

Chapter 16

In a daze, Justin parked his truck on his return from the bank in Jessup. He was left stunned and bewildered, on hearing that a huge sum of money was missing from his savings account. He told his wife about this and Eunice said,

“Are you accusing me of robbing you, Justin?”

It was evening and they were both sitting at their usual places on the porch.

“I didn’t use the word 'steal', Eunice. A lot of money is missing and yours and mine are the only names on that bank account.”

“If you didn’t go around forgiving debt like you are God, you wouldn’t be short of money. Sybil should pay that lease money.”

“This has nothing to do with Sybil. Nothing at all. Those trips you have been taking with Jimmy, do they have anything to do with money?”

“Yeah, man. I stole your money so that Jimmy and I could buy a house in Kingston and live together. Jimmy didn’t tell you about what—?”

“Shut up!” Justin’s voice boomed like a canon and Eunice cringed. “Do you find this funny? Eh? Have you lost your blooming mind, woman? This takes the cake! All this money... this huge sum of money just— just— disappeared. *Poof!* Like magic. You have access to this account so what the hell am I supposed to think? Eh?... What could anybody with a pinch of common-sense think?”

”So I am the robber, right?” Eunice sprang to her feet and

faced him.” So call the police, Mr. Justin. Call the police and have me arrested. What are you waiting for? Call them.”

“Calm down, for God’s sake,” Justin said. “You know I wouldn’t do that. You are my wife.”

“Calm down, eh? How would you feel if I called you a thief? Answer that.”

Justin shook his head in despair. Only Eunice could have taken the money. She had to have a reasonable explanation and he simply wanted to hear it. She had never stolen from him before, so why now?

“Sit down, Eunice,” he pleaded. “Please. Let us talk about this. I just want to listen to what you have to say, okay? Please.”

“Talk about what?” Eunice hissed and turned away. “I cannot tell you where that money is so what is there to talk about?” With that, she stomped off and into the house.

Justin sighed. The money his father brought back from Panama had disappeared long before this house had been completed. The Winslow money had been earned by working three times as hard as other people. The tractor he wanted to buy was to facilitate even greater returns but , apparently, that was never going to happen.

Maybe something was going wrong with Eunice, Justin mused. The loss of a child could drive a woman crazy, he knew, but that had happened so long ago. Maybe it was menopause. He had heard that that condition could make women his wife's age, act strangely. Eunice’s recent trip to Kingston must be at the heart of this trouble, Justin thought. His eyes wandered over to where she was watching him from a window, but he did not see her.

Eunice watched till Justin lay back and closed his eyes. *Poor Justin!* If she were to leave things to him, the Winslow

family would completely lose its status. Money was required to protect the Winslow heritage. Since Claire would not cooperate, Eunice had to find some other way to prevent Stephen from marrying Sybil and probably moving in with her. She wanted Stephen to live in this house with the right sort of wife, so that the Winslow's could keep their place in a society in which they stood out like royalty.

If Sybil had found herself a man at that place where she was, things would be so much easier, Eunice mused. She decided to send Jimmy to check that out. And even if that wasn't so, Jimmy would be willing to help Eunice invent Sybil a boyfriend, as long as the price was right. She spent the rest of the evening contemplating the possibility of paying Sybil to leave her son alone.

That night, Eunice had a dream. It was so real, so vivid: She was peering down at Sybil who lay dead beside her mother in the Jessup cemetery, when - from behind a headstone - Princess came running. Squealing with delight, her arms open wide, Eunice ran to meet her daughter. Swiftly they closed the distance between them. With tears streaming down her face, Eunice reached out to touch her child and yelled, "*Princess!*"

"Wake up, Eunice!" Justin's hand was on her shoulder.

She opened her eyes, dried her face and thought, *If only that wasn't a dream.*

The morning after, Eunice rose with a brand-new plan and summoned Jimmy to inform him of their next mission. Lately, Stephen was spending much too much time with Sybil and Eunice felt the need to move fast. She had been fighting this thing for too long to be defeated now.

