

*“Oh husband, dear husband,
great love of my life;
as you’re roaming the streets,
do you think of your wife?”*

*“Hell no, dumb lady,
not you, or the kids;
girls in tight skirts,
are taking my bids.”*

CHAPTER ONE

Our theme song played in my head as I lie in bed alone another night. Terrence had a late meeting and dinner at the bank. He probably decided to get a room at a hotel in town. If questioned, he would say, “Sasha, I’m just too tired to drive all of the way home now. I’ll get there early enough in the morning to change and have breakfast with the children.”

Around eleven o’clock I would receive the obligatory matrimonial telephone call. There would be no I love you or I miss you. Obviously, an apology embodied dark, mystical powers; and a genuine one was capable of making our children orphans in a matter of minutes. I can see it clearly; Terrence choking, spitting and writhing to death on his expensive hotel room floor, as soon as it cleared his lips. Me, still holding the telephone, suffering a massive coronary and

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collapsing here in my lovely bedroom the moment it registered in my mind.

How could two people who loved each other as much as we had wind up in this stagnant, loveless farce? How could we still call it a marriage with a straight face? Though difficult to accept, I knew the real answer to those questions. One of us was crazy as hell and the other, plain old stupid. Switching those two roles represented all of the interaction between Terrence and I; intimate, or otherwise.

Our marriage had become a necessary convenience for Mr. Terrence Bain, Vice President of Quaker National Bank. After all, he was the first Black to achieve such a position with that bank. His perfect image must remain pristinely impeccable. So what if it was mortgaged with the souls of our entire family.

As Mrs. Terrence Bain, I must maintain the illusion of the blissfully happy wife and mother. Well, I guess I ain't Houdini, because I can not do it. The pay is good, but the benefits really suck.

At this stage in the game, I would rather be the floozy he is taking to the hotel. She is the one who is having all of the laughs now. I needed to give this situation some serious thought and change the lyrics to the song.

The ringing telephone always made me look at the clock. It was eleven-fifteen. When I answered there was no need for a hello. I simply said, "You're late."

"Don't start, Sasha. Or, I'll stop calling too," Terry responded as emotionlessly as I had.

"Oh really, Terry? What will I tell those grand white folks you work for when they call then? Try the Latham Hotel?"

Just as I thought, there was no response. His great banking mind could not and would not deal with reality based questions. After a long pause, the great one says, "I'll be in around seven o'clock. Put out my navy suit and shoes, white shirt and choose a tie I haven't worn in a while." Without another word, he hung up.

I stared blankly into the silent telephone and said sarcastically, "Of course, Sweetheart; anything for you. Oh, by the way, the children are fine."

Like clockwork signaled by the nightly telephone call, I heard the patter of feet in the hallway. My bedroom door crept open slowly. Tiara, my eight-year-old daughter, stuck her head inside and asked with concern, "Are you okay, Mom?"

Before I could answer, there were two more sets of feet in the hallway; her five-year-old twin brothers, Terrell and Taurus. Without fanfare they pushed Tiara into the room and all three of them raced for the bed to get the best space. When the position power struggle ended, a chorus of, "Are you okay, Mom," went up again.

"I'm fine, guys. Everybody comfortable?"

Everyone nodded, "Uh huh. Good night, Mom."

"Good night."

My poor babies thought nothing of their missing father. His not being there only meant they could sleep in the big bed with Mom. All three of them snuggled down in the king-sized bed and fell asleep.

I looked at their sleeping forms and realized they were my only reason for existing right now. There was no me. Sasha Bain lived as Terrence Bain's wife and Tiara, Terrell and Taurus's mother. I had absolutely no identity of my own. No career or dream outside of these walls. I laid back, closed my eyes and let the tears fall until I fell asleep.

The alarm clock went off as usual at six o'clock. The kids mumbled and stirred, but I was the only one to get up. Sliding my arms into my burgundy satin and lace robe, I groggily propelled myself downstairs to make a pot of coffee.

