

CHAPTER ONE

In the muted lighting of the bedroom, Derrick leaned back on the cool, thick, brass rails of his headboard and watched Cassandra dress. Derrick was thoroughly mesmerized by the sight of her taut, voluptuous body's fluid motion. Her smooth, deep copper skin teased the lights by casting shadows in the most provocative places. Cassandra had somehow evolved the simple act of dressing into a carefully choreographed dance of sensuality; the way she flicked her hair, or gave a seductive glance over her shoulder as she lovingly stroked her stocking covered leg. Soft jazz from the stereo served as her accompaniment.

Inwardly, Derrick wrestled with his rule of never dating a woman more than three times. He truly enjoyed Cassandra's company. If only she had not uttered one of the many bachelor-threatening latch phrases, "I love you," Derrick might have dared to extend her stay in his life. The mere thought of belonging to any one woman made Derrick uncomfortable. After all, there were so many beautiful women to choose from. How could a man simply select one and never be attracted to any of the others ever again? How? In Derrick's estimation, it could not be done without acupuncture, hypnosis, or a witch doctor's long-winded, incomprehensible chanting and a good dusting.

The telephone rang as Cassandra sat in Derrick's wing chair pretending to comb her hair. Derrick knew she wouldn't comb it with abandon because three quarters of those heavily highlighted, shoulder-length locks were masterfully weaved. Derrick never answered the ringing telephone. As a matter of fact, he acted as if he never heard it.

Turning to the café-au-lait Adonis of her dreams, Cassandra smiled sweetly and asked, "Are you going to answer that?"

The coolest of casual smiles caressed Derrick's full, intricately sculptured lips when he responded, "If I answer, I'll be distracted."

"Distracted from what?"

"You."

Cassandra gave a nonchalant wave and said, "Please, Derrick. You just don't want me to know, for a fact, that you're seeing other women. In case you think I haven't noticed you never answer any of my questions, I have."

Feigning his trademark ignorance, Derrick asked innocently, "What questions?"

Standing and smoothing the tantalizingly form-fitting dress over her luscious body, Cassandra asked sarcastically, "Why don't I see you more often? Why haven't you returned my calls this week? Where have you been?"

Derrick bit his bottom lip briefly, folded his hands in his naked lap and replied, "I didn't answer those questions because I knew I didn't have an answer that would satisfy you."

"What kind of crap are you trying to peddle now, Derrick?"

"If I say to you I have work to do, I was visiting my mother, or I like to spend time alone; what would your response be?"

With crisp confidence, Cassandra responded, "Bullshit."

"Exactly as I thought, sweetheart. I have options. Waste a lot of time defending my bullshit arguing with you, or allowing you to form your own opinions and enjoying the time I spend with you. I prefer the latter."

Cassandra slowly strolled over to the bed. Like a predatory lioness, she draped herself over the length of Derrick's nude body and licked his lips. He didn't move. She purred, "While your reasoning escapes me, I must admit I prefer the latter, too." The long, hot kiss that followed threatened to rekindle the earlier fire of the night. Of course, Derrick had no complaints. After all, he was at home and had absolutely no place to go. It was Saturday. Cassandra could stay as long as she wanted and Derrick was willing to play any game she thought of.

Eventually, Cassandra pulled her mouth away from Derrick's and gave his lip a promising nibble. With a great sigh, she said, "I wish I could stay, sweetheart, but I've got to

serve the good citizens of our fair city early in the morning. I'm the relief dispatcher this weekend. Would you like to take me to brunch afterwards? We could spend the rest of the day together."

Derrick meant it when he said, "I would love to." He also meant it when he added, "But I can't."

Sullenly, Cassandra asked, "Why not, Derrick Dawes?"

"Sunday is always a busy day for me, Cassandra. I have to get ready for the work week and visit my parents."

"I could hang out while you get ready for the work week and go with you to visit your parents."

"I don't think so, Cassandra. Not tomorrow. Maybe some other day."

Frustrated tears burned Cassandra's eyes when she asked with agitation, "Why not?"

This was the part of relationships Derrick despised. The never-ending string of "whys." If he could find a woman who never asked why, he would marry her in a flash.

Still Derrick didn't want to hurt Cassandra's feelings, and God knows he didn't want her to start crying. Weeping women put knots in his stomach. So he took the conversation to a place where he thought he might be able to get out of it rationally.

"Do you really think our relationship is strong enough to drag families into it already, Cassandra?"

