

La Toya Hankins

Press Kit



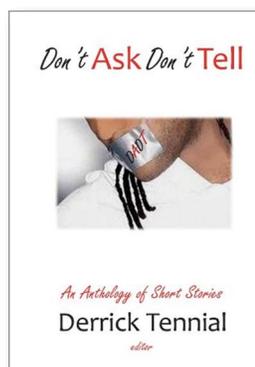
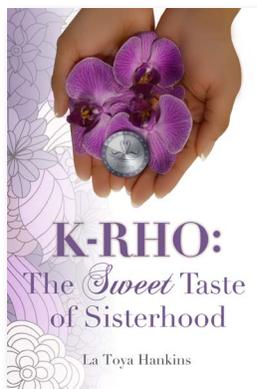
Meet La Toya Hankins, author of the novels *K-Rho: The Sweet Taste of Sisterhood* and *SBF Seeking...* and the short story *Three Is the Magic Number*.

La Toya serves as co-chair of Shades of Pride—organizer of the annual Triangle Black Pride. She’s an active supporter of LGBT issues and health disparities that affect her community.

Her literary influences include Zora Neale Hurston, Walter Mosley, Anne Rice, and Pearl Cleage. Her motto, borrowed from Hurston, is “I do not weep at the world, I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

La Toya is a North Carolina native currently residing in Raleigh. A graduate of East Carolina University in Greenville, NC, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism with a minor in Political Science. In college, she became a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and later served as second vice president for one of the largest graduate chapters in the state.

She divides her free time between being a proud pet parent of a terrier named Neo and volunteering in her community.



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- Author photo

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- *K-Rho* (front cover)
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- *Don't Ask Don't Tell* (front cover)

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Author talk at North Carolina Central University



Sipping On Ink



Ladies of Literature

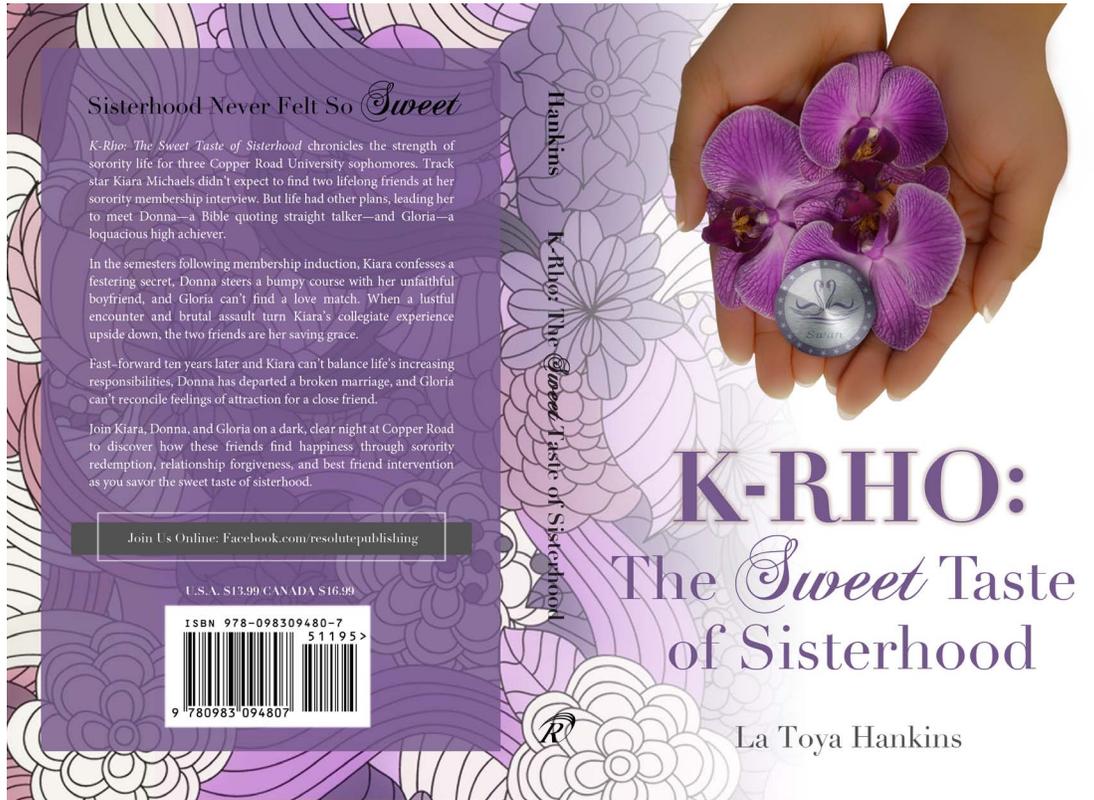


Lez Talk Books Radio



K-Rho: The Sweet Taste of Sisterhood

Novel



SUMMARY: *K-Rho: The Sweet Taste of Sisterhood* chronicles the strength of sorority life for three Copper Road University sophomores. Track star Kiara Michaels didn't expect to find two lifelong friends at her sorority membership interview. But life had other plans, leading her to meet Donna—a Bible quoting straight talker—and Gloria—a loquacious high achiever.

In the semesters following membership induction, Kiara confesses a festering secret, Donna steers a bumpy course with her unfaithful boyfriend, and Gloria can't find a love match. When a lustful encounter and brutal assault turn Kiara's collegiate experience upside down, the two friends are her saving grace.

Fast-forward ten years later and Kiara can't balance life's increasing responsibilities, Donna has departed a broken marriage, and Gloria can't reconcile feelings of attraction for a close friend. Join Kiara, Donna, and Gloria on a dark, clear night at Copper Road to discover how these friends find happiness through sorority redemption, relationship forgiveness, and best friend intervention as you savor the sweet taste of sisterhood.

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K-Rho: The Sweet Taste of Sisterhood

Chapter 1

ANY OTHER MONDAY night, Kiara Michaels' mind would be on the ethics of corporate mergers. Tonight, a different kind of union occupied her thoughts.

