



BETTYE GRIFFIN

*Sinner
& Man*

A SHORT PREQUEL

Author of *Isn't She Lovely?*

SINNER MAN: A SHORT PREQUEL

by Bettye Griffin

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Sinner Man

In this prequel to the upcoming novel **Secrets & Sins**, author Bettye Griffin transports readers back to 1950s Chicago, to the wedding of Lorraine Hawkins and Vernon Pace. Lorraine is the daughter of a maid, while Vernon comes from one of the leading families in the area. Regardless of Vernon's background, many people have doubts about his ability to settle down...including Lorraine. What no one knows is that this marriage will set the stage for events that will forever change the lives of both Lorraine and her best friend, Julia Scott, as well as future generations.

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The Almighty, from whom all blessings flow.

Everyone who downloaded this prequel. Enjoy!

A Note From the Author

Sinner Man is a short (approximately 30 pages) prequel to the upcoming novel **Secrets & Sins**. I enjoy writing prequels, for they give additional background information and character development and give you, the reader, the opportunity to get to know the characters before you read the main story. The majority of **Secrets & Sins** takes place in 2010, but the events of this prequel set the stage for the secrets and the sins that follow.

I have included an excerpt from **Secrets & Sins** within this prequel that will all but guarantee you will want to keep reading!

I hope you will tell your friends about this prequel and excerpt. Please note that it can be downloaded for free at my [Bunderful Books Freebie page](#). The online retailers require a minimum purchase price of 99 cents, and they do not allow any mention of it being available for free, so if you paid 99 cents don't get mad...get informed! Become a part of my network by "liking" [my Bunderful Books Facebook page](#) or joining my mailing list at www.bettyegriffin.com to be made aware of future freebies (and there will be more freebies!). And don't forget to read the preview of **Secrets & Sins**!

B.

Chapter 1

Chicago, June 1954

The gossip started well before the ceremony.

"No wonder they didn't get married in church," said one middle-aged woman to another as she stared at the chairs that had been arranged theater-style, just six seats in each row, with an aisle between. "I've never seen a wedding so small. Imagine being told to sit wherever you like, regardless of whether you're a guest of the bride or the groom. I thought there'd be family members from out of town present. There are Paces living all along Lake Michigan. Only two rows are reserved for the groom's family, which comes to twelve chairs. What does that tell you?"

"That there are either a lot of funerals going on today between Milwaukee and Muskegon, or a lot of people moving," her friend quipped. The Pace family owned dozens of small businesses catering to the Negro community living along Lake Michigan in the states of Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, with the main focus on their mortuary business. They also sold life insurance and owned real estate in Negro neighborhoods, and if a colored person got arrested, their family likely met with a bail bondsman named Pace.

"Exactly, Doris. I've never heard of such a thing. And not an usher in sight to escort us to our seats."

The two women chose seats at the outer edge of a row in the middle that would allow them a good view of the ceremony, as well as the ability to see each new arrival. "Well, it isn't as though the bride's family has any means," Doris said in a dismissive tone. "I understand her mother works as a maid for a wealthy family in Winnetka, and that her father has been out of the picture for years." She seemed delighted to share that tidbit. "If they did separate the bride's friends and family from Vernon's, everyone would be on his side of the room."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, she can have him," her friend replied. "He may come from a good family, but he's certainly no catch. He's barely in his mid-twenties, and he's well on his way to becoming a drunkard. He gambles and carouses, too. If you ask me, he'll make a lousy husband."

"I'm hoping my Cynthia will catch the eye of Clarence," Doris said. "He and Vernon may be brothers, but they're different as night and day. Vernon is a bum. Clarence is husband material."

"Hello, Anita."

"Good to see you, Gladys." The two friends embraced while their husbands greeted each other.

"It's going to be a small wedding, isn't it?"

"I'll say. Maybe sixty people, tops," Anita replied. Lowering her voice to a whisper, "And aside from Arnella and Sidney Walker and Roscoe Scott, no one of any real prominence. No John and Eunice Johnson, no Earl and Kathryn Dickerson, no John and Jewel Rogers. Frankly, I expected more from a Pace wedding. Who are the bride's people, I wonder?"

