

Chapter One State of Disarray

"There has got to be a better way. I've got too many split ends. My glory is ruffled."

Jennifer shakes her bob and tries to fluff it up.

"You just got it done yesterday, now what's the matter," says Troy. He is standing behind her looking in the mirror with her.

"You know Jennifer; I spend a lot of money on you. I pay for your hair, your nails and your pedicures. I want you to maintain a certain look. And since you told me I had to pay, that's what I'm doing." He gives her a big hug. She likes that a lot. She loves it when Troy hugs her. She feels so protected. There is nothing more rewarding to her than being in the comfort of a man.

"You've been going to that Shelia for five months and you're still not satisfied. I told you to try my sister. Some people are jealous if you've got a good head of hair. You need to understand "that" baby and judge accordingly. Before you started going to this Shelia, you didn't have any problems. Now, you've got split ends." He picks up the ends of her hair.

"And she almost chopped off all of your hair," he says. "I started to go up there myself. But I love you and I'll be satisfied as long as you are satisfied. If she doesn't tighten you up in a month, I'm cutting off the money and you will go to my sister. My sister can't give you all the styles you want, but she will keep your hair healthy plus, you can trust her."

"Baby, I'll be alright. You know I'm just so hard to please," assures Jennifer. Troy knows that to be a fact. She starts twisting in the mirror...trying to see if her dress will spin around. It is a hot red dress with short sleeves and one of Troy's favorites. As a matter of fact, Troy bought the darn thing.

"Baby, I like it when you do that. I like it when you twist like that. Come to Daddy. I'll make it all better. He grabs Jennifer and they both are now looking in the mirror. Since Troy is taller, he places his chin in the top of her head. Damn, he thinks. Even her hair smells good. That Shelia is getting on my nerves too, he realizes.

"What's the name of that shop again?," he asks.

"It's called "Touch-UP." It's located downtown near the Pyramid. A lot of the TV people get their hair done there including the Mayor's wife and a lot of women who go to my church."

"Either they're tipping that woman real good or you're going to the wrong hairdresser. Baby, this is your glory. Take care of it. This defines you. There's nothing sexier to me than a woman with a nice head of hair. I like it long. Sometimes I like it short. But mainly, I like it long. So, I can play in it. And I know a lot of other brothers feel the same way."

Troy kisses Jennifer on the nose and pats her butt.

"Now get ready so we can go shopping. I need you to help me pick out something nice for tonight. We're going to that new restaurant downtown. It's supposed to be the cat's meow. All the guys at work go there." Troy looks at Jennifer and she looks a little down. He knows that she's not use to bad hair days.

"Do you think God is punishing me for something? Did I do something to somebody?" she asks. She looks up at Troy with those bedroom eyes. She wants some confirmation or something. Maybe, she is going a bit overboard. It isn't that time of the month. So, she can't blame it on PMS.

"No baby, you didn't do anything to anybody," he says placing his finger on the tip of her nose. He pulls her by her arms bringing her closer to him.

"I'm sure this happens from time to time. Sometimes you just have to be content with healthy hair and style it yourself. I'm sure it must be hard trying to find a salon that provides everything. I still love you. We'll find you a good hairdresser. I told you to go to my sister Patrice, but if you want to search the hard way you can."

"Honey, Patrice can't style worth a lick," she pouts "I need to have somebody who knows the current styles. I work in TV sales. I can't have my hair in a style that looks like "I just gave up." But I like it long too. You like it long."

Jennifer grabs Troy's neck and kind of hangs on it. He is sitting on the edge of the bed now. He stayed with her last night. She's got a big loft apartment overlooking the Mississippi River. Memphis has really picked up. She was about ready to leave this town until she got that sales job at the number one station in Memphis. Her story about dissatisfaction here could take hours to tell. Troy tells her to be content with herself. He

says that it's dangerous to curse where you are because it's part of God's divine plan. God puts us at different places for different reasons. She's here in Memphis because the city has something that she needs and she has something that the city needs. Once she effectively conquers Memphis and God is pleased with the work that He wants done, He just might change her assignment.

Troy always has a wise word to say. But the truth be told, he loves Memphis. He could be content here if he felt Jennifer was content. And as long as he continues to win and make money, he'll be happy here. But he understands that sometimes it's hard for women like Jennifer. She has so much going for herself. Sometimes other women are threatened by that. It's a shame they've been led to believe that God doesn't have enough stuff to go around. Jennifer looks at Troy very lovingly. She is content now that Troy's here. She has somebody to face the world with. She has somebody to face her problems with. Things go a lot better when you have a decent job, a good church, a good man, a little money and yes, good, healthy hair.

She worked in radio sales for a long time. She networked with a lot of the anchors and they were able to get her a job interview with the General Manager. The GM hired her on the spot. She's been there for two years. And things are going well. Businesses are popping up all over the Mid-South. So, she spends a lot of time after hours networking and trying to come up with new leads.

Troy is a director with a local telemarketing company. That business is just as insecure as television. But Troy has managed to stay at his company for ten years. He doesn't play

and he's very shrewd. She thanks God for him, because he's a Christian. He often gives her advice on politics at her job.

She still gets a warm tingly feeling when she thinks about how they met. Jennifer met him on a Sunday afternoon after attending the All of That Baptist Church. Of course, she would love to marry him but you just never know. She's just dating to enjoy. Sometimes you meet Mister Right while you're dating someone else. But, truth be told she's not looking for anyone else. She wants Troy.

She doesn't date around on him. Why? Because, she's got the best deal going. A few years back, he met most of her family members. They like him. But they both stay pretty busy going to different functions. They hit it off just like that. Sure, there have been times when she thought Troy was cheating, but she knows that she's a tough act to follow and whoever tries to take him had better come correct.

She means the sister has got to be thorough. She has this two bedroom loft in a security building. It was decorated by an interior designer whom she met at church. The living room has African Art with plants near the door. The sofa and love seat are peach leather. The coffee table is an antique oak table. There's a brass magazine holder near the peach sofa. She found it at an antique shop. The carpet is a soft peach. Troy's picture hangs over the fireplace. He gave it to her for her birthday last year. She turned 31. He's 35. Jennifer is so in love. Some of her past relationships have been really rocky. She's been involved with very possessive men. One time she was involved with an abusive man, but that didn't last long. But God sent Troy to her. She didn't go out looking. She didn't have

to beg anybody to fix her up. She just met him one Sunday afternoon at the grocery store. Jennifer is on her tip toes trying to get some beans off of a shelf.

"Do you need any help?" he asks. She can remember that moment as clear as day. It's like it just happened yesterday.

"I'm fine," she says somewhat annoyed. She doesn't turn around.

"I know that," he responds." But do you need some help. I would really like to assist you." Then, she turns around prepared to tell him where to get off.

"Look Mister, I can do this," she says. But when she turns completely around, she decides that maybe she does need some help. She is speechless. He is gorgeous. And he has the most beautiful teeth. He must be about 6'2" 180 pounds. He is well built and very neatly dressed.

"I've seen you at church at All of That Baptist," he says. "I've been wanting to come up and speak to you. But, you just seem like you have a lot on your mind all of the time. I've never seen you with anybody. I don't even see you hanging out with girlfriends that much. And you're not married. So, what about we go out to dinner?" he says with a smile.

"No, I'm not married," says Jennifer. But, she is determined not to appear desperate.

"I could be dating someone for all you know," she adds.

"If you're dating someone, why don't you ever bring him to church," he rebuts. "If you're dating someone, why isn't he with you now after church shopping for Sunday dinner? You're not dating anyone and I know that." He gives her a megawatt smile like don't try to play me.

He is right. Troy has been watching her for months. He knows her routine. She sits at the same place in church...the sixth row from the back in the middle pew. It never fails. He always knows where to find her. Sometimes she sits with girlfriends, but for the most part she appears to be a loner. Troy also knows that she is one of the more active ones at the church. He sees her car. It's usually there before he gets there. So, she must be attending Sunday school. After church, she usually mingles around for about twenty minutes or so and then she leaves alone. A few Sundays, he's stayed just to watch to see if she is with anybody. Guys come up to her from time to time giving her hugs. But, she doesn't leave with anybody. He even knows what kind of car she drives. It is a green European sedan. She keeps it very clean on the inside and outside. It needs waxing but that's something they can address later.

Jennifer doesn't know what to tell him. He has peeped her card. She isn't dating anyone. So, the only thing she can do is go out with him. She has never seen him before even though he is very good looking. But, he could also be an ax murderer as far as she knows.

"Will you have dinner with me, tonight?" he pleads. Jennifer doesn't immediately respond. But, how can she resist him. He is so very cute. He would make her a nice boyfriend. Plus, he looks like he's got his act together.

"What about tomorrow?" she bargains.

"No, tonight," he insists. "I need something positive to jump start my work week. Meet me at 8:30 at Phil's on Union, please." But it isn't a desperate please. It is a pretty please without the pretty. It is an if you will allow me please kind of please. He knows she

is so into church that she probably attends night service. So, he doesn't want any lame excuse about her not being able to meet him. Troy is going to see her tonight if it kills him.

"Eight-thirty sounds good," she says. He pulls out his business card holder and then takes out a pen. He writes his home number on the back of the card. His pager number is on his business card as well as his fax number, cell phone number and e-mail. There is no excuse for her not to ever reach him. None.

"This is for you. If for some strange reason you can't meet me, I want you to call me. Please don't disappoint me," he asks staring at her hair. And for some reason he feels that she won't disappoint him. He can discern that she has a good heart. She is exactly the type of woman he needs to be the mother of his children. Of course, he is jumping the gun a bit in his mind. But he can tell that the two of them will be going places. His search has ended. Then, he walks off to continue his shopping.

Jennifer just stands there with the card in her hand. The card reads "Troy Smith, director of Sales for Galaxy Telemarketing Company, a full service telemarketing group." Sounds like a nice job, she thinks. He is definitely good looking. And he seems friendly enough. She peeps after him perhaps to make sure he is gone. She didn't notice a ring on his finger. She wonders if he has any children. He has to be about 35 or something. But what she likes most about him is that smile. His smile is truly spectacular. Jennifer has fallen for many a handsome devil with a megawatt smile. He smells good too. She's so glad she has met someone. And she is all dressed up looking her very best after church. Her hair is in place looking very sexy. She doesn't appear stressed out because she spends

a good portion of the morning in meditation. She has been meditating on the Word of God.

That suit that he has on has to be worth five hundred dollars or more. But that's nothing for guys to spend that kind of money on suits. Men get all into their suits and ties and shirts. Troy is at the cash register now paying for his groceries. On his way out, he looks around to see if he can see Jennifer. He wants to stay with her and help her finish grocery shopping. But he doesn't want to lay claim too quickly. He doesn't want to scare her off. And he knows that he can't afford to do that.

You have to be careful how you approach women these days. A lot of them have been through so much. And he and some of his partners are responsible. But Troy is a much more changed man. He is no longer a card carrying member of the Canine Club. He no longer prances around like America's Most Wanted. Although, he still feels that way. But, he is proud to be a black man.

Troy knows Jennifer's name already because he has asked around. Plus, she leaves some mail in her car and it has her name, "Jennifer Williams", on it. He will let her hand over any personal information about herself. He will also advise her not to leave mail showing her address in the car. Someone can see it and follow her.

Troy is currently involved in a relationship, but it is going nowhere fast. He is going to dump the girl anyway once he and Jennifer hook up. He's been meaning to dump the other girl for awhile. But well he's got needs and she's been meeting them. He isn't going to rush into sex too soon with Jennifer. He will probably wait about six months at the most. That is about all he can take or stand. But she is definitely a woman that he can take

home to meet his Mama. And she will like that since she hasn't met anyone in the last five years, not even Carmen who he's currently dating.

He goes to his car...a Jeep that he's had for about a year. He hates having car notes. He looks forward to the day when he can pay for the car in cash. Troy has a house out East. It's just big enough for him and Jennifer. When they get married and want to start a family, then they can move somewhere else.

Troy knows that Jennifer is more than likely the one. He just has that feeling.

Carmen will not be that happy when Troy decides to leave her. He'll do the best he can to leave on a friendly basis. He wants to have a good beginning with Jennifer and well good endings make good beginnings. The thing with Carmen is they started out sexual from day one and it's always been, well....sexual. She is not going to take it well at all when he leaves. He has spoiled her...taking her on trips and cruises and the like. But Carmen has her own consulting firm. She's about four years older than Troy. She won't have a problem finding another man. If she had cheated on him, that would have given him the out he needed. But she's been totally faithful. So, he'll just have to totally leave her. They've only been dating for two years. He knows that Carmen's biological clock is ticking and she probably wants him to be the one.

But there's something about Jennifer. She's so spiritual. She's so committed to her God and Troy just finds that so exciting. Sure, we as humans all mess up from time to time. But someone who still manages to be faithful could be a good teacher to him. He's sure that Jenny has a story to tell. And maybe she will share it with him tonight at dinner. He will have nothing but time to listen to her life story. He can't wait. But then, he thinks

about Carmen. Her flight is coming in around 11 p.m. So, he will have to tear himself away from his precious Jennifer to pick her up. He can't just leave her high and dry at the airport. That wouldn't be nice.

"Always treat people with respect and dignity," his mother use to say. "Even when you are ending a relationship that person is still a human being. And they deserve to be respected." Troy truly loves his mother. Perhaps, this is the reason he has so much respect and admiration for women. He leaves the store and heads home. This grocery store is on the way. But he knows Jennifer will go there just as she does most Sundays after church. It pays to be observant.

Jennifer has not been expecting to met anybody today of all days. She hasn't dated anyone in a year or so. She is still recovering from a clown she dated a few years back. But now, this Troy Smith just shows up out of no place. She's sure he has a woman or two, because some brothers want to. But that won't be a problem because she can tangle with the best of women for a man. She has a lot to offer a man. But, she knows that she will need to pull out all the stops for this Troy Smith. Her apartment is already beautifully decorated. That will be a plus. She has an okay car with notes running for another year. She's not in a whole lot of debt but she has a few credit card bills. Let's see she's healthy and beautiful. She's young and gifted. She can cook. And oh yes, the bedroom scene is just awesome. But that's not the important thing. She's a woman committed to God and trying to do the right thing. If she could just stop fornicating until she married, she would be okay. She'll do just fine with Troy.

Normally, Jennifer wears the same thing back to church for night service. Today, she's donning a deep khaki suit with a mint green scarf and mint green pumps. Tonight, she will wear something softer perhaps a deep yellow and orange summer dress that she has. It will be nighttime so she can be less business like. Plus, it's a pretty little dress with a flattering neckline. Troy will love it and fall madly in love with her. Yeah; he is going to be her husband. She can feel it. God has given her a second chance and she isn't going to blow it. She will have to make sure he is in love with her before they sleep together. She doesn't think that she can wait until I do before sleeping with him. They would at least have to wait six months to a year. Unless, he's a strong brother, he'll be cheating before that. So, she has to wait until he's emotionally invested in her. Jennifer hops in the cash express line. She only has about 15 items. She wants to go home and take a one or two hour nap before venturing out to church and dinner with Troy at Phil's.

The grocery store isn't quite as crowded as most Sundays. The walk to the cash register seems like the longest in eternity. There are three others in front of her. One guy has about three items. Another woman has about 20 or more items. Why that woman is in the express lane Jennifer will never know. Jennifer stands there and looks at the magazine covers until her turn is up. One magazine boasts of "A New Way to Turn Your Man On." Another promises to give you "Ten Steps to a More Beautiful You." One soap magazine promises to "Show You What Mike Will Do with Rachel." And even another magazine promises "Sex On Demand...The Way You like It." Jennifer does not feel like buying a magazine today. She looks in her basket. She doesn't really need two half gallons of that

premium yogurt, but it is on sale for \$2.99 when it's normally \$4.27. And you can't beat that with a stick.

Then, she thinks about Troy. What if he is the one? She hates to do this to herself...get all worked up when meeting a guy. But, how does she ever expect to achieve anything in life if she doesn't think positively. She's also separated herself from scrappy girlfriends. She's at the point in life where she's not playing. So, she doesn't have time to hang out with sour pusses.

"Miss, you're next," says the cashier.

"Okay. Sorry," replies Jennifer placing eggs and milk on the register line. For a brief moment, she gets caught up in what could be. She gets caught up in her and this guy named Troy. She wonders what he is like and if he is really that nice. She wonders if his family members are nice. Some relatives can clown. Jennifer is thankful that her family members, especially her parents, are supportive.