Two weeks ago, the heavy purple linen envelope her mother trained her to expect almost from birth landed in the Copper Road University sophomore's campus mailbox. The letter bore an invitation. The women of the Lambda Mu Chapter of Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority, Incorporated had requested her attendance for an interview. She was being considered for membership. Acceptance of the offer required Kiara to deliver three copies of the enclosed application and a money order for \$24.95 to the Sanford Student Center at 6:45 p.m. tonight.

Kiara walked briskly out the back entrance of her dorm. The Blueburg, North Carolina cold air slapped her mocha colored cheeks with an icy hand. Shivering she thought, 'why am I doing this? Doesn't being the daughter of a lifetime sorority member count for something? They should just tell me where to show up in my white dress so I can get my sorority handbook, pin and a bounty of crossing gifts. Hell, I have probably been to more national conventions than all the girls put together.'

"Excuse me, are you here for the Kappa sorority meeting?" a voice said behind Kiara.

Kiara turned to face a girl who resembled a gazelle. Slender shape, beaming brown eyes and a direct gaze. She wore a royal blue beret leaned to the side of a neat black braided bob. Smiling, the girl waited for a response.

"Are you here for an interview?" Kiara asked walking inside followed by the newcomer.

"Yes, good to know I'm not the only one they are meeting with tonight. Usually, this time on a Monday, I would be in my Comparative Latin American Politics class. But, since the lovely women of the Lambda Mu Chapter of Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority, Incorporated requested my presence, I decided to forgo my educational advancement for a night. I'm Gloria Allen by the way, what's your name?"

Kiara introduced herself. Walking up the carpeted steps to the second floor, Kiara noted Gloria also wore glasses and seemed about the same height. Then again, it could have been the three-inch heels Kiara wore making her eye level to her companion.

Lowering herself onto one of the brown leather sofas in the center of the second floor lobby, Kiara noticed fifteen other girls milling around. Removing her jacket, she unconsciously rubbed the back of her neck. She had recently cut her hair and still felt sensitive about exposing her neck. Her hairstyle choice did not come from a desire to jump on the recent Toni Braxton hair cut craze sweeping campus. It was to camouflage the damage of a dorm-applied perm. The scholarship checks only stretched so far and trying to cut costs, Kiara had gone the budget route instead of the beauty salon. Feeling clumps of the hair, damaged by harsh lye, separate from her scalp when she washed her hair a week ago, she realized some things were worth the price you paid.

"Does one of y'all have a light?" the buxom girl with skin dark as a starless December night asked. She sat with an unlit cigarette in her mouth. To Kiara, she resembled an African queen regarding her subjects who'd failed to amuse her. She wore her raven colored hair in a neat bun and had a serious look on her face.

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“Sorry. I don’t smoke,” Kiara said. Gloria shook her head.

“No matter, I don’t think I’m supposed to smoke in here anyway. I just wanted to stir up some trouble while I wait for the sisters to call me in for my inquisition,” the girl drawled, checking her brown teddy bear faced watch. “They need to hurry up. My show comes on at nine and I am not trying to miss it because Thelma and ‘nem are running behind.”

“I totally know where you are coming from with that. I was just saying to Kiara, I am usually in one of my night classes at this time. Dr. Brevard usually lets us out right at the stroke of nine so by the time I get back to my dorm shows have been on for about fifteen minutes. I hate trying to get into a show once it’s started. I feel like I’m playing catch up the entire time so I usually don’t try to watch,” Gloria said nodding her head.

“Listen to me just talking up a storm without introducing myself. My name is Gloria and this is Kiara. What’s your name?”

“Donna Edwards, pleased to meet you,” she said.

“Nice to meet you Donna. Seems like I have seen you around campus before. What’s your major?”

“Social work.”

“Cool, mine is Political Science and Spanish. Kiara what is your major?”

“Business with a minor in Psychology,” she answered.

‘Man, this girl asks a lot of questions,’ Kiara thought looking around the room.

Gloria continued her fact-finding mission. “Neat. So what dorm do you stay in?”

Frustration creeping in her tone, Donna answered, “Brunswick, and you?”

“Pitt.”

“Aw shit, the honors dorm. My girl May-Lynn stays there and I know there aren’t that many of us up in there. Props to you,” Donna said with an approving look.

Blushing, Gloria replied, “Please, it’s just a brick building with some people who happen to test well. I think it’s neat your dorm is right beside mine. No wonder you look familiar. I have probably seen you coming and going in the morning.”

“How about you?” Donna asked Kiara. “Don’t tell me you stay in one of the other Coal Campus dorms? You know I think it is sort of silly for Copper Road to divide up the dorms on campus using mining terms. I mean damn, everyone knows where the money came from to build the campus.”

“No, I stay in one of the Diamond Divide campus dorms, Greene,” Kiara said.

“Oh, the girl jock dorm. What sport you play? My cousin Regina who plays softball stays there, on the third floor. Country as hell,” Donna said, shaking her head. “She got written up last semester for trying to cook some collards in a crock pot in her room. You know the rooms aren’t wired that well and it caused a small fire. My people, my people.”

Relaxing a little, Kiara replied, “I run track. Gina your cousin? I heard about that last year. At least, from what I heard, the greens were off the chain so the situation wasn’t too bad.”

The three of them shared a laugh. The laughter seemed to help calm the trio’s nervousness about the interviews. They each came to this interview with different motivations but hoped for the same outcome. Kiara’s purpose was, in a sense, to join the family business. Her mother, two aunts and a cousin were Kappa Alpha Rho members. Kiara’s exposure to the organization began almost from the crib, when her mother dressed her in Future K-Rho shirts and took her to every sorority function possible. Kiara had been a Rho Angel in elementary school, a Rho-ette in middle school, and a Rho Rose in high school.

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Along with her actual love for the organization's mission, Kiara's reason for joining involved the love of her mother. Staring at Donna and Gloria, she reflected. She and her mom never seemed to have anything in common. Her mother never left the house without her shoes and purse matching. Kiara lived in t-shirts and tennis shoes. Dorothy Michaels seemed to own the biggest church hat collection east of Cape Fear River. Kiara kept her hair pulled back in a ponytail, or due to recent circumstances, simply styled. Kiara thought, 'maybe if we shared the same organization we could bridge a gap, which seemed to start when I decided I'd rather climb trees than play with tea sets.'

