happened. We even...” I stopped myself from telling her that we spoke of marriage. I wasn’t quite ready to share that part of us, and definitely not with a cynical older sister.

“Even what?”

“Did a little S and M,” I improvised.

“Already? Bet you were the dom.” She chuckled. Zsa may be the only one who knew that as bubbly and friendly as I was in public, I could be darker and aggressive in the bedroom. And she knew because she was the same way.

“Nope. And I loved being submissive. He could lead me anywhere. Told you that our connection, like the food he cooks, is otherworldly.”

“Alright, Sis, not mad at ya. Be safe out here in these streets.” Definitely didn’t want to tell her we’d been going at it like rabbits without a condom. She would probably punch me out through the phone. “I’m almost home.”

“Almost home? Where have you been?” Zsa usually chilled or worked from home on Sundays.

“Not fucking.” She retorted. “Naw, had to finish some work. Up for a promotion at the office.” Zsa worked in Congressman Jones’s office, a black representative from Chicago. She was a staffer and researched his policies linked to criminal and police reform. After years of busting her ass, it was her dream job, and now she was recognized for her effort.

“Big ups, Z. Proud of you.” The alarm at his front door chimed. “He just came back. I’ll call you on my way home.”

“I won’t hold my breath. Doubt you leaving that nigga’s bed tonight.” She clicked off the phone.

I got out of bed and boldly walked naked through his home and up the stairs to his kitchen, where he put up groceries. He didn’t look at me as he placed milk, butter, and fresh spinach in his frig. “Didn’t mean to take so long.”

By the time he turned around, I had sat on the sink with my legs open and the nozzle pointed toward my pussy. “Squeeze it.”

His brown eyes impossibly darkened with lust as he placed his hand over mine, spread my thighs wider, pressed the nozzle against my sexier lips, and squeezed. “Shit!!!” I cursed loudly at the pressure of the cool water hitting me directly and intimately. Helpless to do anything else, I leaned back and held on to the back of the sink with my other hand. He twined

my locs around his fist, jerked my head up, and his tongue ravaged my mouth. Kwon caught my gasps and screams with every swirl of his tongue as he kept the water shooting inside me. While I struggled to gain any sense of control, Kwon lowered his head to nip and suck on my breasts. I arched my back, urging him even closer. My grape-colored nipples puckered desperately, needing his lavish attention. The rapturous sounds of our collective moans, the feel of his tongue, the fisting of my locs, and the pulsing spray had my legs shaking uncontrollably as my orgasm came quickly and loudly.

Not giving me a moment to come down to sanity, Kwon dropped the nozzle and moved me to the edge of the island. His t-shirt was discarded, and cargo shorts were down around his ankles. With one powerful thrust, he had my body start the spiral of ecstasy again. I held on to his strong neck as he pumped hard and rapidly, his climax nearing. I urged him to completion with soft kisses on his chest and shoulder and whispered that I needed him to come. Needed to feel his dick shoot cum in and out of me. When Kwon began to buck wildly against me, my pussy clenched and unclenched around him until our pulsing, entwined bodies culminated in euphoric keening.

Chapter Nine

Just say yes.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty.”

I opened my eyes to a shirtless, smiling, handsome Kwon propped up on his elbow, watching me. “What time is it?”

“Almost nine. I’ve been up since seven. Morning jog. Shower. Made us coffee and croissants.” He pointed to a tray at the end of the bed.

“Why did you let me sleep so late? I would’ve loved to have joined you.” This was our second weekend together. He had spent the week in my bed every night. I had to get used to his late schedule, which was way past my bedtime. I would sleepily open the door, and he would shower and join me in bed. Depending on his schedule, Kwon would leave with me in the morning and head back to his place or work. Last night he worked late, gave me the code to his door, and asked me to be naked and ready for him when he came home. When he arrived home a little after midnight, I created a tasty treat of whip cream and pussy. Kwon eagerly indulged in my body, especially the hidden cherry.

“Nine on a Sunday morning isn’t late. Figured you needed the rest. You hated the gym back then. You jog?”

Rolling on my side to face him, I said, “Still hate the gym. I attend dance classes to keep myself healthy. I meant the shower. I like to wake up early and enjoy my whole day off, especially when spending it with a fine man.”

“Well, you up now. What do you want to do after we eat? I’m not visiting the kids until seven for dinner.”

My eyes traveled from his face to the fine hairs on his defined pecs and abs. His running shorts left nothing to the imagination. “Think your dick wants to do something before we eat.”

He grinned and pushed his shorts down, and his erection sprung free. I licked the tip before pulling it in my mouth as he hissed in pleasure. “Shit, I don’t want to use a condom with you. But we better start planning unless you want a baby in nine months. You might already be.”

After alternating between making love and fucking, we hadn’t used anything. Absolutely nothing except the pull-out method. Something about knowing he already wanted to marry me freed me from guilt and worry. Unafraid of any consequences.

“You’re the first person I’m telling.” Unable to maintain eye contact with his steady gaze, I dropped my eyes to his chest. “I’m in the process of adopting. Thought you should know if you want to change your mind about marrying me.”

He tilted my chin back up to meet his now concerned gaze. “Can you have children?”

“Never tried. I planned to adopt because I wanted to be a mother and didn’t want to wait for a husband that may never come.” As I finished my statement, it dawned that he had already offered his hand. If I said yes, he would be the father of my children, whether biological or not. “Do you want more children?”

“Only with you.” He kissed my nose. “If you want to adopt, I’m down. Even if we adopt, can we still try for one of our own?”

“More than anything, I want one of my own.” My smile belied the acrobats I really wanted to do. This man didn’t hesitate or blink about starting a family with me. A man ready is a man ready. And Kwon was prepared to be my husband and father of my children.

“You still haven’t given me an answer about marrying me. If you’re ready to be an insta mom, why not be an insta wife. Being a mother is more of a commitment than marriage. Our children are ours for life. We can get it right with another person if a relationship fails.”

“Divorce is not an option for me. I waited this long, then it has to be right.”

“I don’t plan to get married to get a divorce, which is why I didn’t marry my ex. But I’m a realist. Even if we dated for a year or more doesn’t guarantee that we won’t divorce. I know what I want and don’t want to wait.”

“And if I don’t want to marry now, you’re going to keep looking?”

“No. You are who I want. Even if we never marry.” He smiled. “I ain’t going anywhere. Just don’t want you to wait two or three years down the line, we get married, and you wished we’d done it when I asked. And trust me when I say I will rub it in your face.”

I tucked my head against his chest. “This is crazy. Like, what if I am that angry woman like your ex, and I want to fight you because you get on my damn nerves?”

He laughed. “That’s never been you, and I doubt it’s you now. You have to have the patience of Job to work with babies. Even if I’m not giving you what you want, you’re not fighting with me at night and crawling around on the floor with them during the day.”

I covered my mouth briefly. “Kiley told you?”

“Yes, she told me she loves her teacher who will crawl right along with them and read while you and your students lay on your stomach.”

“They learn better that way,” I explained.

“No judgment. I love your style. Think you are an amazing teacher and woman. My daughter is lucky to have you as one of her first teachers.” Kwon twirled one of my locs on his finger.

“No, I’m the lucky one. She’s a bright, quiet girl already comfortable in her own skin.”

Kwon nodded with a beaming smile. “She even asked if I liked you.”

I gasped. “You a lie.”

He held his hands up. “I swear. I spoke to her yesterday morning by phone and almost spat my coffee out.”

“What did you tell her?”

Kwon brushed his lips against mine before he pulled back slightly. “I told her I would love to marry Ms. Murphy.”

My eyes watered at the love and sincerity in his eyes.

“She asked if she could be in the wedding. You have to appreciate the innocence of children. It’s simple for them. She’s already crazy about you, and she knows I’m alone. She sees her mother with someone and wants the same for me.”

I nodded. “Wish it could be that simple for me.”

“October twenty-eight is six weeks away. In the next six weeks, we’ll spend whatever spare time we have getting to know each other. We can decide about our living situation and what would be best for the children. Even if we live in separate households initially, we can make it work. If you decide you’re not ready, we’ll wait. We can get married at the Justice of Peace and have a wedding and reception later if you want.”

