



The Kiss

marie q. francois

The Kiss

marie q. francois

Copyright ©2021 by Marie Q. Francois

First Edition: July 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Zariah sat with her knees to her chest as she lay against the enormous old Ebo tree named Nagina. Nagina, which means grandmother, stood tall at the break of the thick jungle, filled with deep purple leaves that provided great shade during the heat of the day. Nagina's branches were long and thick, with some touching the ground like elbows propping up the old tree. Zariah sat at the base of Nagina's wide trunk next to one of her thickest branches that extended to the wide Anga River.

The morning light just started peeking downstream the Anga River as it lazily rolled by, licking the black pebbles and sands lining the riverbank. A cooing sound could be heard from above, garnering her attention. Lifting her head, Zariah pushed her long black kinky twisted hair behind her back, searching for the vocalist. On a high branch, she spotted the culprit, a little Candor. She watched as the Candor fluffed its feathers and heaved up its chest as it sang its morning tribute to the rise of the sun. Parting her lips, she took in a deep breath of the fresh early morning air. "What a magnificent beginning to a dreadful day," she sighed.

Zariah glanced down at her brown toes observing their contrast against the dark black shores as she thought about today's festivities. Slipping her sandals from her feet, she pushed her feet into the cool, damp sands beneath, much like she did when she was younger. As she wiggled

her toes, her mind slowly drifted away from her troubles. *I miss the days when happiness was this simple.*

Smiling to herself, she reminisced about those good times. In those days, every morning before she went out to play, she tied up her hair in a colorful scarf and bound her breast with a dull khaki sash—all in the hope of hiding that she was near the age of the blossom. For once a girl reached the age of the blossom, all playtime ceased. Their days regaled to hours of training on caring for children, cooking, sowing, and other tasks assigned to women. *And where is the fun in that?* It was nothing like the adventures with her friends Juko, Marcus, and Kwasi. Being the only girl in the group and the youngest, she made great strides in keeping up with the boys. Sometimes they had to keep up with her. Every day, they either went to the Anga River or explored the jungle, pretending they were warriors fighting to defend their village or sent to other planets. Their games lasting until the sun went down. *It was like a wonderful dream.* But like all good dreams, eventually, one had to wake up.

That day came when Kwasi challenged everyone to see who could do the best backflip off Nagina's branch into the river. "You get only one jump," Kwasi called out as Juko climbed. Zariah couldn't help but smile to herself. She'd been practicing jumping off Nagina's branch alone at night for a month ever since Juko told them that he heard that all warriors in the

Laykan Kingdom knew how to dive off the cliffs in the mountains into any body of water. From that day forward, they made time to flip off Nagina's branch. It was only a matter of time before one of them issued a challenge to flip off Nagina.

"Here I go!" Juko yelled as he jumped, a simple backflip that landed him square into the river with an undignified and enormous plop. Zariah giggled to herself. Man, he looked ridiculous with his legs flying about trying to get his footing. Marcus jumped next. "This is how it's done!" he called out. First, he bent over frontward, then sprung back up into his backflip and dove smoothly into the water as if were a fish.

"Oooooo!" they all exclaimed. Kwasi quickly climbed on the branch next. "I'll go next," he called. Kwasi crouched down to flip back, copying Marcus's form, but when he tried to spring up, he slipped, falling back unto Juko's head as he fell into the water. *That was hilarious.* Zariah chuckled aloud, remembering how pissed Juko was. Kwasi was coughing up water as he tried to get away from Juko, trying to dunk him again. "My turn," Zariah called out. Taking a deep crouch similar to Marcus, she steadied herself. But instead of just springing back into a flip, she jumped on the branch twice, allowing it to propel her higher in the air so she could flip twice before landing gracefully in the water.

Their cheers could still be heard, though muffled, underwater as she sprang back up for air. Flicking her now released hair backward created an arch of water above that followed and quickly fell behind her. "Now, that is how it's done!" she yelled. As she looked at the boys still excited about her victory, she noticed they now stood silent in the water, merely glaring at her. "What?" Zariah asked, confused. "What's wrong?" That was when she could hear Aunt Deana screeching at her with her younger cousin Esther in tow. "Cover yourself right now, Zariah! And get over here!" she demanded. Zariah remembered looking down at her then exposed breasts and quickly sinching the front of her shirt closed. Looking to her right, she quickly spotted and snatched the cloth she bound her chest alongside her headwrap floating away. Once again, she couldn't help chuckling at the vision of herself half-naked and the confused look on the boys' faces.

You'd think they didn't know I was a girl until that exact moment. Idiots.

That was a horrible day. It's crazy that I can laugh about it now. I got in so much trouble. All because my breast was out. Which honestly isn't fair considering none of the guys were even wearing shirts, and that was okay.

