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The Write1.com

Chapter 1

Sunday, 6 A.M.

I am so nervous. What am I about to do? My heart is racing a mile a minute. I don't know what I'm about to do; that's the problem. My hands can barely sit still on this keyboard. My brown skin is about to turn white. I need to wring out this pajama top. This is not like me at all, totally out of character. But is it really wrong? After all, this is the Internet. I don't know this man. He seems nice. He's warm, affable, intelligent, giving, open. The list is endless with positive adjectives to describe him.

However, things are not always as they seem, and especially on the Internet. Yet, I do enjoy being with Joseph. It doesn't matter what we're doing—going to a play or a movie, having a nice dinner or laughing and talking. It's always a pleasant experience. And when I hear his voice, ohhh, I simply melt inside. Then again, he could be searching for prey—looking for a vulnerable woman who will submit to his charm and gentleness. Or maybe, he's trying to find a weak woman who'll melt in his big, warm arms. Thus, becoming a stupid woman who'll sign over her life's savings in the name of Love! Well, that is not this woman!

Okay, that settles it! I'm going through with it. Will Joseph be able to figure out that it's me: Shannon or Annon@omibks.com? Well, I'll have to ensure that he doesn't. I'll have to write differently; choose different words. Express myself using another side of my personality. But I can't lie. I won't lie! I'm certain that would make this wrong. Okay, honesty is the key. As long as I'm honest, there's nothing wrong with this. Right?

I remember Michael, my co-worker, and I discussing this same subject extensively about a month ago. He has been dating women from the Internet for approximately two years now. He says he is going to meet his future wife on the Net. He got frustrated with his local options, said he had to broaden his arena. He has this Internet dating down to a science. He decides within three dates whether or not she possesses the qualities that he desires in a marriage partner. He has this criteria and list of questions that he subtly

asks. I think he got that from a book he read on dating to marry.

He said, "I guarantee you it works. It hasn't failed me yet."

"Michael, it hasn't failed you, but I don't see that it has worked, either. I can agree with you to a certain extent. I believe people ought to know what they want in a partner, and be able to screen out those who don't meet that criterion prior to becoming emotionally attached."

"That is precisely what my plan does."

"But it's not always possible to determine that in three dates."

"Yes, it is! It's tough, but it's a skill that you develop."

Doesn't that sound ridiculous? You can develop "a skill" to determine within three dates that this is the person for you to marry. Now, I can see determining that this *isn't* the person for you. Sometimes, you can pick that up on the first date, in the first conversation, or even the first appearance. But I am convinced it takes much longer to be certain that this *is* the person to whom you want to make a lifetime commitment.

I said, "I haven't lived long enough to have been able to develop that 'skill'; I've got some more learning and living to do."

Some qualities can only be displayed, not only talked about. That takes time. A lot of potentials can't pass that test of time. So far, Joseph is passing, with flying colors.

Michael is an attractive Caucasian man. He has a handful of degrees. You name the topic and he knows something about it. There is no question; he is well educated. But sometimes he sounds stupid. I mean out of touch with the real world. I believe he is too educated. And you know what? Too much education is not good for any brain; he lost his common sense. Then again, maybe he never had it, and that's the problem. He is too busy trying to apply a scientific formula or use well-documented research to figure everything out. Unfortunately, people are always changing the formula, which creates another area of confusion and frustration.

Michael is thirty years old and lives with his mom. He says he doesn't want her to be alone. She cooks his meals, washes and irons his clothes, even packs his lunch. I think he is the one who doesn't want to be alone. **Check this out.** He is a spoiled, self-centered brat, but I enjoy hearing his perspective on life. It is, at the least, entertaining.

I don't think Michael will ever meet an educated woman who'll tend to his needs like his mom. Maybe a woman from a culture that teaches women to cater to men. But not a woman of the new millennium, born, raised and educated in the U.S.A. However, I do believe White women are more accepting and condoning in a relationship than Black women. But even they are not as self-sacrificing and tolerant as Michael requires. At least, I don't think they are. I don't mean to offend anyone. It's just that the American culture has, at times, required Black women to be superwomen. It is one of the by-products of slavery.

I am convinced that some of us have been obliged to exude so much strength, that a man would have to be the Incredible Hulk to measure up, or think he's King Kong to be confident enough to even approach us. Michael and I have controversial discussions like this all the time. I share the Black experience as I know it, and he shares the White. People come from several departments to listen to us when we get started. I view it as an opportunity to educate.

