

Lost Romance Found

Forty-four year old Debra Neville sat curled on her floral sofa. It was one-o'clock in the morning. The late,late show was on but Debra wasn't watching. Rehashing the past had robbed her of sleep. Finally, ending up out of bed and on the sofa, her thoughts continued. I wonder whatever happened to Tina? she pondered staring into space. It had been close to twenty years since she had seen Tina. But Debra vividly recalled their first encounter.

Sandy, Debra's best friend had been shopping for fabric that day with her sister,Tina when Debra ran into them at Beki's Fabric Store. It was no secret that Tina disliked Debra, making greetings awkward and the conversation short. The following week found Sandy and Debra together in the same fabric store.

"Tina wants to come with us the next time we shop for fabric," Sandy announced nervously as the two friends strolled through the Store. Debra stopped suddenly. In wide-eyed disbelief, she turned to Sandy.

"Why! She don't sew. She don't even know how."

Sheepishly, Sandy answered, her eyes shifting away from Debra's stare. "She says she wants to learn. I started teaching her a few things with the fabric she bought last week."

"Why now? I don't want her to come. Let her find somebody else to teach her to sew. Why it's gotta' be you who teach her?"

Sandy placed a hand on her dropped hip and cocked her head to one side. "Now, what kinda' sense do that make for her to go lookin' for somebody else to teach her when her own sister sews? Of course she'd come to me. That's why we were in here last week to get fabric so she could get started."

"I don't care. If she comes, I won't go," Debra shot back. The two friends had planned to make look-alike outfits for Sunday's service. Next thing we know, Debra thought. Tina will want to come strollin' in church dressed like me and Sandy.

"I hate that you feel that way," Sandy said with resolve. "But Tina's my sister. And if she can't come I guess me and you can't go shoppin' together no more."

Debra jutted her face forward, stretched her eyes wide, and looked hard into the face of Sandy. "I guess not," she answered. Debra then turned and marched away leaving Sandy to regret having stuck up so forcefully for Tina.

Tina wore a smirk as she shopped for fabric with her sister the following week. Can't wait to see Debra's face when me and Sandy walk in church Sunday dressed alike. Sandy is my sister, she thought as she pursed her lips tightly together.

Sandy eyed Tina sensing that her sister was pleased with the falling out between herself and Debra.

"Don't think you so smart. You been tryin' since we were kids to come between me and Debra. It ain't never worked and it won't this time." Sandy paused, looking hard at Tina.

"And wipe that smirk off yo' face or I won't sew nothin' with you."

"Don't act like this all my fault," Tina snapped. "Debra don't like me no better than I like her." Tina's contorted face showed her contempt for Debra. "She think she so much just 'cause she got that light skin and that long hair."

"Don't blame Debra for her good looks just 'cause you got a problem with being dark and yo' hair won't grow." Immediately, the shock and pain of Sandy's words reflected in Tina's face.

"I'm sorry, Tina." Sandy reached for Tina's arm to console her sister. Angry and hurt, Tina snatched away. She left the store and headed for her car with Sandy at her heels pleading.

"Ahh-hh-hh, come on Tina. Let's get the fabric so we can go home and get started. We only have three days."

"Forget it!" I don't want to dress alike no more. Go on. Go make yo' ol' outfit with Debra!"

Tina pulled the cream colored old Chevy that the two sisters shared into the driveway. They had traveled home in silence. Tina got out, slammed the car door and marched off to her side of the duplex. Sandy stood for a moment in the driveway massaging her temples before entering her own home.

On the other side of town, Debra lifted the receiver, put it to her ear, and placed a finger in a hole of her rotary dial phone. Without moving her finger, she quickly hung the receiver up. It had been two weeks since she and Sandy had exchanged angry words. She missed her friend terribly. But maybe it was for the better. As long as Tina was around, their relationship would be like the up and down of a seesaw.

While Debra agonized over the spat with Sandy, Tina, speaking with a long-time acquaintance, Muriel, plotted the permanent dissolution of the friendship between her sister, Sandy and Debra.

