

SENSUOUS AFRICAN AMERICAN ROMANCE

TAKEN
BY *You*
BOOK #3

DOROTHY ELIZABETH LOVE

Sensuous African American Romance

Taken By You
by
Dorothy Elizabeth Love

The Ryan Family Series

Book-3

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LED Literature and Publication

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Chapter 1

It had to be nervousness.

How else could she explain the anxiety she felt as she waited to meet the man who tiptoed around her dreams yet didn't know she existed?

Not only was Reese McCoy a stranger to her, but he was also a famed football player, model, and successful businessman. So much rolled into one man. That was probably why her heart was racing.

At Atlanta International Airport, Leila stood in the shadows of the waiting area of baggage claims. She scanned the crowd for the face she had seen many times in online media and TV. She hadn't discovered any of the details about his personal life until last night when she had talked about him while viewing his pictures in the photo album of her friend, Chi. The album was followed by an exciting look through a male pinup calendar. The barely clothed pinups of Reese McCoy told a completely different, definitely more enticing story that she reexamined again and again.

The less publicly known pictures in the album revealed expressions of happiness that seemed to lessen more and more as time passed by and Leila found that somewhat baffling.

When Reese McCoy finally entered the baggage claims area, he flashed that sexy smile—one Leila had come to like—at the airline worker helping travelers arriving from Scottsdale, AZ. His denim jeans and matching shirt nicely emphasized what she knew was an incredibly fit body underneath.

Lord, she thought, tingling, he's too fine in person.

Reese suddenly turned that alluring smile toward her. It masked the troubles she had heard he was having. Yet, still, it caused her breath to catch; she exhaled slowly. Too bad she had never met him in person before now.

Leila was about to wave to get his attention, but he turned and looked about, searching for someone. Leila knew he was looking for his friend but wished it could have been her. She also knew that would never be the case. It seemed Reese McCoy had very little time for things outside of business, especially something as bothersome as a serious relationship.

Suddenly, his gaze returned to hers. This time their eyes locked for several moments. A slow, meaningful smile danced across his face. Leila couldn't stop her mouth from reacting to his contagious smile. When he winked, she realized she had been staring. Did he think that she was just another pretty face on the long list of many that smile and that sculptured body could entice? Embarrassed, she glanced away to refocus on her reason for being there.

Amazingly, in the short time she looked away, he closed the distance between them.

Standing a few feet away he said, "Hello, pretty lady." His words, like his presence, were intoxicating.

Leila smiled slightly. She wasn't just some starstruck woman; he was about to find that out. "I'm here to pick you up," Leila said, surprised by the confidence in her own voice.

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that was entirely too sexy. "I haven't been to Atlanta in a while, but I see the come-on lines have certainly gotten bolder." His grin widened. "Should I ask: your place or mine?"

"My place." She enjoyed watching his surprise, pleased that she had caught him off guard. Maybe Reese McCoy wasn't as smooth as she had thought.

"Ohhh..." His eyes raked over her body slowly as if savoring the sight. "I do miss Atlanta."

Was she flirting? God, she was flirting! That realization sent a rush of warmth through her, boosting her confidence as she extended a hand. "I'm Leila Chamberlain. I'm a friend of Parker and Chi's. Parker's stuck out of town on business, and Chi can't get away from the hospital, so I've been tasked with babysitting you until Parker gets back." Her playful smirk met his surprised gaze. She could handle this.

"Babysit?" He chuckled again, a sound she was growing dangerously fond of. There was something in his sienna eyes—a flash of something that might have been regret. He shook it off quickly. "Nice to meet you, Leila." His hand lingered on hers a beat longer than necessary. "It's a pleasure."

His voice dipped, sending warmth curling through her, and for a second, she forgot what she was supposed to say. "Parker warned me you might be upset about the last-minute changes. He mentioned you're a bit of a stickler for preplanning."

"Tell him I wasn't upset at all," Reese said, his smile deepening. "It was his choice of babysitters that made all the difference."

Sinful. That's what his grin was—sinfully charming. "We should get your luggage," she said, trying to keep her thoughts on track.

"That's one option." There was no missing the double meaning in his tone, and Leila couldn't help but laugh. She stuck to the plan, though, refusing to let her mind drift to places it shouldn't.

"We also need to stop for your tux fitting," she reminded him. "It's one of Parker's instructions."

He shrugged, his eyes never leaving hers. "I've got some business to handle first. The tux can wait. And I think I'll need a rental car."

"No, you don't." She dodged a passerby, brushing against Reese in the process. His scent—spicy, masculine, and utterly intoxicating—filled her senses. "Parker left his Jeep and house key at my place. I'll take you there."

"You were serious about going to your place?" Reese raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. That smirk sent a wave of heat through her.

