

HEARTLESS...when love isn't enough
by Brenda L. Thomas
Prologue

Happy Birthday
Isabella Washington

I hate Philadelphia. The weather there alone drags me down. You'd expect an October chill...but instead, it's 75 degrees and humid! Tonight, none of that matters, as it's a combined celebration of my birthday, and Elijah's promotion to Chief Financial Officer at TL Durden Land Development. For this long-awaited occasion, I'm surprising him with a stunning Cartier watch. I'm sure he'll question the hefty expense, but I want him to think of me every time he pushes back the embroidered cuff of his tailored shirts.

When he asked what I wanted for my birthday, I didn't get specific, I only asked that he get me whatever he wanted me to have. For him that meant an engagement ring, however for me it could be as simple as lingerie. As much as I'd love to marry Elijah, exposing my past to him could change the course of so many things.

So that's how we ended up at Ocean Prime on a Friday night. Perhaps not a good choice, I can barely get through the millennial happy hour crowd. As I get close to the bar one of the bartenders waves me over to a reserved seat at the far end.

"I was told to save this for you."

"For me? Are you sure?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder to see if he's talking to someone else.

"Isabella, right?"

That's me... but... I didn't order anything," I respond, noticing the ice bucket with a bottle of champagne from which he then begins to pour.

"Someone wanted to surprise you. He called it in."

Typical Elijah, always looking out for me, when the truth is he's running late.

Sémile X. Brantley

Popping open my glove compartment – I reach for my brush, stroking it through my beard three times down the left, three on the right, and then straight down the middle.

Flipping down the mirror, staring right back at me are bloodshot eyes; a result of being up all-night drinking and fucking around with that damn Kitty Kat. I had no intention of going to her house. I was chilling at the titty bar, watching Thursday Night Football but she came in there all over a nigga, begging me to go home with her and what do I do but go. But shit, I ain't met a brother yet who can resist her! She's like a good meal, you know you full but it tastes so good you can't stop eating.

The phone on the dash vibrates with another call. I've ignored it all day. What sense does it make to have two phones, when most times I don't wanna answer either of them?

"Hey Unc, what's up?"

"You talk to ya boy yet? I mean, how long I gotta wait?!"

"I said I would handle it, but I think you got the wrong man."

My Uncle Boobie, or Jibril as he now calls himself, is fresh off 20 years with the Feds and somehow, he got it stuck in his head that Elijah was the reason he got booked. I mean, we did some dumb shit back then... but ain't no way Elijah pulled a job without me and definitely never against family like that. Shit, he was barely allowed outta the house!

"You gone believe that nigga over me? I know you think you raised yaself but I took care of ya ass. When the Feds shipped me out they took every dime I had. But I see you ain't gone handle it, so I got somebody lined up to make a move."

"Hold off Unc, and let me talk to him again."

"It ain't like he don't got the cash. Everybody saw that write up bout him in the papers being the top Negro at that company."

"I told you I'm gonna handle it."

"Too late," he mumbles then hung up.

He's right I have to get to the bottom of this. I spoke to E about it briefly and he laughed it off actually, we both did, if only for the simple fact that he wasn't built like that. Either way though, someone has to pay for setting up Unc and implicating my man.

Looking through my rearview, approaching me is the muthafucka that gets me paid. His father-in-law owns Durden, where the White boys and Mexicans on the site call him Boss Man, but to me, as the foreman, he's simply Hondo.

Letting the window down halfway I say, "S'up Hondo?"

"You set?"

"What you got for me?"

From his inside jacket pocket, he removes a bulging envelope.

"Here."

Thumbing through the stack, I see he's paid in full.

"We'll talk when it's done?"

I nod in agreement knowing that what he wants to be done is something I'd gladly do for free but he has to pay top dollar for not having the balls to do it himself. I mean how you not gonna handle your daughter's boyfriend after he roughs her up? For me, it ain't nothing, cause I got a special vengeance for that shit.

With him gone I shut off the engine but before I can step out of the truck my personal cell vibrates.

"Hey man where you at?"

"I'm here but like I told you E, I think you moving too fast."

"I get it, all you have to do is follow my instructions and it'll work perfectly."

"Your call."

Everybody got a job for me and that's why everybody gotta pay.

Elijah J. Moore

Turning around to lock my office door, using my hanky I wipe the fingerprints from the gold plate that reads, Elijah J. Moore, Chief Financial Officer. My title now brings a level of respect for which I've worked all the hours God sends. That title also means this will be the first and last time I leave my office without a briefcase full of work. It dawns on me though that I'll also be spending some nights at the company's Rittenhouse condo instead of traveling out to Barren Hill.

Sinking into the backseat of the company Town Car, the significance of tonight weighs on me. The past four years have been filled with the unexpected. In addition to my promotion, there's the unexpected cash flow from a new business venture, and then moving into and restoring my grandmother's dilapidated Victorian. The highlight of the last four years has been falling in love with Isabella Washington.

Isabella

Having started on my third glass of champagne, I'm half-listening as the bartender engages with the man seated beside me about the gun violence overtaking the city and that's when I realize it's 6:45, and Elijah is 45 minutes late. Gazing around the bar, checking out servers passing by with food, my stomach growls in response to the delectable dishes and the aroma floating from the kitchen.

Among the diners and happy hour folks, I don't see anyone who might be part of our celebratory group but then again, I've yet to meet any of Elijah's colleagues. I'm about to text him when appearing at the hostess desk is someone who shouldn't be here.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Sémile and I are former lovers, but what's worse is that he's one of Elijah's oldest friends. I discovered this in the worse way and ever since then I've practically begged Sémile to let me explain but he won't respond to any of my text messages or calls and when we're in Elijah's presence he chooses to ignore me. So then why is he here?