She will soon find out about Troy's folks. Jennifer doesn't quite overreact the way she use to when meeting guys. It's like going through a phase. She usually waits for them to show a lot of interest before she even lets on. And a lot of times that's just her natural response. So many times she has gotten crazy over a man and then he turns out to be "The Player of the Year." But a man can't really play a woman unless she lets him. Mr. Troy Smith will just have to prove himself. Time will tell, she thinks.

"Thirty-five, sixty-eight," says the cashier. Jennifer fumbles through her bag to find a checkbook. Then, she fumbles to find a pen.

"Sorry," she apologizes to the customer waiting behind her and the clerk.

"That's okay Miss," says the clerk. Jennifer hands him a check and her driver's license.

"Is everything on the front correct?" he asks.

"Yes, it is," she says.

"Do you have a work number?" She gives him that. He runs everything through and gives her a receipt.

"You have a nice day, Miss. Thank you for shopping with us."

"Thank you," Jennifer replies. Then, she pushes her groceries out the door. She looks back inside the store for a moment. She wants to record in her mind the meeting place of her next romance. It is an unusually lovely day outside. The birds are chirping and the bees humming. The flowers look bigger than life. Going into the store, she spots an elderly couple. They look like they've been together all their life.

I bet that woman has been through some mess, thinks Jennifer. And for some reason she takes note of the couple. Later on, that couple is to be one of many cues or confirmations to her from God that Troy is the one. Jennifer disengages the alarm on her car and opens the door. She puts the key in the ignition and turns the car on. Jennifer flops down in the front seat, reaches for the glove compartment and pushes the button to the trunk. She rolls the window down on her side just a tad. These power locks are strange. Plus, she doesn't want to get stranded at the grocery store on a Sunday evening.

After placing her groceries in the trunk, Jennifer gets in the car and heads home. For some reason, she feels like taking the scenic route pass the park. Just as she suspects, there are hordes of people hanging out in the park. A lot of them probably didn't go to church

today so they could hang out. Jennifer use to be in that number and then she got saved while in college. It is amazing the way her friends treated her just because she wanted to go to church. Sure she made good grades and all of that, but something was missing.

She pulls into her downtown garage not a minute too soon. There are nice grocery stores downtown, but the one near the church usually has better prices. She isn't sure why. Jennifer waves at the garage attendant. He basically knows her routine on Sundays. She usually gets back home from church and shopping around 3:00. Then, she leaves out again around 6:30 for night service. It never fails.

She parks near the elevator. Pops a button in the glove compartment and then hops out of the car with bag in hand. Jennifer then gathers her bags of groceries in both hands. She tries to buy just enough to carry because she doesn't like making a second trip to the garage. That's why she also demands those plastic bags. No one is in the garage at this moment. She punches the button so she can go to the fifth floor. As soon as she gets in she leans up against the back of the elevator. A flashback of how she came to be at this apartment enters her mind. After she stopped dating a clown right out of MBA school, she moved to these apartments. No one enters the parking garage unless they are a resident or have authorization from a tenant.

More than likely, it will be awhile before Troy makes his way to her apartment. She has a hard fast rule of not giving a guy her number for at least two weeks. After about two or three dinner dates, she can tell if he's an idiot. Most of them haven't complained and if they can't wait that long they just stop calling. She gets off the elevator and goes down the hall to her apartment placing the groceries on the floor. She unlocks the deadbolt and then

unlocks the lock. She pushes the door open and then goes in. She steps into the kitchen first. Right past her kitchen is a huge den, then the dining room and then her bedroom and bath. She spends a lot of time decorating, making her home feel like a comfortable place. Jennifer puts everything away. Then, she goes into her bedroom. She has two messages, one from her baby sister and one from a girlfriend. She will get to them later.

Peeling off her clothes, she begins to think about how coincidental it is that she met Troy. Could he be "the one?" Did God send Troy to her? And he goes to church. I wonder if he's ever been married, she thinks. I wonder if he has any children. Sometimes women make it hard on themselves with all of their lists. Troy appears to be one of those types of men where you throw lists out the window. Jennifer wouldn't be able to turn Troy down. And he just doesn't seem the type to accept "no" for an answer. She looks at the clock. She has a chance to get in a two hour nap from 3:30 to 5:30. That's what she'll do. Plus, it will keep her rejuvenated.

Jennifer goes to the bathroom and washes her face. She doesn't like sleeping in make-up. Then, she uses a scrub to get all of the residue of make-up off her face. She has a strict skin care regimen that she follows. It hasn't failed her in seven years. Other product offers come and go. But, she has found out if a basic skin care system works...keep it. She places her hair in a ponytail. She doesn't sleep in scarves because she sleeps on satin pillow cases and sheets. A hairdresser suggested it to her once. She told her it would keep her hair from breaking off. Plus, she can remain sexy on the nights her man sleeps over. Jennifer closes the curtains in her bedroom. And then sets her clock. Sometimes she is a

light sleeper. She needs rest today. Plus, meeting Troy will provide for some sweet dreams she's sure. She will just take it easy and not try to get too stirred up about this guy.

By now, Troy is home relaxing in his den. He is watching a game. He misses some of it just to catch up with Jennifer. But, he's sure she'll be worth it in the long run. His favorite teams are in the playoffs. If all goes well, maybe he and Jennifer can attend the Super Bowl together.

He knows she probably has a man or somebody she is messing around with. He looks around his house. He feels confident that he can knock him off. Troy has a steady job, a good personality, attends church and loves his mother. What woman wouldn't want him?

Carmen is due back in town this evening. He promises to pick her up at 9:30. Troy starts thinking of excuses. He really needs to cover his butt. He can say he overslept. But Troy is always pretty punctual. Carmen will think something is up. He can just say he was hanging with the guys and lost track of time.

Just then, the phone rings. He looks at his I-D. It shows an out of state call in Minnesota. That's where Carmen is. He decides against answering. After about the fourth ring, it goes to voice mail. He waits about five minutes before answering.

"Hi Honey, this is Carmen. My flight has been delayed until around 11:45. It would be great if you could pick me up. Talk to you later, Carmen."

This must be my lucky day, thinks Troy. Now, he doesn't have to make an excuse. He can see Jennifer and still pick Carmen up. Eleven-forty-five at night is too late for her

to take a cab. She is still a good friend. But Jennifer will probably be the one he spends his life with. He just has a feeling.

It has been a long day and he needs to get some rest to be alert. During the fourth quarter, Troy dozes off. He sleeps for about two hours. When he wakes up, it is six o'clock. He scurries to get ready. Wait a minute, he thinks. He isn't meeting Jennifer until 8:30. Why is he in such a hurry? Then he remembers might as well do church since that appears to be where Miss Jennifer's heart is.

Since it's night service, he'll wear something casual. He gets up off of his sofa and lets out a mighty stretch. He looks at Carmen's photo on the fireplace. She truly is a beauty and everything a man could hope for. But Carmen is in no way as spiritual as Jennifer. And in recent months, that's where Troy's heart has been heading. He and Carmen don't appear to be growing in the spirit together.

But, he doesn't dally on that much longer. He goes to the bathroom. Gets in the shower and stays for about 15 minutes. He wonders what Jennifer is really like. She seems to be so nice. He can tell underneath she has a good heart. She may have even been hurt a few times. A lot of times, women will put up walls to keep men from talking to them while they're healing. Well, as far as he is concerned Jennifer is healed and it is time to let someone else in she can definitely trust Troy with her heart.

Sometimes, brothers get a bad wrap about not being sensitive enough, not having enough heart and not being romantic enough. That is far from the truth. If a woman treats a man the way he wants to be treated and indeed lets him be the man, the man will be to her everything that she desires.

He jumps out of the shower and looks at himself in the mirror rubbing his chin. He isn't a young buck anymore. But he isn't an old buck either. He does the necessary things like putting on deodorant and lotion after towel drying.

He's met so many women looking for perfection. Nobody is perfect. Not even the women are. And until women realize that, they will forever have a hard time. They have to know which qualities can't be compromised like a good work ethic, good treatment, good hygiene, good morals, clean surroundings and basically somebody with some common sense.

A lot of cosmetic things aren't important, but it is important that a woman be attracted to the man. Who wants someone faking affection just because a brother has money or a nice job? If you don't want me, move on. Next. Women truly need to be educated on what to look for in a man. They need to find someone who they can grow with. Men don't like women who think they can change a man. Troy won't change for anyone. Accept him for who he is or don't accept him at all.

He doesn't like overly aggressive women who have a secret desire to be the man. Sure women have competitive jobs and competitive salaries. But if he can't be the man, he will keep on stepping. Plus, Troy is a man who commands respect. Since he is the man, he pays mostly when he goes out with women. If she just wants to treat him every now and then for fun, that's okay. But he is the man, so he will play the man at both ends.

Now, if she wants to share part of the load by cooking that's fine. He loves good home cooking. But he also loves trying new and exciting food at different restaurants. Women get confused when they have to step in and take on responsibilities that are

generally taken care of by the man. And then another man requires something else. Perhaps there should be some sort of universal code that the sexes can agree to disagree on. That will never be, he's sure. But, Troy definitely has his eyes set on Jennifer. She is the type of woman who he can spend the rest of his life with.

Jennifer jumps up from a very refreshing nap. She reluctantly rolls out of bed. She stands there looking in the mirror then she falls back on the bed. I need 15 more minutes, she decides. Then something tells her "get your butt up." So, she gets back up, drags herself to her bathroom, and washes her face. Then, she towel dries. Now, she feels 110 percent better. She just stands there for a minute like this is going to take some time. Jennifer looks closely at her hair. It is almost time for a re-touch. She leaves the bathroom and goes to her closet to find something casual to wear.

What is she wearing tonight? That deep yellow and orange summer dress and her orange sandals will be just great. She will wear flesh colored hosiery. This dress will knock any man off his feet, she thinks. And she needs that kind of power tonight. She separates the dress in her closet and then goes to her mirror. Jennifer looks at all the cologne and make-up that she's collected over the years. She could go a bit heavier if she wanted to since it is evening time. She will also put her hair up in a cute pony tail with curls down the sides. That will give her a more feminine seductive kind of look.

The hairdresser that she has now can't style worth a flip. But, her touch-ups are good. And she doesn't try to cut off all of Jennifer's hair. But Jennifer has seen some really cute styles lately that she would love to try. She's heard about Shelia at Touch-Up. She

might go there eventually. She's heard Shelia is sort of a trip though. But you can't believe everything you hear about hairdressers.

Jennifer pins her hair up. Then, she looks in the mirror at the clock. It is about 6:15. She has to get out of here no later than 6:40 to get there on time. They won't let you in for about ten minutes if you get there pass 6:55. Pastor is strict about stuff like that.

"You can get to work on time. So, why can't you come to church on time? Isn't God more important to you than work," he often asks.

She remembers what an Atlanta preacher says on television. "God gave you the house, the car and the family and you blew it. You stopped going to church and you stopped tithing. You blew it."

He is so right, agrees Jennifer. She knows that she never wants to be a minister. Ministers have to put up with a lot of crap. People act so crazy. Plus, they're always lying on you. You can never please anybody. Yet, it is the most important job on the face of this earth...bar none. Ministers are charged by God to minister to the flock and prepare people for glory. That in itself is a hard and important job. Salvation is serious business.

I don't ever want to be a preacher, she thinks. I want something easy like being a preacher's wife or a Sunday school teacher or Vacation Bible School teacher. But then, she's heard that minister's wives catch hell, too. You have the dozens or hundreds of women who want to hug the preacher after church. The minister has to be nice to them so they can keep coming to church. But what about the sisters who need prayer after church service. Being a minister is such a thankless job.

Please deliver me, thinks Jennifer. Those sisters need a special prayer that they can't get through themselves or can't get through during church service. So, they have to call on the pastor after church. That's when he's busy trying to rush home to eat. She's sure lots of folk want him to eat at their home. A minister probably doesn't have to cook on Sundays unless they just want to. A first lady has to watch her diet. All those Sunday dinners can take a toll on a sister.

Jennifer shakes her head as if to wonder why she is pondering so long on being a minister's wife. She has never dated a minister and never plans too. She looks at her size eight frame in the mirror. Jennifer has managed to hold her own very well. She stops daydreaming and starts putting on her make-up. Then, she washes her hands so she can put on her clothes. She takes out some gloves that she has worn as an usher in church...putting them on. Then, she puts on her hosiery. She's torn many a stocking trying to put them on without gloves. That's why she makes sure she has a pedicure. One time she went through four or five pairs of expensive hosiery within a matter of two weeks. She stopped buying them for awhile. Now, she just wears them on special occasions. Maybe, she is getting too sophisticated. Maybe she is getting too into doing the do.

Okay, she is just having a bad day. God wants her to be cute. God wants her to look good. God wants her to be happy. God wants her to have Troy, she thinks. Then, she smiles. Outside her window, a little bird chirps. She looks. Perhaps that is her confirmation. She wouldn't serve a God who she couldn't be positive about. Jennifer jumps in the mirror. Man does she look good. Troy Smith better watch out because he won't be able to help himself tonight. And she means that. On the way out, she looks

around her apartment. She has done a good job on decorating. While other women are worrying about the men they don't have, Jennifer is busy decorating and trying to better herself. She is busy getting right with God and talking to friends and family members. She is busy doing a lot of things like volunteering. Besides, she's never had to worry about getting a man anyway. A man should be worrying about trying to get her.

He who finds a wife finds a good thing. That's in the Bible somewhere. And that is the way she's looking at it. She doesn't have to go looking for a husband. The husband needs to be looking for her. Her mother trained her well. Not only can she cook, but if need be, she can sew. She's an excellent housekeeper and now, she's even become more detail oriented in the money department. That's something that she's been working on for a long time.

She's paying her tithes, but sometimes she still gets in a bind. It could be because she likes to shop and likes to buy things for the apartment. But, she doesn't need too much for the apartment right now.

Jennifer hurries out of the apartment. She doesn't want to be late.

Troy gets up from his nap. It is about six o'clock. He goes to his closet and pulls some dress slacks from a cleaning bag. He goes to one of his drawers and gets out a nice short sleeved shirt. He knows Miss Jennifer will probably get to church on time. So, he needs to leave in 20 minutes. He lives out East. Jennifer looks like a downtown chick. But if she lives out East, he wouldn't be surprised. Troy really likes career women. He has grown tired of the women who appear to be waiting on prince charming to come through

and pay all of their bills and take care of them. But, what they fail to realize is that they need to at least give the appearance of being self-sufficient. Some are not trying to do that. They need to develop themselves through education and just hard work. True enough, folks years ago could get away without a lot of formal education. Now a days, people need to have education to stay competitive.

He finishes getting dressed. Troy has gotten on his mental soapbox like he does so often. He dashes out of the house into the garage setting the alarm on the way out. He pulls out of the garage waving at a neighbor who is finishing some lawn work. Troy can't bring himself to do lawn work on a Sunday, even in a tight. If he can't get it done Monday through Saturday, then it just doesn't need to happen. His ride to church is a good thirty minutes. He pops in one of his favorite female jazz vocalists.

"Neveerrrr as good as the first time. Never as good as the first time." The opportunity to go out on a first date with someone appeals to Troy. It is somewhat exciting. He hasn't been with someone new in a few years. Had he not met Jennifer, he would still be seeing Carmen. But, Jennifer has something special about her. She is more spiritual then Carmen. Carmen goes to church, but not religiously. Most times on Sundays she likes to play tennis or do house cleaning. She sometimes grocery shops on Sundays and does odd jobs around the house. Making time for church on Sunday for Carmen is like making time for lunch during the regular work week. It's just not going to happen a lot. But Jennifer looks like the type who does lunch religiously through the week just to hook up with friends. She goes to morning and night service at church. To some that is a little much.

Sure a lot of people can do the morning service thing, but to go night and day is really an accomplishment.

Troy pulls into the parking lot of the church. He looks for Jennifer's car but hasn't seen it yet. It is already 6:50. She is no doubt in the building. Then, a smile crosses his face. Troy hasn't been this excited in years. He doesn't know why, but he is. He jumps out of his vehicle and starts walking towards the building. He waves at the security guard. About a few hundred feet ahead of him he sees a girl in a yellow and orange dress. He stops right in his tracks. She has a ponytail, but he is certain it is Jennifer. She is walking into the church.

Troy gains his composure and kind of plays this thing off in case someone is watching him. He just looks around as if to take in the summertime air. The security guard already knows what time it is. He sees Jennifer too. He sees her every Sunday. She always comes by herself. She and that young man would make a good little match, he thinks. But he doesn't see Troy that much. He sees Jennifer every week. He sees her every Sunday morning and night. He sees her on Wednesday nights at Bible study. She comes to revival religiously and then comes to other major church functions. Security guards get to see a lot. It's a tough job, but somebody has got to do it. Now, he isn't so sure if Troy is good enough for her. Troy doesn't come to church quite as much as she does. But maybe she'll rub off on him. He's willing to give Troy a chance.

