

PRODIGAL IN THE CITY

A Novel Excerpt – Chapter One
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Samuel Barnes stood, staring out the window of his room in a D.C. rooming house. It was his 45th birthday, and all he could think about was *her*.

He barely noticed the dark and overcast August morning, the phalanx of pedestrians heading to work, the seemingly eternal clog of vehicles on the nearby freeway. During this moment, a rerun of several such past moments, his mind was overrun with images of blissful times, long since passed. The images were vivid to him, almost as if he were experiencing them and living them at that moment.

Mavis greeting him on birthday mornings, with a wide smile and breakfast in bed.

Mavis calling him during the day at work just to say “I love you” and perhaps to utter some sensual words that would help him through his day.

His mind focused on the day of his 37th birthday, eight years ago. It was one of the best days of his life; second only to the day that he married Mavis on a sunny April day twenty-three years ago. Mavis had greeted him after work with a big kiss and a smile. Afterwards, she had led him to the dining room, where his favorite meal of lightly seasoned prime rib, collard greens seasoned with smoked turkey, and macaroni and cheese sat on the table next to a homemade birthday cake and an unopened bottle of Pinot Grigio. She had then coyly announced that she had conveniently arranged for their kids, Erica and Michael, to spend the day and night at Samuel’s mother’s home. She would then flash a sly smile and lift her eyebrows to let Samuel know that it would be a memorable evening.

Then one year later, suddenly, she was gone. To the media, she was just another statistic, the 257th murder victim of the year in D.C.

It comforted him to remember the good times they shared together. Gracious, how he loved that woman and everything about her, especially her sweet personality and easy-going manner. She had a face that glowed with joy and promise, and a body that was just perfect. He was certain he would never find another woman like her, and to respect her memory, he never tried. He had to focus on being a single father to his son Michael, to try to assure a promising future for his boy, despite the fact that the tike missed his mom and would occasionally act out in school because of it.

As much as it comforted him to think about the good times, the thoughts also occasionally fueled his lingering anger and engaged his residual guilt. He wished he had more strongly urged her not to walk alone to the store after dark, and he wished he had not been working late that night so he could have been with her. But when his headstrong wife wanted something done, she had to do it immediately. She figured it would take just ten minutes to walk to the store; dash in and grab some bread, milk, and cereal for the kids; and then head home.

That fateful day, Mavis was on her way home, crossing the street at the corner of Oates and Lauren Streets, when someone struck her from behind with the butt of his pistol. He snatched her purse and fired two bullets in the back of her head, without a care in the world of who was looking. He retreated with her purse and a few dollars, leaving Mavis splayed dead at the intersection, her blood mixing with the spilled milk and cereal on the sidewalk.

Samuel didn’t understand why someone would shoot his wife dead just to rob her of a few dollars. He didn’t understand why the police seemed so disinterested in solving the crime and why seven years later, despite sufficient forensic evidence at the scene, the murderer has yet to be caught. All he knew was that out there was an evil, heartless man who deprived him of his heart and joy, just to get a quick high. And that man was probably still walking the streets, probably laughing about the lives he destroyed.

It was the moment that a spirit of bitterness had begun to take root in Samuel.

Samuel shook his head and turned away from the window. He glanced at his 10-year-old son, who was still sleeping in the rollaway bed on the other side of the room. His son’s cherubic face, lying on the pillow seemingly at rest, only reminded him of the next tragedy in his life.

His daughter Erica was only 17 years old when she left home to go to a party one night five years ago. She never returned. Police had yet to find any trace of her. Some D.C. detectives investigating the case bluntly told Samuel that they suspected that his daughter was dead. "After all, that's how these missing persons cases usually end up," they had said. Samuel accepted that conclusion without much difficulty. After the murder of his wife, it was easy for him to believe that he was God's personal latrine. And Samuel knew how smart and tenacious his daughter was. If she were still alive, she would have found a way to communicate with him, to let her know where she was. No, she was dead.

And he knew exactly who had killed her.