Jimmy responded quickly. "Morning, Miss Eunice," he said, handing her a letter. "This is yours, Ma'am."

"What's that now?"

"Miss Simmonds asked me to give it to you. I was at the Post Office when I got your message."

Eunice opened the letter and read:

Dear Mrs. Winslow,

Regarding our discussion of a few weeks ago, I must first apologize for not giving that matter you mentioned, the attention it deserved. My boyfriend and I had just begun to talk about marriage and I was anxious to get my divorce. I am sure that you, as a woman, can understand that. However, in light of the fact that my son is going to be involved, I am willing to give the matter a second thought.

I must first establish, however, that because my wedding will have to be postponed to facilitate your request, you will need to pay for that inconvenience. The least I will be willing to accept is Three Hundred Pounds.

Paying that money will furnish you with all the time you will need to stave off a marriage you don't wish to happen. I strongly suggest that you contact me immediately at the above address, regarding this matter.

Yours,

Claire.

Beaming with excitement, Eunice said, "What did I tell you, Jimmy, my boy?"

She wore a dark-red, linen skirt with a casual pink and white top. Her shoes were stylish, yet comfortable, perfectly matching her brown handbag. Eunice patted her curls (not a strand of gray was showing), glanced sideways at her driver and said,

“You are not driving a horse, and this is not a race, Jimmy”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Jimmy slowed down. “I know the way this time.”

“Good. But I can’t talk to Claire if I am dead.”

“No, Ma’am.”

Dressed in sweatpants and a tank top, Claire promptly answered when she heard the knock, and invited her guest in.

Eunice looked appreciatively around her and said, “Nice place. Anybody else here now?”

Claire shook her head no, and showed Eunice to a seat. They looked, awkwardly at and away from each other, neither knowing how to begin.

“Why did you change your mind,” Eunice asked.

“Second thought, maybe. I am not exactly sure. Maybe because Lance is involved.”

“You didn’t seem to care much about his picture and you weren’t exactly nice to me last time. My blood pressure hit the roof that night.”

“Sorry. That was kind of a tough day for me too. Please forget it. What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Very soon now, your divorce from Steve will be finalized, is that right?”

“Yes, the court is proceeding with it.”

“I want you to inform whoever is handling the matter that you wish to challenge the divorce. Will they have to inform Steve

about that?"

"I would imagine so. Do you have the money?"

"Yes but listen." Eunice leaned in closer. "This is business, so I brought just half of it. When you finish doing what I ask, I will pay you the rest."

Claire frowned. "But—"

"If I don't pay you everything afterwards, just go ahead with your divorce plans. You get the idea?"

"I'm not sure it can work that way..."

"It has to." Eunice gave a shrill little laugh. "So you really expected me to give you so much money all at once? No, man. That wouldn't be smart."

Several seconds passed. Claire said, "Suppose I refuse to accept a half?"

Eunice gazed steadily at her. "I think you will accept it. This is a fair deal and very profitable to you."

"Okay. Let's see the money."

Eunice dove into her handbag for an envelope. "It's a hell of a risk I took to get this so this thing has to go right."

Claire counted the money and looked up. "Okay. Should I give you a receipt or something?"

Eunice burst out laughing. "A receipt? So that if you don't call off the divorce, then I can set the police on you?"

Realizing the absurdity of the idea, Claire shrugged. "I'll do my best but, as you must know, I cannot compel Stephen to stay married to me, not for any extended period of time. Still, my input should provide you with adequate time to...to do what you wish to do."

"Sounds reasonable. Just get to it quickly. Please. Life and things move fast and people have to do what they have to. Stephen

is at Sybil's home every time she is there. It is maddening."

"If he is in love with her—"

"Stephen is not in love with her. Sybil is the one behind the whole thing. That girl had been trying to trap him even before you turned up. I don't know why she won't leave him alone."

