

## *Prologue*

“**B**ut I’m a nice guy, Kim. Why do I get this kind of treatment? It’s like I always say, women don’t want a man who’ll treat ‘em right.”

Kimberla Washington twisted the phone away from her mouth and turned her lips in a snarl. “Yadda, yadda, yadda,” she said after pressing the mute button. She didn’t know why Derrick Thompson thought she had nothing better to do than listen to his relationship problems. It seemed their friendship had turned into a Dear Abby saga, with her playing Abby. Well, she was tired of it and she was tired of him. She pressed the mute button again. “Look, Derrick,” she said, interrupting his sob story, “I’ve got work to do. I’ll talk to you later.” She hung up without waiting for his response. “I’ve got to get some new male friends,” she muttered. “I’m about tired of these *nice* brothers crying on my shoulders about how women don’t want a nice guy.”

“What’d you say, Kim?” Jim Whittaker asked from the doorway of her office cubicle.

Kim looked up at the short, balding man who’d hired her to work at Urban Style Magazine when she’d first moved to D.C. five years ago. “Nothing,” she said.

Jim came fully into her cube and propped on the corner of her metal desk. A chubby man of about fifty-five, he didn’t seem to mind that his stomach rolled over the waistband of his pants as he made himself comfortable. “Didn’t sound like nothing to me,”

he said. “And from the smirk on your face, it wasn’t nothing to you, either.”

Kim sighed. Sometimes Jim was nosy—there was no other way to describe it—but she knew that if she didn’t tell him what he wanted to know he’d hound her until she thought she was going crazy. He was known in publishing circles as a bulldog, a moniker he relished. Word was that he’d been a helluva reporter before striking out and starting his own magazine. “I was talking to Derrick,” she explained and wasn’t surprised when Jim’s lips turned down. She and Derrick had started dating soon after she’d been hired at the magazine, so Derrick’s face had become a regular around the office. Unfortunately, their break-up a few short months later followed by their decision to remain friends had become fodder for office gossip. “He’s complaining again that women don’t appreciate nice guys like him. In other words, he got dumped. Again.”

Jim rubbed the faint stubble on his chin. As usual, he’d been in such a hurry to get to the office that he’d left home without shaving. “This makes what—the third time this year?”

Kim rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “And it’s only April.”

He dropped his hand from his chin and snapped his fingers. “Kimmy, girl, you haven’t been learning what I’ve been trying to teach you.”

Kim leaned back in her chair and waited. She knew the twinkle in Jim’s eyes meant he had what he thought was a great angle for a story. “I’m waiting. What are you gonna teach me today?”

Jim grinned and stood up. He framed his hands as if he held the headlines of a magazine. “Can’t you see it, girl?” he said, but he didn’t wait for her answer. “Why Nice Guys Get Dumped.” He grinned a smug grin. “The title alone will sell thousands of magazines.”

Kim leaned forward as Jim talked through his idea. Okay, so the idea intrigued her a little—just a little. Her attention faded in and out as she thought through how she’d handle the story. Why

did nice guys get dumped? She could think of a thousand reasons why *nice* guys like Derrick got dumped and she was getting excited just thinking about putting those reasons on paper and getting paid for doing it. Boy, did she have a lot to say on the subject.

She'd start with the fact that *nice* guys like Derrick weren't really interested in regular women. No, they wanted the *Jet Magazine* swimsuit types who wouldn't give them a cold stare on a hot day. Not that she had anything against the women who posed in *Jet*. It was just that Kim knew that Derrick and guys of his ilk were more interested in beautiful faces and perfect bodies than in building committed relationships with real women. She'd been through enough of his type to be an expert.

"Hey," Jim shouted, drawing her attention back to him. "I've got it. A contest. We can do a contest. Kimmy girl, this is pure genius. We can sponsor a contest for the nicest guy in America. Only our nicest guy has to be nominated by a woman who's dumped him."

"Wait a minute, Jim," Kim began. She chastised herself for not paying more attention to Jim's thinking out loud. "The article has some merit, but a contest? I think we'd be overplaying it with a contest."

Jim shook his head and his meaty jaws wobbled. "*The Nicest Guy In America Contest*. Kimmy, this idea is gonna make us a bag of money. Now you get on the copy for the contest. We can probably get it into this month's issue." He rubbed his fat hands together. "Then we'll sit back and wait for the money to roll in. This oughta raise circulation. If we're lucky, we'll make a run at *Upscale's* number three position."

