

# *What I Did For Love*

by Lorraine Bartlett

**W**hatever were you thinking, Rhonda?" My older sister, Marla, gazed at me with the same stern disapproval I'd too often seen in my own mother's eyes. That look was her legacy and Marla had inherited it.

I didn't have to justify my actions to anyone. All I needed from her was an answer, yes or no. "You're either going to be there for me, or you're not."

Marla frowned and heaved a deep sigh.

"This isn't the way I pictured you getting married. In a prison chapel," she said bitterly.

It wasn't the way I'd visualized my wedding day, either. All my girlhood dreams contained a whitewashed church, stained glass, scented candles, a circlet of flowers in my hair and a white-beaded gown with a twenty-foot train.

Those dreams were now tarnished. I was no longer in my twenties. The man of my dreams hadn't ridden up on a white horse, promising me a life of love, happiness, and security.

Loneliness had driven me to the personals section of our local newspaper. At thirty-five, my biological clock had been ticking loudly. Never one to make the bar scene, and working in an office full of women, made it hard for me to meet men. I'd taken classes, gone on singles trips, but every man I met only seemed interested in a quick roll in the hay. I wanted a lifetime commitment, a home and a family.

The ad I answered gave no real clue of the man who'd written it:

White, single male, non-smoker, loves poetry, quiet walks, sunshine and fresh air. Seeks loving companion. Grow old with me.

I was too embarrassed to tell Marla or anyone else how low desperation had taken me.

The first letter arrived only days after I'd sent my own.

*Dear Rhonda,*

*Thanks for your warm and funny note. Let me tell you a little about myself. I'm a computer programmer, age 32, who loves swimming and hiking. Like you, I read tons of books and love to discuss them at length. I've written some poetry--which has become kind of a new hobby for me.*

*Please write back and tell me more about yourself. I think we could become friends. I hope we can become more.*

*Your new friend,  
Dave Sanders*

A real letter, with neat handwriting, was so much more romantic than an e-mail and I was glad I'd chosen the old-fashioned route to communicate. I bought new stationery, a pen with pretty purple ink, and answered his letter. That was the beginning of our relationship.

"Something's fishy," Marla said to me after Dave and I had been corresponding for almost two months. "Why hasn't he asked to meet you?"

"Dave's had several bad relationships in the past. He wants to take things slow."

"He's married," Marla said with conviction.

"No, he's not. I already asked him."

"Why do you write letters? Hasn't he got a computer? You could e-mail each other. Why hasn't he called you?"

"Dave's old fashioned. He says people used to take their time to get to know one another. He doesn't want to make the same kinds of mistakes he's made in the past."

Marla's expression hardened. "What kinds of mistakes?"

I shrugged. Dave hadn't given me any specifics.

Marla glanced at Dave's return address on one of the envelopes.

"How come he only has a P.O. Box?"

"He lives in a small, rural town. They don't have house-to-house delivery."

She shook her head. "Be careful, Rhonda. I don't want to see you hurt."

"I'm not going to get hurt," I assured her.

Dave and I wrote often. How I lived for the postman's delivery; Dave's letters were the high point of my day. Sundays were torture without my daily Dave fix.

Then came the day Dave asked for my picture. I'd already looked through the envelopes of snapshots I'd taken during the past few years, but other people had usually been the subjects as I'd been behind the camera.

What I needed was a glamour shot. Surely that would entice Dave to finally ask to meet me.

The pictures came out gorgeous. With soft lighting and a professional make-up job, I looked like a million bucks.

I sent Dave a five-by-seven inch print in a pretty silver frame.

Thanks for the picture, Dave wrote. You're everything I've dreamed about. I hope you won't be disappointed in mine.

Inside the envelope was a portion of a snapshot. Obviously Dave had not been the subject of the photo, and he'd cut it down. Warm brown eyes under a fringe of dark wavy hair looked at me. A sweet, shy smile graced his thin lips.