"I never kid about inviting a man to my home," Leila tossed out casually. "It's also my place of business."

That look on his face. It was the look of a man whose thoughts had just gone to very naughty places. "Thanks for coming to pick me up," Reese said as they reached the baggage carousel.

"No problem," Leila said as other passengers huddled around in search of... or scampering to catch suitcases in motion. She stepped aside to get out of one man's way and brushed against the side of Reese. An unexpected jolt of awareness shot through her. And she started craving for more.

"What will Mr. Chamberlain say about you entertaining me while my friend's away?" His breath sent warmth over her ear.

"My father gave up on advising me years before he died," Leila said. She knew he was attempting to find out more about her personal life. Although single and available, she wasn't quite sure if she wanted to admit that yet.

It tickled her pride knowing she'd done very little to capture his interest, yet clearly, she had. Well, if not counting the blatant stares, the flippant invitation to her home, and the unnecessary closeness they were now sharing.

Her reaction to him was purely physical, the worst kind, and she needed to contain it. His skin coloring reminded her of warm pecan pie, her favorite. Leila recognized that Reese looked just as rugged and daring as he had in the younger photos. But now, the fine lines of wisdom that cradled those eyes suggested an

experience she wanted to know more about. She liked his faint beard that surrounded lips that promised heaven in a mouthful. Instantaneously, her mind drifted to a scene where she was experiencing that mouth, those fine hairs against sensitive parts of her body. She unconsciously licked her lips as she recalled the calendar pictures showing more of his skin.

And soon, very soon, they would be alone together.

Reese noticed. "I would pay big money to know what you're thinking," he said, his voice bedroom soft.

Leila smiled, fighting the blush threatening to creep up her body. "Just didn't expect you to look the same in person as you did in those photos Chi showed me." Leila was proud of how well she came up with a valid, although veiled, excuse for blatantly, probably heatedly, staring at him. "You haven't changed much in the past few years."

Reese smile faltered, a shadow crossing his features. "Pictures can lie. I'm not the same guy I was back then."

The weight of his words lingered in the air, leaving Leila wondering what secrets lay behind those eyes.

He was frowning, and she blamed herself. "I just meant..." Leila was about to say, 'You look the same physically,' but it was too late because he had turned to retrieve his bag from the spinning carousel.

She was sure his statement had nothing to do with physical changes, but more with the circumstances that surrounded his life. She didn't know all the details, but Parker had labeled them as "difficult times." Since Parker had also labeled his first fiancée's death, his sister being shot, and the car accident that almost killed the love of his life, Chi, as "difficult times," Leila figured Reese's life must have been just as troubling.

Reese collected the last of his luggage and followed Leila outside into the warm June afternoon. They went to Leila's car in short-term parking. She easily maneuvered the car out of the airport only to encounter caterpillar-slow highway traffic.

"Is this typical for this time of day?" Reese asked a few minutes later, looking at the dashboard clock.

"Not normally. There must be an accident ahead."

"How far away is your place?"

"Without traffic, it's about twenty-five minutes."

"This can go on for a while." Reese reached into his overnight bag to retrieve his cell phone and dialed. "Bill? It's Reese McCoy," he announced when the person

answered. "I'm in town but stuck in traffic. First, the plane was delayed. Now this. Can we delay our meeting until this evening?" Reese listened. "No, no. That's okay. I'll get there as soon as I can. I really need you to see my plan and consider supporting it... Yeah... Bill, it's a solid plan. Don't shoot it down until you have a chance to review it." The longer Reese talked, the flatter his tone got. He hung up and stared at the phone for a few seconds, visibly shaking off a difficult mood.

"I can take you directly to your meeting," Leila offered. "Pick you up and take you to get the Jeep afterwards."

"I'm not sure how long I'll be or where we might head afterwards." Reese watched the traffic come to a halt. "The sooner I get to Parker's, the sooner I can shower, change and get to the meeting." His look suggested appreciation. "But thanks for offering."

Leila liked the sincerity she saw. "I have a better idea. You can change at my place, it's closer and we need to stop there anyway to get the Jeep." She looked at her car's dashboard infotainment map for the time delay on the current route. Then, she reached into the backseat to get her cellphone, thinking about using its navigation system for alternative routes. "I'll get off the highway as soon as I can. Maybe get around this."

"Take your time," Reese said, looking down the V-neck of her blouse that showed a peek at the tops of her breasts as she leaned to retrieve her phone.

"Are you sure? That call sounded important." She looked up, still leaning back with the phone in hand.

"It was, but this..." His eyes roamed provocatively up her chest to her eyes. "...delay is taking my mind off it."

His somber look from moments ago had disappeared, replaced with a warm, much more pleasing smile. The inches between them would only take seconds to remove.