They laugh at us and say, "You two are like an old married couple."

People who don't know us well think we're dating. There is something about our charisma together; our ability to respectfully disagree and find the humor in that disagreement is a good ingredient for a healthy relationship. I try to tactfully let all know that he's not my type. I yell in my head and want to scream aloud, "HE'S WHITE, AND I LOVE BLACK MEN!" But, of course, I can't verbalize that to anyone White; can't even say that to some Blacks. They wouldn't understand, and would be offended. They'd walk away certain that I was a racist, as opposed to realizing that I just love my people.

Michael and I said, although it might be tempting, we'd never trick anyone we met on the Internet. We'd never cross that line of deception. We'd always walk the straight and narrow. However, that was before I found myself in the situation that caused me to need information. He was the one who persuaded me to venture out to meet people by this mode of communication. You could even say he forced me. Well, that may be an overstatement. But you get my gist. Whatever happens, good or bad, I give him the credit. He convinced me to walk this road. Now here I am walking,

and feeling a need to pick up the pace.

I had considered Internet dating a few times, but decided against it. I was uncomfortable with contacting men by computer. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I do enjoy the experience of being approached by a gorgeous, educated, financially stable, African-American man. I like hearing, "You're absolutely beautiful and I'd love the opportunity to be in your presence, to get to know you better. You simply take my breath away."

Okay. I'm dreaming; that has never happened. At least, not to me—wait a minute! That's not true. There was the handsome gentleman I met at the NAACP Dinner, last year. He is forever planted in my memory as a lost possibility. His wife had died in a car accident five years earlier.

He said, "I'd love to spend some time getting to know you. You seem to possess all of the nice qualities that first attracted me to my late wife."

He was genuine. I could see it in his eyes. He invited me to go for a walk with him. I thought, how sweet and romantic. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't want to step into some other woman's shoes; didn't want him calling me by her name. I didn't want to lose my identity in her life. It seemed as though he was still mourning her death. Well, I guess that is to be expected after fifty years of marriage. Okay, old and lonely doesn't count as a favorable prospect. In my book, it sums up as desperate. But there is no reason to be offended by that statement, because this is my book. I don't have a man. Thus, I'm not certain that I even qualify to make that judgment.

I don't understand why my Mr. Right is not knocking on my door. Maybe it's because he doesn't live in my neighborhood. Fool-io, Lie-o, and Cheat-o do. But my Mr. Right is out there somewhere. I know he is. I just need to find him.

Now you are beginning to understand why I, Shannon Grier, decided to give this Internet connection a try. Sitting at this computer, I can still hear Michael's voice saying, "You're pretty and intelligent. You have a lot to offer any man, but you haven't had a decent date in years."

Yeah, I was feeling pitiful, because he was right! I have a lot to offer on my plate of life!

He said, "This will help you screen out the undesirables, saving you a

lot of emotional pain. Give it a try. I guarantee you, if nothing else; it'll prove to be a nice experience."

When he saw I was considering it, he said, "But you must follow these simple, unwritten rules of Internet interacting."

I rolled my eyes and thought, oh no! Here he goes again.

He looked at me sternly and said, "Safety comes first."

"Okay, what are your rules for safety?"

"Rule #1: Be honest. Rule #2: Be cautious. Rule #3: Proceed slowly. Start with Internet communication - e-mail. Slowly move to telephone communicating. Be able to recognize his voice when he calls. Then carefully plan a face-to-face, public meeting."

He raised his voice and repeated, "A public meeting; Ms. Independently able to protect herself."

I smiled. Surprisingly, those rules didn't sound bad.

Well, creating this second identity is not eliminating any of those rules. In fact, I'm enhancing them a bit. Yeah! I'm clearly defining "Rule #2: Be cautious," by being astute. Yeah, that's it! I'm being cleverly cautious, because I need undisclosed information to maintain my safety. Yeah. Yeah, that's it!

I e-mailed Joseph for the first time after Michael made me promise that I'd go home and e-mail somebody, anybody. I read his profile in *Blakfokes*. He wrote:

Hi, I'm an Architect who spends many nights taking visions from my head and putting them on paper. This is my first time doing this, so bear with me. That is if my picture hasn't already scared you off. That's not a good shot of me, but it was the best I could do under such short notice. I didn't know you were coming. I look much better in person. I promise.

