

SENSUOUS AFRICAN AMERICAN ROMANCE

WHISPERS
IN THE *Night*
BOOK #1

DOROTHY ELIZABETH LOVE

Sensuous African American Romance

Whispers In The Night
by
Dorothy Elizabeth Love

The Ryan Family Series

Book-1

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LED Literature and Publications

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Chapter One

Would she make it?

Pulling into the parking lot, Patricia Ryan glanced at the car's digital clock. If she didn't make it, all would be lost. Rushing, she grabbed her purse, folders, and keys, then slid from behind the wheel, making sure to lock the door. She turned and ran right into the solid chest of a stranger.

"Oh my!" Patricia exclaimed, stumbling backward.

Strong hands captured her waist.

Her black portfolio burst open when it hit the pavement, scattering papers around her feet and those of the stranger who continued to hold her. Her purse also fell, spilling its contents over a three-foot radius. Keys clattered as they hit pavement, her lipstick container rolled, and Patricia cursed faintly.

Looking up, she could not help noticing that his engaging smile had widened after she whispered what she thought was inaudible. Luck, she decided, wasn't on her side tonight.

Then he said, "In a hurry?"

She wanted to apologize for being inattentive, but the powerfully mesmerizing eyes that complimented an ebony-bronze face halted any words she wanted to say. A faint scar above his left brow added a charming quality to his manly features. His deep brown eyes held confidence. And amusement. She watched his lips, ones that had a look that promised satisfaction, curl up into a wider smile. His mouth was draped with the blackest, silkiest mustache. The smile. The looks. Or possibly his closeness? Whichever it was, it stunned her into temporary silence. She inhaled quickly and was treated to the pleasant aroma of his spicy cologne.

"No. I enjoy running into men built like a brick wall," she managed. Humor in times of desperation. Wasn't that the theory for handling stress? Caution was also warranted because she didn't know this man. She stepped backward to add distance between them, and her heel caught in the ring of her car keys. Unsure of her footing, she reached for the closest form of stability, his outstretched arms.

"Did I hurt you?"

She wasn't hurt, but her senses were reacting to the feel of his hands at her waist. She couldn't believe her dazed reaction to him. Less than twenty minutes ago she had been debating with the executive team at Brackman Advertising about the long-term benefits of implementing her new sales and marketing proposals. That had been exhausting but hadn't left her feeling as limp as she did now.

The slight squeeze before one hand dropped from her waist sent delightful pulsating signals through her body. At the same time, she was very aware of the overly familiar contact he was making with her. She cautiously stepped backward again, forcing him to drop his other hand.

"No, I'm fine." She was at a loss for words, which was very unlike her.

"Good. Let me help you pick up your things," the man suggested.

Kneeling to retrieve her belongings and gather the important documents needed for the battle with City Hall and the Mackenzy-Duran Company, Patricia remembered she was late. She graciously withheld another colorful choice of words and managed to utter a more appropriate statement.

She used the moment of silence to mentally regroup so that she could focus on the issues she wanted to present in defense of the DuBois Center. If she didn't win over the council in the meeting tonight, all was in jeopardy. A lot of poor kids were depending on her not to fail. As the president of the volunteer Board of Directors for the DuBois Center, she had been struggling to help save it from destruction. Without the positive impact the Center had on the "At-risk" families in its community, the kids who attended would be relegated to the sewers of society with its limited choices.

The Mackenzy-Duran Company was trying to purchase the land on which the Center stood and demolish the building that held hope for many of the inner-city kids. If the Center was lost, so too would be their hopes. Patricia had promised not to let that happen.

"I'm rushing to a meeting that is about to start at city hall. I should have been watching where I was going." They were at eye level, squatting and reaching around each other for her personal effects and wrinkled papers. "I'm sorry for running into you."

As she knelt, the hem of her cream-colored skirt slid to mid-thigh. She noticed the man's eyes lingering there, obviously admiring her legs. As she leaned forward to get her keys, she could feel his eyes on the top of her breasts as her silk, cream-colored blouse opened slightly. She wondered if he could see that her heart was racing. That and the humid, Florida breeze heightened her discomfort.

"Don't be. I came up from behind. I should have said something, but I thought you were headed in the opposite direction." He retrieved her pink lipstick container

and most of her papers before standing. Stacking them neatly, he stowed them in her black leather portfolio and laid it on the hood of the champagne-colored BMW 740 parked next to her car. "You're pretty quick on your feet."