Troy proceeds to walk to the church. His heart just flutters for a minute. He has never had this happen to him before. Here he is cool Troy Smith. There she is beautiful Jennifer Williams. He goes to the balcony. That way he can see her and then when church

is over he can wait for her downstairs. Even if he misses her, they are still going to meet at Phil's. Come hell or high water, he thinks...I'll be there. He sits on about the third pew from the bottom. There she is down there. She is standing up talking to a few ladies in the middle of the sanctuary. That is her with the yellow and orange sundress. Her hair is in a ponytail.

Troy really likes women who keep themselves up. She appears to be taking really good care of herself and it shows. She is so beautiful, he thinks. Then, he sits down. Of course, Jennifer notices him. She looks around the church from time to time, but not always. But on this particular night, she looks up in the balcony. And who does she see, but Troy. It's good to know that he attends church. Coming to night service shows real commitment. She turns around and sits back down. She doesn't want to give the appearance of staring at him. He might think she likes him or something. The minister gets up to the pulpit. "Welcome back to night service. We're so glad that you decided to worship with us this evening. The choir will sing."

"Somewhere down the line, you're going to need the Lord. Somewhere down the line. You're going to need the Lord. You're going to need Him in your home. You're going to need Him wherever you roam. Somewhere," sings the soloist.

"Somewhere," repeats the choir.

"Try God," says the soloist.

"Somewhere," sings the choir.

"Oh, Some whereeee," humms the soloist.

"Somewhere," buzzes the choir.

"Need my Lord," whines the soloist.

"Somewhere," sings the choir.

"You gonna need," ends the soloist.

"You gonna need the Lord," repeats the choir.

Then the choir starts clapping as they continue to sing. Folks start getting happy in the choir. The preacher starts bouncing and choir members start fainting.

"It is a blessing to be in the midst of the Lord," says the Pastor.

"If you're happy tonight, you ought to say thank you Jesus." He continues to bounce his head.

Troy looks for Jennifer. She is up clapping as well.

Jennifer makes it up in her mind that she isn't going to shout tonight. She needs to look fresh when she goes to dinner. She is not going to shout. And she is happy to be in the service of the Lord. She's also thankful not to have any major stressors in her life. So, she continues to praise the Lord and thank Him for His goodness and mercy.

"Some of you are still sitting there acting like God hasn't done anything for you," says the Pastor. "How can you come into the house of the Lord and not acknowledge Him? How can you take in air and not thank God for His goodness and mercy? You at least owe God praiseeeee," he shouts. Suddenly, he pulls away from the pulpit as if to allow these tired Christians an opportunity to praise God. He looks around to see who is shouting and who isn't. Choir members start flying through the stands. One woman is running back and forth behind the pulpit. The minister comes back. He doesn't want to get in the way or get knocked down.

"Some of you need to be shouting because God answered your prayers just today. Some of you have been knee deep in debt, but God pulled you out and gave you a second chance. Some of you finally got out of that marriage that was killing you. You wanted that person, but didn't consult God and it was more than you bargained for. I need some help up in here tonight" he says pushing himself away from the pulpit.

The audience members immediately start shouting, "Amen, Amen."

"Somebody has been going without male or female companionship for years because you've been trying to do things the right way. Or maybe God delivered you from that married man. God delivered you from somebody who was eating away at your soul, tearing down your self-esteem. God thought enough of you to spare you anyhow and you still won't give Him praiseeeee!" yells the minister.

Just then Jennifer starts jumping. People don't know her story. People don't know about the married clown she dated and only through the grace of the Lord did she get out of it. Many people don't know what she has gone through except her sisters and a few close girlfriends. Nobody knows like Jesus. No one knows like the Lord. And for that reason, Jennifer just turns loose because truly the Lord has brought her out. She knows people know. They come up to her and kind of mention the subject. But she never tells them anything because she knows they aren't her friends. They are merely on a fact finding venture. They want to destroy her. But they don't think she has sense enough to know what time it is. But she still finds favor with God. He still saw fit to deliver her and for that she's so grateful.

Troy is busy in the worship service himself. He hasn't felt this satisfied in a long time. He is experiencing a high that he never gets with sex. He is experiencing a high that he never gets with being with Carmen or hanging out with the guys. He is experiencing a high that doesn't come by looking at his checkbook. Something is different about this. He is having a good time at church on a Sunday night and for that he gives God thanks.

"Some of you have been toiling on the job for years. Your boss won't do right by you and you keep wondering "How good do I have to be?" Well, I know someone who you're good enough for and all you have to do is give Him praise. I wouldn't leave out of here tonight if I hadn't accepted Christ as my personal Savior. With all that's going on in the world you need someone who is going to stand by you. You need someone who will stick by you when folks get so jealous that they can't help themselves. I wouldn't leave out of here tonight without knowing Christ. When one minute you're here and the next minute you're gone. But, I come tonight to tell you that we serve a mighty God." Just then, one of his ministers starts jumping up and down.

"Don't worry about what the ministers and choir members are doing up here," he says. "They can't shout for you. You have to shout for yourself. I wouldn't leave here tonight without participating in some praise offering. I wouldn't leave here tonight without giving our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ glory because He is worthy to be praised." He orders the pianist to stop playing and he just waits for choir members to calm down. After about ten minutes of praise, the minister comes back to the pulpit.

"I think I will go ahead and give the sermon since The Spirit of God is running high in this place tonight. Turn with me to Job 17:13. It reads "*If I wait, the grave is mine house:*

I have made my bed in the darkness." Job is talking here with friends. They should have been there to uplift him but instead they find ways to criticize them. If Job had let them get to him, he could have gone to an early grave. But for our purposes tonight I would like to talk about the danger of waiting. "The danger of waiting" "Ushers you may take your seats."

"So many times throughout our lives it is good to wait on things," he suggests "You wait around on your job for that big promotion. You young women wait on the right man to ask you to marry him. You wait on people to come back from the military. You wait on God to bless you. But, I want to talk about an instance where it is dangerous to wait.

In these perilous times, most of us know that we're closer to the coming of the Lord than ever before. Some might say that folks have talked about the coming of the Lord for years. But the devil continues to trick some of us into believing that you have nothing but time on your side. But a wise man will look at the signs and read the Bible and understand that some of these signs have been unfolding before our eyes. Some of the signs have been manifesting themselves before you or I or our parents or their parents were ever born. Some of these signs started coming to past some hundred years or sooner than that after the death of Christ. I submit to you today a reason why it is dangerous to wait."

He grabs the wireless mike and proceeds to walk into the crowd. The church is unusually crowded for a Sunday night. And there is nothing special taking place. There are no programs. It isn't a communion Sunday and it isn't youth night.

"If I were you and if I didn't have a church home, I wouldn't wait until next Sunday," he continues. "Let me tell you why. God could come back tonight, in the morning,

Wednesday or Saturday night while you're at the club," he shouts." God could come back Tuesday night and take back only those who have confessed a belief in Christ. It is dangerous to wait when your soul will be required of you. And God wants to know what kind of work have you done. If I were you, I just wouldn't wait because if the truth be told, you can't afford to wait. You're sitting there waiting to get right with God when it will take you a lifetime to get right with Him. Then, you still won't have your act together like you want. If I were you, I wouldn't wait. If you wait, you run the risk of losing your soul and going directly to hell if you wait.

But some of us don't believe that God will make good His promise. When He tells us to be not deceived that murderers, adulterers and liars will not inherit the kingdom of God, we don't believe Him. And if you're doing these things right now then you fit those categories. And I think that God is just and I take Him at His Word. If He says that surely I come quickly, then I think that's probably something that we can take to the bank."

Some of the church members are up on their feet praising God. Apparently, the minister hits a tender spot for some folks. He looks up in the balcony and then back down on the lower level of the sanctuary.

"I think He will come quickly if He says that He will. And if the Word of God is true and I believe that it is. He says that He will come like a thief in the night. And Saints you just never know when a thief might show up. You're sitting at home watching your favorite game and all of a sudden an intruder tries to enter your home. You aren't expecting the intruder and you have many other things planned for that night. But that intruder throws you off of your whole program and then you have to call the police. Thank

God you have an alarm system because the intruder could have hurt you. But what if you didn't have an alarm and what if you had been asleep. That could have been your last night on this earth and you could have gone straight to hell because of unfinished business with God.

If I were you, I wouldn't wait for God to come back like a thief in the night. If I were you, I wouldn't wait for death to sneak up on me unexpectedly and you're still out there cheating on your wife. You're still out there cheating on your husband. But, you plan to change tomorrow because you think you have plenty of time. And then you commit one more act and that's the one that takes you out. Because you see, the condom broke and now your extra partner tells you that they've got AIDS and that you might want to get tested. But, you can't have AIDS because you're not supposed to be sleeping with anybody else. And you've got a family. You're a deacon in the church or an assistant pastor. You serve on the usher board or mother board. What will people think if they find out that you do have something? You can't have AIDS because you are one of the star vocalists of the choir." Choir members are fainting and shouting now. God is moving in the building.

"Cause you see you've been coming to church every Sunday like clockwork. You've been acting so sanctimonious and Spirit filled. Folks think if anybody is going to go to heaven we know sister so in so is going or brother such in such is going to get in. They think that God will let you through the gate before they get in. But I come tonight to tell you that all that glitters is not gold. And everyone who prances around you ain't real. So, stop using these people as compasses for your life. Jesus should be your measuring

stick. Jesus should be your compass. Because if you continue to look at Brother So and So and Sister Such and Such, you will continue to be disappointed!" he shouts.

"If I were you, I wouldn't wait because there is danger in waiting. You can not afford to wait when hell awaits all those who don't believe. If I were you, I wouldn't wait because you don't get a hearing when you go to hell. You don't want to wait."

Troy has to really think about what the preacher is saying. He is saved and everything but he just isn't doing much these days. He isn't ushering or working with the youth or serving on any committee. He isn't even coming to church on a regular basis. Truth be told he has been sort of inactive for years. He's not even tithing on a regular basis. But this minister is hitting home. Troy is not one to be caught with his guard down. He can't let God come back and catch him not tithing regularly. He can't let God come back and catch him not working in the church. He can't let God come back and catch him fornicating. But that is something he is going to have to work long and hard on. He really doesn't have any intentions of marrying Carmen. He needs to be with someone who he wants to marry. And Jennifer appears to fit the bill. He is standing now with a lot of the other church members. Jennifer comes walking from out of nowhere to her seat. She must have had to use the ladies room, thinks Troy.

The minister is making his way back to the pulpit. He places the wireless mike back in its spot. He looks around. People are shouting and having a good time. He continues on with his sermon.

"Can you imagine God coming to you and telling you this? As good as I've been to you, you can't turn your life over to me? As good as I've been to you, you can't give me

praise? I believed in you when no one else did. I made the bootstraps that you say you pulled yourself up by. And now, you don't even want to tithe. You were down at that school all by yourself without your parents, but I took care of you. Your husband left you for a younger woman. You didn't have hardly any skills. He didn't think you were going to make it. But, it was I who picked you up and motivated you to move forward. I gave you a few gifts and look at you nowwww!

When you lost your job and fell into a different tax bracket, I didn't run like your friends. But, I was there always for you. I answered the phone when you called. I didn't avoid you like friends and relatives who thought you were calling about money. You cried on "My" shoulders," he says patting his shoulders. "I listened to "your" problems, he says patting his heart.

Before you even got your act together, I hung with you like your best friend because no one else thought you were worthy. I believed in you all along. Nobody else believed you could be a doctor. Didn't anybody else believe you could actually dance and make a living. Everybody told you that you couldn't preach and hadn't been called. Everybody told you that you couldn't teach. And look at you nowwww!

Remember when you "called" yourself to preach and you couldn't preach worth a lick. You were confused and didn't ask me if you were to be a preacher. Sometimes Satan uses the power of suggestion. But you were starting to get embarrassed. Then, I found mercy on you and decided that perhaps you could help the kingdom as a preacher. I gave you that talent anyhow. As good as I've been to you this is the best way that you can serve me!" he shouts.

It is as if someone is starting to sweep praise all across the building. Folks who don't even look like they can shout are shouting.

"You ought to at least give Him praiseeee," yells the minister as he turns around in a tailspin. Then, he starts shouting. He starts putting his arms up in the air and magnifying the Lord. He starts waving his hands as if to say thank you Jesus. You can tell that the Lord is dealing with him right now. And then, several people start coming down front to sit on the front pew. Several people start joining the church. These are people from all walks of life.

Troy decides that now is the time to join if he is to join. The minister convicts him. And if Troy has anything, he has a conscious. He can not let God catch him with his work undone. Troy proceeds out of the balcony and continues downstairs. The ushers open the door for him. He walks down the aisle. Folks are still shouting. Troy doesn't know if they are shouting for him or for themselves. But, he keeps walking anyway. By this time, the minister sits down. Another minister takes the wireless mike and goes downstairs. Choir members get up and sing "God Is" very softly.

The minister asks a woman standing near him, "How many do we have?"

"Pastor, we have 20 people coming to unite with us. Fifteen through Christian experience and five to be baptized," she says.

"Let everybody say praise the Lord," commands the minister.

Folks in the audience shout "Praise the Lord."

Troy is on the end. The minister has him stand first.

"What is your name brother?" he asks.

"My name is Troy Smith."

Just then, Jennifer looks up. She assumed Troy was already a member of this church.

"Are you coming by Christian experience or are you a candidate for baptism?"

"I'm coming by Christian experience."

"Everybody say praise the Lord," says the minister.

Church members shout "Praise the Lord."

"When were you born and how old are you?" the minister asks Troy.

"I was born July 15. And I'm 35 years old."

"I need a young man about 35 or 36 to team up with this brother and be a church mentor. Can someone about 35 or 36 come forward? Just then, a tall brother in his 30's comes forward. He whispers his name near the minister's ear.

"Carl Hampton will be your church mentor." The minister continues that same procedure with the rest of the new church members. Carl shakes Troy's hand and grabs his shoulder with his other hand. It is as if he is saying welcome to the fold. Troy hasn't seen Carl before. And Carl really hasn't noticed Troy.

Shelia Kennedy is sitting out in the audience. She has her own hair salon...Touch-Up. She's been in business for a few years. It's just like Carl to volunteer to help someone out especially on the road to Christ.

When Carl and Troy go to the back, church members explain that they should try and talk at least once a week.

"If the new member has any questions, try and answer them," says the church secretary.

"Do you have any questions," she asks. Both shake their heads no.

"Very well. After you finish filling out this paper work, you both are free to go," she says. Then turning to Troy, we thank you so much for joining All of That Baptist Church.

"Thank you for having me and making the atmosphere conducive to my joining," he says. The secretary leaves their area and moves on to another group of people. Troy and Carl are busy filling out their information.

"So, are you from Memphis," asks Carl.

"Yes," says Troy. "Are you?"

"No, I'm from Houston, Texas," proclaims Carl. "Have you ever lived outside Memphis," he continues.

"No I haven't," replies Troy. "I was born and raised here and I really don't plan on leaving," he answers in a somewhat annoyed voice.

"I see," says Carl. Carl has been in Memphis for about five years. He was about ready to transfer out of state until he met the love of his life Shelia Kennedy. Shelia has a budding hair salon and is very career oriented. She has managed to corner a large portion of the hair care industry. She has big plans for her downtown salon.

"Well, you've got my number," says Carl. "If you need anything just holler. Shelia and I....Shelia's my girlfriend...usually come every Sunday including for Sunday school.

Sometimes, we even get here early enough for Bible Study on Sunday mornings. But I just usually try to make the Bible Study during the week on Wednesdays."

He looks toward the door as if he is expecting someone to walk through it.

"This church is very active in the community. We have a gym. A lot of the guys shoot hoops on Saturday mornings from about 9 to Noon. The church has a basketball and baseball league. I'm a member of the peer/mentor group. I mentor young boys and kind of serve as a big brother to them." He then kind of searches his mind for other information.

"I'm an accountant. I work for MNY Bank downtown. We're one of the largest banks in the Southeast region. Memphis is our headquarters. So, if you and your girl want to get together just let me know."

"Sure thing," says Troy. But he didn't know which one he would be going out with. Hopefully, it will be Jennifer. Troy wonders if she saw him join tonight. He's sure that she did. And will she think he joined just to get next to her...probably not. The main thing is he joined and that's one less thing he has to worry about...salvation. Carl extends his right hand.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," he says with a hesitant smile. Troy stands up.

"It was a pleasure meeting you as well. Thanks for agreeing to be my church buddy or whatever they call it."