She wasn't sure which one of them moved first, but somehow his mouth seemed much closer to hers. Her heart jiggled a little and she found herself breathing heavier. Then something in his eyes called to her.

Sampling him was a fantasy that had crossed her mind several times while looking at pictures of his fantastic body. Now she was sure she was the one to move closer this time.

The honking from the car behind startled her.

"Oh!" She jumped and let out a nervous little laugh. Looking quickly about, she then moved back under the wheel. It took her a few seconds to realize the car was already in gear, and all she needed to do was remove her foot from the brake pedal.

She felt like a clumsy teenager instead of the professional, sometimes sassy, business owner that she was.

That was a stupid gesture I just made, she said to herself, then turned to Reese. "Traffic is moving."

"Uh-huh," he grunted, his smile widening.

Luckily, since she couldn't think of anything else to say, jazz music from the car radio filled the air. It bothered her that she'd neither resisted nor gone through with the kiss. A kiss she'd been wanting to experience since the moment she'd dreamt of him. This kind of indecision was another example of why she would always be the lonely maid of honor and never the bride. She could dream about having this man but couldn't pull off impressing him as an experienced flirt.

Remembering the map app, she busied herself with getting a more convenient route.

"How long have you lived here?" Reese asked.

"I moved back about four years ago. It's changed a lot since I was a kid." She studied the smartphone map display, then looked up at the road ahead. "I think I can get around this by getting off at the next exit."

"I'll leave my comforts in your competent hands."

Leila looked at him. *His comforts*. Was he picking at her for failing to resist him and failing to kiss him? Certainly, kissing was a bit much for someone she had just met. She played it safe and pretended to take a greater interest in getting around the heavy traffic. The ride through the business districts was the perfect distraction.

They arrived at her home, or partial home, as Leila called it, about thirty-five minutes later. They had talked very little en route because Reese spent most of the time on his cell phone discussing shipping matters. The gist of what Leila picked up on was that his cinching an important business deal was imperative to expanding his company. Based on Reese's solemn tone, she figured things weren't going well.

Reese noticed the daycare sign. "You have a kid we need to pick up from daycare?" he asked as she navigated into the parking lot.

"I live on the floor above it. My private entrance is around the side." Leila said. She parked, and they got out of the car.

"Interesting place to call home." He said as the trunk opened so that he could retrieve his luggage. "How come?"

"I own the building. The daycare center is my business."

"Very clever." He glanced around at the upscale business location.

The daycare was the size of a two-story warehouse with a large playground and an expanse of land behind it. Several cars were in the parking lot. A few parents

were picking up their children. On the playground, kids played on slides, swings, and monkey bars, while others played a game of putt-putt golf on artificial turf. Several kids cheered when another whacked the small ball between the legs of a gigantic parrot.

Upstairs, Leila's loft door opened into an extremely spacious, open area. She had a flair for the dramatic and had reconfigured the large warehouse space into sections with cream Roman columns separating the foyer and hallway from the living room. The floors were bleached hardwood with matching paneled walls. Large plants were aplenty. A deep purple leather sofa sat against the back wall; on the other side of the glass-top table, matching chairs faced the sofa.

The unusually high windows on the back wall spanned up to vaulted ceilings and allowed a view of blue skies and green tops of leafy trees. A view she considered her peak at heaven. No one could have imagined that a busy playground, a major road, and several businesses were just beyond those walls. It was just like she wanted it to be.

Reese's cell phone rang again. "Hey, Suzette," he said casually.

The female name got Leila's attention. She shouldn't be eavesdropping. Or at least not look as if she were eavesdropping. Leila went to her desk at the far side of the room and opened the top drawer, pretending to be busy as she tuned into Reese's conversation.

"I'll rearrange my schedule," he was saying. "I don't want to change the plans for this weekend. Okay. Bye." He walked toward Leila.

Leila sensed Reese was studying her downcast head. She put down the mail she held and reached back inside the top drawer to get a stuffed envelope, which she handed to him. "These are for you. Jeep keys, Parker's house key, and address to the tuxedo shop."

"Parker is finally getting married." Reese shook his head. "I still can't believe it."

She angled her head, slightly confused. "For a best man, shouldn't you sound a bit more supportive?"

He looked at her, his expression tame. "Parker deserves to find happiness finally." Then he added, "And Chi is amazing. She is the yin to his yang."

"Well said." She passed him and headed down the hall. Reese followed. "You wanted to shower and change. Let me show you to the bathroom."

Reese stepped inside a bathroom that only an interior designer could have imagined. It was supersized with the look of two rooms forming one. The high ceiling was painted with clouds, and the borders with leafy red and purple roses. It had a

Jacuzzi tub, a freestanding glassed-in shower stall, and more Roman columns. The other side of the room featured a vanity area with a leather loveseat with a bookcase.