Blinking once, Cassandra answered emphatically, "Yes. I would take you to meet my family right this minute."

Never caught off guard on this subject, Derrick asked in succession, "What would you tell them about me, Cassandra? What's my occupation? Where do I work? How do you know? What are my likes? Dislikes? What's my favorite food? Color?"

Stuttering, she replied, "You didn't ask me any of those questions last night, or two weeks ago. Why are you asking them now?"

Smiling comfortably, Derrick said, "Because you're trying to make this into something more than it is. We're still in the enjoying each other's company stage of the game. I don't know the answers to many of those questions about you either."

Seething, Cassandra asked, "Are you saying this is purely a sex thing for you?"

"No. But I am saying we haven't progressed beyond that point yet. We've been to dinner three times. Slept together

three times. How many conversations have we shared? Honestly? What pertinent questions have you asked me? What's transpired between us that points toward family meetings? Before taking a woman home to my mother, I'd like to know a little more than what she prefers sexually, Cassandra. And honestly, that's the gist of what I know about you."

Without another comment, Cassandra snapped her purse closed and strolled out of the room. Derrick got up, slid into his teal and navy terry cloth robe, picked up his keys and followed her. She had already descended the stairs and was standing at the door. Derrick knew the dead bolt was the only thing keeping her there.

As he approached, Derrick said softly, "I really don't want you to go away upset, Cassandra. You have your way of looking at things and I have mine. Maybe we should discuss them."

Unemotionally, Cassandra responded, "If you want to discuss life, Derrick, surf the net. If you want to live life, give me a call. Good night."

She stepped away from the door, clearing the way for him to unlock it. Tilting his head in resignation, Derrick found the door key and put it in the lock. He hesitated momentarily. Holding onto Cassandra crossed his mind again. His attraction to her was slightly more than physical and he knew it. Cassandra's conversations lacked disciplined structure, but there was something endearing about her empty and breathless chatter. The very traits that made Cassandra delightful company had condemned the relationship. She had slept with Derrick without knowing anything about him. There was no intelligent, in-depth suspicious female inquisition. Derrick knew that Cassandra would have just as readily accepted him telling her he was the American Ambassador to Saigon as she would have been to hear he was an electrical engineer. What he did for a living did not matter to her. Cassandra had chosen Derrick for the same reason he had chosen her—she simply liked what she saw.

Standing there looking down at this magnificently packaged vessel of unlimited, uninhibited pleasure made the greater part of Derrick shout, "Open the damn door! Now!" And, as always, Derrick listened to the greater part of himself. He opened the door and silently watched Cassandra walk out of his life, the way so many others had.

CHAPTER TWO

The ringing telephone woke Derrick at seven o'clock on Sunday morning. Not in the mood for conversation yet, he let it ring. He would listen to the messages later. It was probably his mother or sister wanting to know what time he would be there for dinner anyway.

No matter what, Derrick always felt women were crowding him. His father often said, "If you let them, women will smother you to death."

Derrick sat on the side of the bed and ran his hand over his coarse, short black hair. He looked at the telephone, considered calling Cassandra and trying to patch things up, thought about next week's chorus of whys and ditched the idea. Instead, he hoisted himself from the bed, slipped into baggy gray jogging shorts, a green cotton tee shirt and headed for the basement. An hour of rowing and running would clear his head.

By ten, Derrick was showered, shaved, fed and in the process of making his bed. The telephone rang again. He moved to answer it and decided against it. Derrick resumed what he was doing, relaxed and read the newspaper until noon.

Derrick loved spending time alone in his new two-bedroom townhouse. There was a fireplace in the living room, master bedroom and the basement recreation room. Two gleaming black and white tile bathrooms upstairs. Solid white powder rooms on the first floor and lower level. A midnight blue and silver kitchen, with an abundance of morning sunshine. Plush purple carpeting in every other room; his very own laundry room, parking space and private entrance. What more could a man ask for?

After years in an apartment and hotels on the road, the peace and quiet of his townhouse made it worth every penny

he was paying. Derrick could have afforded a home years ago, but he couldn't persuade himself it was worth the extra expense. The day he came home and found he had no appliances or clothes drove him to the decision.

A little after noon, Derrick felt he had lounged enough. He would listen to his messages before dressing and heading for his parents' home for dinner. There were the usual harem messages left by extremely creative women with varying distinctive and alluring styles. Karen, Tyra, Khalia, Shawna and Cassandra—each wanting to know when he would be calling, or seeing them again. Cassandra had reconsidered her position on their stalemate and now thought it worth discussing.