"Sure thing," Carl says. "Got to go before Shelia comes looking for me."

"Later," says Troy.

Just as Carl thought, Shelia is sitting on the same pew where he left her waiting on him. She knows this whole process can take an extra 30 minutes or so. By this time, church has dismissed and folks are scurrying outside. A lot of people are still in the sanctuary brown nosing with the minister or telling him what a good sermon he preached. Shelia admits today's sermon was pretty good. She sees Carl coming from the left door near the sanctuary. She waves her hand to get him to notice her. He smiles as if to say all is right with the world. Whenever he is away from Shelia, he feels like he should be with her. She's been through so much in her young life. He has too. It's almost as if they share similar stories. Maybe, that's why they're so much alike. He knows that she is definitely his soul mate.

Carl has definitely hit pay dirt. Not only is his woman a business owner, but she has her own house. She can cook and he's sure that she will be good in bed. They both agreed that they wouldn't have sex until marriage. They want to make sure that their bond is very tight. So, when problems arise both will be more committed to weather the storms. Other girls have tried that with Carl in the past and it hasn't worked. But with Shelia, he doesn't seem to mind. The payoff is so great. He gets to keep her for life.

Carl is the youngest of three brothers. His father still lives in Houston. His mother died about three years ago of breast cancer. After that, he has always stayed on Shelia about getting regular check-ups at the gynecologist for any female type issues. He also gets regular prostate check-ups.

"We have to stay healthy for each other and for our children. If we are to do the work that God would have us do, we need to be healthy. It takes a lot of energy to be a

good soldier, he reminds her. He is definitely a happy man. And he's not even mad about the fact that Shelia makes more than him. He even audits her books for free to make sure that everything is in check. He tells her that she can use the money that she would pay an accountant for something else. Whenever her business gets super big, he will come on board maybe in a more full-time capacity. In the meantime, he is considering other opportunities with accounting firms. He would like to become a partner with one. After attending U of H, he successfully completes all parts of the CPA exam. Success is so very sweet when you've got someone to share it with. When Carl reaches Shelia, he gives her a big hug.

"Ready to go get something to eat?" he asks.

"Uh huh," she says. "Can we go downtown to my little favorite restaurant on the square?" she pleads.

"Sure baby, anything for you." agrees Carl. He grabs her hand and they leave out.

Jennifer is still flipping out about the fact that Troy joined the church. She's only seen him once and she knows that is him. She was in her own little world when he joined, but thinks that is a good thing. I wonder if he joined for me, she ponders. Of course not, she corrects herself. People join churches because they want to, not for other people. She thought he was a member here already. No wonder they hadn't been crossing paths. She looks at her watch. It is 8:15. She heads out the sanctuary speaking to various folks along the way. There's a girl that works at the station. Jennifer just recently landed a

job at the number one station in sales. It's challenging but sometimes it seems her boss pays too much attention to her. He may not be. But, her big sister always says "If the people believe it, it's a reality." If she believes her boss is paying too much attention to her, then it's a reality in her mind. He may not even be concerned about her on a day to day basis. But she works in sales and she knows that he's watching everybody's numbers. Dexter is very detailed oriented. But then, she could be going through the change. So, even the tiniest things can get on your nerves.

Jennifer doesn't want to be late for her date at Phil's. She knows that Troy might be late since he is in the back. They make you fill out a ton of paperwork when you join church. It's almost like applying for a job. They want to know if you have any special skills or talents. That's in case they need you at the church. This church has really taken off in the six years that Jennifer has been here. There's a huge Single's Ministry. The Youth Ministry is huge. They've got a senior's Ministry, a Prison Ministry and a Family Ministry. They offer relationship counseling, spiritual counseling, business counseling and all of that. The church has aerobics and various sports leagues. There's a picnic every year and the church often takes a lot of trips.

She's fortunate to be at a church where they like to showcase one's talents. In many instances, some people are intimidated by another's talents. If the truth were told, there are not enough hours in the day to do everything that everyone else does. So, why be jealous of another person's gifts. God has given many of us gifts. But sometimes, we let the jealousy of another's gift blind us from seeing our own gifts. It would be asking too much, thinks Jennifer, for everyone to mind their own business and develop the gifts they have.

The gifts that are suppose to be used for kingdom building. And yes, the gifts that God has given you to get over in life. One minister says that God has equipped every person with a gift where they can be self-sufficient. In other words, God does not want us to struggle for money. So, He has equipped all of us with something that will put bread on our tables.

Too many times, we let sins like adultery, fornication, idolatry and other things block us from the blessings. Jennifer knows that adultery and fornication are big blessing blockers. It does not pay to mess with someone else's husband. You won't grow spiritually, socially or economically. And it's not worth having others whisper, "Is that not the woman?"

Jennifer bounces into her car. Sometimes, she can be so hard on herself. No one's perfect. She loves it when her hair bounces as she dashes around Memphis. Jennifer's hair is half way down her back. She suspects that's why Troy is attracted to her. It's a hair thing and no one can tell her differently. Men absolutely love healthy hair. It can be long or short. But they love them some hair. Hairdressers have been trying to get her to cut it for years. That's why she's going to this hairdresser who can't really style. But, Jennifer doesn't have to worry about her cutting her tresses. She doesn't have to worry about her hair shedding. And she doesn't have to fuss with the woman about her hair. There are too many things in life to worry about other than hair. And Jennifer just rather not go there. It is about a 15 minute ride to Phil's. Jennifer is extra hungry. She didn't really eat earlier today. She'll try not and make a pig out of herself with Troy. She has gone for about two years without a man. She had to finish her MBA and plus she's so darn picky.

Poor guys...Jennifer can be so hard on them. A man has to be tall, have a decent job, and go to church. She also has to be attracted to the person. He needs to be a gentleman, caring and kind. She likes nice teeth and prefers men who are independent and have their acts together. And that's her right, since she's in the same predicament. Her sister tells her to stop judging people so much. But, she tells Jillian that people judge her as well. Besides, the Bible says the Saints will judge the world. Guys require that women know how to cook. They want you to have nice hair, clothes that fit, a decorated apartment and a lot even have the nerve to demand that you have nice hands and feet. So, excuse her if her list is a little bit long. Because if she has to stay married to a man until death does her part, she wants to make sure the trip is as pleasant as possible.

Jennifer reads a lot of self-help books. If she's going to marry someone, she wants someone who is just as committed to the relationship as she is. What if something happens and one of them gets sick, will he still stick by her? That's why she has girlfriends. Men can't handle a lot of the stuff that you have to say about day to day life. They don't like to hear you gripe. You have to always be happy and workout so that you can stay happy. You have to keep yourself up and look good. So with all of that stress on a woman, the man needs to have his act together as well. It's only fair. And he usually has to have money. After all, he is placing lots of demands of upkeep on his woman.

Jennifer jumps out of the car. She always gets on these mental soap boxes. She's thinking about writing a book since she has so much to say. But, she probably needs to be well known or something before it will sell. She's seen a lot of unknown folks writing

books. So, she might as well throw her hat into the ring. Why not? She looks around the parking lot at Phil's. It is just starting to get dark. She scurries to the front door. Jennifer wouldn't want anyone to snatch her. And she hates the fact that sometimes she's the first one at the restaurant. You have to keep guys waiting.

"Good evening and welcome to Phil's. I am Manuel, your server for the evening. Table for two," he asks.

"Yes, table for two in a non-smoking area. I'm waiting on a gentleman, Troy Smith. I don't know if he's here yet," she replies.

"Ah, follow me," says the waiter.

Jennifer is impressed. Is Troy here already? And how did he manage to get out so soon? She doesn't even know what type of car he is driving. The waiter takes her to a booth in the center of the restaurant. It is in the non-smoking area. The lighting is a bit cozy. Plus, it isn't near the kitchen or anything. Troy stands up to welcome her.

Jennifer slides into the booth across from him.

"I will be back shortly to get your drink orders," says Manuel. That lady's got nice hair, he thinks.

"I'm so glad you could join me," says Troy.

"I'm glad that you invited me," says Jennifer. By this time, her heart is racing. She thought that she would have time to settle her nerves. She wanted to mentally prepare herself to meet him. Troy already being at the table throws her off a bit. But, she is pleasantly surprised. He just kind of stares at her. Could he also be anxious to see her too? She is wondering; of course not. He seems much too cool for that.

But Troy's hearts is warmed by her appearance. She has such beautiful hair, he thinks. He has been trying for the last two years to get Carmen to grow her hair out. Her style now is very smart, short and sophisticated. But, he wants to see what she will look like with long hair. Look at him, he catches himself. He's already talking in the past tense about Carmen. "You have such beautiful hair," says Troy. He is staring at her in utter amazement. "It has such a nice sheen to it. He can tell that she is a healthy eater and that she must drink lots and lots of water.

"I bet all the men tell you that," he adds.

"Not all of them," she says. But, Jennifer knows that men love her hair. It is one of her most striking characteristics. She takes pride in her hair. Maybe, she's suppose to. Somewhere in the Bible it says that a woman's hair is her glory. Now, Jennifer is longing for a new style. The style that she flaunts now is so outdated. Her hair is just hanging there.

Troy looks down at his menu and then looks back up. "I hope you're hungry," he says.

"I'm starving. I didn't eat anything after church earlier today. I took a nap instead." She catches herself. Maybe that was childish to say that she takes naps. But, she's sure lots of church folks do that. And for some reason, words just flow when talking to this man. Jennifer had better be careful not to say too much too soon. Many times you have to feel people out before opening up to them. A lot of folks have their own agendas. They want to be the local insider with all the information. Perhaps, they've sold out to a power structure and just want to keep them informed. It's hard at this age to find guys

who are just trying to get to know you. A lot of them are trying to bleed you for information. But she feels too at ease with this brother.

"Yeah, I took a nap too after church," Troy confides. "Sometimes Sundays can be a bit hectic and you need something to help you out." He isn't just saying he took a nap to have something in common with Jennifer. He really took a nap. That's the standard on Sundays after a game. He usually doesn't go to night service so the nap can run longer. And then the next day he's up even earlier for work. It's ironic that they're both Sunday nappers. Troy could be trying to read too much into this similarity. But it is good to know that she doesn't mind a nap. When they get to know each other better, they can take Sunday naps together.

"You joined church today right," asks Jennifer.

"Well, yeah," says Troy. He didn't really know how to respond.

"Congratulations!," she responds.

"Thank you," he says. "They make you fill out a ton of papers when you join. And you have to take membership classes for about a month." He is looking dead in her eyes as he speaks.

"But it will all be well worth it in the long run."

There is silence for about a minute as the two of them stare at each other. Phil's offers the perfect setting with great dining. All of this comes at an affordable price. Jennifer takes the liberty of breaking the staring game. She read somewhere that a woman isn't suppose to stare. Or maybe the woman is suppose to stop staring first. Who knows? She can't get all of these darn rules right. So, she's just winging it. Let the chips fall where

they may. But, it would be good if the chips could fall here. Troy's so nice to look at, she thinks.

"Everything on this menu looks good," comments Jennifer.

Troy looks at her nails. They are well done. She probably has a pedicure as well. Troy loves a woman who takes good care of herself. She's not somewhere waiting for a man to teach her how to live. She's already living. And if a man wants to join the party, so be it. Jennifer looks like that type of woman. She's so well polished, he notices. Her little sun dress is a nice summer color. Her hair is glowing along with her skin. Black women are just so beautiful thinks Troy. This girl is beautiful. But then all women are beautiful.

"Jennifer is beautiful," he murmurs in a low tone.

"Excuse me," says Jennifer looking up from her menu.

"I said we had better order," lies Troy. He is loosing his mind, he thinks. What if she had heard him?

Troy decides on a steak and potato dinner. It's kind of late. But, he'll be up for awhile anyway because of that nap.

Manuel comes gliding back to their table. "I trust you two have had plenty of time to choose your orders," he says staring at Jennifer in a way that Troy just doesn't appreciate. But then, Jennifer doesn't belong to him yet. But she will be his one day. Anyway, he doesn't like the way that waiter looks at her. It just isn't professional. It looks like he has lust in his eyes. Jennifer looks up smiling at the waiter. Okay, so now she's flirting with the waiter, thinks Troy. Is this what I've got to look forward to?

"I will have the shrimp summer salad with all the trimmings." On the menu, it comes with cocktail sauce and summer crackers. "And for dessert I want a slice of Phil's summer cheesecake," she says smiling at Manuel. He "is" kind of cute. "Thank you Manuel," she says.

"You're just on a summer kick aren't you," says Manuel smiling at Jennifer and showing all 32.

"I will have," interrupts Troy. Jennifer and Manuel both look at him as if he has interrupted something.

"I will have steak and potatoes. I want a slice of mocha cake with strawberries for dessert. And do bring us a bottle of your house wine," declares Troy. Take that Manuel, he thinks.

Manuel isn't smiling at Troy. He stops him from gazing at Jennifer. Manuel can already tell that Troy is the type of guy who tries to impress people. Well, Manuel isn't impressed one bit. Truth be told Manuel has his own problems. His girlfriend tells him that she needs somebody with more money and more time. She says that he is always waiting tables. But Manuel is in law school and this is the best he can do at the time. If Caroline doesn't want to wait on him, too bad for her. He's going to be the next high powered attorney in Memphis. Those LA attorneys had better watch out.

"I will be back with your wine in less than ten minutes. Your salad," he turns to Troy. "Will be ready in about 15 minutes. Your food will be out in about 20. And then dessert will follow about 20 minutes after that." He turns to Jennifer and briefly looks at Troy.

"We at Phil's take pride in being the epitome of American cuisine. Enjoy your evening." Then just as quickly as he shows up. Manuel is gone. Troy doesn't like that Manuel one bit.

"He is such a nice waiter," says Jennifer. "He has lots of personality and he gives us all of the times when our food will be out."

"He is nice," lies Troy. He knows Manuel just gives some B-S times to make it look like waiting tables is so meticulous. There's nothing wrong with it. But he knows whatever Manuel ends up doing; he will be good at it. If he can strive to be that detail oriented waiting tables, who knows what he can do in other areas. Enough of Manuel, he thinks.

"Tell me about yourself," says Troy. "Are you from Memphis? Where did you go to school? And what did you major in?"

Jennifer is flattered that Troy asks. But, she knows those questions will come sooner or later.

"I was born here in Memphis," she smiles. My parents are from Arkansas. But me and my sisters and brother were born here. I went to school in the central part of Memphis at the high school. I was a cheerleader and played in the band. You know normal stuff. I was also a member of a very popular teen social club. How much do you want to know?," she asks.

"I want to know as much as you are willing to share," says Troy.

This brother is not real, she thinks. He is just too understanding. But then, a lot of them start out that way until one person in the relationship manages to mess it up.

"Okay," she says moving herself in a better position in the booth to talk. She looks down at the menu and then looks back up. "After high school, I attended State University. That's where I graduated from. I got a BA in Business with an emphasis on Marketing. Then a few years later, I got an MBA. My concentration is Finance." Jennifer leaves out the part about being a bad money manager early on. Getting an MBA in Finance also assures her of being able to balance her checkbook among other things. She pauses for a moment. Every time she thinks about when she finishes her MBA, hints of Jeffrey come back to mind. She is not truly free from that experience. She's praying that God will wipe him from her memory. Jennifer immediately tries to get back on track so that Troy won't know what is going on.

But Troy is a few steps ahead of her. He notices the distance.

"After graduate school, I took a few sales jobs around town until I got hired at the station." She is motioning with her hands in the air as if recalling this information is difficult. "I've been there for about three years. I love my job. It's challenging and that's where I am now. Your turn," she says

"My turn," says Troy pointing at himself. Troy knows something went down while Jennifer was in grad school. Maybe she had a hard time or could it have been a bad relationship. He won't ask her about that. He's sure she'll tell him in time.

"I'm a Memphian as well. I grew up on the north side of town. So, maybe I'm a lot tougher than some of the guys you've dated. I went to State University. But I never ran into you. I'm probably a few years older than you. I don't know how we managed to miss each other," he smiles. "I have a BA in Telecommunications and Technology. I landed the

job that I have now right out of college. Since that time, I have worked my entire telecommunications career at Second Chance Long Distance. It is a great company. I worked my way up through the ranks from sales rep. I spent a year or two in the training department. After that I became a supervisor and then finally a manager."

Jennifer is impressed. That means that he must have had this job about seven years or something like that. At least, he shows stability.

"After awhile, I decided to invest some money in the stock market and then I bought my house," says Troy. He figures he would just throw that out there. Why not let her know that he's got it going on. If he doesn't toot his own horn, who will?"