"Yeah, I can get the money," Tina answered tilting her head back and blowing cigarette smoke into the air. "Only this betta' work!"

"Well, don't forget she stole Edward from me. I want to get her much as you do. Madam Zelda will give us a deal since we both want her to voodoo the same person," Muriel answered.

"So when we leavin'?" Tina asked getting excited at the prospect of finally being able to watch Debra suffer. And just think, she won't even know what hit her. Tina chuckled to

herself. Watching Debra go from having everything to havin' nothin' was gonna' be sweet.

"We'll leave in a couple of days," Muriel responded.

On the day of their departure, Muriel and Tina made the final preparations for the trip from Jackson to Sardis, Mississippi. They had a three-thirty afternoon appointment with Madam Zelda. Muriel, remembering that she hadn't yet picked up the hamburgers for the trip, checked her watch and rushed off to Whitey's Hamburger Stand. There was just enough time to get the food before picking Tina up.

As Muriel entered the establishment, she spotted Debra and her heart leaped. She stopped short and squinted her eyes. You thank you done won, she thought. But jus' wait. When Edward leave you we gon' see who the winner is. Madam Zelda had promised she'd fix it so Edward would leave and never return to Debra. Madam Zelda's ad in Hap Magazine had boasted that she was the best for getting results. Her work was guaranteed. She had come from a long line of enchanters and workers of magic. There had been her grandmother, sister, and an aunt. They had all used their powers for revenge upon their clients' enemies.

"Hey Debra!" Muriel yelled out startling Debra who turned in the direction of the voice. "You thank you so smart." Muriel took long strides in Debra's direction, but stopped just short of reaching her. Muriel pointed a finger towards Debra who, starring wide-eyed at Muriel, had remained silent. "You thank you done won." Muriel dropped a hip and propped a fist on it as she continued.

"Edward gone leave you. I'm seein' to it. And it ain't gon' be nothin' you can do 'bout it, my dear." She moved her head from side to side as she spoke.

Patron's eyes darted from Muriel to Debra whose mouth was hanging open. Debra remained silent, keeping her eyes on Muriel. Muriel switched hips and continued.

"You gon' know it was me that made him leave you. I may not have Edward but you ain't gonna' have him neither."

As abruptly as she had entered, Muriel turned and left without ordering the hamburgers for which she had come. Humiliated, Debra had lost her appetite. She politely excused herself from the line of customers and rushed out.

Sandy watched from her living room window as Muriel pulled into the driveway and Tina exited with a small overnight bag. Her sister had mentioned nothing to her about a trip. Sandy moved swiftly from the sofa to catch Tina but she was too late. Muriel had backed out of the driveway and they were too far to hear Sandy call to them. Sandy went to the phone and dialed Debra's number.

"Hello?" Debra pondered if the call could have anything to do with her earlier strange encounter with Muriel. She was relieved and happy to hear Sandy's voice.

"I'm sorry Debbie," Sandy choked out.

"No, I'm sorry."

Just then, Edward walked up behind Debra, locked his arms around her waist, and planted a kiss on her cheek. "I guess I'll let you go, Sandy. The love of my life is here," Debra said turning her head to smile at Edward.

"Alright, I'm glad we had this little talk," Sandy responded laughing and hanging up the phone.

"Did you bring the things I told you to?" Madam Zelda asked resting her brown hands on the table. She intertwined her plump fingers waiting for Tina to show her the items she had brought.

Awkwardly, Tina pulled the picture of Debra and Edward posed in an embrace from the overnight bag. She looked at the photo a second before laying it on the table. Muriel picked it up and starred contemptuously at the couple before slamming it to the table. Next, Tina brought forth a clump of Debra's hair wrapped in a piece of plastic wrap.

She thought back to the day she had taken the items right from under Debra's nose. Stupid woman. All I had to do was pretend my car was broke down in front of her house and ask to use her phone. Once I got inside, I just said I had to use the bathroom. There on a table in the hallway leading to the bathroom was the photo. The comb, with hair strands sticking from its teeth lay on the edge of the face bowl.