"Sort of," Patricia said. "But better on a dance floor. Or at least I hope I'm more graceful."

"I'll bet you are," he said.

His tone indicated more was hidden behind those words. His pulsating, deep voice reminded her of a risqué jazzy beat. One that could move you, sweep you away with its rhythm. When his charming smile returned, Patricia decided that he had read her thoughts.

"Maybe," was all that she said.

"Got everything?" he asked, looking around until he spotted an errant sheet of paper blowing in the gentle spring breeze. "I'll get that."

Patricia gave an appreciative eye to the way his tailored charcoal suit fit his tall, lean form. His casual movements and relaxed demeanor replaced her usual caution with attraction.

"Here's the last of it," he said, retrieving her portfolio and placing the paper inside before handing it to her.

"Thank you." She noticed he didn't make any move to leave. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I need to get something out of my trunk." He stepped back against the BMW as Patricia slipped sideways into the narrow aisle that separated their cars. Looking up and catching his gaze, she smiled slightly, nervously, and glanced at his silk burgundy tie. His expression was making her nervous, so she glanced away. *There should be a law against that roguish look on his face,* she thought.

When she closed the trunk of her Volvo, she noticed he was still resting against the hood of his car, arms crossed on his chest, legs crossed at the ankles, eyeing her at an angle. *What a good-looking man.*

"I'm headed to City Hall," he said. "I waited to see if you need any help." He pushed himself away from the car. "It's the least I can do for delaying you."

It was times like this that Patricia's vanity got in the way. She hadn't checked her appearance before getting out of the car and wasn't sure if their collision left her looking as disheveled and uncomfortable as she felt. She rubbed her lips together, hoping to spread what little lipstick remained. She desperately wanted to look in a mirror. The springtime purple-blue sunset provided limited light for checking her appearance in the window's reflection. Besides, such a move would be too shallow for her liking.

"I have everything," Patricia said. "I'm in a hurry, but we can walk there together." Since he had been silently watching her closely, Patricia decided he had probably seen more than she could detect from her faint reflection in the window anyway. Walking toward him and stopping a few feet away, she said, "Do I look as though I just broadsided someone?" He was also blocking the path that led to City Hall.

"Let's see." He took an intimate step toward her. He reached up and brushed what Patricia assumed to be a lock of stray hair back into place, a motion too familiar for a stranger. She got another whiff of his spicy cologne, an aroma that had a fresh, exquisitely relaxing quality about it. She drank in the smell of him, needing its soothing effect. Deep breaths cleansed the remnants of the tension about the meeting away. He stepped back to further appraise her condition. She watched as his eyes slowly moved over her from head to toe. His look was appreciative. Then he said with deliberate slowness, "Perfect."

Though she liked his warm and reassuring appraisal, the reality of the moment seized her. "Th--Thanks." She cleared her throat, hoping that anything else she said wouldn't sound like the croaking frog she had just heard.

He stepped to the side again and moved his arm to wave her through. "Let's go." As she walked past, he fell in step with her. "I'm Mac Carter."

"Patty Ryan." Where do I know that name? she asked herself. She asked aloud, "Mac Carter? That name sounds familiar."

"I would have remembered if we'd met before," Mac responded, smiling. "And I don't make a habit of accosting women in Volvos," he said. "But I do make restitution for my mistakes. Please, you must let me make it up to you."

He reached for her elbow and gently held it as they ascended the steps to the building. Patricia counted to twelve before he removed his light touch from her arm. Chivalrous and protective. She liked that.

"Name it," Mac offered. "Launder your suit. Have your car washed." He paused to open the door for her.

Slowing to smile up at him because of his kidding, "I really must go."

"You can give me a few more minutes." Mac implored. "If I'm not being too forward, I'd prefer dinner. Say tomorrow evening. At your favorite restaurant?"

He was being extremely forward, but how could any woman resist that tempting smile and seductive voice? He makes it hard to refuse him, Patricia thought.

"What can I say to an offer like that?" she said, somewhat surprised that he had made it.

"Either seven o'clock or eight o'clock would be a good choice," he suggested.

Patricia watched his kissable mouth form that offer. She weighed her options of having dinner with him or another dinner alone. "Maybe I can take you up on your offer at another time." She stared up at his dark chocolate eyes for several seconds. "I really need to get to the DuBois Center meeting. I need to rearrange my notes if I'm going to give a worthwhile presentation on saving the Center. I think..." She stopped her statement and turned to the person calling out her name from across the corridor. She waved back.

