

LBRIS

We know
books

C. A
Cinnamon
Falls
Mystery

R. L. KILLMORE



**SIMON &
SCHUSTER**

London · New York · Amsterdam/Antwerp · Sydney/Melbourne · Toronto · New Delhi

Chapter 1

Monday
Nia

There was, quite simply, a very reasonable explanation as to how Nia ended up back in Cinnamon Falls. She'd always imagined that she would return home in a flurry of triumph with a crowd of supporters chanting her name and throwing rose petals at her feet. Instead, she arrived with two suitcases full of regret, a wrap-around headache, and a serious need for a nap, or a large scoop of cinnamon swirl ice cream, whichever came first.

Let's start with the facts: Nia Janice Bennett has never been a homewrecker. So, when Miss All-Tits-and-No-Ass braved metro Atlanta's Monday morning traffic and showed up to Nia's three-story townhouse downtown at eight a.m., claiming Nia's man of two years was actually her husband of four, Nia could have contorted her body like one of those creepy circus performers and simply vanished into thin air.

Instead, she did the second fastest thing. She left.

In forty minutes and a maddening blur of tears, she stuffed every single item she'd ever owned, including her completely shattered pride and ego, into two rickety suitcases and an oversized purse that Bryant, her now married ex-boyfriend, had bought her last Christmas. She'd never even taken it out of the box before today. She didn't see a reason to carry a purse the size of a small Doberman. She could call that subtle foreshadowing.

Thousands of memories of their relationship flickered through her head like a highlight reel in the rideshare while she journeyed to the bus station – the moment they met in the copy room of her coveted internship at Gildman & Sons, Georgia's most powerful law firm, until now, the day she realized her entire relationship was a lie.

All she could think about on the commute was his smile. In the picture his wife all but shoved at her, Bryant's gorgeous brown face was pressed against hers, showing all thirty-two of his adult teeth. He was stuffed in a classic black tuxedo with a crisp white collar accentuating his expertly lined beard. His brown eyes were wide with an unbridled happiness, like someone had left him in a simmering pot on a hot stove. They both had their hands raised toward the camera, showcasing their matching rings, mocking Nia.

Ironically, he'd had the same expression with Nia

just a few days ago when they celebrated her graduation, minus the matching rings.

What had she missed, and most importantly, how could she have been so stupid?

That question was on a loop for Nia's entire trip back home to Cinnamon Falls. For the last two years, besides finishing grad school, her world had revolved around Bryant. If she was being completely honest with herself, everything felt a little emptier without him now.

Nia looked at her cell phone. Behind the screensaver of Bryant and her, it showed twenty-two missed calls from his number and another fourteen missed calls from an unknown number after she blocked him. She'd leave him to figure out his life in peace. He clearly had enough going on. There was no need for her to be in the equation anymore. Nia had never been the type of person to stir up drama but somehow it always, always found her.

Nia had managed to drag two uncooperative pieces of luggage across county lines, but this final leg of the journey would be the hardest – the bus ride into Cinnamon Falls. The cost of living in a small town was never having any business of your own. By the time she made it into Cinnamon Falls, at least one third of the town would know that Nia Bennett, the prodigal daughter, had returned.

Nia watched as the bus ambled toward her stop. Shawna Daniels, Ms. Pearline's great-niece, was all

grown up now, and from the looks of it, worked full-time for her family's public transportation business.

'Nia Bennett?' Shawna eyed her with a knowing voice, giving her a focused once-over like Nia was an extraterrestrial sent down to destroy her homeland.

'Hey, Shawna,' Nia started, wrestling with the suitcases to make them stay upright.

'It's been a minute,' Shawna replied, stating the obvious.

It had been six years since Nia left Cinnamon Falls, but who was counting? The little girl with pigtails who used to sit at the steering wheel and marvel while her great-aunt maneuvered the big bus through the town's tight streets was the one doing the driving now. Their familiar lightning logo was proudly displayed across her polo shirt, the bright blue color matching the vehicle perfectly, like Ms. Pearlina's always had. Nia was happy to know that at least some things had stayed the same since she'd been gone.

'How old are you now?' Nia wondered.