I was sitting at the kitchen counter having a cup of coffee when his majesty parked his gleaming, Kelly green, BMW in the garage. I automatically looked up at the clock. Terry was thirty minutes early. Miss Thang must not have been so good last night.

I wondered if he really thought no one ever saw him come in at this time of morning four out of seven days a week. Who was he fooling by closing the garage door? Who was supposed to believe the car had been there all night? Who even cared?

Of course our neighbors were not directly in front of us, but he passed their houses to get home. The paper boy surely saw him regularly. Someone else was bound to be sitting in their kitchen having a cup of coffee, just as I was doing now.

My mother had said something the other night that came back to me. "It's a sad day when you see a man with as much on the ball as Terrence Bain stupid to the bone. And, I don't have to tell you which bone I'm talking about either." I sat at the counter and laughed out loud.

When Terry came in, that's how he found me, laughing hysterically. With no more than a momentary quizzical expression, he asked stiffly, "Are my clothes ready, Sasha?"

Still laughing, I said, "No, Terrence. They are not."

"Well, have them ready when I get out of the shower," he said shortly.

Being fed up with Terrence was a given for me. Ignoring conceited requests while numbly filling them was my claim to fame. I had passed all of the stages of anger a long time ago. Or, at least I thought so. This morning Terrence stirred a fresh batch. How much I despised him paraded boldly through my mind. Not only was Terrence Bain not having his way today, I was ready, willing and able to take this conversation and its ensuing consequences anywhere.

"Tell that bitch you laid up with last night to come over and get your clothes ready, Terrence," I shot back.

I could tell by the stunned expression on his face this was not the response he expected. Normally I sigh and say in a defeated tone of voice, "Okay, Terry." I just did not feel like saying that this morning.

"What did you say, Sasha?" Terrence asked very slowly, as if he were trying to be intimidating.

“You heard me, Terrence. Tell that bitch you laid up with last night to come over and get your clothes ready,” I said just as slowly.

With a distinct elevation of pitch and volume, he said, “I’m telling the well-dressed bitch living in the big house I pay for to get my clothes ready.”

I laughed. I don’t know why. I just did it. As soon as I managed to speak, still grinning, I said, “Well, the bitch in the big house says, ‘Fuck you, Buddy.’”

I guess both of his bitches failed to perform their assigned tasks properly today. Terry’s carefully cultivated, cool demeanor appeared to be a little wilted this morning. That actually looked like perspiration trembling on the tip of his golden aristocratic nose. He took one threatening step toward me. Calmly, I rose from the stool and stood in front of the sink.

Through clenched teeth, he hissed, “Sasha, I am not in the mood for your shit this morning. Get my clothes and make my breakfast before I do something we’ll both be sorry for.”

Terry’s sophisticated anger tickled me. Wrong as two left shoes and vehemently making demands. I laughed at him.

Terrence started toward me with his fists clenched at his sides. My hand slid into the silverware drawer and came back with a big, gleaming razor sharp, butcher’s knife. I raised the knife over my head in response and Terrence’s fist stopped in mid-air.

I spat at him with all of the venom a tortured woman possesses, “Go ahead, Terrence! Make me kill your sorry yellow ass early this morning! Give me one good reason.”

Terrence closed his eyes and dropped his head. I think he was counting. Slowly, he backed up, headed upstairs and started mumbling, “Damn women make me sick. Give the bitches the world and they won’t even put your damn clothes out for you. I’m not in the mood for this shit today.”

“I don’t give a damn about your mood! The mood you’re in the day you hit me, Terrence Bain; will be your last damn mood!”

Hearing the children's footsteps in the upstairs hallway, I quieted down. When they appeared in the kitchen doorway the knife was back in the drawer. Brilliant sunshine poured into the room on a serene Mom pouring juice.

Clinging to me, Tiara asked teary-eyed, "What's the matter, Mom? Did he hit you? Is Daddy leaving for good?"

