Ms. Legault

**Love Bites**

Shaniqua Beckett brushed her long dyed purple ponytail over her shoulder and pressed a kiss her boyfriend’s cheek. Oliver, her boyfriend, offered her a smile and brushed the lipstick off his cheek. He was sitting on the couch in her apartment with her maltese Tin Tin sitting next to him. Tin Tin’s tale wagged happily as Oliver ran his fingers through the dog’s soft fur.

“I’m off to work, hon,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. There was a game playing on the television screen and she could tell his attention was elsewhere.

“I’ve got a big case right now,” she said. “I’ll be home late. Don’t stay up.”

“Okay,” he said. “YES!”

Someone had scored. She wasn’t at all sure if he had picked up on what she said, but she left the house feeling comforted with her alibi for the night. She had a date with George that she had been looking forward to for a really long time.

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When Shaniqua arrived at her office, the phone was ringing. She grabbed it quickly, without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Hi, babe.”

“George?” she asked, recognizing the husky voice.

“We still on for tonight?”

“Definitely,” she said. “Are we meeting at my office?”

“Yep. See you then.”

There was a click and George hung up. Shaniqua slipped the smile off her face. She was excited but she didn’t want her client to see her acting like a giddy teenager. It was hard enough to get them to take her seriously because she was only twenty one, and she didn’t need them to see her acting her age.

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Around one in the morning, Shaniqua returned to her apartment. Tin Tin greeted her at the door with a happy yip and some thorough sniffing. She laughed and stooped to give him a good scratch behind his ear. The small fluffy, white dog was too energetic for his own good and after she had kicked off her boots, she scooped him up and carried him to the bedroom.

She had expected to see Oliver curled up under the covers but the bed, the room and the apartment was empty. Shaniqua shrugged this off. Oliver probably had decided to sleep at his own apartment that night. It often happened when she ‘worked late.’ Shaniqua didn’t have the energy to think it over, she was exhausted from her day and the visit with George. So instead of calling Oliver to check in on him as she often did on a night like this, she crawled underneath the covers of her bed and curled up with Tin Tin for a long night of sleep.

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In the morning Shaniqua woke with a jolt. Something was off. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she had a gut feeling that something was wrong.

She got dressed in a rush and decided to walk Tin Tin over to Oliver’s apartment building, it was a short walk and she missed him. So she put the leash on the dog and made her way out.

Even this early in the morning, the streets of New York were bustling, and Shaniqua found herself weaving through men in suits on their way to work. She very much did not fit in with this crowd in her skinny jeans and over sized t-shirt that had once belonged to Oliver.

When she reached his apartment, she let herself in. One of the perks of dating for a year and a half meant an exchange of keys between the two of them so they could come and go as they pleased. It made her extra-relationship affairs only the eensiest bit more risky, but she just made sure never to have them at her apartment.

“Hello?”

The call echoed through the apartment and bounced off the walls. That feeling of something wrong twisted her stomach into knots and that feeling intensified as Tin Tin began to growl as if he was a wolf and an enemy was nearby.

Shaniqua made her way into the room only to find her world shattering into pieces around her feet.

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Oliver was dead. Oliver had been murdered. Oliver was gone.

Her phone rang all day long but she let them all go to voicemail. After a certain point her voicemail was full and the calls stopped coming. Tin Tin sat beside her on the couch and whimpered softly every so often.

After a while, grief morphed into a festering anger in the pit of her stomach. The cops were useless. They wouldn’t be able to find who did this. She needed to solve the mystery herself. Oliver had been murdered and she would be the one to figure it all out.

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She began her investigation with gusto the next morning. She pushed a source who was on Oliver’s case to give her the information she needed. There were no fingerprints other than hers and Oliver’s. He told her about a shoe print they found in the blood and the distinctive print it left. He sent her a picture and the print seemed very familiar. Her source seemed reluctant to tell her, but did eventually pass on the information that she was a suspect. It was to be expected. She had a flimsy alibi and she had access to Oliver’s apartment.

She was reluctant, but in exchange for the information from the source, she expanded on her alibi. She told him about George and the affair she was having, but she didn’t tell him about the other lovers. That was her information to keep to herself for now.

Shaniqua spent the afternoon going through her voicemails and text messages from people offering her condolences. One message from Anthony, another lover, stood out to her.