He was just what I'd pictured.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," I wrote that night. "But my family is giving me a hard time. They think you're misleading me. The P.O. Box--the fact that you don't want to meet me in person...."

I didn't receive a letter back for four days. I've blown it, I thought, each day when I checked that empty mail box.

On the fifth day I found the familiar white envelope with the handwriting I'd come to love.

*My dearest Rhonda,  
Your family is right to be protective of you. I didn't want you to judge me before you got to know me. Now that you've admitted your feelings for me, I hope you are as pleased to learn I feel the same way about you.  
Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to come see you. I do live in a rural town--in Mastin, at the Correctional Facility.*

"I knew it. He's a jailbird!" Marla wailed when I told her.

"Dave was wrongfully convicted," I said.

"Oh, Rhonda," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "Don't tell me you believe him?"

"Of course I do."

Marla shook her head sadly. "What crime?"

I turned away from her. "That's not important."

"It most certainly is. Tell me."

I couldn't look my sister in the eye. "Rape."

"Oh, Rhonda, no! Please don't say you've fallen for a man who could do that to a woman!"

I whirled to confront her. "Dave is innocent."

"How do you know?"

I didn't. And I'd already thought of every argument she might have come up with to discourage me from continuing my relationship with Dave.

"How long has he been in jail, anyway?" Marla asked.

"Nine years. He'll be eligible for parole next fall. He's been a model prisoner. He's even earned a college degree in computer science. He's--"

Marla held up her hand to stop me. "Don't say any more. I can tell by the set of your chin that you've already made up your mind about this loser."

"Dave's not a loser," I said hotly.

"Have it your way," Marla said. "Just be careful."

Marla left my apartment, giving me too much to think about.

I loved my sister, my only remaining immediate family member. I loved Dave. If we were ever to have a chance at a life together, I had to look into Dave's eyes to see for myself if he could indeed have committed such a heinous crime.

The Mastin Correctional Facility was a medium security prison located an hour from my hometown. Razor wire on high fences kept prisoners inside its brick walls. I arrived at the visitor center bright and early one Saturday, in the company of other women, some of who had brought their children.

Female guards searched me for contraband, and my purse was emptied, but I was soon ushered into the meeting room. I'd thought the prisoners would be behind a plastic barrier, and despite my excitement at meeting the man with whom I'd shared so many of my dreams, I felt nervous to be so close to him.

I knew Dave the moment I saw him. The drab, prison-issue coveralls couldn't hide his lean, well-muscled body. My knees went rubbery as he clasped my hands and looked into my eyes.

"Thank you for coming, Rhonda. I was so afraid that knowing about my past would color your feelings against me."

We talked about nonsensical things for most of my first visit; the weather, our favorite foods. Near the end of the hour, I forced myself to ask the dreaded question.

"Did you rape that woman?"

Dave's eyes filled and his lips pursed. "I swear, on my mother's life, I could never have done what they convicted me for."

"Then how--why?"

"I lived on the same street as the woman who said I raped her. I didn't know her--had never met her. All I can figure is I must have looked like the man who hurt her. I swear to you, Rhonda, I didn't do it!"

"All men behind bars are innocent," Marla said snidely, when I told her about my visit.

"I believe Dave," I said, "with all my heart."

Marla scowled. "Why didn't he appeal his case?"

"He couldn't afford it. He--"

Marla shook her head. "You poor, misguided girl. You always were a sucker for a sob story."

Anger surged through me. "That's a lie!"

"Then how about the lemon of a car you bought from Tim Maxwell? You wouldn't even take him to small claims court."

"How could I? His mother was dying of cancer."

"I saw her in the grocery store yesterday. She looked fine."

"You know experimental drugs saved her life."

"Yes, but it was her health insurance, not the two grand Tim bilked from you, that paid for it."

I wasn't about to argue with her.

"I won't listen to you talk bad about Dave. You don't know him like I do."

"I hope to never know him. Look how he misrepresented himself. Letting you fall in love with him before he told you the truth about his past. Rhonda, dear little sister, Dave's using you!"

