
A LESSON FOR VEDA

Psycho-bitch! I can't believe she had the nerve to call me a psycho-bitch. I've got her psycho-bitch alright, I fumed to myself. I had to think and think quickly. My wedding was less than three weeks away but I felt more like a bounty hunter than a bride-to-be. Monica Webber was used to going for bad, not respecting the law. Well, I was about to change all that. You couldn't let a woman intimidate you. I had to handle my business. Ain't no sleazy, low-life cow from Beaumont gonna come out here and take over. I'll be damned if I let her stop me. I'll make good on my promise. Calhoun women don't play.

We had a house full of relatives: my mother's two sisters, Aunt Lucille and Geraldine and all their children, including my favorite cousin, Joy. My grandmother, Big Mama, was cooking everything you could imagine while Mama played the happy hostess.

Joy came into my room to check on me. She was damn near in my face before I finally realized she was talking to me. This whole mess with Monica had me so preoccupied, I was being downright rude.

"Veda Marie Calhoun, what's wrong with you, girl? I didn't come all the way out here to watch you daydream. You've been sitting here in a daze for the last fifteen minutes."

I couldn't believe I'd been in my room that long. Thoughts of my fiancé's ex-girlfriend had flooded my mind. I was so pissed off, I could feel the veins rising in my neck. My nostrils were starting to flare. I felt like a caged animal. I had to talk to somebody and get this madness off my chest. Joy seemed like a good candidate. There wasn't anybody in our family like her.

When we were growing up, Joy looked out for me like a mother, she was so protective. Now that we were older, I wanted to hear her perspective on things because Joy understood relationships from a point of view that was different than what I was used to.

Joy was unique—no, Joy was gay. No one in the family knew for sure, although they had their suspicions. I was the only one she'd confided in. But she was my cousin and I loved her just the same.

I stared at her for a minute, trying to decide if I should tell her about Monica. After all, she'd trusted me. I gathered my thoughts and proceeded to run things down.

"Joy, have you ever had trouble with women trying to take your

man?"

She started laughing. "Veda, I've had trouble with women trying to take my *woman*. But yeah, when my life was in that space and time, I've had to confront a sister and put her in her place. What's up? Don't tell me you've got to put some woman in check over Charles?"

Before I could explain, she continued, "Do you remember when we were kids?"

"Yeah, Joy, why?"

"You would get into so much trouble. One thing for sure, you were never afraid to get in someone's face if they made you mad. I feel sorry for whoever is pissing you off. They just don't know."

We started laughing. It helped ease the tension and took my mind off Monica.

Joy looked over at the shrine I had for Sadie. She shook her head.

"Veda, as old as your behind is, you still into Sadie? That dumb cow's been dead so long."

"Look, don't make fun of Sadie, now," I said laughing.

I glanced over at the stuffed cow that my parents had given me when I was a child. Even though she did look pitiful after all these years, her outward appearance didn't matter to me. Sadie reminded me of a place I could go and be free of my cares. I could tell her my inner most secrets and not be judged. Some people took to drinking and drugs or other sinful things to ease their pain. Sadie was harmless. I didn't expect Joy to relate to my feelings for Sadie anymore than I could relate to her passion for women.

As I thought about Sadie, I could hear Joy in the background talking about times gone by, things we used to do.

"Veda, you remember the beating you got over that berry bush?"

"Yeah, how could I forget it?" I said. "Big Mama wore me out."

But before we could get any further, Mama passed by and stuck her head in the door.

"Joy, are you and Veda catching up on old times?"

"Yes, Aunt Myrna, we've been through a lot together."

Without any formal invitation, Mama came in and started reminiscing. She had some tall tales about how she met my daddy, JD and the troubles they encountered. She told us about how he and his best friend, Maxie would hang out at the racetrack and how she had to deal with crazy women running after him, especially this one conniving woman named Pat. She told us about how they started their business using Big Mama's Southern recipes. She even went back to the time when Charles and I first started dating and the things we went through—like crazy Eugene and psycho-bitch Monica (who Mama had no idea was still causing me problems). It was the funniest thing. I could see where I got my attitude from. That's why Monica didn't stand a chance if she thought she was going to stop me from marrying Charles. I had Calhoun blood in me. I came from a long

line of strong women.