"It's okay, Baby. Daddy's in a bad mood. There's no hitting allowed around here. You know that, Tiara. Take your brothers back upstairs. Brush your teeth and wash your faces while I make breakfast."

Tiara pulled away reluctantly, gathered her still whimpering brothers and left the kitchen. I sighed with relief once they were all gone. My mind raced as I prepared breakfast for my family.

Terrence was going to make me do something I did not want to do before this was all over. We had to find an amicable solution for the problems we were having or dissolve the marriage, for the children's sake. If we continued on this path, someone was definitely going to get hurt. I could not risk it being me or my kids.

No one would have ever guessed what transpired here earlier this morning by the breakfast scene played out a mere half hour later. My smiling husband found his own blue suit, shoes, white shirt and tie; and was stationed appropriately at the head of the kitchen table.

Terrence answered the enthusiastic questions of two shining-faced little boys who fought for his attention. They were identical twins who looked exactly like their father. My family called them triplets.

My daughter was a honey-complexioned, hazel-eyed, black-haired beauty. She was not happy at all. There were no questions for Daddy from her. Knowing Tiara was old enough to know exactly what was going on disturbed me.

Tiara ate her breakfast in silence. She had stopped smiling in her father's presence almost two years ago when the new routine began. The selfish bastard never noticed.

I went outside to retrieve the newspaper and handed it to Terrence who had the nerve to kiss my cheek on his way out. The man was crazy if he thought the neighbors saw that bullshit kiss and missed his car coming in at six-thirty. Rolling my eyes, I dismissed him, as usual. My attention went to making sure the children had their sweaters and jackets on, lunch boxes and book-bags. It was still cool out.

We waited in the doorway for the school bus. When it pulled up, the boys almost ripped my robe off trying to kiss me good-bye. Tiara gave me a kiss with a little less enthusiasm. She took two steps up the walkway, turned around and said, "Mom, Daddy's got to go."

Before I could say a word, she ran to the bus. My mother always said, "Out of the mouths of babes come truth."

I knew I had to be the one to draw up a list of alternatives or put the divorce proposal on the table first. Terrence did not have a problem with the way things were going. After all, he had his cake just the way he liked, was eating it and not gaining weight.

CHAPTER TWO

With the children safely on the school bus I returned to the kitchen and flopped down in a chair at the table. Placing my elbows on the table, I rested my forehead on the palms of my hands. All I could think of was, “What a way to start a day?”

A voice inside my head said, “Chin up, Girlie. It could always be worse.”

My own voice said, “If it gets worse, Terrence will pay with a lot more than his precious money. A big chunk of his ass ought to settle it nicely. I’m close to the edge already and I’m not Nancy Blackmon.”

Shaking my head from side-to-side, I never looked up until Maggie, the housekeeper, spoke to me. “Good morning, Miss Sasha. What’s on your mind so thick you can’t hear people at the door?”

Only lifting my chin to my palms, I asked, “Who was at the door besides you, Maggie? You have your key, don’t you?”

Maggie put her bags down, poured herself a cup of coffee and joined me at the table. She took her time responding, which was Maggie’s way. She said, “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you who was at the door since you’re obviously in a *‘I don’t care’* state of mind.”

Throwing my head back, I moaned, “Maggie, please. I’ve already gone around with that jackass I’m married to this

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morning. I don't want to fight anymore. Who else was at the door?"

She sipped her coffee and said matter-of-factly, "It was a delivery man. Looks like flowers, but don't go by me. I'm just the help around here."

"Maggie, who would send flowers here? Definitely not the slut I'm married to," I said, rolling my eyes up into my head.

"Well, maybe you should go see. The slut might be applying for a promotion," Maggie said smartly.

Sniffing, I got up and headed for the dining room. I couldn't resist throwing one last comment in Maggie's direction on my way out, "I doubt it."

