

Andrea' Porter

Gina

We are at the bridal store, my best friend Ceal and I. Today is supposed to be a fun outing but instead, it is disappointing. Ceal has the better end of the deal. I envy her unfussy display of contentment, sitting there on the off-white sofa, sipping on apple juice, and going through an array of magazines. My frustration grows with each dress I try on. I'm down to the last dress out of the ten that I've already tried and still no perfect dress. Everyone says I will know the dress is right for me once I find it. Well, no such luck.

"This is starting to suck. I've tried on eleven dresses and nothing fits."

"Maybe this is God's way of telling you, you shouldn't marry this guy," Ceal says and I roll my eyes, unzip the dress, step out of it, and redress myself.

Ceal is not a holy roller, but sometimes I swear the woman overuses the Bible. The last time I was in a church was nineteen eighty-six and the next time I will be in one is when I walk down the aisle. Well, that, and Ceal's baby shower. I'm the godmother. Church folks are too uppity and judgmental. Besides, I have too many sins.

Ceal waves her hands before my face. "Are you still on planet earth?" she asks with an odd expression on her face.

"Why don't you like Bernard?"

Ceal sighs and pushes herself up from the sofa. The maternity top she wears reveals her protruding navel from her round tummy. I smile.

"I know a snake when I see one and your fiancé may have you fooled, but I'm not fooled by him," she says with a frown. She makes another facial expression and holds

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her stomach.

“Are you okay?” I ask, rushing to her aid.

Ceal grips my hand. “Yes girl, indigestion. This baby craves all sort of junk food my body is not used to and when I give in to the cravings this is what happens. I need to stop eating. I’ve gained so much weight. I feel as big as a house.”

“Stop it, you look beautiful. Pregnancy agrees with you,” I compliment. She laughs and frowns at me. Ceal fluffs her hair and picks up her purse from the sofa.

“How does pregnancy agree with anyone?” Ceal asks and giggles.

“Now you’re fishing for compliments. It makes you glow.”

Ceal turns toward me and stops. “Gina, you and I have been best friends since we were old enough to form words. You know that I love you and wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

I have a suspicion I’m not going to like what she has to say, but what choice do I have? I stand my ground and try to open my heart to what my friend’s words.

“I think you’re making a huge mistake marrying this man. You have a lot going for you and he isn’t going anywhere with his life.” Ceal’s eyes shift from me to something or someone behind me. She pauses, smiles, and waits for the reason for the intrusion. I turn to face my bridal coordinator and old classmate.

“Gina, did you find something you like?” Estelle asks politely. She is petite, with black-blue hair and wire-rim glasses.

I sigh, resignedly. “Girl nothing fits. When will you have some more new stuff in?”

“Umm, I don’t know. I can check with the store manager and get back to you,” she answers.

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“Okay, do that and let me know,” I say, with no excitement in my voice.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” Estelle apologizes, then adds: “You’ll find something, don’t stress out.”

She touches my arm to reassure. “I have another lady waiting on me so I got to go, but I will definitely get with you after I talk to my manager Jennifer.”

I’m disappointed but I try not to show it as I watch Estelle walk away. It doesn’t help when I hear the woman next door gushing about how much she loves her dress and she goes on and on about it.

“Someone sounds excited,” Ceal notes.

“Ugh! I guess.” Wasting no time, I say, “Ceal, you may not approve of Bernard but I love him and I hope you will come to see him the way I do. If you can’t, that’s understandable, but I don’t want to have this conversation about him again.”

Ceal looks hurt, but Bernard is my man and I’m tired of people telling me what I should and shouldn’t do.

“Okay. I will leave it alone, but I will say this: You’re gonna regret it.”

Tracey

These nightmares are getting stronger. I wake up in a state of distress the same time every night, drenched in sweat and tears. My hands tremble as I bring the glass of water up to my parched lips. I’m restless, scared, and loneliness surrounds me. Even

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though my adoptive father is dead and gone, I still have nightmares. I'm still afraid to close my eyes at night, because I'm too petrified that I will wake up to find him standing over me. When Gina and I lost our parents, it left us vulnerable to all kinds of perverts.

The night we lost our parents, we were on our way home from church. The U-Haul truck came out of nowhere and in an instant our lives were changed. Our parents died in the crash and Gina and my lives were spared. We bounced around in foster home after foster home until a couple adopted us. I was only thirteen years old, beautiful and innocent when my adoptive father snuck into my room to take advantage of me.

Nausea grips me and I rush into the bathroom to throw up. The worse of it was over. I wash my face, brush away the foul taste from my mouth, take two sleeping tablets, and will myself back to sleep. This time I don't dream.

"It says here that you've done some work for local boutiques and runway shows," Martin asks. He is the executive designer for Lee Lee's boutique in Soho. Lee Lee's carries chic yet casual designer wear for real women who want their clothing to look flattering on them.

Martin's broad shoulders block the view of outside. I want to fix my eyes on anything but him. He is striking, a golden boy, but also a gigolo, sleeps with anything that stands still long enough.

"Yes, that's right," I confirm and fix my eyes on the beautifully handmade couture dress to his right.

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“You were highly recommended by one of my colleagues. I’m expecting great results at this runway show. You seem a bit nervous. Will you be able to deliver?” Martin waits patiently for a reply.

A man comes to stand at the register with his back turned to us, one hand in his pocket, and no clothes in his hands. His presence is unnerving and I wonder why he is even there until a woman comes out to join him. They leave together.

“Martin, I know you’ve seen my portfolio. I also know that you were very impressed with what you saw. I can understand your need for reassurance, but my work speaks for itself. Hire me and you won’t be disappointed,” I offer with a flirtatious smile. *Work it... work it...work it.*

Martin smiles knowingly. “You’re absolutely right. I wanted to see how you handled yourself. I like what I see. You are correct. Welcome aboard.”

Martin sticks out his hand. I want to hug him, but that would be unprofessional. I accept his hand. It’s warm and clammy. The weirdest thing happens. The attraction for him is gone.

“I need you to start as soon as possible,” Martin tells me. I glance down to our entwined hands. Martin notices my awkward gesture and releases his grip.

“Tell me when and where,” I beam excitedly.

“Come on Tuesday at one o’clock. See you then.”