Turning back to Mac, she saw him reach into his inside jacket pocket to produce what looked like a business card.

"Where can I reach you?" She watched him pull out his cell phone to probably store her number.

She was about to give Mac her phone number when Councilman Cecil Wilson, a member of the Standing Committee on Land Usage and Zoning, walked up to them.

"Mr. Carter," Wilson said. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Miss Ryan, are you purposely trying to lose this debate tonight? If you don't get up there now, you won't have a chance at all!" Wilson took Patricia's forearm and pointed her in the direction of the elevator. "You two have met. Good! I'm surprised to see the two of you talking so amiably." He punched the elevator button.

Wilson and Mac must both be on the committee together, Patricia concluded.

She noticed an annoyed look enter and quickly vanish from Mac's eyes. The man did not take well to interruptions, she concluded, and made a mental note of that.

Wondering about Wilson's last comment, Patricia asked as they stepped into the elevator, "What makes you say that Mr. Wilson?" she asked.

Wilson pressed the desired floor on the elevator panel as Mac stood next to him. "I would think the two of you would choose to be less... What can I call it? Friendly. Good to know the two of you aren't letting business get in the way of friendship. Even though Mackenzy Carter," Wilson tilted his head toward Mac, "Is the main owner of the Mackenzy-Duran Company. And he is planning to buy the land the Center is on to tear it down and put up a parking lot." Wilson laughed briefly. "That's the reason we're all here in the first place, right?"

Shocked, Patricia looked in disbelief from Mac Carter's unreadable face to that of Cecil Wilson. The man she was accosted by, charmed by, and considered going on a date with, was the one man she had vowed to oppose. Mac Carter was Mackenzy Carter, owner of the Mackenzy-Duran Company!

Chapter Two

Patricia couldn't believe it. If Mac Carter had pulled a knife out and threatened to slice her throat, she could not have been more shocked! "What?" she managed to sputter. "I'm ... I'm sorry, Mr. Carter," she said. "I didn't recognize you. Up until now, your company's lawyer and PR people were involved." Still looking at Mac, she said, "Did you know that I was here on behalf of the DuBois Center?"

"Yes," was all Mac offered. Patricia thought he should have acknowledged it earlier.

Wilson, on the other hand, acted shocked. "You ... you, you mean..." His eyes darted rapidly between them, "You don't know who *he* is?" Painfully embarrassed, he stuttered, "Well it's ... I just thought ... you two were friends," he ended lamely. His small, thin-lipped, over-talkative mouth was not big enough for both of his small feet to fit in.

The full impact of his blunder did not register with him until Patricia's face had swiftly shifted from shock to controlled rage. His embarrassment became obvious with each shade of color his face turned. The pale, thin, balding man took on the characteristics of a chameleon. He turned red, which deepened to a light purple when Patricia admitted she didn't know Mac was her nemesis until he had blurted it out. Then Wilson's color faded to a sickly shade of yellow, which blended nicely with the paint of the government walls behind him, as he saw the murderous look on Mac Carter's face. Wilson stuttered another apology, then launched into a litany of reasons for his assumption. Each explanation centered on how Patricia and Mac seemed quite *cozy* and *comfortable* with each other. That comment elicited a grunt from Patricia and an unreadable stare from Mac.

She would not allow Mac Carter to waste any more of her time. Time to get to the meeting, time to prepare to save the Center, time to regroup. Time, as precious as it was, has been escaping her all day. Never had she been so desperate to catch it. For a split second, Patricia wondered if it was life's way of telling her that the mission tonight was hopeless. No, she couldn't think that way.

Patricia straightened her spine in response to that thought. The instant the elevator door opened, she excused herself and hurried out. She was politically and philosophically against the Mackenzy-Duran Company because she believed it lacked compassion for the kids who would be hurt by the company's callous plans. She had mentioned to Mac Carter the plight of the Center as they entered the building, and he had not let on that he was with Mackenzy-Duran. Correction, the *owner* of Mackenzy-Duran.

That act was a blatant deception, she thought. And not only that, but he was also trying to delay her. The company lacked compassion, and its owner lacked scruples. Patricia counted another reason why she shouldn't like him.

