

“The Guest Room”

by Aaron Goldenberg

Kappa Tau- Book Chapter

Upper Room Assembly of God, Miami, FL

Word Count: 1,780

“And how does that make you feel?”

Steven sat back in his chair, reflecting, letting out a deep breath. *How do you answer a question like that? I mean, really answer truthfully.* “It’s funny... How life surprises you.” He pursed his lips together, and avoided any eye contact with the doctor who was listening so intently. “If you had told me five years ago that I would be here... sitting here... here in my life, I wouldn’t have believed you. I would have laughed... I feel like laughing. It’s all so ridiculous. Then I also feel like if I laughed I’d be a horrible person. So I just cry.”

The rain outside the office pounded against the windows. The park just in view had countless puddles. Nothing sunk in. A skinny mutt whimpered as he tried to stay clear of the harsh cold shower. Kind of thing you see and wonder what the sad story behind this emaciated guy was. Poor kid was probably beat till he finally decided to run away.

Steven paused for another brief moment. He took out his wallet and opened it up. There in the middle was the beautiful picture of three happy people. A family. Steven was in his early-40s, his wife Cynthia, mid-30s, and their daughter Sarah, four years old. Steven had just a little more gray than he’d hoped for. Cynthia was not the conventional beauty queen you’d expect a guy with Steven’s looks to end up with, but still attractive in her own way. The smiles are like daggers.

“It hurts me to see them like this,” he continued. “What did they ever do to me? They didn’t deserve any of this. It pains me to see their smiling faces... And I swore, I swore to God it wasn’t true... It baffles me why God would give me something so amazing, all the while knowing I would destroy it all.”

-2 YEARS BEFORE-

Steven Richardson was the Pastor of Living Hope Church. The church had a steady thousand member congregation, great media team and drama group that would pump out sketches to go with his sermons every few weeks. Cynthia helped out with the sketches when she could; she had some theater background. Everyone looked forward to the days when she came in. Things just flowed so smoothly.

Of course he chooses today to do this thought Steven as he drove up to his well-kept two-story home when he noticed his neighbor Jim mowing the lawn.

“Be nice,” said Cynthia. “I can already see that look in your eye.”

“I promise,” he replied oh so eagerly. He stopped the engine, slid out his door and went for the back to grab Cynthia’s luggage. *Maybe he won’t say anything today.*

“Hey Richardson!” Jim said as the lawnmower’s deafening engine came to a halt. He leaned on the handle as if he needed a break from the small patch of grass that was cut.

Steven continued to move. “Jim! How are you today?”

“Ah, can’t complain... Hello Cynthia.”

“Jim,” she said nonchalantly as she reached for Sarah. “C’mon, pumpkin. Wake up. We’re home,” she cooed as she gently unbuckled the waking child.

“Glad to see you’re back. He’s not givin’ you too much trouble, is he?”

“No, he’s fine, Jim. Thanks for lookin’ out for me,” she said politely.

“Hey, God bless you, brother.” Steven said while thinking *Just get inside the house.*

Steven shut the trunk and rolled Cynthia’s bags to the door.

“God bless. Y’all take care. Especially you, Cynthia. Stay Healthy,” and he reached down for the cord.

“Hey, lawn’s looking great there, Jim,” Steven said so sincerely only Cynthia knew it was sarcastic. *That’s ‘cause you cut the thing two days ago!* Steven smiled and reached for the keys.

Steven sat in his home office, as was a nightly tradition. The place was cluttered with religious books and classic novels, with the occasional picture frame carrying a happy moment. Steven read his book in the lamplight with his laptop close-by, pausing frequently to jot down some notes for Sunday in his large yellow pad. The doorknob turned and the hinges creaked as Cynthia poked her sleepy head through. He never thought she looked very flattering before bed.

Cynthia leaned up against the doorpost and crossed her arms “You comin’ to bed soon?”

“Soon. Soon, I’m almost finished here.”

“Even God rests, Steven.”

“I’m coming. I promise. I’m almost done,” he said as she sighed and let her head drop.

“What is it?”

“What?”

“Something’s bothering you,” *I told you I’m almost done...*

“I just hate it when he does that, you know? It’s inappropriate. And you’re supposed to defend me.”

“He doesn’t mean anything by it. He’s just a flirt. We’ve been over this.”

“It really does bother me though. It’s not right, Steven. He’s married, I’m married, he does it in front of you like it’s no big deal!”

“If it really does bother you, I’ll talk to him.”

“Yeah?” She said, finally looking up at him.

“Don’t even worry about it. I’ll let him know you’re uncomfortable and ask him to stop.”

“No, but don’t just make it about *me*. He’s not gonna care; he’ll make it an inside joke between the two of you. You’ve got to care about it too.”

“I told you, ‘I’ll talk-“

She persisted, “He just gets this look in his eye. You know?”