"So y'all sophomores or juniors?" Donna asked. When Kiara looked at her with a why-you-want-to-know expression, she added, "In a few minutes, those K-Rho sisters are going to be all up in your Kool-Aid so you might as well get used to people being nosy."

"I'm a sophomore," Kiara said looking at Gloria.

"So am I."

"Good, there's nothing worse than being around a bunch of young-acting freshmen or some stuck-up upperclassmen," Donna said offering mints to Gloria and Kiara. After they declined, she placed one in her mouth.

"So I guess you're a sophomore," Gloria said.

"How did you guess?" Donna replied with smiling sarcasm.

Kiara considered the motivation of the two sophomores she just met. Neither had shared what brought them to the interview. She knew K-Rho was selective so she assumed the two had something going for them. Otherwise, they would be in class or somewhere else. At this point, she thought to herself, 'I should focus on me and not them.' Soon she heard her name. Looking at her watch, Kiara realized close to twenty minutes had passed since she sat down. Grabbing her purse, Kiara walked to the door where a girl in purple and platinum stood, and prepared herself for what awaited on the other side.

"Good evening, Ms. Michaels, my name is Ruth Wilson. I am currently the president of the Lambda Mu Chapter of Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority, Incorporated," she said. "I, along with chapter secretary Veronica Whitman, will be conducting your interview. We anticipate the interview to last up to thirty minutes, but out of respect for yours and our schedules, hopefully we will complete the process without extending that time frame."

Kiara and Ruth often cracked jokes in Abnormal Psychology, however tonight Ruth was all business. Kiara knew she had to respond accordingly if she was to make a good impression.

Setting the digital clock facing her, Ruth started the interview. "Kiara, why do you want to be a member of Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority, Incorporated?"

"My interest in Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority, Incorporated comes from my admiration of the sorority's goals of standing strong, reaching high, and giving back," Kiara said. She struggled not to shift in her seat. Be it nerves, the new wool long sleeve navy dress, or a very good heating system, she was starting to sweat. She knew being a legacy or daughter of a sorority member all but guaranteed her acceptance. Still, anytime she faced an interview she felt a little unsettled.

"Not to speak ill of the other sororities on the yard, but the Lambda Mu Chapter members are the ones registering voters, collecting food and clothing for the homeless and tutoring students at the high schools. I remember when the student union didn't want to bring Angela Davis here to speak, y'all donated all the money from your dances to help pay for her fee. Plus, y'all's step team is all that."

Veronica and Ruth smiled slightly and scribbled Kiara's answers. She hoped praising the chapter's philanthropic and party side would confirm her appreciation and awareness of the group's impact
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on the Copper Road Campus. Known for being selective, Kappa Alpha Rho's interest process differed from other organizations. Instead of interest meetings, they garnered their interviewees based on attendance at each of their events. Consideration for membership required each of the women to have attended at least three Kappa Alpha Rho events during the previous twelve months. Kiara had attended five.

The Lambda Mu Chapter was also unique on campus for never having any allegations of hazing leveled against it. CRU hosted eleven fraternities and sororities. All of them except Kappa Alpha Rho had been removed at one time or another. Kiara felt based on her experience and stories she had heard from others, if selected for membership, she wouldn't have to worry about being mentally or physically harassed.

"Thank you for your response to the question. What do you think you can bring to Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority?" Veronica asked.

"I can bring a dedication to keeping the name of Kappa Alpha Rho respected on the yard. I also bring a knowledge and appreciation of all that Kappa Alpha Rho has done and a desire to make it all that it can be."

"If I didn't know any better, I would think you had practiced that little speech," Veronica said, lifting her naturally arched eyebrow and looking sideways at Ruth.

Not knowing what to say, she responded, "No, that came from my heart."

When she told her mother about receiving her packet, her mother kindly sent her what she had just said in case the question came up in her interview. Dorothy had given the same response during her interview thirty years ago. Waiting for Ruth and Veronica's response, Kiara's stomach churned. Did it work?

"Kiara, are you seeing anybody special?" Ruth asked in a way suggesting she may already know the answer.

The hair on the back of Kiara's neck stood up. Did they know about Chris? Since becoming a couple last year, the two worked hard at keeping their relationship under wraps. She wasn't ashamed, just cautious. Copper Road University was a Southern school and certain types of relationships were frowned upon. She kept her love life under wraps out of a love of privacy. She also didn't want it to interfere with becoming a Kappa. While on the national level the organization prided itself on its diverse membership, on the local level everyone may not be so accepting.

Crossing her fingers under the table Kiara answered, "Not really."

"Good to know. The process of becoming a member of Kappa Alpha Rho Sorority, Incorporated is very time intensive and often results in less time on social activities. If you are selected for membership, the learning process requires your full attention. Oftentimes those not connected with the organization have a difficult time understanding," Ruth said smoothly.

"I understand," Kiara said.

Veronica and Ruth asked additional questions. Kiara shared what social issues she felt the organization should address through their community service projects and her career plans after college. The two also confirmed they had researched her. Veronica complimented her for winning the conference 800 meter title last year and expressed appreciation for volunteering at the hug-in to raise money for Blueburg's chapter of the American Heart Association. The runner, who lost her father three years ago to a heart attack, smiled at the members' praise. After giving Kiara a chance to ask questions, they dismissed her and advised if there were any additional information needed they would be in touch.

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Kiara's nervousness about the interview prevented her from eating her usual four small meals. Instead, only a cup of coffee and a pack of crackers had touched her lips during the previous twelve hours. Now, her stomach signaled it was chow time. Pondering her dining options, Kiara saw the smoking sophomore from the lobby coming out the small study room to her left.

"Hey Donna, how did it go?" Kiara asked.

Rolling her eyes, Donna pulled a Dalmatian patterned scarf out of her black pea coat pocket. "I have had better Pap smear exams. I had three Rho's doing my interview. Cassandra, my freshman RA who wrote me up for breaking curfew. Cynthia, the Rho who wears what looks like every piece of makeup she owns every day to class, and some haint whose face was so twisted up I figured her drawers were cutting her in two. But like the Bible says, if someone doesn't make you feel welcome or pay attention to the words you are saying, you need to shake the dust off your feet and keep it moving."

