

Lipstick in the Kitchen

by Gita M. Smith

I knew that marrying Kenley would be a mistake the moment he brought me home to meet his mother who, it appeared, never left her kitchen. A passive-aggressive woman, her way of conveying anger was to bash pots and pans around like cymbals and gongs. Her means of showing disapproval was to slam cupboard doors. Her kitchen was a symphony of rage.

Kenley made the introductions, and she was pleasant enough at the start. She offered us both sweet tea, but the glass she handed to me had a definite lipstick print on the rim, and she pronounced my name "Jita," although I had been introduced as "Gita." We sat at the breakfast table and they made family small talk while I took in the surroundings.

The stove was obviously the centerpiece of this domain. It was a gleaming stainless steel behemoth with two ovens, a plate warmer and six gas burners. In the middle of the floor squatted a sway-backed butcher block that appeared to have been chopped upon with such force as to make it cower.

"Lita? You're not drinking your tea. Does it need more sugar?"

"I'm sure it's fine, Mrs. Carmoody," I said. "I'm not thirsty right now."

And there it was. The first lie. It sat in the air between us like a cough and she chalked up round one. She knew I wouldn't criticize the cleanliness of her glass, *and* she knew there would be a million more lies to come. I could see the years rolling out ahead of me: a marriage to Kenley would make a complicit liar of me. No one in Kenley's family ever expressed anger or dissatisfaction openly. I and my children would tiptoe around the knife-wielding Matriarch. I'd be roped into the Carmoody Corral like a meek heifer.

"Actually," I said, looking up into her eyes, "the glass is dirty."

I held it up, like Exhibit A, and heard Kenley's quick intake of breath.

" *And* I'd appreciate it if you would call me Gita with a hard G.
Most people over the age of five get it right on the second try."