Jennifer just kind of nods in the affirmative as if to say, you're bad. And you know you're bad. I bet he still has a woman, she thinks. I guess I'll just have to bump her off. He's not married. And if he's out with her then obviously, he's looking.

"And Jennifer, I even manage to get in some volunteer work here and there. I work down at the Boys Group a couple of hours a week. I'm also mentoring one of the guys."

Jennifer's eyes are as big as saucers now. She is impressed. Obviously, his job is very demanding and he still finds time to give back. Hello!, she thinks.

"But I just don't want to talk about me. I want to hear about you," he says.

"But, your life is so interesting," says Jennifer. "Tell me more about yourself. I bet you're well traveled."

Here is a woman after his own heart, thinks Troy. Well, if he can do anything else, he can certainly talk about himself. This woman is a good listener. He likes that. "As a matter of

fact, I do travel extensively," he smiles. "I've been to Europe a few times. I also take junkets to the Islands whenever the mood hits me. But it's always nice to take a good woman along." By this time Troy is staring in Jennifer's eyes. If she didn't know any better, she would say that he is trying to seduce her.

"Here is your wine," says Manuel. If looks could kill, Manuel would be a dead man. Troy looks at him in the most disturbing way. But no one is paying any attention to him. Manuel is looking at Jennifer. Jennifer is smiling at Manuel. Troy kind of feels left out. He's the one paying for this meal, but he's not getting much attention. Manuel pours wine in Jennifer's glass. He wants to ignore Troy, but then he knows his lust for Jennifer will be blatantly obvious. So, he pours Tiger Man a glass of wine as well. He sets the wine bottle on the table and looks at the both of them in his most professional manner.

"I will be back shortly with your salad," he directs at Troy.

"Thank you," says Troy. Now, get out of here, he thinks.

Manuel sees the look in Troy's eyes. He knows then he isn't wanted. But he is determined to enjoy as much of this dinner as he possibly can. And if Tiger Man wasn't sitting at the table all night with Manuel's new found love, he'd slip her his number. He'll treat her better than this Romeo. Reluctantly, Manuel backs away from the table. Where is that salad?, he thinks. He is going to see what is holding everything up in the kitchen. He can't stand to be away from Jennifer for too long.

Troy now has time to gaze at Jennifer. They won't be back at Phil's anytime soon. It is a shame that he has to compete with a waiter for the attention of his new found love. And he knows that Jennifer will be his. He likes her already. He can tell that she has

a good heart. Jennifer smiles shyly. She knows the waiter has taken a liking to her. And she can tell that Troy is not the least bit impressed. Nonetheless, the two of them will manage to have a good dinner.

"So, how many people do you manage," she says. Jennifer usually doesn't get that statistical on a date. But it seems like a good question to ask.

"I have about five supervisors under me. Each of them has about 12 sales representatives in all. Two trainers are assigned to our group." Then he smiles, "We have a lot of fun. I'm in my element so this is a job that I truly enjoy."

He changes focus briefly. "You know Jennifer sometimes it's hard to stay in your element, have the job that you truly desire. Some people are still bitter because they gave up on their dreams. Sometimes they've taken that pain out on me. I try to develop people whenever I can. Because if I help you, I'm really helping me. A lot of people don't know that."

Jennifer just shakes her head in the affirmative. She can tell he is a great teacher.

"If there's something that you want to do, you need to do it. Whatever your career aspirations are just stay focused. Don't let temporary setbacks, financial problems or stress cause you to lose sight of your goal. God wants us to be happy. And a lot of folks will have you believe that is not the case." He looks down at his wine for a moment and then looks back up. "There is plenty of room at the top for all of us. Those who work the hardest generally win and generally stay on top. Also, integrity is of the utmost importance. Sure, nobody's perfect but at least strive for perfection.

At work, I have to depend on the integrity of my supervisors, as well as their sales representatives. I play hard, but I play fair and by the rules. I also expect a high degree of integrity from my bosses. I've been there about 13 years. And in that time, I've seen a lot of changes. Sometimes the changes have been for the better, sometimes not. But everybody doesn't play by the rules. And yes, you might get some heat for playing by the rules." Troy catches himself and realizes that he is doing most of the talking. He is truly passionate about his work. And he doesn't want to bore Jennifer. But conversation flows readily with this woman. He will just lay off for awhile.

Jennifer just smiles at Troy. For some reason, she enjoys hearing him pour out his heart. It is something when a person pours out their heart to you. You learn a lot about what makes them tick. They let you in on their hopes, dreams and aspirations. Troy is sharing his heart with her. And Jennifer likes that.

"You have a very interesting life," she says. "I look forward to hearing more about your travels in life." She knows that she is stepping out on a limb offering all of this praise. But she figures it won't hurt. She knows that isn't the way it is suppose to be according to the rules. Jennifer is suppose to keep Troy guessing. She is suppose to act uninterested. But you can only keep that masquerade up for a short period of time. She doesn't feel like being constricted to her books. As a matter of fact, she has stopped reading the relationship books and is now delving into African American history and literature.

Jennifer wants to know as much about who she is as possible. It's amazing how one has a certain thirst for knowledge. Sure, she's finding that she's becoming a Biblical scholar. But it is the knowledge of one's past struggle coupled with the Bible that has

proven to be the most fruitful in her life. Richard and Sylvia Williams instilled in her early on the value of self. They always stressed to her and her siblings how perfection is everything.

"You young people are charged with making life better than it was yesterday," says her Dad. They often had dinner table discussions on ethics. That was her parents' time to get in their business and reinforce their ideals.

"I don't want any of my children leaving out of here ignorant about the Word of God. The Bible says somewhere that "Ye do err in not knowing the scriptures." If you don't know the Word of God, life will be rough. There's just no getting around it. Stay in the Word," he admonishes. Troy reminds Jennifer of her Dad. Already, he appears to be the type of man who likes to teach or give instruction. That's what Jennifer is use to. No one talks when their Dad is talking. And when he finishes talking, that is the only opportunity they have to speak.

Her mother use to often tell the girls. "Always, let the man have his say. Always, let him be the man. If you don't, he will get upset because he's a man. He wants to be the man. He doesn't want you telling him what to do," says her Mom.

So, Jennifer isn't aggressive from her upbringing. She finds herself becoming more aggressive when she dates guys who have their roles mixed up. Then, when she dates a man who is a man, she has to readjust to him being a real man. Now, here she is with Troy who is obviously a real man. Hopefully, she won't have to adjust again.

"Here we go with your salad," says Manuel. He tries his best to pay the guy in the back to put a rush on it. But the chef knows Manuel by now and he isn't budging.

"Stop hitting on the customers," warns Percy. "If management finds out about it, you will be fired."

"Aaahhh," says Manuel. "I do a good job. Why would they fire me for flirting?," he asks.

"It's sexual harassment. And it's against the law," says Percy.

Manuel knows that Percy is into all of that human resources stuff. But sometimes he gets carried away. He still thinks he's in corporate America. But, the reality is, he's a chef. Nonetheless, Manuel decides to cool it this time. He brings Troy's salad out with very few words and then goes about his business briefly smiling at Jennifer.

Jennifer can tell that he must have picked up on Troy's annoyance with him. Or maybe someone just told him to cool it. Whatever!, she thinks. She immediately notices the change in Troy's persona. Perhaps, he doesn't feel like he has to compete for attention. And he is right. The brother has it going on. He's very well employed. He's good looking with his dark hair that is cut so neatly. And Troy has nice teeth that are as white as the lace on a bride's wedding dress. He has a very confident smile. The kind of smile that makes you think he is getting over on somebody, but you don't know who.

Troy is definitely a man to be reckoned with. And sure Jennifer may have been a little too friendly with the waiter. After all, she hasn't had a lot of male attention in awhile. There have been offers, but she will only entertain the ones that meet her standards. Men have standards and Jennifer definitely has standards.

"So, Jennifer. Do you travel much?" inquires Troy.

"I do. I mean I haven't in awhile. But traveling is something that I love to do."

"Have you been anywhere in the last six months?" he pries.

"I went to Chicago with some girlfriends on a shopping trip. It was just for the weekend. I often find myself getting away at least once every six months," she adds.

Troy can tell that she is a woman who loves to shop. Already, he's seen two of her outfits in one day. Some folks usually wear the same outfit to church that they wear during the day. He can tell that Jennifer takes pride in her wardrobe and her hair. She has such beautiful hair.

"Here's your food," interrupts Manuel. That is quick, thinks Troy who barely finishes with his salad.

Manuel places bread on the table. Then, he places Jennifer's shrimp summer salad before her. The cocktail sauce and summer crackers are all in separate places. He also places some extra napkins before her.

Troy is taking all of this in. One usually has to request extra napkins before getting any, but this waiter is on the money. He is able to do all of those extra things without asking. Then, he places Troy's meat and potatoes before him with vegetables on the side. Troy doesn't get any extra napkins. Maybe, he is to share with Jennifer since she has enough for a party of five. And Manuel doesn't have that little smile on his face as he places Troy's food down. It must be a boy-girl thing. Who knows, thinks Troy. Manuel then proceeds to leave the table.

"Thank you Manuel. You've been an excellent server tonight. We really appreciate your attention to detail," says Troy. Manuel nods in the affirmative and walks

off. He still doesn't like Troy. Troy can compliment him all day and leave a big tip and he couldn't give a hoot about him. But Manuel still loves Jennifer. He may always love her.

Jennifer is enjoying all of the attention from Manuel and her new love interest. Now, she knows that Troy has a jealous streak. But it doesn't appear to be a bad kind of jealousy. After all, Manuel is a little overbearing for a waiter. She has never received that type of attention from a waiter. So, Troy is justified by his actions.

"How's your food?" asks Troy. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," smiles Jennifer. "The shrimp is very good." Actually, the shrimp is to die for. The shrimps are very big. And the cocktail sauce is delicious. Jennifer usually eats about two good meals a day. And this is kind of unusual for her to eat a meal this heavy at this time of the night. She will have to stay up at least three hours before going to bed. And then she will need to do sit-ups.

She is very diligent about her exercise regimen. She walks or runs about 3 times a week. And she works out on weights about two times a week. She prides herself in being physically fit. A woman really has to remain competitive these days. She has to exercise and eat right. She has to have a pleasing personality. And yes, she has to have good hair. She watches Troy as he digs into his steak. He isn't saying too much. Maybe, he is very hungry.

This steak is awfully tender, thinks Troy. He is so glad to get something to eat. Troy practically skipped dinner earlier today. But, he is definitely getting mileage out of that nap he took earlier. It is amazing what a full fledged nap can do for a person. I wonder if she's always this happy and perky, thinks Troy. Troy can't stand being around depressed

people. You know the types who are always in a bad mood and they're just always depressed about life. Or they may not be depressed about life, but they're so pitiful that they can't wish happiness on you. No, if Troy wants someone to be the mother of his children, she needs to be a woman who can bounce back in the midst of adversity. She needs to be a woman who can hang with the best of them attitude wise and doesn't conform to the pitiful existence that many people find themselves in. She needs to be someone who embraces diversity and creativity.

Troy writes music whenever he has the time...spending sometime on his keyboard. He doesn't like being depressed because depression stifles creativity. That's the thing with Carmen. She can be so much of a drama queen from time to time. She blows up over things at work. You would think anyone who has been working that long would have a handle on things. That's why he is so immediately taken by Jennifer. She seems to be getting the most out of life and not worrying about what is going to happen from day to day. She doesn't ask Troy for his number. He just gives it to her because he wants her to have it. Plus, she is on time for dinner. And that says a lot. Some women find the need to be late just to let the man know that they're in charge or simply making sure that he's there before them so that he can pay. Troy has seen all of the games and notices all of the insecurities. He has a keen eye for detail and can spot people and their types very well.

Sometimes he gets on his mental soapbox. He's so over concerned about the ills of the world and the societal problems. He's getting more out of that. Because he realizes there exists an element of ignorance that is greater than he. In order to bring some people

out of darkness and their backwards thinking, it will take God. Only through prayer and fasting can people be delivered from their petty insecurities.

He remembers how it was for him growing up. His mother did the best that she could with her children. But it was like he felt embattled all of the time. No woman can understand what a black man goes through. Sometimes they think men are just complaining just to be complaining. But there are some real battles that are not of the natural world. There are battles that exist only in the spirit realm. And until more people tap into the spirit realm and see what God's purpose is for their life, they might not ever see what is happening.

"Are you about ready for desert?" asks Troy. He is trying to snap back to reality unnoticed. He often gets on a mental soap box. Sometimes he feels like he needs to do like his other partners and move to Atlanta...land of opportunity. He just wants to be in an atmosphere that at least tolerates diversity and embraces creativity. He wonders if Jennifer is the type that never wants to leave Memphis. If she is, no matter how beautiful she is, he will have to cross her off of his list. Well, maybe not.

"I'll be ready for dessert shortly," says Jennifer. Jennifer has been thinking about how great it would be to live outside of Tennessee. She hasn't really lived anywhere else, but people tell her all of the time that she might have a good time somewhere else. And at least she owes it to herself to live outside of Tennessee for at least one time in her life.

"If you don't like it, you can always come back," says her business professor, Mr. Wang. "I just think that you're a beautiful girl with a lot going for you. Sometimes people can't live to their fullest potential in their home environment. You owe it to yourself to see

how the rest of America operates. It's not perfect anywhere, but some places are better than others."

Jennifer thinks about Mr. Wang from time to time. He makes a lot of sense. One time she thought about just moving to Atlanta to live with a cousin. But, she's gotten to the point where God has to send her someplace and then she knows that she can stay. So, if God sends her some place, He will make a way for her. That way, she won't have to hoop and holler and beg nobody to help her. She won't cast her net before its time. People can be awfully cruel when it comes to helping others. Jennifer has always managed to make her own way in a lot of areas. Well, God has managed to help Jennifer make her way in a lot of areas. And as much as she loves her parents, they haven't been able to help her like God has. They haven't been able to do it all. She hasn't always been able to depend on them.

And as good looking as Troy is, he can't meet all of her needs. He can't be there for her always. He will let her down eventually because he is only human. But surely, there must be a happy medium in there at some point. Surely, he can at least be a good friend and a good mate. Surely, he can do everything humanly possible to stick by her.

Jennifer knows that she can't be totally dependent on a man. A woman has to have a support group outside of her husband so she won't bug him to death. She and her sisters are her Mom's support group. Sure, her mother has friends, but she can't trust them like she can her daughters.

"Do you like Memphis?" asks Jennifer. Troy is all into his steak and barely hears what Jennifer has to say. He is still on a mental soapbox.

"Excuse, me," he asks.

"I said, do you like Memphis?" she repeats.

"Memphis is fine. I mean this is home," says Troy.

"Do you ever want to leave?"

"If the job and money are right, I could be persuaded to leave Memphis," agrees Troy. He likes this girl already, he thinks. There's nothing wrong with a young person venturing out into the world to claim what is rightfully theirs. He is leery of the person who is so threatened by that. Why are they so threatened? Could it be that they're afraid one might like what they see outside of Memphis? If there's nothing to be afraid of, why not venture outside of Memphis? But Troy won't leave unless God tells him it's time to go. That way, he knows that he will have good success when he gets to another city. That way, he knows that he will be a good provider for his family.

"Do you want to leave Memphis?" he reverses the question to Jennifer.

"I think it will do me a world of good to get out there and see what else life has to offer," she says.

"I see a lot of people living life to the fullest and reaching goals and staking claims. Sometimes I feel like I'm so underrated and unappreciated. I think if I get out that I can find other things to do. I find myself writing in my journal a lot because most of my girlfriends don't want to move pass the state line and that's bad," she looks at Troy like she really means that. And why did she decide to get on this Memphis kick. She can never bring up Memphis to Carol, a girl at work. That child can't see past tomorrow. It's a shame that someone that sophisticated looking can be so shallow. But there are many

people like that out there. She just wishes that God will spread good cheer around Memphis overnight. And the next day everyone will be happy. If someone makes her a good job offer out of town, she will take it.

"If you do get a chance to get a job out of town and everything is right, take the job," she recalls of Mr. Wang. "Sometimes when you stay on your first job after a counter offer, you might become a lame duck. If the outside offer is good enough, take it."

Jennifer keeps that etched in her mind. She will never start a massive job search unless she is serious about leaving. But, she doesn't really know where she wants to go. And she's not the type to just move out of the city without a job. Memphis ain't that bad. She just wants to experience other things in life. She wants to broaden her horizons. Too many times people even seem to be threatened by that. But, a lot of them have lived other places and brag about when they use to live there. But a young woman coming up shouldn't have those desires. People are just crazy, thinks Jennifer. She doesn't want to talk about Memphis anymore. She is having such a good time.