Sémile

Thoughts of money, family, and loyalty shut down when through the crowd I see Isabella seated at the far end of the bar. Her hair, instead of pulled back in a ponytail is laying over one shoulder, its signature white streak moving as she speaks with the bartender. When I get closer, she stands up and I can tell from the arch in her back, she's wearing heels. The bigger question though is what the fuck does she have on? From here I can see thin straps holding up what I expect will be a short ass dress. She ain't never wear shit like that for me, but then our situation didn't often require clothes. Had there been a choice I would've locked her in, but she insisted that what we had was all she wanted, obviously it wasn't. Now that she's with E, it puts me in a bad spot, making it the second time we've shared the same woman.

It was about a year ago, while I was down South Philly gambling, E texted me, talking about he had a woman who wanted to party. We'd done it before, but usually, I was doing the inviting so I didn't think it was anyone he particularly cared for but man was I wrong and now here I am being sent to fetch her.

Elijah

Riding through Center City I'm thankful to Sémile, who I consider my brother for helping me navigate the streets of North Philly and hence pointing out the similarities of navigating corporate America. Growing up, the two of us promised we'd be those brothers that reach back, and last month we officially launched, Community Hands, a non-profit organization whose

mission is to nurture, educate and empower young people from our community and beyond. The other pact we'd made was to not become someone's baby daddy, so far, we're on track.

Unfortunately, the one thing I can't share with Sémile is the nature of my alternate source of income. He would've stopped me short. I hadn't planned on it, but Romanek Morashou had been introduced as a client of Durden who'd asked for a favor and as a result, I stumbled on a financial opportunity that I couldn't pass up.

When the driver pulls to a stop in front of Steak 48, to put a difficult situation into play I reach out to the only person who won't question my next move, Kitty Kat.

Isabella

To steel me from our usual awkwardness I gulp down my drink and motion the bartender for a refill. I keep my eyes on Sémile as he strolls towards me with a walk that is particular only to Philly men, a slow gait that exudes a dip of confidence as if they're moving to a beat only they can hear. His smooth baldhead is stamped by a prostration mark on his forehead, but his action figure physique has been formed from prior years of athletic training and later, physical labor.

Sémile is the most well-groomed man I know who doesn't work behind a desk. I'm not sure if it's his Muslim upbringing, or as he says, he was schooled by older guys, on how to dress, and how to treat women. Even though I have no desire to have sex with him I do remember his lovemaking, quiet, strong, and deliberate as if he dared you not to have an orgasm with what he was offering, and he offered a lot.

His labels are subtle and few, being particular to Loro Piana, Tom Ford, and Mr. Porter. Tonight, it's clear to me he's sporting a Piana baby cashmere sweater that hugs his upper body the way I used to. I brace myself not only for his brusque approach but for the Sauvage cologne clinging to his skin.

Pausing to take another sip of my drink, I ask, "Where's Elijah?"

Instead of on me, his eyes survey the room, when he responds, "Plans changed. He's at Steak 48."

"Why didn't he call me?"

For a brief moment, I catch him peeking down at my cleavage and the barely-there, Balmain dress I'm wearing with only fringes covering my butt cheeks, sans lingerie. Ignoring my question, he nods towards my drink, "You finished?"

"Sémile?"

"Yeah right, let's go."

He places two one-hundred-dollar bills on the bar for the champagne and as bad as I need to use the bathroom, rather than stop I wade through the crowd, following him out the door.

Sémile

Walking back through the restaurant men give me a nod of acknowledgment and approval, having no idea she doesn't belong to me. Women take an envious second look, smirking at each other probably questioning if what she's carrying is real, it is. If they only knew that most days she dressed in Carhartt coveralls and work boots they'd probably shun her and even though this woman is no longer an option for me, she fits with E. That's why I gotta get rid of her ass.

Isabella

“Where’d you park,” I ask, as I attempt to navigate my champagne high and not scrape the 4-inch Saint Laurent stilettos on the cracked sidewalk of 15th street that my friend Mai insisted I borrow, but also repeatedly warned me that one scrape would ruin our friendship forever.

In typical Sémile fashion, he ignores me but stops to shake hands with a few of the many people he knows across the city. In this city, he’s considered a local celebrity having played three seasons as a running back for the Philadelphia Eagles including their Super Bowl win. The following year he incurred an Achilles injury that never healed properly for him to return to the field. It’s that reputation that allows him to keep his finger on the pulse of everything legal and illegal, providing him with a wealth of resources across this city and beyond.

Trailing behind him, I repeat my unanswered question.

“How far away did you park and why the hell didn’t you use the valet?”

“Sydenham Street.”

When we turn the corner of Walnut Street he pops the locks on his matte black pick-up, its wheels unbalanced on the curb. Of course, I’ve lost the privilege of his coming around to open my door. Instead, I quick step to catch up to him and place myself between him and the driver’s side door making it impossible for him to ignore me.

“Don’t you think we need to talk?”

“About what?”

“Me, you, Elijah. I want to apologize for what happened.”

Still refusing to look at me he gazes up and down the street.

“If we don’t talk about this now I’m never asking you again.”

“Good.”

“You’re an asshole Sémile.”

I make my way around to the other side of his truck, get one foot up on its high step when a party van, with music blasting out the window distracts me. As it pulls up alongside us, I press my body against the truck waiting until it passes before opening the door. When I turn to see what’s taking them so long, the side door on the van slides back and I feel someone grab me forcefully by my neck, pulling me inside the van’s darkness.