



*Should've
Been*

Alexandria House

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(A Short Story)

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Claudette

“I’ll have a shot of Hennessy.”

My back was to the patron, but I knew who he was, and if for some reason *I* didn’t recognize the voice, my body definitely did. But even with that certainty, I still lifted my eyes to the mirror lining the wall behind the bar, quickly colliding with his gaze in the reflection.

Yep, it was him.

And he was still...him.

I dropped my gaze and spun around. “Is that all?” I managed to ask.

He nodded, those charcoal eyes locked on my face as he tucked his thick bottom lip between his teeth.

My God, he was beautiful.

“Okay,” I said, but before I could move, he spoke again.

“I can’t believe you still work here.”

My eyes surveyed The Royale’s small bar. It was early in the evening, so there was barely anyone there other than a couple of haggard-looking regulars...and him. “Yeah, uh, still here. Let me get that drink for you.”

He blinked and smiled. “Thank you.”

Tearing my eyes away from that white smile surrounded by a canvas of smooth peanut butter-toned skin, I quickly poured his drink, told him the price, and when he handed me a hundred-dollar bill and told me to keep the change, I shook my head. “I can’t do that.”

Cocking his head to the right, he asked, “Why not?”

“Because...I can’t.”

“Your man won’t let you?”

Rolling my eyes, I left him sitting there, got his change, and returned to find the bar stool he’d occupied and his shot glass empty. I stood there for a good five minutes, confused, a smidge disappointed, and hell...aroused.

The rest of the night sprinted by as Friday nights usually do. The only difference was his occupancy inside my mind. With every drink I mixed and poured, with every glass I washed, with every greeting I offered or smile I plastered on my face came a memory of us—me and him. Or just him. Yeah, mostly him. There weren’t many, but there were enough.

More than enough.

And since he looked and sounded the same as I recalled, I wondered if he felt the same.

I also wondered...shit, I had to stop this. It wasn’t healthy, and in addition to the good memories and feelings he evoked, there was some bad.

Really bad.

So after my shift had ended at The Royale, I went straight home, soaked my aching feet, ate a late dinner of leftover pizza, and climbed into bed.

Claudette

“You okay, Claudette?”

I snatched my head in the direction of Ariel’s voice. “Huh? Yeah, I’m good. Why?”

“You’ve just been standing there for like five minutes holding that bottle of Grey Goose and staring at that stool.”

“I have? I...sorry.” I turned to face the much shorter, red-headed woman, my co-bartender for that evening, and repeated, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, but please don’t zone out like that all night. It’s Saturday night, and on top of that, there’s a business thing that lets out in a few minutes. We need to be ready.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath and setting the bottle of liquor in its place on the shelf behind the bar. As Ariel had pointed out, this was the last day of some business conference being held in the convention center adjacent to the hotel, and if things went like they usually did with these events, we were about to be slammed. So I needed to shake off what I was feeling, the side effects of having seen him for the first time in two years. Shit, I thought I was over him, but apparently, I wasn’t with the way I kept looking for him, almost willing him to return to the bar, just so I could see him. I simply wanted to see him, that’s all. I was sure the mere sight of him would be enough to...to what? It damn sure wasn’t going to settle my nerves or make me want him less. It—

“Excuse me.”

My breath caught in my chest somewhere as I turned toward the voice, my eyes landing on his handsome face and then strolling down his tall, bulky frame covered in a navy suit. I watched him slide onto a stool, the same one he'd occupied the night before. At that moment, I decided that was *his* stool.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Ariel moving toward me and damn near tripped over my feet trying to get to him before she could. “Um, what can I get you, sir?” I breathed.

“Sir?” he asked, with a grin. His eyes shone with mischief. “I’m sir now?”

“You’re my customer. I try to show respect to all of my customers.”

“Just a customer? I used to be more than that to you, didn’t I?”

I licked my lips. “You...I...what would you like tonight?”

That grin of his spread into a proper smile. “I don’t think your man would appreciate my answer to that question.”

“I don’t have a man,” I slowly admitted. “Haven’t had one in a long time.”

“Well shit, in that case, can I have your number?”

Truth

I watched her lean forward a little, her small eyes glued to me. “Won’t your woman have a problem with that?” she asked.

“I’m single, Claudette. *Very* single.”

The corner of her top lip rose into a skeptical smirk. I wondered if her lips were still soft. “You’re single? Okay. Suuuure.”

“Is that really so hard to believe? I can’t be single?”

“You *could* be, but you’re not. There’s no way she let you go. No way.”

“So you think I’m lying? That hurts my feelings, beautiful. I’m wounded.” I clutched my chest.

She rolled her eyes.

“You just told me you don’t have a man. How would you feel if I didn’t believe you?”

“Where’ve you been?” she asked hesitantly.

“Why? You missed me?”

Another roll of her eyes.

“I’ve been here and there, doing business, making money, missing the hell outta you...”

Her eyes darted around the small hotel bar. “Look, this place is starting to fill up. I need to be working. Did you want a drink?”

“Yeah, baby. You know what I like.”

She pursed her lips and left me, returning in seconds with my Hennessy and insisting it was on the house despite me trying to make her take my money. Then I watched her work, pouring and mixing drink after drink, and I found my eyes on her ass in those tight black pants more than once. Her thick natural hair was pulled back into a puffy black ponytail, the way she’d always worn it. And that skin of hers? The color of cinnamon roasted almonds and flawless right down to the little black mole next to her top lip. Claudette was about five-six to my six feet, with a body that I’d been dreaming about for a long time. Her nigga had nicknamed her Slim, because she wasn’t a big girl back then, but now? Now, Claudette had

curves, dangerous curves. In my opinion, she'd definitely transitioned from Slim to Thick.

In one word, Claudette Wynn was *fine*.

In four words?

Finer than a motherfucker.

So she was single? Really?

I smiled, watched her, studied her for a couple of hours as the small hotel bar grew more and more crowded, and then I left.

Two years earlier...

"T, this is my lady, Slim. Baby, this is my boy Truth Ebo." He punctuated the introduction by squeezing her to him, and my first thought was that she was too damn pretty to be dealing with him. I watched her eyelashes flutter as she looked up at me and smiled.

"Hi," she said softly, shyly.

Yeah, she was definitely too good for this nigga.

"Hey," I replied, with my eyes glued to hers. When I felt an elbow in my side, I remembered that I had a damn wife who was standing right next to me, and said, "Oh! Craig, you remember Tiana, right?"

As my friend introduced his lady to mine, my eyes wouldn't leave Slim, *couldn't* leave her, and right that second, something in my soul told me this was the woman I should've waited for. Maybe if I'd slowed down just a little, I wouldn't

have found myself tied to a woman I didn't love, at least not anymore. Shit, at that point, I didn't even like Tiana. And contrary to what she wanted me and the world at large to believe, I knew my wife shared my feelings.

We didn't have a marriage. We had a damn arrangement.

I exchanged a few more words with my old friend, promised to keep in touch with him, and then watched as he grasped Claudette's elbow, leading her away from us.

"Well damn...why don't you just go snatch her from him? I mean, why not strip her and fuck her right here in front of everybody, T?" my wife hissed softly.

Unfazed, I watched Craig and Claudette disappear into the sea of bodies and then gave Tiana my attention. "Don't start that shit tonight, Tiana. You know you don't give a damn."

She leaned in close to me. "True. You could fuck that bitch from sunup to sundown and I wouldn't lose a wink of sleep. I definitely don't give a shit what you do behind closed doors, but you better not embarrass me in front of our friends."

"*Your* friends. I don't like half the motherfuckers in this room, and the other half I don't know. Why don't you go do a silent bid on some useless shit and give me a break? I'm tired of pretending to like you."

"The feeling is mutual. I can't believe I ever thought your trash ass was a catch."

"Then give me a god damn divorce like I asked," I said through my teeth.

"And let you go get with some ghetto trash like Craig's girl, Thin, and live happily ever after? Nope."

"Her name is Slim."

"Whatever." She lifted on her toes to plant a lingering kiss on my lips that I fought not to wipe off. "I'll be back. Mingle, sweetie."

Through narrowed eyes, I watched her walk away before moving from my spot in the middle of the room, making my way to the bar. If I was going to make it through yet another night of faking this long-dead marriage, my ass was going to have to be as close to drunk as possible.

I was throwing back my second shot when I heard him say, “Damn, man...you ain’t playing, huh?”

Craig’s ass.