Why am I doing this? My lifestyle doesn't afford me the opportunity to meet a lovely woman who is not already taken. So if you're beautiful and not taken, and oh yeah, a woman, keep reading.

I don't do drugs. That is, unless you count caffeine. And I don't do games. That is unless you count Spades. I would

love to meet a strong, kind, intelligent, Black woman who knows what she wants in life. If that's you, send me a line or two, or three, and maybe even a picture.

E-mail: Flavo@Omibks.com
Gender: Male
Kids: No
Ethnicity: African-American
Age: 30-35
Relationship: Single
Income: \$75,000+
Education: College graduate

His profile was the first of four that I responded to. He made me smile. His picture was attractive. He looked like a professional. He wrote like he had a strong character and a good sense of humor. I was interested. So, I found it easy to immerse myself into the world of Internet communicating. My response:

E-mail To: Flavo@Omibks.com
E-mail From: Annon@Omibks.com

Hello Flavo,

I'm a 29-year-old criminal lawyer. I read your profile in Blakfokes and I must admit that you've piqued my curiosity. I don't do drugs, unless you mean caffeine. And I don't do, games, unless you mean Scrabble. I consider myself a strong, kind, intelligent, and God-fearing woman who knows what I want in life. I am striving diligently to give it to myself. I'd love to meet a Black man who could share in my diligence, while adding a bit of his own. Send me back a line, if I've gained your attention.

Annon

I was interested in Joseph, but I wasn't about to send him my picture. I didn't know this man or what he'd do with my picture. My face could end up floating around cyberspace with a "For Sale" sign attached to it. No! I had a little bit of sense.

Anyway, Joseph and I e-mailed each other every day for about three weeks. Michael was proud of me. I'd rush home for lunch everyday, expecting

to receive e-mail from Joseph, yet overjoyed when I did, as though it were some big surprise. Who would have thought the computerized words, “Read Your Mail,” would be able to ignite such a high level of thrill in a person’s life?

Interacting with Joseph added a touch of excitement to my days. I felt energized after reading his e-mails. He was the mystery man, and I was hanging onto his every word. What would he say next? How would he reel me in to becoming more interested in him?

Finally, he did it. He gave me his telephone number and asked me to call. At that time, we didn’t know each other’s real names. I didn’t want to seem anxious; I didn’t call. I kept hearing Michael’s voice, “Rule #3: Proceed slowly.”

Joseph wrote again the next day, “Why don’t you give me a call tonight? I’ll be home after 9 P.M.”

I was struggling with fear and excitement for the rest of the day. My eyes could not stay away from the clock. When 9 P.M. rolled around, I began the internal dialogue. What should I do? I think I should wait, at least another ten minutes. Then I heard Michael’s voice, “Proceed slowly.”

Then maybe I should wait until tomorrow. He may have something to do tomorrow! Hearing his voice is somewhat tempting. And I would like to verbally communicate with him. But I’m scared! Girl, it is only the telephone. But Michael said, “Be Cautious.”

Well, make sure you block your telephone number before you dial. All right! I’m going to call.

I dialed the number, *67-555-688-8777. I forced myself to breathe. I listened intently for the rings, counting each one as it came: one...two...three. My anxiety, heightened by thoughts of this long anticipated conversation, was interrupted by his answering machine. His voice was deep, like the singing doctor of love. His words were clearly enunciated, like a radio announcer. His message was short with soft jazz playing in the background. I was even more intrigued. My heart was on acceleration. I could have keeled over at any moment. The only words my brain was able to retain were: “Hello, this is Joseph.” I heard the beep and quickly hung up the telephone.

He’s not home. I took a deep breath. Ahhh. Now what? I began to rehearse a message. “Hello, this is Annon.” No. “...Shannon, also known

as...” I tried my business voice. “Hello.” I tried my sexy voice. “Hhell-low.” I tried my sweet voice. “Hil-lo.” Then I tried my strong voice. ‘HELLOW.’ Should I be humorous, serious, or both? Both.