Derrick smiled when his sister's tiny voice pleaded with him to come to dinner. A Sunday without her two big brothers would throw Deandra into a pouting fit for the entire day. Derrick knew her next call was to their eldest brother, David. Being born when they were fifteen and sixteen made Deandra feel like an only child most of the time—never on Sunday though. David and Derrick showed up for her with sports injuries, contagious diseases and hangovers.

A frown of confusion claimed Derrick's handsome face as he listened to the final three messages. The first message said, "Hello, Mr. Dawes, this is Mrs. Monet, calling from Metropolitan Hospital. I don't mean to alarm you, but your wife left her room sometime before dawn this morning. The staff seems to think she may have left the hospital. She was fine the last time they checked her vitals, so I wouldn't be concerned about her health. Please give us a call if she's at home, her release forms were not signed by the doctor. She wasn't scheduled to leave until tomorrow.

"Oh, and don't forget to bring your medical information when you come in. Mrs. Dawes didn't have it with her when she was admitted. The emergency circumstances forced us to admit her without it."

Derrick stared at the answering machine as if it had somehow become possessed. He waited for it to emanate a bright green glow and pulsate. It didn't. Instead, it beeped and that strange woman's voice began her second bizarre message.

"Hello, Mr. Dawes. This is Metropolitan Hospital calling again. If we do not hear from you or your wife before five this evening, we will be forced to bring Social

Services into this situation. Ask for Mrs. Monet when you call or come in."

Talking out loud to himself, Derrick asked the answering machine, "Metropolitan Hospital? Social Services? My wife? What the hell are you talking about?"

The third and final message sounded both angry and impatient. It made absolutely no sense to Derrick. The origin had to lie in someone's idea of a joke was his guess.

"Mr. Dawes, this is Mrs. Monet, calling from Metropolitan Hospital again. I sincerely hope you and your wife don't intend to do what I think you are. If so, there are appropriate forms to be filled out; agencies to be contacted. I implore you to do this the correct way. Otherwise, they will float in limbo for years. This can present you with astronomical legal ramifications, and I'm sure I don't have to speak on the scope of the devastating emotional damages. Please call me before five, 555-9438 extension 512. I hate being a part of these things."

Knowing this had to be a joke, or a clerical mix-up and feeling he should speak up to let this Mrs. Monet off the hook, Derrick dialed the number. He didn't have long to wait for Mrs. Monet's frustrated and breathless voice to come on the line. There was no greeting from the woman. She dove right into pleading the instant Derrick identified himself.

"Mr. Dawes, please don't abandon your babies this way. You will be sorry for the rest of your life. I don't know why your wife walked out of here without them, but this is not the way to resolve anything. If she was uninsured, we have other remedies."

Still undisturbed by this obviously mistaken revelation, Derrick said calmly, "Mrs. Monet, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. I don't have a wife or any babies. There must be another Derrick Dawes."

Hearing paper shuffle, Derrick waited for her response. Seeming uncertain for the first time, Mrs. Monet asked, "Are you the Derrick Dawes who lives at 347 Comly Court?"

Smiling and unperturbed, Derrick said, "Yes, I am. But, I don't have a wife. And before you ask, I don't have a pregnant girlfriend either."

"You have someone, Mr. Dawes. Your name is on the birth certificates of a set of twin girls born early yesterday morning. Their mother's name is listed as Paula Dawes. Her maiden name was Anderson."

Feeling genuine irritation slowly crawl up his abdomen, Derrick snapped, "Look, Miss. I don't know any Paula Dawes or Anderson. I don't have a wife, and I definitely don't have any twins. Girls or boys."

"I think you should at least come down here and take a look at these babies before you go through the entire denial routine, Mr. Dawes."

This time, Derrick did yell, "They're not mine! I don't have to come down and look at them!"

Completely out of patience, Mrs. Monet said sharply, "Okay, Mr. Dawes. If you won't cooperate with me, perhaps the police will have better luck."

"The police?! I've already told you there's been some mistake! They are not my babies!" Derrick screeched in shocked disbelief.

Obviously searching for some form of calm rationale, Mrs. Monet said sternly, "Fine, Mr. Dawes. They're not your babies, but if you're not here by five I will be calling the authorities. It is against the law to abandon newborn babies, and like it or not, all roads lead to you, Mr. Dawes. You will answer to someone regarding these infants."