'Eighteen,' she replied. 'I graduated early 'cause Auntie Pearlina wants me to get as much training as possible.'

An awkward silence drifted between them, until Shawna offered Nia a small smile. 'Let me help you with that.'

Nia slid a suitcase over to her while she loaded the rest of her bags onto the bus. Shawna stacked Nia's luggage neatly in the corral and slid into the

driver's seat, buckling her seat belt and triple checking her mirrors. Nia noticed her nametag that read 'Trainee'.

'You in town to see Darius Lyons at the Fall Festival?'

'Darius Lyons?' Nia repeated, the name and all its glory coming back to her like the season's first snow, slowly and then all at once. She felt a pang in her chest and checked the date on her phone – October 6th.

Fall Festival always took place on the second weekend in October, which meant it was only a few days away. History said that the first settlers of Cinnamon Falls started the Annual Fall Festival as a way to bring the community together after the tough harvest season. Now, it was more of a tradition that shut down the entire town with parades, hayrides, eating contests, vendors, and the most coveted title for high school seniors, Cinnamon King and Queen.

'He's back in town to crown the new Cinnamon King,' Shawna said brightly.

Nia was sure the crown still fit his ego just fine after all these years. 'Isn't he playing for the Falcons now?' she asked. The last time Nia had thought about the town's golden boy, he was well into his football season. Just last year, his team won the championship, which probably made Mayor Lyons want to paint a mural of his son's face on the side of Town Hall. The mention of Darius being back in town didn't make Nia feel much of anything besides contempt.

‘On a bye week,’ Shawna said enthusiastically, pulling Nia from her thoughts of yesteryear. ‘They let him come back special just for this. Can you believe it? Darius Lyons putting little ol’ Cinnamon Falls on the map.’

Nia rolled her eyes. She had already had enough of yapping about Darius. It would take them forty-seven minutes to get from the bus station into town. She was looking forward to watching Georgia’s four-lane traffic, badly paved streets, and morning smog give way to the lush green forests that crowded the quiet, one-lane highways. Despite the Darius chat, Nia was buzzing. She couldn’t wait for the tantalizing aroma of cinnamon to pull her closer and closer like a warm hug from a loved one; something she desperately needed.

But instead of a quiet and nostalgic ride, she watched her seductive vision of a nap slip through her fingers. Shawna was nothing like her great-aunt. All those years of training at her aunt’s helm proved to be useless.

By the time they’d gotten to the outskirts of town, Nia was sure she’d sustained the kinds of injuries that would qualify her for medical compensation. Shawna ground the bus to a stop so violently – sending all Nia’s luggage catapulting to the front of the bus, then careening backward – that absolutely nothing could have prepared her for the look of satisfaction on Shawna’s face when they arrived at

the Bennett family ice cream shop, The Cinnamon Scoop.

The Cinnamon Scoop was the first established business in Cinnamon Falls, back when there was only a couple of hundred residents. Nia’s great-grandmother, Ma-Clara, and her husband, Eugene Bennett, moved to Cinnamon Falls for work at the old spice mill. The mill processed cinnamon from the wild cinnamon trees that grew nearby and packaged it up to ship all over the country. Eugene would bring home some of the freshly ground spice, and Ma-Clara started making cinnamon swirl ice cream as a sweet treat. It wasn’t long until word got around the town and Ma-Clara opened a humble ice cream parlor for the mill workers to enjoy.

The mill had burned down decades ago but the shop, and the Bennett legacy, remained.

‘Here you are,’ Shawna said with an accomplished smile. Even though The Cinnamon Scoop was the last place Nia wanted to go, since she hadn’t necessarily left on the best terms with her family, she sprinted off the bus with the last bit of her life intact.

‘Welcome back!’ Shawna called before pulling off. The bus made a sickening crunch as she steered it into traffic on Main Street, back toward the bus station.

Nia stood on the sidewalk for a moment, catching her breath and observing the scene before her. Her father hadn’t told her they’d given the shop an update.

She was so used to the cinnamon bun mascot with the googly eyes holding a silver spoon. In its place was a Neapolitan-colored awning that boasted the shop's name in a loopy script font. It looked too modern for a sleepy town like Cinnamon Falls.