I was ready about ten minutes later. I had the perfect voice and message. I slowly dialed the number again, *67-5-5-5-6-8-8-8-7-7-7. When the telephone rang the first time, I took a deep breath. When it rang the second time, I took another deep breath and put my hand on my chest. I could feel my heart making a running start to jump out of my skin. I exhaled slowly, trying to calm down; and preparing myself for the last ring. But it didn’t come. He answered. My heart dropped to my stomach. My stomach dropped to the floor, and I suddenly had an urge to pee.

“Hello,” he said in a deep, yet gentle voice. I was stunned and enchanted with the real voice.

“Hello,” he said again, a little louder.

I gathered myself together and said, “Hello, how are you?” I spoke in a soft, firm tone.

“I’m fine, and who owns this lovely voice? It is unfamiliar to me.”

“Shannon. Annon! I mean this is Annon at Omi-b-k-s, better known as Shannon.”

Oh, now that sounded weak and vulnerable.

He said, “Shannon. What a beautiful name. Finally, I hear you, and you sound like a pleasure.”

His voice was deep and smooth; I couldn’t help but be attracted to it.

I said, “Thank you. I could say the same about your voice, Joseph.”

“Well, isn’t that interesting? You know my name and I haven’t yet told you. Do you also know my address?”

Now I’m busted! Do I know his address? Is he joking? Oh, why didn’t I just leave a message on the answering machine? Because I was scared! I’d better fess up before he thinks I’m stalking him.

I said, “I called a few minutes ago and got your answering machine.”

“Why didn’t you leave a message? I was home. I have Caller I.D., but your telephone number must be unlisted.”

See! Good, I blocked it.

I said, “I’m a bit apprehensive. This is all new and different for me. I’m

trying to take it slow. And safe.”

“Shannon, you’re taking a good approach. I’m with you all the way.”

We talked for the next two hours and I enjoyed every minute of it. The time raced by. I was at ease, so I asked him the God question. I know that one needs God in order to really have life and happiness. I said, “What is your spirituality?”

He said, “Why don’t we save that for a face-to-face conversation?”

I thought, what’s the big deal? But I allowed that question to quickly and easily fade away. His voice was mesmerizing and I was lost in it. He was going out of town on business the next day, so we e-mailed each other that week.

On Monday:

E-mail From: Flavo@Omibks.com

E-mail To: Annon@Omibks.com

Wanted to send you a quick note letting you know that I am thinking about you. I have to leave for a business dinner in a few minutes; we’re building a mall in AZ.

Shannon, I enjoyed our chat the other night. Tell me something else about yourself.

Talk to you soon,

Joseph.

That gave me a warm feeling. Couldn’t help, but smile; he’s thinking about me.

E-mail To: Flavo@Omibks.com

E-mail From: Annon@Omibks.com

Hey,

Hope your meeting went well and you’re having a nice trip ☺. I must say that I, also, enjoyed our chat. I haven’t had good conversation like that in a long time. Are you really as nice as you seem?

Something else about me? I have or had a brother, André,

who died about fifteen years ago in the Marines. It was a 'Friendly Fire.' He was my only sibling so I get a lot of attention from my parents. They're sweet, but at times, a little over-protective. Let me correct that, very overprotective. I could go on and on with some stories. But I won't. Let me simply say, they can and have done some crazy things in the name of love.

That's enough about me. Now something about you.
Catch you later,

Shannon

On Tuesday:

I had to take a late lunch; I had a difficult case and my boss, Mr. Hendersen, works close with me when I'm feeling challenged. I appreciate his guidance. Michael gave me the smile of approval when he saw me grab my coat. He knew I was headed for my e-mail.

He winked and said, "Let me know how your lunch goes."

I smiled. "You bet." I rushed home from work to read. It takes me approximately ten minutes to get there, but it seems like twenty or twenty-five when I'm anxious.

E-mail From: Flavo@Omibks.com

E-mail From: Annon@Omibks.com

Hey Shannon,

Business meetings are business. Drawing is where my passion lies. But my time here serves a purpose. That is what makes it a productive trip. Wish you could join me. It sounds like your family loves you. Appreciate that. There are many people who'd trade places with you in a minute, and without hesitation.

Something about me? I'll follow your lead. I'm the last of four children born to my parents. And no, I'm not a brat. However, my siblings would disagree ☺. My parents gave me a lot of material things. Unfortunately, they didn't have much time for me, given their jobs and responsibilities. That's how I got into drawing. I'd focus all of my energy on something I could create. I gained a lot of attention from them that way ☺. They

saw my talent early on. That's enough about me.

