

A LOVE IN THE SPOTLIGHT NOVEL

A RUN

at

LOVE

Toni Shiloh



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To the Author and Finisher of my faith.

PROLOGUE

JUNE, LAST YEAR

I breathed in deeply, inhaling the intoxicating combination of horses and hay. Today was going to be a good day. I just knew it.

My folks had sent me and my best friend, Tucker Hale—who also happened to work for them as one of their assistant trainers—to come to today’s livestock sale in their stead and purchase another racehorse. They were hoping I’d take over their farm and racing operation one day.

Only, I had my own plans, which was why I’d registered myself as a potential buyer under my new farm name. And since I wanted to avoid a potential conflict, I’d asked Tuck to register for Bolt Brook Thoroughbred Farm and act in my folks’ place. I’m sure he thought the request strange, but until I found the perfect horse, I’d keep the *why* to myself.

Before walking into the stables, I’d pored over the information in the catalog, studying every horse’s stats. Some were quite impressive, like Emperor Whethers, whose stall I stood in front of now.

“Can you bring him out?” I asked the stable hand.

“Sure.” He opened the door and grabbed the lead hanging from a hook on the wall. Then after clipping it to the two-year-old’s halter, he walked the colt into the aisle. Instead of calmly

following, he tossed his head back and forth as if trying to break free of his hold.

“He’s very spirited,” the stable hand said.

Mm-hmm. Not a horse my folks would appreciate but one they’d listed as a potential nonetheless. I went down the list they’d sent with me, marking my opinions in the catalog after inspecting each horse out of the stall. I also kept out an eye for any I might like.

I had the budget for one good horse. One I believed could take me all the way to the Kentucky Derby and launch my own aspirations, giving me the independence I so desperately wanted—*needed*. Before flying out here, I’d entered the contract stage of purchasing a farm. I was merely waiting to see if everything would be processed smoothly before calling myself an owner.

So far today, I’d starred two Thoroughbreds that would make perfect additions to my folks’ farm. Tuck had already been through the stables as well, a tactic we’d establish long ago. We each examined the horses on our own so we wouldn’t influence the other’s opinion, then discussed the pros and cons of each one before the bidding process started.

Except this time I had no plans of asking Tuck’s opinion on the purchase of my own racehorse. I’d know the perfect one when I spotted him.

I reached the last stall.

“This here is Dream. You wanna see him?” the barn hand asked.

“Yes, please.”

I sucked in an inhale as Dream stood before me. He was absolutely magnificent.

“May I touch him?” My fingers itched to run along his strong, sleek lines.

“Sure can. He won’t mind.”

I put my palm face up below Dream’s muzzle. His nostrils widened, and a puff of air caressed my hand as the colt took

my measure. Slowly, I ran a hand down his shoulders and along his flank, reveling in the softness of his coat but also assessing his muscular structure. He didn't shy away from my touch and held a calm disposition.

No, not calm. Regal.

I continued my assessment by running my fingers along his knees down his cannons to his fetlocks, my hands allowing me to feel what I couldn't see. His repository had shown he was injury free. All the X-rays and other medical tests had shown him to be a healthy horse, but I wanted to feel for myself.

"Why are they pushing you this early?" I whispered softly. Why had his current owner decided to give up on Dream being a Derby contender? His ears flickered backward, listening to my voice. I caressed his neck, keeping my volume low as I spoke. His racing speed hadn't been as fast as the others that ran the eighth of a mile, but he was no slouch either. I could see the promise in him.

Perhaps his regal personality kept him from getting in the trenches with the others? I wanted to ask the handler, but I would have to decide this on my own. Everything I saw of Dream showed me he could go the distance.

"You could be mine," I whispered.

I stepped away, noting other potential buyers filling the stables. I didn't want anyone to think I was attached and try to drive up the price later on. Because deep down I knew I'd bid on Dream.

The next day I found myself in the auction room, waiting impatiently for the start.

"First up is Hip 340." The auctioneer read the highlights of the dam's family as well as the colt's breeze time.