“I don’t care about a wedding. As much as I love to host parties, I never wanted a wedding. Always pictured my husband and me getting married on some island. Just the two of us.”

“Is that your way of saying yes?”

I tweaked his nipple. “I thought I had six weeks.”

“You need six weeks to decide if you love me and can even imagine marrying me?” He dragged his finger between my breasts and smiled when my breath hitched.

“No. Still not ready to say yes yet.” I shifted to my back, grabbing the wooden slats of his headboard. “Although I am ready for you to fuck me.”

Kwon laid his heavenly naked body on top of mine, pushing my thighs open for him to settle in between. The tip of his erection teased my opening. “Baby, I’m warning you now, if I fuck you the way I want, you’ll beg to be my wife.”

“Sounds like a challenge.” I lifted one of my legs until my toes touched the headboard. “One of the perks of working with kids is flexibility.”

He wickedly grinned as he pushed up my other leg. “Bet.”

Chapter Ten

I love a man who loves his kids.

The whole day I couldn't ease my nerves. My stomach vacillated between butterflies and bubble guts. I even had to wipe the sweat off my forehead several times, although my classroom rarely overheated. All because Kwon and I were taking his children to a fun plex for Go-karts and arcades. While we'd been together, including the past two weekends, his children had been with their mother. But today, he would have them again for the weekend, and he took off Friday afternoon so the four of us could spend time together. He would pick up his children from school, and we would meet right after that.

I did my best to not show favoritism to Kiley at school, though it had been hard. She would have been my favorite even if I wasn't falling for her father. She gravitated toward me and would find a way to sit next to me during circle time and play near me at recess. She loved learning and, although quiet, would raise her hand to answer questions. Every time she grinned or pushed up her little glasses, my heart warmed at the reminder that she was the child of the first boy I ever loved.

When Kiley ran up to hug me before filing in line with her class for dismissal, I wanted to tell her that I would see her later. We decided to ease into the children getting to know me, and Kwon wanted to introduce me to them. I quickly gathered my things and proceeded to my car to meet my potentially new family. Smiling in amusement at the fortunate change of events, I thought the day I met my family would be through the adoption agency. I finally had my answer for Kwon, even before spending time with him and his children. God had already prepared me to be a mother. I'd been in therapy for months and had begun to make small changes in my apartment for a child. Now, I would have two. And more if my life continued on this path.



DEAR LIPSTICK,

Tonight, I told Kwon I would marry him as he walked me to my car while his children waited for him in his. They easily accepted me into their small family because they first knew me as Ms. Murphy, the popular kindergarten teacher at Benjamin Banneker Elementary. We paired off boys versus girls on the track. Kwon and Khalil had their own cars, and I drove with Kiley while she squealed in joy as we beat her brother and father. Then the boys got their revenge when they outshot us in laser tag. We all ate too much pizza and drank too much blue lemonade. Then we ended the night at Baskin Robbins for ice cream. Watching him with his children, the patience, the affection, and the love he exhibited for them touched me more than the grandest romantic gesture. I may have expensive tastes and drive a car I couldn't really afford, but my heart... my heart was simple and practical. I'd been searching for a good husband and a father in the men I'd dated. Some were good in one area and not the other, and some were piss poor in both. Kwon really did check all the boxes, and he was right. If I waited for some designated timeframe instead of now, I would regret the time wasted not being his wife. I didn't want to have another birthday without being his wife. So when he hugged me goodbye. I whispered in his ear, "I want to be your Mrs. Mason."

He grabbed me into a big hug and lifted me over his head. His joy made me weightless. And we both laughed at his reaction as he placed me back on my feet. A calmness I'd never experienced in my life draped over me like a blanket warm from the dryer. Kwon opened my door, and we promised to call each other later tonight. I looked over my shoulder to make sure the kids didn't see us before I planted a big kiss on his lips. As I watched him grow smaller in my rearview mirror, all I could do was dance. Jagged Edge's Let's Get Married remained on repeat while I jammed all the way home.

Now, to tell the ladies.

Chapter Eleven

Meet the real Kwon.

The aromas of steak grilling greeted me as I approached Harmony on the Harbor, an upscale five-star restaurant on the Baltimore harbor. I loved the water. Couldn't swim to save my life. Yet I was always fascinated with water. When I first moved here, I would spend my weekends strolling along the sidewalks in front of the restaurants and shops along the water. A childhood dealing with fighting parents, a mostly absent father, and an alcoholic mother left me feeling hopeless more than I cared to admit. Especially after Kwon moved away. Moving an hour away from D.C. had been the best decision of my life outside of teaching. Whether my decision to marry Kwon is, another good decision will be answered in time.

The ladies were meeting him tonight, and he'd planned a special dinner for my friends and sister. They were already inside waiting, and I, as usual, was running late, although I lived the closest. Before I could touch the handle, a man's hand grabbed it. I thanked him without looking up out of politeness.

"Ms. Murphy?" The voice asked.

I looked at the speaker as I moved through the door. It was one of my students from last year's father. A charming and attractive Latino man that could have definitely got it if I saw him again before Kwon. "Pleasant surprise, Mr. Santiago."

"My son is not in your class anymore. Call me Carlos." He followed close behind me. "It really is a pleasant surprise. You look good in that dress."

My dress left nothing to the imagination in how the material draped against my curves. I loved color even in the Fall, and the red and orange patterned dress stood out against the usual gray, black, and blues. I smiled at the compliment. "Thank you. How is Manny?"

“He’s well. Still talks about you.” He quickened his steps to walk beside me. “Please say you’re eating alone.”

“No.” I pointed at the round table near the back of the restaurant. “Meeting with friends.”

Carlos grinned. “Beautiful women have beautiful friends. Can I at least walk you to your table?”

I scanned the busy restaurant for Kwon and realized probably not a good idea if my man saw me with another interested man. “I’m good. Are you meeting up with friends too?”

He shook his head. “No. Grabbing a to-go order. I don’t live far from here. We should hang out sometimes.” Carlos stopped walking when he reached the dessert showcase, reached into his pocket, and gave me his card. I took it with a smile with no intentions of using it and hurried to my table. As I neared the table, Kwon approached from the other side, dressed in a red shirt, black slacks, and tie, with a dimpled smile at the ladies. “I was just about to introduce myself and start serving.”

I placed my purse in the only vacant chair. “Sorry, I’m late. At least I got here just in time to make introductions.”

“Bruce Leroy.” Zsa immediately went to hug him. “My, my, my, you have grown up. You’re like Bruce Leroy at the end of *The Last Dragon*. All glowing and shit.”

He kept one arm around her waist and laughed. “I swear, I hated that name until now. I’ll own the glow-up, Bruce Leroy.”

I moved closer and playfully pulled his arm from around my sis. “Nope. He’s mine.”

Kwon curved his hands to my face and kissed me. “Hey, Baby.”

“Hey.” I gazed into his eyes. He really did make me happy. Or using Kwon’s words. Happier.

Bea tapped my shoulder. “Can you let him go so Monie and I can speak?”

“No.” I laughed and squeezed him before I eased down next to Zsa.

After Kwon re-introduced himself to Monie and Bea, he announced, “You can have anything on the menu. I recommend my specially prepared lamb lollipops, garlic-steamed asparagus spears, and basmati rice. We have an excellent wine selection and specialty cocktails.” He gestured to the young waitress behind him. “Britany, our best, will be at your beck and call.”

As the pretty woman gathered orders, Kwon picked up my hand and addressed the group. “Ladies, can I borrow Rianna for a second?”

They were too busy contemplating the wine and cocktail menu after deciding to go with Kwon’s choice to pay attention to me or his ask. Only Monie glanced up and smiled. He pulled me up and led me to the kitchen.

“Are you showing me around?”

Kwon only grunted.

“I know it was brief, but aren’t my friends cool? I can tell Zsa likes you. She was smiling big, and that’s not her. We’ll have to invite them to my house or yours.” I rambled to hide my discomfort that he seemed irritated or annoyed. An emotion I hadn’t seen in him since we were teens. “What’s wrong?”