Knowing where the items were was easy too, courtesy of unsuspecting Sandy. The day Sandy told me 'bout the 'nice' picture of Edward and Debra was the one time I got somethin' from Sandy that I could use against Debra.

Madam Zelda took the picture from the frame and cut right down through the middle of the couple. She then reached under the table cloth and brought up a glass jar where she placed the two pieces of the photo. She then stuffed the clump of hair into the jar. Next, she again raised the edge of the tablecloth and reached for something that looked like a bunch of plant roots. She pushed them into the jar, screwed on the lid, and handed the jar to Tina.

"You must believe that the moment you bury this jar, the fate of Debra and Edward's relationship is doomed for failure," Madam Zelda said.

"But can't curses be broken?" Tina asked. She could hardly wait to see the curse take effect on Debra. And she didn't want it to backfire.

"Yeah. But the only way "this" curse can be broken is if Debra or Edward was to dig up that jar. She pointed to the jar in Tina's hand. They gotta' find it and destroy it. Now, you tell me how either one of them gonna' find it buried out in a field somewhere here in Sardis?"

"When is Edward gone leave her? Muriel asked. Her eyes sparkled with delight while her lips curled into a smile. Nothing in this world would make her happier than to see Debra lose the man she had stolen. Me and Edward was happy until Debra came along and took him away from me, Muriel thought.

"Not this Sunday, but next Sunday as they get dressed for church there's gonna' be an argument and Edward will simply walk out on her and never come back." Madam Zelda nodded her head in assurance. "That's a fact!"

Muriel and Tina turned to face each other with broad grins plastered over their faces.

Muriel, her eyes squinted, turned away from Tina to stare into space. She shook her head slowly from side to side envisioning Debra crying herself to sleep every night once Edward left her. After all, she had cried when Debra stole Edward from her. Muriel relished the thought and whispered, "I just can't wait."

They stood to leave and Madam Zelda held out her hand. Tina placed a wad of cash into her sweaty palm. Madam Zelda waddled to the front door with the women at her heels.

Back in Jackson, Sandy and Debra took the emerald green silken fabric they had chosen and went off their separate ways hoping to finish their look alike outfits by the time Sunday rolled around again. They had missed their chance to finish the outfits in time for this week's service because of the spat between them. Debra, not wanting to wear her suit unless and until Sandy was finished with hers, called her friend.

"Did you get it done?" she asked hoping the answer was yes. She so wanted to wear it on the following day. But unless Sandy's was done, she'd have to wait 'til the next Sunday.

"Yeah, it's done. Girl it is sharp."

"I know. I think we both look good in that color. What if we wear our gold shoes?"

"I was thinkin' the same thing. Did you ever get a gold purse?"

"Uh-huh. Well, I better go wash my hair. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Debra was combing out her freshly shampooed hair when Edward came up, grabbed her by the wrists and leaned over to kiss her neck. "How 'bout I go get us some Kentucky Fried Chicken and we kick back and watch a movie?" Edward asked.

"Sounds good to me. You know how I hate to cook."

Sunday morning Debra rose early to find Edward already awake and up. "Why you up so early, Edward?"

"Didn't sleep good last night. Thinkin' 'bout going home to see my mother."

"Goin' all the way to Atlanta, Georgia! When? Today?"

"Yes, today!"

"You don't have to yell, Edward. I was just surprised 'cause it seem to come up all of a sudden." Edward was silent. Debra stood staring at him. What is up with him? she

pondered with a wrinkled brow.

Edward went to the closet, pulled a suitcase out, opened a drawer, and started pulling clothes out. Debra stood beside him and rested a hand on his arm.

"What's the matter, Edward?" He didn't answer. "Edward!"

He snapped the suitcase shut without a word and headed for the door. He turned and said, "Will you send my last check to my mother's?" With that he was gone.

Debra stood frozen. Her legs wouldn't move to run after him. Her mind wouldn't work. Surely, this was a nightmare. It couldn't really be happening. But it was—Edward was gone.

