

Excerpt

His Love Is Freedom

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I Made the Mistake (of Thinking You Were My Mate)

Last **season**, I made the mistake of considering you a potential mate.

Something my heart desired...
in you, I admired...
those things I aspired...
to be.

No guidance was needed.
No scripture was heeded.
I pressed toward that mark.

I heard how nice it could be
to have someone fashioned just for me
and I exhaled whenever you laughed....inhaled whenever you
whispered...and slowly
the dance began.

Last **month**, I made the mistake of treating you like a mate.

Our discussions focused less on Christ.
Your lips began to entice
all those things that were dormant but real
and Ooh, how you made me feel.

Not once did I ask, "Father is this what you want for me?"
from me?...to be...
in this state?!
With a jaundiced eye,
I did not hesitate
...to proceed.

Last **week**, I made the mistake of wanting you to be my mate.

Your schedule became our schedule.
Your favorite dish became my specialty.
We prayed for strength and sought forgiveness,
for in our hearts...we were one.

But why is my spirit unsettled?
Why does my heart feel embattled?
Why the conflict?
To which my Father answered,
“Remember, you picked”...
which is fine, but then he went on to say,
“**Did I tell you this was the time?**”

Last **night**, I made the mistake of thinking you were my mate.

When I awakened, it was as clear as the tug in my heart.
We had no right.
I had no claim.
All had to be given up in Jesus' name.

Properly routed and spiritually intended,
this may have been prevented.
Instead, I must bid thee farewell,
My Father is calling me back to the garden.

The harvest is in
and I still have work to do...
and so does He
...who lives in me.

Freedom Reflection: Appointed Time

Freedom Scripture: Eph 1:9-10

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

When the Apostle Paul wrote the passage above in his letter to the Ephesians, he was speaking on the concept of appointed time. In this context, he explains God’s intention to reveal the mysteries of His plan when the time is right. More specifically, he speaks about the purpose the Father placed on the heart and earthly vessel of Jesus and its fulfillment on heaven and earth at the appointed time. In effect, the appointed time is that moment in which there is an unwrapping or revealing of something that was once a mystery. It is the proverbial “ahh-haa” moment when things finally come together and make perfect and complete sense. If we are patient, we too can realize many ahh-haa moments that promise to reveal great mysteries pertaining to our life. This is particularly true when it comes to making love relationship choices.

Have you ever heard the expression, “right person, bad timing”? Perhaps you have been in a relationship that for whatever reason never seemed to smoothly transition to the next level.

Maybe you were ready (or thought you were ready) for a commitment that could potentially lead to marriage, but the person who held your heart wasn't sure this was the right time for them. Irrespective of where you fell in this situation, it's a disappointing place to be. As the situation played itself out, the relationship may have eventually fizzled or someone compromised to please the other. What happens least often is one or both parties asking themselves the question, "is this the appointed time for me?"

My heart poured out this poem not with any particular relationship in mind rather it was inspired by a culmination of experiences that speak generally to dating as a single person. At varying points in a single person's life, there are seasons where one may grow tired of the dating game and instead desire to settle down. Let's face it, being "engaged" in a relationship can be comforting! When you initially meet and things seem to be "clicking", you begin to move and sway to a hypnotic rhythm. You're delighted by the things you have in common, you're ecstatic about how well you compliment each other (e.g., intellectually, spiritually, emotionally), and life in general seem to be chugging along nicely. Before long, you begin to fall into what's best known as the "dating ritual", which includes seeing each other on the weekends (perhaps even during the week), calling each other

"So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it."
Hebrews 4:16 (NLT)

at least 4 times a day and night (sometimes into the wee hours of the morning), “playing house”, and perhaps planning holidays and vacations together. Before you know it, the butterflies have moved from your stomach to your heart and it feels good! Ohhh, yes! That feeling is quite an elixir for the soul and you don’t want any interruptions, distractions, or deviations. You just want more of where that came from and with innocent indignation, you ask, “is there anything wrong with that?” Well, let’s chase the answer for a minute.

**“Trust in the Lord
with all your heart and
lean not on your own
understanding; in all
your ways
acknowledge him and
he will make your
paths straight.”
Proverbs 3:5-6**

In group and individual discussions I have had with both men and women on the subject of relationships and “appointed time”, I have found that in most instances, in the initial meeting and early on in the dating process, there is a natural tendency

to view the object of affection as a potential mate. “Who has time to waste time?” one woman said with a hint of indignation. Her male companion jokingly added, “if she peaks my interest, it’s only natural that I’ll want to learn more about her.” Two slightly different perspectives, but the basic premise is there...curiosity is peaked and further investigation is required. What may be a mystery to us at the time we initially meet someone is how that person is to fit into our life’s plan. Do we even know our life’s plan?

Does the fact that *there is* a plan for our life come to mind when engaging in a relationship? Should it?

In Jeremiah 1:5, the Father tells us “before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” In other words, before your parents consummated your existence, God knew you! Not only was He thinking of you, He devised a plan for your life. Jeremiah was “called” to be a prophet, and the Lord gave him all the tools necessary to fulfill his purpose. Just as He had a purpose and plan for Jeremiah, He also has a purpose for each of us. There are many books on the market that discuss the subject of purpose and the fact that God created us all for a reason. Although I only briefly touch on this subject in the book, I have listed a few references in this book that are worth reading. Assuming you understand the general concept of “purpose”, it is important to note that although He does not reveal the path of purpose until the appointed time, He provides His word and Jesus as a guide to assist us with the journey. As we follow Jesus on our course to purpose and draw closer to Him, we are able to discern the many things He wants to communicate to us, including the timing on when to consider a life mate. It is true we choose our mate, but we must

”For everything comes from him; everything exists by his power and is intended for his glory. To him be glory evermore. Amen.”Romans 11:36 (NLT)

ensure we are in the right season and have entered the “appointed time”.

There is no one in this world that can deny having been single at some point in their life. Before we had “somebody”, we had “nobody”. Many of us have spent time in-between states and during that period, we may have done some soul searching and self-discovery as we worked to refine or redefine who we are. There are those who are very comfortable spending time in the “in-between” time state, and others who don’t give themselves enough time in

**“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”
Matt 6:33**

that place. Dependent upon where you are in your life’s journey, you will fall in one of these two situations. Where you are in your relationship with the Father will also dictate how long your stay will be in either state.

If ever you find yourself in a relationship you are not equipped to move forward in, ask yourself, “is this where God wants me to be right now?” You may find yourself there because you haven’t completely healed from a prior relationship that scarred or otherwise damaged your ability to move into a healthy relationship. You may find yourself there because you feel lonely and desire companionship. You may have even convinced yourself that the only prescription for happiness is marriage or some commitment you hope leads to marriage. Be assured that none of the scenarios

mentioned above is a state in which the Father would sanction for your life. He desires to heal you from your wounds, fill your lonely and empty places, and be your overall solution to happiness and fulfillment. However, He cannot act on your behalf without your permission. He cannot be that source of comfort without your admission. He cannot communicate to you when the appointed time has arrived, if you aren't listening.