The thing with my friend was he really wasn’t my friend. Craig was a snarky asshole whom I’d never liked. Shit, truth be told, no one in our group of friends did. The nigga was arrogant, had grown up with money just like my wife, and had always looked down on us regular folks although he chose to hang with us and loved fucking regular chicks. I always believed that was because being around us made his ain’t shit ass feel like he was somebody. But he wasn’t. Craig was just a nigga who lived off the money his daddy worked hard for. The motherfucker was spoiled and entitled. He and my wife had a lot in common there.

I shrugged. “I ain’t supposed to drink at a bar?”

“I ain’t say that. I’m about to knock back a few real quick, too, and then I’ma get the fuck up outta here, see if I can make Slim wake the neighbors up again.” He winked at me and then took a shot glass from the bartender, throwing back what had to be vodka. He shook his head and said, “Woo! That damn Spirytus ain’t no joke! I’ma fuck my girl’s world up tonight!”

“Where you find her, anyway? She don’t look like your type.” Translation: she didn’t look like a ho’.

He slammed another shot back and shuddered. “Here at The Royale. In the main bar. She’s a bartender.”

My eyebrows tented. It was no surprise that he’d met her in a bar since he was a damn alcoholic, and a lightweight one at that, but... “You fucking around with one of your employees?”

“Not *my* employee, or at least not yet. My daddy still on that ‘I gotta prove I’m ready for the responsibility of running

one of our properties' bullshit, but anyway, it irks the shit outta him that I'm fucking one of his employees, plus she's fine, and the pussy? Well, all of that *makes* her my type. Been with her for over a year. Who knows, I might even marry her. Sike!" Then this idiot started laughing.

I didn't so much as crack a smile. "Still tryna make the old man's life miserable, huh?"

"Yep," he said, taking another shot and snatching his head around toward something or someone else.

Her.

She'd appeared out of nowhere, and this time, her scent traveled over to me. Cherries.

"You back? Done with the bathroom? Want something to drink?" Craig slurred.

"No, thank you," she answered.

Craig turned to me with a smirk. "Get this. She's a bartender, but she doesn't drink. Ain't that some shit?"

"Yeah, you driving? Might need to catch an Uber or something. Looks like that Spirytus done hit you, man. Need me to call a ride for you?" I offered.

He slid off the bar stool. "Nah, I'm good. You know I..." He stumbled a little, grabbing onto Slim, who struggled to hold his big ass up. "Shit," Craig mumbled.

I pulled him off her, and as he leaned into me, looking up at me with drowsy eyes, I said, "Look, I'll drive you—"

"We have a room upstairs?" she asked rather than informed me.

"Oh," I replied, and then I stood there and stared at her like I was a damn fool.

"Um, can you help me get him to the elevators? I'm sure I can handle it from there," she said.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll help you get him to the room. He’s too big to be leaning on you anyway.”

I had to coach Craig into putting one foot in front of the other so I wouldn’t have to drag his big ass behind me. We were the same height, and although I wasn’t a lightweight myself, he was wider than me, and where I was mostly muscle, his ass was flabby, a result of never having to lift a hand for shit in his life.

Yeah, I really, really didn’t like this fool, and truth be told, he didn’t like me either and I knew it.

Once in the elevator, all was quiet. Slim kept her eyes glued to the number panel until the car stopped at the top floor. The penthouse. I’d forgotten Craig actually lived in the hotel. Perks of being the heir to the Holman empire.

The doors opened, and I dragged him into the lavish space, putting him on the sofa at her direction.

“Um, thank you for helping me with him,” she said softly.

I nodded and gave her a grin. “No problem, Slim.”

“Claudette.”

“What?”

“My name...it’s Claudette.”

“Oh, all right. No problem, Claudette. You need me to help with anything else?” I asked, my eyes locked with hers.

Returning my smile, she shook her head. “No, I’ve got it from here. He just needs to sleep this off. While he’s doing that?” She shrugged. “I guess I’ll figure out something to do.”

My damn wife was downstairs in the same building and Craig was passed out barely a foot from me, so I should’ve been rushing to leave, but instead, I stood there and stared at her, wanted to stay and find out everything there was to know about a woman her age named Claudette. And she didn’t seem to be in a hurry for me to leave either as she kept her eyes on me. A moan from Craig made us both drop our eyes to him,

and I took it as my cue to leave before I got myself into some real trouble.

“Well, I’d better get back downstairs,” I said.

“Yes. Have a good rest of the evening,” she offered.

“Thanks.” And then I left, returning to the charity event, but my mind stayed in that penthouse with Claudette.

Claudette

Now...

One thing I loved about my city was that barely anything shut down on Sundays. Bars, liquor stores, the boat, AKA the casino, they all ran on Sundays just like they did every other day. Sundays were the slowest day for the bar, but the steady trickle of patrons made for decent tips and allowed me to earn my pay without wearing myself out. Sundays were usually chill, laid back, mellow workdays for me. But not this Sunday, because he was back.

He was back.

Sitting there in a dark brown suit looking all lickable and shit.

Damn.

I'd hoped I'd get a break from the sight of him, just a tiny break, but no such luck, and I was the only person working the bar.

Heaving a sigh, I made my way to him, plastered on a smile, and said, "Good evening. Hennessy?"

"Yes, and don't forget your number."

I left to make his drink without responding, returned with it and told him it was on the house *again*. When I turned to leave, his voice stopped me.

"Why you rushing away? Ain't nobody else here."

My eyes rounded the bar to find that he was correct. We were alone, and that fact made my stomach flip. I spun back around to face him, bit my bottom lip, and said, “Truth—”

“You know what this reminds me of?”

I shook my head rather than verbalize my lie as I wiped the clean bar surface down, anything to keep from looking at him. Of course I remembered. I remembered every encounter I’d had with him.

“It reminds me of the first time you ever made me a drink, right here in this bar.”

I kept wiping the same damn spot on the bar.

“You smiled when you saw me, thanked me for helping you get that drunk fool into the room. You were happy to see me that night.”

I’m happy to see you now...too happy. “Yeah, well, things were different back then.”

“You’re right. They were. Back then, I was married to a woman I never loved, and you were...”

“Yeah, I was.”

“So...you really don’t have a man now?”

I sighed, finally raising my eyes to meet his. “I really don’t.”

He nodded. “Good.”

“You’re divorced?” I asked, because I had to know.

“Yes.”

“How? I mean...” I glanced around to be sure we were still alone. “I thought you *couldn’t* divorce her. I thought she was blackmailing you.”

“She was, but she...can’t or won’t use what she knows against me now.”

I leaned across the bar, moving in closer to him and getting a nose full of his familiar cologne, the bergamot and pineapple

notes making me a little woozy. Still, I managed to utter, “Oh.”

Licking his lips, he stared into my eyes for a moment before saying, “Yeah.”

My eyes remained glued to his as if he had some kind of spell on me, and maybe he did, because I opened my mouth to speak again but lost my words.

He stared at me for a long moment before reaching up and resting his big hand on my left cheek. “You are still so beautiful, Claudette. You are still the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on, and I still want you so bad, baby.” His voice was low, rich, sending vibrations from my ears to my core.

“I never thanked you for...” I murmured.

“No thanks necessary.”

Someone tapping on the other end of the bar snatched my attention from him and lifted the fog of privacy that had settled around us. The warmth of his hand left my face, and his minty breath and cologne vacated my nostrils as he sat back and tugged at the collar of his suit jacket. I stood upright, sliding my eyes down the bar to see a man sitting there, one of my regulars. I shifted my gaze back to Truth, and he gave me a smile as he lifted his shot glass to his gorgeous lips.

“I...I’ll be back,” I stammered.

He nodded. “Looking forward to it.”

Two years earlier...

A few days after I first met Truth Ebo in the flesh at that benefit, he came to The Royale’s bar and ordered a drink from me, his eyes drinking me in as he enjoyed his cognac. We shared small talk that evening—he asked about Craig, I asked

about his wife, and an hour after he took up residence at the bar, he left. There was nothing extraordinary about that interaction at all, and I didn't see him again until Craig and I ran into him and Tiana at a nightclub, Truth's nightclub—Ignite.

Well, the run-in was intentional. After we arrived in one of his daddy's limos, Craig made sure word got to Truth that we were there which insured us free access to VIP. Craig was the cheapest rich nigga I'd ever had the displeasure of knowing.

