



The
Other
WOMAN

By Dana Ellington

Chapter 1

So, there I am sitting at the bar of this swanky new “bistro” called Cavaliers. Catchy name, eh? There’s certainly a bit of irony in there somewhere but I wasn’t in the mind set to look too deep. I was waiting for my friend and her husband to show up with my blind date. My mind was on a million other things when I hear this voice...

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Tonya sat at the bar waiting for her friend Caitlyn, Caitlyn's husband Mike, and the guy they'd coerced into coming out for a blind date. All was right in her world; 36 years old, mid-level project manager for a fairly stable company that paid a decent enough salary. A few bucks in the nest egg and townhouse in the burbs. Yes, she could say she was doing okay. With the exception as far as her few casual acquaintances and best friends, Caitlyn and Mike were concerned, she hadn't yet found her "one". As Lily Allen so eloquently put it, "all she wants is a boyfriend, she gets one night stands", that was the story of Tonya's romantic life.

She didn't meet many eligible bachelors; hell, she didn't meet many men period considering she spent the majority of her time either at work or at home. The few she did meet at the various work functions seemed to be all about hooking up, not establishing long-term commitments.

It was her friend Caitlyn's recently established happily ever after that brought about a resurgence in the "let's find Tonya a man" escapades. Caitlyn, forever hopeful that if it had finally happened for her, it could also happen for her good friend.

"Excuse me. I hate to intrude but you look familiar. I'm positive I know you from somewhere."

Tonya turned her head, readying to shoot down this obvious lame attempt at a pickup line but her breath caught as she stared into the guy's face. There was no mistaking the familiar curve of his lips, the set of his jaw or, the sparkling hazel of his eyes. The fact that the face had plumped a bit in the last twenty years didn't stop Tonya from recognizing her childhood best friend.

"Keith?"

"Oh shi...I mean, wow! Tonya?!"

"Oh my God. Keith Powers as I live and breathe."

They hugged like the long-lost friends they were.

"I'll be damned. It is you. Wow, of all the places to run into each other."

"I know. How long has it been?"

"Meh, don't get me to counting. Man, you haven't aged a bit. Girl, stand up, let me see how fine you are."

"Good grief. Really?" But she stood up, gave the obligatory turn and pose, his smile excited her just a bit.

"Damn. Had I known you were going to grow up like this, I never would have left." Her feeling of excitement grew.

"You can stop with the corny lines and start telling me what's been up with you?"

"Nothing much, just working."

"Software engineering right?"

"That's what my degree says. I don't engineer anything. I'm a glorified software installer."

"Whatever gets the bills paid, eh?"

"For sure. So, who you here with?"

"Nobody just yet. I'm meeting a friend of mine, her husband, and some dude they're trying to hook me up with."

"What? You're single?"

"Painfully so. You?"

"Not quite."

"Not quite? That sounds suspicious."

"Eh. We'll talk about it later. Over dinner tomorrow night, I hope. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

"That we do."

"Here's my number. Call me tomorrow and let me know what's up. We'll go grab a bite. It was really good running into you Tee." He handed Tonya a slightly worn business card he pulled from his jacket pocket.

"Man, no one's ever called me that but you."

"Glad to hear it."

"It's nice to hear you say it after all these years."

They looked at each other, sounds of the bar patrons faded. They were teenagers again, the day before Keith was leaving for college. So many words were left unspoken that day. Words that now hung between them as if some cosmic occurrence had given them a second chance to be said.

"Yeah, well, I better hear from you tomorrow."

"You will. For sure." He bent over to kiss her gently on the cheek. His lips lingered, brushing her jawline unexpectedly. She shivered.

"Bye Tee."

"Bye Kay."

He faded into the crowd. Tonya watched him go, the heat from his kiss still warming not just her cheek, but sending tendrils of heat down throughout her body. She looked at the business card he'd slipped in her hand. With a smile, she made sure it was tucked securely in her handbag.

"Hey darlin'," Tonya stood up to hug her friend Caitlyn. She could see Mike standing at the hostess stand with a guy.

"So, that's him, huh?"

"Yup. His name is Donavon. Mike thinks he's a decent enough guy but told me to tell you that if you had any concerns, he'd run a thorough background check and handle any problems you may have."