Zariah then thought of how Aunt Deana laced the story to my parents with outrageous accusations of exposing herself on purpose and being a bad example for Esther.

"I'm telling you she did it on purpose," Aunt Deana yelled to her mother. "Even the boys were shocked."

"She's lying," Zariah called out.

Aunt Deana pierced her lips placed her hand on her chest, being sure to dramatize how affronted she was.

"Zariah," her mother answered back in shock.

"I mean, she's mistaken." she answered, lowering her head, doing her best to calm her tone. "the boys weren't shocked because I was exposing myself to them. They knew it was an accident. My breast was bound. See!" she said, holding out her soaked sash to her mother. "It just fell off. She's," Zariah stopped herself from saying liar and said. "mistaken."

Zariah's mother gently took the cloth from her hand with a look of sympathy, but Aunt Deana refused to be undone.

"Even if that was true, which I'm sure it's not, why is she out playing with the boys if her breast needs to be bound? Surely she has passed the age of the blossom if that is needed." Both women looked down at her causing her to cast her eyes on the floor.

"Zariah," Her mother said, stepping closer and placing her hand on her chin, and lifting it so she could look into her eyes. "You haven't bled,

have you?"

"I, I," Zariah studded, "I was going to tell you." Zariah's heart sank as she saw her mother's face melt into disappointment while Aunt Deana took on a sinister grin.

"And she calls me a liar," Aunt Deana added as she took a position next to her mother. "I love you, sister, but if you don't get a handle on this girl, she will lead to ruin. My poor Esther prospects will diminish as well as hers. You've catered to her whims, and look what it has bought you. Who knows how many moons she has hidden her blossom from you? Such a deceitful girl." Zariah wanted to focus her anger on Aunt Deana, but she couldn't overshadow the pain her deceit had to cause her mother.

"It's time to start training," Her mother answered, dropping her hand. "We'll begin in two days since I will need to prepare."

And just like that, my time as a young girl was over. Though her parents forbade her from going out with the boys again, Zariah snuck down to the river to at least say goodbye. Hours went by as she sat under Nagina waiting for them, but they never showed up. It wasn't until she went back home at night sulking and heartbroken that she found out that it was time for Umbe, and the boys of age fourteen were all gone. A year later, they returned to begin working as laborers or as warriors. Though she somewhat

reclaimed her friendship with Kwasi, who returned as a laborer, he never treated her the same again. And she rarely got even a glimpse of Juko and Marcus, who were now full-time warriors going on missions. *Warriors! Yet another thing women couldn't do.*

The faint sound of footsteps approaching halted her reminiscing. Closing her eyes for a moment, she tried to reclaim her memories before giving up and reopening them. *Not really in the mood for company.* Releasing a soft groan, Zariah picked up one of the smooth black pebbles nearby and began rubbing it between her fingers as she strove to distinguish the person as they drew nearer. *Definitely Kwasi.* Turning the stone in her hand, she waited until he was close enough.

"Hey, Kwasi," she said, turning towards him and giving him a weak smile before returning her eyes to the river.

"I thought I had you this time," Kwasi said, taking a seat on the ground next to her. "I'll never understand how you can do that. You didn't even check to see if it was me."

"Who else would know to find me here?" she answered. Holding the pebble firmly in her hand, she rubbed it with her thumb one last time before giving it a solid sideways flick. They watched as the pebble sailed above the sands crossing the river halfway before it gradually lowered and

plopped into the water. Kwasi reached over, picked up a similar pebble, and cast it. The pebble flew above the water until it fell into the Anga River, a clear distance shorter than her stone.

"Next time when I'm in the mood, I'll give you a real challenge," he explained.

"You must never be in the mood seeing how you've never beat me," Zariah countered, tilting her head giving him a smirk for his loss.

"There's no honor in defeating a woman," he chuckled. "At least by losing, I look gracious."

"That would make you the most gracious man I know." Zariah snickered before turning her focus back at her feet. "What do you want?"

"Just wondering why you're here with old Nagina instead of getting ready for the Kusankha?" he asked, leaning back against the broad trunk of the Ebo tree. "I was looking everywhere for you. Most women have at least been soaking in oils or treating their hair since last night,"

"As if any of that stuff could help me," she answered as continuing to use her toes to dig deeper.

"You don't know that. You're still highly valued. I bet you will secure your future today," Kwasi said, grinning at her sideways.

Zariah glanced down at the ravine her toes created in the grains of black sand. *Why is he so sweet this morning?*

"Highly valued? I doubt even you believe those words," Zariah said. "Besides, the Ekulo Council informed my Aunt and Uncle that this is the last year I will participate in the Kusankha if I am passed over."

