

Sometimes Love (excerpt)

The vows were simple and to the point, short and sweet. They'd written them themselves. While they were pledging their undying love and devotion and promising to stay together no matter what and to always be honest and true, someone opened the front door of the restaurant and a streak of bright sunshine cut into the sanctity of the occasion, taking away the ambience, disturbing the peace. Right away, I was annoyed because someone had been paid to stand guard at the door so that anyone arriving after the wedding ceremony had begun would have to wait until the vows were said. Before our latecomer could detract attention from the couple of the hour, I slid my hand from Michael's and walked toward the light.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," I heard the minister say as I continued past the bar. When I approached the door, it was flung all the way open and in walked Humphrey – just like that, just like he'd been invited.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, breathing shallow breaths that came and went to the rhythm of my accelerated heartbeat, a rhythm regulated by anger and apprehension. I trembled inside, caught off-guard by his unexpected appearance and his great presence. He always seemed to have the upper hand.

His eyes looked wild and his movements were jittery, indicating a nervousness of his own. He looked different. There was more hair everywhere – coarse curly hair, on his head and his face; places I'd never seen it before. He looked rougher, less polished and more rugged – even scary.

He grabbed me by the arm. "You've been staying away from me, ignoring my calls. You should have known I'd come. Why are you doing this?"

“Let go of me right now,” I said in a strong, sure voice that belied my fear. “What is the matter with you? This is not the right time or place for you to be here. This is Phillip’s wedding.”

“But I need to see you right now.”

“Why? You’re the one who wanted me gone – remember? You pushed me away.”

“That’s not true. We were both having second thoughts. We needed time to think. I’m finished thinking now and I know what I...”

“You weren’t even sure if you loved me.”

“What’s going on here?”

I turned around to find Michael standing behind me, obviously concerned about me and confrontational toward Humphrey, but clearly no match for him.

“None of your goddamn business...who's this?” he demanded turning his attention back to me. “One of your little boyfriends? Huh? Look what you’ve turned into – a little strumpet.”

I gave him no answer or reaction and he returned his attention to Michael.

“You her man?” he asked.

“That’s none of your goddamn business,” Michael shot back to him. “You ought to leave before you get more than you came for.”

Humphrey burst into laughter that was both insulting and demented. He laughed from the depths of his soul, much longer than the remark called for, and then he abruptly cut it off and pushed me aside as he moved toward Michael, stopping close enough to touch him. By then, he’d begun to draw attention from the wedding guests and my mind started racing with ideas of

how to get Humphrey to leave. I still couldn't figure out how he came to know when and where the wedding would be, when to come looking for me.

"You don't know what I came for..." he sneered when he spoke to Michael. "But what I did come for, I will get. And it's not leaving with your woman. Besides, she's not yours...yet."

"Leave right now, asshole."

I turned around again and this time it was Phillip standing beside the bar just a few feet from where Humphrey and Michael were standing. "It's just like you to show no respect to others not even during a wedding ceremony. My little sister finally wised up and dumped your ignorant ass. You can't take it? Well, that's too bad. Leave right now."

"Not before I give you a little present," Humphrey said with a mocking smile as he pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

"Man, I don't want nothing from you except your absence."

"No," he insisted. "You'll definitely want this."

Humphrey shoved the envelope into the top of Phillip's tunic, then walked toward the door to leave. Before he parted, he turned around to face Michael again. "She's just on loan, so don't get too comfortable. If you sniff real good, you'll smell me all over her, all in her. I'm in her blood."

He left dead silence in his wake and in it, all eyes were on me. I felt the heat rise to my face as the humiliation of the scene sank in. Because of me, Humphrey had put an ugly blemish on Phillip's and Patrice's wedding day. It had probably been captured by the photographer's lens and recorded by the videographer's digital camera and more importantly, remembered by all in

attendance, to be recounted for years to come. Tears welled up in my eyes, the same ones that hid behind my lids while Humphrey had vilified me, only now they spilled over and ran down my face.

“I’m so sorry, Phillip...it’s my fault...he tried to ruin your day...it’s my fault...I’m so sorry.” I sobbed and hurried off to find privacy in some corner, somewhere. I pushed past all the spectators who’d gathered along the bar trying to get front seats to the entertainment. I found another route back to the room where I’d sat earlier with my brothers. I closed the door. I bawled my eyes out.

Angry voices conducted fierce inquiries outside the door. *Which way did Humphrey go...Was he walking or driving...Where does he live...Do you know how to get there from here...I’m gonna go find that mofo. ...He ain’t gonna humiliate my little girl like that...* Voices belonging to Michael, Clifford, E.J., my father. They were only making matters worse, drawing more attention to me, and underlining the fact that I’d drawn him there.

They wanted to form a posse and hunt Humphrey down. They wanted to be a lynch mob and string him up for rendering them defenseless. And the only reason they didn’t defend me in the ways they really wanted to was because they were gentlemen. Beneath the anger, the outrage, and the shock, they lived by a social code that wouldn’t allow them to be as ruthless as they could – not at that moment. Until that day, I was sure Humphrey lived by one such code. After this, I wasn’t sure of anything about him.

My mother broke up the mob and knocked on the door, but pushed it open before I invited her in.

“Are you alright, Baby?” she asked while she scanned my face. She knew by the signs of fear and embarrassment that I was not.

“I’m not right now, but I will be.” Tears started anew.

“What got into Humphrey? I never would have imagined he could be like that. Have you ever seen him that way?”

“Ma, I don’t know what’s wrong with Humphrey. Our break-up was mutual. He’s the one who changed everything, when his sister left. He changed! It’s almost like he took his hurt out on me.”

“He’s probably not used to needing the kind of help he needs right now and he’s angry about that. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to allow him to exorcise his pain through you. Let me go find my cell phone. I’m calling him right now.”