"What for?"

"That's a good question. One you should be asking him!"

I watched Marla's car pull away and knew if I was ever to have a lasting relationship with Dave, I'd have to prove to Marla what Dave's court-appointed attorney had not been able to prove to a jury: that Dave had been wrongly convicted.

My first step was to unearth the newspaper reports on the crime. The public library's microfilmed records provided that. Dave had been arrested in January ten years before. I found the account on the Police Blotter. It said simply: David M. Sanders, 22, of 67 Marlborough Street, was arrested for rape.

His trial, in city court, lasted two days. The unnamed woman (they protected her name, but not Dave's), testified that a man matching Dave's description had broken into her apartment and raped her at knife point.

As I read through the account, it occurred to me that the evidence presented was pretty circumstantial. Dave had been home alone at the time of the crime, with no one to verify his alibi. Although he'd never so much as had a parking ticket, the judge had given him a sentence of fifteen years.

I thought about what I'd read and I realized there'd been no mention of DNA evidence. I knew that ten years ago they used blood tests to clear or convict suspects. Was it possible to have the evidence rechecked using the new technology? If Dave was innocent, and I believed he was, that would be the only way to clear him.

I wrote Dave immediately, and told him I'd be up to see him on the next visiting day to discuss the matter further.

In the meantime, I went on the Internet and tried to find out if such testing would be authorized. Did I need a judge's order? Would I need an attorney? What were the laws in our state for reopening old cases?

Armed with new knowledge, I headed for the prison to see Dave.

Instead of being happy with me, Dave's face bore a frown.

"Don't push this, Rhonda. I'm due for parole in a few months. I want out of here so bad--"

"But, Dave, you're a convicted felon. If we can't clear your name, you'll carry that stigma with you the rest of your life!"

Dave's eyes were grave. "Don't stir up trouble for me, Rhonda."

"He's guilty," Marla told me the next day. "Otherwise he'd be begging you to help him."

I admit, Dave's refusal to have the evidence DNA tested had shaken my faith in him--if only just a little. Yet I couldn't believe the man who had written such tender love poetry could ever treat a woman with the violence he'd been convicted of.

Despite Dave's objections, I decided to pursue the matter.

Luck was with me. About the same time, the State decided to review old prosecution evidence in felony crimes. I hired a high-priced lawyer from the biggest firm in town, Benson, Johns and Connelly.

Jared Connelly's kind blue eyes looked at me over his half-glasses, studying my face. I immediately liked him upon shaking hands. His were smooth, warm and dry, his handshake firm but not crushing. The silver at his temples contrasted nicely with the rest of his thick, dark hair. An aura of confidence surrounded him, and I knew I'd be able to trust him with my life. With Dave's future....

"You know, Miss Roberts, that this will be difficult without Mr. Saunders full cooperation."

"Yes," I said.

"First we'll have to determine if the evidence still exists."

"You mean it might have been destroyed?"

"It's a real possibility. Also, some prosecutors have resisted allowing old evidence to be tested. It upsets their conviction rate for old crimes to be overturned."

"You don't give me much hope," I said.

"I want you to be aware of the difficulties we might encounter. I know several people in the DA's office. Lucky for us, this isn't an election year. I'll see what I can do."

I didn't mention any of that in my letters to Dave. His letters didn't come quite so often, and there was a chilly standoffishness to them that stung me.

Couldn't he see I only wanted what was best for him? Couldn't he see how clearing his name would make his life better?

He's guilty, said an insidious little voice inside my head. That's why he's against this. He raped that woman and is playing you for a fool.

I didn't want to believe it. Didn't want to believe that I could fall for a man who could attack and threaten a woman, forever taking away her sense of security; stealing her dignity.

Instead, I concentrated on the bright future I'd have with Dave. How we'd marry, have children, and build a new life together.

Jared Connelly kept me up to date on the progress he was making on the case, and I struggled to work all the overtime I could get to pay his fees. I began to look forward to his

weekly calls, surprised at how personable he was. Not at all what I would have expected from someone in his position.