Kiara was no Biblical scholar, but her recollection of that Bible passage differed from Donna's delivery. The two walked down the steps in silence and Kiara prepared to let this frustrated girl go her separate way. Something, however, in the back of her mind prompted her to reach out.

"Listen, you want to walk with me downtown to get a sub? I didn't get a chance to get dinner and I don't want to walk by myself. I would drive but I let my roommate borrow my car to go to work."

"Sure. Better yet, I will call my boyfriend so he can pick us up and give us a ride," Donna said, looking pleasantly surprised at Kiara's suggestion.

"Where does he live? I don't want him to make a trip just because I'm hungry."

"Peter doesn't mind coming from Martin. He will do anything for me. I mean, since the season is over coach doesn't have them under a curfew," Donna said walking toward the bank of six campus phones located in the student center lobby.

"He stays in the football dorm? Your boyfriend isn't Peter Darden, the center that people are talking about going pro?"

"The one and the same. We have been together since last year. I tutored him in English and we have been kicking it ever since," Donna said, picking up the phone and dialing his number. Kiara watched Donna's face change from expectation to resignation when the phone rang without an answer.

"I guess Peter must have run to get him something to eat or his roommate is on the phone. He never clicks over," Donna said hurriedly. "I will be glad to walk with you downtown."

"Kiara, Donna, wait up please," Gloria said, racing down the steps at such a pace that Donna and Kiara rushed to break her fall.

"So I guess your interview went well?" Kiara asked, smiling back at Gloria who looked joyous.

"Truly. Gwen Brantley, the chapter vice president, Keisha, who is in my Spanish class and Cassie Addams, a member of Tau Omicron Kappa, their local graduate chapter, did my interview. You know, it really wasn't that much of an interview. They asked some questions, I gave some answers and then we chatted."

"Lucky you having Gwen do your interview. She stayed on my hall last year. She is one of the few K-Rhos on the yard I think is alright. We were going to walk down to Famous Subs, do you want to go?" Donna asked.

"I'm all for exercise but I can drive us. My car is a little junky, but if you don't mind I don't," Gloria said.

Donna and Kiara surveyed the overflow of books, jackets and something resembling a plant occupying the passenger and back seats of the blue Toyota. They exchanged glances confirming their opinion
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their opinion about Gloria's definition of a little junky. Still, a free ride was a free ride.

"Damn girl, are you trying to blow out my ear drums?" Donna said responding to the syncopated rhythm of drums and cowbells of go-go blasting from the speaker behind her head. She shared the back seat with Gloria's leather knapsack.

Backing out of the parking spot Gloria said, "Apologies, I like to crank my music up and I was in a Chuck Brown frame of mind today."

"What is this we are listening to?" Kiara asked. Her shoulder and neck swayed to the rhythm of song. While she really couldn't make out the lyrics, the groove had her going.

"That my friend is the soundtrack of my youth, go-go. I spent most of my youth in D.C., and go-go is the district's unofficial theme music. Not too many people down here are into it," Gloria responded. "You remember the song "Da Butt" that was popular three years ago? Well the group who did that was E.U. and they are one of the biggest go-go bands there are."

The drive to the sub shop only took a few minutes but Kiara and Donna learned much more about Gloria than they requested.

"I was born in Baltimore, Charm City as we call it. My mom got a job during the last half of my junior year as one of the state's assistant attorney generals so she moved to Raleigh. I decided to go to school down here so I wouldn't have to drive so far when I need to go home to do my laundry or borrow money," Gloria said with rapid-fire delivery.

"I wanted to go to Howard or FAMU but I figured CRU would do, especially after I was awarded the P.A. Neal Scholarship. It covers my tuition and room and board until I graduate. Well, that's not the only reason I'm at CRU. I'm a big fan of Dr. Joffey who teaches in the Poli Sci Department. Did you know he used to work for the UN? I had a class with him last year and he is sooo brilliant."

Waiting for their sandwiches, the three discussed more about their backgrounds. Donna and Kiara grew up less than ninety minutes apart; Kiara in Wilmington, NC and Donna in Kenansville, NC.

"So Kiara, what do you want to do when you grow up?" Gloria asked, motioning the sub worker to add more black olives to her sub.

"Be employed," Kiara chuckled. "No, I'm trying to decide if I want to go to graduate school and become a therapist or work in some corporate human resources department."

"My goal is to get a job with the State Department after graduation. I had considered working stateside, but I would love to see the world and I figured if I can get the United States government to pay for it, even better," Gloria said. "Last summer, I spent three weeks in Haiti doing relief work with my church, Saint Joseph, and I grew so much. Did you know Haiti is the world's oldest black republic and it was the first independent nation in Latin America? You really should read *Tell My Horse* by Zora Neale Hurston. She went to Haiti and investigated the whole voodoo and political culture back in the 1930s. It is remarkable that what she wrote about in terms of their political process still applies today. I wrote a paper last semester and used her book as one of my sources and just blew my professor away by how a book written by an anthropologist/folklorist/fiction writer over sixty years ago is still relevant."

"Are you always such a know it all? If that is the case, I may need you to become my roommate and help me with some of my courses," Donna said, monitoring her sandwich's construction. "I have this girl whose major seemed to be fucking fraternity members. Last semester, she screwed three Sigma Chi members. Now she is spending her days and nights at the Tau Kappa Epsilon house on East Tenth. Like my cousin Cheryl would say, girl is just giving out the goodness out of both draw legs." *{Continued...}*

“So Ms. Psych Major, what do you make of that kind of behavior?” Gloria asked, sitting on a yellow plastic chair waiting for the other girls to get their sandwiches.

“Well, I could say she has some daddy issues she is trying to resolve by seeking out inappropriate male attention. Or she could have low self esteem and is seeking to bolster it by engaging in a behavior that traditionally indicates a woman’s worth, which is the ability to attract a mate,” Kiara said, paying the worker for her turkey and Swiss. “Or girl just likes screwing.”

Donna nodded her head and said, “I will take door number three for the win. I mean my roommate is good people. Don’t get me wrong, I like having the room to myself most nights since she is out gallivanting, but I just hope she doesn’t get hurt or get caught out there.”