Kwon nodded with a slight smile as he passed patrons and the staff in the busy kitchen. We didn’t stop until we arrived at a small office. He practically slammed the door behind him and closed the blinds to the only window before facing me. “You don’t flirt with other men. Period. I saw you grinning all in that man’s face.”

“It wasn’t like that. His son was in my class, and we happened to walk into the restaurant simultaneously.” I defended. “I was being polite.”

“What did I say?” He moved closer. No trace of a smile or a smirk. His jawline and the veins in his neck seemed more pronounced. “I’m not that same boy who took shit off people.”

I looked around me. “Excuse me. Are you talking to me? Because I never gave or treated you like shit. Or took you for granted. Ever.”

His hand curved to my ass the moment he reached me. “Then don’t ever fucking flirt with another man.”

“I’m just friendly.” I grabbed the collar of his shirt. “A little harmless flirting because I’m feeling myself in this dress.”

His eyes zoned in on the cleavage of my ample breasts that the dress proudly displayed before he smacked my behind. “Make sure no one else is feeling you.”

“Ouch,” I exclaimed, gripping his collar tight. “Quit it, Kwon. It was harmless.”

Kwon pulled me closer and growled, “It’s not harmless to me. Women always hit on me, and I politely smile and keep it going when I’m in a relationship. I don’t cheat, so I avoid situations that make me a liar. We have to protect what’s ours, or another person will get in between us. And I’m always going to protect mine. Not going to make it easy for another man to have you.”

“What if I don’t stop flirting?” I nibbled his bottom lip, loving the energy between us. Jealousy brought out the alpha and possessiveness in him.

He shook his head, and this time his hand yanked up my dress past my hips. The cool breeze from the room hit my heated skin. “Don’t play, Rianna. I’m not a jealous man except when it comes to you. Walking around my restaurant with no draws or bra showing everybody what’s mine.”

“What’s yours?” I grabbed my own breast through the thin material and arched an eyebrow. “No one owns this or me.”

Kwon’s dark gaze held no humor. “Bend over and grab the desk.”

Excitement, more than irritation, goaded me to remain firm. “No.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Rianna.” His chest heaved as his breathing became shallow, and he roughly spun me around. One smooth palm grasped my neck to tongue me, and the other cupped my naked mound. Kwon’s finger dove in and out of me while his erection pressed insistently and urgently against my ass. Our tongues dueled for control, and I refused to bend over like I knew he wanted. What we both madly wanted. My stubborn resistance the only barrier to fucking. Kwon repeated, “Grab the desk.”

Something in the quiet command of his voice left me utterly helpless yet willing to comply. I laid my chest against his desk, gripping the sides, and raised my ass high. I heard his buckle, and then his pants dropped before he smoothly entered me. My soaking wet body welcomed his rigid, thick length. His fingers reached under me to rub my throbbing clit.

Kwon emphasized his words with every deep stroke. “You and this pussy are forever mine. I didn’t want to fuck you to prove no other man can make you feel like I do, to prove I can have you anytime, or to get you to submit to my will. Don’t need to prove anything I already know.” His valid words triggered more throbbing, more flow, more ecstasy. “I’m fucking you because, from the moment I saw you across the room in this damn sexy dress, I’ve been walking around hard as fuck. Grateful my pants were loose enough to hide how much I want you.”

As my body coiled, ready to explode, Kwon stopped thrusting. I rocked my hips against him, the fullness of his hard dick inside me urging me to completion. He didn’t budge and instead pulled me back up to whisper in my ear, “Don’t fuck around with my heart, and never tell me no to make a point. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” panting, I curved my arms up and behind me to caress the soft hairs on his head. “Please.”

Kwon grasped my hips and dicked me into submission once again.



WHEN I SLID DOWN TEN minutes later in my chair, Bea took one look at me. “You just got fucked.”

Monie and Zsa whipped their heads to look at me, and I calmly straightened my napkin back on my lap. “Can’t wait to eat this delicious food.”

Zsa clapped her hands in appreciation. “You and Kwon might just work out.”

Monie added, “I hope you washed your ass before sitting with us.”

I gave my cuz the middle finger before I dug into my grilled lamb lollipops with relish. My man can cook, fuck, and knows how to handle me. Yep. Kwon and I might just be my best decision.

Chapter Twelve

The shoe just fucking dropped.

Our bond continued to grow every day. Kwon and I were more than a month in and forever to go. With October twenty-eight fast approaching, neither of us had changed our mind. We had a fun day at the movies and a stroll along the harbor. Then browsing through vintage shops while drinking chocolate mochas on a chilly October day. We'd stumbled into his living room, snatching our clothes off, all over each other, hot and heavy, ready for sex. When the doorbell rang, we heard the excited chatter of his children.

Kwon cursed. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What are they doing here so early?"

We scrambled around the room, searching for the clothes we carelessly and wildly discarded. "Should I hide?"

"For how long? My children are staying with me for the week. No idea how to sneak you out. Still need to fix the gate on my back fence to let you out," he said as he hurriedly donned his sweatshirt while his bottom half was still naked.

"Um...think it's more important that you cover that." I pointed to his erect manhood. "How can you be hard right now?"

"Look, my body hasn't caught up with my mind. And you still standing there big titties all out ain't helping matters." He pointed back at me as he found his pants and my panties on the other side of the armchair. I watched him slide the lace into his pocket.

"I need them back. Those are my fav." I finish snapping the front clasp of my bra before pulling my sweater down over my jeggings.

"Now they're mine." Kwon grinned, and the doorbell rang again. The sound was more impatient. "That's Ma. She would love to see you. We can pretend you just dropped by. Time I

re-introduced you officially since we're getting married anyway." He sniffed the air. "Does it smell like sex?"

I sniffed only the clean linen air freshener. "Thank God we didn't fuck yet."

"Can you not say that word in my presence?" He tapped the fading imprint on his pants.

"Okay...okay... we have to answer the door, or it's obvious anyway." I placed the pillows on the sofa, switched on the TV, and started watching Guy Fieri. I took a settling breath, wishing I could reach out to the Diaries and get their advice on acting normal around his children after almost tackling their father. I heard the tapping of children running and Kwon admonishing them. "Hey...no running in the house. We have a guest."

I then heard the deep timbre of his voice but couldn't make out the words. Then a woman's voice. A familiar sound, yet not his mother's voice. I cringed. Great. Not only would I be seeing his children again like this, but I would also be meeting their mother. Kwon had already expressed reservations about introducing us too soon.

Given that we were getting married any day now, we needed to bite the bullet and deal with whatever drama she gave us. I fidgeted on the sofa, trying to figure out the correct posture when they entered the room. Before I could decide, Kiley entered the room first, and when she saw me, her smile practically covered her face, and she flung herself at me as I tried to stand. I lost my balance, and she fell into me. Her infectious giggles brought a smile to my face.

"Rianna?" My other childhood best friend, Taisah, walked in. A hesitant, questioning smile on her face. She looked practically the same as the teenager, I remembered, but more formal. More rigid, to be exact. She rocked an expensive black weave that hung in loose waves down her back. Overdressed in her black linen suit and chocolate brown riding boots for a lazy Sunday, hanging out with children. She looked like money. A real-life black Barbie doll.

"Mommy, this is my teacher."

I closed my eyes briefly, praying for sanity and calmness as it just hit me that my two former best friends not only had been in contact over the years. They had two children together.

She sounded impatient. “Kiley, get off of her.”

I rubbed Kiley’s shoulder. “It’s fine. I was about to leave anyway.”

“No, Taisah is about to leave.” Kwon placed his hands in his pockets and nervously shifted from foot to foot. “She’s on her way to Atlanta.”

“Then you should probably be alone. Excuse me.” I hurried out of the room, not even bothering to acknowledge a woman who ignored or berated me the last two years of high school. Unfortunately, I left my purse and keys at his house. I kicked the tire. Of course, Kwon was too good to be true, and I’m back at square one. Except everything was so much worse because I’d already fallen in love with him and pictured days like we’d been having for the rest of our lives.

Contemplating how to get my shit, I paced in front of his home. When I saw the door open, I quickly headed in the opposite direction with no destination.

“Rianna,” he called after me. I only walked faster. He panted behind me and finally grabbed me in a hug from behind.