"Good grief. You don't think he's a crazed killer or anything do you?"

"He didn't set off my spidey sense and you know how sensitive it is."

"True that. Speaking of which, life treating you okay? Are you still seeing Doc Moreland?"

"I am happy to say that Chapter is closed. I can call him if I need to but I'm done with the regular visits."

"So glad to hear. I still say you're the most resilient person I've ever met."

"Yeah, well. Enough about me. Let's get you and Donavon together and see what happens, okay?"

They wove their way through the crowd toward the hostess stand.

A few minutes later, Caitlyn, Mike, Donavon, and Tonya sat at a table. They'd placed their

orders and were enjoying an awkward but affable bit of chatter. Tonya found it hard to concentrate on what was being said. She kept remembering Keith's smile, the warmth his hug had brought to her. It had been over 18 years since they'd last seen each other. A soft kick from Caitlyn brought her back to the conversation.

"I'm sorry, Donavon, what did you say?"

"I was asking you what your credit score was?"

Tonya looked at Caitlyn with a "is he for real" stare. Mike was studiously looking around the room as if trying to pick up clues at a crime scene.

"My. Credit score?"

"Well yeah. I find that today, you can't be too careful you know. Women tend to be on the lookout for someone to upgrade them so I almost always ask for the particulars upfront. Do you have any stocks, bonds...property? You won't know it to look at me but my net worth, surprisingly enough, especially on a cop's salary, is almost a quarter-million dollars."

"Uh-huh. Wow. A whole two-hundred, fifty thousand. That's. Impressive."

"I know. You know how I did it?"

"Uh, I have no idea."

"Well, first off, I paid my own way through school, so no student loan debt."

"Where'd you go to school?"

"Danvers Technical College."

"Weren't they in the news a while back?"

"Yeah, something about their accreditation not being valid but that was well after I graduated. Anyway, after that, it was a matter of living as frugally as I could, putting away as much as I could right off the bat. I lived with my mom till I saved up enough money to pay for my place. It's a one-bedroom condo. I got it on the cheap, it was a foreclosure. Needed some work, but that was okay. I'm handy, you know. Anyway, I put almost fifty percent down so my note wasn't that major. After that, I made sure to take my lunch to work every day..."

Tonya's mind drifted back to Keith again. He sure looked good in those slacks, button-down pressed to death. Even that tie. And were his eyes always that brown?

Another kick, this time with a little more force.

"Wow. So, you've really got your, um, finances in order, there, eh?"

"Most definitely. You know, if you're having money problems, I can help you out. I've got a ton of books back at my place I'd be happy to loan you if you'd like."

"Are you serious?"

"Sooo, uh, Tonya, how's work going?" Caitlyn couldn't have been more obvious.

"Pretty good actually...I have a new..."

"I'm sorry Tonya, here I was just going on about myself. What do you do for a living?" Tonya gave another quick look in Caitlyn's direction. Donovan's conversation takeovers were getting tiring.

"Tonya's a project manager for Talfair Publishing." Mike suddenly found himself chipping into the conversation.

"Talfair? I've never heard of them. What do they publish?" Everyone's estimation of Donavon visibly dropped with his question.

"Mostly fiction. Caitlyn's one of our top authors."

“Oh. So, you make what? Fifty, sixty thou a year?”
Tonya didn’t even try to hide her eye roll.

As soon as Donavon’s car pulled away from the valet stand, Caitlyn, Mike, and Tonya broke into laughter.

“Oh my God. Caitlyn, where did you guys find him?”

“Mike. You’re fired.”

“Hey, don’t look at me. You asked me to tell you about some of the eligible guys around the precinct. And that’s what I did. You didn’t ask me about personality or anything.”

“You’re still fired.” Caitlyn crossed her arms and huffed.

“You’re both fired. From now on, no more blind dates. PLEASE.” Tonya handed her ticket to the valet.

“Alright, alright. I’m done. You win. You’d think I’d know better by now.” Cait smiled as she held her hands up in mock surrender.

“Yes, you’d think. Why on Earth have you been trying to fix me up in the first place Cait?”