"Very nice. I like your taste." Reese set down his luggage.

"Thanks. I live too close to my job. So, home had to be an escape for me." Leila opened the bathroom's closet door and handed him a towel and washcloth. She pointed and said, "Everything else you might need should be under the sink."

She turned and noticed him unbuttoning his shirt, pulling the shirttails from out of his pants. She froze. Not out of panic but out of pleasure. She'd dreamt about seeing that body up close and personal. Putting his hands on his hips, the shirt parted, turning the pinup calendar view into reality.

His muscles were more chiseled than Leila had dreamt. Fine, silky black hairs called to be touched. She flexed her hand in response.

"Anything else I should know?" Reese asked, breaking her trance.

Again, she was staring. His chest was more enticing than the one she'd conjured up in her dream last night. She dragged her eyes up to his. His cocky grin didn't help matters. It was one thing to secretly drool and pant like a cat in heat. Being caught, however, was rather embarrassing.

"I need to go downstairs to check on the daycare." Leila found herself struggling to find something other than him to gawk at. Failing, she walked toward the safety of the door.

Unfortunately for her, he stopped her by catching her by the arm as she passed.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"There is something else," Reese said, pulling her closer to his inviting body.

She sidestepped. "I've delayed you long enough from your meeting," Leila said to his hand since she wasn't brave enough to look him in the face. He might see just how in need of his touch she was.

The house telephone rang. Again, she jumped and inwardly cursed because of it. She needed to gain control of herself. "Let me get that."

Due to her business and the enormous size of the upper level, she had landline phones installed in most rooms so that she wasn't jogging down long hallways in search of her cell phone. She looked at the telephone that hung on the bathroom wall by the loveseat behind him. Though parts of the too-large bathroom looked and felt like a den, it was still too intimate a setting for her with Reese in it. She decided to take the call elsewhere.

At her desk, Leila found herself breathing heavily when she answered. "Chi! Hi! Your timing couldn't be better... We just got here. Reese was about to jump in the shower."

"Stop him!" Chi said. "I need to talk to him."

"Oh, okay, hold on." Leila hurried to the bathroom door and called out. "Reese, it's for you!" When he picked up the bathroom telephone, she went to hang up the handheld on the desk.

As she walked away, Reese stepped out of the bathroom, the cordless telephone resting on his bare shoulder. He had taken off his shirt and shoes, and his pants unbuttoned and barely zipped. "I think that's a fantastic idea. I'm sure of it," he said to Chi. "I assume you've already talked to Leila?"

Leila came to stand in the hallway, watching him watch her. His stare was disconcerting. So sexy, so disarming, so distracting. Thankfully, the man would be leaving her home forever once he showered and changed. Moments earlier, when he touched her, she'd thought he would do something quite thrilling. That would have been a mistake for her, considering the Suzette call, but she felt disappointed that it hadn't happened for some reason.

Luckily, he was leaving, and her life would soon return to normal. She could sit back and think about her crazy reactions to him later. Whatever he had just said to Chi, Leila hadn't heard; she was too busy enjoying his near nakedness.

In less than an hour, he will be gone, she reminded herself. She exhaled slowly to calm her racing heart.

"Leila," Reese said, "Chi was wondering if you could help with something tonight."

"Sure," she said. "Of course."

"More wedding guests are flying to town," he said.

"Does she need me to pick them up from the airport?" she asked.

"It seems Parker has run out of rooms. So, Chi was wondering if you wouldn't mind entertaining me tonight...", Reese paused to smile, "by letting me use your bedroom."

Although his statement was obvious, Leila asked, slightly flustered, "What?"

He removed the distance between them and said again, very slowly, very provocatively, "I want to stay the night with you."

Chapter 2

Leila stared dumbfounded for several seconds.

"You want to sleep with me...", she sputtered, then quickly shook her head as if to eradicate her blunder. "I meant, spend the night here with me?" *Who did he think he was flashing an arrogant grin?*

Reese said calmly, "Which of those questions do you want me to answer?"

She was smart enough to avoid that. "Let me speak to Chi." She took the telephone from his extended hand.

"I'll be in the shower," Reese said. "If you need me, come get me." He left her standing in the hallway, stunned, with her mouth wide open.

"Okay." Leila agreed and thought about it. "I mean..." It was too late. He had already closed the bathroom door. To the telephone, she said, "Chi, what's going on?"

"I'm getting married in a week," Chi joked. "I thought you knew."

"Don't play with me," Leila complained. "You know what I mean. Reese can't stay here with me. He's a stranger."