Anyway, we were not only invited to VIP, but we were quickly invited to join Truth and Tiana at their table where it first became evident to me the butterflies that only flooded my stomach in his presence were real, and I wasn't imagining the light-headed feeling I'd first felt at the benefit that morphed into a headiness in the penthouse suite, and jumped a hurdle to become wet panties at the bar. Truth was probably ten years older than me, a living legend in my hood, and drop-dead gorgeous, a girlhood crush in technicolor.

I couldn't take my eyes off him, and Tiana noticed.

"Skinny? Your name is Skinny, right? Nice to see you again," she said, her voice oozing with fake civility.

"Nice seeing you again too, Sri Lanka." I knew her name and she knew mine. She was mad about me ogling her man, but shit! I couldn't help it, and he was staring at me, too, so it seemed he liked my skinny ass.

"Slim," Craig slurred. Yeah, he was already drunk, making me ask myself why I'd agreed to go on this date. Oh, yeah, he hadn't really given me a choice.

"Her name is Slim," Craig repeated his correction.

"Oh yeah. Right." Tiana said, shifting her eyes to Truth who was still burning holes into my flesh with his gaze. So she elbowed him.

In response, he jerked his head around to frown at her. "The fuck you do that for?"

Tiana heaved a loud sigh. “My name is Tiana, Slim. Like the princess.”

I gave her a slow nod. “Oh yeah, right,” I muttered unenthusiastically.

“Shit, what y’all drinking? I’m ready to get tore up in this bitch!” Craig announced.

“Looks like you got a head start, huh?” Truth asked, eyeing Craig with disgust.

“Shit, had to. Slim’s ass decided to start some shit with me tonight before we came here, but we made up, didn’t we, baby?” He leaned in close to me, planting a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

I fought not to cringe and didn’t answer him. I didn’t know he really expected one until I felt him softly pinch my thigh under the table, making me jump a little, and then he slid his hand up my thigh, inching his way to my pussy.

“Yeah, we did,” I forced out, my face tight as I put my hand on top of Craig’s, stopping his progress. I could feel Truth’s eyes on me again, but I didn’t look at him.

Three shots of very expensive rum for Craig and several minutes of extremely lackluster table conversation later, Craig was all over me, grabbing me, kissing me, promising to “tear my ass up” once we were alone. His face was in the side of my neck when Tiana excused herself to the restroom. A soft snore soon told me that Craig had fallen asleep with his heavy body burdening mine.

“He’s an asshole.”

Truth’s voice made me lift my eyes from the glass of wine I’d barely touched to his handsome face.

“Who?” I asked, as if the answer wasn’t obvious.

“Your nigga.”

“He’s *your* friend, so what does that say about you?” I countered.

Truth shrugged. “The same thing it says about you, I guess.”

In response to that, I said, “Your wife’s a bitch. She thinks she’s better than me. I can tell.”

“Her thinking’s fucked up. Hell, she thinks she’s better than me, too, and I know that’s a got damn lie. Ain’t nobody better than me.”

I shook my head. “You’re no better than him,” I said, tilting my head toward Craig. “Arrogant, think you’re the shit because you got money.”

“I don’t think a damn thing, Claudette. I know it, and so do you. That’s why you can’t stop staring at me.”

With wide eyes, I hissed, “You keep staring at me!”

“Because I like what I see. A lot.”

“How does your wife feel about that?”

“I don’t know and don’t give a fuck either.”

“Wow, you’re a piece of shit.”

“Maybe, but you want me.” He leaned across the table and smiled at me. “You want me to fuck you. I know you do.”

“You don’t know shit about me or what I want.”

“Yes I do.”

“I have a man, remember?”

“That’s what you think he is? A man?”

“A better one than you are. At least he’s not a cheater.”

Lifting his eyebrows, he asked, “You sure about that?”

I wasn’t, but he didn’t need to know that. “Fuck you.”

“I told you, you wanted to.”

I’d had enough, and well, my pussy was drenched because I *did* want to fuck his cocky ass, so I shook Craig’s heavy ass until he stirred.

“Shit, did I fall asleep?” he mumbled.

“Yeah, call your driver or whatever. I’m ready to go.” I slid out of the booth, making Craig drop to the seat.

“Got damn, Slim,” he groaned. “Give me a minute to get my head right. You just gonna drop my ass on this seat like that? Fuck!”

“Sorry, I’m just really ready to leave, baby,” I crooned.

He managed to sit upright and grinned at me. “You ready for this muhfuckin’ summer sausage, huh?”

I fought not to roll my eyes, painted on a smile, and said, “You know it.”

A few minutes later, I was dragging him out of the club without uttering another word to Truth Ebo.

Truth

Now...

I stayed at the bar that Sunday night until her shift was over, watched her clean everything up, count the money in the register, and disappear through a door next to the bar I’d never noticed before. I assumed that was where the bar manager’s office and the safe were. When she stepped out of that office, her eyes quickly found me, although she didn’t move a muscle as she said, “Uh...I’m leaving now.”

“You *gotta* leave now?” I asked.

“Well, the bar is closed. You...want another drink or something?”

“Nah, I don’t want a drink, Claudette. I want your time. I want to talk to you, and since you won’t give me your number and I’m sure you won’t let me drive you home, I’d like to talk to you here.”

She moved a little closer to me. “So you’re assuming I need a ride home?”

“Do you?”

She slid her hand up and down the strap of her purse. “Come on.”

With lifted eyebrows, I said, “Come on?”

“Yes. Come on and take me home.”

I actually felt nervous as I opened my car door for her. That only got worse when she slid beside me to climb in, and her scent surrounded me. She’d always smelled so good, and it wasn’t only her cherry-scented bodywash or the coconut oil she put in her hair or the shea butter she put on her skin, it was just her. Her pheromones and shit. She smelled fucking divine.

I had to take a deep breath to settle my nerves after I climbed in beside her, because Claudette was it for me. She was my fantasy, my dream, and I was determined to make her come true.

“You still staying in the same spot?” I asked, as I started my car.

“Yep,” she said, sounding unhappy about that fact.

“Claudette—”

“I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

I dropped my hands from the steering wheel. “You... haven’t?”

“I haven’t. I haven’t wanted to.”

“Claudette—”

“I know you keep coming to the bar because you think I’m what you want, that I’m some kind of prize, but I’m not. I’m stupid and weak and—”

“Claud—”

“I am. I really am.” Her voice broke a little with that last statement.

“Stop it. Stop that shit. Ain’t none of us perfect. You *know* I’m not, and you *are* a damn prize. Your heart is a prize and I’m tryna win it. I...I’ve missed you, baby. I’ve missed the hell out of you these two years.”

She shook her head. “The next thing you’ll be saying is that you love me.”

“I do,” I confessed. “And you know I do. Haven’t I shown you that?”

Her wet eyes met mine. “Truth...”

I reached over and rubbed a finger over her nose. “I love you, Claudette. Shit, I think it was love at first sight for me, because from the moment I first saw you, I couldn’t stop thinking about you, knew I’d do anything for you.”

Her eyebrows were in a tangle as she spoke. “Truth, I don’t know what to say.”

“You could say you love a nigga back since I done laid my heart out here for you. Tell me I’m not in this shit alone, baby.”

“I...”

Before she said some shit that would fuck my head and my heart up, I let her off the hook. “You’re still not ready for me, are you?”

“I don’t...I don’t know.”

I sighed. “That means you’re not. Look, I’m just fall back, give you some more time.”

A tear escaped her eye and rolled down her pretty cheek.
“I’m sorry, Truth.”

I wiped her tear away, kissed her forehead, and said, “It’s all good, baby.”

Then I drove her home in silence.

Claudette

I was off on Mondays, had been since being hired at The Royale more than three years earlier. Usually, I used the time to wash my abundance of black slacks and black polo shirts—my work uniforms. I also caught up on my shows, immersing myself in episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Orange is the New Black*, or *Power* and eating junk food while painting my nails or conditioning my hair. If I had the energy, I'd hop on the city bus and run a few errands, and if my mom had been riding me, I'd put on something conservative and attend whatever revival she insisted I show up to. But this Monday, I couldn't seem to climb out of my bed any more than I could clear my head of visions of Truth.

Truth.

What an appropriate name for a man like him—blunt, direct, difficult to accept.

Truth was...everything I'd ever wanted and nothing I ever believed I needed, a hero wrapped in an irresistible brown package and infused with enough arrogance to make a girl like me nauseous. He wanted me. That was obvious, plus he'd said so. He also said he loved me, and although I didn't want to believe him, I *did* believe him. Honestly, I wanted him, too, and I loved him. I really did.

