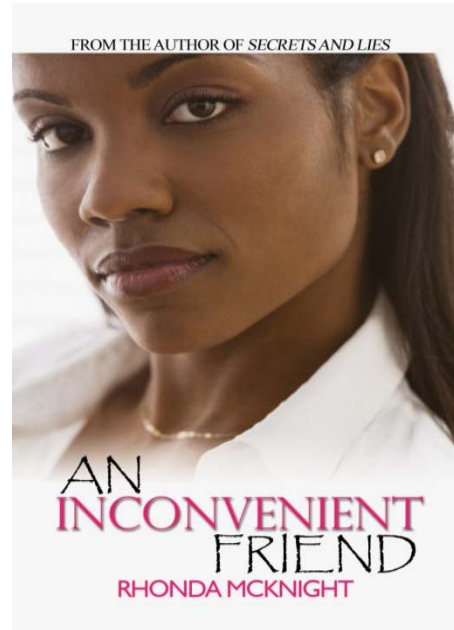


# ***An Inconvenient Friend***

By

**Rhonda McKnight**

Available Aug 1, 2010



## **Chapter 1**

I stepped into the classroom marked “Women’s Bible Study” with a mission in mind that had nothing to do with Jesus. I was going to get to know more about my man’s wife and use what I learned to steal her husband. This place they called holy ground was about to become a battleground. The plan – “*Operation Steal Greg.*”

“Is this classroom C?” I made sure to add just the right mix of airhead and sweet church girl to my voice. The door was clearly marked, but I had to say something, because I was late and all the real church sisters were already seated and staring.

A plump chick in her late thirties jumped to her feet like someone yelled happy birthday and she was popping out of a cake. “Yes, sister, come in. Have a seat.” She swayed an open palm in the direction of the chair she’d vacated.

I smiled tight, then took two steps to the left and away from the over eager beaver. “Thanks.” I crinkled my nose and pointed. “I’ll take something over there.”

Big girl looked disappointed, but my choice of seating was strategic, so I wasn’t giving in to sad puppy eyes. I flicked a lock of my hair over my shoulder and did a visual sweep of the occupants. Thirty or so women were dispersed throughout the room in small groups that

reminded me of cliques in the high school cafeteria. I could tell they were the kind that chewed you up and spit you out like the mystery meat that followed Tuesday's spaghetti.

Since they were staring, I put a little extra motion into my well practiced jig. Sixty eyeballs followed the rhythmic gliding of my hips as I made my way to what I thought would be the perfect seat to make observations; the vacant back row. I rested my Dolce Gabana handbag on an empty seat, picked up the Bible that lay in wait for me, and as a final gesture for the royal nosies, wiggled down into the chair and crossed one knee over the other.

*Try that*, I thought, noticing more than half the occupants in the room were overweight and hard pressed to cross any extremity over the other.

I turned my attention to the woman behind the podium whom I figured must be the Bible study teacher, if that's what you called the presenter at a thing like this. The only study groups I'd attended were for school. Church wasn't my thing. I had never quite figured out the purpose for it all, and as far as I could see, most of the hypocritical, nasty, back biting Christians I worked with hadn't either. Nah, I'd taken a pass on the church thing – until now.

“Hello.” The teacher met my gaze. “I'm Sister Green. Welcome to women's Bible study.” Then, with an uncomfortable cough, she dropped her eyes to the book she was holding.

*So much for introductions.*

“Let's go to the sixteenth verse, and if you would, Sister Hawkins, read down to verse twenty-one for us,” Sister Green continued.

A wiry woman not too far from me stood to her feet and began reading, “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful...”

I tuned her out, after all, that wasn't the reason I was here. I craned my neck left and then right, looking for the person I'd come to see, but she wasn't here. I'd only seen Greg's wife once,

from a distance, when I'd lurked outside a charity event he'd slipped and told me they were attending.

Angelina Preston had long hair that fell in an angled bob down her back. No one's 'do' fit the bill from where I sat, and because I was in the back I couldn't see any of their faces. I hoped I hadn't wasted an evening coming to this gathering of stuck up, sanctimonious, women for nothing. I snapped the Bible closed I'd had open across my knee and began tapping my heel impatiently. Just when I was about to call it a wrap, the door opened.

Angelina Preston swept into the room looking like an African-American corporate *Barbie* doll in a chocolate St. John suit, Jimmy Choo sling backs and matching handbag. I let my mental calculator go to work. The woman was wearing close to a thousand dollars worth of gear and that didn't include the rocks in her ears or the one that for sure was weighing down her left hand.

I squirmed in my seat. I wanted to curse, but remembered I was in a church, so I bit my tongue. Talk about a bad sister. I uncrossed my legs and watched Angelina glide across the short space, and slide effortlessly into a seat. Her featherweight hair billowed like smoke behind her. She turned to the women on her left and right, offered them a few words and a quick smile through perfect teeth and looked to Sister Green.

"Sister Preston, we're glad you're here. I'll turn the lesson over to you." Sister Green moved away from the podium like someone had told her there was a bomb underneath it. From the awkward way she had been conducting herself before Angelina showed up, I could tell she wasn't one for public speaking. Her role as teacher really had me wondering about the church thing already.

Angelina stood and peeled off her jacket as she made her way to the front of the room.  
"Good evening, ladies."

Her voice matched her corporate persona. It had that Demi Moore husky quality that was great for business, but also sexy to a lot of men in the bedroom. “Hmmm, something else to hate about her,” I murmured under my breath.

“Thank you for excusing my tardiness. It couldn’t be helped. As most of you know, I’m on the board for the Department of Youth and Family Services, and thanks to the media, you’re probably also aware that we had a child death last night that necessitated an emergency board meeting.”