Getting into Gloria’s car, Kiara replied, “Sounds nothing like my roommate. Ms. Freshman seems surgically attached to our room. She may venture down the hall to visit one of her high school friends, but other than that, she is either sitting in her bed eating cereal, in class or at work at Round-Up Ranch.”

“She works at Round-Up Ranch? Man I love their fried chicken. It’s not as good as my momma’s, but it will do in a pinch,” Donna said, licking her lips.

“It was cute the first two weeks she got the job when she would bring food home, but now both of us are so over their food she doesn’t even bother to bring leftovers.”

“Wow, I guess I’m lucky to have a room to myself. I got a private as part of my scholarship package,” Gloria said. “It’s great because I had a chance to put up a book case for all my books and my aquarium.”

“You have fish in your room? The only fish that graces my room is usually fried with some tartar sauce and fries on the side,” Donna said.

“Well just know, when you come to my dorm room, my tank is a no fry zone.”

“Thank you for the ride, Gloria. It was good meeting you and Donna tonight,” Kiara said when Gloria pulled in front of her dorm. The ten-story building sat on the east section of the sprawling campus set on the outskirts of North Carolina’s tenth largest city. Donna and Gloria’s dorm occupied the middle section of the university.

“Don’t mention it. I had fun getting to know Donna and you tonight. I haven’t had a chance to hang out with many black girls since I enrolled here. Tonight was cool,” Gloria said. Donna looked at her with a somewhat bemused look on her face.

“Glad we could provide you with a cultural excursion. Now if you wouldn’t mind, I would like to get to my room to catch the rest of MacGyver,” Donna said.

“Oh, you’re into MacGyver? I’m more of a Murphy Brown fan. Did you see the episode last week?” Gloria asked.

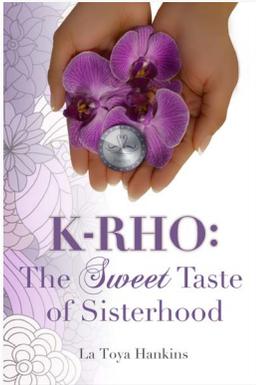
“Can’t say I did,” Donna said dryly.

“Oh well, I guess I will tell you about it on the drive,” Gloria said.

Watching Gloria drive away, Kiara reflected on the connection she made with the Donna and Gloria. First impressions were often lasting impressions. Those two had certainly made an impression on her. The question was, she thought, ‘did they make a lasting impression with the Kappa Alpha Rho sisters?’

K-Rho: The Sweet Taste of Sisterhood

Author Q&A



La Toya, what inspired you to write this book?

I didn't see a piece of fiction that addressed the strength of sisterhood among African American sorority members. Sororities have helped thousands of women to overcome life's difficulties and spark life-long friendships. I also wanted to focus on how those who identify as lesbians are treated. Too often members face backlash for being who they are. I wanted *K-Rho* to speak to that topic and to convey the idea that sisterhood should supersede sexuality. A person's sexual identify shouldn't be a reason to isolate them from the sisterhood.

What was the most challenging chapter or scene to write?

The most challenging scene was the rape scene. I researched all the relevant details concerning the medical and legal responses. Still, it was hard to channel the emotions the main character, Kiara, goes through and how her sorority sisters respond to the situation. I wrote the section to deal with the fact that gay bashing, when it comes to lesbians, often takes a different form than with gay males though it is no less brutal.

Who's your favorite character?

My favorite character is Donna. While I identify more with Gloria, I never met a metaphor I didn't like. Donna's path to maturity mirrors so many of us. She transitions from being a college girl unable to act on the truth staring her in the face, to an adult who can accept her weaknesses and forgive others of theirs.

What's your favorite chapter or scene?

My favorite chapter is when Kiara stands up for herself during her graduate sorority meeting. I felt like the words she spoke: "Judge me for my worth as a sorority sister, not on my sexuality." This is something so many in sorority leadership positions need to hear.

What specific character, object, or activity did you borrow from your real life to place in K-Rho?

I borrowed my use of metaphors and placed them in the mouth of Gloria. I used a lot of my favorite sayings such as "falling out like a fainting goat." Those who know and love me are used to random pieces of knowledge weaving themselves into my conversations.

Do you have ride-or-die soror besties like the characters Donna and Gloria?

I do have a soror who I met through the Delta Zeta chapter in Charlotte who has been there for me in good and bad times. She inspired the character Donna, minus the cursing.

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What message do you want readers to grasp?

I want readers to know that sororities are more than the step shows and sordid stories of hazing and elitism. Membership allows women to form bonds and establish relationships that strengthen and inspire. As an only child, I cherish my sorority membership. It has given me a chance to experience sisterhood among women from ages 18 to 88. I don't discount those who have had formed supportive relationships elsewhere. But to coin a corporate slogan, membership has its privileges.

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Praise

“Hankins, a Zeta Phi Beta member since undergrad, writes authentically in *K-Rho*. She exhibits talent in writing what the sorority experience is like, most especially as a lesbian in an alliance of women who may not always accept you – despite wearing the same colors. But despite it all, Kiara, Gloria and Donna can't be, won't be stopped. So at Hankin's capable hands, sisterhood does taste quite good.”

~ *Sistahs on the Shelf, Reviewer*

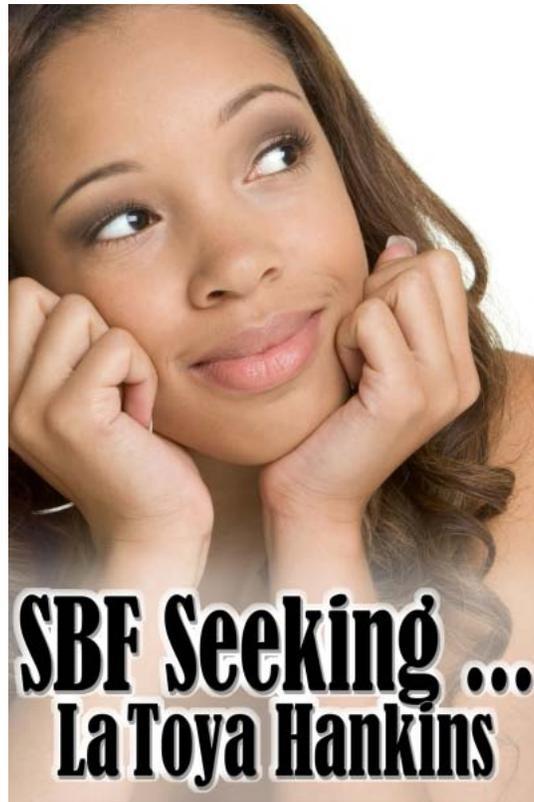
“This book was very informative, especially about sororities and their true meanings and dedication to sisters and caring for your communities! I loved how this book showed the importance of diversity, friendships and education!”