It was weeks before we learned the evidence against Dave had not been destroyed and, after some persuasion from Jared, Dave had consented to give a DNA sample to the County Prosecutor's office.

I had hoped Dave's letters would have been more upbeat. Giving the sample had to prove Marla wrong. Dave was actively cooperating. He'd have never let himself be tested if there was any chance he'd be proven guilty.

We didn't discuss the case in our letters, or at my monthly visits to the prison.

Dave seemed different, restless. I wasn't sure how to cheer him, except with talk of the future.

I wasn't always sure he was listening to me. Often he had a far-away look in his eyes. But when he'd smile, I took comfort that everything would be all right.

"Once Dave's found innocent, we won't have to get married in the prison chapel," I told Marla. "I'll contact a justice of the peace and we can exchange our vows at a pavilion in the park. It'll be a simple but lovely wedding. You'll see."

Marla didn't comment.

I had to believe in the future--in my future with Dave. That we'd be married as soon as he was released.

I bought a tea-length gown of ivory satin, selected a florist and a caterer. All I needed now was the groom and the wedding date.

We waited two long months for the wheels of justice to turn.

It was a rainy Tuesday evening, and I'd just walked in the door when the phone rang. I ran to catch it before the answering machine would get it.

"Hello?"

"Rhonda, it's Jared."

My stomach tightened. He'd never called so late.

"Good news or bad?" I asked with trepidation.

"That depends on your point of view."



My hand tightened on the receiver, and a puddle began to form around my already soggy shoes. "Hit me with the bad news first."

"We probably won't be chatting on the phone much in the future. Too bad. I've so enjoyed our conversations."

I frowned. "I don't understand."

"Dave's tests came back negative, proving he couldn't have raped that woman."

A wave of giddiness passed through me. I fell into one of my kitchen chairs. "Thank God," I breathed. "When--when will they release him?"

"If we're lucky, within the week. I'll keep you posted."

"Oh, Jared, thank you. I'm so happy I could kiss you."

"I'm so happy I would let you," he said.

Jared and I spoke often during the next few days, we even met for lunch so that I could inspect the paperwork that would set Dave free.

He reached for my hand over coffee. "You're a remarkable woman, Rhonda. You have a lot of love to give. I just hope you'll be happy. That you truly know...." His words trailed off and he turned his gaze to our clasped fingers.

I studied Jared's face, noticing the fine lines etched around his eyes, and the sadness in them. Why did I have to meet him now, when I was so in love in Dave? Jared possessed everything I'd always wanted in a man: strength, integrity, and most of all kindness.

If things had been only different....

I pulled my hand back, feeling disloyal to Dave.

"You've been a good friend, Jared. Dave and I will always be grateful to you."

Jared's lips pursed. He looked like he wanted to say something more, but the waitress approached the table and set the check before him.

I gathered up my purse. "I'll see you in court," I said, and fled the restaurant.

Three days later, Dave and Jared stood before the judge. I sat behind the defense table, beaming with pride in my soon-to-be husband, and happy to be able to tell Marla "I told you so."

The judge called Dave to stand before his bench.

"It is with great regret that this court must agree that you were wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for the crime of rape. You are hereby set free."

There were papers to sign before the judge finally banged his gavel.

Dave turned to Jared. "Thanks, Mr. Connelly. I don't know what else to say." He offered his hand and they shook.

Jared glanced at me. "You can thank Miss Roberts. It was her faith in you that persuaded me to take the case."

Dave's smile was wistful. "Thank you, Rhonda."

I moved to stand behind the man I loved, giving him a quick kiss. Dave seemed embarrassed, and my love for him swelled.

"Call me in a day or so," Jared told Dave. "Next we go after the State for damages. They owe you nine years of your life. Or at least the financial equivalent."

The court continued to empty and I clasped Dave's sweating hand.

"This means a new beginning for us," I said.

Dave hung his head, his smile fading. "I'm afraid it doesn't, Rhonda."