Then when I saw Dream on stage in the auction ring . . . well, something in my heart clicked. He was it. Dream was *my* horse. He would help me make my own dream come true. One that involved no one telling me how to live or how to dress. I

didn't want to run a three hundred acre stable like my folks'. Something much smaller and less formal was more my speed.

I leaned forward, heart pounding within my chest. Once again, I couldn't get over how stunning the two-year-old was. If he did well in the Derby, he could go on to sire many winners after him. I'd prayed all last night for wisdom regarding him and one of the other horses I'd marked as a potential purchase.

I swallowed and looked at my best friend. "I want to buy that horse," I whispered.

"Your parents didn't mark him down, did they?" Tuck's brow furrowed as he stared at his copy of the catalog.

Goodness, he was a fine-looking man. "No." I shook my head—pushing away attraction to him that shouldn't be present. "Not for them. For me."

"Wait, what?" Tuck placed a hand on my arm as if to keep me from raising my finger.

I wanted to sigh as the warmth of his palm heated my arm with little electric pulses. But now wasn't the time to think of all the ways I loved Tucker Hale. After all, I'd made a commitment to myself to never admit to him the depth of my feelings. I couldn't—*wouldn't*. Tuck was my person, and I wanted him to stay my person. If I told him how I felt, and he rejected me . . .

Well, I'd never know if his rejection of me was as a woman or a Black woman. Either outcome was one I didn't want to navigate. Not when we were so good together as BFFs—my moniker, not Tuck's. He claimed the term *BFFs* was too feminine.

"I've been thinking," I said.

"Uh-huh . . ." His warm blue eyes studied me.

"I want to be more than just the daughter of Ian and Jackie McKinney. I want to make my own way in the racing world." I held my breath, waiting for his reaction.

“And buying this horse is a way to do that?”

The auctioneer opened bids. I bit my lip, waiting to see if someone would raise their hand or nod to accept the price.

“Yes. I’ve been dreaming of running my own Thoroughbred farm, but something a lot smaller than my parents’ big ol’ estate.” *Big ol’* was a complete understatement. Their operation was a huge undertaking.

“So why this guy?” Tuck motioned to Dream.

“Look at him.” I flinched as first one person, then another, bid. “Obviously, I’m not the only one who agrees.”

“I won’t stop you, but I will caution you.”

That was Tuck. The one to hesitate and plan out everything before taking a plunge. While I could appreciate that fine character trait, I wouldn’t let it prevent me from going with my gut feeling. I caught the auctioneer’s eye and raised my finger. Adrenaline surged through me as he acknowledged my bid.

Tuck gaped at me. “You already registered, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I grimaced inwardly. “That’s why I asked you to register my folks.”

“I would’ve never guessed.” He shook his head, looking stunned.

“Please bid for them.”

“Pipsqueak, come on. Let someone else buy this colt. We can talk about your plan before you go diving in headfirst.”

I raised my finger again. “Tuck,” I whispered out the side of my mouth, “I’m not jumping into anything I haven’t tested the temperature for. This has been a long, thought-out plan. I have a vision board and everything.”

“Oh no, not a vision board.”

I suppressed a laugh at his dry tone. “Besides, I’ve been sitting on the sidelines of my own life for far too long.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were thinking about this? I thought we told each other everything.”

I turned toward him just in time to see hurt flash through his eyes. A pang throbbed in my chest. “I’m sorry. I just . . . I didn’t want to say anything until I had the wheels in motion.”

“And the wheels are moving?”

I nodded and raised my finger once more.

The auctioneer continued chanting at the speed of lightning flashing, but it looked like no one else was going to raise the bid.

“Is this really happening?” Tuck asked.

“I hope so.” No need to tell Tuck I was in the process of buying a farm as well. Purchasing a racehorse was probably too much of a shock for him right then as it was.

The auctioneer slowed his speech, then named my bid as the final call. This was it. This was my move toward freedom. Dream—*my* dream.

This colt would be my first official major purchase as an adult. Up until now, my parents had bought almost every single thing I owned, including my truck. Getting my own place, purchasing my own racehorse . . . all done to move me toward independence and help me stand on my own two feet regardless of what the folks of Eastbrook, Kentucky, thought best.