For three weeks Debra did not answer her phone nor the door. She received written notice in the mail that she had been fired. It didn't matter--Nothing mattered. Edward had walked out on her for no reason. She couldn't show her face in Jackson again. She'd leave. That's it. I'll go some place where nobody knows me. To the town folk, it was as though she had vanished.

For twenty years, Debra asked herself and sometimes she asked God. Why had Edward left her? She wondered who he had married and if they were happy. She thought about how she used to attend church and how for twenty years she had not set foot in one. And then one Easter Sunday she decided to visit a church she had often listened to on the radio.

After the traditional Easter message was preached, Debra and the other parishioners were preparing to leave when the pastor who was still in the pulpit raised his hands, palms towards his congregation and every movement halted. His eyes were closed as though in deep meditation. Debra was puzzled but she did as everyone else, standing in quiet reverence with her head bowed and eyes closed.

"There is a woman here," the pastor began, his eyes still closed. She is a visitor. I want that woman to come forth. She knows who she is." Debra felt a rumbling in her abdomen and became weak in the knees. She grabbed and held on tightly to the back of the bench in front of her to keep from dropping to the floor. She knew without a doubt that she was the woman. But what could the pastor possibly want with her? Debra, keeping her head bowed, opened her eyes and scanned the sanctuary letting her eyes come to rest on the pulpit. The pastor's eyes were still closed as he continued to call for the woman.

"Woman, you are wearing a pink flowered dress with matching pink shoes. Please be obedient and come forth."

Debra's eyes filled with tears. She sensed it all had something to do with her twenty years of misery. But what did it matter now that she was a woman in her forties. If there were some answer or explanation it should have come a long time ago. Why now when she no longer cared? She felt a hand from behind rest on her shoulder and turned to look into the face of a young woman in her thirties.

"Go forward," she whispered. "It means God has a personal message for you." Other members, despite the presence of other visitors had also sensed that she indeed was the woman for whom pastor was calling. They too, urged her forward. Squeezing past two parishioners, Debra made her way to the front weeping. After so many years she didn't want to deal with anything from her very painful past.

Though she never prayed and asked God why He had allowed such a cruel thing to happen, she had asked Him while yelling accusations at Him because she blamed God. He knew all she ever wanted from life was to get married and raise a family. What was wrong with that? Yet, she had been robbed somehow. It was too late--too late to hope for love or children or any of the things that make life worth living. The past with Edward, Tina, and Sandy was best left dead.

Debra stood before the pastor whose wife had joined him at his side. The pastor's eyes were now opened and teary. His wife wept openly holding her hankie to her mouth as she stared at Debra.

"Some people struck a wicked deal with the devil many years ago. As a result you've suffered. You have wondered why and you hold God responsible. He wants you to know today that He wanted all the same things for you that you wanted for yourself. I see a broken love and I see three people involved. One has since gone on to answer to her maker for her deeds done in this life. What God wants you to know is that there is an answer and an explanation from His Word."

Debra felt like screaming. What difference does it make now! If there is an explanation why did God wait so long to tell me? She felt like running out of the building but forced herself to stand and hear him out.

"Our God is discreet. He would not have me to tell all that has been revealed to me in the presence of this congregation who are strangers to you. But come see me in my office once we dismiss."

Pastor Prasad then raised both arms in the air and dismissed the congregation with the

closing prayer. "May the Lord watch between me and thee until we meet again. Amen." Debra mingled briefly with the members before meeting with Pastor Prasad in his office.

"Well, let's see Pastor Prasad said with a clap of his hands as he briskly entered his office where Debra had already been seated by Sister Prasad. He was a short, slender, dark-skinned man who had come with his wife to the United States from India more than eleven years before after hearing the good news of the gospel in his own country.

He settled himself into his brown, thickly padded leather chair behind his desk while his wife, Jemma, a petite woman, remained seated next to Debra across the desk. Though Pastor Prasad was dressed in a dark suit and floral tie, Jemma had continued to wear Sari's since coming to the United States.