My body refused to give in to his strength and warmth, and I remained stiff as I accused, “How could you do this to me?”

Kwon’s chest rumbled. “What did I do to you? I know it doesn’t look good. But she and I have been done even before we had Kiley. Having her confirmed that we were no good together.”

“Do you know how horrible she was to me after you left? To know she’s been in your world all this time, and you’re just finding me.” The hurt changed his arms into a cage, and I had to break free. “Let me go now.”

He released me, and I turned to face him. The sorrow and regret etched in his forehead and eyes still penetrated my temporarily constructed wall. The wall I learned to build

whenever I needed to hide my true feelings until I could be alone.

“Please get my purse and keys so I can get the hell out of here. I don’t want to see that bitch or you anymore.” I wiped my hands for emphasis.

Kwon ran an exasperated hand over his thick hair. “I can’t talk now. I’ll get my mother to watch the kids and come over later and tell you everything.”

“The Leroy, I remembered, never kept anything from me. Always honest with me. I agreed to marry you believing that at the heart of Kwon was that boy.” I yelled, “No. Whatever this is between us is over.”

Kwon’s head jerked back. “It’s not over. We wasted too many years, and fate didn’t bring us back together to destroy us. I planned to tell you that first day, but I kept chickening out because I never wanted you to think you were second choice when you were all I ever wanted.”

“Really? Then why does she have two of your babies, and I’m trying to fucking adopt? Somehow you and she found each other again. Meanwhile, you never tried to find me. I’m all over social media. You could’ve reached out anytime.” I pressed my fists against my eyes, stopping the inevitable tears. “I hate this.” Without looking at him, I uttered, “Get my shit so I can get the hell out of here.”

His cell rang, and he cursed.

I snarled, “I’m sure that’s your bitch calling.”

He touched my arm, and I snatched it away from him. “You better go home, I’m sure she needs to go, and she can’t leave your children until you get back.”

Kwon pleaded with his eyes before jogging back toward his house. I peeked around the corner and saw an angry Taisah come out of his house, yelling something at Kwon, who stood at his door. They were too far away for me to hear their conversation. When she glanced in my direction, I ducked and flattened against the wall like a criminal running from the police. Her car started soon after, and the sound faded in the

other direction. I snuck another glance. This time Kwon leaned against my car with my purse in his hand. I calmly walked toward him and held my hand out. He placed my keys and bag in my hand and stepped off my car.

Without another word, I jumped in the car and sped away. I wanted to call Zsa because she knew all the players, but she would be ready to fight Taisah and Kwon. I was so upset I probably would welcome an ass-kicking. And we were way too old to brawl like we did when we were kids on the block. As much as I needed Bea's sensibility, she had a love/hate relationship with men and would feed into my anger and hurt. Only one person remained.

As soon as I heard her soft voice, I wailed like the floodgates of my tear ducts had been slashed open. "Monie, it's all over."

"What? You and Kwon? I like him for you, and I thought everything was going well." Her voice sounded deflated.

"It was. We had another amazing weekend and started discussing how to weave his children into our relationship more. We even debated whether to buy something together or keep his place since I'm still renting mine."

"Okay. That's all good. What else happened?"

"His ex showed up at the house with his children while we were in the mix."

"Shut the fuck up. No! Did they catch you?"

"No. Kwon thought it was his mother dropping off the children. We got dressed super fast and looked appropriate. Neither of us expected his ex."

"Oh, God. My skin is crawling. You know I went through that shit with Chris." Monie's boyfriend was still married when they started dating five years ago. Monie didn't find out until she popped up at his apartment after he ghosted her, and his estranged wife was there.

"Me too, but this time was much worse than the last time a woman busted in on a man and me."

“Please don’t say he’s married or they’re still together?”

“No. They’re not together.” She rang the doorbell like a guest. My heart thudded so heavily as I drove through the empty streets, trying to find the right words to explain the gut-wrenching pain.

“Well, if she tripped, no sweat. As long as you believe they’re not together. Can’t let another woman who had a chance interfere with your chance.”

“You say it like it’s so simple.”

“Because it is,” she replied, finality in her tone.

“Then why did you leave Chris since you said you believed he and his ex-wife weren’t together at that time?”

“Really, Ri Ri? Why are you throwing my situation back in my face?”

“No, I’m serious. You left that man for five years and were crazy about him. So don’t act like it’s that simple.”

“I thought we were all being different this time. Not getting in our own way. I can admit I agreed to be with him, and then when shit got hard, I bailed. Don’t repeat my mistake Ri Ri.”

“What if you found out that you weren’t Chris’s first choice?”

“Technically, I’m not. He was married before, remember?” She paused. “Are you saying you think he’s still in love with his ex?”

“I’m saying he may settle for me because he couldn’t make things work out with her.”

“I don’t understand.”

Z would have understood what I would say next, but I didn’t need her starting World War IV.

Monie pleaded, “Try me. Wait, where are you anyway?”

I looked for the nearest sign and realized I had ended up in some random neighborhood. “Driving aimlessly. Not ready to

go home. Too depressing because my sheets still smell like him.”

“Then come here.”

“Forty minutes? Isn’t Chris there?”

“He left already. Come on. You’ll be here by four. I’ll order gyros and have some cocktails waiting. We’ll talk, and if you don’t want to go home, you can spend the night and go to work from here. I have a couple of outfits that might work since my ass is bigger than yours anyway.”

“Yes. You got that big donkey butt.”

She giggled. “Alright, it ain’t that big.”

Teasing my cousin lifted some of my dour mood. “Ooh, wait until you pop out one of Chris’s big head babies. That ass will spread even wider. I can’t wait to see you struggle to get through the door with those wide hips and big donkey butt.”

“Shut it, Ri, or you about to make me change my mind.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Monie.”

“You and Z are more than my cousins. You’re my sisters. I always got you.”

“And I always got you.” I turned onto the Baltimore-Washington PWKY. “See you in a few.”



WHEN I PULLED UP TO her apartment complex, I noticed Bea walking to the entrance. I looked around and spotted my sister’s white Acura.

I called Simone, and before she could greet me, I announced, “I’m not coming in. Don’t feel like hearing I told you so from Z. Or Bea looking at me like I was foolish in the first place to agree to marry a man I barely know anymore.”

Tap. Tap. “Get out of the car.” Zsa held a bottle of Crown in her hand. “We’re all here now, sis. Come on before I curse

your ass out for not calling me first.”

I got out of the car reluctantly and followed behind my big sister into the house.

Chapter Thirteen

Hoes before bros.

Once we were all settled in Monie's living room, cocktails, gyros, and hummus in hand, they all looked at me expectantly. I sighed and looked at Zsa. "His baby mama is Taisah."

Zsa's eyes became large and round. "What the fuck?"

"Who's that?" Bea asked.

Monie's brows suddenly lifted. "Your best friend from childhood."

"Wait...I thought Kwon was your best friend?" Bea searched our faces for confirmation.

"They both were my best friends since elementary. Taisah and I were friends since third grade and Kwon since fourth." I crossed my fingers. "We were this tight. Taisah wanted to be accepted by the popular crowd. Me and Kwon had no desire or money to keep up with them. She lost baby fat, braces, and glasses the summer before our junior year. Gained ass and breasts. We didn't exist anymore. Kwon moved away, and I spent the rest of my high school life alone."

Zsa, who sat across from me, frown grew deeper. "I didn't know you were alone. You never said anything."

I shrugged. "You never asked about me. Too busy trying to stay away from Mama and me."

Zsa grabbed my hand. "I was never trying to stay away from you. I couldn't stand Mama. You know that. And you always seemed chipper. It's the one thing I still admire, that you don't let crazy get to you."

"Z, wake up. Keeping a fucking smile when all I want to do is curse or scream isn't healthy. It might be why I'm still alone because who wants a Stepford wife. Men want a woman to fight with and for them. The spicier, the better. Meanwhile, I always try to keep the peace and hate when trouble starts. So

afraid to be fucking left, I lose a little bit of myself.” Pulling my legs under me and rocking in place, I stared straight ahead and verbalized what left the deepest cut. “Maybe that’s why Kwon wants me now. He had the biggest crush on Taisah before he moved away. At some point, they reconnected as adults, had a serious relationship, and had two beautiful children. He tried the spicy, and now he wants mild. The people pleaser, impulsive, energetic woman, my family tolerates, friends laugh at, men adore until they don’t.”