“Hey, Sha, it’s Ant. I thought I’d call to say I was sorry about your boyfriend, but then I remembered that I wasn’t sorry. He was an ass and he didn’t deserve you. Call me, and let’s hook up.”

Everyone else, even George, Frank, Bob and Dawson had offered proper condolences. They had seemed very sad to learn about the loss of her boyfriend. But the more she thought about it, the more she remembered times that Anthony had been resentful of Oliver.

He had said things and done things that normally might not have raised alarm bells, but today did.

Her finger hovered over a button on the phone and in an instant it was dialling.

“Hey, Anthony, it’s Shaniqua. Can we meet up? Will you come to my apartment?”

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Forty minutes later, Anthony and Shaniqua were seated on her couch. She tried not to remember how Oliver had sat there only a couple of days ago and she tried to forget that she had barely even said goodbye to him that day.

Anthony didn’t seem to notice that she was distracted and upset. He was rambling on and on about this customer he had picked up the other day in his cab. Apparently this customer was heavily pregnant and had nearly given birth on his newly upholstered seats.

“Did you do it?” she asked.

“What?”

“Did you do it? Did you kill Oliver?”

“What?! No, of course not. I’m glad the guy is dead but I didn’t kill him.”

“I know you did, Anthony. You never liked him. I saw your shoe print in the blood.”

“I didn’t kill him,” he repeated.

“I know you did. I’m going to tell the cops, Anthony. I-”

She never finished the sentence because something collided with her head and everything went black.

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“She’s waking up!” George’s voice echoed through the fog in Shaniqua’s head.

She blinked and the picture began to come into focus. There they all were, standing in a semi circle around her. They weren’t in her kitchen anymore though, and she didn’t recognize the locale.

“W-where am I?” she asked.

“That doesn’t really matter, Sha,” said Anthony, coming into view.

She tried to rub her head but found that her wrists were tied together. This was a sticky situation she had gotten herself into.

“We didn’t want you to find out, Shaniqua,” said Anthony. “You were never supposed to know and everything would be fine.”

Shaniqua shook her head. “So now what?”

“So now we have to kill you,” said Anthony.

There were murmurs of disbelief between the others.

“That wasn’t in the plan, Anthony,” complained George. “She was never supposed to get hurt.”

“You want her to tell the cops, George?” Anthony asked. “You want them to find out you distracted her and that Bob broke into the apartment or that Frank made sure he went back to the apartment? That Dawson held him while I killed him? We all did this. We will all go to jail.”

“I don’t want to go to jail,” called Dawson.

“You won’t go to jail, Dawson,” said Anthony. “We’ll kill her and it will be fine.”

Shaniqua shimmied her wrists and pulled and tugged. She let them talk and keep talking. The more they talked the more time she had to escape. Soon, she found that the rope was getting looser and looser and she found herself wondering what idiot had tied the knots. When the ropes slipped from around her wrists with and whisper, she launched herself from the chair at Anthony, knocking him down. She conked him in the head with an elbow and launched herself up again.

Shaniqua had never run so fast as she made her way out of the small apartment she was in and then down the stairs. She didn’t have much time at all. They would recover quickly and she could get caught in an instant.

Outside the building she found an overweight cop eating a donut. She found herself banging on the window of her car with an ear shattering frequency. He rolled down the window at a painfully slow pace.

“You have to help me!”

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The sun beat down on Shaniqua’s neck as she stood in the graveyard. Oliver’s family and friends stood all around her but there was a solid foot of space between them and her. They blamed her, and they were right too. She had gotten Oliver killed by straying from him and she would have to live with that for the rest of her life.

The priest stood at the head of the grave as the coffin balanced tentatively above the hole. In mere moments Oliver would be buried underneath the earth and she would be left behind. She wished she could join him.

The cops had gotten the bad guys. Anthony and the rest of them were safely locked up and awaiting trial, but despite them pulling the trigger she might have well as loaded the gun. Oliver was dead because she couldn’t remain faithful. She had done this. And Shaniqua didn’t know if she could forgive herself.

As the coffin was lowered into the grave and his family and friends made their way away, Shaniqua considered talking to his mother and saying something, anything. But his mother was gone before she could and Shaniqua was left alone with Oliver’s grave and her guilt.