~ *Arlanda Bradsley, Amazon Reader*

“LaToya Hankins does not disappoint. Her latest novel is like *School Daze* meets *Waiting to Exhale*.”

~ *S. Weathersby, Amazon Reader*

SBF Seeking... **Novel**



SUMMARY: Four months before her wedding, Yvette Thurman realizes this might be her last chance to have a sexual fling with a white man. But she never thought placing a personal ad would lead her to discover she was a lesbian.

Yvette's small town life in eastern North Carolina never prepared her for the personal journey she undertakes as she struggles to find her heart's path.

Through personal ads and late night visits to an adult bookstore, Yvette learns more about her own personal desires than she ever did when she was engaged to be married. If she embraces her true self, can she find acceptance and love from her family and friends? Or will she be forced to hide who she really is from those she cares about the most?

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SBF Seeking...

..... Chapter 6

AN ARRANGEMENT OF SUNFLOWERS greeted me at work the next day. The note read, “Sending you sunshine to make the next few days brighter.” My sister Yolanda can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but I would not trade her for anything. I had not seen much of Danita since around the Fourth. She had been busy working double shifts to ensure that when the first day of school arrived on August 16, Devon and Nia would be ready. With less than twelve days to go, she felt all the needed pens, pencils, and hand sanitizers had been purchased. That being the case, she felt secure enough to spring for dinner. I broke the news to Danita as we split a carafe of sangria at a Mexican spot in Knightdale. She responded with a big hug, a broad smile and an offer to be a shoulder for me to cry on whenever I needed it.

“After all honey, I have soaked enough of your shoulders,” she said, digging into her burrito.

“It’s all good. By this point, I am like ‘Lisa Lisa, all cried out.’ Last night was hard, but after talking to Yolanda, making me a hot toddy and getting up this morning and throwing out all those bridal magazines, I started feeling better.”

“Making the right decision will do that for you. You remember how messed up I got after meeting with the divorce attorney the first time. But, as time passed and I began to realize I could be happy again, it got better.”

“Word,” I said, cutting into my enchilada. As our waiter approached with new chips, Danita and I appraised the way his chinos highlighted his thighs and pelvic area. He had a killer smile and a head full of thick black hair. I found myself smiling extra hard as I declined his offer of more salsa. Yep, I made the right choice.

All week, I threw myself into work to avoid thinking about what awaited me when I would see Martin. I removed my ring as if taking off the symbol negated the commitment. I did not feel comfortable telling my co-workers my decision. So if they asked about the wedding, I changed the subject.

Friday, as I battled weekend traffic, butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I headed out to meet Martin. It seemed traffic parted for me so I could not use it as an excuse to delay the final note to the end of our song. Pulling up to his apartment, I sat in the parking lot for a few minutes, steeling myself. As I unlocked the apartment door, Martin sat silently flicking channels. It was a repeat of some many Fridays past, only this time I felt no sense of homecoming. Without a word, I put the engagement ring on the coffee table. Martin did not look at it or say a word, he just continued to race up and down the channels, the colors flashing in front of his face, the sounds a crescendo of confusion. Not knowing what to say or do, I sat beside him.

“Are you hungry? You want to get something to eat,” he asked in a monotone.

I shrugged my shoulders. Without another word, Martin got up, grabbed his keys and walked out to his car. Stilted could not describe the conversation as we struggled to make light conversation without either of us bursting into tears while we drove to what once was “our” restaurant.

“You know Paul called me this week. He and Rodney were checking when I was coming home for us to go pick out tuxes. I told them they were off the hook. There wasn’t going to be a wedding,” he said without expression.

Knowing Martin’s two brothers, they would not press the issue or ask about the reason for the cancellation. They worked in the family business and as all good funeral directors, possessed a keen sense of discretion and knew when to push an issue and when to give you space. I can just imagine his mother’s and sister’s reactions. Both of them took their time warming up to me so I’m sure nothing good was going to be said about how I broke their poor son’s/brother’s heart.

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That weekend, it seemed Martin tried hard to get on my good side. We saw my favorite movies, went to my favorite restaurants and even had great sex Friday and Saturday night. Still my decision stood, we were through.

Before I left home, I cleaned my house of anything remotely connected with Martin. Since he did not believe in leaving too much stuff behind, it did not take me long. The final tally: a pair of sweatpants, two sweatshirts and a pair of raggedy briefs. A callous woman would have put everything in a grocery bag and brought it to him. My mom raised me better so I packed it in the empty tote I needed to cart my stuff home. My clothes, shoes, and hair accessories took up half his closet. As I packed on Sunday, Martin sat silently in the same spot he had occupied two days earlier. The ring box still sat on the corner of the coffee table.

“You weren’t bullshitting. You really are breaking up with me,” Martin said as I took my bag to the car.

Trying not to cry, I said, “Yeah,” and went out the door to put the tote in the car. I hoped I would not have to ask for my key back. I figured since we were not together, he should not have access to my house whenever he wanted. Martin must have read my thoughts because as I walked back in, the key to my apartment lay beside the ring box. I wordlessly picked it up, put it in my pocket, and put my key down in its place. As I turned to say good-bye and walk out, Martin spoke in a soft, hurt voice I never heard before.

“Muffin.”

“Yeah?”

“I will always love you,” he said as I stood in the doorway willing myself not to be weak. I’m-doing-the-right-thing cycled through my thoughts.