“I dunno. It’s not like me, is it?”

“Not at all. Mike, what’d you do to her? Is this what happens when women get hitched to their heroes? They’re so freakin’ happy they have to fix everyone up?”

“I have no idea. I try to stay out of it.”

“Lord love a duck. Well whatever it is, Cait, I’d wish you’d just give up.”

“Lesson learned.”

“I love you Cait.”

“I love you too. Now, don’t forget to call me when you get home.” The valet had just pulled up to the curb with Tonya’s Honda Accord.

“I won’t. Bye Mike.”

“Bye, Tonya. And for real, sorry about Donavon.”

“No stress. You guys have a good rest of the night.”

A few minutes from the restaurant, the hands-free system in her car announced she had an incoming call from a number she didn’t recognize. A flip of the button on her steering wheel answered the call.

“Hello, this is Tonya”

“I couldn’t wait till tomorrow.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Keith. Geez, you can’t have forgotten me again that fast.”

“What do you mean forgotten you again? And how’d you get my cell phone number?”

“I called your mom of course.”

“Oh geez.”

“I cannot believe she still has the same number. Or a house phone for that matter.”

“Dude, you know my mom. When she finally got a cell phone I had to spend a day teaching

her how to work it and she still barely uses it.”

“Yeah. My mom’s no better. She refuses to upgrade from that stupid flip phone. I don’t know how it’s still working.”

“Ha! Man. I haven’t seen your mom since your dad’s funeral. Speaking of which, where the hell were you? I didn’t want to ask your mom, didn’t seem to be the time you know.”

“About that, I was on a job in Denver. It was a new project, my second biggest so I didn’t have a lot of time I could take off. I’d been able to take a couple days when he first went into the hospital, but after that it was nuts. When mom called to say he wasn’t going to make it, I was only able to talk to him a couple of times on the phone. He kept insisting he was fine and that I shouldn’t jeopardize my job ‘just’ to come see him.”

“That is so your dad.”

“Exactly. I’m glad I at least got to talk to him. Made my peace, you know. Anyway, after he died, mom made all the arrangements based on what day I’d be able to get down for the funeral.

So of course, it being March in Colorado, a freakin’ snowstorm blows in that night and grounds everything for the next day. I was pissed. Called mom that morning, told her to go ahead with everything, I’d get there as soon as I could. She’s telling me not to worry about it and the next thing you know, it’s the end of April and I’m off on another assignment.”

“That sucks. So what exactly do you do as a software engineer or installer or whatever that has you on such a short leash?”

“Well, I take what the developers wrote, cram it into an operating system, and hope it doesn’t blow up.”

“Uh yeah. That sounds, um.”

“Yeah. I’m basically mobile tech support.”

“Sounds like a major headache.”

“It is. But at least I get to travel.”

“So what has you back in town? Weren’t you living in Houston or Dallas?”

“It was San Antonio and that was just for a few years after I graduated. I’m living in Atlanta now. I’m in town for a project. Big software install at some manufacturing plant.”

“Sounds impressive. How long are here for?”

“If all goes well, just a month.”

“Oh cool. So we’ll have time to hang out maybe.”

“Maybe. If uh, your blind date dude doesn’t mind. How’d it go by the way?”

“It was a hot mess.” She burst out laughing at the memory.

“Oh no. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I learned more about money than I ever thought I could.”

“Oh. That’s good?”

“No, it wasn’t. He asked me what my credit score was.” Her giggles kicked up again.

“Wow. No wonder he’s single. That is ridiculous.”

“It went downhill from there. He started babbling about stock options and how he’s worth a whopping quarter of a million dollars.”

“How old is this dude?”

“I’m pretty sure he said forty-one.”

“Uh-huh. He’s practically a millionaire. And so young.” Now Keith was laughing. The rumble of it made Tonya smile.

“I know. I’m sure I was supposed to be impressed, but it was all I could do to keep a straight face.”

"So, when's the second date?"

"You've got jokes now. I'm sure that my lack of fiscal responsibility was a turn-off."

"He's an idiot if that's what would keep him from asking you out."

"You flatterer you. Bet you say that to all the girls."