Nia turned around, taking it all in. Maggie Shilling and the festival crew had already decorated Main Street in preparation for the weekend's festivities. A white banner as old as the place itself hung from the four-way traffic light that read, 'CINNAMON FALLS SINCE 1919'.

To be back in the thick of it all was humbling. Nia took in another deep breath, inhaling the faint smell of wild cinnamon from the forest. If it were quiet, she could have heard the rushing waterfall miles away.

Barkwood Bridge would be covered in bronze and ruby red leaves by now. Tons of tourists from all around Georgia come to snap a picture or two there. Eventually, they'd make their way into town to grab some apple cider at Rosie's or a magnet at the general store.

The Cinnamon Falls residents who lived here year-round loved it here. Everyone except for Nia.

She pulled on the door to the ice cream shop, figuring she would find it empty, especially before noon on a Monday. There was a fifty-fifty chance her father would be behind the counter, taking inventory or triple checking the temperature of the freezers.

Instead, Nia was met with the piercing screams of

joyful toddlers. Her father, Walter, was standing on top of the counter in his ridiculous cinnamon bun hat, with his arms splayed open and an animated smile on his face.

'And that's why I always say: the perfect scoop is the key to happiness!' he boomed, holding up an ice cream scoop like it was the holy grail. The children cheered as if he was delivering a fire and brimstone sermon. Nia wondered how much sugar these innocent children had been subjected to this early in the morning.

A hand belonging to an adorable little boy with glasses too big for his face shot in the air. 'So how does the cow make the ice cream?'

Her father's shoulders deflated, which meant he'd have to start his ice cream origins story from the beginning. But before he could, Marjorie, Nia's mother, emerged from the back of the shop with a tray full of individual bowls that held small dollops of pink strawberry ice cream. Nia's mouth watered at the sight. Chunks of bright strawberry, picked from the fertile soil on Old Man Milton's farm at peak season, were folded into the creamy strawberry base, Ma-Clara's signature recipe.

'Who's ready for strawberry?' Marjorie asked the group of waiting toddlers, who squealed in delight.

Her mother's hair had grayed at the temples since Nia had been gone. It was gathered into a neat ponytail, secured in a clamp. Her eyes were softer, and

her smile lines more prominent, but she still looked the same.

Her father, on the other hand, hadn't aged a bit. He was clearly still jumping on top of Ma-Clara's good counters and making impatient children sit through a twenty-minute presentation on how ice cream was made before giving them a sample. It was the same speech he'd given when Nia's class came for Career Week all those years ago.

Her mother didn't look in her direction when she said, 'If you're gonna stand in the doorway, you might as well make yourself useful.'

Nia deserved that.

The last time they had seen each other, they'd had an exchange of words that was so blisteringly cruel that it still kept Nia up at night. She wasn't sure how her mother would react to her return. So far, this was much better than any of the scenarios she'd imagined on the bus ride over.

Nia stashed her luggage in an open booth near the door, grabbed a spare apron, pushed up her sleeves, and got to work. After washing her hands, she grabbed as much ice cream as she could carry and helped her mother dole out bowls to the squirming children, who had already begun questioning why some scoops were bigger than others. After the complaining died down, the only sound that could be heard were satisfied smacks of approval as the children worked on their ice cream.

'Well, well, well, if it isn't Nia "Never Coming Back" Bennett!' a familiar voice floated over to Nia as she wiped up a splotch of spilled cream from the service counter. 'Back like you never left! Did you miss scooping ice cream for the little people that much?'

Morgan Taylor hadn't changed at all since the last time Nia had seen her. The girl everyone thought was strange because she wore purple every day was still sporting her favorite color. This time, it made an appearance in her hair: a dramatic pixie cut with a flash of purple in the bang that swooped over her left eye. She wore a purple cardigan with a pair of ripped black jeans. Purple ribbon crisscrossed through the prominent holes.

'I actually did,' Nia laughed, remembering the slow nights in the shop when the two of them dreamt about getting out of this too small town. 'Nothin' like finger blisters and hand cramps that make you long for home. What about you? Herding crotch gremlins for a living treating you any good?' She nodded over to the kids who were enthralled in a story her mother was reading to them about an ice cream monster. Wide eyes watched Marjorie intensely with their tiny hands clamped over their open mouths, as her fingers curled in a sinister way.