"Jim," Kim said again, but it was no use. He ignored her and walked to his office. She knew he was already counting the new subscribers he hoped to get.

## **One**

*Late May, two months later*

“**Y**ou’ve got yourself some losers here, girlfriend.” Kim’s longtime friend Leslie Montgomery tossed a black-and-white photograph on the mound of black-and-white photos covering Kim’s dining room table. “Thank God it’s Saturday and I have a date tonight. You two are about as boring as some of these guys here.”

Kim rolled her eyes in the direction of her other friend, Tammy Williams. The three women had been friends since they were freshmen roommates at Spelman. Pledging Delta Sigma Theta sorority together their sophomore year had cemented what had now become a lifetime friendship.

“Give it a rest, Leslie,” Tammy said with a sigh. “Kim didn’t force you to help out. If you want to go, just go.”

Leslie got up from her seat directly across the table from Tammy and stretched her lithe, five-foot-four-inch, one hundred-ten-pound body. Her orange shirt, which had been tucked in her short orange shorts, rose up and exposed her flat pale-brown stomach. Kim knew Leslie’s innocent stretch was a not-so-subtle taunt at Tammy, who’d been in a losing battle with the weight monster since her divorce six years ago and she found her

friend's display offensive. Who did Leslie think she was pulling a stunt like that with them?

"Yes," Kimberla agreed. "Give it a rest, Leslie. If you gotta go, then leave. Don't stay around here complaining all day."

Leslie made a production of pulling her top down. Then she reached over and grabbed her shiny gold shoulder bag that matched her shiny gold sandals, earrings and choker in typical Leslie fashion. "If that's the way you feel about it—"

"Please, Leslie," Tam said. "You know you want to go so just leave."

Leslie turned and headed for the front door of Kim's small one-bedroom apartment. "I'll be sure to call you two and let you know how my date went. I *did* tell you he was a fine brother, didn't I?"

Kim shot another glance at Tam whose now-full face showed disgust and maybe something akin to envy. But Kim knew Tam wasn't envious of Leslie. No, Tam was envious of the slender girl she herself had been back in college when all was right with the world. Feeling as though she was intruding on Tam's private thoughts, Kim turned and watched Leslie sashay through the front door and close it with a whack.

"That chick needs to learn some manners," Tam said.

Kim didn't want to be put in the position of talking about Leslie behind her back, even though she agreed with Tam's remark, so she turned the conversation back to the contest. "What do you think, Tam?" she asked. "Do we have any winners here or is Leslie right—they're all losers?"

Tam brushed her straight, shoulder-length dark brown hair back behind her ear in the self-conscious manner she'd adopted since her divorce. "I don't think they're all losers and I bet you don't, either." Tam shuffled the stack of photos in front of her. "Look at this one."

Kimberla took the offered photo and immediately recognized the dark, handsome face smiling back at her. Reggie Stevens. Goodness, he was a fine man. She guessed he was about six-foot-

two and spent a great deal of time in the gym. The brother definitely had a buff body. Why in the world had so many sisters dropped him? She shook her head. Fine. Fine. Fine.

“So, what do you think?” Tam asked.

*I think he’s so fine that I should take him for myself*, she thought, but of course, she didn’t say it. Tam, though upset with Leslie now, would be on the phone within five minutes of leaving her apartment telling Leslie that Kim had the hots for one of the *Nice Guys*. “He seems like a *real* nice guy.”

Tam picked up another photo and slapped Kim on the shoulder with it. “What do you expect, silly? It’s a Nice Guy contest.”

“I know, Tam,” Kim said, remembering the day two months ago Jim had come up with the contest idea. “At first I thought the whole idea was going to blow up in our faces. Thank goodness, other women had *real* nice guys in their lives because the ones I’ve had have been the pits.”

“Like Marcus,” Tam said, speaking of her ex-husband. “I still can’t believe that jerk left me so he could marry that sleazy nurse. I practically put his behind through medical school *and* I gave him a daughter. I get mad every time I think about how stupid I was to think he ever cared for me or Melissa.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Kim said, not for the first time. “It’s not your fault Marcus was a jerk. We’ve all had our share of jerks. Remember that I had Derrick, the man with the roving eyes.” Kim let her eyes scan the dining room without moving her head similar to the way Derrick used to do. As she’d hoped, Tam laughed. “The brother was always looking for something, or shall I say, someone.”