"Ha. Not so much. But seriously, how is it after all this time that you of all people ended up not married and with a gaggle of rug rats by now."

"A gaggle of rug rats? Seriously? Truth be told, I just haven't found my 'one' yet."

"And here we go. Why is it women always looking for Prince Charming instead of settling for us ordinary guys? You know, the kind that don't have the white horse or shiny armor?"

"What's wrong with wanting the Prince?"

"I'm just messing with you."

"I know, it's just,"

"Did I hit a nerve?"

"Maybe just a bit."

"I'm sorry."

"It's just that, why is everyone so hot on me settling? I know I'm on the downhill side of thirty and that almost all of my friends are married and popping out babies. Why can't folks understand that I want to hold out for someone who really gets me, who sweeps me off my feet? I want someone who will take me places I've always wanted to go..."

"Sounds more like you want a travel agent, not a husband."

"Look, this isn't some fairy tale, it's my life and I just refuse to let society force me into something just because I'm supposed to. I'm fine with being by myself until the right guy comes along."

"You don't have to work to convince me. You were always like that. Never needing to fit in or do what other folks wanted you to do."

"You sound pretty wistful. I seem to remember that was you too. You had a definite idea on how you were going to live life and it certainly didn't have anything to do with conventional wisdom."

"Yeah, well. Life has a way of putting you in certain positions and you have no choice but to end up doing things in ways you hadn't planned."

"I've heard that tone before. What's really going on with you these days?"

"Eh. Nothing much."

"Bullshit. Unless you've changed drastically in the last several years, you've got something pretty heavy on your mind."

"Tell you what, we can talk about it over dinner tomorrow. Are we still on? Don't want to step on Donavon's toes or anything. Good grief, just saying his name makes me laugh."

"You are such a goof. You won't be stepping on anyone's toes. Like I said, I doubt I'll be hearing anything more from him. And truth be told, he dang sure won't be hearing from me. So, I'm most definitely free for dinner with my oldest and bestest friend."

"Alright cool. You decide on the when and where then call or text me in the morning. I'm about to hit the shower and get in the bed. It's past my bedtime."

"Yeah, I need to be hitting the sheets soon myself. I've still got about ten minutes though before I get home."

"Dinner must have been real good. Are you just now leaving the restaurant?"

"Not quite. We left just before ten. I live in South End now so a good little ways away from downtown."

"Got it. Well, drive safe. Don't forget to text me with the dinner info."

"I won't. Have a good night."

"You too Tee. Good night."

"Good night."

"Alright, spill it."

"Spill what?"

"Whatever it is that's got you grinning like that?"

"Grinning like what?"

"Grinning like you just scored front row seats and backstage passes to a KEM concert."

"Cait, you know me too well."

"I sure do. So, out with it? Did you get a promotion?"

"Uh, not quite."

"Okay, then. Um, you finally booked your dream vacation in Europe?"

"No."

"Look woman, we've only got an hour till you have to go back to work. What the hell is it?"

"Do you remember me telling you about my best friend growing up?"

"Yeah. Kevin, Craig, or something."

"It was Keith and I ran into him at the restaurant last night."

"WHAT? Wow."

"I know. And girl, when I tell you he has aged beautifully? I do mean beautifully. We were roughly the same height when he left for college. He had me by maybe a couple of inches, but now? He's got to be around six-two, six-three. Shoulders all out to here, ass filling out those slacks like some action movie star. Oh and wee."

"Oh my. Sounds nice. Is there potential for a rekindling of affections?"

"I'm not sure. I'm thinking there's a girlfriend, or Heaven forbid, a wife."

"No wonder you didn't tell me right away. Oh well. At least you had a chance to see him again."

"Yeah..."

"Wait a minute. I know that look, there's more you're not telling me."

"We're having dinner. Tonight."

"Is his girlfriend or wife coming?"

"Um. Not that I know of. You see, whoever she is, I'm sure she's back in Atlanta."

"Atlanta?"

"Yeah, that's where he lives now. He's in town for a bit on a work assignment."

"My spidey sense is tingling."

"For what?"

"He's married."

"You think so?"