Troy is just feeling Jennifer out. He is trying to see where her head is. If he is going to think of her in the long term, he needs to make sure that she isn't so wrapped up in family and job that she can't leave the city with a job or husband. A lot of people let other folks chart their own destiny. Thankfully, Troy's mother is very supportive of him and his endeavors.

"Baby, there is a big world out there," she often says. "You need to grab a piece of it and make your Mama proud. Troy loves his Mama. That's no doubt. He loves her more because she supports his growth. She believes in him and that's hard to find sometimes in

family members. Some folks have let life pass them by and they're too bitter to see you get anything out of life. Obviously, they need prayer. They're just lazy and still waiting on the lottery ticket that will make them millions. Or they're waiting on the horse racing number that might not ever come in. And yes, they're still hoping to win big in Tunica.

Whatever happened to working hard and enjoying life? Whatever happened to paying our bills and saving and investing. The stock market is where it's at. That is a good place for a person to achieve wealth. Then, there's real estate, bonds and living below your means. And many times, folks don't want you to hear that. They want to act like they've got some secret formula that's only working for them. They want to act like God is handing out gifts to them only. Truth be told a person just needs more education. Even God says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

If a person is not educated, growth is sometimes limited. If a person is not educated about money, they won't know how to make money, how to save money and how to keep money. Too many times small business owners try to make all of their money off of a few customers. That's detrimental to their growth in the long run because word gets around about how they're conducting business.

"Here is your dessert," says Manuel. Troy just smiles and slightly acknowledges him. Manuel doesn't really care for him anyway. He is more concerned about his precious Jennifer. Is she happy? And is this jerk treating her okay? He carefully places Jennifer's dessert down taking her other plate away. If she isn't finished, she is now. He doesn't want her to blow her lovely figure.

"Are you finished Sir," he inquires of Troy. Truth be told, the guy could eat himself out of a house and a home and Manuel wouldn't have cared.

"I'm finished," says Troy. Manuel reluctantly takes his plate. This guy is such a smart alec, he thinks. He places Troy's chocolate cake in front of him. Then, he stares at Jennifer. "I hope everything has been to your liking this evening," he says.

"It has. Thank you," she responds. Manuel then places the check on the table. Wait until this guy gets the check, he thinks. He might not be able to pay. The check isn't a problem for Troy since he has two gold cards in his wallet. He probably has enough cash to pay for it, but that money will be for incidentals. He hands Manuel his card. Manuel zips off to wherever waiters go in between customers.

"It has truly been a spectacular evening," he says. Troy and Jennifer finish their meals. Both are quiet for awhile. Troy guesses that it is about time that they left.

"That waiter is really funny, isn't he," inquires Troy.

"Yes, he is," says Jennifer. "I've never seen a waiter with so much personality. If we had asked him to sit down with us, I'm sure he would have." Troy knows that she is right.

"Here is your card. And will you sign here," says Manuel. Troy signs the receipt. Manuel hands him his copy plus the carbon. People are so darn picky about stuff like that these days. He's sure this guy is no different.

"I would like to thank you both again for coming tonight. I hope you two have enjoyed your evening. It's been a pleasure," he says looking at Jennifer and bowing. Then, he leaves never to return again.

"Troy it has truly been a wonderful evening. But it is getting rather late. I have some things to do before work tomorrow. You won't mind if I decide to leave now."

"Of course not," he says. "What am I thinking? It is a Sunday night. That's when a lot of people regroup for the upcoming week. I've got a few things that I need to take care of myself," he says. Like picking up Carmen, he thinks.

Jennifer starts to rise. Troy rises as well.

"Don't forget your roses," he smiles. He is at her side now pulling her chair back so that she can get out with ease.

"I won't," she says. The week is already starting off with a bang. She has met a nice guy and things couldn't be sweeter.

"Do you mind if I walk you to your car," asks Troy.

"I would love it," says Jennifer. "I wouldn't want someone to snatch me," she chuckles.

"I wouldn't want someone to snatch you either," he says. Truth be told, he could be a mad man if someone snatches his future love. He would be protective of Jennifer and treat her well. He wouldn't be overbearing. He can tell that she is a woman of means. She has a purpose in life. He would not be threatened by that. He would walk with her and not in front of her. They would walk side by side. That's why he likes her. She just has a sense of purpose. Sure, she has everything else that makes her a woman. But, it is her higher calling that makes her so attractive.

Jennifer starts walking towards the door.

"Are you coming," she asks.

"Yes, I'm right behind you," says Troy. He has got to stop dreaming especially when others are around. Jennifer waves at Manuel on her way out. Troy nods in his direction. Then, he gets in front of Jennifer to open the doors. There are only a couple of people on the parking lot. Jennifer is moving in the direction of her car. It is a medium sized compact car. It has made the top selling car list in the U.S. for two years straight. It is reliable.

"I had a wonderful evening," says Jennifer. "Thanks so very much." She extends her hand.

"The pleasure is all mine," says Troy. He kisses her hand hoping that she won't snatch it away. Jennifer slightly nods and prepares to get in her car. Troy opens the door.

"Goodbye," she says.

"Goodbye," says Troy slamming the door. "Will you call me tomorrow?," he asks. But she has already sped off.

Troy walks to his Jeep still feeling like a conqueror. He looks at his watch and decides to head in the direction of the airport. This is not going to be an easy task. He is not going to be able to stay focused on Carmen. He now is pursuing Jennifer.

Carmen is exhausted and so looking forward to a romantic night at home with Troy. She is hoping that he will stay at her place tonight. But, she knows how he is when it comes to work.

"All work and no play will make Troy a dull boy," she often jokes.

"Someone has to work," he would jokingly respond.

But Troy is kind of distant these days. She isn't sure why. She doesn't suspect anyone else, but one never knows. They spend an adequate amount of time together. But truth be told it is mainly a sexual relationship. Sure, they take trips and everything together, but it is usually all about sex.

Carmen wants more. But Troy doesn't appear to be thinking the same way. She doesn't want to pressure him because men get scared over just about anything.

The plane is pulling into Memphis International. After waiting for the necessary emergency procedures, Carmen and the rest of first class begin to exit. There are plenty of perks that come with her job. Flying first class is definitely one of them. Will Troy be outside the gate waiting for her, she wonders. He usually is. Why should tonight be any different?

"Enjoy your stay," says the flight attendant.

"Thank you, I will," says Carmen.

Troy is waiting anxiously outside the gate for Carmen. He has never been so nervous in all of his life. How is he going to leave a woman who has done nothing to him? How is he going to leave a woman who has given her body to him on a regular basis? It is of her own free will. She is just trying to please him. But now, he wants out because the relationship is going nowhere fast. He wants to bail so that he can devote all of his time and attention to Jennifer. She deserves it.

Carmen steps out of the passenger's gate and into the airport. She spots Troy near the back and smiles as she walks toward him. She wants to act like a child and run toward

him. But their relationship isn't that way. He would think that she is a bit foolish. Plus, her woman's intuition tells her that something is up.

"How was your trip?," asks Troy giving her a light hug.

"Great," says Carmen. She expects a big hug. Maybe, she doesn't. Troy has been acting kind of strange lately. Carmen thinks perhaps there is a lot going on at work. Never does she think that he isn't satisfied.

"Let's go get your bags," he says. The walk to the baggage area seems like a short mile. Troy isn't saying a lot. For the life of him, he really doesn't know what to say.

"I'm glad you're back home safe and sound," says Troy. "Liar," says his conscience on the inside.

"It's good to be back," says Carmen. "Did I miss anything?," she inquires. Surely, he wouldn't just volunteer information. That much she knew. She would probably have to dig it out of him.

"You didn't miss much. There was a big explosion across the bridge. No one is killed. But Arkansas had to call Memphis for assistance. It took them all day to put the fire out. That was yesterday. It's all over today's paper. I'll show you. It's in the car," he says.

After grabbing Carmen's bags, they head for home. Of course, Troy will be dropping Carmen off at her house and he will go home. Usually, he would just spend the night at Carmen's or she would come to his house. And they would make love and then enjoy breakfast together. Carmen truly is a good lover. She knows how to please a man. She knows how to make him feel appreciated. She knows how to respect a man and let the

man be the man. She is very well trained. And any man would be glad to have her. A man would be a fool not to want her.

Carmen is successful and she seems to be a spiritual person. But that has never really manifested itself into worship form. They've been to churches for weddings and things like that. But Carmen uses Sundays as a day of rest. But Troy no longer wants to be with Carmen. He likes Jennifer. And he trusts that Jennifer likes him. Troy is not even concerned about Jennifer having a boyfriend or some jive friend. He will knock him off, no problem.

But with the here and now, Troy has to deal with Carmen. Good beginnings make good endings. He quietly puts the bags in the Jeep. Then as always, holds the door open for Carmen. He is determined to treat her with respect until the very end. For a smart woman like Carmen, these are obvious signs that something is wrong. Troy has been restless for weeks, but she doesn't know why. It isn't anything that he has tried to talk to her about. Troy decides that he will tell Carmen after taking her home. There is no sense in dragging it on and just using her.

"Are you hungry?," he asks.

He knows that I don't eat past 8 p.m., thinks Carmen. All of a sudden, she has this sinking feeling in her stomach. It isn't hard for her to guess what will transpire next. The ride to Carmen's house is a long one. She thinks that Troy will be happy to see her. He isn't talking much at all. And that is unusual. He isn't talking about today's football game. Carmen watches just to keep up with him. She wasn't a sports fan until she met him. But, she keeps up with a lot of it especially football just to please him.

Troy is thinking about his dinner with Jennifer. He is very excited about her and about joining his new church. He doesn't have time to devote to two women. So, Carmen will have to go. She has a lot going for her. Plus, she's beautiful. Troy doesn't plan to spend the rest of his life with her. Maybe, he is being too rash. Maybe, he's not thinking straight. This is all perhaps too immature. No, he rationalizes it's now or never. He pulls into Carmen's driveway. He gets out, goes on the other side and opens her door. Then, he takes her two bags out of the trunk. She grabs her two carry-ons. Carmen is still staring at Troy who isn't looking at her. She is waiting for the bomb that is about to drop. She opens her front door and leaves the door open for him. Idiot, she thinks. She isn't about to hold the door open for a man who is going to leave her.

Troy closes the door behind him placing her two bags in the front room. That's strange, thinks Carmen. Normally, he would take the bags to her bedroom. But, it's apparent that he has no intention of spending the night.

Troy crashes on the sofa. He is going to make this quick. He doesn't want to lose too much sleep tonight. But that nap earlier is going to help him out a lot.

Carmen comes back in and asks, "Is there something I need to know?" Troy takes her hand. She sits down beside him, not at all happy about what is about to transpire. She wants to be positive. But his whole attitude is funky from the moment they leave the airport.

"Carmen, I've decided to start seeing someone else," he says. "I just haven't been happy. And I've met someone who I could possibly be happier with."

"Okay," she says.

Troy is kind of shocked. She is taking this much too easy. Carmen has been reading the signs over the last few weeks. No way is she going to sit here and look upset. She can do that later.

"Anything else," she asks.

"No, that's basically it," says Troy.

"Well, it's kind of late and there are some things that I need to do," she says. Troy figures that is his cue to leave.

"Okay," he says shaking his head. "Take care." He wants to hug her but he senses that she isn't having it. Troy walks to the door. Carmen walks behind him as he leaves. As soon as she shuts the door, angry swells to the surface. She definitely has to work out tomorrow. And yes, she will take some guys up on their recent offer for dinner dates. She's not going to give Troy Smith the satisfaction of thinking he's hurt her.

Troy approaches his vehicle in utter disbelief. Carmen takes this awfully well. It's like she knew what was coming or just didn't care. Nevertheless, he has to live with his decision whether this thing works out with Jennifer or not. He gets back in his vehicle. And the rest is history.

Troy is very protective of Jennifer and she likes that. She doesn't date around, but why should she. He gives her everything that she needs. Troy's in the shower now. They usually shower together, but since she just got her hair done, she'll hold back and just take baths.

"This girl really messed my hair up," thinks Jennifer. "She must be evil. I wonder if she even goes to church." She picks up the phone and starts dialing her sister...Jillian.

Jillian suggests this girl. The phone rings twice before Jillian answers. "Hello."

"Jillian, what are you doing?"

"Girl, I'm getting ready to hit the mall. What's up?"

"Oh, I'm mad at you?"

"What did I do now? Trouble seems to stick to me like fly paper," replies Jillian.

"Girl, it's my hair. That woman you told me to go to, she ain't right."

"What do you mean, she ain't right? She does my hair. I've been going to Shelia for five years. You pissed her off didn't you?"

"No, I don't think so. She cut off all of my hair. I don't like this short bob."

"I saw it and thought it was cute," says Jillian. "Girl ain't that many people wearing their hair as long as you wore yours. You looked like an African princess or something."

"What's wrong with that? Troy likes it long."

"Bump, Troy."

"Bump you, Troy is my man and he pays to get my hair done."

"Oh, so he's complaining."

"Girl, I don't even know why I bother with you. If you weren't family, we definitely wouldn't be friends. But I just had to call you about your girl."

"Oh so, now she's my girl. She's just my hairdresser. Do you want me to talk to her about your hair?," asks Jillian.

"No, I don't want you to piss her off. If she doesn't come through for me after a few more months, I'm just going to vamp. And if she cuts any more of my hair, I just might spring on her butt. I don't have time for childish games. Image is everything in my business. And she need not play with grown folks. It takes a big hairdresser to let a woman's hair grow. It takes a big hairdresser not to sabotage a woman's glory. It takes a big hairdresser to stand back and let someone's hair be all that it can and all that it should be. But it takes a petty, jealous, evil and vicious person to do what she did to me."

"Child, calm down. And who told you were grown?," shouts Jillian.

"Bye girl, I've got to go," says Jennifer.

"Later, baby girl," says Jillian.

Chapter Two The Memphis Scene

Jennifer and Troy are at the New Mall called Bristles in Whitehaven. It's about a 20 minute drive from Jennifer's. After the former Mayor serves several terms in office, things really pick up. Now, the new Mayor is even more determined. Both Mayors are friends with Atlanta's Mayor. Jennifer is about ready to leave this city. If she hadn't met Troy, she

would have gone to Atlanta or Dallas or somewhere. She's never been so sick and tired and sick and tired of being broke. But once she started tithing, things just picked up. Troy tells her that the reason she is so depressed is because she is cursed. He tells her anytime that you rob God you will be cursed with a curse and depression usually follows.

Troy's been very helpful to her. He let's her develop and do her own thing career wise. She's very much in love with him. She never thinks about leaving. Where would she go? Who can she find that's so together like Troy? He's single, never been married, drug free, making big bank and a Christian. She won't even mention the bedroom scene. All she asks is that you pray for them. She's knows fornication is wrong. But, they are so weak.

"Baby," get you an outfit too," Troy says lovingly looking in her eyes.

"I don't really want anything. I'll just help you pick out something."

"Jennifer, that's what I love about you. You like nice things, but you're not selfish and you don't try to milk me dry. I think I'll keep you." Troy grabs Jennifer and gives her a big hug. Then, he rubs her hair. It's very soft and smells good. No wonder she is always concerned about it. But he doesn't want her to worry about Shelia. Then, her hair will fall out.

"Where you gonna go anyway?" Jennifer smirks...kissing him on the nose.

"Don't play me baby. You know I can go somewhere. You know that," Troy says matter of factly.

But we play with each other like that. Because we've got it like that. That's why I likeee him. He's so darn cocky. I love a man full of confidence. Sometimes, he acts too cocky like she really doesn't have any place to go. He almost psyches her out. But, she's

not crazy. That's why she works out and eats right and works diligently to keep her hair together. She can never be friends with someone who deliberately tries to damage her glory.

You can tell when a hairdresser is sincere. Jennifer has been hearing some good things about Adrienne and Angela at La Vogue. She's going to check one of them out. But first, she might go to Gwen's down near the Pyramid or George downtown. And then there's Margaret on the south end. She's heard that child can whip some hair. Then, she'll try Adrienne or Angela. Carolyn in Grand Junction does a good job as well. That's a long drive though. It's about 45 minutes from Memphis. Jennifer definitely needs prayer in a big way when it comes to hairdressers.

"Baby are you daydreaming about me," Troy asks looking Jennifer dead in the eyes. "I hope you're not worried about that hairdresser of yours," Troy is looking down at Jennifer. It's so great to date a tall man, she thinks.

"I suppose I shouldn't be so concerned. But the hair is a woman's glory. It's in the Bible. And I hope God gets that hairdresser for messing with me," says Jennifer.