“Ma, wait. I’m mad too but I’m worried. I think he’s severely depressed.”

It was well into evening before I spoke with anyone about Humphrey again. My mother hadn’t been able to contact him on his cell phone. She’d left numerous messages that went unreturned. I figured it was for the best. She didn’t need to get herself all riled up with him on the phone. Her mother-of-the-groom duties weren’t completely fulfilled. She still had more pictures to pose for and from the look on Phillip’s face, she needed to have a heart to heart with him before we went back to the hotel. I felt so badly because I was sure that Humphrey was the main reason for the change in mood and by association – so was I.

I made my way across the room to Philip and led him onto the dance floor. They'd hired a reggae band to perform at the reception and they impressively covered all the popular songs and a respectable amount of Bob Marley tunes. They were playing one as we swayed to the music.

"Okay, Phillip. What gives? Are you going to keep that long face all night to make me feel guiltier than I already do?"

"No. It has nothing to do with you. I feel like I've just been hit with a freight train and right now, I'm trying to see if I have a leg left to stand on."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

He grabbed me by the hand and pulled me through a door that led to a small courtyard. No one must have known about it. It was empty and afforded us a lot of privacy. That's what it seemed like he wanted.

"Tell me again how you met Humphrey...and don't leave any details out."

"Why? That seems like ages ago and it doesn't matter anymore."

"Look, it's important. Just tell me, okay?"

I filled him in on that fateful rainy day when Humphrey rang the doorbell and I recounted that chance encounter at the Italian restaurant. It was a bad time for a stroll down memory lane. I didn't want to remember those special times anymore. I wanted to forget. It was hard for me to recall those days when love was new and nothing else mattered in the world, but spending time with him or just listening to his voice.

"Who did he say he was looking for?"

"Huh? I think he asked for somebody named Sheila."

Phillip swiped his hands through his hair and kept them folded on top of his head alerting me that something did not sit well with him.”

“What’s wrong? Why are you asking me all this? Do you know something I don’t?”

He met my eyes but didn’t utter a word. He was stalling.

“Tell me the truth.

We sat down at a wrought iron scroll table next to a low brick wall cascading with ivy and he reached into his pocket, pulled out an envelope, and laid it on the table between us. He pushed it toward me.

“Sheila is the alias I had Madonna use, so we wouldn’t reveal our forbidden relationship.” His voice was just above a whisper.

“What?”

He gave his head a frustrated shake and motioned toward the envelope.

“Go ahead, open it," he instructed and I did.

Moments of silence followed and turned into minutes – minutes that required no conversation. Words were jumping off of the contents of the envelope – a ripped-out worn page from a diary dated three years ago, some photographs of Phillip from when he first moved to New York, when he was fresh-faced and eager to make his mark on the world – with special attention to the ladies, the picture of a brand-new baby – the ones they took in hospitals at birth, and the piece de resistance – some photos of beautiful Madonna...as a student carrying books, working in the financial aid office, holding Phillip’s hand and looking up into his eyes like he was an angel from God. Finally, there was a picture of Madonna standing on the front porch of

her mother's home in D.C. with her hands on her pregnant belly and the smile of a proud mother-to-be. A name stood out from the diary page: Phillipa Marie Pearson Browne and in parenthesis (Pia). Sounds sprang from the pictorial: *"Fine young thang. Man of my dreams. I love you. We're having a baby. Get lost."*

That sweet girl had suffered because of my brother, because she was betrayed and alone. I was mortified to learn that my big brother, who I looked up to and adored, had caused that kind of pain.

"She's yours?" I asked.

He nodded slowly.

"I can't believe it. This is the person you wanted to throw away?"

"She wasn't a person then."

"She was always a person, Phillip. She's slept in my bed. I love this child."

"Stop getting all melancholy and shit. This couldn't have come at a worst time. Don't look at me like that. I'm not a monster. I told Donna I didn't want this baby. She tricked me. The sweet innocent loving Madonna Pearson – she is just like all the rest. See, I told you that God has a sick sense of humor. Now the joke is definitely on me. Humphrey saw to that, didn't he? He could have told me at a better time and another place."

I stood up from the table and looked down on him with disappointment.

"Don't look at me like that," he repeated. "I'm not a monster. I made plans for my life. This wasn't one of them."

He was only thinking of his own life. He wasn't thinking about the baby and how she didn't have a father, something he'd had his whole life. The day was turning out to be full of surprises, none of them good. Humphrey was acting like a madman and Phillip, who looked down on him, was a selfish prick – actually no better – if not worse. But he had the luxury of walking around unaffected, passing judgement.

“I'm appalled at you, for considering this baby to be a sick joke. And just in case you didn't know it, Madonna disappeared a few weeks ago. Now your daughter is practically an orphan. An honorable man would go find Humphrey so he could get some answers. He would want to make arrangements to meet his child and make room for her in his life. You're more worried about Patrice and how she'll react. But the truth is – if she doesn't want you because of this, you don't need her. That baby needs you.”

I walked away from him and back into the reception, which was winding down. Michael was talking with my father at a corner table and they looked like they were engrossed in a serious conversation. I was glad he was too engrossed to look my way because just one look would tell him something was wrong. Patrice scurried over to me inquiring about her new husband, and I directed her to the courtyard. It would be a few days, before they left for their honeymoon in South Africa – something they'd both been looking forward to. For the next few days, they were going to stay at Akwaaba in Brooklyn. I didn't stick around to find out if he would tell her about Pia. I hoped there was some remnant of the man I once knew inside him. The way he handled it would attest to the kind of man he really was and if he would continue to command my respect. I kept on walking...past the long bar, out the front door and onto the street. I needed to think.