

the house on the hill



QUICKREADS

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Susan Perry, a young real estate agent, turned onto a wide street lined with newly planted trees. “This new subdivision has some very fine homes in your price range, Mr. Johnson,” she said. “I think you’ll like what you see.”

“Please, just call me Devin,” her passenger said shyly.

“Certainly. Then Devin it is. And I’m Susan,” she said.

Devin tried to hide it, but he was uncomfortable. He hated being around people he didn’t know well. Only solitude suited him—until he’d met his wife Sarita. For the first time in his life, he no longer wanted

to be alone. He wished his young bride was with him now, but she hadn't been feeling well. They had both agreed that Devin should go ahead and at least get things rolling with the real estate agent. He hadn't intended to actually look at any houses today—just meet with the agent. But Susan had convinced him to go out with her just to “get the lay of the land.”

Now Susan pulled up in front of a two-story house—so new that it hadn't even been painted.

“This is a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath model,” she said. “There's lots of room for your future family—and yard space for pets, if you want.”

Devin wasn't listening. He was staring at the big old house on the hilltop overlooking the town. The rambling Victorian stood alone—no other house was close by.

“*That* house—” Devin said, pointing toward the hilltop. “I'd like to take a look at that one.”

Susan blinked in surprise. “But—I don't

think it's available," she said.

"It won't hurt to look. I'd like to drive up there, please," Devin said.

"Why don't you just check out this new place while we're here?" Susan suggested. But her new client was already climbing back in the car.

When they reached the house on the hill, they saw a young man and woman loading a chair into a rental truck. Devin was out of the car before Susan turned off the engine. After introducing himself to Ed and Clara Baines, he asked if the house was theirs.

"No. It was my sister's," the woman said. Her face was grim.

"Is it possibly for sale?" Devin asked.

"Oh, goodness," said the woman. "We haven't even thought—"

"Yes it is," the man interrupted, putting his hand on the woman's arm. "May I look inside?" Devin responded.

The man seemed hesitant. "We—uh—haven't cleaned up yet," he said.

The woman's lips trembled. "My sister

and her children were *murdered* here,” she said in a shaky voice.

Devin didn’t react at all to this startling news. He turned away from the woman’s tight face and crossed the porch. When he stepped through the doorway, he felt something like a hot wind rush through him. To stay on his feet, he had to grab hold of the doorknob.

“Are you all right?” Susan asked.

But the strange feeling had passed, and Devin didn’t answer. He eagerly hurried down the dim hallway and started walking from room to room, as if he knew the place. In the living room, the others in the group stood waiting for him by the big bay window. Susan was trying not to stare at the great dark stains on the carpet.

Finally, Devin rushed up to them. “I’ll take it!” he said, his voice tight with excitement.

“Well, if you’re really serious,” Mr. Baines said, “I guess we could have the place ready in a month or two.”

Devin felt a stab of anger, as if a white-hot wire was poking his neck. “No!” he shouted. “I want it *now!*”

“Why don’t we all sit down in the kitchen?” Susan quickly suggested in a shaky voice. “What’s *with* this guy?” she mumbled to herself.

The deal was made in just a few minutes. Devin wrote the largest check he’d ever written. “A deposit,” he said, “toward the down payment.” He pushed it across the table, where Ed and Clara Baines sat stiffly. He saw that they were afraid of him. For some reason, it made him smile.



When they got back to Susan’s office, Devin felt exhausted, and his ring finger ached. Actually, the finger was only a stump. He’d lost most of it when he was a baby. He was never told how, and he’d never cared. Not until he’d wanted to marry Sarita and wear a ring.

As Devin drove home, he began to feel

groggy. To stay awake, he tuned the radio to a lively station. He was utterly amazed at what had happened. He had bought a house! And all he could remember about it now was that it had steep stairs and a basement. Why had he done this without talking to Sarita? What would she say?



It was late when he got to the apartment. The lights were on in the bedroom. Sarita was in bed, asleep, her slim brown arms spread out across the comforter. He smiled as he saw the photo album across her lap. She'd been arranging pictures from their honeymoon in Hawaii.

He leaned over and nuzzled her cheek. "Go away," she said sleepily, but her voice was soft and warm.

He tickled the back of her neck. She turned and gently swatted his hand.

"Baby, I—I bought a house," he said.

She was wide awake now. "You *what?*" She sat up suddenly, grabbing the photo

album so it wouldn't get knocked off the bed. "You bought a house that I haven't even *seen*?"

"I don't know what came over me," Devin said. "It seemed so right—almost like I'd lived there before. It felt like I was coming home. I just *had* to do it."

"That's pretty strange," she said.

"I know," he said quietly. Devin had been raised in a less-than-loving foster home. He'd never known a real family.

"First day out with the real estate agent and you *bought* a house!" Sarita shook her head. "Devin Tyrone Johnson, I don't believe it! This kind of behavior is very unlike you," she said.

"That's a fact," he agreed. He took her hands. "Look, let's go see it tomorrow. If you don't like it, we'll cancel the deal. I never meant to shut you out of this."

She smiled. "You're the best, baby," she said, putting her arms around him. "I'm probably gonna love it. We'll live there for years and years until we get old and fat.

And our kids will grow up there and bring all *their* babies to come visit us. Does it have a big yard?"

"I don't remember," he said.

Sarita's eyes twinkled. "Devin, I don't know about you!" she laughed.



The next day, Sarita wore a new, lemon-yellow dress. Devin told her four times how beautiful she looked.

As they stepped through the door of the house on the hill, he felt the same hot, rushing sensation as before. It made him weak in the legs and short of breath. Sarita didn't seem to notice. "It's pretty dark in here," she said, peering down the hallway.

Mr. and Mrs. Baines weren't there. Susan Perry made them coffee and said she'd be back in an hour. "I think that realtor is avoiding you," said Sarita, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Could be she doesn't like the idea of an African-American family sitting up here in

this big house,” said Devin.

“I don’t think that’s what’s going on,” said Sarita. “I get the feeling she’s *afraid* of you—you, of all people!”

Sarita slowly twirled her coffee mug. “Devin—you know I love you?” she said.

He nodded, suddenly wary.

“I have to tell you, baby—I don’t like this place,” she said. “All this dark wood, and there’s a weird kind of smell—”

Again he felt the hot wire poking his neck. “This is our *home!*” he roared.

“Devin!” she said. “Am I wrong, or are we a *couple*? Which means that you *and* I are going to make this decision together! And I don’t appreciate—”

Suddenly Devin slammed his fist down on the table. Sarita pulled back, knocking over her coffee. An ugly brown stain appeared on the front of her new yellow dress. She stared at Devin, confused and frightened.

Devin turned away so she wouldn’t see the satisfaction on his face.