I have also made mistakes along the relationship path due to my inability to discern whether or not the appointed time had arrived. Although I was maturing in many areas of my life, I did not readily recognize those areas that still required thoughtful and prayerful refinement. Instead, I swayed to the rhythm of the beat until the musician stopped playing. Retrospectively thinking, I would have saved myself a lot of grief, heartache, pain, and tears had I made it a priority to seek first that which the Father required of me in purpose, instead of seeking external fulfillment. It's only human to seek those things that bring immediate gratification, however, it takes a certain level of spiritual maturity and self understanding to see beyond the immediate with an eye on perpetual peace...a peace that only the Father can provide. It is in the midst of that peace that we come face-to-face with our ahh-haa moment. It is the place where everything finally comes together.

There are many distractions as we walk in purpose, including our innate desire to be loved and in love. There is nothing wrong with feeling love or wanting to be loved, however, it can influence your walk with the Lord if you allow it to consume you to the point of losing focus on the purpose or plan He has for you. Don't worry about recognizing when the appointed time has arrived. You will know. If or when that person arrives, you will recognize him/her just as Adam recognized Eve, or Jacob recognized Rachel. The ah-haa moment will be upon you as it was for them. With a steady eye on Him, approach your relationships from the angle of how this person or relationship fits into the overall plan the Father has laid out for you. Be disciplined and stay planted. As you grow in your walk, you will not only become a better witness to others, you will also establish more fruitful relationships...irrespective of where they may lead.

Freedom Thought of the Day: It is more important to seek His plan for my life and live accordingly. All things will come at the appointed time.

Freedom Scriptures for Meditation:

Eph 1:10

1 Tim 6:15

Rom 5:6

John 7:30

Heb 4:16

Gal 4:4

Isaiah 40:31

Passionate Love

Ours is a passionate love.
Lined with lavender and jasmine oils,
scented candles,
walks on pink sands,
talks under moonlit skies,
dreams of forever times,
and hopes of peaceful and loving hearts.

Ours is a passionate love.
Etched with silent stares,
crumpled tissue,
raised eyebrows and voices,
hard choices and swallowed thoughts and pride,
bouts of alone time and struggles inside.
Rainy days
cast away
as nonchalantly as they came.

Ours is a passionate love,
that sees beyond the sunshine and rain,
rejuvenates,
and make whole again
in the oneness and fulfillment that God can only bring,
when two come together and with a joyful noise sing..
His praises...because
His passionate love endures forever.

Freedom Reflection: It Takes THREE

Freedom Scripture: Mark 10:6-9

“But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate.”

As a wedding gift, a very dear friend of mine gave my husband and I a framed message that I thought was so undeniably true. The message simply reaffirmed the fact that it takes three—the husband, the wife, and the Father—to make a marriage work. Staying focused on the Lord (whether you are married or not) is vital in our ability to maintain “freedom” (see Introduction) in our daily walk. Inviting Him into your marriage raises the level of expectation and accountability you have for one another. The full knowledge of God’s presence allows you to meditate on what He would have you do as it relates to situations you encounter together. As you meditate on His word and reflect on its application in your life as a married unit, you are in affect inviting Him into your union.

**“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; and your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.”
Psalm 128:3**

Marriage is a gift from God! In 1 Corinthian 7:7, Paul tells us that he wishes all men could be as he and not marry. However,

he also recognizes that each man has his own gift from God and that marriage is that gift. In a somewhat related discussion Jesus had with the Sadducees, He tells us in Luke 20:34 that the people of this earth will marry, however, at the resurrection there will be no marriage between us and that we will be like the angels. If you consider those truths, you should realize as a married person how precious the institution of marriage should be to us. Because it is a gift that God gave us to enjoy during our short time on earth, it is imperative that we make the most of our union and not dwell on those things that threaten to cause continued strife and pain. Relying on His word for strength will get you through the challenges you face and help you both to enjoy the gift the Father has given you.

Although marriage comes with challenges, the THREE of you can make it a gratifying experience. At times when you are experiencing difficulty, pray and ask God to lead you through the challenge and sustain you in it. Go to His Word and be strengthened by it. As you come out of the valley, thank and praise Him for what He has done and the lessons learned. Don't forget to tell the devil, he's a liar!

Freedom Reflection Thought of the Day: The “ups and downs” of life will not affect or dictate how I treat the one whom God has blessed me with.

Related Freedom Scripture:

Psalm 128

Malachi 2:14-15

1 Cor 7:7

1 Cor 7:14

1 Cor 7:27-29

Heb 13:46

Sistah, Girlfriend
(Tea with NPWE)

Sistah, Sistah, Girl, Sistah, Sistah, Girlfriend

Where you goin'?
Whatcha doing?

Sit a while...no, no come on now.
Have a seat
Kick off those heels, and put up those tired, and weary feet.

Relax and chill with me.
Share your life...
Your world...
Your day's goin's on.

Hmmm...
Your employees are crazy, loco you say.
Your assistant wants an increase in pay!
Your Director, Mr. Perfector, wants what? By when??
Girl, you don't even have time to do something about those
chipped nails and wax the hair off your chinny-chin-chin.

So works really hectic,
A few relationships have been neglected,
The bills keep coming in,
What? You've pretty much given up on men!
Oww, child...slow down...now let me begin.

The children are acting up and out,
But, honey, the husband still making me scream and shout!!
The pay is OK...in a way
And I thank the Lord for it every single day.

It's only He who abides in Me
That has allowed, no...enabled me, to be

Mommy, Daddy, Sister, Aunt, Friend
Leader, Follower, Supervisor, Co-worker, Counselor, Enforcer,
Protector, Corrector...

The list seems to grow with no end.

Sistah, Sistah, Girl, Sistah, Sistah, Girlfriend

Woman...

Professional...

Incredible...

Phenomenal.

Let's sit a while...

Share...

Sip some tea...

Eat some crumpets...

Don't forget the pinky!!!!

And just be...WOMAN.

Freedom Reflection: Tea with the Lord

Freedom Scripture: Proverbs 31:17 &26

**“She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong
for her tasks...She speaks with wisdom, and faithful
instruction is on her tongue.”**

Without a doubt, WOMEN are divinely made! I am not implying men aren't special, but it is my humble opinion that God perfected humanity even more so when he created WOMAN. Amen! Look around you at the wonderful examples of "woman" you either have as family members, personal mentors, friends, or colleagues. Many are seasoned with the lessons of life, others are transitioning through the peaks and valleys of life, and yet there are

**"She is clothed
with strength
and dignity; she
can laugh at the
days to come."
Proverbs 31:25**

others who are fresh and promising buds waiting for that burst of sunshine to fall upon them in order to flourish. Wherever we fall in the spectrum of "woman-ness", we are divinely made.