Straining for composure, Derrick asked, "If I come down there, look at the babies and tell you they're not mine, what then?"

"I won't lie to you. No matter what you do, there will be problems. The babies are too young to establish paternity through DNA. You will have to sign all of the forms to turn them over to an adoption agency or the State. Answer all of the questions. Twenty years from now, these girls will come looking for their parents and they're going to find you, Mr. Dawes. If what you say is true, that young lady has dropped a bomb on you."

"Mrs. Monet, I'm telling you, I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know a soul who would pull a stunt of this caliber. Can't you look in the directory and see if there's another Derrick Dawes to pick on? Or, are you sure there's no way out of this for me?"

Sighing heavily, Mrs. Monet said, "No. If you sign anything, you're acknowledging paternity. If you don't sign anything, you're going to be charged with abandonment until paternity is established. Of course, you can fight the charge. It will take months, perhaps years, to undo and cost a fortune in attorney and court fees. If the tests show they really are

yours, you'll do a little time in jail, pay a hefty fine and all of the medical bills. In the meantime, the babies go into foster care. Not necessarily together."

Cradling his head with his free hand, Derrick moaned, "Jesus."

Sounding sympathetic for the first time, Mrs. Monet said, "Come down, Mr. Dawes. Let's try to handle this with some dignity. Two little lives are dangling in the wind."

Hoping with all of his heart that this was an elaborate prank pulled by his brother, one of his fraternity brothers, or a demented co-worker, Derrick nodded his head slowly and said, "Yeah. Okay. I'll be there in about an hour."

Derrick pressed the release button and dialed his parents' number immediately. It rang a few times before David answered. David knew the moment he heard his younger brother's stunned greeting, something was wrong. His questions began immediately.

"What's up, Dude?"

"I need you and Mom to meet me at Metropolitan, David."

"Why? What's wrong? Are you sick or hurt? You want me to come over there to get you?"

"No. I just want you to bring Mom down to the hospital and meet me in the lobby. Tell her to bring some baby pictures or something."

Astounded by Derrick's strange request, David asked, "Baby pictures? What does she need those for? What about Dad? Do you want me to bring him too?"

"No, David! Just Mom and the pictures."

"Okay. You've got it. We'll be there in about thirty minutes. You sure you don't want to tell me what's going on before we get there?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I don't believe it myself. See you down there."

When Derrick replaced the telephone this time, he told himself, "Stay calm, guy. They will have found their error by the time you get there. They have to. No one would really dump a set of twins on anybody like you. What would she think you would do with them? You don't know dick about babies. You've never taken care of anyone, except yourself. Not even a dog.

"Somebody's going to be waiting for you in that lobby, laughing his ass off. It has to be a joke. They're going to get a real charge out of the fact that you called your mother.

Don't worry about that though, because it won't matter when you put your fist in his jaw anyway."

Still mumbling reassurances to himself, Derrick dressed in tan khakis, a white dress shirt and loafers. He took his time. Looking disheveled would give them the impression he was nervous, possibly guilty of something. He climbed into his red Nissan 300 and drove to the hospital. Carefully.

CHAPTER THREE

The first people Derrick saw as he entered the lobby of Metropolitan Hospital were David and Sonya Dawes. His brother, who many thought was Derrick's twin, sat watching their mother pace back and forth nervously; her long and shapely legs still attracting the admiring stares of much younger men. Sonya Dawes was dressed in the beautiful paisley and navy dress David had given her for her birthday, along with the navy blue leather purse and heels Derrick gave her. Sonya's full head of thick, black hair, with an impressive gray streak artistically caressing her forehead and make-up were done to perfection. She remained a strikingly beautiful woman at the age of fifty-five.

Sonya spotted her six-foot-five inch, two-hundred-and-twenty pound baby boy immediately. She raced to meet him halfway. Her eyes and hands busily examined Derrick's face, neck, arms and chest, as she asked urgently, "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Really."

Not believing him, Sonya continued her own examination while asking impatiently, "What are we doing here then, Derrick?"

Taking his mother's hands into his own to calm her, Derrick directed her over to where David stood. David and Sonya stared at Derrick with raw fear in their eyes. He hated having to tell them that someone was obviously playing a bad joke on him, but he had to. If this wasn't a joke, he needed their support.