"Definitely"

"Well, married or no, he hinted that he's not single so even though he might have been looking good enough to eat, I know better. Plus, I doubt he's even thinking of me like that. We were like brother and sister growing up. Used to spend so much time together we might as well have been."

"You're all grown up now though. No telling what feelings are lurking below the surface."

"Oh don't tell me you're one of those who believes men and women can't be just friends."

"No, I think it's possible. Mike and I were just friends for a good little while before I realized I felt more for him than that. And you guys were friends during your hormonal peaks and nothing happened."

"I wouldn't say 'nothing', exactly."

"Oh my."

"He was my first."

"Uh-huh. Was it just the one time or did find yourselves going at it like rabbits?"

"Just the once. The summer before our senior year, out of the blue one weekend while we're hanging out, he admits to being a virgin. We were as close as friends could be, you know, so of course, since I was a virgin too, we convinced ourselves that it would be the friendly thing to you know to uh, take care of that for each other. It was nice and all but nothing Earth-shattering. We were weird around each other for a while after, but eventually got over it and went on like we'd always done."

"And you never did it again?"

"Naw. I wasn't all that into sex in high school. We made out a couple of times but beyond that, I just figured he was getting his rocks off with whoever, and that was that."

"Wow. Y'all were definitely different as kids. But then again, I wasn't all that interested in sex back in the day either. Whatever. Back to the matter at hand. You sure there's nothing there that might tempt you two back between the sheets?"

"I doubt it. We're grown-ups now. His 'not quite single' status makes him off-limits. I'm clear on that. We'll just be two good friends catching up on each other's lives. We're going to eat, laugh, and joke, then go on our separate ways."

"Riiiiight. What happens when he starts in with the sob story about how his wife never really loved him and how lonely he's been for just a hint of affection, then what? After all, you guys are friends, you've had sex as friends before, what's to stop you from doing it now?"

"Ah, there's that writer's flair for the dramatic I love so much. Speaking of which, when is that movie deal happening? You know I'm ready at any time to quit my job and ride your coattails to fame and fortune."

"Don't try to change the subject. That deal is still a ways off. Damn lawyers don't want to agree to me keeping any kind of creative control. I keep reminding them it's my story they're going to tell. I don't need some money-grubbing hack turning it into some overly dramatic made-for-TV kind of movie. I'm telling you, I had no idea it would be this difficult to get people to see reason. Oh, snap. I see what you did there."

"Almost had you going."

"Almost is the keyword. Back to this dinner. I'm telling you, don't do it. Best to just leave it as it is, a chance meeting in a bar; your two ships passing in the night never to see each other again."

"I couldn't do that. He's my oldest friend. I've missed him. Maybe a bit more than I'd realized at first, but now that I have a chance to spend some time with him, I can't imagine passing that up."

"I can see that. I sense there is some unfinished business between you two."

"I don't know about how he feels, but yeah. I didn't think too much about it before you know, but seeing him, even though it was just that few minutes, all these feelings have come rushing back. I think I've actually been waiting for him."

"Waiting for him? What?"

"I mean, I've sort of put my romantic life on hold in hopes he'd come back, and well, it sounds straight out of one of those silly romance novels. But yeah, I think since I was he left for

college, I've been waiting for Keith to come back, say he loves me, then we live happily ever after traveling, going to shows, visiting museums."

"You know you could be doing that yourself. You don't need a man for all of that."

"I know, I know. But I've never been able to do it. I can go to the book store and the coffee shop by myself, but when it comes to traveling and whatnot, I just never worked up the nerve. Didn't want people staring at me, thinking there was something wrong with me because I was by myself."

"Alright, then I'll leave it alone. We better quit gabbing and get to eating."

"You aren't kidding. Didn't realize it was so late. I've got to get a bunch of stuff done so I can bug out a little early and get ready for dinner."

"If I may, just so there's no accidental temptation. I highly recommend not getting 'ready' for this dinner. In fact, pick someplace casual. Wear some jeans, a nice shirt. No, a turtleneck. No, wait, a sweatshirt. Yeah, some baggy sweatshirt, loose-fitting jeans, no make-up; just pull your hair back into a ponytail and call it good. Meet, eat, then break camp."

"Sheesh Cait. What's the worst that can happen?"

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