As a bonus gift, the Father equipped women with the strength and tenacity to do mighty and great things, evident in our ability to maintain many responsibilities in spite of our own "peculiarities". Our overall makeup (e.g., intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical) is unique to that of men because our God-given role in the universe of humanity is special and inimitable. The Father has equipped us to be mighty prayer warriors, discerners, caregivers, bookkeepers, financial planners, event planners, gourmet chefs, fry cooks, psychologists and physicians--and we wear these hats just within the home. You can imagine then that we are quite a force to reckon with once we

venture outside the doors of our abode, which is why it is *critical* that we seek His guidance and support in all that touches our hands, penetrates our thoughts, and spill from our lips. In order to do that, we must spend quality time or “tea time” with the Lord.

At a tea event hosted by the National Professional Women’s Exchange, I was honored to speak on the history of teas and present this poem. I shared with friends the importance of fellowshiping with the Lord when spending precious “alone time” with ourselves.

**“Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.”
Prov 31:29**

We are spending “tea time” with Him when we take time out of our very busy schedule to free our minds and hearts long enough to concentrate on Him in prayer and meditation. That means turning off the computer, the television, the CD player, putting the kids to bed, giving the husband something to do while he waits, taking the phone off the hook, and doing nothing but laying in bed, sitting on the couch, or rocking on a porch chair with a free mind filled only with thoughts of what God wants from you in your life. Then, take the time to thank Him for what He has already done. After that, praise Him for what He is about to do in your life. Amen!

The time we spend with friends strengthens our bond with them. We learn about their likes, dislikes, challenges, joys, what makes them tick, what makes them laugh—and at the same time they are learning the same about us. The same holds true when we

fellowship with the Father. When we spend private time with Him, we communicate our joys, our challenges, our fears—and His Word allows us to know His ways and acknowledge His will. We can then rejoice in the fact that there is a real connection between us that provides comfort and strength in handling life’s daily rituals.

“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his son, Jesus Christ.”
1 John 1:3

Because He is an Omnipresent and Omniscient God, it goes a step even further. Whether we are in prayer or going through our day-to-day, our connection with Him lets us know that He is with us. In our alone time when we are enjoying a bubble bath with scented candles and soft music, or reading our daily devotional before the household awakes, or praying for a friend’s situation, He is fellowshiping with us. When we are handling a personal crisis, or watching our children play soccer, or reaching out to a friend who could use an encouraging word, He is with us. On those occasions, we are spending and sharing valuable “tea time” with the Lord. It is in those moments of personal meditation or support of others that we are encouraged and strengthened by our connection and relationship with Him. It is because of Him, we are able to handle life’s daily challenges.

As noted in **Proverbs 31:17 & 26**, God has fashioned “woman” so that our “arms are strong for the task”, and He tells us that we are to “speak with wisdom and faithful instruction”. This charge should be a realization of our responsibility to others, and our accountability to the Father.

Sisters, as you work to sustain your households, manage your work schedules and tasks, and be a good witness and example for others, be mindful of the importance in spending quality (tea) time with He who strengthens us and makes all things possible.

Freedom Reflection Thought of the Day: My shoulders are strong enough and broad enough to carry the load because He strengthens me to do all things!

Related Freedom Scripture

Psalm 18

Psalm 29

1 John 1:3

Psalm 23:3

2 Cor 13:12-13

1 John 2:25

Psalm 28:7

Phil 2:1-2

2 John 1:9

Until Next Time
(for Nin-Nin)

Peacefully...she slept
Willingly she allowed His hand to take hers.

Shackles were lifted.
Health was restored.

There may have even been an extra bounce in her step...
as her spirit began to make its journey homeward.

As they proceeded, she looked up to the face of our Savior, Jesus,
and said,

“Merciful One, before we go to the mansion my Father has
prepared for me,
can I glance back for a moment to see,
those who have loved and cared for me,
ensured my comfort and gave so freely?
Not to say goodbye, but instead, ‘until next time’
when their spirit will flow upward
to join mine.”

Looking on his faithful servant with a smile,
He knew he couldn’t deny the request
from one such as this.
Standing by her side,
He granted her last earthly wish.

Busy at work and play,
we didn’t notice the soft kiss on the cheek,
the soothing, velvety whisper in our ear...of an unwavering love
from one so dear,

the wide and proud smile of a mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin, friend that glowed on her face.

No, we didn't notice as we went on with life at our usual fast but steady pace.

With a sigh and a nod to Jesus,

He took her hand and escorted her to the celebration that was in full swing up yonder.

It was a glorious and wondrous occasion taking place in her honor.

Familiar and friendly voices greeted her at the door where she paused for a moment before entering in.

She gazed around the room slowly, but purposefully, until her eyes rested on the Father, who, with outstretched arms bellowed,

“Welcome”.

Freedom Reflection: Journey Homeward

Freedom Scripture: Psalm 73:24

“You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.”

When a loved one journeys to glory, it may be difficult at first notice to realize that in death, there is life. In John 5:24, Jesus said, “I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death to life.” Isn't

it reassuring and encouraging to know the Father, who always keeps His promises, is there to see that loved one into glory.

While writing this book, I had to say “until next time” to a number of people who were very near and dear to my heart. My Uncle Leon Hall and Aunt Lucille Content, my sisters Evangeline Stewart and Deborah A. Staton-Wright, and my dear grandmother, Udopcile Content were among those who journeyed home to be

“If we live, we live
to the Lord; and if
we die, we die to
the Lord. So,
whether we live or
die, we belong to
the Lord.”

Romans 14:8

with the Father. Although I miss them very much, their spirit surrounds me with every joyful memory we shared. Because they were believers in Him who promises eternal life, I take solace in knowing that the Father welcomed them into glory.

The passing of my grandmother was very difficult for many in my family, including myself. The writing of this poem and its delivery at her funeral was not only therapeutic for me, it also helped those in attendance to see death for what it really is...a natural progression to God and eternal life. It's the next step or level in our connection with Him. Psalm 23:4 reads, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me.” Knowing that He stands with us at the gateway of eternal life just as He has in

our earthly life is an exciting and comforting feeling. His love truly endureth forever!

Being a faithful servant for the Lord does not extend our stay here on earth, but it does assure a place in heaven and eternal life with the Father. Be encouraged!

Freedom Reflection Thought of the Day: The memories shared will sustain me until I see that loved one again in glory.

Related Freedom Scripture:

John 3:36

John 4:13

John 5:24, 29

1 Cor 15:42-44

John 11:25

Excerpt

Tropical Prayers

Anticipated release: Summer 2007

Claudette

“Can you believe this guy?”

“You’re looking at the next governor of the great state of Maryland,” Claudette said as she and Michael stared at the TV where a reporter was interviewing Maryland State Governor hopeful, Jim Robbins.