Debra sat stiffly upright in her chair with pursed lips staring at Pastor Prasad. What could he say that would explain why twenty years of her life--if you could call it life, had been stolen. He sighed and leaned forward returning her gaze before speaking.

"There are things that have been revealed to me about..." He paused. "About what took place in the spirit realm all those years ago--evil things. And your life, as a result, has very much been affected by these, these powers. However..." He sighed again and shifted his weight uneasily in his chair. "What happened to you, happened because you..." How should I put this?

Debra's mind screamed, Because I what! I didn't do anything wrong! I'm the one who has suffered here. Debra felt the tears welling. She felt like she was choking from the lump in her throat. And she felt herself getting angry at Pastor Prasad. She folded her arms across her chest, tilted her head to one side, and braced to defend herself.

Pastor Prasad knew that in order for Debra to be free of the pain she was carrying she'd have to hear the truth--God's truth--and she'd have to accept it. But he had no desire to condemn this young woman who was sincerely questioning why God had not protected her. "Let me begin again," he said. Pastor Prasad reached for a slip of paper and a pen and poised himself to take notes. "Tell me about your relationship with this man you were going to marry. What was his name?"

The memory of Edward and the good times brought a change to Debra's mood. Suddenly, she wanted to talk about her lost love. She wanted to unload the heavy burden she'd carried alone for so many years. Maybe this stranger who claimed to be a man of God actually had some answers to the questions she'd asked over and over again. Why had God allowed her evil enemies to have ruined her life.

"Well, his name was Edward. Edward Burton." A faint smile graced Debra's lips as she

remembered how Edward used to come up behind her, wrap his arms around her waist and plant a kiss on her cheek. She shook herself back to the present before continuing.

"Edward was a gospel singer. He sang with a group called The Gospel Notes. That's what I liked about him." She leaned forward, her face beaming from the memory. "He was the only man I had met in a long time who was actually attending church without my always tryin' to convince him that it's good for people to take some time out and go to church. All of the other men I had met were always tryin' to convince me that while we were young was the time to have our fun. I mean some of them were willing to go to church on Sunday but I just didn't feel like we should do whatever sins we wanted to all week and then go to church on Sunday. I wanted to really live for God. The others who didn't want to go to church at all said there would be plenty of time for church when we were old. I just didn't agree."

She stopped abruptly. The pastor had asked her to tell of Edward and here she was going on and on about those other men who didn't matter to her.

"Anyway," she continued. "Edward gave me an engagement ring just a little while after we met. Once we were engaged we waited until a month before the wedding to move in together. You know, to save paying two rents. I guess..." Debra lowered her head as sadness overtook her. "I guess that's why I don't understand why God let such a awful thing happen to me." The room was silent. Suddenly, Debra raised her head, her voice was louder and anxiety shown on her face. Her bent arms spread out to her sides gesturing, why? "Edward and I had plans to marry. It wasn't like we were just shackin' up with no intention of making it legal. God knew I loved Him and Jesus and that Edward and I had big plans that when Edward stopped singing, maybe he'd be a pastor one day and..."

Pastor Prasad raised a finger in the air interrupting Debra. He lowered his head and scan read his notes before looking at his wife. Jemma knew her husband all too well so she knew also what Debra had said that caused him to interrupt. "I want you to finish telling about what happened Debra. But, first I'd like for you to return to something you said earlier. I believe you said you just didn't feel like you should do whatever sins you wanted to all week and then go to church on Sunday? Debra, I have to ask you... What sins were you referring to?"

"Like I said, well, I think I said we didn't go to bars or drink or cuss. We just worked hard all week, went to church on Sunday and Bible study mid-week. I volunteered at the Youth Shelter with troubled teens and Edward went to one or two singing rehearsals a week."

"You were good people who opened the door to Satan when you moved in together. And

we all know that whether by blatant disobedience to God's word, ignorance of God's word, or misinterpretation to suit our own purposes, Satan will waltz his way into our lives to steal, kill and destroy. And he has the authority because you gave it to him."