"Not based on the conversation I just heard between you two." Chi laughed. "Besides, Reese is like family, Parker's so-called big brother. My problem is that Parker's mother is flying in tonight. She wasn't supposed to get here until the end of the week. His old coach arrived last night, and we put him in the guestroom instead of letting him drive to the hotel. He's still at the house. Mama is at my place babysitting. We've run out of bedrooms, and you have two extras. Put Reese up for tonight to give me time to figure out what to do with Coach."

"I have fifty-two impressionable kids downstairs, all with parents who respect me. What kind of image do you think they will have of me if I start dragging strange men home?" Leila was pacing the floor, shaking her head.

"First, it's none of their business. And second, having a guest visit your home is not the same as teaching promiscuity..." Changing the subject, Chi said, "Anyway, I picked out another flower to use in the arrangement that's going to be at the altar."

"Another flower?" Leila complained. "We've completed all the design. You can't change the flowers on me this late in the game. Rita and I have taken care of that."

"Think about gladiolas." Chi went on, "I saw this arrangement on a display counter at Macy's. The height of those flowers will be perfect at the altar."

"Forget flowers. And shopping at Macy's. Rita and I have already selected the arrangements for the altar. Now back to Reese. I can't have him staying here tonight."

"I thought we settled that," Chi said. "Reese doesn't mind. You have room. Parker and I don't. So, it's settled." Chi's pager went off. "I gotta go. I just got paged to the Emergency Room. Once you see the Macy's arrangement, you'll agree with me. I will text you the picture. Oh, and take care of Reese for us."

"Reese can take care of himself," Leila said tartly. "Or possibly have Suzette do it."

"Suzette?" Chi said, confused. "Reese's ex is the last person we want around him."

The room went still. Leila had forgotten his ex-wife's name. She'd been referred to as 'his ex' the few times she had come up in conversation. She had known Parker and Reese were old friends who played professional football. She had known Reese rarely traveled to Atlanta; the reason she hadn't met him in the year since she'd become friends with Chi and Parker. She had known his life started to spin out of control with the divorce but hadn't known the details. Somehow, all the pieces hadn't come together in Leila's mind until now.

"Now I recall Parker having said he was to pick up his son from his ex-wife's place," Leila finally said, numbly.

Chi exhaled a playful sigh. "Girl, you scared me for a second. I thought you meant something else by that comment. Reese is dying to see Keith. Anyway, I've got to go! Bye."

The line went dead.

Leila stood there holding the telephone to her ear. Her emotions had run from complete attraction to Reese to complete annoyance. What baffled Leila was that she had brought these diverse emotions on herself. This attraction to him would be her doom.

Dazed by her thoughts, she walked into the bathroom to hang up the telephone.

In her frustration, she had momentarily forgotten Reese was in there. As the steam evaporated, so did her thoughts because she suddenly remembered him. Probably because he materialized into view. He was completely naked and absolutely beautiful as he stood inside the glass shower stall. Warm water rinsed down his muscular, pecan-toned body as strong arms flexed. Suds glistened from the silky hairs of his arms down to the ones of his legs. When he turned, looking back over his shoulder at her, she got another view of that fabulous chest that led to...

"You need me?" he asked casually as if they were both standing completely dressed in a crowded room.

Leila's eyes shot up. That damn knee-weakening smile of his was back.

"Um, just hanging up...," she muttered before hurrying out of the bathroom. The soles of her white sandals beat against her feet as the heels clacked loudly on the hardwood floors. When she got to her bedroom on the other side of the building, she was almost running.

She closed the door behind her, thinking it would somehow block out what had just happened. It didn't, of course, so she leaned against the door and exhaled slowly.

At times like this, cigarettes and alcohol could come in handy. Unfortunately, she didn't drink during business hours or when she planned to spend time with the kids. And she stopped smoking the year her father was diagnosed with lung cancer, which eventually took his life.

Leila resorted to meditation.

Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths, exhaling very slowly. Calmer now, she looked down and realized she was still holding the cordless phone.

In lightning motion, images of Reese's tantalizing nakedness returned to assault her with an erotic jolt. Her nipples hardened as she began to warm.

She exhaled slowly to calm herself. It didn't help. Leila took several slow steps toward the bed, easing down to sit at its foot.

"So, Leila," she said, looking at her image in the dresser's mirror in front of her. "You have an incredible-looking man under your roof that you are dying to have sex with but shouldn't. What are you going to do about it?" Her pitiful reflection made no reply. Her nipples pressed stubbornly against her blouse; her chest heaved laboriously. She ran her fingers slowly through her short hairstyle, then down her neck to her chest. Her reflected image looked more like a hooker enticing a paying customer than of a modest woman attempting to calm herself. She shook her head in disgust. "Apparently nothing."