Kim shook her head. While she knew she didn’t have the kind of looks that made men stop on the street for a doubletake, she also knew she could hold her own in the company of most women. At five-eight, she wore a size twelve, which meant she wasn’t skinny but then neither was she fat. Her skin was dark, which she knew turned some men off, but those men she didn’t

want anyway. She liked her complexion, and except for a few weak moments in high school and college, she always had. And on top of all that, she was a kind and intelligent woman with a good job and good friends. As far as she was concerned, her break-ups with Derrick and the others like him who'd passed through her life was their loss.

"I hope Derrick hurries up and finds whoever he's looking for," she said, "because he's been through almost every woman in D.C. by now."

"And he still hasn't figured out why he keeps getting dumped?"

Kim shook her head again. "What can I say? Mr. Roving Eyes is slow. He still thinks he's a nice guy being mistreated by cold-hearted women."

Tam chuckled. "You should have nominated him for the contest and I should have nominated Marcus."

Kim laughed with her friend. "I thought about doing it, girl. Then we began getting nominations and I saw how serious the sisters were about the brothers they nominated. Some of these guys sound like real princes." She glanced at Reggie's picture. "If one of them had come through my life, you can bet I wouldn't have let him go."

"You know," Tam said. "I bet a lot of your women readers will feel the same way. You're going to be getting letters in droves after they see these brothers."

"I know you're right," Kim said. "I just hope Jim hires someone else to go through all the mail. He's definitely not paying me enough to do it in addition to my regular responsibilities." As a feature writer, her tasks usually included special projects like the Contest, which required a great deal of time—on and off the job.

Tam plucked the picture of Reggie out of Kim's hands. "This brother here is going to get his share of mail. I can already tell you that. Looks, a good job, knows how to treat women. Can you believe somebody gave him the boot?"

Kim glanced down at the full-length picture of Reggie on the stack of photos in front of her. “And it wasn’t the first time.”

“How do you know?” Tam asked, eyes wide. “Did someone else nominate him?”

Kim pursed her lips. “More like some *ones*.” She picked up the short stack of letters next to the tall mound. “Look at this.”

Tam took the offered letters and began to read. After finishing the first one, she went on to the second. “You mean he was nominated twice?”

“Keep reading,” Kim said.

Tam shook her head and went to the next sheet. “Three times?” she said with obvious surprise. “But he seems like such a nice guy. I wonder what’s wrong with him.”

Kim’s sentiments exactly. Sure, Reggie Stevens was fine, had a good job and seemed to possess the qualities women always said they wanted, but something had to be wrong with him. He’d been entered in the contest so many times by so many women.

“Wait a minute,” Tam said. “You mean to tell me that this guy was nominated six different times by six different women? Dag, something must be seriously wrong with this one. I don’t think he should make the finalist cut, Kim. The guy’s probably a drug addict or something.”

Kim smiled. Tam’s overly imaginative mind was now in high gear. “You read those letters, didn’t you? Those women love that guy.” She thumbed through the letters Tam held. “Here, let me read you parts of this one. It’s from Christina Duncan from Boston. Apparently, she and Reggie dated before she got married. Here goes.”

*“Reggie is a very special man. I could tell from our first meeting that he was open, honest, considerate and fun to be with—traits that are becoming more and more difficult to find in men. And he never proved me wrong. When he learned I hadn’t gone to many amusement parks during my childhood, he took me to Six Flags Over Georgia and we spent the day like kids. I still have wonderful memories of that day. What I*



*remember most is having tired feet from all the walking and having Reggie pull my feet on his lap and massage them. I almost fell in love with him that night.”*

*“I think I would have fallen in love with Reggie had I not already met the one love of my life. When it seemed my love and I weren’t going to make it, Reggie offered the most wonderful of sacrifices, which I’ll leave to him to tell you about. He’s indeed a man among men and I wish him the happiness I found.”*

*“Reggie told me once that he thought I’d get over the love I felt for my now husband, but I knew then he was wrong. I told him that one didn’t get over love, but I don’t think he believed me. He will when he finds that special woman. She’ll be a lucky woman whoever she turns out to be.”*

Kim’s heart filled with wonder as she read again the words she’d read many times before and she knew she had to meet Reggie Stevens. “What do you think?”