Your turn,

Joseph

E-mail To: Flavo@Omibks.com

E-mail From: Annon@Omibks.com

Hi Joseph,

I'm not too thrilled about meetings either, unless they're conducted properly. To me, they take up a lot of unnecessary time and energy. But I like meeting with my boss, because he feeds me an enormous amount of knowledge. I eat up every word, as though it's my last meal ☺.

I wonder if I should respond to the "wish you could join me"? Nah, I'll leave it alone. Don't want to come across as eager. I'll simply write:

Sounds like you found a creative way at a young age to get your parents to respond to your emotional needs. It looks like it's paid-off in your career, too.

Let me see if I can slip this one in.

Joseph, what's your spirituality? I'm a Christian striving to make good decisions that are pleasing to God. Growing up, my family always focused on God as the deciding factor in everything we did. We were striving for perfection, yet realizing it would never be attained.

Your turn,

Shannon

This went on for the rest of the week. I found out that Joseph is thirty-three years old, and lives in Annapolis, Maryland, almost an hour drive from me in Baltimore. The closest he has come to marriage is in thought, to his high school sweetheart. When they went away to separate colleges, her love for him went, too. She wrote him an "I love you, but I want to date other people" letter. He said he was heartbroken, because he thought they had something that would last a lifetime. When he found out he was wrong, he

said it devastated him. The two bad relationships that followed shattered his faith in love. It has taken him years to consider trusting again. He said, “I’m ready to love the right woman.”

He, again, evaded the spirituality question, “Shannon, let’s save that for a face-to-face conversation.”

What’s the big deal?

When Joseph returned home from his business trip, we talked on the telephone extensively over the next two weeks. It seemed like he knew the unwritten rules too, because he was proceeding at a slow pace. Then it came. “Shannon, why don’t you let me see the face behind the lovely voice?”

He wanted to meet me. I paused for a moment. As Michael’s rules stated, I could easily recognize Joseph’s telephone voice. I was nervous, but ready. I wanted to meet him, too.

He said, “I promise I won’t bite. At least, not on the first date.”

Again, he made me smile, but that last comment was suspicious. What does that mean? All right, I’m paranoid, thinking too much like a lawyer. Stop it! But note it.

I said, “I think I’d like that. Well, not the biting, but the meeting. Name the time and place. And I’ll be there.”

“How about Zye’s Restaurant? I’ll be in your area tomorrow for a business meeting. After, I can buy you dinner. That is, if your schedule permits.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be in court all morning. I have a meeting with my boss to review the case at 2:30. I should be able to get to the restaurant by 4:30.”

“Okay, 4:30 it is. Now Shannon, you do realize that while I have exposed myself—face and background to the entire Internet world—you haven’t? I don’t know what you look like. Describe yourself for me. That way, I’ll be able to recognize you.”

Wow! My interactions with Joseph had been so frequent and intimate that he had become a routine part of my life. I had forgotten that he didn’t have any idea of what I look like.

I said, “You ask me what you want to know and I’ll respond. I promise I’ll be honest. But first let me ask, do you have a preference regarding—

race, height, weight, hair, etc?”

“I guess I’ve assumed that you’re African-American, because you responded to my ad in *Blakfokes*. You also relate like you’re either African-American or in touch with the community. I’ve dated Caucasian, Asian, and a few other races of women. My preference is African American. I’m hoping that there is no reason for you to be offended by that statement.”

No way! But I said nothing.

He continued, “I’ve dated tall, short, fat and thin. Some have had long hair, while others have had short. Some have gone from long hair to short, while others have gone from short to long, and in a matter of hours.” He laughed and said, “I realize that is a Black woman thang. And I love it all. What matters to me is how one carries what they possess. If it is nicely packaged, I am content with its form. Now, with all that having been said, tell me, what is your race?”

“I’m African American and proud of it! You did not offend me by your preference. In fact, you adored me with it. I like a Black man who can see and so appreciate the beauty in his own people that it causes an attraction manifested in a predilection for us. I don’t mean that in a narrow way. I have learned that our American society sends the message that Black is bad. I hear in the comments of many African Americans that their choice of a partner, from a different race, subconsciously buys into that message. That negative message guides them to choose a partner from another race, as opposed to good character attracting them to fall in love with a man or woman who happens to be of another race. I don’t want my choice in a partner to feed into any of society’s prejudices. Besides, there is something about a Black man who knows who he is, and is confident, that is alluring to me. He is truly a Prince. I’m sorry; I’ve gotten carried away, rambling on to no end. What’s your next question?”