"They couldn't. There aren't enough women as it is," Kwasi said, sitting up with his eyebrows raised.

"The way they figure, it would be better for me to wait for a man willing to deal with me in private," she said, resting her chin on her knee as she started scooping up sands to cover her feet. "But who would want a woman passed over three years in a row?"

"That may be how you feel, but I still find you very desirable. You're the most beautiful and intelligent woman I have ever met." He smiled at her. Zariah ignored his words, finding them blunt where the action was concerned, continuing to bury her feet in silence.

"You're also the best cook I know," he said, nudging her shoulder, trying to get her to respond. "Haven't your meals always been among the first cleared at every Moons Day festival? I can scarcely get a taste of it."

Her feet, now firmly planted, Zariah turned back to Kwasi. "I've stood for two years now refusing to kneel or promise to obey my husband at the

Kusankha. And for that alone, I've been passed over every year, even with a shortage of women. So I'm sure it won't be overlooked, no matter how pretty you say I am or how perfect I cook my rice. It's my obedience they value above all."

"I know you don't like the Kusankha, but you have to admit that it is the foundation of peace between the five villages here in Aundum. I can't even imagine living like the men in the Lakan mountain villages. It's been over 300 years, and they're still fighting the death to have a woman while our peaceful system is working."

Zariah smiled and shook her head at his dramatics. Kwasi always got frustrated when they discussed this. "The way you're talking, you'd think the Ekulo Council sent you to deal with me," she said with a smirk. "If I promise to tell them you made a great effort to speak to me, will you spare me the speech?"

Kwasi frowned at her. "I don't need the council to tell the benefits of the Kusankha. Every woman, labor man, even the warriors participate as equals if they wish to be married. We've even abandoned our technology to make sure it's completely fair. Just to be sure that it works well for everyone."

Zariah peered at him from her peripheral. "Easily said when you're the one choosing."

Kwasi countered, "Any woman can bow her head to refuse when a man stops in front of her. Everyone has a choice. And you know it."

"Is it really a choice? If she doesn't accept his offer, another man will rarely risk asking her and being turned down in front of everyone. I have yet to see a woman say no to the first man that asks. Remember Ashata? Everyone knew that she and Jabari had hoped to marry. But Oni asked her first, so she had to accept."

"Come on, Zariah. That's why they suggest that we make no connections before the Kushunka. Nobody knows how it will go. That's part of what makes it fair. Besides, Oni didn't know who she was. Remember, she was wearing a mask over half her face. Even if he could see her eyes, he wouldn't know it was her until she took it off. Besides, aren't they happily married with three children anyway?"

Zariah hated to admit it but said, "They do seem very happy."

"Exactly. The Ekulo council thought of everything," he said.

"Has it?" Zariah asked. "Or have we simply ignored other problems? Even though I own this property now since my parent's death, it will belong

to my husband when we marry. If my husband dies, and I'm still alive, that property goes to my son. How does this make sense?"

"So that's what this is about? You would ruin our peace so that you can keep your property?"

"It's not the property," she said, sitting up, "I'd give it up today just for a voice. To have an active role in the decisions of my life. Instead, they prefer us, women, to be quiet and in the background. It's about households being held together by the silence of women. Silence and obedience can hide all manner of abuse and unhappiness."

"Abuse and unhappiness. Come on. Women have taken their issues before the council just like men."

"A council made of only men is hardly a worthy place to bring issues of women. How can a fair decision come from a group who don't find women worthy enough to be one of them."

"Now you're saying the Ekulo council is the problem," he answered, shaking his head in disapproval."

"I'm saying I want to make my own decisions? Why is it foolish for me to desire the choice and voice you say ended the violence between men in our villages? Why can't a woman help make decisions in a village full of

them." Her eyes burned into Kwasi's as she clenched her fists and gritted her teeth, her back now rigid.

Kwasi gazed at her, then exhaled before he finally responded, "I didn't come here to argue this with you. I wanted to tell you something, and now I don't think I want to."

That's right. He sought me out. I totally forgot about that. Zariah calmed her facial features.

"What is it?" she asked.

Kwasi frowned at her then turned his head away. "Come on," she pleaded. "you know you want to tell me."

Kwasi glanced at her for a moment, then looked around to see if anyone was nearby before leaning in close. Zariah quickly raised her hand to stop him.

"No touching on Kusankha day," she said sarcastically.

"I wasn't going to," he answered. "I just want to show you something."

Zariah watched as he reached into his pocket and pulled out something wrapped in a white cloth. When he pulled back the fabric, it revealed a large smooth black stone with his name carved into it.

"I won a spot in the Kusankha this year."

"For real!" Her eyes gleamed as she looked at the stone.