The package on the table was obviously flowers, but who had sent them? I carefully removed the soft lavender wrapping paper in case it had been delivered in error. Inside was the most exquisite arrangement of lavender orchids in a fine, clear crystal vase. I could not say for sure if I had ever seen orchids in that color before. My fingers fumbled with the card while my eyes continued to admire the magnificent arrangement.

The card said, '*Rare beauty for a rare beauty that all can not appreciate.*' There was no name. I looked at the envelope again. Maybe the delivery man had delivered it to the wrong house. The envelope definitely said, '*Sasha Bain.*' With or without a signature, this beautiful gesture touched me. It forced the first real smile to appear on my face in a long time.

I called out, "Maggie, come look at them."

Coming quickly, Maggie stood next to me, whistled loudly and said, "Wow! If those don't warm your heart, you're dead, Baby."

Smiling, I said, "Oh, they've warmed it, Maggie. They are magnificent. I wonder where they shipped them in from. You can't grow flowers like this locally."

"Well, who sent them, Sasha? You finally giving that slut a dose of his own medicine?"

“No, Maggie. I really don’t know who sent them.”

I let her read the card. Maggie smiled broadly and said, “Say you don’t know this fella, Miss Sasha? Well, I vote for finding him and gettin’ to know him. I like his style and his choice of flowers.”

“Well, whoever he is, he won’t drag me into playing the game my husband’s playing. My children would be in a world of trouble with two whorish parents.”

Maggie responded slowly, as if she were giving her next statement a great deal of thought. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. One whorish parent should be the limit. Let’s dump Master Bain first.” She paused, smiled wickedly and said, “Then, we can find the Lavender Orchid Man.”

We laughed like two bad little girls. Maggie always tickled me when she spoke as if she were an extension of me. Maybe she was justified in feeling that way. For the past two years, she had been picking me up off of the floor and gluing me back together four out of seven mornings a week. Maggie became my second mother during the eleven years of keeping house for us. The fact that she had been with Terrence all of his life did not sway Maggie’s allegiance to me and the children one iota.

When I felt low, Maggie dragged me around the house with her. She would prop me up in a chair in whichever room she worked in and talked or listened. If the children had to go somewhere, Maggie propped me up in the car and drove them. I can honestly say, if it were not for Maggie constantly propping me up, Terrence would be walking on my lifeless body today.

My thoughts strayed back to the flowers. Someone thought I, Sasha Bain, was a rare beauty. Whoever he, and I am presuming it is a he, is my champion today. I felt special. My fight with Terry became a black shadow in the back of my mind. Maggie would not have to prop me up today.

I decided to do something for myself; something beautiful, exotic and mysterious that felt good, a new hairdo, a facial, a manicure and a pedicure. Maybe I would even find

some other outrageous triviality to spend Terrence's precious money on.

As I carefully carried my fabulous prize up to my bedroom, I yelled back to Maggie in the kitchen, "Maggie, I'm going to the beauty parlor. Be ready to go out for lunch at noon. We're dining someplace expensive and irritating on Terrence's tab today."

Maggie screamed with laughter. When she came up for air, she yelled back, "I hear ya talkin', Miss Sasha."

Placing my flowers on the nightstand, I noticed the clock said nine o'clock. A quick call guaranteed me an appointment at the beauty parlor at ten o'clock. It's unbelievable what a difference a half hour and beautiful flowers from a secret admirer could make to a potentially demented woman.

Earlier, I decided, I didn't want to go to the beauty parlor today. Who cared what I looked like anyway? Terrence had not seriously looked at me for longer than I cared to think about. The only difference between me and Maggie, in his eyes was I had access to most of his accounts. Talking to myself out loud, I said, "Well, Terrence, this housekeeper is going to show off today with your money."

I rushed in and out of the shower; got dressed in a pair of olive linen slacks and a pale olive long silk blouse that buttoned up the front. After a brief search, I found matching olive soft leather slippers in the great wall of shoes in my huge walk-in closet. I brushed my hair straight down. Thick, black waves rested heavily on my shoulders and spilled down my back.