“As much as I hate to admit it, I guess you’re right. I don’t agree with everything he stands for, but he’s definitely a better candidate than Riley.”

“And the constituency apparently loves him. He’s still up in the polls.” Claudette was making her fourth trip to the dressing room as she rushed to figure out what to wear that day. Michael proceeded to put on his tie as he assessed his wife’s comment.

“The polls are a political ploy to sway votes. The people of Maryland are a lot smarter than that. The bigger question is where does his running mate stand on the issues. He’s as quiet as a church mouse.”

Claudette smiled as she watched her husband’s eyebrows furrow in contemplation.

“Well, Congressman Foster. Perhaps you can get him to talk more on the issues at next week’s Chamber of Commerce dinner. I’m sure he’ll be ready for a debate considering how vocal you’ve

been on his reluctance to talk outside of debates and media interviews.”

Michael grinned as he watched Claudette settle on the Jacques Charles suit he bought her that Christmas. He found her thoughtful views and attentiveness to his political career a turn-on, even after 14-years of marriage.

“Has Michal left for school?” he said, staring at her as she slid on her stockings.

“He left while you were in the shower. He said he had to make it in early to finish up a history project.” Claudette felt her husband’s penetrating gaze and looked up as he walked toward her.

“Well, ‘Big Daddy’ has a free weekend coming up and I’m looking forward to spending some QT with my sweetie,” he said putting his arms around her.

“Oh...really,” Claudette said laughing and shooing his hands away. “And when, prey-tell, were you planning to let me know about this QT weekend you’re babbling about?”

“I’m thinking I can move a couple of things out to next week to allow for a work free weekend as long as I can carry my blackberry,” he said insistent in his pursuit.

“Blackberry is still my friend. I haven’t kicked him out yet.

“Than it’s settled,” Michael said checking his watch. “I’m not really due in the office for another hour. That should be just enough time to start the weekend off right.”

Claudette giggled as her husband proceeded to fumble with her bra straps.

“You think so?” chuckled Claudette as she felt her husband’s beard and lips brush softly against the back of her neck and over her shoulders. As she took in the scent of the designer aftershave she bought him a few weeks earlier for Christmas, and felt the energy of his passion for her, she couldn’t help but close her eyes and exhale as the power of his love washed over her.

It was Friday morning, and Claudette was looking forward to spending a peaceful weekend with Michael and their son, Michal. Although she had long become accustomed to the rigors of being married to a prominent attorney, businessman, and now Maryland State Delegate, she was always delighted when the three of them could spend quality time together. Since the campaign and his swearing in as State Delegate for the 25th District almost a year ago, it seemed he barely had any free time to spend with the family. His ultimate goal to become a U.S. Senator translated to an even tighter schedule, but Claudette was happy to support him in his ambitions. She had some concerns about Michal, who like any teenager, could benefit from spending more time with his Dad. However, she was

especially appreciative of her father-in-law and pastor, Rev., Dr. Michael J. Foster, Sr., who filled the gap of his son's absence. In light of his own busy schedule, the elder Foster ensured he had time and an ear for his young grandson and between father and grandfather, Claudette felt that Michal would ultimately be OK. Claudette also knew they were all over due for the family time this weekend promised to bring.

After kissing Michael goodbye and making him promise to be home before 7:00pm, her first order of business was to cancel any plans that could be scheduled for another day to allow her the time necessary to make the evening special. First, she checked her social calendar and canceled her reservation to attend a preview of a new exhibit at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, which was to be followed by afternoon tea with some of her fellow trustee members. She also canceled a lunch appointment she made with a local designer commissioned to design a gown for Pastor Foster's upcoming 25th Anniversary Ministry Ball. She decided to move up the appointment she had with her masseuse and was also able to squeak in a facial at Elizabeth Arden.

Claudette then called her cousin Janice to arrange a school pick-up and sleepover for Michal. Janice lived a few miles down the road in Kessering where they both grew up. Kessering was a small city in Northern Maryland just 15 miles south of Upper Melborn

where the Foster's lived. The wooded surroundings of Prince Georges County gave an air of Southern suburban living even though it bordered the hustle and bustle of Washington, DC and Baltimore, Maryland only minutes away on either side. The cousins, who grew up in New York City boroughs, were thick as thieves. Michal often hung out with Janice's twin boys, David and Daniel, who were 9 months older. In between barking out orders to the staff she managed at a local real estate office, Janice pressed Claudette into getting the full details of the romantic evening she was scheming. She refused to hang up with her until she got the full scoop.

After Claudette secured the sleepover, she made reservations for the three of them to fly into New York Saturday morning to catch a production of The Lion King. She had been hoping Michael's calendar would free up enough to allow for such an outing and thought it might also be a great opportunity for a quick visit with her family. Janice was the only relative she had in Maryland, and Claudette cherished the opportunity to go back home and visit her Mom, aunts, uncles, and cousins, although she saw them a few weeks prior during the Christmas holiday. They treated Michael as if he were the U.S. Congressman for New York City as they talked about education, health care, and race relations in NY. He treated their comments sincerely and gave good advice

on what they could do about it. Claudette was proud that he could help and that she was the tie that brought this type of productive dialogue together. She and Michael would pick up Michal in the morning and head straight to NYC on the Express Shuttle.

The next order of business was the romantic dinner for two that night. She decided against eating out and headed to the kitchen to see if James had made it in. James was a gourmet Chef from Ghana who worked at *The Table of Contents*, a swanky restaurant on 18th street in downtown DC. Claudette loved the food he prepared there so much, it became a regular dining spot. One day while having lunch with friends, she made James an offer with a salary he couldn't refuse. When Michael came home one night to find an elegant dining table set for three and James standing ready to serve a three-course meal, he roared with laughter and shook his head when Claudette tried to explain. After much discussion, they agreed to James coming in three times a week to prepare meals that Claudette would only be required to warm up in their double oven. Although she liked cooking, it really wasn't her forte, and her increasingly busy schedule did not always allow time to prepare well-balanced and nutritious meals. James not only prepared healthy, mouth-watering gourmet delights, he also helped her plan the menus for small dinner parties and other social gatherings they hosted on a regular basis. For tonight's menu, they

settled on lime and ginger grilled salmon with Cajun rice and fresh vegetables. She also had a bottle of Puligny-Montrachet brought up from the wine cellar. She smiled remembering Michael's comment about the "soft sweetness" and aroma when they sampled it while vacationing at Martha's Vineyard.