“How is the family, Sister Preston?” One of the women asked. A solemn pallor had fallen over the room. I vaguely remembered hearing something about a four-year-old foster child dying from an unexplained fall. I shuddered at the thought.

The family is outraged, understandably, but I’m not really able to discuss the case.”

The women seemed to understand that. I had no idea Angelina was affiliated with child welfare. What thankless work for someone who – well – didn’t have to work at all.

“We can pray for the family after the meeting.” She closed the subject neatly. “Let’s pick up where we left off last week.”

“Sister Preston.” Big Girl stood and careened her neck in my direction. “We have a guest.”

Darn, I didn’t need anyone pointing me out. I was trying to be incognero, but it was not to be so. Angelina wasn’t going to be rude and ignore a sistah like her predecessor had.

She tilted her head ever so slightly and her mouth eased into a smile that was full of sincerity. “I apologize for not noticing. I’m Angelina Preston, the women’s adult education coordinator for Greater Christian Life. Welcome. Please tell us your name and anything else you’d like to share with the group.”

I wasn't sure how introductions were handled in church. I stood to my feet and stated the lie I'd prepared for this moment. I hesitated for a second, wondering if I was supposed to call myself "sister", but then I realized Angelina hadn't put "sister" in front of her name, so I nixed it.

"Good evening, ladies. My name is Rae Burns. I've been coming to the church for a few weeks now. I live in Roswell. I'm single and I work as a healthcare consultant." I plopped down in my seat, shocked that perspiration had dotted my top lip, and pleased that I hadn't messed up and said my real name.

That coming to the church a few weeks part was not true. Tonight was the first time I'd stepped foot in this church or any church that hadn't been for a wedding or funeral. I was thinking with nearly two thousand members that no one would know this was my first visit. I was obviously wrong. A few of them looked between each other, comparing mental notes, shaking their heads that they had not seen me at their service. I ignored them. I only cared what one woman thought and that was the one who was looking directly at me.

"We're glad to have you with us, Rae." Angelina's delivery was warm and sincere. "We hope that this evening is the first of many journeys into the Bible with us." After an appropriate pause for welcomes and nods from other women in the room, Angelina resumed her discussion of the lesson.

I resumed my studies also. From her appearance to her public speaking skills, the way she threw her hair over her shoulder and the classy way she held her swan-like neck, every word, every movement, every thing about her was polished. Her persona seemed to be perfected to convey one resounding message. *I am the hotness with a capital "H". Don't mess with me.*

It was starting to get on my nerves, because I was going to mess with her, and I hated the fact that I was starting to feel intimidated. I mean as far as looks, she was predictably what I

expected. A doctor's wife – classy. A handsome doctor's wife – beautiful. I did notice one thing that I wouldn't have guessed, not based on Greg's old southern money, Louisiana upbringing. Angelina wasn't from the south. This surprised me, because the southern gentlemen usually married the belles who understood them, but northern she was.

I had studied a lot of accents. She spoke that clipped English that well-to-do black folks from up north chirped in their superior, northernly way. My guess was this diva was from Jersey or Connecticut. Greg and I had never talked about it. With the exception of the few times he let me know Wednesday evenings were a good night for us to be together, because his wife taught Bible study, he never mentioned her. The only reason I knew where to come tonight was because he'd been talking on the phone to her and I overheard him sarcastically say something about her undying allegiance to Greater Christian. I had heard that name, Greater Christian, before, on radio advertisements. One trip to Google had me in the complete know.

I covertly tried to learn more about Mrs. Preston from Greg. A girl likes to know a little about her competition, but he was unwilling to share. That was a big “why” for me. Why no complaints like most married men? The complaints were what usually soothed their dogged guilt. His lack of flack about the Mrs. made me wonder how Greg soothed his. Surely he had some. I knew he wasn't absolving it in church, because he laughed when he told me he hadn't been to church in years. “That's my wife's bag.” His tone was full of venom. The good doctor and Jesus had fallen out over something, so I felt sure I wouldn't be running into him here.

Angelina Preston was attractive, well bred, and my guess would be educated, but obviously, as my mama always told me, all that glittered wasn't gold. Her husband was in my bed.

I let out a long sigh. I was no fool. I understood how the cheating husband thing worked.

Most men didn't leave their wives, because they actually loved them or something like that. Chicks on the side, I had learned early on, fell into one or two categories. The first was what I called "something different." This would be a woman that was completely different from the wife; usually a real freaky-deak who probably traveled with handcuffs and a portable pole. She was willing to do the things wifey had never done or didn't respect the Negro enough to do anymore. But she was a distraction, a way to make the man feel better about his boring home life.

The second category, and the one I preferred to be, was "the new model." That was simply a younger version of the current wife. From my experience, more often than not, the younger version was more common, at least amongst the upper middle class men I spent my time with. Their wives didn't stroke them in the right places anymore. First and foremost, the ego and then...well let's say most of the married men I'd dated didn't think they were getting enough sex. I liked being the new model. It held more promise. After all, who was going to actually leave their wife for a freak? You couldn't take a freak to a business dinner or a charity affair, but you could take the new model anywhere and everywhere and that's what I had in mind. My future.

I squinted for a better view. Now that Angelina was really close up I could see the similarity; same complexion, bone structure, height – *heck, did we get our hair wrapped at the same salon?* I thought, patting my shoulder length tresses. Add ten years and fifteen pounds and I was already Mrs. Gregory Preston. I clucked my teeth. I didn't like what I saw. The woman was darn near perfect, which meant this might be more difficult than I'd originally thought. But I was up to the challenge. Nothing in life that was worth having came easy, and getting my claws into a successful surgeon like Dr. Gregory Preston would be worth whatever I had to go through,

including this boring study lesson. Besides, starting over with another man was out of the question. I needed big money, soon, or I was going to lose everything I had.