“I will always love you too. I do not want to ruin both our lives. Something is not right between the two of us and I need to figure out what it is. I’m sorry,” I said, and then rushed out to my car. Backing up, I saw Martin standing in the doorway. And as I drove out the parking lot, he gave a half-wave and closed his door. It was like the door to my past, present, and future closed. Half of me wanted to run back to the safety of Martin, but the voice inside of me, which knew best, kept my foot on the gas.

Back home, I cleaned up my already clean house to avoid thinking about our final goodbye. As I was scrubbing the floor, the doorbell rang. Despite my swollen eyes and wet shorts, I opened the door to see Danita and her kids.

“I was in the neighborhood picking up the kids from their Dad’s when I saw your car,” she said as Devon and Nia rushed into my living room and turned on my TV. My angel of mercy bore food and beverages. I guess she knew firsthand that ending a relationship is better with beer and pizza.

“I remembered you were going to Greensboro this weekend and I figured you might need someone to talk to. The kids have already eaten so this is just for us,” she said, heading for the kitchen.

“Don’t go in there. I just mopped and waxed the floor.”

“You waxed this small ass floor. You really are upset.”

“Don’t even talk about it. Let’s go upstairs.”

“It’s your house. Nia and Devon, if you touch anything, it’s your ass.”

In a droning voice, they said, ‘Yes ma’am’ as they lulled themselves into a trance with video games.

“Danita, he looked so sad when I took him his stuff.”

“You did the best thing for both of you by calling off the wedding.”

“I know, but it still hurts,” I said as Danita put her arms around me.

“Don’t worry, you don’t need a man to complete you.”

“So you say, Ms. I-gotta-have-a-date-every-weekend.”

“Girl, I’m trying to find a father for my kids. You, on the other hand, are young, black and free. Celebrate, enjoy your freedom. You’re attractive; I am sure if you need the company of a man, you can find one willing to lend an appendage. After all, you can always put another ad in the paper.

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I would urge you to seek a black man this time. You remember last time you tried some white meat?" I smiled and laid my head on Danita's shoulder as she smiled back at me.

Our back to school issue, which rolled out at the end of August, was one of our biggest each year, so work occupied the hearts and minds of my co-workers. Even Sandi stopped inquiring about the wedding as we worked to complete all our assignments.

So, for two weeks, I kept my secret. The news about my canceled wedding started spreading after I told Gwen Bell, our lifestyle editor, I would not be putting my wedding pictures in fall wedding issue because there would not be a wedding. My male co-workers did not bat an eye when I told them about the canceled nuptials, but the females put all their journalistic skills into play to find out what led to the break-up.

"So did you catch him cheating?" April Clark, our business editor, asked on Monday as we stood at the drink machines.

"No, we just realized we weren't right for each other."

"So did he catch you cheating?" said Mari Wilson, one of our advertising reps, asked as I passed her in the hallway Wednesday morning.

"No, we just realized we didn't need to get married."

Reading over my shoulder while I worked on a story about the new law governing tattooing, Kimberly asked, "How long was the relationship?"

"Seven years."

"So tell me, what really happened?" Sandi said as we walked out to our cars to go home at the end of the day Friday.

"I realized I didn't love him anymore."

"That's a good reason to call it off," she said, talking over the hood of her car.

"Yeah, but I still feel bad. Yesterday, I got an early wedding gift from my college advisor. I sent him a letter telling him I was getting married and told him the date. Since he is going to Russia for six months he figured he would send his gift early."

"Well what are you going to do?"

"Send it back and hope it reaches him before he leaves."

"What is it?"

"A framed copy of some love poem writing by an obscure Russian poet."

"By all means send it back. We only accept gifts we can use in the real world. You want to come to my house for dinner? We are having tacos."

"No thanks, my friend Danita is taking me out."

"Alright, see you Monday," Sandi said, getting in her car.

* * * *

I agreed to meet Danita at LaCounts, this kick-ass soul food restaurant. Located across the street from St. Augustine College, it was a part of Raleigh's black landscape. Regulars sat in the same place each time they came and didn't have to order from the menu. By the time they made it from the door to their seat, their plate was hitting the table. When I arrived, I saw Danita was not alone.

"Vet, this is Karen, Karen this is Vet. We went to FSU together and she just moved down. Since both of us are divorcees, we figured we would gang up on you, tell you our war stories and make you feel better about dodging the bullet of marriage," Danita said as I sat down.

I could do nothing but smile at my friend's attempts to cheer me up. The two of them looked like
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such opposites they would have no choice but to be friends. While Danita looked every inch the former college athlete, Karen looked like the girl who spent her four years in the library stacks.

I could not get a good read on her height, but as I gauged the fact her head only came to Danita's shoulder, I figured she shopped in the petite section. Over a plate of pork chops and collard greens, I learned Karen hailed from my birth city, Baltimore. She relocated to Raleigh after getting a job as a trainer for one of the local banks. As we devoured our food, we shared stories of growing up in the New South and being professional black women in the white world.

"So anyway, I'm working for Capital One after graduation and I decided to wear my hair braided one day to work," Karen said, cutting her meatloaf.

"When I came in, all my white co-workers oohed and aahed and wanted to touch my hair. They were just so dumbfounded that overnight my hair went from near the top of my neck to my shoulders."

Talking around the squash casserole I just placed in my mouth, I said, "You too? Girl, I have been there so many times, it's not even funny."

"But you know what I hate?" Danita jumped in. "I hate being in a meeting and saying something but not being taken seriously until a white person repeats it."

"Truly," Karen said putting a forkful of black-eyed peas in her mouth.

"I know there are people at my job who are convinced the only reason I got my job was to keep a discrimination lawsuit from being filed. You know I am the only chocolate drop in the place. But I prove my worth every day by pulling stories out my ass and doing twice the work some of them do," I said.

"Oh you know it's the black woman's plight in America. Work twice as hard for half the pay," Danita said, shaking her head over her baked chicken.

"So you have those who give you the side-eye just for doing a good job, then you have the ones who want to be your best friend when it's so not necessary. When my co-workers come up in my face trying to show how down they are by talking about rap music, I just tell them I don't listen to N.W.A, I listen to NPR," I said.

"I will go you one better. I tell them I'm into country music," Karen said.

"For real? Or that's something you hand them?" I asked surprised. I was not the only twenty-something black female who counted Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn as some of my favorite singers.