Before rising to her feet to leave, Debra pursed her lips, looked away into space and sighed hard. So, instead of focusing on the two people who were clearly agents of the devil, Muriel and Tina, Pastor Prasad was about to come down on her and Edward. Well, Debra knew where this conversation was going--no where as far as she was concerned. No way was she going to sit there and be accused of bringing a curse into her own life. She slowly rose and looked down at Pastor Prasad.

"So, you're saying that after all the good that we did God overlooked those things and handed us over to the devil all behind moving in together thirty-days before the wedding?" She then turned to Sister Prasad who was still seated as if to ask, are you in agreement with your husband? Jemma sat looking up at Debra without speaking. Debra grabbed her purse and left the office without another word.

The pastor and his wife looked, in shock, at one another before Jemma jumped up to run after Debra.

"Debra! Wait please."

Debra, without turning around continued her brisk walk towards the Exit sign with a hand raised behind her towards Jemma. Jemma stopped. She sighed as she shook her head staring after the obviously angry woman.

Several weeks passed without Debra returning to the church. She had failed to fill out a Visitor's card so Pastor Prasad had no contact information. Parked in the parking lot of a shopping center one day, Debra looked up and into the face of Pastor Prasad who was parked next to her. She stood, key in the lock waiting for something to happen. Pastor Prasad walked around to Debra's car where she waited for him. She knew that there was more to the revelation given Pastor Prasad weeks before than what had transpired. She was now ready to hear the rest of it.

"Debra," Pastor Prasad began when he reached her. "I didn't ask for the revelation that I received about you. The question is what is it that God wants to happen behind it? He paused and then asked, "What do you think He wants to happen?"

"I honestly don't know," Debra answered. "I just don't know. My life is ruined which seems so-o-o, so unfair."

"Unfair as it may seem by our standards of fair and unfair, God has set certain principles

in place. Whenever they are violated, there are consequences. He tells us so in His Word. I'm sure you can recall either being taught or reading it for yourself that the servant of God who doesn't even know the will of God will be punished. Actually, the Bible says beaten with a few stripes for that he didn't even know. So, can you imagine what happens to the servant who does know the Lord's will and goes on in disobedience anyhow?"

Debra humped her shoulders. "I guess they get punished more."

"Something else, Debra. Some people, and I mean people in the church will try to convince you that one sin is no greater than another. But when Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, he told them not to keep company with those who called themselves brethren and yet committed certain sins, among which was fornication.

"You want me to say I knew it was wrong--that I was living in sin--that I was a fornicator. Okay, I knew it. I just thought in the end it would all work out. But nobody is dealing with what Muriel and Tina did."

Tears stung her eyes as she blinked to hold them back. A tear rolled down her cheek anyhow. She raised a hand and wiped her eyes.

"It's not Muriel and Tina standing before me today, Debra. It's you." The pastor's tone was soft. "And it's you who has to forgive and leave those women to the Lord's vengeance." Looking at Debra's red, moist eyes, Pastor Prasad's heart went out to her.

"All God wants us to do," he said tenderly, "is acknowledge our sin, repent and Jesus, our advocate with the Father pleads our case. We are then back in fellowship with our Savior and the Father. How hard is that? You didn't give me a chance that day you ran out of the church, but there was so much more to the revelation. It wasn't just about your past. You speak of your life being ruined. Let me tell you..." A broad smile broke across Pastor Prasad's face as he wrapped an arm around Debra's shoulders, gave a squeeze and let out a hearty laugh.

Debra couldn't keep herself from smiling as she searched the pastor's face for an answer to what was suddenly so funny. She desperately wanted to know what was that 'more' to the revelation. Was there, after all these years and so much heartache, a chance to be happy. To be married and have a family?

As Pastor Prasad released Debra, he heard children's voices call to him.

"Pastor Prasad! Pastor Prasad!" Eight-year old, Brenda and ten-year old, Sean bounded up to him. Right behind them was their father, forty-year old, Patrick. He and his

children were among Pastor Prasad's newest members. Pastor Prasad introduced everyone, looked at his watch and waving good-bye, rushed off to meet Jemma. He'd let the revelation of the future unfold for itself.