Leila rubbed a hand down the front of her white Capri pants. Then she rested her elbows on her knees and stared down at the intricate details of the Persian rug

under her feet. She heard distinct sounds of movement in the front of her home: Footsteps. The alarm chirps when the front door opens. More footsteps. She sat quietly, hoping, waiting for answers.

She was still sitting in that same spot fifteen minutes later. The only clear decision she had made was that the rug needed to be cleaned. Standing, Leila felt somewhat better because she was alone in her home.

She hadn't confronted Reese or confirmed anything with him. He had gone to his meeting without having any way of ensuring that he could get back inside. If he called before returning, she would give him the locations and telephone numbers of a few hotels and then carry his luggage to him.

Comfortable with the new plan, Leila stood and walked out of the room. She planned on heading downstairs to check on the daycare center. All the after-school students would be there by now, so it would be a full house over the next two hours. She liked to tour the center and check on the kids. It was the one thing she had complete control over as well as success with.

Telephone still in her hand, Leila walked out of her bedroom, past the large room on the right that she used for designs and crafts, past the two guest bedrooms and guest bathroom, then the kitchen. She wanted to make sure Reese had locked the front door behind him. Nearing the front room, she was feeling a lot better about her plan to rid Reese from her home.

"So, there you are." The deep voice came from the sofa.

She visibly jumped and let out a soft cry. "Lord, Reese, I thought you had left for your meeting!"

Reese stood up, placing the notepad and pen he had been using on the sofa table in front of him. "Not without saying goodbye." He came around the table.

Leila never moved. She watched as he walked with a strut befitting his self-assured, muscular body. The navy slacks and matching shirt fit nicely. The gray blazer was tailored. When he stopped in front of her, she had to look up to meet his gaze.

"Thanks for your hospitality," Reese said.

"No problem." Leila stepped back, but the wall prevented her further retreat. "Are you familiar enough with the city to find your way to the meeting?" It was a dumb question, she knew, but she needed something to say to feel the quiet. She inhaled and exhaled slowly. Something about the scent of his cologne was quite soothing.

"Yes." Reese glanced at his watch. "It's about four-thirty. I'm running late. The guy I'm meeting is looking for a reason to walk away from this deal. He might use

this, but what the hell. I've made a friend in you. If nothing else, I've accomplished that today. I'll probably be tied up until around seven-thirty. If you don't already have plans, maybe we can have a late dinner together."

He considers me a friend. Possibly lost an important business deal just to say bye to her. He wanted to take her to dinner. Leila felt pleased. *A date. A date with a man the calendar labeled Nubian Prince.*

She hoped she didn't look as mesmerized as she felt. "Dinner sounds good," she finally said aloud.

"I've been craving soul food, and I believe there's a restaurant downtown on Peachtree Street. Would that be okay with you?"

He likes what I like. "Sure. I know the one you're talking about. Shall I meet you there at eight?"

"Let me pick you up here around that time. Just in case things change."

He's considerate of my time, she marveled. "Here is fine," she said softly.

"Good." He quickly glanced at his watch again and went to the table to get the notepad and Jeep keys. "I've gotta run. I've already taken everything else I need to the Jeep." He took her by the elbow and walked toward the front door. "I left my cell number on your desk. Didn't know where to toss my towel, so I hung it in the shower." He stopped at the door. "You came into the bathroom earlier. Do you need something from me?"

Lord, do I ever. Leila was proud of herself for not melting into a pile of heated mush. "I somehow forgot you were in there. I wanted to hang up the phone." She lifted the telephone since she was still clutching it.

"Makes sense." Reese surprised her by leaning to kiss her forehead. He was obviously one of those affectionate men. She loved that. Leila leaned into it, into him. "Thanks again. See you tonight." He stepped outside.

His kiss is so warm. "See you." Leila leaned on the front of the door, watching him leave. She was going to miss not having him stay the night with her after all. He had said he'd taken his things to the Jeep. Probably when she heard the alarm's chirping sound, indicating the front door had been opened. That was an efficient use of his time. Preplanning was one of his strong points, Parker had said.

Luckily, he was leaving because her resistance was weakening.

"By the way," he said midway down the stairs. "I'm not sure which room you want me in tonight." He paused, his smile seductive. "So, I put my luggage in the first bedroom. See you later."

Sleep here! When did I agree to that? It took a second or two to translate those thoughts into words. "I... didn't... You can't..."

"What?" he said from the bottom of the steps. "Can we talk about it later? I really do need to go."

"We'll definitely talk about it at dinner."



At six o'clock that evening, Leila and Joyce, one of the teachers, watched the last child leave. David Kendal's father was always the last parent to arrive. As the Kendals headed down the long private driveway flanked with blossoming trees, Leila turned to Joyce. "Good night. Great job today."