Swallowing hard and licking his lips, Derrick said, "Mom, I got a call from this hospital this morning. They

said my wife had left the hospital."

Interrupting immediately, Sonya yelled, "What wife?! If you brought me down here to tell me you married somebody without telling me, Derrick, you brought me to the right place! I'll crack your skull and pay the bill!"

Shaking his head pathetically, Derrick said, "I wish it were something that simple, Mom. This woman who said she was my wife gave birth to a set of twins yesterday."

Impatiently interrupting again, Sonya asked with what sounded like mounting hysteria to Derrick, "What did she do?! Stick you with the bill?! Are you taking up a collection?! What, Derrick?! What?!!!"

Again, a heart-sickened Derrick said, "I wish it were something that simple, Mom. She left the babies, and no matter what I do, I'm stuck with them because my name is on their birth certificates."

David and Sonya looked at each other with identical stunned and confused expressions. Shaking his head in absolute denial, David threw his hands up and said, "So what. She left her babies here. What's that got to do with you?"

"Are you listening to me, David? They think the woman was my wife. They think those are my babies. She put my name on their birth certificates. If I don't take them, they're going to call the police and charge me with abandonment. If I sign them away to be adopted, I'm acknowledging paternity. They're not mine. Can't be."

Sonya's lips were moving, but no sound came out. David said sarcastically, "Let them charge you! We'll fight it in court! Come on! Let's get it over with! We'll post your bail and deal with them later. I can call Roger right now, if you want me to."

Speaking in a conspiratorial tone, Derrick said, "I want to see what's going on first. Maybe they'll see where the error is and we can forget the entire thing."

Finally finding her voice, Sonya whispered, "Are you sure they're not your babies, Derrick?"

"As sure as I can be, Mom. I don't know any Paula. That's the mother's name."

Finding her maternal voice, Sonya chanted, "You know this is happening because you and your idiot brother never listen to me. I've told you both a million times not to take loose women home. The minute they see you've got two dollars to rub together, they pull stunts like this. If you say those aren't your babies, I don't want to go see any stray's litter. Let's get out of here. Call Roger, David."

Adamantly, Derrick said, "Mom, I'm not leaving this hospital until I know exactly what's going on. I would prefer it if you two went up there with me. If you don't want to, I'll go alone."

"You're not going anywhere by yourself! You'll probably be stuck with every baby in the nursery! I'll look at them and tell you if they're your babies or not. If they are, you will not be abandoning them, Derrick. No son of mine will ever do anything like that as long as I have a little sense about me. But, if they're not, the State can just start hunting down their sorry mama."

David asked, "Can't they stay here until DNA tests are done? I don't know if just looking at them will prove anything, Derrick. All new babies look alike. None of them really look like anybody."

Sonya hissed, "Typical male response. You have to look at babies with an abstract eye. They do look like somebody. If it looks like a Dawes, it is a Dawes, David. If not, we'll wait for blood tests. Since Derrick can't say with absolute conviction that these definitely are not his; and that is what he's saying by insisting we go up there and look at them, we will give them a look. If their mama shows up in the meantime, I'll kill her personally."

Taking a deep breath, Derrick said, "Okay, let's go up."

Under her breath, Sonya mumbled, "Sticking my child with two babies he don't know nothing about. I'll strangle that wench when I find her. This is what you get when you

take up with a bunch of sorry women. Sleeping with men they don't know from Adam. No morals. Bet you won't take just any old thing that's offered to you anymore."

After asking the receptionist where they could find Mrs. Monet, the threesome took the elevator to the fourth floor. The moment the impersonal metal doors slid open, Mrs. Monet stepped forward extending her tiny, smooth, walnut colored hand to David and introduced herself.

David smiled at the pretty little woman with the short, tightly curled auburn hair and said, "Hello, Mrs. Monet. I'm David Dawes. This is my mother, Mrs. Sonya Dawes. And, this is my brother, Derrick."

After shaking Sonya's hand, Mrs. Monet smiled sympathetically up at the apparently shocked man she had spoken to on the telephone. Cradling Derrick's large, soft, yet obviously strong hand in hers, she said, "Relax, Mr. Dawes. I don't know exactly what has happened here, but I will help you in every way I can. Of course, I can not break the law."

Speaking barely above a whisper, Derrick said, "I wouldn't want you to do that, Mrs. Monet. And, I appreciate your help already, for some reason. I take it their mother hasn't returned."