“Enough! Stop it right now,” Zsa roared. We all jumped in our seats at her bellow, which I felt through every cell in our bodies. “Don’t you dare put yourself down in front of me. I won’t hear it.”

I snapped, “You never want to hear shit, Z. I may play nice to keep the peace, but you ignore every fucking thing and everybody, praying it all disappears.”

“Maybe you should have done the same, and you wouldn’t be sitting here crying over some nigga who doesn’t deserve you.”

Monie immediately rebutted. “And Z, maybe you’re alone because you’re too afraid you’re not good enough either. Hell, all of us probably think in some way we’re not good enough. Not just for men. But good enough. Period. So shut up, Z, and let your sister speak. You’re not helping matters.”

Zsa jumped up, her long braids swinging behind her. “If I’m not helping, I’m out.”

“Sit your five-dollar ass down before I make change,” Bea quoted Nino Brown, and stunned by the steely command, Zsa slowly slid back down in the chair. Bea then glanced at us while I determined if we should be laughing. “I had to say something to change the mood in here. Ri Ri is upset, and what happened today triggers old emotions about herself and her family. My family skeletons and drama keep me from giving my all to a man, but today is not about me or you, Z. It’s Ri Ri’s turn, and we’re here for her. Let her say whatever she needs to say.”

Zsa grudgingly smiled. “I’m at least ten dollars.” In a rare show of affection, she leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You’re the best person I know. I hate that you can’t see what I see.”

Smiling back at her, I sniffed and responded, “Most days I like myself... but when Taisah walked in, still gorgeous and arrogant like I meant nothing, it brought back the pain of my last two years in school. It was enough that she acted like seven years of friendship meant nothing, but she made snide remarks about my clothes or hair whenever we passed each other in the hall. She used my insecurities against me to be accepted by her new friends. I’d been invisible to the popular crowd, and no one bothered me. Now, her comments made them notice, and I couldn’t ignore and rise above my emotions when I heard them snicker about me. So, I either spent lunch in the library or helped some teacher. Anything to avoid my classmates.”

Monie hugged me from the side and rested her head on my shoulder. “No wonder you were distraught when she walked in. Bad enough you didn’t expect to meet his ex today, but then it’s a bitch who betrayed you.”

“A bitch that he used to love,” I reminded and leaned my head on my cousin. “Now I wonder if it was just a lie when he told me he didn’t want to marry her. Maybe she rejected him, and because he’s ready to be married, he’s settling for me. And I’m no one’s second choice.”

Bea raised her second cocktail of the early evening. “That.”

Zsa asked quietly, “Have you at least talked to Kwon? Heard his side?”

“No, Z, I got the hell out of dodge. I turned my cell off because he was probably blowing it up. He wanted to come by my place tonight and explain. I didn’t want to hear it.”

My sister moved to the edge of her chair. “My first mind tells me that you should cut your losses now. It’s only been a month, and you don’t need to marry a man you don’t know anyway. But that was before Lipstick. I also met Kwon, and

he's a good man. A solid one. He was a good kid who knew firsthand how crazy our parents were and still stuck by you. From what I know of men, a truly sincere man wouldn't want a manipulative, disloyal, mean woman as his wife." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, men think with their dicks and might get caught up... fascinated because of her looks, but eventually they see through her. Talk to him first and then use your gut, not your lying mind, to decide what happens next."

"I can't believe you're telling me this."

"Me either. But I've never seen you this happy, and the nigga only been back in your life a minute." Her self-deprecating chuckle reminded me that despite our disagreements, she loved me. Deeper than either of my parents.

Impulsively, I hugged her, almost knocking her out of her chair. "Thank you."

"Rianna," she warned as she tried to disentangle my arms from around her shoulders and braids.

"You'll take this loving until you hug me back." For good measure, I placed several kisses on her face. She yelped like I was killing her, and then Monie and Bea joined in on hugging Zsa.

Chapter Fourteen

When his soul speaks.

When I walked up my front steps the following afternoon, I heard Kwon's voice, "I stopped by last night and was here for hours. You won't take my calls. Please talk to me."

I didn't turn around or acknowledge him. I opened the main door and trudged up the stairs to my apartment without closing the main door. When I made it to my apartment, I looked back. He'd just landed at the top and simply opened his arms. I wish I could say I resisted. Kwon always knew what I needed more than I did.

In my bed, I laid my body across his. We were still fully dressed sans shoes. Kwon started speaking, "I'd just turned twenty-eight. Had a chef position at a popular black restaurant in Atlanta. Taisah and her friends were celebrating her twenty-eighth. She asked to speak to the chef because I created a special platter of appetizers at her friends' request, and she loved them. When I approached the table and saw my old friend, I was happy to see her. Hoped that you and she were still in contact so I could reach out to you. She told me that you and she haven't spoken since high school. She didn't tell me that she'd been distant or cruel.

Taisah was instantly attracted, and I just thought she was attractive. A beautiful woman. Yet not my type. I was knocking off for the night, and she insisted I hang out with her and her friends. I didn't have a woman at the time and had money to spend, so we all hung out, and I treated her, and her friends as we bar and club hopped until the wee hours of the morning. We ended up alone at her place, and we started something that I could only say was because of our unresolved pasts. I wanted to be noticed by her when we were teenagers, and she needed validation from a man, a man who she remembered as having the craziest crush on her. She also loved that I accepted her three-year-old son from a previous

relationship. Her ex didn't want anything to do with her or their baby. I was there for her and helped her parent Khalil. Told her as far as I was concerned, he was my son. We kicked it until she pressured me for commitment, and we moved in together a year later, and you know the rest."

"Why didn't you tell me that Khalil wasn't yours? He looks just like you."

"He's grown to look like me because I raised him. All he knows is me. Neither Taisah nor I want him to know that he had a deadbeat. I love him like my own and hadn't been in a serious relationship since she and I broke up to explain our situation." He began rubbing the soft hairs on the side of my head. "Khalil is my son in every way except blood, and telling you I'm not his real father reminds me that I'm not. I meant when I said that if you want to adopt, we can, and I will love that child like my own. But I also need to see you and me in our child."

I listened to our breathing. How we inhaled and exhaled in unison. "A woman desires to be with the father of her children. You took it one step further by being a good father to a child that wasn't yours. Sometimes men judge women for something that's only a part of who she is. Or not realizing she's holding back from loving you the way you want because you're not giving your all either. Maybe Taisah's anger and aggression were only frustration because you refused to give her your name or your all."

"Why are you telling me this? Are you trying to push me back with her? Let me make it clear that I didn't misread her. She is the mother of my daughter. Don't you think I wouldn't have tried to give my daughter what I never had? Huh?" Kwon adjusted so that he looked down at me. "I needed more in my woman. When I felt down, I needed warm hugs on cold nights and a reassuring word or two. Not a moody woman whose primary interest in me felt financial. She knew I was a provider, and I believed in spoiling her. Nothing makes me happier than to give a woman what she needs and wants. I don't mind working hard to do whatever it takes to see her smile, but I ain't no sugar daddy either. I'm not giving just for

you to take, take, take. Love is reciprocal, and when it's not, I'm out. She fights ugly and below the belt when she doesn't get her way. That's not me and will never be. Don't get me wrong, she's a good mother and loves her children. Being a father to her son, who has never known another father, kept us together longer. Thought maybe I'd misjudged her selfishness from when we were young. Time revealed that she is who she is, and I am who I am. I questioned whether I wanted to get married because I hadn't met a woman who evoked that from me. Until you."

My chest swelled, listening to his heartfelt words and how his eyes never wavered from mine.

"When I stood at the classroom door, before you noticed me, my knees almost buckled, and I leaned on the door for support. I knew you were going to be my wife. And not because of a promise made years ago. My soul spoke to me that you were the one. And how can I ignore my soul?"

My hand curved to his cheek, and he brushed my palm with his lips. "Baby, I understand what you're saying. Trust me, I do. This makes me question what else you are hiding or will hide in the future. I haven't hidden anything from you. Were you going to marry me without my knowing that Taisah is your baby's mother?"