Also by Vanessa Winters: *The Beauty of Staying Together*

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The Beauty of Staying Together

CHAPTER ONE

Seated on the brown overstuffed sofa, Calvina, a married sixteen-year old had just nestled into the arms of her lover, Edgar. *He's everything I always wanted in a man.* She smiled to herself as she played with the button on his shirt. *Maybe Edgar will ask me to marry him. If he does; I would divorce Duane Dawson in a heartbeat.* Calvina settled back, crossed her long legs, and let her brown eyes roam around the spotless apartment. *We gon' have a place like this someday,* she thought. Calvina finger twirled the black twirly curls that graced her honey-colored face as she glanced around at the sparkling glass topped tables, and the polished wood furniture. Bonnie, Edgar's sister was a good housekeeper. *Yep, one day Edgar and me gon' be as happy as Bonnie and Louis.*

The frantic knock at the door startled Calvina, interrupting her daydream and sent Bonnie's short legs scurrying across the room to answer the door.

"Comin'!" she called out as she brushed back the brownish-black lock of coarse hair that continually fell across her forehead. Bonnie opened the door; Roberta, not waiting to be invited in, rushed past Bonnie. She was a very light-skinned woman, barely twenty years

old, whose voice became high pitched whenever she was excited. Once inside she blurted out, “Yo’ husband didn’t go to work.” Her gaze was fixed on Calvina. “He’s checked you guy’s apartment and know you ain’t there,” she continued. “He knocked on my door and asked if I knew where you was.” Roberta stopped to suck in a breath. “I told him that I would go next door to tell ya’ that he was lookin’ for you. He asked me who you was with next door and I told him that you was at Bonnie’s.” She rested a hand on her chest and swallowed before continuing. “He’s waitin’ for you to come home.” She was still staring, wide-eyed, at Calvina.

Calvina pushed away from Edgar and jumped to her feet. Always uncomfortable with her five-foot-ten frame, Calvina dropped in one hip as she stood there, fearing what Duane would do to her if he ever found out about the affair with Edgar. The hip-drop was her coping mechanism whenever she was on display: like the time Ms. Williams, her fifth grade Math teacher had called her to the blackboard to work out a difficult Division problem that only Calvina had answered correctly on the last test. She had felt her peers’ eyes at her back as she made her way to the front of the class. At five-feet-six inches, she was the tallest kid at Grant Elementary School. Fearing another call to the blackboard, Calvina never solved another difficult test problem.

“What am I gonna’ do?” she yelled into the air, throwing her long arms up and letting them drop to her sides. “Duane’s gonna’ beat the s ___ outa’ me,” she whispered through clenched teeth. She was afraid of Duane and felt trapped; trapped in an abusive marriage to a man she no longer loved, trapped in a tall, skinny body that she hated because it had brought her unrelenting teasing during her school years, trapped in her mind because she saw no way out. *Oh, how I wish I had stayed in school. I’d be graduating in two years and goin’ on to the police academy. I’d be helpin’ to put people like Duane in jail.*

Whenever Calvina was scared; feeling caged like a circus animal, she thought of all the things anyone had ever done to her. Fear turned to anger that gripped her very being. She found herself transported from the present to the time she caught Duane and her best friend, Anita in *her* bed.

That f— got the gall to judge me after what he did. She was becoming enraged. I scrubbed peoples’ floors and cleaned toilets to get the money to buy a decent bed for us and he wallowed around in it with that h—. I didn’t want him back! The church mother said I had to give him another chance ‘cause he asked for my forgiveness. And she said if I didn’t forgive him, God wouldn’t forgive me for things I had done.

Calvina was beginning to wonder if the church mother had been right. Where was such a Scripture anyway? Tears formed in her eyes.

I hate Duane and I hate Anita. And I hope they burn in hell.

Thoughts of hell fire brought visions of others she'd like to send there. Right on Duane's and Anita's heels would follow her *daddy*, Calvin Robertson.