My phone vibrated against my coffee table, making me shift my eyes from the sandblasted ceiling of my tiny efficiency

apartment to see who was calling me—my mom.

“Hello?” I answered, placing my phone on the bed and lowering my head to meet it.

“Hey, sugar! Wanna go to revival at True Fire Holiness Macedonian Lighthouse Church of God in Christ our Savior with me tonight? We can grab a late dinner afterwards at the Pink Café. My treat.”

“The Pink Café? Uh...sure,” I responded, a small smile popping onto my face.

Truth

There was this one time I went to this spot in my old hood, The Pink Café. They had the best salmon croquettes in the world and this special mango ginger tea that I swear was addictive. I loved that place and gave them my business as often as I could. As an added bonus, Tiana hated it, so I didn't have to worry about her tagging along.

This particular night, about two weeks after Claudette had to drag Craig's drunk ass out of my club, I was sitting in my regular booth at the café, in the darkest corner of the place where I knew I wouldn't be bothered by the kids who thought they wanted to be me when they grew up, not knowing there was nothing glamorous about my life or how damn miserable my rich ass was at the time. When she walked in, I was staring down at my phone, and I'm not sure what made me raise my head. Maybe it was her energy or that magnetism that was embedded in her, the thing that kept her on my mind from the moment I first met her. Whatever it was, I was thankful for it, because just seeing her lifted my mood.

I watched her and an older woman sit in a booth near the door and licked my lips like a damn lion stalking his prey. Not many people outside the hood knew about this place. She was from my hood? That thought made me want her even more. It meant she knew the life, was familiar with the struggle. Hell, at that point, I decided we were kindred spirits, fucking soul mates.

After the waitress took their order, I waved her over to me, and said, "I got their check."

She lifted her eyebrows and smirked at me. "You know she got a man, right?"

"Who?"

"You know who, negro. And you got a wife."

"Look, Dana, just bring me their check and I'll be sure to include a fat tip for you."

She gave me a salute. "Yes, sir."

Claudette's back was to me, but that didn't make it any easier for me to take my eyes off her. Shit, the back of her head was a pleasant sight in and of itself. I was obsessed and I knew it, but what the fuck could I do about it?

I sat there and observed as she and her tablemate ate, as she beckoned Dana to their table, and then as she snatched her head around to look at me after she was presumably informed that I'd picked up the tab. When she rolled her eyes at me, I gave her a smile. After what appeared to be a heated discussion between her and Claudette, the older lady with her waved me over, and it took all of my cool not to jump up and run to their table. Instead, I strolled over to them, grabbing a vacant chair from a nearby table and setting it at theirs.

"Good evening, ladies," I said, focusing on the older woman, who upon closer inspection, had to be related to Claudette. Closely related. Same high cheekbones and small dimple in her chin. Shit, she was beautiful, too, but not as beautiful as Claudette.

No one was as beautiful as her.

“Good evening!” the older lady greeted me. “And thank you for paying for our food. That was so sweet of you!”

I smiled. “It was my pleasure, Miss...”

“Seedra, Seedra Wynn, and this is my daughter, Claudette.”

I took the older woman’s outstretched hand and kissed it. “Truth Ebo.” Then shifted my attention to her daughter. “Claudette *Wynn*?”

She nodded, refusing to look me in the eye.

“Girl, where are your manners?” her mother scolded.

Through a deep sigh, Claudette uttered, “Thank you, Mr. Ebo.”

“Seedra! Girl, is that you?” a shrill voice coming from the front door filled the restaurant.

“Maggie?!” Claudette’s mother shouted, and then she was asking me to excuse her as she hopped up from the booth, following the lady to another table where the two of them instantly fell into a lively conversation.

“What do you want from me?” Claudette asked, in a low voice.

With raised eyebrows, I leaned closer to her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s with you paying for our food? You think that earned you my pussy?”

Reclining back a little, I replied, “I would hope your pussy would be worth more than a couple of meals at a hole-in-the-wall in the hood.”

She finally lifted her eyes to meet mine. “Your wife know you’re here all up in my face? Doesn’t she care about how you look at me?”

Tilting my head to the side, I asked, “How do I look at you?”

“Like you wanna eat me up,” she hissed.

“I sure do. I wanna eat you and lick you until you forget I have a wife.”

Shaking her head, she glared at me. “You’re gonna have to look further for a new side chick. I’m not interested, and as you already know, I have a man.”

“Again, you call that a man? I thought you were smarter than that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“He ain’t shit, and you know it. I bet you don’t even like that nigga. It’s the money, isn’t it?”

“Where is your wife?”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. Probably somewhere fucking another nigga. Nothing about my marriage is real, Claudette. It’s an...arrangement.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You wanna fuck me that bad? You’re willing to lie like this, risk me telling her what you’re saying just for some of my pussy?”

I sat up straight, giving her a serious expression. “First of all, I never said I only wanted pussy from you. Second, I’m not lying, and you can tell her whatever you want to tell her. I don’t love her, and I seriously doubt that she loves me.”

“Then why are you with her?”

“Why are you with Holman?”

Neither of us spoke another word until I said, “Did you drive here?”

“Why?”

“Trying to see if you need a ride home.”

“From you? No thanks.”

“Let me drive you home, and I’ll explain my marriage to you.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I know that, but I also know you wanna hear it.”

I watched as she dropped her eyes to the top of the table and then raised them back to my face. “My mother—”

“Sweetness, I’ma catch a ride home with Maggie. Talk to you later. Thanks again, sir!” her mother said, leaving before either of us could reply. In response, I fixed my eyes on Claudette.

After two or three minutes, she said, “Okay.”

Her apartment was small and neat, smelled like strawberries, and felt like her—nice but a little rough around the edges.

“You want something to drink? I got water and apple juice,” she said, standing in the middle of the small space still wearing her heavy winter coat and an unsure expression on her face.

“No. Holman ever been in here?”

“Have a seat,” she said, dodging my question.

I did, sitting on an uncomfortable futon sofa that a quick glance around the one-room apartment told me was also her bed. She remained standing.

“You don’t wanna sit down?” I asked.

She grabbed a chair from in front of the lean refrigerator in lieu of a response to my question and plopped down in it, giving me an expectant look.

“You like me, Claudette? You feel what I feel every time we’re in the same room together?”

“You’re supposed to be explaining why you’re married to that Hillary Banks wannabe.”

I grinned. “All right...she’s got something on me, some shit that happened before I went legit, and I ain’t tryna go to jail for it.”

She nodded her understanding.

“You ain’t gonna ask me what she has on me?”

“No. You’re from my hood, the east side. It’s a lot of shit you gotta do to survive in the hood.”

Damn, she was gonna make me go full stalker on her ass. “How you know I’m from the east side?”

She shrugged. “Who doesn’t know about Truth Ebo? I, uh...I used to have a crush on you back in the day when I was too young and dumb to realize that men like you bring a girl nothing but trouble.”

“Is that right? And what do niggas like Craig Holman bring girls like you?”

“At least three nights a week away from this damn neighborhood.”

“I can give you a lifetime of that if you’ll let me. How far do you wanna get away from here? How long you wanna stay? If I was your man, all you’d have to do is say the word,” I said, and I meant it. I had no idea why, but I wanted to give this woman the whole world wrapped in a damn bow with her name on the deed.

“I don’t do threesomes.”

“I can’t leave her. I just told you that.”

“How does she know what she knows? Did you tell her like you were going to tell me?”

I shook my head and sighed. “She was with me when it happened. She witnessed a lot of shit, because she was my woman. I thought she was a rider.”

She scoffed, “You thought her Regine Hunter-Whitley Gilbert ass was a rider? Really?”

Now she had me laughing. “Uh, she can be bougie, but that wasn’t how she presented herself to me. I met her in a club wearing a catsuit and smoking weed with these huge braids hanging past her ass. We’d been together months before I

found out she was one of those private school chicks. By then, I thought I loved her.”

“Thought?”

“*Thought*. Shit, I don’t really think I knew what love was back then.”

“But you do now?”

“Yeah.”

Her cell phone rang, and after she checked it, she said, “It’s Craig.”

I didn’t say anything but watched as she ignored the call.

After a few moments of silence, she stated, “You should go.”

“He on his way here or something?” I asked.

“No—I don’t know.”

“But you know you want me to leave?”

She nodded, uncertainty in her eyes. “Yeah. I need to get some sleep and you’re sitting on my bed.”

I didn’t want to leave and I didn’t believe she wanted me to either, but I knew I needed to go, so I stood and watched her take the few steps to the front door and open it for me.