"Of course not. Once you told me how mean she'd been to you, I worried about how you would see me. See the possibility of us. I wanted time for you to fall in love with me."

"So, I wouldn't leave you once I knew the truth?"

"Yes," he replied emphatically. "Women can preach until they're blue in the face about wanting men to be upfront. I've been that guy and been dismissed because I was too skinny, too short, too poor, wore glasses, and worked in a restaurant. Or because I already had children or whatever characteristic or part of me doesn't fit what you want in a man. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I didn't want you to believe I was settling for you because I had Taisah first."

A chill went through me at the reminder that he had her first. Did all the things for years I'd been doing with him in the last month. They shared a life and had a family. "How are we supposed to get married now? I don't hate people, but she comes close."

"We don't have to get married anytime soon. Take all the time you need to adjust to everything. I'll make sure she never interferes with our life. Just don't leave me."

"You can't promise that she won't try to fuck with me. I can tell she hasn't changed. The bitch had her nose turned up at me. I won't be surprised if she doesn't ask for Kiley to be moved from my classroom."

He whistled through his teeth and sat up. "Please don't call her a bitch. She's the mother of my children."

His defense of my enemy set my teeth on edge, and a bloody fire coursed through my veins. I jumped out of bed, facing him, and taunted, "Bitch. Bitch. Taisah is a mothafucking bitch. Now what? I'm hitting below the belt, too. Bet you don't want to be my husband anymore since this is me angry."

He rose slowly, reaching for his cell and keys on the bed. "This isn't going anywhere. We'll talk more when you calm down."

"Are you leaving? You don't get to leave because you don't like how I'm talking about your former bitch. Yeah, the fucking bitch made me feel worthless and treated me like shit for two years. The same girl I spent almost every day with for seven years. My best friend, who also knew how my parents treated me. My insecurities about my hair that wouldn't grow until I got these." I pulled on my locs. "Turns around and uses that to make fun of me. Now I'm supposed to be cool with her? Trust that she won't..." my voice broke. "That she won't turn that beautiful little girl against me because she can. I'm supposed to believe she won't resent you married me when you never gave her that."

He closed his eyes wearily.

“My sister and friends encouraged me to hear your side because they’ve never seen me so happy. In one month, you accomplished something no one ever did. Made me believe I could really be happy. I could finally stop looking in from the outside at all the happy people and become one of them. That first day I cried in your arms because I knew you somehow made it through the storm victoriously from the moment you smiled. My best friend, who knew more than anyone else, how it felt to be an outsider, how it felt to be poor and to have a fucked-up family, made it. As happy as I was for you, I also cried because I felt abandoned again by you. I could see you were emotionally in a place I hadn’t quite made.” His eyes remained closed though his shoulders sloped, and the corners of his mouth tilted down. “That’s why I couldn’t just say yes when you asked about getting married. I buy the stupidest shit on a whim, sleep with men I shouldn’t have because the mood hit, and spend money I didn’t have without thought, but when the man I will always love wants to marry me, I can’t. I’m still a work in progress, Kwon. Finding out about Taisah has set me back.”

Kwon pushed his right hand into his pocket and opened his eyes. “I *will* always be a work in progress.” He touched his chest with the other hand. “In here, I’m still that scared short, skinny boy with the thrift store clothes and glasses that barely fit. Scared you won’t love me back. I smiled the way I did that day because I’d found my wife. My best friend. And if you’re worried about Taisah, she wouldn’t remove Kiley from your class. She’s known you were her teacher from the beginning.”

“If she did, why didn’t she tell you?” Some of the air deflated inside my anger, and I placed my hands on my hips. “What fucking game is she playing?”

Kwon held his palms up. “Hell, if I know. I found out from Khalil yesterday. He told me that his mother specifically asked for Kiley to be in your class because she was a friend of yours.”

Confusion swirled through my thoughts. “Is she pissed that we’re together?”

A sly smile slid across his lips. “Still using the present tense.”

Annoyed at his arrogant assumption he still had me, I tried to punch him in his chest. He quickly grabbed both of my hands and looped them around his neck. His aggressive move slammed me against his body, and I gasped just enough for him to slip his tongue inside my mouth. Kwon coaxed me with his lips to relax and forgive him. Holding me tight, he whispered in between his tongue, exploring my mouth, that we could work through this and that he had no more secrets. That he loved me and that he would never abandon me again. His words, touch, and love settled over me like the sweetest balm.

Chapter Fifteen

Unlikely ally.

“Bea, pass me the skeleton.” I precariously balanced myself on a step stool to hang a glow-in-the-dark plastic skeleton from the ceiling.

“Halloween is next week. Why are you just putting up decorations? I’m ready for Happy Hour.” Bea sat on my work table, swinging her feet as she gave me one of the skeletons. She’d been in the city for work and called to see if I was available for drinks. I told her to stop by my school first.

“I’ve been in a fog with everything going on with Kwon. I usually have my Halloween decorations up by October first.” I attached the skeleton and stepped down. “We were supposed to get married on the twenty-eighth.”

Bea sighed. “Why does it have to be over? We all have pasts, and it’s not like you and she were friends when they hooked up. I really like Kwon for you. Makes life easier when it’s someone who already gets you.”

“Like Terrick?” I side-eyed her as I piled up the remnants of my decorations. Terrick, Bea’s older brother’s best friend, was a heartbreak walking with his imposing height and build. His mocha-colored skin, long beard, and bald head screamed big dick energy. Monie used to crush on him terribly when we were teenagers. He’d been too much trouble for me to pay any attention beyond recognizing a fine black man when I saw one. Even now. Half the women, possibly my sister, wanted him, and he knew it.

She bristled. “Terrick is nothing like Kwon. You have a good man, and Terrick will rip my heart apart and not look back. I’ve seen too many of his women coming by my Mama’s house looking for him while he’s out with the next one.”

I walked to my desk and placed the decorations on my desk. “Dogs get tired and come home eventually. Besides, he would never do that to you.”

“He won’t because I would never be stupid enough to let my guard down with him.” Bea folded her arms across her chest. “Why are we talking about him instead of Kwon?”

“Just an observation that every time I’m at any party or gathering with you and him, Terrick always finds a way to be around you. At your mama’s engagement party, he was all over you. He kept touching your arm, your back, whispering something to you. Flirting. Didn’t pay any other woman at that party any attention.” Her face flushed red, and I clapped my hands. “You do like him?”

“No, I don’t,” she protested softly.

“I bet you’re writing about him in the Diary.” I picked up my backpack, and my friend dropped her head. Her asymmetrical bob flowed around her pretty latte face. “Ask him out, Bea. Guarantee that man would be so down.”

“Look, Ri Ri, keep this between you and me. I made such a big stink about dating someone in our circle, and the one man I can’t seem to stop thinking about is my brother’s best friend. Bo and I don’t speak most of the time as is. If Terrick and I ever dated, he would be done with both of us.”

I helped her off the table. “We’re not letting anyone or anything hold us back from love, remember?”

“Um...do you even hear yourself? If I’m not supposed to do that with a man who I know will break my heart, then you can’t with a man who wants you to be his wife. You’re letting some past bitch wreck your future.”

“Shh...” I admonished as we walked down the hall. “She’s a parent here. And I’m not done with him. Just reconsidering this whole marriage thing. Think we should slow all the way down.”

When we headed to our respective cars, a woman’s voice called my name. I turned my head toward the sound, and Taisah was parked in a gray Volvo SUV a few feet from my car. “Can I have a minute?”

Bea moved closer to me with a frown. “Everything okay?” she asked me though she looked at Taisah suspiciously. “I

remember you from a couple of slumber parties when we were kids.”

Taisah nodded with a closed mouth smile.

Bea looked at me. “I’ll be right over there if you need me.”

“I won’t be long.” Once Bea walked to her car, I turned my attention back to Taisah. “If you worried about how I’m treating Kiley, you don’t have to worry. Despite how I feel about you, I love her and would never hurt her.”