As I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I remembered how Terrence used to love my hair out this way. He would stroke it for hours on end a few years ago. Today, the hair and the head it was attached to were the Tampax of Terry's life; horribly uncomfortable but undeniably necessary.

I shook those thoughts out of my head. Terrence had thrown the old Sasha away and so would I. She was not serving the purpose for anyone anymore. I certainly hoped the

person who had sent those flowers would still find me a rare beauty after I did what I planned to do.

Standing up, I looked at myself in the full-length mirror for a long time. After giving birth to three children, I still had a reasonably good figure. Maybe I could stand to lose a few pounds, but in the scheme of things, that was minor. The honey brown, five-foot-six-inch woman who looked back was amazingly attractive to be so unappreciated. She deserved much better than she was receiving.

On my way out, I yelled, "Maggie, don't forget. I'll be back for you at noon."

"Okay. I hear ya, Sweetie." Her response came from the den.

Getting into my steel grey Volvo, I drove to the beauty salon in West Chester. Gloria, an old high school classmate of mine owned it. I did not get my hair done often, but whenever I did I patronized my friend. I felt safe in her hands and I could talk about my problems with someone who knew everyone I referred to personally.

Gloria greeted me in the as of yet empty salon with a cheerful, "Hi, girl. What's new with you?"

"Not nearly as much as there will be. I don't have a lot of time and I want the works today. Gloria, you're not getting paid if I look anything like myself when I leave here today," I said seriously.

She looked at me curiously and asked, "Well, Miss Sasha, exactly who would you like to look like when you leave here?"

"Gloria, look at me and tell me what you see."

Gloria took her time surveying me before she said, "I see a pretty, classy, well-dressed sister with hair to die for. Why?"

"I want you to change me into a sophisticated, mysterious, glamorous, well-dressed sister with hair to die for."

Gloria, using her sister-wit, asked, "Are we preparing for battle or what? If we're just trying to get our husband's attention, it's an entirely different game, you know?"

Sucking my teeth, I said, "To hell with his attention. This is war, honey . . . the big one. So, arm me to the teeth."

"Girl, you ain't said nothing but a word. Just call me Glenda, the good witch from the east and watch me work."

Gloria placed the protective plastic cape around my shoulders. She picked up the telephone and dialed Nadia's Boutique. Cradling the telephone in her neck as she worked, Gloria spoke to Nadia in the same language she used with me.

"Hi, Nadia. Listen up. This is war. Expensive, sophisticated, mysterious and glamorous in a size eight." She paused and tapped my shoulder, "Sasha, what's your shoe size?"

"Eight and a half."

"Eight and a half on the feet, Nadia. She'll be here for a little more than two hours. Be here before then."

Before becoming totally absorbed in the job at hand, Gloria patted my shoulders and asked, "Sasha, this is serious business we're talking about, right? When I'm done you're not going to throw a rich bitch tizzy on me, are you?"

"Absolutely not. I need a change in the worse way. As long as you don't put spikes in my hair, or die it green, there will be no problem. I promise."

CHAPTER THREE

I almost killed myself twice during the drive home from the beauty salon. Gloria and Nadia had transformed me into someone I could not believe existed. They had done exactly what I asked them to do. They had actually created a glamorous, mysterious and sophisticated creature. I could not say I was comfortable with the new me yet, but I found myself completely fascinated.

It was a little after one o'clock when I opened the front door. Maggie's voice came from the kitchen, "Is that you, Sasha? You're late. Where are we going?"

"How about the Point," I asked.

Suspiciously, Maggie asked, "The Briar Point Country Club? Where your husband plays tennis and golf? Are you crazy, Miss Sasha? They don't even like him being there and he's as White as Black people come."

"Yeah. Well, we're going to introduce them to some real Black people today. Come on. I've already made reservations for one o'clock and we're late."