...namin' me some stupid name like Calvina. Like that was gonna' make me be a boy. His no good a— wouldn't have stayed around even if I had been a boy. Why couldn't he just want me for me!

Before Calvina could sentence anyone else to that lake of fire, she found herself back in Louis and Bonnie's living room. Edgar was calling her name for the third time.

“What!” Calvina snapped.

For all the schoolmates who had teased her for being tall, Edgar had just saved them from being the next ones to take the fiery plunge.

“Listen. It's simple,” Edgar said. “This thing is not as hard as we makin' it out to be. Tell the bastard you leavin' him.” Edgar was a very dark skinned man with a chest and arms that revealed his faithfulness to weight training. He moved his six-foot-three frame with the confidence of someone who was sure of his every move. It was that confidence that had attracted Calvina to him in the first place— that, and the fact that he seemed to accept her as she was, all five-feet-ten inches.

“Come on. I'll go with you to get yo' things.” He took Calvina by the arm and headed for the door. Calvina resisted, pulling back as Bonnie and Roberta came to her aid. “Are you crazy!” Bonnie screamed at Edgar. “Calvina is that man's wife. He'll kill you!” Bonnie and Edgar exchanged looks as though some dark secret lurked between them. Ms Lewis in apartment four had said to Roberta one day: “Now I ain't one to gossip, and you didn't get this from me, but I hear that Edgar is a fugitive from justice in Chicago.” Roberta hadn't shared with Calvina what Ms Lewis had said. But as the siblings exchanged glances, she wondered if the rumor were true. There wasn't time to be concerned about it now. Calvina had to get out of her desperate situation.

“If I stick to it that I was visitin' Bonnie, Duane will be suspicious 'cause I never mentioned her before,” Calvina reasoned aloud, switching the drop from one hip to the other.

“You can't change from what I already told him!” Roberta shouted. “He'll think I lied!” And then it hit her. “I know!” Roberta said excitedly. “Tell him that you came over here

to borrow sugar for me. Tell him I couldn't come 'cause the baby was sleepin' and I didn't want to leave him alone."

"Yeah, that's good," Bonnie joined in hoping Edgar would like the idea and abandon his dangerous notion of confronting Duane.

"Do whateva' you wanna'," Edgar sighed. "But I'm tellin' ya' the nigga' ain't a problem. With that, he humped his shoulders and dropped into the nearby recliner.

Columbus, Ohio had dawned a beautiful, sunshine filled day that June 10th, 1962. And if it weren't for the fact that Calvina had to hide her affair with Edgar, she would have loved to be seated out back at the picnic table enjoying the summer instead of trying to figure her way out of the mess she was in.

Roberta and Calvina crossed the yard to their apartment building where they spotted Duane peering out of the rear upstairs hall window.

Duane Dawson was a handsome, twenty-six-year-old; ex-felon who had served three years of a ten-year sentence for armed robbery. He'd been out of prison less than six months when he and Calvina were married. He needed someone to help him keep his nose clean; she needed someone to make her feel good about herself. Duane had told her all the things she longed to hear.

The two women tried to appear casual as they entered the building, but both their hearts were pounding. Calvina could only hope Duane would buy their bogus story. To appear even more convincing, Roberta had asked Duane to listen outside her apartment door for the baby while she ran to get Calvina. As they entered the downstairs door that led to the stairway Duane stared down at them from the top of the stairs. As casually as they could the two women continued their make believe conversation. At the top of the stairs they made their parting remarks. It was hard for Calvina to read Duane's face. *He's so good at hiding his real feelings—especially around others.* Duane hated for people to have a bad impression of him.

Inside the apartment, the interrogation began. "Why did it take you so long to get some sugar?" There was calmness in his voice. But Calvina knew anger boiled beneath his composed exterior. She had seen his fury erupt many times before.

"I was home for over twenty minutes before I knocked on Roberta's door," Duane continued calmly.

"We...we got to talkin'," Calvina stammered as she fiddled with the twist tie on the bread bag. "She's really nice—Bonnie—I mean." Calvina stood at the kitchen counter,

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