“Goodnight,” she said softly.

Moving close to her, I leaned in and gently pressed my lips to hers and was surprised she let me.

Resting a hand on her soft cheek, I gave her a smile, said, “Goodnight, Claudette,” and left.

Claudette

Tuesday nights were usually a midway point between hectic and slow as hell. A few regulars usually showed up along with new hotel residents or stragglers from off the street, but for the most part, the ebb and flow of work was typically manageable, which was a good thing since it was another solo night for me and I was kind of tired from the previous night's revival and super late dinner with my mom. The only issue on this particular night was that the laid-back pace gave me too much time to think and to notice things like the fact that Truth was not there, had not been there all night, and well...I wanted him to be there. But I suppose he was keeping true to his word and backing off, giving me time to be ready for him, or to get ready for him, whatever that meant.

As I handed Bill, a regular who worked at an accounting firm, another vodka tonic, I sighed, gave him the best smile I could muster, and tried not to think about that time, a week or so after Truth paid for me and my mom's dinner, when Craig and I attended Tiana's birthday party. I really tried to erase the feel of the electricity that occupied the air between me and Truth that night, the look in his eyes every time they rested on me in the crowd of people in the Grand Ballroom at the Sable Inn, or the way he found me outside in the cold winter air trying to shake off what I was feeling for him despite not wanting to feel it.

I was there with Craig because he was my man and because he wanted to be there, not me. I didn't love Craig. Hell, I didn't like him, either, but he seemed to like me, was generous for the most part, and took me places I'd never get to go otherwise. Yes, he was a drunk and could be an asshole sometimes, but I figured if I held on long enough, a ring might be in my future. I could deal with a drunk rich man. After all, I'd dealt with sorry broke niggas all my life, and regardless of this attraction I shared with Truth, he was married. According to him, he was trapped in that marriage, so I would take my chances with Craig.

"Out here by yourself? No coat? You ain't cold?" His voice didn't startle me. On the contrary, I'd been expecting him, or maybe I'd manifested him with my thoughts. Either way, his arrival was a welcomed and anticipated one.

"I like the cold. It was stuffy in there," I replied, without turning to look at him. I'd already memorized his handsome face, neat haircut, and divine black tuxedo. "What are you doing outside at your wife's party?"

"Looking for my second wife who should've been my first and only wife."

That made me turn to face him. "Cute."

"No, *truth*."

"Truth is your real name or your street name?"

"Real name. Truth Daniel Ebo. My mama's only child."

"And your father's?"

"Never met him. Don't know shit about him."

"Never met mine, either," I divulged.

"Just another reason I should've waited for you. I had no damn business marrying Tiana when you were in this world."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I skipped over it. "This is a nice party."

"It should be. She spent enough of my money on it."

I nodded. “Hmm, my birthday’s the first of next month. Craig’s taking me to Cabo.”

He didn’t reply, just moved closer to me, taking my face in his hands. “You’re so beautiful. You know that?”

“Truth—”

His lips met mine, another soft kiss like the one he’d given me at my door, but this one didn’t stay soft and sweet. Before I could stop him or myself, my arms were around his neck and my mouth had opened and our tongues were caressing one another. I kissed this man like he didn’t have a wife and I didn’t have a man, like we weren’t mere feet away from both of them. When we finally broke apart, I whispered, “You could’ve had me a long time ago. Remember, I...I told you I had a crush on you back in the day? I’d hang at Parlay’s and watch you and your boys. I was younger than you, in high school back then, but I wanted you to see me, wished you’d choose me, but you never did. You never noticed me.”

He stared at me with an unreadable expression on his face before saying, “You...Parlay’s? Did you used to wear a yellow bubble coat all the time? Kept your hair in afro puffs?”

I gasped. “Yeah...how—you remember me?”

“Hell yeah. I remember you, and I *did* notice you, baby. But like you said, you were young, like sixteen and I was probably twenty-five, twenty-six? I couldn’t mess with you. I don’t do shit like that, but yeah, I saw you.”

And then we stood there and stared at each other in the cold night air, cars whizzing by on the busy city street, until I heard my phone ring in my clutch. I didn’t have to check the screen to know it was Craig. I’d been outside much too long by that time and knew he had to be looking for me. “That’s probably Craig. I need to get back in there.”

“Okay. Can I see you again? Like, for lunch or something?”

I shook my head. “No. I can’t,” I said, leaving him to stand outside alone.

I remember that something shifted inside me after that, something that made Craig's kisses and his touch feel wrong. Something that made me feel like I'd moved too quickly and chosen the wrong mate, too. And now, staring at the empty bar stool that I'd baptized his, I felt a hollowness inside that I knew only Truth could fill.

Truth

My ex-wife's father was a lawyer with a talent for knowing what to invest in and when to pull out of said investments and collect his profits. Him and my relationship with him were the only good things that came out of our five-year marriage. He knew his daughter was spoiled and would do absolutely anything to get her way. He knew that when she set her sights on something or someone, she'd stop at nothing to get it. And while he did not know the specifics of how we came to be a we, he knew I wasn't totally to blame for our marriage not working. Sitting across from him in the restaurant he'd chosen for this Tuesday evening meeting, I let my eyes scan the dining room as he wrapped up a phone call with his wife, the gorgeous woman who was responsible for Tiana being Tiana. She'd spoiled her only daughter, favored her over their three sons, tutored her on being a privileged bitch, and I'd suffered the consequences, because I made the poor judgement call of falling for her.

Just like a lot of women, including a too-young-for-me teenage Claudette, she knew my reputation, the weight my name held, and she wanted me and the respect and power that accompanied the role of being my woman. I'd had many girlfriends and some fuck buddies in the past, had cared about a lot of them, but by the time I met Tiana at that club, I was ready to slow down and find my one. Tiana presented herself

as this wild chick, beautiful and bold, but she was also smart and cunning, maybe too cunning for me. She also appeared to be a rider, would hide dope and guns for me, never complained about the late hours I kept trying to stockpile money so I could go legit. Hell, she even helped dispose of some evidence after an unfortunate run-in with a nigga who thought it was a good idea to run up on me when I was out with her without my boys. So of course I wifed her, and that was the biggest mistake I could've made. Once Tiana was my wife, she decided she needed to be the one to call the shots, tried and failed to rule me and keep tabs on me, tried to clown me in front of my boys, flaunted me as a thug to her father whom she hated, like Craig's bitch ass hated his. She was proud to have married her father's worst nightmare—a street nigga. What she didn't know was that her daddy had been a street nigga, too, because he'd kept that from her. So her using me to get to him actually worked to my benefit. He did everything in his power to help me become a legitimate businessman—investing in my clubs, showing me how to flip houses. Hell, if anyone was owed credit for my empire, it was Tim Presley, her father.

“Sorry about that,” he said. He'd finally ended his phone call and had placed the phone on the table.

“No problem,” I replied.

“It's good to see you, son.”

I smiled. He'd told me when Tiana and I split that I'd always be one of his sons, and he'd definitely kept that promise. “Good to see you, too, Pop. How's the family?”

“Good. Tiana and that Baker negro are engaged now.” He shook his head. “She thought marrying you would get under my skin, but that fool? I can't stand his weak ass.”

I chuckled. “Weak? Sounds like a perfect match for her, then.”

He laughed. “Yeah, you're right. I love my daughter, but her mother definitely trained her to be better suited for a man

without a backbone. Wish you two could've worked out, but I know the divorce was for the best."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Thanks again for your help with that."

"What'd I tell you? I only did what was right, and I'm glad you felt like you could confide in me."

I shrugged. "When your father-in-law asks you what the hell you're doing with a woman like his daughter, what else can you do but tell the truth?"

He chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you did. Like I said, you're my son, more my child than she is in a lot of ways. Hell, you're *me*. We're the same, and I couldn't keep watching you be miserable with my daughter. And she'll never admit it, but she wasn't exactly happy with you, either. You wouldn't be ruled, and I didn't hate you. Nothing went the way she thought it would."

"Yeah, things most definitely didn't go how she planned them to go."

"Mm-hmm. Glad you didn't end up like me. I love my wife, but I can admit it would've been nice to settle down with someone who understood me better. My Vickie was raised just like she raised Tiana." He shook his head. "But she's never blackmailed me. Then again, I was already in law school when I met her. She has no idea what I went through in the past."

That reminded me of how young and dumb I was to pull Tiana into my world and how evil her ass was to throw my past in my face and threaten me into staying when I told her I was leaving. And after she saw me looking at Claudette at my club that night, she made it clear that I wasn't going to leave her for "some Build-a-hoe charity case bitch."