Was that why he had been so attentive after colliding with her? Did he delay her on purpose? Despite his deception, she found his magnetism pulling at her. Throughout the meeting, she found herself staring at Mac Carter who sat on the opposite side of the room. She had to force herself to concentrate on the district councilman who was controlling the meeting. This was a business meeting to discuss the gentrification efforts, and she sat there lusting after the owner of the company she'd told the world she opposed.

The meeting was a public hearing, and many community residents had turned out to support the effort to save the Center. The room, although large enough to comfortably seat more than one hundred people, was overcrowded. Many stood along the back walls. Reserved seats near the front were available for special guests like Patricia.

The seven councilmen sat at tables at the front of the room with microphones and other paraphernalia for their use. The council president sat at a higher table and looked out over the audience. Above his head hung the city's emblem. Permanently attached television cameras flanked every corner of the room because public hearings were televised on the local city cable channel. In the center of the room stood a podium with a microphone for individuals to address the council.

Looking around the meeting room, Patricia recognized parents, Center staff members, and community groups, like the NAACP, in the audience to support her cause. She wouldn't let them down tonight. She would give her best speech. Suddenly, Patricia remembered the shape her notes were in.

As she opened her portfolio to organize her notes, the floor leader spoke into his microphone. "Patricia Ryan. Please come to the podium."

Too late to organize my papers now! Patricia thought. She closed her folder and stood up.

At the podium, Patricia took a deep breath and introduced herself. "As the president of the Advisory Board of Directors for the DuBois Center for the Arts, I am here representing the children, parents, staff, and other concerned community citizens interested in the plight of the Center..." She gave the portion of the speech she had memorized and had presented a few weeks earlier to the school board. It highlighted the contributions the DuBois Center had made to the community.

Then she added, "Ten years ago this city and the school board initiated a joint venture to develop the Center. This was done to support talented young minds in a district of limited community outlets. The DuBois Center for the Arts provides talented youth with a means to prosper intellectually and creatively. The Center serves to introduce music, art, poetry, dance, and adjunct academic studies to underprivileged young people..."

She went on to explain how the alternative methods employed at DuBois were showing phenomenal results.

"I have statistical information you will find helpful..." Patricia opened her portfolio and stared at an upside-down sheet of paper that had a footprint in the center of it.

Her notes were in shambles!

Fumbling through her unorganized papers to find the sheet she wanted, Patricia heard the floor leader clear his throat. With her head still down, she managed to steal sideways glances at the panel members to gauge their reaction to her apparent disorganization: Some were bored, some aggravated, two began to talk with each other, and one was checking his watch.

This was terrible.

Where are the statistics?

She had been so disoriented that she had stormed into the meeting room, sat down, and forgotten to check her notes. Before she could regroup, she had been called upon to make her presentation. A presentation, which by all accounts, was failing miserably.

This was Mac Carter's fault. She mentally counted another strike against him.

Because she hadn't taken the time to memorize the statistical portion of her presentation, she strained to recall something of value to say.

She rolled an unflattering eye in Mac Carter's direction. He had probably hidden her report on purpose, she concluded. No wonder he was interested in helping retrieve her papers. *Why else would it be missing?*

"It seems as though my printed statistics are missing. I will provide copies to you later. This country's school system ranks low compared to other countries..." She

quoted the reasons why. "DuBois was created to enhance the education and training provided to youth today in traditional schools. It must continue to do that. DuBois needs time to continue its mission of assisting and empowering the underprivileged of our community. Our history shows that we are making measurable progress."

Patricia wrapped up her speech with a plea to postpone the sale until the city and school board had had an opportunity to thoroughly examine the evidence. "I urge you to judge DuBois on its merits and record of success." She insisted that the short-term financial gain would never outweigh the long-term benefits to the youths directly and to the community indirectly with lowered crime rates because of more youth who understood and appreciated the value of making a positive contribution to society.

Council members made final comments and adjourned the meeting. As Patricia headed down the aisle, many supporters extended a hand to thank her and express their appreciation.

Hattie Mathison, the Center's executive director, and her boyfriend, Alvin Mills, walked up to Patricia.

"Patty!" Hattie trilled. "Great job." They embraced.

"I think it would have been impressive if my statistics had been included."

Alvin, a policeman who patrolled the area around the Center, knew firsthand the positive impact the Center had had on reducing crime. "The numbers you quoted were impressive. I wish I had provided you with the reduced arrest rates since the Center opened. Kids are off the streets and in constructive activities." To Hattie's nodding he added, "Let's hope the committee's ears weren't too stuffed to hear your message."

