

***Secrets of a Sinner* by Yolonda Tonette Sanders**

Chapter 1: A Way Out

“Excuse me, ma'am-will this be with cash or credit?” The waiter, a short bald, Caucasian who had introduced himself earlier as Paul, walked up to Natalie.

“I don't know,” Natalie answered roughly, her narrow, copper-brown eyes peering up at him. Her matching pearl necklace and earrings complemented the black dress she was wearing, which accentuated every curve of her body. Her dark, shoulder-length hair was pinned up and two tiny spiral curls dangled on either side of her honey-colored face. “You'll have to ask my boyfriend. He'll be back-he went to the rest room.” Natalie's sharp glance at the waiter silently requested that he leave until her date returned.

“Are you referring to the gentleman who was just in here with you?”

“Yes,” she answered, though it seemed like a pretty dumb question. Who else would she be referring to?

Paul frowned, “Ma'am, he left. On the way out, he said you were ready for the bill. Again, will this be cash or credit?”

“What! You have got to be kidding me,” Natalie accused. Her eyes roamed back and forth between Paul and the private-dining-room door. She hoped he'd been mistaken. It wasn't her date who'd left the restaurant. It had to be someone else's. Any minute, Kevin would come waltzing through the door and the two of them would work out their issues and go home.

Her eyes were now glued to the door as she drummed her nails on the table, still trying to convince herself that Kevin would be back shortly. He had to come back. After

all, it had been his idea to eat at this fancy restaurant in the first place. In addition to ordering a very expensive Italian wine, Kevin had ordered three entrees: lobster, steak and chicken, though he'd barely touched any of them. At an upscale establishment like Skyler's, each one of those entrees ranged anywhere from fifty to seventy-five dollars. Sure, he had a right to be upset with her, but he wouldn't walk out without paying the bill. . . would he?

"Will-this-be-cash-or-credit?" Paul raised his voice, seemingly irritated by Natalie's lack of response. The intensity with which he spoke forced Natalie to accept the truth. Kevin was gone.

Natalie stood up and snatched the bill out of his hands. "Oh my God!" She grabbed the table to keep her tall, slender frame from falling when she saw the total printed in bold, black ink at the bottom. The dinner came to \$567.98, including tax, tip and the service charge for using a private room. "I-I-I can't afford this," she stammered.

"You are Renee Coleman, correct?"

"Yes," she admitted quietly. The reservation had been made using her middle name.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry but since you made the reservation, you are responsible for tonight's meal," he affirmed.

"Wait a minute. There has to be a misunderstanding here." Natalie had less than twenty dollars in her purse, and all of her credit cards were maxed out. Since moving back to Ohio from New York where she'd been pursuing a modeling career, Natalie hadn't worked full-time. She still modeled occasionally and was also registered with a local temporary agency. However, with her mother battling breast cancer and being in and out

of the hospital so much, the work assignments that Natalie could accept were few and far between. It was impossible to hold down a full-time job, model on the side and look after her mother, all at the same time. "I'll just call Kevin and clarify this whole thing. I'm sure he probably meant to give you his credit card or pay for it before he left," Natalie said to Paul as she nervously got her cell phone out of her purse and dialed Kevin's number.

"Yeah?" Kevin answered the phone in a calm voice.

"Where are you?" Natalie demanded.

"I'm in my car driving on the freeway."

"How dare you leave without telling me? You forgot to pay the bill."

"No, I didn't."

She turned away from the waiter and whispered into the phone, "Kevin, I know you're upset, but this is not the time for games. I don't have any money."

"Aw, I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you can come up with it somehow. Skyler's does prosecute people who leave without paying. It's called theft of service."

"Theft of service!" Natalie looked behind her. Paul impatiently tapped his foot on the floor, waiting for payment. Natalie turned back around and pleaded with Kevin.

"Look, Kevin, please come back and pay this bill. Hate me if you want to, but don't leave me in this position. You're the one who ordered three entrees, not me."

"Sorry, Natalie, or whatever your name is, but I'm afraid I can't help you out."

"You idiot!" she screamed. "How can you justify doing this to me?"

"Let's see ... What was that you said to me when I asked you how you could justify your deceptiveness these last few months? Oh that's right, you said, 'I don't have to,'" Kevin retorted sarcastically and hung up.

Kevin's demeanor toward her was undoubtedly dramatically different than it had been just twenty-four hours ago. Last night he had expressed his willingness to explore the possibilities of their relationship now that he and Wendy were getting a divorce. Having pursued this man-and his money-for months, the words were soothing to Natalie's ears. Somehow, between yesterday and today, Kevin had learned that Natalie had befriended him using her middle name purposely to conceal from him that she and Wendy had been friends since high school.

Natalie and Wendy had lost contact when she'd moved to New York, and it was during this time that Wendy and Kevin had married. They were already separated by the time Natalie came back to Ohio, so, when the opportunity to get to know Kevin appeared, Natalie took it. Sure, there were other well-to-do men in Columbus, but it made no sense to let Kevin get away ... especially since Wendy had told her so much about him.

Being the "middle man" provided Natalie with the perfect opportunity to manipulate the couple's situation. She had urged Wendy to "move on" while advising Kevin to file for divorce. Natalie knew that she would have to admit her dishonesty to Kevin eventually. She'd planned to do so well after the divorce was final, hoping by then Kevin would be willing to overlook her transgression. However, tonight he'd angrily confronted her and Natalie now realized that this whole evening had been a set-up. "Ugh!" she grunted.

"Ma'am, is there a problem?" Paul asked, appearing unsympathetic to her plight.

"No, there's no problemI-"

"I take it your gentleman friend is not coming back."

"No, but that's okay," she said, nervously biting her bottom lip while trying to think of a solution. Her first impulse was to try and charm her way out of this unfortunate situation. Maybe she and Paul could work out a deal. On second thought, Paul looked too serious to be overcome by any type of female persuasion. Besides, the gentle sway in his walk suggested that Kevin was more likely his type than she was.

"Ma'am, I'm afraid that if you don't pay, I'm going to have to get the manager."

"Hold your horses, will you!" She frantically punched numbers on her cell phone. She really didn't want to call Richard, but there was no other choice. It's not like her mother could get up from the hospital bed to come and help her out. Natalie was totally out of options – she had to call him.

"Great!" Natalie uttered as the voice mail kicked in and she prepared to leave a message. "It's Natalie. Um . . . I need a favor. I'm downtown at Skyler's. My date left me with the bill and no money. Can you please help me out?" she pleaded.

"I'll be right back with the manager," Paul insisted.

"No! Wait –" Natalie tried to object, but her words trailed behind Paul as he stormed off. How in the world would she get out of this mess? She desperately glanced around the private dining room looking for a way out. There was no way to escape except by going through the main restaurant. If she hurried, maybe she could leave before Paul returned with the manager.

With her heart pounding at three times its normal rate, Natalie took off her two-inch heels before grabbing her purse and her suede, knee-length coat, then sprinted toward the door. The adrenaline rush was almost more than she could handle, except it

was quickly subdued; she opened the door to be met by Paul and a tall, stocky, dark-haired man who looked more like a bouncer than a manager.

“Going somewhere?” the manager smirked.