"And a long day," Joyce said wearily. Her petite body looked tired. "'I'm going home and crashing. Don't work too late tonight."

"I have dinner plans. I'm headed upstairs to shower and change."

"Dinner plans?" Joyce said, as if not sure she'd heard Leila correctly. So, you're going to a fundraiser or something?"

"I'm going on a dinner date." Leila wasn't happy with Joyce's shocked look. It only reinforced the idea that she is still uninvolved. She headed to the back hall that led to her private entrance upstairs. "Good night."

"Uh huh," Joyce mumbled. "G'night."

Leila was sure Joyce was smirking at her. Was it that obvious to everyone that her love life was lint size?

A dinner date!

Ever since Leila had moved back to Atlanta to take care of her father during his dying days, dating had become secondary. Helping her father and managing a new business had been all-consuming. After his death, her business helped to overcome her feelings of loss. His death left her with the need to prove something. Do things differently. Focus on stability.

Upstairs, Leila dimmed the lights and lit several candles in her bathroom while a pot of tea brewed. She felt herself tensing up and blamed it on her busy afternoon. She would sink into a lavender-scented bubble bath. That always did the trick.

As Leila entered her bathroom, for some strange reason David Kendal came to mind. She could relate to him in a lot of ways. The first time she had met David's mother had been during an argument between his parents in the daycare's parking lot. Mrs. Kendal had enrolled David in piano lessons and wanted to take her son shopping for a grand piano. Mr. Kendal didn't appreciate her picking up David without informing him since it was his week with the child. The argument got out of

control, and little David jumped in the middle, attempting to appease his parents. So had Leila.

Parental approval was one of the driving forces in her own life. Leila had been their angel from God since she was the only child her mother could have. Her mother's first three pregnancies had resulted in miscarriages, so Leila wasn't supposed to have happened. She was to be the perfect angel that the world would know as Elizabeth Chamberlain's shining star. Leila had sparkled once upon a time as a professional model, but when her career fizzled out, Leila was ecstatic; her father had understood; her mother had been crushed because that had been her dream for her daughter. And Elizabeth Chamberlain never had forgiven Leila for falling short.

Based on what she'd seen of the parental battles between David's parents and the kid's constant attempts to intervene and appease, he, too, would probably fall short of pleasing at least one of them.

Reaching around in the bubbly water, Leila found the washcloth and absently rubbed it across her stomach. Some people never realized how precious having children could be or how important raising them in a nurturing environment should be.

Forcing more pleasant thoughts, Leila's mind drifted to Reese McCoy. From the little she knew about him, she could relate to his upbringing as well. An only child raised by one loving caregiver. Maybe that was one reason she felt drawn to him.

The calendar pictures Chi had given her were surely another reason. When Leila asked to describe what Reese looked like to identify him at the airport, Chi immediately went to get the male calendar entitled *The Nubian Prince*. He had been in several photos, but none as sizzling as the one for August. Lying on red satin sheets, he was nude except for the bit of satin that was draped over his penis. That photo was the one she had studied before going to get him from the airport.

Although the photo revealed much of his body, it hadn't quite prepared her for seeing him firsthand in the shower. A definite muscular vision from head to toe. Though she didn't see all of him, what she did see up close was much more alluring than the pictures.

A familiar tingle began to warm her. It started in her chest and trickled down between her legs. Why is it that every thought of Reese results in a heated arousal? It didn't help that the last time she'd had sex was...?

She couldn't remember.

"Too long," Leila mumbled and got out of the tub.

If she didn't get control of her thoughts, she would have to get back in and run a cold shower.

Leila lotioned her milk chocolate skin, lightly applied makeup, and fashioned her short hair into a style that complemented her face nicely. She automatically pulled out a midnight cotton blue dress that hugged her tall, slender figure from neck to calves. After donning silver earrings and bangles, she stepped into a pair of navy slinky sandals. She was ready.

Smiling, she glanced at the clock. It was five minutes 'til eight. Dinner would be later than planned. For some reason, she wanted to be annoyed at Reese. Possibly to dampen her fascination with him.

Besides, the man did live several states away and, according to Chi, was on the rebound from a terrible divorce.

But none of those things seems to repel her allure to Reese.

He will be here soon, she smiled. She went to the front room to wait.

And wait.

He didn't come or call.

Two hours, twelve minutes, and several glasses of wine later, Leila cursed angrily. "Never again!" She stood and went to her desk to call Reese on his cell phone. Halfway through dialing, she slammed down the telephone. "The hell with him! Why am I doing the calling?" She started mocking his so-called kind words as she marched back to her bedroom to change into pajamas. *I met a new friend in you... I want to take you to dinner.* Then that damn forehead kiss just before he left! "Men!" she shouted, shaking her head. "Mother, you didn't lie. They aren't much good for serious relationships."