"Look baby, don't wish anything bad on your hairdresser. If she deserves to be whipped, God will get her. But don't ever be vindictive or think that way."

"You kill me trying to be Mr. Moral Majority. You know people are a trip."

"But we as Christians have to be better. Don't we," teaches Troy.

"But we as Christians have to be better. Don't we," repeats Jennifer. "I guess you're right. Let's find your suit."

That boy has been called to preach, thinks Jennifer. He's just fighting it. Anybody with that good of a heart and that spiritual, except in a few areas has got to have a higher purpose. We will all be preaching before it's over, she thinks.

"Hey Baby, let's go into Sax. Let's see what they've got. A nice olive color will be great. Remember if you want something just let me know. But, I understand that you do have a lot of clothes."

"Troy, don't make me go on a shopping spree. You know I can shop my buns off," says Jennifer.

"Oh, I know that. We don't even have to go there. You don't need anything anyway." He smiles at her and grabs her hand. Then, they go into Sax. It's about time Memphis got a big league department store.

Downtown near the Pyramid, Shelia is hard at work at Touch-Up. It's a two story full service salon. There's also a dining area in the back. Black women have been wanting something like this in Memphis for years. Now, they can come here and get their hair, manicures, pedicures and facials done. They can also get a massage and eat a healthy meal. There's also a nurse on duty along with a dietitian. Shelia and a few other partners put a big chunk of money into this place. They knew downtown was about to take off. Most of the hair styling is done downstairs. The facials and massages take place in the first three rooms upstairs. Farther back around the corner is the dining area.

Sistahs have never had it so good. They come here to forget about the husbands, boyfriends, screaming children and jobs and literally get lost in luxury. Shelia's working out a deal with some California group to get mud baths and other things set up. This place

will soon reach spa status. It's going to be the bomb. Her work area is well lit like a make-up room. Customers can look to any side and see their hair as she works. She prefers to work with customers facing the front mirror. That way they can see what's going on with their hair. She doesn't have anything to hide and she's not trying to be sneaky.

As customers come through the door...there's a chime. Shelia always tries to look perky and happy even when she's not feeling that well. Being a successful hair dresser is demanding on your time and family. Shelia's single but dating a guy named Carl. Carl is so sweet and understanding. He brings her lunch and dinner. You can't ask for a better man. God sent her a good one.

It's around 1 p.m. and Brenda Kelly, a reporter with a local news station is due in. These darn reporters can be a tripp, thinks Shelia. They don't want a new hairstyle hardly ever. They don't want you to cut it. They just want to keep the same dry style day in and day out. She's glad she's not a reporter.

"Hey, girl." Brenda comes swinging through the door. That girl can dress her butt off. But they pay them enough, thinks Shelia.

"I almost thought I had to go in today. There is a big accident on the interstate and someone called in sick. I talked my way out of it. Told them I would have to miss my hair appointment and they said never mind. Is that clout or what?"

"Or what," thinks Shelia. They didn't want her to have a bad hair day on their time.

"I'm just glad you didn't stand me up," Brenda says.

"I think I've spoiled you news reporters and anchors. You all think this is a place where you can have it your way," replies Shelia.

"But I come every week. I refer people and I tip well."

"We know that. I'm not supposed to complain, but I do send you out here with the fiercest hairstyle east of the Mississippi. Nobody else in Memphis can touch me. Believe it." Shelia is standing back now looking at Brenda in a way that says top that.

"Girl you are too cocky. But I love a secure and self-assured hairdresser. Don't cut my hair today," Brenda points out.

"I wasn't going to cut your hair."

"Yes you were. You always manage to snip the ends too much. Do they teach you that in hair school? Long is bad. Short is in," replies Brenda.

"Your hair is down your back. If it gets any longer, they're going to take you off TV."

"Yeah right," laughs Brenda.

"If it gets too long, you're not going to be able to do anything with it, except put it in a bun." jokes Shelia.

Brenda is laughing now, holding her stomach in the chair. This girl will laugh at just about anything. Sometimes she laughs too much on air. Somebody needs to tell her about that.

"Girl you definitely need to stop. You're going to get my pressure up by my laughing so hard. Today, I just want my straight wrap. You know the deal."

"I hear you," replies Shelia. The customer is always right, she thinks.

"When does Jennifer come in?," asks Brenda.

"She'll be here tomorrow. That girl is so picky. I don't mean to talk about your colleague, but she won't give a hairdresser a break."

"Since she works in sales I don't see her that much. But her cut looks good. How does she feel since you whacked her hair off?"

"I didn't whack her hair off. It was too long," replies Shelia.

"Shelia, explain me this. Your hair is down your back. You keep it in a ball. I bet your boyfriend doesn't want you to cut your hair," says Brenda rolling her neck. She's not afraid that Shelia will do something bad to her hair. She's comfortable with her since she's been coming to her for years. Besides, Brenda will do an expose on her butt, if she whacks off her hair.

"Girl, I am not going to let you TV types worry me. I'm not bothered. Because if you don't like me there are plenty of other salons in the city. But, I bet they won't treat you like we do here at Touch-UP. We cater to the total woman. I'm getting a little bookstore put in upstairs in a few months. We might even move to a bigger place in two or three years. We plan on turning this place into one of those California spas."

"I have never seen anybody work as hard as you. How do you keep a man in your life?," asks Brenda.

"Oh, I'm very secure in my relationship with Carl. He's a Christian and he loves me like Christ loves the church. He knows how to entertain himself after hours when I'm not home," declares Shelia. But Shelia knows the true reason why Carl stands by her. She ain't sleeping with him. And he gets nothing until he says I do. Their relationship is tight. And when God gets ready to bless her, she expects Him to do it in a big way. Most of the

women out there who have good relationships know they didn't sleep with their husbands. But, they won't tell too many people. They're too envious to see anybody else with a good relationship. That's one of Shelia's complaints about life in Memphis. Maybe, people act like this everywhere. She thinks people are too scrappy. Carl says it's like that anywhere you go. He says there are no perfect situations in life and don't expect anything to be perfect. And when you don't sleep with a man and you're in Christ, God will step in and help you. Plus, he reminds her that she is going through the change. So, she might be more critical of things.

Shelia notices this unusual smirk on Brenda's face. What in the heck is she smiling about? thinks Shelia. She's got on a blue pants suit with navy buttons down the front. She looks kind of cute, Shelia admits to herself.

"Well I just hope he's not cheating on you since you just about sleep at this place. I know a sistah needs to make money and all that, but come on," replies Brenda.

"Girl, I know you are a journalist, but you are too nosy. Now if you want some dirt on your man, you've come to the right place."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play me," replies Shelia.

"You know hairdressers hear it all and see it all. I've already got the 4-11 on your situation. And the news ain't good. I can tell you who Franklin is sleeping with and when. And just because you two are living together and engaged don't mean jack. So before you start trying to tear down my fortress, you need to check your own castle. Hear me now."

"What have you heard?" replies Brenda still looking self-assured. She knows Franklin's jacking off and she knows who with. She just wants to call Shelia's bluff. She doesn't care that he's cheating now. But come June 12, 2002. He better have that stuff out of his system or ain't nobody walking down the aisle.

"I ain't going to rat on the brother," says Shelia.

"I just have to let you know who you are dealing with. You know folks can't keep anything to themselves. And he picked a big mouth to cheat with. But you just hang in there. She's just trying to scare you off. He don't want her. He likes you. He's just using her. We all know that. He ain't giving her no money and barely giving her time. She cooks for him all the time and buys him stuff. You just make sure that clown is using a condom."

"We've both had AIDS tests and we're using condoms. I tell him that he better not get out there and catch anything that aspirin won't cure," replies Brenda.

"Girl it's rough out here. I'm not going to be in this rat race that much longer. I told Carl we were getting married in about two years. If he ain't ready then, he's got to go. And I'm not playing," says Shelia. She steps back and looks at Brenda with that matter of fact look. She shakes her head from side to side.

"Let Franklin, mess up and let me catch him. Folks can say he's cheating all day. Let me catch them out or let her call our house. His butt will be toast. And I am not playing. I'm not going to prance my butt around Memphis thinking I'm all that and on TV and this boy is dissing me. I'm just trying to hang in here. I don't care if he is a pilot. I will leave his butt tomorrow. And you know I'll have someplace to go. I've got enough friends who are just waiting for me to dump him."

"Oh, I believe you girl. A lot of guys who come in here to get their hair cut ask about you. We know you don't have to put up with this mess. But see he's put you out there in that big house in East Shelby County. You are driving a Beemer that he's paying for. We know you are not going to let that go. You got it going on. I'm not going to argue with you. I just wanted to let you know that you need not poke holes in other folk's lives, because you're living in a glass house too."

"I hear you Shelia. You're right. I respect you for looking out for a sistah. We got to look out for each other. We're straight," replies Brenda. She gives Shelia a low five. Brenda is quiet until they go to the shampoo bowls. She sees LaTonya Steele, a cheerleader for the Memphis Stallions. The city finally has an NBA team.

"Hey LaTonya girl. You think I can get some free tickets when we play Chicago," asks Brenda.

"Girl you better talk to someone in the sports department at your station. Your station sponsors events there anyway. I get so sick of you begging. Your boyfriend makes more money than I'll ever see," smirks LaTonya.

"Girl just chill. I was just asking. There's no skin off of my back. Stop acting so petty. You ask me for tickets all the time to concerts and I hook you up, but I can't ask you for something. I got to get out of this city," replies Brenda.

"It's too hot in here. And the heat ain't from the hairdryers. Yawl, need to just chill out," declares Shelia.

"Shelia, you've got a phone call," yells one of the hair technicians. "It's your brother, he says it's urgent." Just then, Shelia gets a sinking feeling. She makes her way over to the phone.

"Hello," she says.

"Shelia, this is Sherman," he says. Sherman sounds like he's shaking and his voice is trembling.

"Shelia, mother just died."

"Oh my God," she says. "Where is she?" asks Shelia

"She's at the hospital. She suffered a massive heart attack," he sobs. He truly was his mother's favorite.

"I will leave the shop immediately. I want to see her," says Shelia.

"Why didn't she call one of us," she asks.

"Maybe, she didn't have time," offers Sherman. "She was able to dial 9-11."

"Where is she?" asks Shelia.

"She's at Central Hospital downtown," sobs Sherman.

"I'm on my way," she says.

"Shelia, the head nurse there wants to see you as well," shares Sherman.

"Why," she asks.

"I have no idea what she wants. Are you going to be okay?" he adds.

"Yes, I'll call Carl. And then, we'll go to the hospital," she says.

"You try and get some rest Sherman," she demands.

"Okay," he agrees.

"Goodbye," says Shelia.

"Bye," says Sherman.

Shelia hangs up the phone. She wasn't expecting this at all today. Her mother was only 60 and looked good for her age. They didn't have the best of relationships. But, Shelia never wished death on her. There were times that she wished her mother would work out her issues. But, death is so final.

Just then emotions swell up in Shelia. She actually feels like crying. But, she doesn't want to...not at the shop.

"Is everything okay?" asks Brenda. Shelia is gone for awhile. Brenda wants to see what is going on.

"My mother just died," shares Shelia.

"I'm sorry," says Brenda. "Well, you need to be getting out of here."

"I am. I have to call Carl."

"I'll get one of the others to finish my hair," says Brenda giving Shelia a hug.

"Okay," says Shelia. She starts to dial Carl's number. It's just before lunch. Surely, he is still in.

"This is Carl," he answers.

"Hi Carl, it's Shelia," she says softly.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Can you leave work and come get me? she asks.

"Sure baby, what's going on?" adds Carl.

"Mother just died," she cries.

"I'm on my way. Are you going to be okay in the meantime?," he asks.

"I'm fine," she lies.

"I'll be there shortly," he says.

"See you later," she says.

"Okay," he adds.

Shelia hangs up the phone. This is all happening too fast. She goes up front.

"I'm going to be out for a few days. Reschedule my clients for me," she tells her assistant. "My mother just passed." she shares. "I'm going to my office. Carl can find me there." She goes to her office shuts the door. Goes to her seat and quietly sobs. She can't believe this is happening. She was planning to work things out with her mother. She often tries but her mother never wants to talk. Imagine if you will knowing you have issues and not wanting to discuss them. But it's too late now.

Chapter 3 Friends Hanging

Franklin is cruising around Memphis in his Mercedes with his buddy Luke. Sometimes it's just nice to kick back with his partner and search for women. However, he is very attached to Brenda and enjoys her company.

"Man look at that honey," yells Luke.

"Dogg," says Franklin. "She's letting it all hang out in that outfit."

"You better not look too hard. I know Brenda has you whipped," laughs Luke.

"You're not jealous are you Luke. It gets kind of boring running from honey to honey doesn't it," beams Franklin.

"Man, don't even try it. You use to run around just like I did. You juggled them harder than I did. I still don't know to this day how Brenda managed to hook you. I would give my left ear to know."

Luke is staring at Franklin with that how you like me now look.

"Man you will fall in love one day too. And then I will say to you that, "You're whipped."

"Brother, I can't see it anytime soon. But that little honey right there might make me change," replies Luke.

"Man you know that's not the type of woman you want to marry. You may want to hit it a couple of times, but that's no one you want to share your life with," explains Franklin.

"Speak for yourself. She can't be all that bad," laughs Luke.

"Boy you are buck. I can't talk any sense into you. Let's go to the Mall. I've got to find Brenda something for her birthday today. I know she thinks I've forgotten."

"Whipped," yells Luke.

"Alright, I'm whipped," smiles Franklin.

"I'm whipped and proud," he acknowledges.

Troy and Jennifer are still hunting for an olive colored suit at Sax.

"Baby, you sure are tall." Jennifer looks up at Troy as he surfs the racks for the perfect suit. Then, she wonders over to the tie rack flipping back and forth looking at the ties.

"Baby, do you like this suit," replies Troy.

"No."

"Why," asks Troy.

"It's not a good green. I thought you wanted an olive green....like a deeper green. I just don't like it," she argues. Jennifer picks up another suit.

"Look at this one. It's a deeper green. You'll probably have to get it tailored. You know you can't find a lot of ready to wear stuff."

"That's why I come here. I can get it altered. It will only take an hour or so," he says.

"I'm hungry," declares Jennifer.

"Okay," replies Troy not looking up. The two wander over to the food court. Jennifer is just about a vegetarian. But she eats, chicken, fish, seafood and stuff. She doesn't eat beef or pork. She's trying to get Troy to reform, but he won't. She orders a chicken salad from Snazzles. It's a health food restaurant. Today, Troy has no choice but to get a chicken sandwich, salad and some cheesecake. Snazzles doesn't sell red meat or beer.

"I hate these no red meat places," he tells Jennifer.

"Baby, I'm watching my fat intake and cholesterol level. So, I avoid red meat. But you eat so much of it. If you just eat it in moderation, it would be okay. But you act like you got to have a steak everyday." Jennifer looks at him like she is some sort of health food authority.

Some people stop eating red meat and then set out to change the world, he thinks.

"Baby, a man has got to have his steak. That's just life and that's the way it is. It's not going to change. I'm not going to stop eating steaks. Maybe I'll eat them just a couple of times a month. But I have got to have me a steak," Troy announces. He pulls Jennifer closer to him and kisses her on her cheek. Man, I love this woman, he thinks. And she's not going anywhere, ever. All of a sudden someone taps Troy on the back.

"What's up man," yells Franklin.

"Hey Franklin man, what's up with you," says Troy.

"Hi Jennifer," Franklin says glancing at her hair.

"When did you cut all your hair off?," he asks.

"Man don't even ask her about her hair," says Troy waving his hand in the air. "She's not too happy with it today."

Jennifer doesn't say anything. She just waves and continues eating her salad. She is getting more disturbed with each minute. Especially now that people are acknowledging that Shelia cut off too much of her glory.

"Man I just saw you and Jennifer and wanted to say Hi. I'm out with my partner Luke. I've got to find Brenda a gift for her birthday or I can't go home tonight. You two take care," says Franklin.

"Later man," replies Troy. Franklin catches back up with Luke.

"Man, my friend Troy's woman cut off all her hair. That girl had hair down her back. And she looked really sexy with it. Now, she just looks average, but cute. Her hair is always shining. But it probably grows pretty fast. I'm sure it will be down her back again in a few months. Troy says she isn't too happy about it. She doesn't even speak," replies Franklin.

"Yeah man, women don't like to have bad hair days. Fortunately, I know how to line my own hair. But you got to feel for women. They're at the mercy of hairdressers. They have to relax the hair, shampoo it and curl it and they usually have to go every week. You know women can be treacherous when it comes to hair. And I'm not going to lie. I like

good looking hair. It can be short or long. It just needs to be healthy looking and kind of shiny. I like women looking like they just left the salon," says Luke.