“Girl, that is deep. So, let me break it down for you. I LOVE ME SOME BLACK WOMEN!”

I smiled. I was pleased with his response.

“Just tell me what you’ll be wearing and I’ll see you for myself. I’ve waited this long. I can make it one more night.”

I described myself to the best of my ability. “I’m 5 feet 6 inches tall and

I weigh about 125 pounds. My hair is short, light brown and curly. I'm going to be in court, which means I need to look the part. I'll have on a gray pantsuit with a white blouse and gray shoes. Now let's see if you can pick me out of the crowd of beautiful, African-American businesswomen who will be in Zye's on a Friday night. And, if that description doesn't help you find me, look for someone with a pronounced dark circle on the inside of her right wrist. That's my birthmark."

"Girl, I'm beguiled! You've captivated my attention. Searching for you will pave a beautiful road to the hidden treasure."

Wow! Good thing he can't see me, because I'm doing entirely too much smiling over someone I have never met. Gather yourself back together and speak. But give only a little emotion. "That's sweet. I'm looking forward to seeing you, too."

The next day I was in court much longer than I'd expected. We were choosing the jurors for my harassment case. Then I didn't go into the meeting with my boss until 4:15 P.M. I felt terrible. I didn't have a work number to contact Joseph so I got to Zye's as soon as possible, 5:25 P.M., and fifty-five minutes late. I thought, what a terrible first impression. I had to pee, but I held it. I scanned the room and found Joseph sitting at a table in the corner, reviewing some papers.

I shyly approached him from the back and said in a soft, sultry tone, "Good evening, Joseph."

He lifted his head from his papers and said, "Ah, I recognize that lovely voice. Now I'm afforded the opportunity to see the face."

He turned and looked at me. His eyes followed as I slowly walked in front of the table. I stood still, giving him the opportunity to check me out. He stared at my face for a moment, and then his eyes slowly went down my entire body. I did the same.

He has black, wavy hair, cut close to his head, with a hint of gray around his ears, a nicely groomed black beard and mustache on top of deep dark chocolate skin, and beautiful brown eyes with long lashes. He was right; he looks much nicer than his picture. He is handsome. My eyes slowly went down his body. I could see he was tall by how much of his torso set above the table. Nice. Then I began to run into a few problems, or should I

say a bunch of problems— Yeah, a big bunch of problems rolled up around his chest area. Can it be? No! Yeah. He has breasts. Not big ones, but notable bumps. It got progressively worse as my eyes traveled down a little lower to his potbelly, snuggled close to the table. His body was not looking good, so I stopped. Now what?

I didn't need to see anymore. He is fat! Fat! Fat! Well, about 70 pounds overweight. That profile picture has to be a few years old. Nobody could have gotten that big in one year's time—unless he's stressed. Okay, now that could be opening up a whole can of worms with medication or alcohol or drugs. Let me just get through this night as quick as possible. Again, I don't mean to offend anyone. He's just not my type.

Joseph said, "May I please see your right wrist?"

I smiled and extended my arm, giving him the opportunity to get a good look at my birthmark.

He smiled and said, "I'd call it a beauty mark; it's cute."

My smile got bigger as I responded with, "Thank you."

"You're lovelier than I imagined. Thank God! Come on and sit."

I was praying for, and imagining a little more, or should I say, much less.

I said, "Thank you. I'm sorry for being late. I didn't think you were going to wait."

"Oh, there was no question. I assumed you were in court late, and I knew you didn't have a number to reach me. I would have waited till closing to meet the face of the woman who has captured my mind."

I tried to hold the smile back, but it came bursting out. He wasn't the least bit bothered by my tardiness. He was considering my schedule. I knew then, he was different from any man I'd dated.

He said, "I want to get to know you. If you had told me you couldn't see me tonight, I would have asked to see you tomorrow. If you had told me you couldn't see me tomorrow, I would have asked to see you Sunday. Girl, you are shaking my world and I want to be close enough to feel the full impact of the tremors."