She pulled on her powder blue cotton pajama shorts and matching top with a knee-length housecoat. Then it hit her. She stormed to the bedroom nightstand and took the racy calendar from the top drawer. She marched to the bathroom and tossed it into the trash can.

"That's what got me into this predicament in the first place. If I weren't lusting after the man, I would have seen this charade for what it is!"

Realizing she was talking to an empty room annoyed her even more. Changing her mind, she pulled the calendar out of the trash and hid it under the vanity.

She would call Chi and tell her just what she thought of this "like family" and "like a brother to Parker" guy. Now that she thought of it, he must have known he wouldn't be coming back tonight. Why else would he have suggested she stay at the house in the first place? That nonsense about 'not minding being late to say bye' was probably crap as well. But she was the one who'd agreed to go out with him, even though she'd known her sexual fascination was blindly leading her. That was why she was angry.

Leila picked up the telephone and started dialing Chi's number and then stopped. Why dampen Chi's spirit right before the wedding just because she'd allowed Reese to tiptoe into her fantasies? Leila had suspected from the moment she met him that his intentions were those of a playboy. He hadn't known who she was at the airport and had practically suggested sex. Reese had probably found some Atlanta woman less prudent or more promiscuous than she was.

She hung up, deciding to have one last cup of tea instead of bothering Chi. She had pouted enough about this, and it was time to move on.

Around midnight, Leila went to bed. Leaving the curtains parted to look out at the starry night, she turned off the lamp on the nightstand and got into bed, pulling up the covers over her. Just as sleep began to take over, she heard the faint sound of ringing.

The doorbell.

She practically leaped out of bed and snatched her housecoat off the foot of it. Stopping at the guest bedroom, she grabbed Reese's large suitcase and suit bag, then slid the overnight bag over her shoulder. She struggled to drag all of it down the hall. Nearing the front room, she heard faint sounds of shoes descending steps.

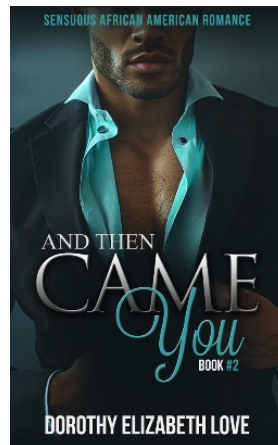
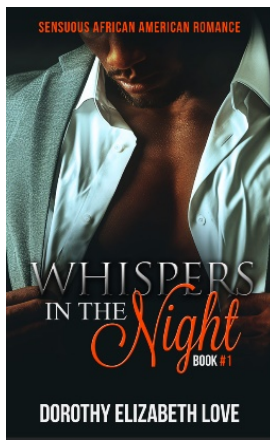
Reese was leaving.

"Oh, no, you don't!" She dropped his belongings and ran to the front door. She fought to open the three locks, then yanked the door open. "Reese!" she called out, seeing him halfway down the stairs.

He came back up, smiling warmly. "I'm glad you're still up. I take it you got the messages I left you."

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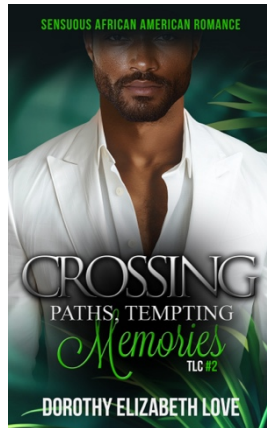
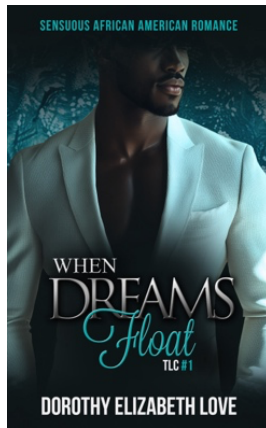
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In the captivating streets of Rio, *Everlasting Moments* brings photographer Rhea Hamilton face-to-face with a man who stirs her deepest desires. Gustavo Owens isn't just a man of mystery—he's a seductive force that draws her into a passion never anticipated.

Let's Stay in Touch

Hi there!

I just wanted to take a moment to thank you—from the bottom of my heart—for spending your time reading a few pages or possibly one of my books. It means the world to me that you've stepped into this journey with me.

Writing has always been my passion; it's where my heart truly comes alive. Being able to share stories that entertain, stir emotions, and bring joy (and a dose of heat!) to readers is why I do what I do.

I hope you've found moments to smile, sigh, and maybe even blush as you read. Would you be willing to do me the honor of sharing my novels with others who support African American Romance?

With gratitude,



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Book-3 Excerpt

The Ryan Family Series