"Honey?" came a voice from the open doorway.

Dave's head snapped up, his eyes alight with pure joy.

A petite blonde, in her early twenties, dressed in a dark blue tailored suit, with matching pumps and purse, stood framed in the doorway before us. Dave rushed to her side, kissed her mouth, and they embraced.

"Sorry I'm late," she said breathlessly.

"You're here now," he said and smiled at her.

For a moment I just stood there, too dumbfounded to speak, groping for a possible explanation. His sister? A very affectionate cousin?

Dave pulled back, clasped her hand and led her forward.

"Rhonda, I want you to meet Sue Abrams. My fiancée."

"Your...fian--" I choked on the word.

How could this be? How could--?

"But, you and I. I thought...."

"You've been a wonderful friend, Rhonda. The best. Without you, Sue and I wouldn't have a chance at a future together."

"Wait a minute," I cried. "What about all those letters? What about all those visits to the prison? Didn't you understand how I felt about you, how I--"

"I tried to let you down gently," Dave said, looking at Sue for support. "If you remember, I never talked about a future together. You were...my pen pal. I'm afraid that's all you ever were."

He couldn't have hurt me more if he'd slapped me.

"But after I told you I loved you, you said you shared those feelings."

"I do love you. As a friend."

"But the love poetry.... I thought you were writing about me--about us!"

Dave shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rhonda. I truly am."

I didn't know what to say--couldn't utter a word.

"Jared thinks I'll get a big settlement from the State," Dave continued. "I'll repay you for all the legal fees. It's the least I can do."

The least he could do? I still couldn't speak.

"We'd better go," Sue said, looking embarrassed. "Thank you, Miss Roberts, for all you've done for Dave."

Tears were streaming down my cheeks.

Dave's mouth moved, but no words came out. Then, still clasping Sue's hand, he turned and led her from the empty courtroom.

I sank into one of the hard wooden chairs. How could I have been such a sap? How many other women had Dave been writing to? Had they all fallen for his golden words like I had?

Dave wasn't a rapist--but he was a heel.

But if I was honest with myself, I should've seen how in recent months how his attitude toward me had changed. His manner, in his letters and during our visits, had become restrained. I'd taken it as a sign he was worried about the ruling. Instead, he'd been corresponding--falling in love--with Sue. She was younger and prettier than me.

I'd spent thousands of dollars to free the man from jail, and all I had to show for it was a stack of canceled checks.

I bowed my head, the tears coming faster now, the sounds of my sobs echoing in that cavernous room.

Suddenly a hand thrust a handkerchief before my swimming eyes. I looked up to see Jared Connelly standing over me, his patient face filled with compassion.

"You knew?" I asked.

He nodded solemnly. "I suspected for some time. Dave only told me yesterday. I'm sorry, Rhonda."

I wiped my eyes and blew my nose. Jared sat down beside me.

"It's not the end of the world, you know," he said.

"Oh, no? I look like a fool. I look like--"

"A woman of great compassion, who'd go to the ends of the earth to see that justice prevailed," he finished for me. "Don't take what you've done lightly. You proved Dave was innocent, got him released from jail. That's no easy feat."

"I've been stupid. What will my friends--my sister--think when they find out about this?"

"You only have to live with yourself. And I'd say you should feel proud."

I dabbed at my eyes. I didn't feel proud. I felt like a jerk.

"I know it's early," Jared said, "but I wonder if you'd be interested in having dinner with me?"

I looked into those kind blue eyes. He was just being nice. But right then, I needed someone to be nice to me. I needed someone's compassion. I needed a friend.

"You don't have to--" I started to protest.

Jared touched my lips with his finger to stop me. A quiver of excitement went through me.

"Maybe Dave only looked at you as a friend, but I'd like to get to know you on a more personal basis. That is, if you wouldn't mind."

I blinked at Jared's sincere face. "Really?"

His smile was sincere. "Really." He rose from the chair and offered me his hand.

I took it, and we walked out of the courtroom together.

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