"Join Alvin and me for dinner," Hattie urged.

Patricia had had a long day at the advertising agency where she worked and then had prepared for this meeting. "Thanks, but I'll pass tonight. Next time, though. I see a few people I need to speak to. You two have fun."

Hattie gave her a final hug good night. "See you later."

Patricia spoke to some of the volunteers in attendance and turned to leave when she saw the opposition closing in. Mac Carter was headed her way. Her blood was beginning to boil, partly because of the lost report and partly because of his charming looks. He was wearing the same wonderful smile he wore when they collided in the parking lot. He undoubtedly had been trying to prevent her from going to the meeting early enough to ensure a dynamic presentation with that stunt.

The snake, she thought. A good-looking, nice-smelling, tall, wealthy snake, but a snake, nonetheless.

Mac stopped in front of her, “Miss Ryan, you gave an informative presentation tonight.”

She decided to give him a piece of her mind. “Mr. Carter,” she said sternly, “You accosted me in the parking lot, delaying me for this meeting. Once I arrived, my notes, the ones you knocked out of my hands and insisted on picking up, were completely disorganized and useless to me. My presentation, which you claim was informative, failed to impress anyone because it lacked the valuable statistics I needed. Statistics that are outside blowing in the wind.” She let out a short laugh, shaking her head in disbelief. “One could easily conclude you planned this.”

“One could. But one would be wrong. You recovered quickly and made excellent points. All of which my company will take into consideration.”

Patricia didn't believe him. “Is that a fact?”

“Yes. I'll make sure of that.” His quick, no-nonsense response made Patricia question her doubts about him.

“I see.” She looked for signs in his eyes to not believe him. She saw none. “Well. Have a good evening.” Patricia turned to leave.

“I was hoping we could talk over dinner. You were about to give me your phone number earlier. Let me get it now.”

He can't be serious after the stunt he pulled, she thought. But Mac was reaching into his jacket pocket. She almost laughed, but decency prevented her from doing it. *The man has gall,* she thought.

Patricia raised one, nicely arched eyebrow and placed her free hand on her hip. “This is Florida, Mr. Carter,” she responded matter-of-factly. “That means there are alligators in just about every swamp you walk past. I'd feel more comfortable in their presence. At least when they attack me, I'll know what's coming.”

“Is that how you view everything that happened?”

“How else do you explain all of your delaying tactics today?” she asked.

“An unfortunate coincidence,” he offered.

She watched several unreadable expressions cross his face before Mac smiled again. “Sure. Right.” She looked at him not knowing how to gauge his response. “Good night.” She noticed his pen was still positioned to write her number. Her smile widened as she triumphantly walked away.

As she walked, she heard a deep bellow of laughter coming from Mackenzy Carter.

Later that night on the phone, Patricia was still fuming as she tried to explain to her friend, Barbara Duncan, who worked for the DuBois Center, just how Mac's unreadable expression had told her all she needed to know about him.

"He knew who I was and was probably going to squeeze as much information as he could out of me before letting on who he was," Patricia said.

"You said yourself you didn't know who he was. The same could have been true of him," Barbara, a friend to the end, offered.

"Barb, you weren't there. Besides, he admitted knowing I was there on the Center's behalf."

"I knew I should have tried to be at that meeting," Barbara stated.

"You were raising funds for the Center. That's more critical now. Is Baylor going to commission the Center to do a mural for them?"

"Over drinks tonight, I got a commitment," Barbara enthused. "Case in point, schmoozing does work. Back to the topic at hand, what kind of person is Mackenzy Carter?"

"I told you. A deceptive one; he's a snake."

"Sounds like he's handsome, fine, intelligent..." Patricia held the phone at arm's length as if watching it mutate into a two-headed serpent. She had said no such thing! She might have said he was tall, well-dressed... very professional. He *was* all those things Barbara mentioned, but she didn't remember saying that. Patricia put the phone back to her ear in time to hear Barbara wishing she had met the man.

"I didn't say that about him." Patricia didn't want Barbara speaking admiringly about him. It only added to the existing attraction she was trying so hard to deny.

"Well, a man that rich should be," Barbara pleaded.

"Girl, the man can't be trusted," Patricia responded. "You know I can't stomach lying, conniving, disloyal men. It doesn't matter how much money they're worth." Her disappointment with men went as far back as Patricia could remember.