“I never thought you would. If I did, I would’ve already had Kiley placed in another class. My son has been in this school for two years. I watched you at the Spring Carnival last year with your class. You were the only kindergarten teacher demonstrating activities by running with them, laughing, and engaging with them. And you had utter control of your students during the chaos of children at a school fair. I wanted Kiley to have the best teacher and specifically requested her to be in your class.”

“Why didn’t you tell Kwon you requested me to be Kiley’s teacher?”

She tapped her long nails against the wheel as if contemplating what to say. “We don’t speak that often, even when it concerns the children. Our friendship ended long before our relationship did.”

“Why are you telling me this? Why did you want your daughter in my class since you seemed determined to make my life hell back in high school?”

Taisah’s light brown eyes held regret. “I’ve wanted to apologize for years. Figured once Kiley got into your class, we would have the chance to talk face-to-face. I know I was a bitch to you back then. So afraid of losing popularity, I did whatever I could to distance myself from you. I treated you like shit for people who didn’t know the meaning of loyalty and honesty. The truth is that to this day, you were the best friend I ever had.”

“Did Kwon ask you to speak to me?” her words barely penetrated my heart, which had been bricked against her for

years. I folded my arms.

“Kwon has no idea I’m here. Not speaking on his behalf, but I am on my own. I was shocked, just like you, when I realized the new woman in his life was you. Although I shouldn’t have been surprised. We argued that day because I thought he should’ve told both of us before we met.”

Feeling the need to defend him though I agreed with her, I retorted, “Like you should’ve told him that you knew I was Kiley’s teacher.”

She blew out her breath. “Listen, I know we’ll never be friends again. Just wanted to apologize for any hurt I might have caused.”

I took a step back. “Your apology came about eighteen years too late. When I needed you the most, you stopped being my friend and became my enemy. Made me doubt myself, and that was probably the worst. I could get over you deciding you preferred other people to me, but the bullshit you said about me, trying to keep up the mess when I did nothing but be your friend.” As I spewed my feelings, I realized I had displaced my anger. I’d blamed Kwon for being with her. That by his association with her, he betrayed me too. And like that, my fury vanished. Like completely disappeared miraculously. “You know what? I’ll take your apology. I forgive you. Holding on to residual hurt is more dangerous to the body than cancer. You’re just not that important for me to waste another thought.” I started to walk off before another thought occurred. “Hey.”

Taisah quirked a brow.

“Answer this.”

Taisah nodded, her lips forming a straight line.

“Did you or he end your relationship? And why did you say you shouldn’t have been surprised that I’m the woman in Kwon’s life?”

Her eyes widened slightly, and she wrinkled her nose like something smelled before she responded, “The last time we broke up, he ended it. Told me he wasn’t the man for me. I

tried to hurt him by running up here with the kids; all that did was hurt everyone. The children missed him so.” She lifted her chin higher, her smile faint. “That bastard never stopped loving you. The first time I saw him again after years, he asked about you. I still remember how his eyes sparkled, waiting to hear about you. When I told him I hadn’t spoken to you in years, the light left his eyes just like that. I never saw that brightness again until I had Kiley, and he started seeing you. Except I didn’t know it was you he was seeing.”

“You giving her too much time. We need to go.” Bea blew her horn and yelled out the window.

“We’re almost finished. Damn.” I grinned. True happiness for the first time since I found out about Taisah.

“I don’t have anything else to say,” Taisah added. “I need to get the kids from my mother’s.”

“Give Ms. Lola the greetings and let her know I still miss her.” I used to love her mother better than I loved mine. Another casualty of the end of our friendship.

Taisah’s lips curved into a broad smile. “Will do. The way Kwon has been grinning lately, you can say it to her soon.” As she started the ignition and prepared to back up, she added, “Take care of him, Rianna. He’s a real one. And tell his ass, ‘you’re welcome.’”

“I plan to.” I watched her drive away, surprised by the turn of events and that maybe Kwon had misjudged her too. She had grown since high school. Or maybe in the last two years, raising her children alone and having a new man brought perspective to the nasty woman she’d been.

Chapter Sixteen

I need my diary.

*D*ear Lipstick

I went to see my therapist to apologize for leaving abruptly and to thank her for allowing me to be more authentic about my feelings. I told her about meeting Kwon and that we planned to honor our promise years ago. I also said to her that adoption would be placed on hold until we decided about our future together. Dr. Cosgrove praised me and was glad I'd returned to terminate therapy officially. She thought I would be fine on my own and had always believed it about me even when I didn't.

The combination of the pact I made with my girls and being in therapy prepared me to love Kwon the way he deserves and needs. He is a good man. A solid man who has and will continue to do all for his loved ones. He taught me about love, loyalty, and forgiveness. He believed my mother always loved me and that life had gotten the best of her. Two days ago, he insisted I surprise Mama and let go of all the pent-up hurt. He drove me three hours to Richmond on a Sunday afternoon.

When we pulled up in front of her home, she and her husband sat on the porch enjoying the afternoon. They looked content, and Mama never appeared more beautiful and serene. Even younger than the last time I saw her about two years ago. When she noticed me, she immediately rose from her chair and ran to me. We cried and hugged each other for so long that our men recognized they were not needed and went inside the house. Then it was our turn to sit on the porch, hold hands and catch up like the mother and daughter I'd always envisioned.

She told me that she'd done more reflection on her behavior as a mother. She truly understood the difficulty me and Zsa had with forgiving her. We'd already lost a father, and she'd deprived us of a mother in her despair and drunkenness.

She'd been respecting our space, but not a day went by without thoughts of us, praying that one day we could be a family again. Mama also spoke of my father, who'd been long gone from our lives, and how she'd once thought he was the love of her life. She believed that if she held on tight, he would eventually see how much she needed him and realize how much he needed her and his daughters. When he finally left us for the last time, she didn't know how to cope with a broken heart and used alcohol to soothe the pain. Until she didn't feel pain anymore and had finally gotten over him. Three sober months later, she met Leo. And started living all over again. She held no regrets in loving my father. Her only regret was not loving herself enough to be the mother she should have been to Zsa and me.

I must have stared in wonder at Kwon all the way back to Baltimore. He once again knew what I needed before I did. To his credit, he never uttered I told you so about forgiving Mama or asked again about marriage. I hadn't yet told him about the conversation with Taisah, and from what I gathered, she had no intention of telling him. He loves me, always had, and that was enough. Kwon seemed content with me and took each day as it came. It was past one in the morning when we reached my apartment. He ran my bathwater, helped me undress, and warmed up a rich broccoli and cheddar soup with French bread he'd prepared earlier. After we ate, we snuggled under the comforter and talked about the visit with my mother until he fell asleep. As he slept, I caressed the waves in his hair, wanting to tell him I decided to marry him on October twenty-eight as we'd originally planned. Instead, I wrote it here.

I'm saying goodbye to Rianna Murphy and hello to Rianna Mason. I hope and pray that I love the man beside me to the best of my ability and that he does the same. And I hope I continue to love his dick even when we're old and gray. LOL. Okay, I'm actually serious, Lipstick.



ZSA CALLED ME THE FOLLOWING day as she commuted to her job on Capital Hill. “So?”

“Good morning. How are ya?” I switched lanes, toying with my sis, knowing why she called.

“Fuck you. You know why I called?” Today was the day.

“I do, but first, I want to tell you I went to see Mama.”

“Why? Is everything alright?” Alarm rang clear from her voice.

“It is. And judging from the fear in your voice, it might be time for you to go see her.”

“No need. You can tell me how she’s doing.”

“She’s really good. All happy, and Darnell treats her well. Still.”

“Guess there is a God,” she said drily.

“I won’t pressure you about seeing her because if Kwon hadn’t insisted we visit her, I wouldn’t have. All I can say is that it was the best decision. I can finally let the past be the past. I forgive her.” She loved my father with a fierceness that I didn’t understand, and when he left for good, she lost herself. Kwon had only been back in my life for a few weeks, and the one night we didn’t speak had been miserable. And I only expected, with time, that I would love him with a boundless deepness. The way my mother loved my father with every bit of her heart. I won’t forget the hell I went through during my childhood and adolescence, but I can say I understand her better. I was in love, probably for the first time. Mama just fell for the wrong man. Right or wrong, our heart wants what it wants.