Before leaving for her "pampering appointments", Claudette happily remembered the gardener would be stopping by that day to check on the flowers in the greenhouse, and left a note for him to bring in fresh foliage for the dining table centerpiece. Claudette loved flowers and although she considered herself a novice, she was proud of the progress she had made in collecting and growing rare and exotic flowers and plants in her greenhouse. The Tillandsia, Cape Primrose, Madagascar Periwinkle, and Blue Rose were her pride and joy, and guests of their home were very impressed with the various gardens and water ponds that surrounded the seven-acre estate. Claudette couldn't remember the last time she gave Michael an arrangement and thought tonight would be a great occasion. Because she was in an especially sexy and festive mood, she asked the gardener to set aside five stems each of red and white roses. She giggled aloud thinking of a number of ways to use them as she drove her Grand Cherokee into the city.

By 6:15pm, she was putting the finishing touches on dinner as she followed the strict instructions James left for her. Claudette's only contribution to the feast was the homemade peach cobbler she proceeded to slid into the oven. It was Michael's favorite and she knew a store bought replica would not do. She sucked her teeth recalling a comment made by her mother-in-law, Ester, concerning the first peach cobbler she had made from scratch for Michael's birthday several years ago.

"Mikey loves him some peach cobbler," said Ester eye-balling the dessert with a semi-disapproving glare. "That's his favorite dessert, you know".

"Yes, I know," Claudette said as she prepared herself for the unpleasant exchange that regularly fell between them.

"You didn't make that yourself, did ya?" Ester continued. "It looks hard enough to cut bricks."

Claudette learned early on to ignore such comments from the elder "Mrs. Foster". She realized being ignored drove Ester nuts more than anything else. Besides, she wasn't willing to let anything ruin her day or put a damper on her husband's birthday celebration. Instead, she cut a piece for her dotting father-in-law, who always had a kind word and smile for her. She also knew this would make Ester even hotter, but she didn't care. She didn't start it. Not only did he enjoy it, he asked for seconds, which Claudette was more

than happy to serve. She absolutely adored her father-in-law's gentle yet commanding ways, which she was certain Michael inherited from him. Smelling the sweet aroma of the cobbler, she giggled and thanked the Lord that the only thing Michael inherited from his mother were her hazel-green eyes.

“God is so good,” she thought as she exhaled and headed for the Master bathroom where a hot bath laced in Jasmine and Lavender oils awaited her. From her Jacuzzi tub, she caught the swirling scents of ylang-ylang and myrrh as they filled the bedroom from the scented burning candles. She could faintly smell the scent of roses from the red and white petals she had splashed across the Egyptian cotton bed sheets in their bedroom.

When she emerged from the bedroom clad in a powder blue, lounge pants suit with matching heels, she stopped for a moment to catch her reflection in the hallway mirror. As her image stared back at her, she smiled at the thought of how, after all these years, she didn't give a second thought to going through such lengths to please her husband. In her heart of hearts, she never imagined how happy and content she could be with being loved so passionately by a man who loved her so unconditionally. Many times, she felt as if she was a young school-girl in love for the first time, and felt guilty when she heard her close friends talk about how

unhappy they were in their marriage or relationship. Friends like Veronica and David, whom she had known since college. They seemed to be having a tough time right now, and Claudette was trying to be as supportive as possible. Although she didn't believe in discussing her personal marital affairs with friends, she often told Veronica that it wasn't until she and Michael *truly and completely* gave their lives to the Lord that she really felt a change in how they saw and treated each other. Veronica only laughed and said she just lucked up and got a good man.

As she took a second look at the tastefully adorned dining room table, she noticed the Grandfather clock in the foyer read 7:27pm. She was surprised at how time had flown by, but not at Michael being almost 30 minutes late.

“That man is such a workaholic. Maybe things were a little more hectic than he thought it would be,” she thought to herself.

After setting the oven on warm, Claudette poured a glass of wine and settled into her favorite chair next to the lit fireplace. She picked up a stack of article submissions she had been looking through the night before. Claudette served as the Chief Editor of the Jehovah Baptist newsletter, a task she reveled in. Although she served on a number of boards for various organizations and civic associations, she particularly enjoyed and felt most at ease with the

work she did within her church's ministry. Having earned a degree in journalism at Howard University where she met Michael, she happily accepted her father-in-law's invitation to serve in the ministry. Jehovah Baptist is the largest church on the East Coast, standing 55,000 members strong. Many of Prince Georges County's affluent families were members of this church. From the time she married Michael until now, she had always been active in the ministry of the church, and had no problem debating with her father-in-law the hypocrisy she has witnessed first hand from some of her fellow worshippers. Pastor Foster loved that about his daughter-in-law and welcomed the debate. He enjoyed her fiery spirit and thought she was an exceptional catch for his son. Ester, on the other hand, disapproved from the beginning and hence the relationship of mother and daughter-in-law.

The theme for the next newsletter issue was *Holiness and How to Spread It*. Her eyes grew heavy as she surveyed the submissions and wondered how many people at her church *truly* knew what it meant to be holy, let alone how to spread it. Claudette dozed off as she was about to read the pastor's article on the importance of tithing as it relates to spreading the gospel.

Startled by the ringing phone, she looked up at the clock and was surprised to find that she had been sleeping for almost 40 minutes.

“OK. He better have a damn good excuse for being this late,” she thought as she reached for the phone.

“Yes.” she answered with a smile and a bit of sass.

“Ms. Foster?”

“This is she,” Claudette answered with a tinge of annoyance hoping it wasn’t a telemarketer and wondering why they would be calling this late.

“This is Sonya Jenkins from George Washington University Hospital”, the voice on the other end replied. “There’s been an accident.”

Raven

“Raven, please sit down. You’re going to worry yourself sick if you don’t get a grip,” said Mia in an attempt to lighten the heaviness that filled the hospital waiting room.

“Don’t go there with me tonight,” Raven barked back.

Raven was in the process of packing for a last minute trip to New York where she was to audition for the lead role in an all African-American cast production of Some Like it Hot, when she got the call from her sister, Mia. Mia said it wasn’t urgent, but Raven was smart enough to know how to read between the lines of that comment. It was no secret between them that Mia felt Raven put her career before family. Although Raven vehemently denied this, she could understand why Mia might feel this way. Although she wasn’t sure how she was going to maneuver this particular incident, she wasn’t going to give Mia the satisfaction.

Raven was very excited about the call back and couldn’t wait to get to New York to delve into the scene and party with friends. She was also excited about the thought of running into Justin Newman, a running back and first round draft pick for the Washington Redskins. He caught her eye a few weeks ago at a charity event, and heard he was expected to attend a gala tomorrow night in NYC. She saw him smile her way, but thought it better to play it cool to not appear to be like one of the many groupies that

surrounded him. For men like Justin Newman, women were “a dime two-dozen”, besides she was technically dating Drew Phillips of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. She was growing tired of the relationship, however, and knew it was just a matter of time when one would officially break up with the other. She hadn’t spoken to him in weeks and didn’t bother responding to his invitation to the Redskin/Buccaneers game in Tampa a month ago. They had been dating for a little over 3 months and were seen together in many celebrity circles, but she really didn’t feel the relationship was going anywhere, and it certainly wasn’t enhancing her career since Drew was about to become a free agent with no real prospects on the horizon. Justin on the other hand was the new hot commodity on the scene and was as fine as the devil. Unattached, according to celebrity circles (as if that would have made a difference), Raven planned to introduce herself at the event tomorrow and turn on the charm. The call about her mother’s latest health crisis really put a damper on things, but she was determined to not allow it to change her plans.