In shock about going to the country club for lunch, Maggie refused to move. She was mumbling softly to herself when I walked into the kitchen. Suddenly, she looked up at me and screamed, "Look at you! Oh my God! Look at you, Sasha! That is you, ain't it? Sweet Jesus, you're husband is gonna give birth to a litter of kittens when he sees you. To hell with lunch, can I stay to see Terrence's face when he comes home for dinner?"

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I giggled nervously and asked, "Maggie, be honest. Do you like it?"

She said breathlessly, "Baby, you look gorgeous. What page are you on in the fashion magazine? Turn around, girl, and strut your stuff."

I modeled for her. Nadia had chosen all white for me; a white linen suit with an abbreviated, tailored jacket. The two large, white flowered buttons beneath my breasts accented my small waist and flaring hips. I wore a white silk teddy with a lace front underneath. The skirt was straight, tight and short. My stockings were sheer and white. The white leather, two-inch heels had a small white rose clip on them and the earrings, large clip on white flowers. My white spring hat was a low, flat circle with a satin band; the brim, large, straight and flat. To complete my outfit, they made me wear large white sunglasses. They insisted the only other appropriate color would be pink. Gloria had applied my lipstick in two shades of pink and my nail polish matched the light shade.

Maggie said, "Baby, you definitely look different and glamorous. Take off that hat and glasses so I can see your eyes and hair."

I did this slowly because it would reveal what I felt was the most dramatic difference. I removed the sunglasses first. Maggie "oohed" and "aahed" over my makeup. Then, I removed my hat. Maggie dropped down onto the chair. Thank God it was there. "Where's your hair, Sasha? Baby, where's your hair?"

I became nervous for the first time. Near tears, I asked, "Maggie, what's the matter? Don't you like it?"

"Yes, I guess I do. But you cut off all of that beautiful hair, Sweetheart." Maggie said and looked as if she were going to cry. Her head shook from side-to-side in unconscious denial.

I started scrambling for something to say to make Maggie feel better about it. "It'll grow back, Maggie. I just wanted something different for a little while. With the summer coming, who needs a head full of heavy hair?" I said

quickly with more enthusiasm than I truly felt, “It’s not that bad, is it?”

Gloria had cut my hair as short as it could get without using a razor. She made points on the sides, tapered and rounded the back into a fancy ‘V’ shape that ended in the nape of my neck. There was very little curl in my hair at this length. All I had to do was wash and blow-dry it. It could not be mussed and I could brush it in any direction I wanted.

Maggie continued shaking her head. At least the shaking had slowed down a little. This meant Maggie was finally coming to grips with the situation.

“Sasha, your hair looks beautiful. It just makes me sad to think of all of the women who go out to get hair sewed and glued on. You had more than your share and you cut it all off. I’m just confused, that’s all. Let’s go to lunch.”

Smiling broadly, I put my hat and sunglasses back on. Maggie kept stealing glances at me as we drove over to the Briar Point Country Club. It was less than a mile from our home in Chaddsford.

Terrence’s grandfather had been a founding member of the Briar Point Country Club and he had sat on the Board of Directors until the day he died. His unbending insistence that Terrence be granted membership guaranteed Terrence’s acceptance. Terrence and Carlton Jamison were the only Black members. I don’t know how Carlton got in. He was probably recruited to keep Terrence from being so conspicuous.

As the maitre d’ led us to our table, it was difficult to tell which one of us attracted the most attention. They stopped gawking at me a long time ago. The regulars had never seen Maggie before, so I imagined they were staring at her.

Maggie’s navy blue, belted shirtwaist dress and heels, while not of country club quality, became her. The navy blue purse she carried was lovely. I had given it to her for Christmas. She looked absolutely fine to me. She had even put on a little lipstick in the car. I loved the way Maggie held her head high and completely ignored their stares.

Several of the old cronies came over and complimented my new look. I knew it was the short skirt that had really caught their attention. The only thing irritating me about them coming over was the way they spoke to Maggie without actually looking at her.