"Yeah, well I know better now," I said. I wanted to thank him again for making her give me the divorce and for making it worth her while via a bunch of his money, but I also didn't want to overdo it, opting instead to say, "So, what did you want to meet about, Pop? I'm sure you didn't ask me to meet you here just to rag on your only daughter."

He threw his head back and laughed. “No, I didn’t. I heard you were in town on business so I thought it’d be a good time to tell you about an opportunity I want to pull you in on. I think you’ll be very interested in what I have in mind.”

Leaning forward, I said, “I’m all ears, Pop.”

Claudette

I met Craig in the very bar where I was still employed. He was getting drunk, of course, but he wasn't being an asshole with it. He was actually really friendly, friendlier than most, and that was a pleasant change for me. It wasn't that the people who frequented The Royale's bar were assholes. They were quiet for the most part, some were sullen, sad, but few were actually friendly. So I smiled and listened to him talk about some football game that was playing on the TV that hung over the bar before it was taken down years later, and when he asked for my number, I gave it to him. I didn't find out he was a Holman, the son of the hotel's owner, until our second phone conversation.

Our courtship was a normal one—dates, phone calls, and eventually, some decent sex. Craig wasn't the kind of man you fell head over heels in love with. He didn't incite butterflies in my belly or make my heart race or my face flush. He wasn't charismatic or even particularly sexy. He was cute and he was nice to me, paid for our dates, took me to fancy parties, and let me stay with him in his fancy suite a few nights a week, because he hated my place and my hood. I couldn't be mad at that, because I hated both, too. The bar was set pretty low for me as far as men went, so I believed I had it good. We progressed into a relationship, and as he grew more comfortable with me, he went from being a social drunk to a constant drunk, passing out on top of me after packing his semi-hard penis inside of me, crying about how his father saw

him as a disappointment, a fuck-up who'd flunked out of college and lacked the business acumen and ambition of the rest of his family. I did all I could to encourage him, because I cared about him. I truly did. I just didn't love him and knew I never would, although I tried.

It was a year into our relationship before my sappy drunk morphed into a mean one, hitting me for the first time.

That was when I realized his father's disappointment induced more than sadness in him. There was some rage bottled up inside of Craig that was unleashed that day, and the smack to my face startled me so bad, *I* actually apologized, because for him to hit me? That *had* to be my fault. He apologized, too, profusely, and the next day, he bought me a ring. Not an engagement ring, but a ring, and that was a good enough atonement for me. Low bar, remember?

As the days and weeks rolled into months, there were more smacks accompanied by slaps and punches, and by the time I met Truth at that benefit, me being abused was a way of life. It was my norm, something I believed I deserved. I mean, what other fate was there for a fatherless girl from the gutter?

"Good evening."

I looked up and smiled at Jade, one of my regulars, her greeting pulling me back into the here and now—Wednesday night at The Royale. "Good evening," I replied.

As I mixed her drink for her, she prattled on about the day from hell she'd had teaching preschool, and I fought not to glance at the empty stool on the other end of the bar. Another night and no Truth.

"I love you, Claudette..."

"You're still not ready for me, are you?"

"...I'ma just fall back, give you some more time."

Shit.

Back home after my shift at work, I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling of my apartment. Sighing, I squeezed my thighs together as my mind kept slipping back to the night of that kiss Truth and I shared outside his wife's birthday party. Then my mind drifted to a night a couple of weeks after that.

It was the night I'd caught a ride home with Zara, one of the housekeepers at the hotel. The night before had been a particularly bad night with Craig. His father had reamed him about something or other, and he took it out on me, so I was avoiding him and opted not to spend the night in his suite. As my luck would have it, Zara's car broke down on the way to my place, and as I stood on the sidewalk with her and waited for her man to come check the car out, a voice almost made me jump out of my skin.

"Claudette?" flowed like thick honey into my ears and made goosebumps spread across my skin. I didn't move a muscle or say a word but watched him cross the street to me and come to a stop only inches from my body. "It *is* you," he said with a smile.

Still, nothing from me, and now I could feel Zara's eyes on me. She knew who he was. Damn near *everyone* knew who he was.

Truth shifted his focus to her, offering her his hand. "Truth Ebo."

"Oh, I know. I'm Zara Edwards." She definitely knew who he was, and she worried the shit out of me about *me* knowing him at work the next day.

"Nice to meet you, Zara. What you ladies doing out here this time of night alone?"

"I was supposed to be giving Claudette a ride home, but my piece of shit car broke down. Waiting for my guy to come

rescue us,” Zara explained.

His eyes found me again, and I could read the question in them: *Where is your man and why isn't he rescuing you?*

“There he is!” Zara announced.

Truth and Zara's man exchanged pleasantries, and while Zara and her man huddled under the hood, Truth and I stared at each other until I finally asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Visiting my aunt,” Truth answered.

“Oh.”

“You cold?”

Although I was wearing a thin jacket and rubbing my hands up and down my arms, I said, “No.”

He shrugged out of his suit jacket and wrapped it around me. “Let me take you home.”

I ran my hand over the headwrap that covered my hair, pulled his jacket tighter around me, and shook my head. “I'll wait for Zara.”

“Why?”

“Because—”

“Hey, Claudette, this thing is gonna have to be towed, but Kent can run you home in his car,” Zara interrupted me, referring to her man.

“No, I got her,” Truth said, his eyes still on me.

Zara said something else to me, her man said something to Truth, and a minute or so later, I found myself in the passenger seat of Mr. Ebo's car...again.

When we made it to my place, he walked me to my door and I welcomed him inside, although I had no idea why. Maybe it was that my emotions were raw from the previous night's altercation with Craig. Or maybe I was just more exhausted than usual. Exhausted from life—a past of poverty

and misery and a present of abuse and depression. Maybe just being in Truth's presence was my therapy.

He was sitting on the futon and me in a chair when he said, "Why Holman didn't pick you up?"

"Why should he have to? He's not responsible for me."

"He's your man. The least he could do is make sure you get home safely. Hell, why he ain't bought you a car?"

I shrugged.

"I like that scarf you got on your head."

I self-consciously slid a hand over my head, letting it rest on a particularly tender spot. "Thank you."

"I like you, Claudette."

"I figured that."

With a smile, he asked, "You like me?"

I didn't answer him.

He stared at me for a moment before standing and making the barely three steps to me. Squatting in front of me and placing his big hands on my thighs, he softly said, "I think about you all the time. You think about me?"

"Yeah...you and your wife. How is she?"

"Still a bitch. Still blackmailing me. Still keeping me from the woman I should be with, the woman who should've always been mine."

I lifted an eyebrow as my heart jumped. "You told her you want to leave her?"

"I tell her that shit every damn week."

"You told her you want me."

"I don't have to tell her that. She knows."

Silence, as I let that sink in. "Truth—"

His lips met mine, and I moaned. Our tongues collided, and I groaned. He cradled my face in his hands, standing and pulling me to my feet, our mouths connected the entire time, and I whimpered. His hands fell from my face to my arms, to my back, my ass. He touched me everywhere, and I could feel that kiss in my very soul. He felt good, different, perfect. Truth's kisses and touch were tailor made for me, to reach places I didn't know existed inside of me.

He led me to the futon, laid me on it, and before I could fully comprehend what was happening, he'd slid my pants and panties down my legs and his head was between my thighs, his tongue was flicking at my clit, and my legs were trembling. A long, thick finger entered me, soon joined by another as he continued to lavish my bud with his tongue, causing my insides to churn and sweet, tortuous pressure to build in my core. My breathing became ragged as the pressure compounded, expanding inside me like a balloon until one tongue swipe made it burst like a pinprick to rubber. I hissed, my breathing halted, and my body bucked.