Claire had never formally met Sybil but she was curious. Before marrying Stephen, she heard about the girlfriend he grew up with. "Maybe she really loves Steve."

Eunice's lips tightened. "If so, that is her problem, not mine, not my son's. I need to get Sybil out of our lives and for good. This situation is – I tell you –I don't even know how to put it. Since she came back to Lebanon, my family has been in turmoil. No peace at all. I am tired of this. Now, to top it all off, she is trying to get Lance on her side too. Can you imagine that?"

Claire glanced through a window, hoping that none of her neighbors was listening as Eunice's voice kept rising. "Don't let it upset you too much, Miss Eunice. I'll do as you ask, okay?"

"Right." Eunice paused to catch her breath. "That is why I want you to deal with this thing right away. As soon as that is done, you get the rest of the money, okay?"

"Okay. Just out of curiosity, though. When the divorce eventually comes through—" Claire waved her hand in a wide, vague gesture "—ages from now, of course, what will you do if Stephen still wants to marry Sybil?"

Eunice stood up, gazed down at her and said, "That will never happen. Trust me."

As soon as she closed the door, Claire went in search of the baby picture Eunice gave her.

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She found it and studied it for some time. She smiled, acknowledging that Lance was a beautiful child - cute like his daddy. She searched his features for anything resembling hers but could find nothing. He was his father's son and his grandmother had a right to be proud. She wondered how her mother-in-law would react if she knew Claire planned to use Eunice's "little prince" as a pawn in accomplishing this mission.

"So you got it?" Clive asked. Claire nodded. He had just come home and they were relaxing in the soft light of the living room. "You don't look happy about it."

"I'm okay. You know, Clive, even though I knew how much she wanted me for Stephen, I never liked Eunice Winslow. She is evil." Clive remained silent. "Not that I am any model of perfection, but--"

"How much did you get?"

"What?"

"How much money did the woman bring?"

"What's the rush?"

Clive took a deep breath. "Just tell me, please. I want to know."

"One hundred and fifty pounds."

"One fifty only? Did you say one fifty?"

"I said one fifty." Coldly, Claire watched him.

"But the letter we wrote said--"

"The letter *I* wrote, Clive. The letter I wrote said Three Hundred pounds. Eunice showed up with one hundred and fifty. Should I have rejected it?"

Clive tried not to show his disappointment. "So when will

you get the rest?”

“After I do what she asked me to do.”

“A shrewd businesswoman, that.”

“She is shrewd alright. A few less flattering adjectives would describe her better.”

“Forget about her. Her money is more important.”

“It sure is important to you.”

Clive grinned. “Don’t be like that, honey. Of course it’s important to me. You know about my current financial woes. Remember you said you would loan me a half of it, Claire? I need it badly.”

Claire looked at him and laughed. “So you want me to give you every penny of what I got? You must be joking.”

“I am not joking.” He sat down beside her. “Remember that money I borrowed to pay you back? I am in arrears with that now, not to mention my other debts and commitments. Those men are loan sharks, Honey. This is serious. My very life could be in danger.”

“That is not my fault.”

“No, but we are partners. It was I who suggested you take the money and put the divorce on hold. I thought you were doing this for me.”

“Listen Clive: We have had some fabulous times together and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But your life may be getting a bit too complicated for me just now. I don’t think I can cope with all this stress.”

“What are you saying? You want to leave me now?”

“It’s just too much.”

“Why didn’t I see this coming? The rats leave the sinking ship.” Claire gasped as he grabbed her shoulders, his face

contorted with rage. “Listen to me, you ungrateful little wretch, and listen good: I want that money. All of it. You hear me? Every penny of it, plus whatever else that woman will bring you. You are not the one in charge here - I am. Understand? And if you ever, ever try to leave me, the only place you will be going is the morgue.”

She cried out, her eyes wide with terror as his fingers dug into her flesh.

“Shut up!” His beery breath against her face was revolting. “I am dead serious, Claire. I carry a gun and some of my best friends are killers.”