Marsha Dalton, the wife of the president of Terrence's bank, stopped at our table. Marsha only bothered pretending with me because Terrence posed a genuine threat to her husband's position. Smiling as if she were in pain, she raved about how lovely I looked.

"Sasha darling, you look fabulous. Your hair is magnificent. I wish I could do something like that with my own, but it's much too thin. And, God knows I couldn't face myself in a tailored suit."

Marsha turned reluctantly toward Maggie and said distastefully, "Hello. It's Maggie, isn't it?"

Maggie's eyebrows shot up at the use of 'it' so many times in reference to herself. I intervened before she had a chance to think about it and formulate a response. Eating lunch at a ridiculous price was still my only goal. Watching Maggie slap Marsha down in the floor, though tempting, was not.

"Yes, this is Maggie, Marsha. I'm sure you remember her."

"Yes, I do. Oh well, I'm going to the flower show at the Convention Center this afternoon. I hear they've outdone themselves this year. Have you been yet, Sasha? I know how much you adore flowers," Marsha said rigidly.

"No, Marsha, I haven't. I'm planning to take the children this weekend though."

"Oh, that's lovely, Dear. Perhaps they'll cultivate a taste for horticulture too."

"Perhaps."

"Well, I have to be going, Dear. Please give Terrence my regards."

"You do likewise with Oscar for me. Good-bye, Marsha."

She disappeared soundlessly. As soon as Marsha was out of sight, Maggie said, “Baby, I don’t like that woman. She’s so stiff that if gravity shifts even a little, she’ll snap in half.”

Laughing, I said, “I know, Maggie.”

Marsha had to deal with us because she could not get rid of us. Terrence’s grandfather had also founded the bank. My husband could only be labeled lowlife in his personal life. When it came to banking, he was one of the best. If Terrence left the bank with his healthy trusts, her husband would have a tough time explaining to the other board members; especially, Terrence’s father and two uncles. Terrence may be illegitimately connected, but he was well connected, loved and respected.

Maggie and I enjoyed the rest of our lunch. Of course, we endured constant scrutiny from the other patrons, but for the most part, we were uninterrupted. Maggie made jokes about the menu not having prices, the fancy names they gave to the simplest dishes and the flair they served with. However, the ornate and colorless dining room actually impressed her.

I said, “Maggie, you know this place is ridiculous. There’s not one real color in the entire place. Whoever decorated reached for aesthetic and only got antiseptic. The silverware’s even too heavy.”

“Oh, it’s all right, Sasha. They could shoot a nice Dracula movie in here, or something. The silverware’s heavy for a reason, too.”

Laughing a little, I asked, “What’s that?”

“After the help hauls it around all day, they’re too tired to steal it.”

I loved it. Maggie ignored the stares and forged her own place in the lunchtime crowd. Maggie could not be easily intimidated by these people. Having worked for rich families for more than thirty-five years, their haughty mannerisms were wasted on her.

With lunch done, Maggie and I headed out to the parking lot. We almost walked right past Carlton Jamison.

He stared, but I don't think he recognized me. I know he recognized Maggie, but he could not imagine what she would be doing here. The man was caught on a hook of confusion. I let him off by speaking first. "Hello, Carlton."

His mouth dropped open in complete astonishment. He asked slowly, "Sasha, is that you?"

Grinning like a schoolgirl, I said, "Yes, it's me, Carlton. Don't be ridiculous. Do you like it?"

I spun around in the parking lot so he could see all of me. When I stopped, Carlton was nearly speechless. The man stumbled for words. "You look stunning, Sasha, but why?"

"Thank you, Carlton. I just felt like I needed a change. You do approve, don't you? I know it's a little drastic, but it's not too much, is it?"

His handsome face broke into a broad smile and he said, "I most certainly do approve. And, no Sasha, it's not too much. Terrence is a very lucky man."

"Thank you again, Mr. Jamison."

"Oh, by the way, you haven't forgotten about the game Friday night, have you?"