Then he kissed his way up my body, stopping to help me pull my shirt and bra off and staring down at me, his eyebrows knitted in confusion. I closed my eyes and sighed, knowing without following his gaze what he was looking at and silently begging him not to ask any questions. To be sure he didn't quiz me, I lifted my face to meet his and kissed him, pulling him back into the moment and reminding him of the task at hand. We kissed hungrily, his big body on top of mine, his big hand between my thighs caressing my tender clit. When he stood to undress himself, I took him in. He was so brown and tall and wide and fine, and his dick? His dick was the kind that dreams were made of, long and thick and veiny, and it had my ass drooling as I watched him sheath it with a condom. He returned to me, his face hovering over mine, his heavy dick resting on my mound before he eased it inside me, making me inhale sharply. Truth was a big imposing man with a sordid past, a man known to fuck a nigga up at the drop of a dime if need be. I'd heard tale of him killing a man with his bare

hands and shooting another dude who disrespected his mother, so I expected to be fucked. Instead, this man made love to me, slow and steady and sweet. Punctuating measured thrusts with kisses to my lips, neck, and chest, lingering on the bruise at my ribcage as if trying to kiss the pain away, sliding back to my treasure to show it even more attention than before and causing me to quiver with another orgasm. As my entire body vibrated, he eased back inside me, and he felt so good I wanted to cry. As he rocked me to another peak, I held onto him like he'd fly away if I let him go, and I did cry. I cried because he felt so good. I cried because I couldn't get enough of him. I cried because he belonged to another woman and I wanted so badly for him to be mine.

An hour later, as we lay on my uncomfortable futon, him holding me in his arms, he said, "I wanna know everything about you."

"Not much to know," I softly replied. "Been poor all my life. Been...sad all my life."

"Been beautiful all your life, too."

"Beautiful and sad. What a combination," I quipped.

"Hmm, you're like a black rose—rare, mystical, and fucking tragic."

I lifted my head. "Damn, I said sad, not tragic."

He chuckled. "I didn't mean it as an insult. I meant tragic as in you not being mine but his. Tragic as in him putting his hands on you."

I returned my head to his chest and tightly shut my eyes.

"He hits you, doesn't he?"

I didn't reply. I just lay there because I didn't want to talk about Craig. I didn't even want to think about him. Not at that moment. I just wanted to pretend that there was no Craig or Tiana and that there was only us—me and Truth.

Truth

I killed for her.

As I sat behind the desk in my new office in my city, staring out the window, that was what was on my mind.

I killed for her, for Claudette.

I killed for her because I had to, because I didn't know what else to do, because that motherfucker was hitting her, beating her. That night we had sex, I saw the bruises on her ribs, her stomach, her arms. And her hair? In the middle of our sex, her scarf came off and her hair...plugs of it were missing. After I pressed her, she admitted Craig had dragged her by her hair, pulling some of it out.

The motherfucker pulled her hair out of her damn head!

And why? Because he wasn't shit and decided to take it out on her.

So I killed the motherfucker.

Not that night, but after watching him, basically stalking his ass for a couple of days, I caught him stumbling out of a liquor store and followed him to my hood, sat and watched him go into some chick's house, and when he finally left early the next morning, I jumped his ass. Hell, that was *my* hood and I knew how to move without being seen in *my* hood. I put his drunk ass in his own car and drove him to the spot, waited for

him to sober up some because I wanted him to know what was happening when it happened. What I initially intended to do was fuck him up, make sure he never put his hands on her again, not kill him, but shit happens just as sure as it stinks.

The sun had barely risen when he finally opened temperate eyes and looked at me. “The fuck?” he said, rubbing the spot where the butt of my gun had met the back of his head. “T? What the hell? Where we at? What you doing in my car?”

“You been hitting Claudette? Beating her?”

“What? Huh?”

Tilting my head to the side, I repeated myself, “You been beating Claudette?”

“Claudette? Slim?”

“Yes, motherfucker! Claudette! You been hitting her?”

He rubbed his eyes and yawned. “The fuck that’s got to do with you? She’s *my* woman. I do what I want with her. What? You want her? Well, you can’t have her. Now get out of my damn car.”

I stared at him. “Break up with her. Today. Leave her the fuck alone.”

“Or what? What you gonna do? Kick my ass and take her? Whatever, nigga. Her pussy ain’t even that good. Believe me.”

“Naw, her pussy is definitely that good.”

This crazy look crossed his face and then he smiled. “So you finally fucked her, huh? You been sniffing in behind her long enough.”

“Look, just leave her alone. Let her go.”

“No. She’s mine and I need her.”

“For what? A fucking punching bag? Leave her, Holman, because if I even *think* you laid another finger on her, I’m—”

“Fuck you! That’s *my* woman and I ain’t leaving shit! You want her but you know she ain’t going nowhere regardless of

what I do to her, don't you? That's why you coming to me with this bullshit. That's what I like most about Slim, the fact that she's so fucked up in the head she thinks she deserves that shit. She thinks I'm *supposed* to beat her ass. I'm beginning to think she likes it when I kick her ass. Stupid bitch. But you're right. She got some good pussy, though. I can't lie about that. Some good head, too. My favorite thing in the world is kicking her ass and making her suck my dick afterwards. Ain't nothing like that shit. Sometimes I kick her ass just so she'll suck it real good. When you get out of my damn car, I'ma drive over to her place and beat the dog shit outta her, make her suck whatever my other girl left on my dick just because."

He'd barely finished that statement when I punched his ass in the nose, making blood spew everywhere, and then I kind of just blacked out and kept hitting him. I hit him until the muscles in my arm locked up. Yeah, I hit him until I couldn't, and then I sat there in his car staring out at the open field—the spot, the place where a lot of shit had gone down in my past. I had changed my life, thought I'd left that shit behind, but I guess my past environment was only partially to blame for who I was. Maybe I was just inherently fucked up, because I had just killed a dude who at one point was at least my fake friend with my bare hands over a woman other than my damn wife, a woman I barely knew but wanted. Hell, I *needed* Claudette, needed her as badly as I needed oxygen and fucking water, and I didn't know why. I didn't understand what I felt for her or why it was so strong, why she had such a damn pull on me.

Night had fallen again before I finally stepped out of the car, shedding my bloody jacket and disposing of Craig and his car. When I made it home, Tiana wasn't there, so I took a shower and climbed into bed with Claudette on my mind.

Claudette

He killed Craig...for me.

Truth killed him *for me*, and it freaked me the hell out when I realized it. He didn't tell me. He didn't have to. When I saw him at Craig's funeral, I knew. I just knew.

After Craig went missing, no expense was spared searching for the heir to the Holman empire. His car was eventually found in the bottom of a lake several miles outside the city with his body inside. The cause of death was listed as: head injuries. In short, he was beaten to death. Everyone, including me, thought he'd had a drunken run-in with someone and was robbed since his credit cards and money were missing. But then I saw Truth at the funeral, and it clicked.

After we were together, as I lay in his arms, he persuaded me to share my shame, how Craig abused me, degraded me, hurt me, and how I just took it. I told Truth things I'd never told anyone before.

"I got teased in school because I never had shit. I mean, we were all poor, but my mom was so religious, I could only wear dresses, Goodwill dresses, until I started babysitting for some of our neighbors and had money to sneak and buy myself some better clothes. My hair was always a greasy mess until I learned how to do it. I know my mother did the best she could, but I got bullied, got jumped on even after I started fixing myself up. I didn't have any friends...so Craig? I never thought I'd be with someone like him," I told him.

As I talked, divulging secrets that belonged between me and Craig, rehashing damn near every blow, every punch, every belittling word he'd ever directed at me, I could feel Truth's rage build stronger and stronger, and maybe...maybe I wanted him to get angry enough to hurt Craig, to kill him.

I wasn't sure if it was a conscious thought or intention, but when I realized what Truth had done and that he'd done it for

me, I avoided him, practically ran from him at the funeral, but he knew where I lived.

When he showed up at my place that night, he was quiet. So was I. We sat side by side on my futon, silence settling between us until I finally asked, “Why?”

I didn’t look at him but felt him move closer to me and grasp my hand. “Why what?”

“I know you did it. Why?”

“Why you think?”

“I...”

“I didn’t mean for shit to go that far. He pushed me, said some shit that I just couldn’t let slide.”

My eyes finally met his. “About me?”

“Yeah...”

“I don’t know how to feel about this or what to do with it. His...his blood is on my hands. This is...it’s my fault.”

He gently grasped my chin as he held my eyes. “No, it’s not. This is on me. It’s all on me.”

“But...why for me? You barely know me.”

“Because I care about you, and I wanna be with you, Claudette.”

I shook my head as tears filled my eyes. “I...”

“You scared of me now? You think I’d hurt you?” he asked, his voice sounding tiny, rather than the cavernous timbre I was accustomed to.

“No...I’m just...I’m fucked up, Truth. I was too fucked up for Craig. I’m too fucked up for you and you have a wife and the police could figure out what happened, and you could get locked up and I don’t think I could take that. Why would you put yourself in this position for me? For me?!”