The same nurse that gave Raven a hard time when she demanded to see her mother earlier, sashayed into the waiting room.

“Are you relatives of Ms. Dunn,” said the nurse looking at Mia and purposely ignoring Raven.

“I’ve had just about enough of this,” Raven mumbled under her breath, as she looked her up and down.

“I’m her eldest daughter, Mia Smith,” said Mia in a commanding voice.

Raven frowned in disgust. “Forever pulling rank,” she mumbled under her breath as she walked over to the sofa and yanked up her purse.

“She’s just waking up and can see you for a few minutes, but only a few,” said the nurse as she curtly beckoned them to follow her.

“She is as rude as they come,” Raven said loud enough for the nurse to hear her.

“What’s upsetting you more? The fact that you didn’t get your way, or that she didn’t recognize you,” Mia said with a smirk as she followed behind the nurse.

Raven was furious Mia had pulled her card, but decided to avoid confrontation as it would unquestionably add a delay to her departure. When she theatrically burst through the waiting room doors earlier, Raven barely heard Mia call her when the nurse stopped her in her tracks. Being told she couldn’t see her mother after driving like a mad woman through the streets of downtown Washington, DC was a little more than Raven could chew. Did they know who she was! Now as the nurse showed them to her

mother's room it took everything she had to keep her cool. She was ready to let off some steam considering she had left seven text messages and two voice messages for her soon-to-be ex-Boy Friday, Blair Hampton, who was supposedly firming up her travel arrangements and ensuring her access to tomorrow night's event and all the celeb hot spots that weekend. She hated trying to find a place to stay in such a busy town at the last minute, and was sure most of the preferred hotels were booked due to the gala. She felt an actress of her stature deserved the best of the best and Blair understood that, however, she was losing patience with not being able to reach him when she needed him. She took a chance on Blair when her agent, the highly sought after Cynthia Taylor, thought he didn't have enough experience under his belt to carry a star of her magnitude. Blair turned out to be worth his salt considering he always came through (although mostly at the last minute which drove Raven crazy) and was resourceful in finding the dish on celebrity happenings. Even Cynthia was starting to warm up to him.

When the nurse opened the door to her mother's room, Raven thought she would vomit from the mixed antiseptic and urine smells coming from the direction of the woman occupying the other side of the room. Raven always complained of having a weak stomach and really didn't like to visit hospitals, particularly since

her father passed away four years ago. During that difficult time, it took everything she had to visit him.

“We’re here, Momma,” said Mia in a reassuring voice.

Her mother smiled at the sound of her eldest daughter’s voice. She tried to say something when the nurse interrupted by reminding her of the doctor’s orders to take it easy. She also reminded them that they only had a few minutes before visiting hours ended. With disgust, Mia and Raven both looked over at the nurse, who frowned before exiting the room.

“Mom, I know you shouldn’t talk, but you gave us quite a scare,” said Mia half-jokingly.

“Yea, Momma. I’m sure I broke all kinds of records to get here. Is this your way of getting back at me for not staying for Christmas dinner?” Raven suggested trying to make light of the situation. She had rushed out of the family Christmas dinner gathering to hop on a plane to Chicago for an appearance on Oprah to promote her film, When I’m Ready, which co-starred Danny Glover and Matthew Broderick. She had a decent part in the movie, but thought she should have played the lead instead of Vanessa Williams. Vanessa couldn’t make the tapping so Raven thought this would be a great opportunity to shine in the limelight. Her mother told her after watching the show that she looked good and interviewed well. Raven took that as a real compliment

considering her mother always seemed to find something negative to say about what Raven was doing or how she was living.

Her mother laughed softly as she looked at the pictures Mia showed her of the Christmas dinner celebration. Mia pointing out her two sons and the mess they were making after they opened what was supposed to be their grandmother's gift. It made Raven feel good to see her mother in good spirits and able to respond, unlike the last scare they endured only four months before. Raven could see the tears forming in Mia's eyes, and was thankful when she pretended to dress up the flowers that decorated the side table. Raven looked for the first time at the arrangement Blair ordered and made a mental note to thank him. She wondered what the card read, but thought better about checking it in front of Mia.

As a young child, Raven always helped her mother plant bulbs and pick flowers in the flower garden her father maintained at their home in Upper Melboro. She had so much fun trying to remember the names of the flowers they planted and watched grow. Her father marveled at the pride she took in explaining the origins of each flower and how they grew. He always thought she would be a reporter or news anchor due to her natural knack to dynamically and dramatically present her ideas and views. During the warmer months, when her father took a few hours away from the construction business, they would sit out on the porch and read

about plants from different parts of the world and how some were used as healing remedies in certain cultures. As she sipped on lemonade and rocked barefooted on the swinging bench, she lazily took in the vision of exotic plants growing in far away lands, and made her father promise to take her to those places someday.

“You’ll get there, baby,” he would say. “With or without me, I have a feeling you’ll get there.”

Raven felt her Dad could do anything and cherished the special time she shared with him and her mother in the garden. Mia hated flowers, which suited Raven just fine.

“Momma, the doctor said you will have to stay here a few days just so they can monitor you,” Mia said as she touched her mother’s hand gently and intruded Raven’s thoughts. “You’ll be home soon enough.”

Raven wanted nothing more than to see her mother back home and back to her old self, but with every visit, the thought became more and more distant.

“Yea, Momma. You don’t want to stay in here too long. I’m told the food gets progressively worse and there’s nothing like some good ole fashioned home cooking from Pete’s Place,” Raven said mocking her Uncle Leonard’s southern accent.

Her mother couldn’t help but laugh aloud and even Mia cracked a smile. As she watched her mother’s smile begin to fade,

waves of guilt consumed Raven as she suddenly remembered the times her mother had called and left unanswered messages at home and on her cell phone. Raven could never find the time to call between working long and late hours, flying coast to coast, partying with friends, and spending time with whomever the “Beau of the Week/Month” happened to be.

“We’d better go and let you get your rest,” Mia said as she leaned over to kiss her mother. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

“Momma, I’ll call to see how you’re doing,” said Raven feeling obligated to make plans as well. “You know how much I hate coming to this place.”

Her mother nodded as Raven leaned in to kiss her. She took in the sweet smell of her mother’s skin, which smelled like the flowers she so loved.