As we talked, I knew Joy was just itching to tell Mama about her *new* life. I could almost hear the wheels spinning in her head. She paused, wrinkled her face and decided against it. Coming out of the closet had its risks. I guess she wasn't ready for a true confession.

Mama excused herself and went to the bathroom. While she was gone, I just couldn't resist the urge to ask Joy how she became interested in women. I sat for a second, trying to skillfully craft my lead question. Nothing I could think of felt right, so I just came right out with it.

"Joy, I thought you and Robert had a good marriage. What happened?"

Joy looked startled by my boldness.

"Well, Veda," she said. "I didn't exactly plan it. Things started falling apart with Robert. I tried to compete with the other women in his life. I was so tired of the nights alone, the constant lying, the lack of any real affection—the raw sex instead of making love. I can't even count the nights I would cry myself to sleep.

"If you must know, I had a friend named Delores. She was always there for me. She consoled me when I was down and took me places to get my mind off my problems. We started spending a lot of time together. Then one evening, after we'd both done some heavy drinking, she spent the night. I was asleep when I felt someone crawl in bed next to me. I thought it was Robert. When I turned over, it was her. I didn't think much about it at the time. One thing led to another and we've been together every since."

I looked at Joy, trying desperately to relate. I just couldn't understand where she was coming from.

"No woman can make you feel the way a man can," I said.

"You'd be surprised," she said avidly. "See, a woman knows another woman's body and her emotional needs, so it's easy for her to satisfy you."

"I hear what you're saying Joy, but I still can't relate. No disrespect to you."

"None taken. I don't expect you to understand. You're in love with Charles and all you see is your relationship with him."

"Why am I the only family member you've told about your new lifestyle?"

"Because I knew I could trust you."

"You're not ashamed, are you?"

"Look, let's change the subject," Joy said tersely.

I could tell she was getting frustrated and I didn't want to upset her, so I apologized. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't offend you."

"Don't worry about it, Veda. Listen, I have a theory about love."

"You do?" I asked, knowing this was going to be real interesting.

"Yeah, this is my take on it: We grow up believing the fairytale of the

little house with the white picket fence, station wagon, two-point-five kids, complete with the dog-in-the-yard—until we get our first taste of heart-break. As we mature, the American dream theory is destroyed. Although the media does its best to keep the dream alive, eventually we find ourselves actually being faced with the dilemma of choosing fact from fiction. We learn that men are different from women, especially when it comes to affairs of the heart. It's been said that women need romance while men need sex. Unfortunately for some of us, we can't distinguish one from the other. We choose to live in a dream world where boy meets girl and lives happily ever after, only to discover later that we have to redefine all the rules. If there's one thing certain, good loving ain't easy."

I sat motionless while Joy talked, just listening to what she had to say.

"Listen Veda, your parents have a good marriage and you will too. Whatever is going on with this woman, try not to let it get to you. So long as Charles ain't pursuing her, don't trip. He wouldn't be marrying you if he had feelings for her. After all, you'll be Mrs. Charles... What's his last name?"

"It's Caziere. Charles Winston Caziere. It's pronounced Ka'zear. Just think of *Ka* and *dear*, but replace the *d* with *z*."

"Yeah, that's who you'll be. Besides, whoever this chick is, she can't stop you from getting married. Not with all of us here."

I looked at Joy and agreed with her. "I personally intend on seeing to it that she doesn't!"

"I hear you, Veda. It's too bad Aunt Bunny and Uncle Jack couldn't be here for your wedding."

"I know. They haven't been well for sometime now."

"They would have loved to see you get married."

Mama returned and they went right back to talking about old times. As they reminisced, I wondered if my wedding would suffer any complications. Monica was just that damn crazy. When I looked up, they were staring at me, waiting for me to speak. I thought I heard Joy ask me something.

"Do you remember that, Veda?"

I didn't have a clue what she was talking about. Joy pinched me on the arm and complained about my lack of attention.

"I'm sorry, Joy. What did you say?"

"I was just telling Aunt Myrna about the time she brought you down to stay with Big Mama. You really learned a lesson that summer..."

I sat listening to Joy reminisce about the summer I spent in the South with Big Mama. Reflecting on my past, I realized that I might have been young at the time, but I learned the beauty of being loved and cared for by strong black women. That, coupled with lessons learned from my parents, provided the foundation I needed to face life's challenges. Joy was right—I did learn a lesson that summer.

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