Pursing her lips and shaking her head slowly, Mrs. Monet said solemnly, "No, she hasn't." Still holding onto Derrick's hand, she asked, "Would you like to talk about it, or see the babies first?"

Sonya answered for Derrick, "We would like to see the babies first. We need to get an idea of what we're talking about. These aren't sick babies, are they?"

"No, Ma'am. They're perfect."

"Better be. Derrick's not taking on the responsibility of any sick babies. I don't care who they belong to."

"Okay. If you'll walk down to room 410, I'll have the nurse bring them in so you can get a good look at them."

Sonya nodded and said, "Thank you."

Leading the way for her two towering, handsome sons, Sonya reached the room first. She put her purse down on the

dresser, sat down on the edge of the bed and crossed her arms. No conversation was necessary until they saw the babies.

A few minutes later a nurse pushing one Plexiglas bassinet and pulling the other entered the room. Derrick noticed the names on them first. "Baby Girl Dawes No. 1" and "Baby Girl Dawes No. 2" were prominently displayed. The babies were wrapped so tightly with tiny pink skull caps pulled down over their heads that it was impossible to see them.

Without invitation, Sonya stepped right up and lifted Baby Girl Dawes No. 1 from her bassinet and laid her on the bed. Not liking the disturbance, the tiny face grimaced and fist clenched. Sonya opened the blanket and stared. The little agitated creature let out a cry when the cool air struck her body. Derrick and David tried to see from where they stood. Neither made a move in the baby's direction.

After examining the feet and hands of the baby, Sonya pulled her hat from her head. Big black, glossy ringlets circled the tiny pale face. She really let out a cry when the air penetrated her hair.

Sonya sighed, picked the baby up, sat on the side of the bed and said softly, "Okay, open your eyes. I want to see them."

The baby clutched at the air, flailed her arms and wailed with her eyes shut tight in response. As if a signal had gone up, the other baby joined her sister. However, the two crying baby girls had not distracted Sonya from her mission at all. But Derrick said nervously, "You're frightening them, Mom."

"No, I'm not, Derrick. She doesn't like the air. That's all. I want to see her eyes opened."

David asked timidly, "What do you think, Mom? Is she Derrick's?"

Stifling a hitch in her throat, Sonya said, "I won't pass judgment until I see her eyes. Give me those baby pictures out of my purse, David."

David moved toward his mother's purse. Derrick stared at the baby in his mother's arms. From where he stood, she looked like every other baby he had ever seen. There was

only one thing that made him uncomfortable. The baby's hairline was exactly like his. A tiny, yet pronounced widow's peak shadowed the forehead.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Derrick turned his back on his mother and the baby. He wondered, "How did I get into this mess? Who could I have slipped up with? I haven't had unprotected sex since I was a teenager. Nine months ago, I wouldn't have touched Mother Theresa without a condom. There's too much crap flying around for me. So, where did that baby come from? Who's her mother? Why didn't she tell me she was pregnant? What am I talking about? This is a mistake. Those are not my babies."

After a brief pause Derrick answered one of his own questions. "She knew I wouldn't have believed her. I'm looking at these babies and I don't believe it. What am I supposed to do now? I can't take care of two babies. I can't.

"What am I talking about here? Those are not my babies. Lots of people have widow's peaks. Hell, it could fall off in a week or two. Babies change every other day, don't they? I'll just sign whatever I have to. Maybe they'll get decent adoptive parents and never know today ever happened. If they look for me twenty years from now, I'll just explain it as best as I can."

Derrick's chin dropped to his chest when he thought, "If they're mine and I've already signed them away, I'll have to fight to get them back. If I lose, they'll grow up never knowing me, or my family. Probably hate my guts. What if they're the only children I ever have?

"I can't process this shit at all. I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't. I'm just going to have to hold onto One and Two until I know for sure they're not mine, or I find their mother."

David gave his mother the three tiny silver framed pictures she requested and moved toward the other crying baby. She seemed to be struggling inside the tightly bound blanket. Wanting to relieve her distress, David reached in and picked her up. The moment she rested in the fold of his warm, thickly

muscled arm, her crying stopped. Then, something happened that made David gasp and hum in alarm—she opened her eyes.

Sonya asked, "What's the matter with you, boy?"

Stuttering, David said, "Mom. Mom. Mom. Look at her eyes. Look at them. Derrick, I think you have a problem."