Zsa grew quiet, and we rode in silence for miles. As I approached my destination, I called her name.

“Yeah?”

“I’m almost here. You okay?”

“Thinking that both you and Mama are happy. Able to let go of shit and because of men. What if I never meet that man

who makes me a better woman or accepts me where I am? Am I doomed to feel this way if I don't?" Her voice trembled so unlike the fierce sister I know and love.

"What do you feel?" I asked quietly, afraid I would scare her off if I spoke even a little louder.

"Sad, depressed, lonely. Probably drink too much. Trying to forget. Realizing no matter how hard I try, some actions aren't forgivable." She paused before talking again, her voice lighter and less embittered. "Glad you and Mama made amends if that's what you needed for closure and peace. I thank God for you every day. You keep me sane and hopeful. That's the only reason I went off at Monie's house. If the one person in my life is my sun decides they want to be a moon, then what happens to me?"

I parked and sat in the car, wishing we were beside each other instead of miles apart. "I didn't know that's how you felt or how you saw me, Z."

She chuckled. "I didn't want you to know. You were already under a lot of pressure. You don't need to worry about big sis, too."

"That's just it. I worry about you whether you ever say a word to me because I know you have hurt as I do. Maybe even more." I blinked back tears. "I'm not that little girl, that pest that irked you most days. I am here for you always."

"Look, I got to get my ass into the office. They'll announce sometime this week whether I got the promotion." She hung up the cell and called me right back before I could touch the handle. "You getting married today?"

"I think I need to tell Kwon before I tell anyone else."

"If you decide to get married, can you at least send me a pic or something? I always thought I would be there whenever you jumped the broom."

"I promise." We both laughed at my choice of words. "Love you."

"Me too." She clicked off again as I locked eyes with Kwon. He leaned against the front door of the house he grew

up in.

Chapter Seventeen

One last secret.

Kwon texted me this morning to meet him at his old house. I exited the car and walked through the black iron fence that had finally been repaired. Tears trickled down my cheeks at the sight of the home I once knew like mine.

“I bought this house as soon as I had the money. Had it fixed up,” Kwon said as he watched me approach. “I rent it out to single mothers and their children. Make the price fair so they can build. Three families have lived here, and each has moved on to a better home.”

I stood at the bottom step and looked up at him. “Thought you were done with secrets.”

His lips curved into a smile. “Figured you would forgive me one more secret.” He held his hand out, and I walked up the three steps and held his hand. “I was frightened out of my mind when my mama told me we were moving. I’d pictured you and me growing old together, even if we were only friends. And suddenly, I had to change my vision. I made that promise to you right here because it was my guarantee of seeing you again.”

I rested my hand against his chest. “At what point did you fall in love with me?”

He smiled. “I know when you fell for me. Right here, that last day. I saw it in your eyes. You looked at me differently. Even your touch was different. I don’t know if it was because I was leaving or because of Antwoine. You wanted to kiss me, which gave me the courage to ask you to be my wife back then.”

I half-teased, “Boy, you said if we were still single, I was a last resort.”

“I only said that because I was still trying to hide how I really felt about you.” Kwon opened the door to a room full of beautiful bouquets scattered throughout the small living area

that had been made comfortable. He picked up a red plastic bag as I covered my mouth at the beauty before me. “Open it.”

“What is this?”

“Just open it.” He grinned.

When I reached into the bag, I felt the soft material. I pulled out a shirt and hugged it to my chest. It was the shirt I gave to Kwon for his sixteenth birthday. “I can’t believe you still have this.”

His jaw tightened several times before he started speaking. “I don’t know if you realized this was the only gift I received that birthday. Mama apologized for not having the money to buy me a gift by making my favorite meal. I knew you had spent whatever money you had on my gift, and I fell in love right then. You sacrificed for me. Even now, since we’ve been together, you still do the same. You wake up from a deep sleep to talk to me about my day, massage my feet, and make sure I have a good meal. You take care of me, and allow me to take care of you. Our love is reciprocal. I also realized that maybe you didn’t believe I truly loved you because I never proposed to you rightfully. Look at the label of the shirt.”

On the label, there was a yellow diamond solitaire attached by a pin. With shaky hands, I undid the safety pin and held the ring. Kwon eased down to the floor on bended knee in front of me. “Every single October twenty-eight that passed since the last day we were here, I thought of you. I wanted this to be our wedding date, but I can live with it being the date we officially got engaged.” Kwon’s glasses slipped slightly, and I pushed them up for him. He chuckled. “I still can’t seem to get the right fit.”

“I’ll keep pushing them up if you can’t.” I smiled at him and touched his face, marveling that this man would forever be mine. “I decided last night that I wanted to marry you today. Until I spoke to my sister.”

His forehead wrinkled, and I quickly bent down to kiss his lips. “Baby, I meant that I want to marry you but want the people closest to us to be a part of our love. Think you can wait until Christmas Eve to marry me?”

Kwon bounced to his feet, grabbed me by my cheeks, and kissed my lips and the sweet spot on my neck. I giggled the whole time. His exuberance and love swept me off my feet better than if he'd picked me up. I found love when I at least expected it. Had stopped searching for it. I had even started planning my family on my own. Because of a twist of fate from an enemy, Taisah, whether consciously or not, brought us back together. Although it doesn't quite make up for her past treatment of me, I will always thank her for placing Kwon in my path. As for the Lipstick Diaries, my sisters, by blood and choice, made sure I kept myself open for love and a man only meant for me. And in my heart, I know Zsa and Bea's time will come, too.

Hope you enjoyed Rianna and Kwon's journey to love. Next up is Bea and Terrick in [*Beautiful Lies*](#).

Keep reading for an excerpt.

BEAUTIFUL LIES

Dating had never been a problem for Bea Wang. Except she doesn't trust men. Wanting to shake her beliefs about men, she and her girls make a pact to be different in love. They vow to be sexually fierce, completely open, and purposeful in getting what they each want from men.

Even faking an engagement with her brother's best friend.

Terrick Jones has always been off-limits. He's her brother's best friend AND is incapable of fidelity. Wanting to fit in with her married colleagues at her company retreat, Bea convinces the sexy and perennial bachelor to pretend to be engaged just for the weekend. And somehow, what started as a lie becomes too damn real. How can Bea trust and love the one man who can shatter her heart?

Excerpt:

On my way back up the back stairs into the kitchen, my brother's best friend, Terrick, seemingly appeared out of the air and pulled me to him by my hand. "I'm ready to dance." I stiffened my body at the contact with his hard chest. No one could see us from where we stood, and despite the hardness of his muscled arm and chest, I still fought against melding my body to his warmth. Always fought against him whether he knew it or not. Never wanted to let my guard down with him.

I pushed away and grumbled, "I don't have time to play with you."

"Promise to be good if you play with me." He spoke in a low tone meant only for my ears, and I pressed down the blush that threatened to show on my light skin. Terrick leaned against the back wall of my house. We were almost close in height for once because he stood two steps lower. Admittedly, he looked good in his white Henley shirt and jeans. The thin material hugged his biceps and chest better than any woman. The diamond studs in both ears sparkled brightly against his dark skin. His warm, copper-colored eyes hinted at mischief and sexual devilment. His panty-dropping full lips were

caressed by his always-groomed mustache and long beard. Terrick's broad forehead and angular face softened by the roundness of his cheeks made him appear much younger than his thirty-six years on this Earth. More boyish despite his height and thick build.

"Leave me alone. There are plenty of women here who've been eye fucking you since you walked in." I gestured toward the backyard before looking him up and down with disdain. "Though I wouldn't hook you up with my worst enemy."

Used to my insults, he only raised one eyebrow. "You've been checking for me."

"You wish, T." I continued into my townhome, though I heard him mutter that he did wish. I had to shake him from my thoughts. He'd dipped me and placed a kiss on my neck in the kitchen earlier tonight when he wanted to distract me from another argument with my brother. His actions had me so fucking hot that I wanted to drag him to my bedroom and fuck him.

And that would be the biggest mistake of my life.

Find out if Bea can tame Terrick and even if she wants to in [*Beautiful Lies*](#).

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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 she 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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