"What game?"

"Terrence and I are taking the boys to see the Sixers."

"Oh well, how could I forget that? Taurus and Terrell only talk about it every time they open their mouths. They'll be ready."

"Good. I hate running off on you lovely ladies, but I'm supposed to meet someone here in exactly two minutes."

"That's okay, Carlton. We have to get home anyway."

Carlton's son, David, was an only child who loved doing things with the twins. They were the closest things to siblings he had ever known. I knew he had probably bugged Carlton as much as the boys had bugged me about the game.

Before Carlton left us, he gave Maggie a big hug, a kiss on the forehead and told her, "You're looking awfully pretty today too, Miss Maggie."

She grinned from ear-to-ear and said, "I like that boy. He's well-mannered, pleasant and damned good looking."

I could not disagree.

It was after three o'clock when we got back home. The kids would be running in any minute. I wanted to surprise them all at once, so I went directly upstairs to wait. The boys always beat their sister to the door. Maggie let them in. She called them parrots because whatever one said the other repeated.

Terrell, as usual, spoke first, "Hi, Maggie. Where's Mom?"

She waited for Taurus to say the same thing, so she would only have to answer once.

Almost immediately, Taurus said, "Hi, Maggie. Where's Mom?"

"She's upstairs. She'll be down in a minute. Is anybody hungry?"

They both nodded their identical heads, "Yes."

Terrell asked timidly, "Can we have some cookies before Mom comes down, please, Maggie?"

Taurus elbowed his twin and said, "May we have some cookies before Mom comes down, please, Maggie?"

Terrell twisted his face at him.

Maggie whispered, "Only if you eat them real fast and don't tell anybody I gave them to you."

In a unison conspiratorial tone, they said, "Okay, Maggie."

She gave them three shortbread cookies each in a napkin.

Tiara came into the kitchen and asked loudly, "Who gave you two cookies?"

The twins spit crumbs everywhere saying, "Nobody."

Maggie spoke to Tiara first, "Hello, Miss Tiara. Did you sleep with me last night?"

Tiara knew immediately she had made a big mistake. She walked over to Maggie and gave her a hug.

"No, Ma'am. I didn't sleep with you last night, but I love you anyway," Tiara said apologetically.

Maggie wrapped her arms around Tiara, kissed the top of her head and asked, "Are you hungry, you little sweet talker?"

"Not really, Maggie. I'll just eat a piece of fruit, like Mom told us to." Glaring at the twins, Tiara took a pear from the fruit basket that was always filled on the counter. Everyone seemed to be enjoying their snacks when I walked into the kitchen. One by one they stopped and stared.

Terrell asked with some alarm in his voice, "Who's that, Maggie?"

Taurus repeated quickly, "Yeah. Who's that, Maggie?"

In a state of shock, Tiara said, "It's Mommie, dummies."

"Is not," Terrell said immediately.

Taurus said slowly, "Is too."

Terrell approached me first. He stared up at me in total disbelief and whispered, "Mom?"

I whispered back, "Terrell."

He looked at his twin brother who was nodding his head up and down, then back at me. Terrell took my hand and said breathlessly, "Wow! You look like a real babe, Mom!"

Taurus said, "Yeah, a real babe, Mom."

Tiara's face split into a giant grin before she said, "Mom, you look great! Take off the hat so I can see your hair."

I obliged and Tiara squealed, "Oh, you look beautiful, Mom!"

The boys said in succession, "Oh yeah. Hot!"

I beamed when I asked, "Do you really like it?"

They all yelled, "You bet!"

I felt so good I wanted to cry. Knowing my children approved meant a lot to me. However, I would have to find out where the boys picked up words like 'hot' and 'babe'.

They made me sit down so they could touch my hair. Tiara asked, "Did you keep the hair she cut off?"

"Yes. It's in a bag on the backseat of my car."

Tiara raced out to get it. My braid would be quite a prize for either one of them. They would fight over it for some time to come.