Making his first tenuous step in their direction, Derrick asked in an unfamiliar paranoid pitch, "What? She does have two eyes, doesn't she, David?"

"You bet, she does . . . and both of them look exactly like yours."

David never acknowledged his likeness to his younger brother. As a matter of fact, they fought long, hard battles over the many comparisons all of their lives. Those were not just Derrick's big, bright, oval eyes with the slightest of exotic tilts he saw in the tiny face—they were his own. David knew those deep aquamarine eyes would turn to a soft caramel brown, like Derrick's, in no time at all.

Sonya said, "Bring her here, David. Let me see."

David walked over to his mother and lowered his ward for her inspection. If he hadn't known better, he would have said the baby looked as if she were inspecting Sonya, too. Getting his first good look at the baby his mother held, David said, "Hey, they're just alike. I mean really just alike."

Smiling at the staring baby girl in David's arms, Sonya said, "David. Sweetheart. They're twins. Obviously identical. And, those are your father's eyes. Take her hat off. I want to see if she's got my mother's peak, too."

Welded to the spot he stood in, Derrick's mind screamed, "Oh God, they are mine! What am I going to do now?!"

Sonya and David's banter wafted through Derrick's mind like a dream. He couldn't discern who was saying what anymore. Someone said, "They've got that double knot on their big toes like Derrick, too. Those are definitely his lips. I can't place that tiny nose though. Must be their mother's. It's cute."

Someone else said, "That must be their mother's hair, too. It's black like Derrick's but it's way too straight. Whoever their

mother is, she must be awfully pretty. These babies are definitely the offspring of a pretty woman."

Sonya's distinct voice finally penetrated Derrick's fog, when she yelled, "Derrick! Derrick! Get over here and look at these babies! See if you can tell who their mother is. They look enough like you for me, but she's got some pretty strong genes showing through here, too."

Whining, Derrick said, "Mom, those can't be my babies. I haven't had unprotected sex with anyone in years. The similarities are probably coincidental. A week from now they'll be looking like Flava Flav."

Sonya asked seriously, "Who's that?"

Stifling a laugh, David said, "Ignore him, Mom. The Flav couldn't make babies like these in this life, or any of his next ten."

Mrs. Monet stood in the doorway, watching the Dawes family pour over the babies. She approved of the bonding of the grandmother and brother. However, she was concerned for the tall, elegantly handsome father. He looked as if he were going to fall over any minute now. Mrs. Monet could not control the smile on her face when she remembered her own husband possessing that same look of sickly stunned unease during the birth of their first child.

Observing Derrick's reaction to all of this, it was easy to see that he really did not know a thing about these babies. That was when Mrs. Monet decided she really would do anything she could to make the transition as easy for Derrick as possible. Inheriting a set of twins would be more than the average woman could handle. She didn't want to imagine how overwhelming it was for a single man. The babies could completely destroy any plans he may have for his future. God knows they would test the mettle of any woman he had any romantic designs on.

Mrs. Monet spoke to the gathering. She outlined all of the options open to Derrick. She made it abundantly clear that even after years of legal hassles the original birth certificates would still bear his name and the trail would

always lead back to Derrick; and who their mother was meant absolutely nothing to the authorities, so they would not look for her. That would have to be done by Derrick.

Mrs. Monet's closing offer, specifically designed for Derrick's peace of mind was, "You hold onto the babies for three months, we'll do the DNA tests, get the results and move from there. I will not file anything with your name on it until we're sure. That way, you'll have a chance to consult a lawyer and take any appropriate measures available to you for your protection. I do, however, suggest you make payments to the hospital on the bill. If not, the entire thing will be brought to the attention of the administrator. That's the day it will be taken out of my hands."

Derrick responded in solemn defeat, "Okay. I don't have any idea what I'll do with them for three months, Mrs. Monet, but I'll take them. If they're not mine, I'll have to put them up for adoption. I can't keep them. I won't."

Sonya chimed in, "What are you talking about, Derrick? These are definitely your children. You think I don't know my own when I see them. Come over here and look at these baby pictures next to this baby. You can't miss the resemblances."

Derrick screamed at his mother, "You may recognize them, Mom, but I don't! Those babies could, and probably do, belong to anyone! They don't have to be mine! They could be David's!"

David laughed hysterically and said, "You're tripping now, partner. My name's not in this mix. Yours is. And if you don't lower your voice and watch your mouth, the first thing your daughters are going to see is Uncle David turning out Daddy's lights."