“That’s it. I’m not talking to him anymore.” Steven stood and shut his laptop.

“No! Hey-“ she darted for him as he rose from his seat.

“Nope, that’s it. You don’t trust me.”

“That’s not fair!” She broke a smile, then ate it and tried again to look upset.

“I’m coming soon, okay?”

Cynthia pouted and threw herself off Steven and towards the door. “I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Love you,” he said and sat down reaching to reopen his laptop. “How was your trip?”

“I’ll tell you later. I’m tired. I have another one next week.”

“Can’t wait to leave again, can you? You know you can say ‘no.’”

“It’s extra money, Steven. Remember about getting that Four-Months salary into the emergency fund?” She seemed to say this with a certain resentment; as if she was saying *you’re a Pastor, and that’s great, but we need some money. Get it?* She continued. “They pay me well for these lectures. It’s fine. I’m fine... I’m going to bed.” She slowly closed the door.

“Good night.”

“Night.” And the door was shut.

Steven reflexively turned back to his work. He moved the notepad aside and brought the laptop close, opening an internet browser. He took a glance at the notepad, mouthing the words as he scanned. “Ah, yes: ‘Sacred Romance’” He looked back up and flinched just a second. On the screen was a pop-up window. “Naughty Girls, Wanna See?” He closed the window... *at least Cynthia didn't see that.*

The night was chilly, a good 50 degrees. Steven's home was in a good area, but one of those with sleaze always in driving distance. The west side of 57th street was pretty torn up. The main high heels that owned this part were Jill Shuman's. One of those fallen beauty types, you could tell she *was* pretty. In her fifties now, could pass for forties, she took on the mother hen role with the other girls. Monique Johnson was feisty, sexy, spunky, but she had a lot of deep hurt, which would come out in glimpses. Jill and Monique scanned the area; Monique adjusted her breasts till she was satisfied. Jill used the store window as a mirror to fix her hair.

“He never shut his eyes,” Jill said.

Monique laughed, “I love it!”

In the reflection, Jill spotted a black sports car slowing to a stop. “Here he comes.” She turned and pointed, showing Monique the car with dark tinted windows. “Big boss man.”

“He's mine, mamma.” Monique gracefully led the march to his car. Jill skipped ahead and got the first knock on the window, but Monique was confident she would win. She was in charge here. No way Jill was getting *this* one.

“Gonna let me in?” Jill asked with a forced upward inflection.

“It's cold out here, baby,” Monique said as the man in his late-50s rolled down the passenger window. Lust was written all over his face as he licked his lips, trying to be the

seductive one. Though it wasn't very sexy, Monique played along. "Mmm, baby all you need is some youth for yourself. You know what you want."

"No, hun, you need someone with experience. Trust me. I know how to work. What do ya say?"

"Is Simone here?" he asked and then he saw her back where the girls were just moments before.

Simone Miller was in her late-30s and the prettiest one of the three. She was also the least enthusiastic. It was always strange, yet exciting, to newcomers to see her because she seemed too classy for the job. She appeared to be uncomfortable most of the time. She knew how to "work," but today she was not in the mood. As soon as she caught the geezer's glance, she turned to escape down the alley.

"Hey!" the twice-married man of fifty-three shouted. With cynical eyebrows raised, Simone looked in his direction. "What's wrong with you? Don't you wanna eat tomorrow? Get over here!"

Jill grabbed Monique's arm and pulled her away. Monique took a last jump forward and hit the man's car. She kept facing him as she drifted away and threw her arms in every direction possible for emphasis. "I don't even care. See right through me, can you? I'm not *that* dark, honey! You sorry old self can have what you want. It's alright. Some smart man is gonna have a great time tonight." She reached down to take her gigantic heels off her throbbing feet. *Useless now, aren't they?* "He's all yours, Simmy. You can have him. I don't even wanna look at him."

Simone headed to the window for what seemed like forever to the man. One deep breath and she put on her game-face.

"You're looking down tonight, Simone," he said.

“I was just tired. Everything’s good now that you’re here.”

“Well get in, babe. We’re taking a special trip tonight.”

“... A trip?” Simone had been with this guy before, but she’d heard stories about those *special trips* that didn’t end so well. “Why don’t we just do the usual, baby.”

“Don’t give me all that. I ain’t gonna hurt ya.”

“How Much?” She wasn’t completely opposed.

“More than you’ll make in a week.”

Book Summary: Steven Richardson, a loving husband and pastor of a local church runs into some resistance when he decides to help out a prostitute named Simone. Though it begins with good intentions, the relationship between the two of them grows into something that could destroy his family, his reputation, and his church. The fatal decision for Steven comes one night when Cynthia is on a business trip and Simone is kicked out of her current residence and head's for the shelter of the Richardson home. Steven tells her that she can stay in "The Guest Room."