"For real, after my break-up with Phillip, my new theme song was 'D-I-V-O-R-C-E' by Ms. Tammy Wynette."

"Good for you. I'll drink to that," Danita said as she lifted up her iced tea glass. After we clicked the plastic cups together, we each took a swig.

"Damn, this tea is kicking," Danita said.

"I was getting ready to say the same thing. Makes me think back to the tea my momma used to make when I was smaller," Karen said.

No matter how civilized our Southern culture gets, nothing is more sought after than a good batch of iced tea. People have spent their lives searching for the right blend of tea, lemon and sugar that could rival the brown elixir they sipped while sitting on their granny's front porch. Many a Northern transplant received a shock when they ordered tea in a restaurant and received a tall glass with a slice of lemon hugging the side of the glass. In fact, when I was in college, a Black Revolution era poet in town for a speaking engagement caused more of a fuss by asking for hot tea rather than for his mile high Afro. LaCounts knew how to do tea the right way and we kept our server busy with refills as we talked into the night.

After we finished eating, we went out dancing and drinking. For the first time in a month, I laughed and enjoyed myself. After our third rounds of screwdrivers, we were a trio devoted to being happy. I must admit, we made a unique looking group: Me, a cocoa-colored, near-sighted sister with braids and a slight gap toothy smile; Danita, a café-au-lait Amazon who carried her height with pride, and Karen a 5'2, black

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coffee, no sugar, no cream sister whose dark brown eyes shined like diamonds behind her frames when she smiled. I would not need a man to make me happy as long as my girls were around I thought as I watched them cut the fool on the dance floor as I rested my feet. I was going to be okay after all.

Praise

“There is an incredibly appealing and emotionally packed journey that I would recommend to women and men, gay and straight, people of color, and white folks, too. For at the heart of it all, this story is about love, family, friendship, courage, passion, sacrifice, and pain. It is about life. Magnificent!”

~ *Rainbow Books Reviews*

“The book is well written with an honest view of the journey a woman goes through in finding what will make her happy. I loved the characters and humor in the book. The book is totally believable and shows various reactions and feelings on how the character’s sexual preference is viewed by friends and family.”

~ *Book Fan, Amazon Reader*

“The reader will be caught up in Yvette’s story as she learns who will accept her for who she is and those that won’t, most of all will she accept herself for who she is? She will also learn that no matter where love comes from, sometimes that just isn’t enough.”

~ *Zandra Barnes, AAMBC Reviewer*

SBF Seeking...

.... Author Q&A



La Toya, what inspired you to write this book?

My personal coming out as a black lesbian in the South and the joy and pain it brought was my main inspiration. Like the main character I was a soon to be bride who placed an ad to meet a white man for a one-night-stand. That spur of the moment decision lead me to questions the choices I made and planned to make with my life. I wanted to give the world a story about what happens when you decide to live for yourself instead of living up to the expectations of others. The main character, Yvette Thurman, covers some rocky ground toward knowing herself. But she, like the reader, can find comfort in being their authentic self.

What was the most challenging chapter or scene to write?

The most challenging chapter was Yvette coming out to her mother. It brought back memories of my coming out to my mother in 1996, which didn't go well. Granted, she didn't throw me out of the house. But my identity as a lesbian was not how my mother expected her only child to define herself. There were hurt feelings on both sides and we had to work to build a bridge of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance. We are in a better place now, but just like in the book, it didn't happen overnight.

Who's your favorite character?

Since *SBF Seeking...* is semi-autobiographical, my first response would be Yvette. But honestly, my favorite character is Linda. She accepts her lesbian identity and deals with the ups and downs of her romantic life authentically. She's a coach and listening ear for Yvette during her coming out process. She manages to blend professional, sorority girl, good friend, and devoted partner into one package.

What specific character, object, or activity did you "borrow" from your real life to place in SBF?

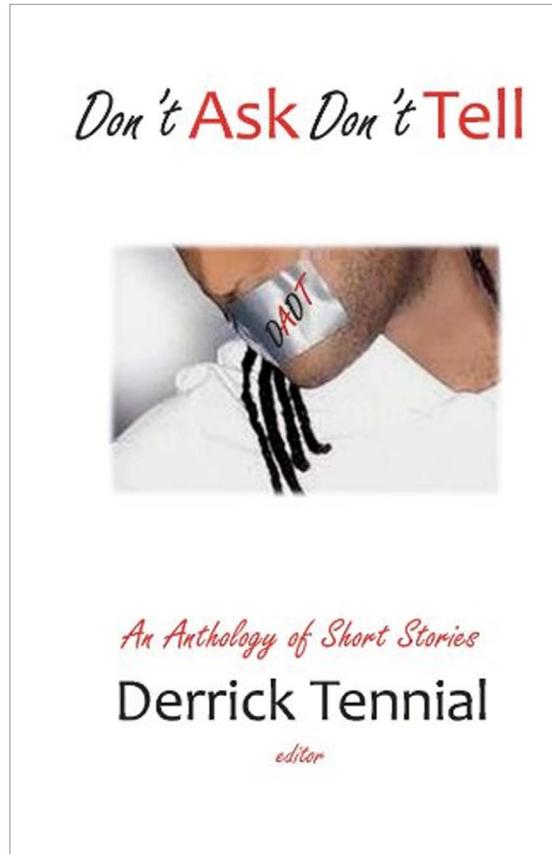
I was engaged to my college boyfriend when I placed an ad to meet a white man for a one-night-stand four months before my wedding. The details of the encounter with the person who answered the ad (such as the trumpet, the cats, and the picture of the universe on the ceiling) were true. The rest of the book is how I wished my own coming out story had unfolded. Also the characters Danita and Karen are based on my best friends at the time.

What message do you want readers to grasp?

We all seek something in life: acceptance, understanding, a bigger car, or a larger bank account. But as long as we have sense of self, those who love and support us, and a willingness to get back up when life knocks you back, you have all you need and more.

Three is the Magic Number

..... **Short Story**



SUMMARY: It took me three times to come out to my mother before the realization really sank in for her. Each time we had to deal with how we perceived each other as mother/daughter. We had to challenge ourselves to embrace the new ways we would relate to each other.

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