Being adopted was a gift I’d never take for granted. But I was tired of letting it keep me from living life on my own say-so. All my life I’d listened to my folks’ suggestions for navigating the tricky waters that were often part of a transracial life. Plus, the people in Eastbrook pressed upon me the need to behave in a way that would express gratitude to my folks. After hearing from so many neighbors how grateful I should feel throughout my childhood, that obligation was second nature to me now.

I needed a change. Somehow I had to get past the double looks I received because of my race. Even at this auction I’d earned second glances. As if the thought whispering in other people’s minds was *Why is a Black person at a horse auction?*

As if I couldn't love horse racing just as much as anyone else. I was tired of people questioning my motives. I just wanted to do something that brought me joy.

And that was owning my own farm, making my own way in this industry. Not as Ian and Jackie McKinney's daughter, but as Piper McKinney, owner of Maisha Farms. I'd run a place that let me be . . . me. But there was one person I wanted alongside me.

I turned to my friend. "Tuck?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you come work for me? Be the head trainer at my farm?"

"You're going to own a farm now too?" He took off his Stetson and ran a hand through his dirty-blond locks. "My head is spinning."

This time, I placed my hand on his and leaned forward. "Tucker Hale, who else would I want beside me as I take the racing world by storm?"



JULY

Tucker Hale always had a plan.

Granted, agreeing to train Piper's new colt meant he'd had to alter his old plan and start a new one. But he had to admit, this might be his best plan yet.

He stared at what he'd written in his planner.

Win Piper McKinney's Heart

- 1. Increase annual income by 30% and have a six-month emergency fund*
- 2. Get Dream to the Derby*
- 3. Win the Derby*
- 4. Tell Piper how I feel*
- 5. Marry her*

Tuck stared at the words, trying to decide if he was missing some steps.

Now that he was no longer working for the McKinneys, he had to figure out other ways to provide for Piper. Yes, she had a trust fund and likely didn't *need* his money, but at the end of the day he wanted to provide some type of income. He could add more horseback riding lessons, maybe even see if he could train other horses besides Piper's.

He nodded slowly, then thankful he'd left a few lines blank after each number, he added a few bullets under step number one. Of course, he wrote in pencil, because you never knew when a plan needed to be altered. He wasn't so bullheaded that he'd write in pen. But seeing the list come together loosened the tightness around his chest and gave him hope.

Tuck had loved Piper ever since middle school, when he finally saw her for the beautiful girl she was. That love had only grown over the years. But he'd never been able to tell her. Unfortunately, he'd always felt inferior to her.

He wasn't rich like her folks. Hadn't owned his own home until the beginning of the year. And up until she hired him, he'd been only an assistant trainer. Not one of the headliners who got to have their names listed next to the racehorse and a bona fide win added to their résumé.

Tuck prayed that was all about to change. He'd poured out his heart to God when Piper asked him to train Dream, praying for wisdom to know if leaving Bolt Brook was the right thing. When he got the yes, he panicked a little, immediately wondering how he'd make his mortgage payment and other bills that must be paid.

So he kept praying that God would provide until the itchy feeling under his skin abated and calm restored. He still wasn't fully surrendered and at peace, but at least he could breathe.

I trust You, Lord, and I know You'll get me through. I pray this new plan will bring me ultimate happiness.

Because being with Piper—as the love of his life and *not* merely his best friend—was all he really wanted. More than a Derby win, more than any plan he'd ever created. It all meant nothing if he couldn't win Piper McKinney's heart.

One

FEBRUARY

Laissez les bons temps rouler!

Somehow Tuck and I had driven right into the beginning of Mardi Gras season. We'd been in the car for more than ten hours since leaving Eastbrook and making our way to the Risen Star Stakes held at Fair Grounds Race Course in New Orleans. We planned on attending the race to check out Dream's competition.