'Livin' the dream,' Morgan said sarcastically, shrugging. They embraced for a long hug. Her voice dropped down to a whisper. 'The best part about it is, they believe anything I say.'

‘That’s how cults start,’ Nia deadpanned.

‘Next stop, world domination!’ Morgan declared with her arms wide. The two women laughed together, before Morgan paused, assessing Nia in her entirety. ‘So, you just passing through?’ She gestured toward the stack of luggage that looked like Nia was staying for much longer than a quick getaway.

Nia opened her mouth to answer with a lie: *You know, just checking in on things*, but her brain decided against it. She’d experienced enough lies today to last a lifetime.

‘I don’t really know,’ she answered.

Morgan nodded, her eyes searching Nia’s, like the story of Nia’s heartbreak was written all over her face. Thankfully, she changed the subject. ‘So that means you’re coming to the Fall Festival this Saturday?’

Before Nia could confirm, Morgan continued, ‘I heard Darius Lyons is back. The whole town is like swooning over the fact that we have our very own celebrity now.’

Nia twisted her lips. ‘Since when are you a Darius Lyons fan? If I recall correctly, you thought he was an idiot in high school.’

‘Not just me,’ Morgan corrected. ‘Me, you, *and* Sienna thought he was a couple beers short of a six pack back then. Now, he’s an idiot with access. You think he can put me on with Leon Crosby?’

‘The actor?’ Nia asked incredulously, holding back a laugh.

‘Unfortunately for me, Darius is my only way in. Don’t all the celebrities like, know each other?’

Nia hated to burst her bubble, but she was saved just in time. The sport watch on Morgan’s arm beeped in a staccato fashion, flashing zeroes.

‘Time’s up!’ she shouted to the group of kids. ‘Lips zipped, hands on hips!’ The children assembled in a straight line without fuss, placing one finger over their closed mouths and the other hand on their hips. Once they were all together in a perfect line she said, ‘Let’s dip!’

The children filed out of the ice cream parlor and lined up against the window, careful not to step out into the street. Morgan, satisfied with their performance, looked back at Nia just before heading out behind them.

‘If you’re not busy, stop by Rosie’s tonight. I’m sure Jesse would love to see you.’ She winked with a mischievous smile. If Nia wasn’t in front of her parents, she would have thrown a tasting spoon at Morgan’s head.

As Nia turned around, she saw her father furiously scrubbing the same squeaky-clean spot on the counter. Her mother had also busied herself, shuffling around the three meager children’s books on the shelf.

‘So, how much of that did you hear?’ Nia asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Walter turned to Marjorie and their eyes had a split-second argument over who would be the one to

answer her first. If Nia were a betting woman, she'd expect it to be her father.

Her mother pointed her chin toward the stack of luggage at the door. 'So, what happened? Bryant left you?'

It was a good thing Nia wasn't a betting woman. 'He was married, actually,' Nia quipped, making sure to keep her head high. 'So, I left him.'

'Good girl.' Her father nodded his approval.

Nia watched as the satisfied smirk melted off her mother's face, replaced with an expression that looked as if it held its own memories of betrayal. She started across the room toward her daughter.

'Group hug?' Nia's little brother, Niles, asked as he appeared from behind the counter. He was much taller than she remembered.

For the first time that day, Nia laughed. She laughed so hard that she cried.

Chapter 2

Jesse

Old Man Milton had three roosters that could wake the dead. Jesse could be six feet under the dirt, and he would still be able to hear Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the afterlife. But, if it weren't for their daily wake-up calls, he'd miss the sunrise over Cinnamon Falls each morning.

Jesse had woken up in different cities all over the world, but nothing compared to home. From the vantage point of his balcony, he could see the sun rise above the waterfall through a small break in the forest of wild cinnamon trees. The honey golden sun spread its magic over all living beings, persistent, dripping between the tiniest crevices of the earth to extend its light. Jesse was thankful it saw fit to adorn his home; thankful that, for at least another day, life existed there.

Jesse began his day the same way he did every morning, thanks to military training, with a sun salutation and some deep stretches to get the blood