“I wonder what great sacrifice he made and I wonder why she, and all those other women, dropped him if he was such a great guy. I don’t know, Kim. I’d be careful with this one if I were you. Dumped six times,” she continued with a shake of her head. “If he’s been nominated this many times, just think how many times he must have been dumped. What do you think? Sixty?”

Kim picked up the full-length picture. There was something about Reggie Stevens that told her he was a man worth getting to know. Maybe it was the kind eyes and the sweet smile set in the most masculine of faces. Or, Kim thought as firecrackers went off in her belly, maybe it was his wide shoulders, tapered waist and firm thighs.

“You’re not getting hung-up on this guy, are you?” Tam asked, leaning over her shoulder.

“Of course not,” she answered quickly. “I’m just doing my job.”

“You’re not gonna make him a finalist, are you?”

“I’m not sure,” Kim lied. Reggie Stevens was definitely making the finalist cut. She had to meet this man and find out for

herself what about him attracted her and what about him had sent so many other women packing. "Let's make it through the stack and then decide."

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Reggie knew he wasn't going to like what he found when he walked into his house as soon as he turned his blue Nissan Maxima onto Southwest Atlanta's Roman Street. Cars were lined up and down both sides of the street. Although he hoped he was wrong about where all those drivers were, he knew deep inside that he wasn't.

He heard the music even before he reached his drive and found it blocked by four cars. Luther had to go. This was it. His neighbors were probably already getting a petition together to force him out. He slapped his hand against his steering wheel and continued clown the street looking for a place to park. He really didn't need this. Not tonight. After his date with Deborah, he needed some chill time. A brother needs time to lick his wounds after a sister breaks his heart.

He found a spot around the corner from his house and grudgingly pulled his car into it. *Why am I doing this?* he asked himself. *I have a house with a two-car garage and I'm parking around the block. Luther has got to go. This is the last straw.*

Reggie got out of his car, pressed down the lock and slammed the door shut. Yes, he had to give old Luther the boot, just as Deborah had given it to him.

"I want to see other people," she'd said, her eyes sparkling. "For the first time in my life, I feel in control. I want to have a little fun."

Reggie could still remember when he'd met Deborah at the wedding reception of a mutual friend. She'd caught his eye because she'd looked so sad and so out of place. He'd immediately walked up to her and struck up a conversation, determined to see her smile before the afternoon was over.

Getting that smile had been a difficult task though since Deborah hadn't wanted to talk. But he hadn't let that stop him. He'd talked. He'd told her about himself, his family and a little about his work as a computer security specialist. But it was the stories about his nephews that got to her. First, she smiled. Then she laughed outright. There was something in the timbre of her laughter that made him think it had been a long time since she'd really laughed. He determined then to make sure she laughed more often.

As the afternoon progressed, she'd gradually opened up to him and told him about her last relationship. Apparently, she'd come home one day to find her live-in boyfriend gone, along with her stereo system, color TV and a few choice prints she'd bought. It wasn't until she got a call from her bank a few days later that she realized he'd almost cleaned out her account, too. She'd been so distressed about the entire situation that she'd been unable to function in her receptionist job and, after numerous warnings, she'd been let go. The day Reggie met her had been the six-month anniversary of the day she'd come home to find the deadbeat gone.

Now, Reggie knew some brothers would have gotten as far away from Deborah as possible after hearing only part of her story. But not him. Her story had the exact opposite effect on him and he'd asked her out. Her reluctance had charmed him and he'd known pursuing her was the right thing to do. That was six months ago. And tonight she'd given him his walking papers.

Reggie sucked in his breath when he reached the walkway to his house. *Luther had to go*, he told himself. No more excuses. He made his way up the walk and into the house. It was a miracle the loud music that greeted him didn't shatter his eardrums. And as loud as the music was, he was surprised it didn't sound louder outside. He thanked God for his thick exterior walls.

A small hand grabbed one of Reggie's buns and he jumped. "Hi, handsome," a soft, sexy voice purred.

He turned and looked down into the smiling eyes of a Halle Berry look-alike. “Hi, yourself,” he said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. It wasn’t this woman’s fault that he’d had a bad day.