"I know hair is important. That's why Brenda's contract pays for her hair. The day that she gets her hair done, I know there won't be any sex that night. If we do have sex, it will be very light. She doesn't play when it comes to her hair." Franklin has that "what can you do" look on his face. He knows the reality of good looking hair and the benefits and perks.

"Man where did your buddy Troy find a babe like that," asks Luke.

"At All of that Baptist Church," says Franklin.

"Straight up," says Luke.

"He found a woman like that in church. All, so he goes to church all the time. I go occasionally to the River Street Church. It's a huge congregation with a few thousand members," continues Luke.

"I'm a member of All of That Baptist Church. I just don't go that often. It just depends on when my flight comes in and I'm usually tired," says Franklin.

"I thought you didn't fly on weekends," says Luke.

"Well sometimes I do. God knows my heart," says Franklin.

"Yeah, you just don't want to go," criticizes Luke.

"Man, I know you're not tripping on me for not going to church. When was the last time, you saw the inside of a church. All you do is club hop and you're trying to talk about me," says Franklin. "Pleeze."

"Well, man sometimes you try to give that holier than thou appearance. You and Brenda have been shacking for a couple of years. I know you're sleeping with her. So

you're sinning. You still hang out with me at clubs from time to time trying to scream at babes. And we all know you're kicking it with Jasmine," he blurts out. "You thought I didn't know, didn't you. But Memphis is a small place. How long have you two been kicking it?"

Luke just looks at Franklin like don't even try to deny it. Franklin looks out into the open space of the mall. How could he deny it? Yeah, he's been sleeping with Jasmine. Sometimes a man has to venture away from home just to see if he's missing anything, he thinks.

"What you don't know won't hurt you," replies Franklin.

"I love Brenda and we will marry in '02. That's all you need to know. Anything else is strictly my business," says Franklin.

Luke is kinda feeling like a jerk now. He has just popped Franklin's spot. He has peeped his card. Franklin isn't as real and as faithful as makes himself out to be. But still, Luke doesn't like seeing his boy down. So, he immediately changes the subject. "But you can't believe half the stuff you hear now anyway and it's best to get everything out of your system before you get married," laughs Luke.

"I ain't mad because you got all of the honeys after you. Just save some for me," he screams. Franklin is smiling now as he regains his composure.

"Wow!," thinks Luke. This man is really in love with Brenda.

"So, what are you buying Brenda for her birthday?," asks Luke.

"I think jewelry will be appropriate," says Franklin.

"I'm going to buy my baby some jewelry," he decides.

"Baby let's go into this store," directs Troy. I've got to find a suit, if not I'll just wear something from my collection at home," he continues.

"I can tell you're itching to spend some money. Why do you have to have a new suit? We're just going out to eat. That's nothing new," declares Jennifer. Troy grabs Jennifer's neck and then he butts his head against hers. Then, he takes his hand down the back of her head starting at the top until he gets to the nape of her neck. Next, he kisses her on both cheeks. Anyone walking by can tell he cherishes the ground she walks on.

"Oh honey, I just love you so much. If I weren't with you I would just die," she says. Jennifer is definitely in love with Troy. She wouldn't kill herself over him, but it just sounds dramatic enough. She wanted to play hard to get and avoid sex...you know do the right thing. But she just felt very comfortable with Troy and he didn't look like the love 'em and leave 'em type. Anyway, he caught her on a two year draught. So far, he hasn't turned out to be that way. But one never knows. She's been in a relationship before that lasted three or four years and suddenly the sizzle is gone. The beautiful sex fades and all of a sudden you want to get far, far away from that person. Some folks even move to different states. But just like that book about men and women being from different planets teaches, men are just like rubber bands. Some of them always come back. But usually you don't want them back or you have found someone better.

Jennifer has ordered tapes for her and Troy. They've gone to some singles workshops at area churches. He's really committed to making the relationship work. Sometimes when the right one comes along, you can mess up all types of ways, but when it's time for you to join with your mate, no one on earth can stop it. And that's a fact. She

reads all types of books about couples trying to get their act together. Her parents have a good relationship so that's why she is so loving. Ernestine and Jonathan Williams raised her right. There are four kids in the family. There's her baby sister Joy. Jennifer is next. Then, there's her big brother Jonathan and her sister Jillian. Of course, all the kids names begin with J. Obviously, her mother loves her some Jonathan.

Troy has a brother. They were raised by his Mom, Nancy Smith. He had uncles to give him "the talk." Of course, he learned on the streets as well. He talks to his Dad from time to time, but they're not as close as he would like. His parents had a thing going on for about four years and then it died down after his mother got pregnant twice. But that woman is a hard working sister. She is a nurse and put him and Nathan through school. She asked Troy's Dad to get involved in their lives, but when he didn't she didn't go begging. Now that Troy is very accomplished, his dad wants to step into his life. Troy is very forgiving and is allowing him some time, but told him now is the time for him to get to know his future wife.

I wish I were more forgiving like Troy. I probably would have told Pops to keep stepping. But just like a minister preached on T-V the other Sunday, you've got to forgive, so that God can forgive you. It's so easy to be hardnosed and uncaring. But we all will want forgiveness sooner or later. So, I guess I'll have to forgive my hairdressers so that God can forgive me.

He also said that holding grudges prevented God from blessing us fully and that all of that anger trapped inside wasn't healthy. That's why some people have heart attacks and strokes. That's why some workers shoot up people at their jobs. The older you get the

worse people seem to act. But if you don't forgive them, you'll end up staying mad at everyone. It's so easy to judge and be unforgiving.

"Baby, are you okay," Troy is kissing Jennifer on the nose. Apparently, she has started daydreaming.

"I'm fine," she says.

"A penny for your thoughts," replies Troy. He is looking at her now with that I love you forever look. I'm so blessed she thinks. To have a man that simply adores me and means it. But it hasn't always been like this. Before this, she was basically giving away good potential guys. They were the kind that you should want to take home to meet Mom and Dad. And while she was in college, she wasn't interested in anything serious. She was too busy trying to get her degree and being in her sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. Now, she's more settled and will only date guys who she can see herself with in marriage. She's been fortunate not to meet some of the bogus characters some of her friends have run up on. You know the types...FAKE.

"Sometimes you worry me when you start drifting like that," says Troy. He is still hugging her. "But I know that you have a lot on your mind with your hairdresser and all. I should tell Carl to keep his woman in line. But then that wouldn't be proper. This is strictly between you and Shelia."

"Oh Honey. Thank you for being concerned. Let's just grab a suit and go home," says Jennifer. Troy shakes his head in the affirmative like you're right. The two go out of the store without a suit. There are lots of folks out this time of day. But it is a Saturday. The two head for the parking lot.

Jennifer notices a homeless man on the street. She takes social issues very seriously. She looks at the man briefly. Good thing he doesn't see her. She continues walking with Troy. He opens the door of his sport utility vehicle. She jumps right in. Troy jumps in on the other side. Jennifer looks at the homeless man again. She wonders how he became homeless and if he would be homeless forever. People always say that the average person is a couple of paychecks away from homelessness. Jennifer wonders what put him over the edge. Was he a drug user? Did he have mental problems? Has he been on the run since his teen years? What brought this man to the streets? And where are his family members? By now, he's too proud to reach out to family members. And maybe they don't care or they think he's dead. Is he even from Memphis?

Troy knows that Jennifer likes to daydream. He sees her looking at the homeless man. He knows that she takes social issues very seriously. That's one thing he likes about her. She has a conscious heart. He has a conscious heart as well. Troy could never hook up with a woman who never wanted to give of her time and talents. There are so many people out there in need of development. How can one not give back when God has been so good? He doesn't bother her. He just places his hand on her thigh. She puts her hand on top of his and leans her head back. She truly is blessed. Sometimes she complains too much. But some people have it worst than she does. Here is a man on the streets who has to stay there during the rain and cold. He doesn't know from day to day what he will eat. And here she is worried about her hair.

They roll into Troy's garage. He has a home out East. His house is four bedrooms. Troy bought a house this size because he didn't want to buy another anytime soon. And he

told Jennifer they would need all of that room for their first child or two. She even helped him decorate. Of course, the interior designer from her church pitched in as well.

Jennifer almost jumps out of the vehicle, but remembers that Troy is very serious about his gentlemanly duties. She waits until he opens the door. Then, she steps down. For a moment, the two just look at each other. The chemistry is still as strong as ever.

He plants a kiss on her forehead, grabs her hand and they go to the door. Inside is his massive living room. All of his furniture is deep green leather. The coffee table is imported from Africa. Jennifer saw it in a magazine and thought that it would go great with his furniture. So, she bought it for his birthday. The fireplace is one of the prettiest she has seen in a long time. She immediately plops down on the sofa.

Troy just smiles as he goes into his bedroom. He checks his messages. His mom has called and then there are a few other unavailable calls on his phone ID. He needs to get some work done. Jennifer can entertain herself with the television or one of his many books. He tries to make sure that she reads a lot to keep her vocabulary fresh. It's also good because they need things to talk about. A person who reads a lot is never at a loss for words and they can move up the ladder faster. He comes back into the living room.

"Hey sleepy head. I'm going to mow the lawn. I've also got a few other things to do. I've added a few new books to my library. If you want to, check them out," he says.

"Okay," agrees Jennifer. She goes into his office and searches around for a couple of books. She would offer to clean the house, but Troy is very meticulous about keeping his house clean and orderly. His house is just as clean as hers. She turns on the television and surfs until she sees one of those television ministers. These guys and gals have a lot of

money. They're always on television. Of course, it costs money to stay on the tube. This guy is a man out of Virginia. He has really dark hair and is very tall. He is a good looking guy. He isn't quite as exciting as Jennifer is accustomed to, but he gets the message across.

"Turn with me to the Lord's Gospel according to Matthew 26:1-2, 14-16 and 21-25. Of course, Judas went on as Jesus says to betray Him. In the end, Judas hangs himself. He has a good thing going but he blows it by betraying Jesus. He could have been named among the most high in Heaven. Let me tell you about a few other people who had a good thing going and they blew it.

Harry Crumb has been married for 15 years. He has a beautiful wife, Alexis, and two lovely children Carlton and Priscilla. And yes, he has the perfect in-laws. Life is good, but Harry gets greedy. One day a woman on the job makes a pass at him. He accepts and takes it farther. He figures no one will know if he has one illicit affair. After all, he has been a good father and husband for 15 years. Harry feels that he deserves a break today. Anyway, he has this affair. The woman tells a friend and the friend tells two friends and so on and so on and so on. Harry's wife was a friend of one of the friends and they told her. At first, Alexis doesn't believe it because she and Harry are tight and she has never believed anything bad that someone has to say about her husband. So, Alexis decides to conduct a full scale investigation. She wants to see exactly what is going on. What is Harry up too? She starts noticing things about Harry."

Troy comes in from outside. He peeks in on Jennifer. She appears to be sleeping on the couch with the TV on. He doesn't bother her. He knows she needs the rest because of her hairdresser. She is stressed out over her hair.

Jennifer is really into this TV minister. How could Harry do such a thing to Alexis?

The minister continues.

"She notices that he is acting a lot spunkier. Harry is now more than ever concerned about his appearance. He gives the appearance of someone trying to impress a new date. One day Alexis pops up at the office to surprise him with lunch. This is totally out of the norm for her. Alexis is an attorney and usually dining with clients for lunch. But, today she decides that she wants to have lunch with her husband. Anyway, she goes into his office. The secretary isn't at her desk. So, she assumes that she is out to lunch. She goes into her husband's office and there sits the secretary leaning over the chair, kissing Harry. Alexis just stands there in shock.

"What in the world is going on?" she says.

Harry literally throws the secretary off of him and stands up trying to straighten his pants. But there is no way for him to get out of this one. His wife is livid and walks out. He runs out after her. All he can think about is losing all. Before he can reach her, Alexis jumps on the elevator and heads to who knows where. Anyway, she files for divorce. It is a disgrace to the community. Harry has always been a little flirty, but Alexis thought nothing of it. Harry continues to call the house and send flowers. She has the locks changed immediately. So, he is bunking at a hotel. He feels that after 15 years he deserves a second chance. Alexis is not too understanding. How can she trust him again? Eventually, Harry gets religion....and he "is" serious. And that is the only thing that saves his marriage. He had a good thing going and he blew it." Jennifer just shakes her head. That little secretary is a whore. She decides.

"Caesar Dunnally is an auditor for a local company," continues the preacher. "They trust him immensely. And he is well respected by many of his peers. He is married with four kids and pulls down \$80,000 a year. But Caesar isn't tithing. And when his wife becomes ill and other bills start coming in, he starts stealing from the company. Well that next year, the IRS audits the company and ten thousand dollars is missing. Ten thousand dollars may not sound like much, but it is someone else's money. Now, Caesar sits in jail with 5 years remaining. He had a good thing going and he blew it. He could have gone to his employer and secured a loan. If he had been tithing, God would have made a way for him anyway.

And then there is Rebecca. Rebecca is an administrative assistant to a bank CEO. The bank ranks in the top ten of the nation. The money is good and the hours are great. Then, Rebecca starts hitting on her boss. She starts to get just a bit cozy. Her boss has been married for some 20 years and he often flirts with her but he never makes a proposition or anything. He doesn't want anything more because he loves his wife. It is evident by looking at his office. It almost looks like a shrine. He has pictures here and there of Rosa Lee. Bill Wright is nobody's fool and he isn't going to blow years of marriage on a two bit secretary. Occasionally, he takes Rebecca on trips with him and some of the other managers. He has never gone with her alone.

Anyway, Rebecca starts acting sexier and wearing more provocative clothing. Eventually, Bill transfers her to another department. And she isn't too happy. He doesn't need this type of pressure at work. He replaces her with an older schoolmarmish type of secretary. Rebecca had a good thing going and she blew it."

By this time, Jennifer has nodded into wonderland. She is dreaming the strangest dream. She dreams that she and Troy own a beauty and barber salon. She has greeters at the door. She selects all of the hairdressers. The customers have to fill out service forms. The salon is located downtown. It is a beautiful building. Her dream doesn't reveal how they finance the place.

Troy comes inside. He mows the lawn, trims hedges and even pulls some weeds. He even clears some space in the garage. He comes through the garage and into the kitchen. He heads for the bedroom and notices that Jennifer is still sleeping. Troy goes into the master bedroom and enters into his bath and washes his hands. Then, he proceeds to get out of his filthy clothes.

Jennifer doesn't like for him to touch her when he's all dirty. He throws his clothes into the dirty clothes hamper and jumps into the shower. The water feels wonderful. He just sort of presses his hands to the wall and thanks God for all that he has accomplished today. He showers for about fifteen minutes and then gets out. He looks in the mirror. Is that a gray hair he sees near his ear? No, it can't be, he thinks. Then upon close inspection, he notices that it is.

Troy is just 35 but the years are starting to creep up on him. He knows that he and Jennifer need to wrap this thing up in a matter of years. Sure, she's young and has plenty of time on her hands. She never talks to him about marriage. Troy is sure that she loves him. He hopes that she wants to spend the rest of her life with him. At least, he thinks she does. What if he asks her and she says no? Surely, she wouldn't say no. Every woman wants to get married. At least, most women do.

But that gray hair just makes him realize that he isn't the young club hopping player that he was ten years ago. He's not the Mister forever young Casanova that he use to call himself. He looks at his body. He's in pretty good shape, but if he doesn't work out he will surely have a beer belly. He pulls in his gut and looks sideways into the mirror. Yeah, he can still hold his own. Yeah, he is still the bomb.

Troy towels off and grabs a robe. He goes into his room and grabs some underwear, a t-shirt and some shorts. Is Jennifer still asleep? They were up for awhile last night. Jennifer has to have eight hours or she feels that she's missing out on rest. She tells Troy that if she doesn't get the right amount of sleep that she will wrinkle early. So, Troy lets her sleep whenever she wants to. It's better for him in the long run. And when they make love, oooh it's so good.

Troy sits on the edge of the bed. He places his head in his hands and just kind of meditates for a minute or so. Sometimes life gets to be so tough. Thank God he has Jennifer. So, life is a lot easier. He doesn't notice Jennifer walking in. She just sits next to him. He feels her and pulls her closer to him. Then, she kisses his forehead...letting him know that everything will be alright. She doesn't say a word. And she doesn't have to. She can tell that Troy is stressed. This is one of those very rare moments. They just stay there for several minutes. Jennifer wants to make love, but Troy is hungry. They will do dinner first. The love thang will finish the evening off.