"Patty, you can't judge every man who comes your way by the way Steve treated you."

Patricia avoided that comment about Steve. "Dishonesty is what I can't handle, Barb." Just as Patricia was about to explain how Mac Carter had almost tricked her into a dinner date and almost got her telephone number, the doorbell rang.

"Barb, someone's at the door. I'll call you back," she promised. "I'll tell you one thing. The next time I see that man I'll let him know how I really feel." Patricia fumed, "I can't believe he tried to undermine my presentation." The doorbell rang again. "I've gotta go. Bye."

It was probably that neighbor who never seemed to have enough groceries and was always borrowing food at the most inappropriate times. Her sour mood was ripe for putting an end to his untimely and ceaseless borrowing. Opening the front door, she almost choked as she looked into the smiling face of the enemy, Mackenzy Carter.

“Hello, Patricia. I'm glad I caught you at home.”

Mac stood there looking just as handsome and charming as she remembered. Her heart raced with surprised delight. The fact that it did, plus the fact that he was standing at her front door uninvited and unexpected, bothered her.

Chapter Three

Patricia's mind whirled. She was trying to conjure up a litany of obscenities to fling at him. Ones that would make ghetto hoodlums proud, but she couldn't think of any. It had been almost twenty years since she'd lived in such a place. Although she was never ashamed of her past, this was the first time she almost wished she was back there. Then maybe the perfect words would come to her. Nothing did.

For seconds, she also wondered if her recall was clouded because Mac held two, long-stemmed, beautiful, aromatic yellow roses out to her.

"A peace offering," he said.

His voice reminded her of a bass saxophone rumbling in the background of a relaxing jazzy tune. She found herself weakening under his warm stare but was determined not to succumb to him. Her rational side played sentinel to her emotions.

"Mr. Carter, this is not a good time to visit." When she looked as though she was about to close the door, Mac held out his left hand and revealed the other reason he was there.

"That's my wallet!" Patricia said, wide-eyed with surprise. "Where did you get it?" She reached for it.

"Would you believe in this day and age you can leave a wallet lying around and no one will take it? It must have fallen out of your purse when you dropped it."

"How did you know where to find me?"

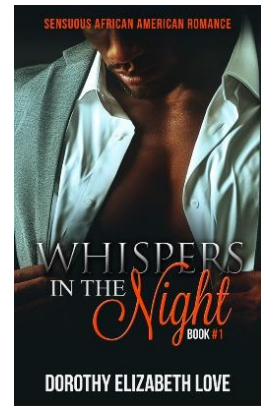
"Your driver's license," he said simply.

The Ryan Family Series

The Ryan Family Series will make you cry, make you laugh, make you cheer.

Patricia Ryan is the board president of a center for at-risk kids. The expansion plans of the Mackenzy-Duran Company require demolishing the center and with it, the hopes and dreams of the kids who attend. Mac Carter, owner of Mackenzy-Duran, finds that he wants to win Patricia's heart, but risks losing his own heart during the battle over the center's property. Winning her over will mean losing a great deal more.

"Ms. Love has written an exceptional novel." - RT Magazine



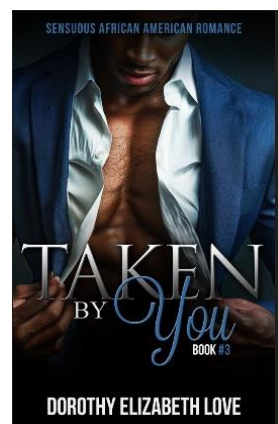
Parker Ryan enjoyed two things love and happiness... but hasn't experienced any of that since the day his fiancé was killed. Dr. Chi Addams, a woman who spent her career healing others, but didn't know that same passion would heal the heart of man needing it most, Parker. Chi's secrets and not-so-previous relationship will rekindle Parker's past pain. Will he run or try love again?

A top-notch page-turner that has everything without overdoing it." - RT Magazine



The Ryan family reunites in **TAKEN BY YOU** for the wedding of Parker Ryan and Chi. Leila Chamberlain is Chi's best friend and Reese McCoy is the Best Man. A troubled marriage left Reese reserved and hurt. Leila finding happiness with this man she barely knew meant jeopardizing more than she bargained for. When Leila gets too close to Reese, his ex-wife, Suzette—who's still in love with him—will do whatever she can to eliminate the competition... including murder.

"Ms. Love's writing was flawless." Brenda M. Lisbon



Ryan Family Series