This brother was talking good, and more importantly, I believed he was genuine. The fat somehow became unimportant, and it *was* nicely packaged.

He had on a BAD white dress shirt with a European straight collar, and French cuffs holding cufflinks of his initials, "JF." His suit jacket was draped across the chair, navy blue with a little lighter blue vertical pattern going through it.

We talked for hours seemingly without a break. We were serious. We were jovial. We were supportive. We were confronting. We even had the God conversation. He was raised Buddhist, but hadn't been practicing for the past three years. Now what are the odds of a Black Christian woman meeting a Black Buddhist man? How many Black Buddhists are there in Maryland? I don't know. I don't even know what Buddhists believe. All I know about that religion is a name, "Buddha," and a doll with a big belly. Come to think of it, his body bares a slight resemblance to that doll. Why did I have to be the one to meet such a nice Buddhist? This was putting a cramp in things. However, this felt too good to allow him to slip through my fingers. FAT and BUDDHIST! But he was really, really worth my time. I didn't want to leave, but I was a half-hour late for my Bible course, and needed to get going.

After I got home from my class and settled down, I decided I was going to e-mail Joseph to let him know how good a time I had. But he beat me to it.

E-mail From: Flavo@Omibks.com

E-mail To: Annon@Omibks.com

Shannon,

I enjoyed being in your presence tonight. I found you to be in person as I find you to be on the telephone: enticing and intelligent. Now I can add beautiful to that list. While I know the evening had to end, I wasn't ready for the dialogue or the warmth to stop. It is good that you had another appointment, requiring you to leave, because I could have stayed there all night.

Joseph

I could have stayed there too, because I felt exactly the same way. I guess this is considered an e-mail connection.

Joseph and I had dinner again the next night. He asked me what kind of

food I like.

“Mom’s home cooking.”

“Okay, but if you couldn’t have ‘Mom’s home cooking,’ what would you choose?”

“It really doesn’t matter to me. I like good-tasting food.”

“Fine. Meet me after work at Zye’s. You can leave your car in the parking lot and ride with me. I’m going to take you to a quaint little place. It’ll be a surprise.”

A surprise? That sounded special. He didn’t suggest picking me up at work or home either. That was good, because I wouldn’t have known how to respond. Michael didn’t give me a rule for that, but I knew I didn’t know Joseph well enough for him to learn my home address or place of employment.

I met Joseph at Zye’s and got into his big Lincoln Continental. The seats were soft and plush. I could have lain back and gone to sleep.

He said, “Relax, and let me take you away.”

I smiled and sat back, but I didn’t get comfortable; resisted the urge to close my eyes, too. I needed to see exactly where we were going. If I had to jump out of the car to run for safety, I wanted to know our location. But Joseph hadn’t done or said anything to give me a reason to believe he was sick or dangerous. And I was keeping mental notes of suspicious statements. I can’t help it; that’s the criminal lawyer in me. We drove for about an hour, but it didn’t seem that long.

The time spent with Joseph is always a pleasure that flies in time. We stopped at a beautiful little house.

He said, “This is ‘Mom’s Place’; a quiet get-away I found last year. I’m sure the food won’t taste as good as your ‘Mom’s home cooking,’ but I’m hoping it will come close.”

I smiled. He gently placed his hand on top of mine and gave it a soft rub. When I looked up into his eyes, he smiled and whispered, “Sit still for a minute.” He got out of the car, walked around to my side, opened the door, and took my hand. “I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to help you out of the car.”

I smiled and shyly lowered my head for a second, to take a quick break

from the feelings that the eye contact was generating inside of me. I lifted my head and softly replied, “And I wouldn’t have wanted to miss it, either.” He kept my hand and we strolled into the restaurant.

Joseph was right; it was a nice get-away. The lights were dim; there was soft music playing, and a sweet smell of home cooking. A polite, older, African-American gentleman approached. He said, “Hello, Mr. Flavors, in what area would you like to dine, Sir?”

Joseph said, in his strong business voice, “I’d like the BBCD area.”

The waiter chuckled and led us down a narrow hallway to a cozy room. There was a small, round dinner table in the center of the room holding a burning candle. On the wall to the left, a large, elegant, yet comfortable-looking loveseat wooed you to sit. In front of a picturesque window that displayed a beautifully moonlit garden was a stereo system. Across the room was a lit fireplace to balance the chill from the window. Black art consumed the room; there were African pieces on the walls, the table and the floor. I walked around and was devoured by the décor.