The brisk wind caught Raven by surprise as she exited the hospital doors and headed for her car. She signed a few autographs on the way out as Mia watched in disgust. Raven didn’t bother to say goodbye to her sister, nor did she look after her to ensure she made it safely to her car. She had had enough of Mia in one sitting and was ready to move on to other business. She quickly pulled out her cell phone and hit redial.

“It’s going to be a long cold winter for sure,” she thought as the numbers beeped in her ear.

“I better turn up the heat a bit if I’m going to get that man to spend a little time with a sistah.”

As she popped open the trunk to get the snow remover, she paused to watch the snow fall softly and effortlessly over anything and everything in sight.

“Great. I hope my flight isn’t delayed,” she murmured to herself.

“Hello?” a sexy, deep, male voice on the other end replied after several rings. Hip-hop was blaring in the background. Raven was certain Blair was at club.

“It’s about damn time.”

“Did you check your messages?” Blair said with slight indignation. He prided himself in knowing how to handle Raven and her type.

“Just give me the 411.”

“Your flight is leaving on time in about an hour. United. I sent the details to your blackberry. You’re staying at the Ritz Carlton and I had to really pull some strings for that one, Missy.”

“You’re earning your keep. I’m not happy with the location, though. Is that the best you could do?”

“At this late date, I’m afraid so.”

“Keep looking. Did you find out where Justin is staying and when he is expected to arrive?”

“Now hold on, Diva. Keep your clothes on. He’s staying at the Trump Towers, but there has been no sightings of him. He’s been paying for the room since Wednesday, but my sources say he hasn’t officially checked in.”

“Interesting.”

“Crazy if you ask me. He’s staying in one of the presidential suites. Do you have any idea how much it’s costing him a night?”

“I would if you ever booked me there.”

“We’ll see if we can hook it up when you get the part.”

“Make it happen.”

“Of course, Diva,” Blair said with special emphasis on “diva”.

“Call Cynthia and tell her I’ll give her a ring when I touch ground.”

Raven hung up and stood outside of her car for a moment to enjoy the silence of the snowfall.

“There’s nothing like a warm body to cuddle up with on nights like this,” she whispered as she watched her chilled breath whisk away in the wind.

Ester

Lord, help me if that woman says, Amen, one more time. She's been talking me and Michael's ear off since we got here. Amen this, Amen that. I so dread being dragged to the Baptist Leadership Conference every year. And I'm so sick of these nosy women who want to know what's going on in our personal life, so that the moment they suspect some drama, they try to move in for the kill. I have had to deal with that the better part of 25 years since Michael started his ministry.

The old days were so much simpler. We had a small church of about 20 people and each year we grew by leaps and bounds. Mickey was just a teenager back then and my younger son Ezra couldn't have been more than five. Now Ezra is about to do his trial sermon in a few weeks as Michael grooms him to become the next pastor of Jehovah Baptist. Mickey didn't want to follow in his Daddy's footsteps, but he sure is making out well for himself as a Congressman for the State of Maryland. We are all so proud of him. We're proud of both of our boys and their success in life. Ezra will more than likely marry Joanne, although I would have preferred Rose Mary if he had asked me, but he didn't. I guess anybody is better than that daughter-in-law of mine Claudette, but there isn't much I can do about that either.

Whooooo! That woman can talk. Mouth going a mile a minute! Let me find a place to sit down and rest my feet. Michael, or shall I say, Pastor, and I have been in airports almost the entire day. Why they would have a conference in Chicago in the dead of winter is beyond me! I'm so tired and hungry I just want to go up to the room and rest my weary bones, but the Episcopal Bishop insisted that we see him upon our arrival. This woman, I think she said her name is Brenda, was asked to meet us in the lobby until the EB makes his grand entrance to welcome us. With all the money Jehovah Baptist is bringing into the denomination, he would want to roll out the red carpet and have a grand feast prepared for us when we got here.

I would rather be home. I have 101 things to do including preparing for the women's retreat next month. I need to meet with the team at least one more time to ensure all plans are still going smoothly. Last year was a near disaster when scheduling was mixed up with one of the speakers. Good thing I was able to bring in my home girl, Linda Taylor, at the last minute to give the attendees a message on contentment in the single state. Many of the woman who attended were single or divorced and really need to hear from a strong spiritual sister what it means to truly be content in the single state. She was awesome. Glory to God! We had a spirit-filled time in the Lord! I briefed Pastor every night of our 3-day stay and he

was very pleased. He truly has a heart for the women of the church and if I was a sensitive woman, I wouldn't be to happy about that. He and Mickey share that sincere heart for people in general, which makes people flock to them like magnets. Pastor also cares very much for the male seed and making sure they are strengthened in the Lord. After all, they are the core of the family foundation. If the foundation isn't stable, the whole family will suffer. But every now and then, some women will take his kindness for something other than its intention and that's when I have to step in.

Finally! There's the grand pooh-bah himself. Let me stand up so we can get this over with. Look at him grinning from ear to ear. They smile in Pastor's face and behind closed doors try to figure out how they can control him and his ministry. Well, the folks at Jehovah Baptist absolutely love their pastor and—

“Sister Foster! How are you?”

“Doing well, Bishop Collins. Good to see you.”

“We're going to have a fine time in the Lord, Amen? Praise God! Everything is in place. I anticipate this conference will be the best one ever, yes saa.”

Bishop Collins is full of it!

“Well we certainly are looking forward to a very productive conference in light of our agenda.”

My husband! Just as cool as he want to be! Before he got involved, the conference agenda was a complete mess. That's why they asked him to step him. He pulled the whole conference together. Organized it practically from scratch...got the right speakers lined up, and now its going to be a success largely due to his hard work and the fact that he is truly anointed. He sincerely knows and loves the Lord and that's what it takes to be fruitful. You have to know Him and have faith in Him.

"Why don't you two settle into your rooms? Pastor Foster if you wouldn't mind meeting me here in an hour, I want to talk to you about the agenda changes that were just made."

What!

"Is there something wrong? Did someone cancel on us?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. WE just thought there needed to be some tweaking here and there to maximize the purpose of why we are here. I'll see you in an hour."

Ain't that nothing! First of all, the agenda was approved four months ago and there was a final meeting 4 weeks ago to ensure everyone was on board with the final plans. Second, why in the world would someone want to tamper with an agenda of this magnitude on the eve of the event! Thirdly, who is WE? I bet it's the same four southern pastors that are dead set in wrecking havoc on our ministry. Lord if jealousy had a face it would be theirs,

including that Bishop Collins! Furthermore, why couldn't they wait to consult with Pastor before making changes? Pastor's going to get an earful from me as soon as the elevators close.

Is that my cell phone?

"Hello?"

"Hi, Momma."

"Hey, Mikey. How you doing, son?"

"Great. You guys make it to Chicago, OK? I hear the weather's really bad there."

"Yea. Someone told the weather authority that a bunch Baptist preachers were making their way over here and they decided to bring out the bad weather. Hold on a second. Your Dad is chomping at the bit to talk to you."