He kissed me, stopping my words and my heart, his hands on my cheeks. He kissed me for eons, his tongue soothing all

that ailed me, and when he pulled back, he softly said, “You need time to deal with this?”

I dropped my eyes and nodded.

He rested his forehead against mine, and we sat there like that for several minutes.

When he finally moved his head, he cradled my face in his hands again, his thumbs caressing my cheeks. “Okay. I’ll give you time, but I’ll be back for you. I promise I will.”

And after one more kiss, he left. I heard he’d left the city and didn’t know he’d come back until he showed up at the bar last Friday night, less than a week ago. Two years had rolled off the calendar by then.

“...and then he gon’ apologize! I was like *negro please!*” Gary, the bartender I was relieving said, bringing my consciousness back to the present, to Thursday night at The Royale. He was also a good friend of mine, and I missed hearing about his shenanigans since we hadn’t worked the same shift in months.

“When did you start dating black men?” I asked, genuinely shocked.

“Oh, he’s Italian. Same thing.”

I rolled my eyes and chuckled.

“But speaking of negroes, who in the absolute fuck is that?”

I knew it was him, because he was the one and only man who could make a person say what Gary had said. He was the only man I knew who was fine enough to drop the jaws and drawers of straight women *and* gay men, and the thought of it being him made my pulse accelerate. I’d missed him.

So much.

Without giving me a chance to answer him, Gary said, “Let me go see what he needs while I’m still on the clock, because that nigga can have my whole damn credit report if he wants it,” and then he twisted his narrow ass over to Truth, who wore

a white dress shirt and black slacks. I watched Gary greet him, observed as they exchanged brief words, and let my eyes follow Gary back down the bar to me.

“What’d he want?” I asked.

“*You*, bitch. He made a special request for you, and if you can’t describe his dick to me in vivid detail the next time I talk to you, I’m having your ass committed.” With that, he left, and I just stood there for a moment.

When I was finally able to get my feet to move, my first task was to make the drink I knew Truth wanted. Then I approached him, setting the glass on the bar before him. “Hi,” I said. “You’re back?”

Paying no attention to the glass, he shrugged. “I thought maybe you were ready for me now.”

“I thought maybe you’d given up and moved on.”

He gave me a deeply incredulous look. “I’ll never give up on you. Don’t you know that?”

“Because you love me?”

“Very much.”

I moved closer to him, leaning over the bar. “Say it. Tell me you love me.”

He smiled, his eyes displaying the adoration I’d always seen in them when he looked at me. “I love you, Claudette Wynn.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re the same, kindred. Can’t nobody convince me you weren’t made for me.”

“But I’m so fucked up...”

“So am I, baby.”

I dropped my eyes and then raised them to meet his again. “I...love you, too. I’ve loved you since I was sixteen years old.”

He opened his mouth, and then he closed it, and then he smiled. “Does that mean you’re ready for me now?”

“It means I’m more than ready for you, Mr. Ebo.”

He gave me another smile as he inched his face closer to mine and kissed me.

“I know that’s right! Shiiiiit, you better kiss him before I do!” That was Gary, who was evidently still there and made me break away from Truth and giggle along with some of the bar’s patrons.

He made Truth mumble, “The fuck?”

I laughed harder, covering my mouth with my hand. Truth moved my hand and shook his head. “Don’t cover that up. You smiling, laughing? That’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. I’d like to see more of it.”

I smiled wider.

Taking both of my hands in his, he returned my smile. “I have somewhere to be, but can I see you tonight after you get off work?”

“I’d love that.”

Truth

Later that Thursday night, I stood just inside the entrance to The Royale's bar watching as she performed the closing duties, thinking about the pull she had on me that I was helpless to fight, not that I wanted to fight it.

When she finally noticed me, she jumped a little and then smiled. "Hey, how long you been standing there?"

Moving toward her, I replied, "Not long."

"Well, I'm almost done. Only be a few more minutes. I just need to wipe the bar down and then I'll be ready," she said, as she began that task.

"No rush, baby," I said, stepping around the bar. Once I was behind her, I pressed my mouth to her ear. "Take your time."

She clutched the towel in her hand, halting her work. "Truth, you can't be back here."

I dragged my tongue down the side of her neck. "Why not?"

"B-because it's against the rules."

Wrapping my arms around her, I began to pull her black shirt out of her pants. "Is that right?"

"Y-yes," she almost whispered.

Sliding my hands up to cup her breasts through her bra, I said, “Well, since I’m the owner of this hotel now, I say fuck that rule.”

She stiffened in my arms and then spun around to face me. “W-what? How? When?”

“Turn back around and I’ll tell you.”

She did, letting out a little yelp when I snatched the button closure of her pants open and slid my hand inside them. “That’s what brought me back in town. Besides you. I needed to wrap up the deal to buy this hotel from the Holmans.”

“You...shit!” she whined as I stroked her clit.

“So we can do whatever we want in this bar, and right now, I wanna fuck you. It’s been a long time for me, baby. Like you, I haven’t had sex since we were together.”

I sped up my strokes until her chest collapsed onto the top of the bar and her legs began to tremble. While she came down from her high, I slid her pants down her legs and did the same with mine.

“But your wife. Didn’t you—”

As I glided inside her good-ass pussy with a groan, I said, “No one else, baby, especially not her.”

She softly whined my name as I closed my eyes. This shit was heaven. Being inside her was something I didn’t think I’d ever get used to.

“Claudette,” I moaned. “Got damn, baby...”

Leaning over, I licked her back, gripped her ass, and before I could stop myself, I was driving into her at a hectic pace, making her moan and groan and whimper.

“I...love...the...shit...out...of...you!” I screamed with each thrust.

“Ooooh, shit! I love you too!” she hissed, as she began to contract around my dick, and that was it. I couldn’t have held out even if I wanted to. So I didn’t.

A few seconds later, I was lying on her back, trying to catch my breath.

“Truth?” she said, her voice light, weary. I’d worn both of us out but still wanted more of her.

“Yeah, baby?” I responded.

“I need to turn around.”

I lifted my heavy frame off her, and my eyes damn near popped out of my head when she dropped to a squat and grabbed my wet dick, wrapping her mouth around it.

My hand instantly met the back of her head as I willed my legs not to fucking give out, and then I closed my eyes, moving my hips to the rhythm she’d set as she sucked my very soul out of my body.

Claudette

“I can’t believe you own this hotel now,” I said, as I dug into my French toast the next morning.

Sipping coffee from a tiny cup, Truth nodded. “I do, and I’m working on becoming part owner of the building next door.”

“The convention center?”

“Yeah, my ex-father-in-law is bringing me in on that deal.”

“Oh.”

He grinned at me. “Me and him are cool, always will be, but you got my heart, Claudette. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to, and hey, whatever I own, you own. What’s mine is yours, including my heart.”

I tried not to smile but failed.

“Ah, there it is. I love that smile.”

“Thank you. Hey, am I still a black rose?”

With peaked eyebrows, he sat back in his chair. “It depends. You still see that as an insult?”

I shook my head. “I never saw it as an insult, it just took me aback for a moment. But I actually get the metaphor...and I like it.”

“Then hell yeah. You are definitely still a black rose, *my* black rose.”

I just couldn’t stop smiling. I truly loved this man and loved being with him. “So...what do we do now?”

He stretched his body across the table and kissed me. “Whatever you want to do. We can see the world or stay in this room and fuck until the end of time. You want a car, a house? Shit, does your mama need a house? It’s whatever you want, baby, but first...”

He stood from his chair, reached into the pocket of his robe, and stepping closer to me, kneeled beside my seat at the table, holding a beautiful ring up to me. Raising my eyes from the ring to his face, I took him in from his closely cropped hair down to the goatee and mustache that framed his thick lips, and as tears spilled from my eyes, I said, “Yes.”

With a lopsided grin, he said, “Damn, I ain’t even ask you yet, but thank you.” He slid the ring on my finger and then kissed me with so much love and passion, I felt dizzy by the time our mouths parted.

“I love you, Claudette,” he murmured. “And I always will.”

Reaching down to rest my hand on the side of his handsome face, I declared, “I love you, too, Truth, and thank you for making me your new Toni Childs.”

He laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he stood, pulling me to my feet. “Nah, you’re my Claudette Wynn. The one and only.”

“Soon to be Claudette Ebo.”

“Yeah, and the sooner the better, baby.”



A southern girl at heart, Alexandria House has an affinity for a good banana pudding, Neo Soul music, and tall black men in suits. When this fashionista is not shopping, she's writing steamy stories about real black love.

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