“Shannon, what would you like to drink?”

Joseph’s voice brought me back to him. “I’d like a virgin Strawberry Daiquiri, please.”

He said to the waiter, “I’ll have your house special fruit drink.” The waiter went off to get our beverages.

“What would you like to listen to? Jazz, classical, romance?”

I said in a soft, relaxed tone, “How about jazz?”

The atmosphere was warm and tranquil. There seemed to be nothing going on in the world, but Joseph, that moment, and me. There were no concerns from the day, no thoughts of tomorrow, and no desire to leave.

As we sat on the loveseat, I asked, “What is the ‘BBCD’ area?”

“A booth in the back, in the corner, in the dark.”

“What?”

He slowly repeated. “A booth, in the back, in the corner, in the dark. I wanted to be alone with you. I hope you don’t mind.”

I laughed. “No, actually this is nice. I can’t say that I’m familiar with that phrase, though.”

“An old African-American comedian used to say it.”

“It’s clever. The waiter is obviously familiar with the comedian.”

“Yeah, most people his age would be.”

This is a nice place. I’d like to share it with my parents. They’d appreciate it. My dad and I have a special dinner together once a month. It’s a tradition that we’ve had since I was a little girl. He’d like this atmosphere.”

“The food is good, too.” He smiled and said, “But again, I’m sure it’s not at all like your mom’s.”

At that point, I didn’t care; it didn’t matter. Big deal! My mom cooks candied yams with pineapples, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, cornbread, pork chops smothered in gravy, and a choice between hot apple pie ala mode and banana pudding for dessert. I realized then, I had overrated home cooking. What is it, really? Food that causes you to believe a few pounds won’t hurt. That evening with Joseph was lovely enough for me to hold as a lifelong, precious memory. It was a special night.

Joseph called the following night, and we went to another fine restaurant. He kept calling night after night, begging me to have dinner with him. I didn’t let on that I wanted to beg him to ask me, because that would have been, “Improper, not lady-like. You have to keep him guessing” is what my mother says.

I found Joseph dazzling. He was so nice, so warm, and so handsome; and no I didn’t forget, FAT and BUDHIST! But he made such an impression on me that I was digging this man who was not at all what I was expecting or needing. I wasn’t bargaining for an extra large man to come into my life and overwhelm me with his gentle and kind presence. Neither did I need this religious conflict floating behind him.

My time with Joseph seems to have flown by. It’s been six months since I sent that first e-mail, and three months since our first meeting. I question the intelligence of my dating someone of a totally different religious belief. God is important in my life, and my beliefs regarding Him are unwavering. Yet, I find myself surrendering to Joseph’s every request to meet him for lunch, dinner, a movie, or a hot chocolate.

Now, I need to know if Joseph is worth this inner struggle. I’m going to e-mail him as someone else, because I want to see how he responds. I want to know if another woman can easily experience this same strong gentleness.

If he responds to the fake me the same as he does the real me, then the struggle is all over! Because that means he's not real. Then the fake me—uh, I mean the real me. Oh no! I'm getting confused already. This could be difficult. Can I pull this off? I have to! I need to know! I've never dated anyone before that no one could give me background information on. Somebody, somewhere, always knew something about the person I was dating. It was simply a matter of finding out who had the information, and deciding if I wanted to access it. Now, I've got to improvise, because there is no one to provide me with the information. I won't continue this hoax for a long time. I promise, in a little while, the fake me will disappear.

Okay, okay, "SEND." It's gone into cyberspace, never to return. There's no turning back now. I'll only e-mail Joseph a few times as **Shalom@Goofer.com**. I'm all right with this. The only problem I foresee is with the name on the new e-mail address. I was supposed to give my full name along with my screen name. But if I did that, I would have defeated my purpose. Therefore, I used my middle and last initial instead, "GG." That way, I'm keeping with the rule of honesty. Maybe Joseph will think this is my name and not my initials. Hopefully. Since he doesn't know my middle name, I may be all right. Just can't let it slip out. And I definitely can't tell anybody what I'm doing. They'll think I'm insane for sure. Cause I'm wondering about myself round about now.