I couldn't quite express what it felt like seeing purple, green, and yellow beads hanging from the branches of the trees. Surely that was just something from the movies, right? Had parade participants thrown them up there on purpose, or was it a bead toss gone wrong?

"Can you believe this?" I asked.

"The sights or something else?"

"That we made it on the Derby trail."

Dream had done well in the early prep races, and now he'd be participating in the championship series, consisting of sixteen races that would lead to twenty horses on the field of Churchill Downs to run the Kentucky Derby.

"You mean when you asked me to train Dream, you didn't

actually think you'd make it on the Derby trail?" Tuck smiled at me from the driver's seat.

My breath hitched at those perfectly curved lips and baby-blue eyes. Why did my best friend always have to make me feel like I was in need of a fainting couch?

I swallowed. *Focus on his words.* "I'd hoped. But now that we're here . . ." I shook my head. "Seriously, Tuck, how did we get here?"

Risen Star was the first race on the Derby trail, but we'd chosen to instead participate in the Battaglia Stakes at Turfway Park in two weeks. Each race awarded a certain number of points for the first through fifth winners. The twenty horses with the most points were eligible for the Derby.

"Hard work."

His hard work. Sure, I'd picked the horse, but I hadn't been the one spending hours and days and weeks training the colt. Tuck had. Though I did give my opinion here and there.

"I can't begin to thank you enough." My fingers itched to squeeze Tuck's hand like I'd done numerous times. But I needed to get my heart rate back to normal and push those affectionate feelings aside before I could touch him platonically.

"No thanks necessary, Pipsqueak."

Well, there went those loving feelings.

Since Tuck and I had started working together, our friendship had taken a strange path. We'd gone from sharing everything with each other to Tuck putting up an invisible brick wall between us. He treated me more formally, like he'd once treated my dad, his old boss. Yet every now and again, the wall lowered, and he'd choose to call me by my childhood nickname. I couldn't remember how often he called me Pipsqueak prior to training my Thoroughbred, but now I heard the unflattering nickname way too often.

More than once I'd considered confessing my feelings to Tuck, but the longer I remained mute, the longer it seemed taboo

to me. Tuck would most likely reject me with all the love and kindness that existed in him, but that goodness wouldn't lessen the blow. No matter how he cushioned his words, telling me I would simply remain his best friend would shatter my heart.

Unfortunately, I wasn't sure his returning my affections would be the best thing either. We'd never been anything but Tucker and Piper, the two kids seen running across my folks' estate, playing hide-and-seek or, once we got older, racing our horses. We were always together, and people naturally assumed that meant we were like brother and sister.

Only there wasn't a single ounce of sisterly affection for Tucker Hale in me. I stuck my hand out the window and let the warmth from the sun soothe me. It had been a lot colder in Kentucky when we'd left my farm.

I'd bought the property last July, throwing my folks for a loop. I could still remember the shocked look on my mother's face when I enlightened her regarding my plans.

"Piper, honey, we didn't even get to look at the place. What if they upped the price because you're a McKinney? How could you make this step without our guidance?"

Dad had winked at me. *"Now, Jackie, we raised Piper to be smart. I'm sure she handled it beautifully."*

I sighed as the memory faded.

"You're thinking awfully loud over there. Thinking 'bout your folks?"

"Yeah," I murmured.

Tuck sighed. "They show their love the only way they know how."

Which begged the question, How did I need to be loved? Was it ungrateful for me to want them to let me stumble a bit? As soon as they'd learned of my plans, they'd tried to step in and help. They'd offered to find a jockey to race Dream and even tried to pay for my farm. I'd had to beg them to let me be independent and trust I could handle the responsibility.

“I might be smothered by the end of the season.”

Tuck laughed. “Jackie McKinney is a fashion icon in the Derby world. Surely her picking out outfits isn’t all that bad.”

I just stared at him while he tried to dial down his laughter.

“Okay, the last outfit made you look like a Stepford wife.”

“It’s not me.” I shuddered thinking of the pale pink tweed skirt suit Mama suggested I wear at our last race.

“Keep gently reminding her of that, and she’ll eventually get it.”