“Wanna dance?” she asked. He could tell by the smile dancing at her lips that she fully expected him to say *Yes*. Women like her always did. And men usually complied. There was a confidence and a surety about this woman that was the exact opposite of what he’d seen in Deborah when he’d first met her. But, he realized with a jolt, the confidence in this woman’s eyes now had been in Deborah’s earlier tonight.

“Save one for me,” he said with a forced smile. “I’ve got to find the host and take care of some business.”

She gave a practiced frown that said she was disappointed. “I’ll be waiting for you. Don’t forget me.”

“How could I?” Reggie said with the teasing grin he knew was expected and the woman walked off. The male in him didn’t miss the invitation in her hips as she moved away from him.

He forced his eyes away from the Halle look-alike and scanned the living room for Luther. He spotted him behind the bar, preparing drinks and no doubt giving a line to the three women seated around him. Only three women tonight, Reggie mused. Luther must be off his game. Women usually felt all over themselves for what Luther called his Tavis Smiley-ish looks and his Denzel-ish charm.

With purpose, Reggie walked over to them. “What’s up, man?” he said to Luther.

The surprise in Luther’s eyes was almost reward enough. Almost.

“Ahh, ladies,” Luther began, “You’ll have to excuse me for a minute.” He winked. “I gotta see a man about some business. But I’ll be back. Have a good time while I’m gone, but not too good.”

Luther quickly moved from behind the bar and clapped Reggie on the shoulder. “I didn’t expect you back tonight, partner. I figured you’d be spending the night with your lady.”

“Well, you figured wrong. What’s going on here, Luther? I can’t believe you’ve turned my place into a nightclub when you have a real one across town.”

Luther laughed, all the while leading Reggie away from the party crowd and back to his bedroom. When he stepped in front of Reggie and eased the door open, Reggie knew he was making sure no one was *using* the room. A relieved look on his face, Luther turned and let Reggie enter the room before him.

“What were you doing, Luther? Making sure none of your friends were making use of *my* bed?”

Luther grinned. “You know how parties are, man. I didn’t want you to be embarrassed.”

Reggie dropped down on the foot of his king-sized bed, not even bothering to turn back the comforter as he normally did. “This isn’t working out, man,” he began. “You have to find your own place.”

“I’m looking,” Luther said. “But you know it’s hard to find the right house in the right neighborhood at the right price. I’ll be outta here as soon as I find something that’s right for me.”

Reggie didn’t even want to think about how many times he’d heard that spiel. Luther had been living with him for almost a year now, when they’d originally planned for him to only stay a couple of months. “Well, you’d better start looking harder. I’m giving you a month, Luther. Four more Saturdays and you’re outta here.”

Luther pulled up the burgundy leather armchair in the corner of the room and sat down facing Reggie. “What happened with you and Deborah?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“I don’t even want to talk about it. Just get these people out of my house so I can get some rest.”

“She dumped you, didn’t she?” When Reggie didn’t answer, Luther said, “I knew it. She did, didn’t she?”

Reggie fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He noticed a couple of cracks in the crown molding and made a

mental note to call his builder. “She doesn’t want an exclusive relationship anymore.”

“She dumped you, man. I don’t care what pretty words she put around it.”

Reggie knew Luther was right, but he didn’t want to hear it right now. “Why don’t you go and get your party people out of my house?”

“I knew this was going to happen, man,” Luther said, ignoring Reggie’s request. “I told you that chick had too many problems. Never date a woman with more problems than you. Didn’t I tell you that?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Sure, I told you. But did you listen to me? No, you didn’t. What did you do? You loaned the sister some cash, helped her find a new job and let her cry on your shoulder. And what did it get you? Dumped. I’m telling you, man, never date a woman with more problems than you, ‘cos once they get themselves together, you’re history. History with a capital *H*.”

Reggie grabbed a pillow from the bed and threw it at Luther. “Get out of here and get these people out of my house. I need some sleep.”

Luther stood up. “Okay, man,” he said. “I know you’re feeling down right now. But remember there are plenty of women out there. Hell, there are plenty of women at this party. Next time just make sure you don’t choose a woman with more problems than you.”

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Kim hung up after talking to Melvin Gaines, her fourth Nicest Guy finalist. Now she only had one more finalist to call. Reggie Stevens. She picked up his black-and-white photo again. What was it about this guy that tugged at her heart so? she wondered for the hundredth time. Sure, he was good looking, but she’d come across good looking men before. It was more than Reggie Stevens’ looks.