"I know, right. I can barely believe it. And at twenty-three years old too. My parents are so excited."

Zariah reached for the stone but stopped, knowing better than to break the rules by touching it. His wife would be the first woman to receive that honor. Still, this was the closest she had been to one other than the stone her father gave her mother.

"I'm so happy for you!" She exclaimed.

"Do you really mean it?" Kwasi asked, wrapping up the stone again.

"Are you serious? Of course, I'm happy for you. I know how long you have been waiting for a family. I won't begrudge you happiness," she said, giving him a genuine heartfelt smile. As she looked over his face, she couldn't believe she didn't notice that he looked more groomed than usual but handsome as always. His mustache and beard were definitely trimmed, giving his dark brown skin a cleaner look she was used to. And his locs were shiny from recently being oiled. *I can fix that, though.* A wicked grin began to pull at her lips as she dug near her feet for some mud. "Nice trim, but you missed your facial." Raising her hand, she tried to put some on his face. Kwasi quickly redirected her hand away, not realizing that she

gathered more in her other hand. “Stop playing,” he chuckled as she brought her second hand forward, smashing some mud to his face.

Zariah’s jaw dropped, surprised that she actually succeeded as Kwasi started wiping the mud off his face with a scowl.

“You play too much,” he complained as he wiped the last remnants away.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Oh, you will be,” he countered, pouncing toward her. Zariah tried to scoot back to get away but fell back against ole’ Nagina’s roots giving her nowhere to go as Kwasi leaned in and started tickling her. The air filled with rings of her laughter as she tried to deflect his hands from her sides.

“I’m trying to make,” she pleaded with glee breathlessly. “all the women want you.” Each time Zariah tried to move out of reach, he put his hand down to block her. Only for him to resume again.

“Okay, okay, okay. No touching,” she called out nearly out of air, prompting him to stop still leaned against her on the tree. *Finally, some fun.*

Zariah took a moment to calm her breathing along with Kwasi as she gazed into his eyes. *Was his eyes always this dark?* She wondered as he remained in his position hovered over her staring back. *I don’t remember*

them being that dark. Kwasi began to move his face closer as she glanced at his lips. *Or his lips being this full.* Almost as if she was under a spell, Zariah began to reach up to his face to touch them when he suddenly turned away and backed up.

"I want to show you something," he said, as her hand dropped back to her side.

"What?" she answered, sitting herself up. Kwasi looked back, forth, and back again to be sure they were still alone. Once he was satisfied that they were still alone, he dug something out of his pocket. He unfolded a brown piece of cloth in his hand, revealing his black half mask with intricate stitching around the eye holes.

"Now, who's breaking the rules? We're not supposed to know which men will be wearing which mask until tonight's unveiling."

"For you, I'll break this small one," he said as he wrapped his mask and placed it in his pocket with his stone. "Zariah, I've always loved you. You are a wonderful woman. Even though we don't always agree, I love your mind and your spirit. And yes, this is against the rules. I'm just showing you this to prove my feelings for you. I will choose you tonight if you have me."

"Kwasi!" Zariah said as tears threatened to fall. "Are you sure?" She rolled to her knees in front of him.

"Yes." Kwasi nodded. Zariah made a move to embrace him when he put his hand up to stop her.

"No touching, remember?" he said with a laugh. "Didn't you just warn me? Or should I start tickling you again?"

"I know, I know," she said, nodding her head before repeating the mantra. "No touching until the night of the Kusankha."

Kwasi smiled at her but abruptly became serious, "I just need you to do one thing for me."

"Anything? What is it?" Zariah said, beaming.

Kwasi's face swiftly turned serious. "Just kneel and use the right vows for me when it is time."

Want to continue?

Click this link <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09BBF88PT> for the entire book now available on Amazon and KindleUnlimited.

**WHEN YOU READ THE FULL BOOK *THE KISS*
OR IF YOU READ ON MY PREVIOUS BOOKS**

PLEASE LEAVE A RATING/REVIEW ON AMAZON.COM

Getting reviews is one of my most significant challenges. Please Help!!!!

I currently have a high rating, but I need more people to add their ratings/reviews. Ratings/reviews are essential for me in the business of being a self-publishing author.

Amazon has made it simple. Just swipe past the last page, which is the **Author's Note** page of the book you are reading. You will see the page **Amazon has provided** called **Before You Go...** to give me a verified rating/review for this book. Giving either a rating, review, or both will really help.

Want to read another one of my books? Try [*The Professor*](#) or [*My Brother's Keeper*](#).

Best regards,

Marie Q. Francois

Click any of these links for more information about me, upcoming books, giveaways, or just chat.

www.marieqfrancois.com – [Facebook](#) – [Facebook Author Page](#) –
[Email](#) – [Instagram](#)