I rolled my eyes. Maybe I needed to have a conversation with Dad. He was great at playing mediator when I thought Mama’s guidance a little overbearing. I tried so hard not to show her how upset her suggestions made me.

“Don’t slouch. People will wonder why you can’t walk with confidence.”

“Don’t wear those colors. They’re not good with your complexion.”

“Always use the manners we raised you with. We don’t want others to complain.”

She was so focused on what other people thought. And I got it. I was, too, but I saved myself a little breathing room. Of course, I couldn’t be mad at her, because she adopted me. Wasn’t it ungrateful to be mad at a parent who’d done more for you than your biological parents had?

My bio parents had dropped me off at an orphanage in Oloro Ilé—an island country in the Gulf of Guinea—and left me without a backward glance. Believe me, I know. I had that one childhood memory of their departure to torture me. Their re-treating backs and my wails were all I could recall of them. On the other hand, my adoptive parents had continuously poured their love and monetary blessings on me. I’d never wanted for anything . . . except a little more autonomy.

As the parent of an only child, a little breathing room wasn’t something Mama knew how to give. She loved fiercely and with

a side of a little-overbearing presence. She'd been unable to have biological children, and Dad said after the two long years of waiting for my adoption to finalize and for me to actually arrive in the States, it was too much turmoil to go through again. So I became an only child to wealthy parents who were royalty in the Kentucky Derby scene. Their horses had sired past Derby winners, and they enjoyed selling the foals to the highest bidder in hopes that history would repeat itself.

"I don't know when, but I have no doubt your mom will learn how to parent an adult and give you some space." Tuck's voice broke my silence.

"I hope you're right." Because I didn't look forward to another ten years of feeling like a child past the age of eighteen.

Tuck slowed the truck to idle in front of our hotel.

I looked up at the white building with a black awning over the front entrance. "These buildings are gorgeous."

"And right downtown where you wanted to be."

"That's because I was thinking of my stomach." I grinned. "I've been dreaming about gumbo and beignets ever since I've known we were coming."

Tuck laughed. "Are we going to try to catch a Mardi Gras parade or two as well?"

I shrugged. I was there to scope out the competition, and I hadn't really made any plan other than that. Knowing Tuck, he'd taken care of that for the both of us.

"What's your plan?" I asked him.

"I'll share with you. Don't worry."

"Okay."

After we found the guest parking lot, skipping valet service, I followed Tuck up the hotel steps. He handed our baggage to a bellboy, and then we went inside to check in. My eyes took in the swanky details of the place, and I recalled the first time I traveled with my parents. They always stayed in five-star hotels for the best accommodations. I had to admit, the hotel snobbery

bug caught me. Only now it was my money paying for my room as well as Tuck's.

"We going to eat right away?" I asked.

"Definitely. I don't want you getting hangry."

I loved that crooked grin on his face. What would he do if I let my wobbly knees tip myself right against him where lips could meet? I turned away, feeling heat in every pore on my face.

The memory of our first meeting came to the surface.

"*You the new kid?*"

I'd tilted my head back, the sun silhouetting a kid's frame. Someone sat down next to me, and a young boy's face came into focus, showing blond hair and blue eyes. The complete opposite to my black eyes and short black hair. His skin was pale where mine was dark.

"Yes," I said, English feeling foreign on my tongue.

He stuck out his hand. "*I'm Tuck. My dad's the horse trainer.*"

"*Piper.*" We shook hands, and something clicked right into place.

I hadn't realized it then, but Tucker Hale had stolen my heart before I even knew what love was. From that day forward, I followed him around Bolt Brook on a daily basis. Tuck taught me how to skip rocks at the water hole. He was right next to me when I rode my first horse. He was there to wipe my tears when I fell off and to cheer me on when I got back up.

I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. "I'm gonna go shower and change, then."

"Sure thing."

Good grief. Attending races together now proved to be a lot more difficult than when we worked for my parents. I thought removing my family from the equation would make work easier, but it had only added a weird tension.

After checking out my room, I grabbed a fresh set of clothes and toiletries from my suitcase. I wanted to look my best for