That Mikey is a good son and that grandson of mine is a chip off the ole block. I love that boy to death. Good thing he inherited a lot from this side of the family. Michal's just as smart as a whip, and handsome too. Got those killer hazel-green eyes. That's from me. His Daddy promises to let him spend a few weeks over the summer with us, but the jury's still out on that. Claudette said something about some expensive science camp she wants him to go to, and said she would get back to us. I won't bet money on it. Michal and I have a special bond and it drives that woman crazy! I just don't know what to say about Mikey's high society wife. Good,

Lord! That woman is in her mid 40s and so mixed up and confused it doesn't make sense. Got a hint of that Island blood in her, which should be a good thing, but she's just as unstable as a coon dog on a jackrabbit. And I can't stand the fact that she's older than Mickey. Why couldn't she find someone her own age? I'll give her one thing. She knows a good catch when she sees it. Just scooped Mickey right on up. I don't think the boy saw it coming, but I did. I could see it the minute he introduced me to her. I would have told him, too, but he didn't ask me.

Veronica

“Hello.”

“I’m leaving him.”

“What?”

“Have you checked the time?”

“I did as soon as I heard the phone ring.”

“Well I haven’t heard from him since yesterday.” Veronica felt bad about calling Claudette at this hour, but had no one else to turn too. She knew Claudette was having problems sleeping since Michael’s accident, but knew a quick chat with her would calm her down.

“That doesn’t sound like David,” Claudette said in a reassuring tone. “Did you two have another fight?”

“Yes. For the exact reason that I’m pissed with him now, only he’s taking it to another level.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s working on that new project I told you about for the municipal center and has been putting in a lot of hours. He’s been going in at 4:30 in the morning and getting home around 10:00 at night. I know he has a lot on his plate, but he also has a daughter that would like to see her father from time to time.”

“I can imagine how difficult that must be and I know exactly how you feel.” Claudette took a moment to settle herself as she felt sadness begin to overcome her. She really missed Michael, but also knew she had to be strong for one of her best friends.

“Now, Ronnie. Let’ be fair. You know how important this project is to him. It will either propel him to partnership status at his firm or compel him to branch out and start his own architecture firm. Either way, he’s putting in the dedication and commitment he needs to realize those dreams.”

Veronica couldn’t really argue with that and was ashamed that it took Claudette’s reminder to bring it to mind. She wanted to be supportive of David, just as he would be for her, but her marriage was in such disarray she many times felt she couldn’t see the forest for the trees.

“If it’s bothering you, Ronnie, call him. There is nothing stopping you from picking up the phone to let your husband know you are concerned about him and want to ensure he is OK. Let him know you care.”

Veronica knew Claudette was right and was so thankful for their friendship.

“I know you’re right. But I feel in my heart of hearts that he is doing this to get back at me. It’s that stupid tit for tat thing that our relationship has been reduced too. Since when was it ever

OK to not call when working later than usual. He just ticks me off so easily these days. It seems like every little thing he does bothers me. I can't help but feel this way," Veronica said as she felt the tears well up.

"If you feel that way, I'm sure he feels it, too. I know I've said this before, but maybe you two should really consider spiritual marriage counseling to work through this. You need to find out where this is all coming from."

"I'm afraid I already know."

Veronica paused as she contemplated telling Claudette about Rick. She decided that would have to wait for another time.

"I'm not happy and neither is he. We aren't connected on any level. Spiritually, emotionally, physically...we just aren't there." Veronica's voice began to quiver. "I don't feel I have a husband anymore. He's more like a roommate."

"Ronnie. I'm sorry you feel that way and that you're going through this. I have known the two of you for years and I'm sure you can work this out."

"I'm not sure I want to work it out."

"You say that now because you're angry."

"I have been thinking of leaving him for months now. It's not working out and I don't think either one of us are willing to make it work."

Veronica could hear Claudette adjusting herself on the bed and was certain she was saying a silent prayer.

“Kia would adjust. Kids always do, you know. I make enough money to support us so that’s not an issue. I want a second chance at happiness. I’m tired of being depressed and angry. I want to love and feel loved. David doesn’t know what that means anymore.”

“Ronnie. I know things look bad right now, and it may seem like leaving is the answer to everything, but rest assured this time will pass, and when it does, the two of you will be stronger for it because you would have weathered this storm together.”

“Claudette. David and I are not like you and Michael. You have a genuine love and compassion for each other. That’s why you can be so strong for him now.”

“You and David—“

“Me and David had that once, and it was beautiful. That time has long since passed. We are in two different places now..”

“Will you promise me you will at least seek spiritual counseling before making a final decision?”

“I can do that.”

“One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Can we say a prayer?”

“I think I need that more than ever right now,” Veronica said almost inaudibly.

Veronica was so encouraged by Claudette’s strength. When they had lunch the other day, Claudette shared Michael’s condition with her and how the accident has completely turned her life inside out. She knew this prayer would minister to both of them.

“Father, help us through this seemingly difficult time. Help us see beyond this situation in recognition of what it truly is...a challenge that we can overcome with your guidance. We believe you are with us as we face this immediate challenge. The devil is a liar and is forever trying to find a foothold in your plan. His attacks are endless and persistent. But heavenly Father, we acknowledge that he has no place here because we don’t belong to him. Our debt was paid through the blood of Jesus. We pray that our actions and words will always be in edification of Your Word and Will. Thank you, Father, for the many blessing through experiences you have given us. We have come a long way and take solace in knowing that you have been with us every step of the journey. Please remind us of your continued walk with us when we feel otherwise. Please remind us that your love and an understanding of your will can get us through anything. Please help us to put aside our own selfish agendas to focus on the “we” and not the “me”. Teach us, Father, to forgive as we have been forgiven in your sight. In Jesus our

Savior and Redeemer, we pray this prayer of strength in the full knowledge that you are with us and will deliver us from this challenge. Amen.”

“Amen. Honey, I thought you were going to pray, not preach.”

“Did you receive it?”

“How could I not?”

“Then His message to you through me was not in vain.”

“Thanks, sweetie. I’m sorry I woke you. The last thing you need is me waking you up at this hour with my crap. How are you holding up?”

“As well as to be expected. His condition is stable. Not much has changed,” Claudette said optimistically.

“How’s little man holding up?”

“It helps that Ester is here.”

“I never thought I’d ever hear you say that.”

“She’s actually been a great help. Michal loves her so much and she adores him. Her being here has helped us both. I think we are all being supportive of each other.”

“You’re a strong woman, C. Your faith is like a rock. I can see how much He has strengthened you. I wish I could be as open to Him as you are.”

“Wherever we are in our walk, the Father is right there to receive us. He’s right there to carry us through whatever we’re going through.”

“I truly believe that. Goodnight, Sis.”

“Goodnight.”