"Anyone you don't recognize," Gladys replied with a smile, "and who looks like they don't belong. Some of these people look poor, others downright rough. Like that big brute over there." The woman pointed with her chin at a bear of a man in a navy suit who sat in a rear row.

"I'd hate to be walking in front of him down a dark alley. Oh! I take back what I said about no one of prominence attending. There's Marva Spaulding and her husband."

They fell silent to cast admiring looks at the stylish socialite. "She certainly landed on her feet after divorcing Joe Louis, didn't she?" Gladys remarked. "The doctor she's married to now is a much more appropriate choice for someone of her upbringing than an uneducated boxer."

Her husband protested. "Don't say anything negative about my man Joe, Gladys. He's getting a raw deal from the government about those back taxes. His manager mishandled his money, but a white man would never be hounded like that. Joe helped keep up the country's morale during the war, tried to behave like a gentleman, but they're still giving him a hard way to go. It stinks."

Gladys turned to her friend and gave her a hapless look.

"Poor Leona," Anita said, giving an understanding nod as she changed the subject. "I'm sure she wishes Vernon had chosen a girl with some kind of background rather than a maid's daughter."

"I'll bet when his younger brother marries it'll be to a young lady of quality." Gladys sneered. "With Vernon, I'm not sure it matters. I give it two years."

The room filled up quickly. Leona Pace, the mother of the groom, was escorted to her seat by her tuxedo-clad younger son, Clarence, who was also serving as his brother's best man. The guests all craned their necks to get a look at the bride's mother, by tradition the last to be seated before the ceremony began. She looked lovely in a beige lace dress and cocktail hat with facial netting, escorted by the well-known attorney Roscoe Scott.

"She might be a maid, but she makes a good appearance," someone whispered. "She

looks almost as nice as Leona.”

“Pinning an orchid on a woman hardly makes her a lady,” came the dubious reply. “That’s a lovely dress, but she was probably hunched over a sewing machine for weeks making it herself. I doubt it came from Marshall Field’s.”

The groom and best man took their places up front, and the guests all rose when the music began.

A lovely young woman floated down the aisle first, wearing a pale pink tea-length dress. Several of the guests nudged each other, some merely raising eyebrows and others saying, “Only one attendant?”

A collective, “Aww,” sounded at the sight of the two young girls and small boy who served as ring bearer and flower girls. The boy looked handsome in his tuxedo with tails, and the girls, one bigger than the other, had their long hair pressed and curled and wore Empire-waisted pink dresses with ruffled sleeves and hemlines. From the way their smiles lingered on the big, menacing-looking man who now stood next to a petite woman as they passed, it was clear these were their parents. Funny how the man didn’t look so scary when he smiled at his children, but more like a gentle giant.

Then the bride appeared, doing a carefully timed walk up the aisle on the arm of Roscoe Scott, whose Southside law practice and free legal clinics made him known and highly respected by many in the community. Roscoe had met with former Mayor Edward Kelly, who’d been more progressive than others who ran the city, about the plight of the Negro in Chicago, and he also was a consultant to the NAACP. Friends of the groom’s family knew that Vernon had met Lorraine Hawkins after she began working as an office assistant at Pace Moving and Storage, with her placement there arranged between Roscoe with his friends Walter and Leona Pace.

“I don’t know who those flower girls belong to, but the sign in the church program says that the ringbearer is Hunter Blackwell. Isn’t Arnella’s daughter married to someone named Blackwell?” Anita whispered to Gladys.

Gladys nodded. “Yes, and their son would be about five or six. That’s Arnella’s grandson, I’m sure. Besides, Hunter was her maiden name.”

“The sign also said the maid of honor is Julia Scott. That must be Roscoe’s daughter,” Anita said. “I hear she and the bride are good friends. Julia goes to college, but the bride couldn’t afford to. That’s why Roscoe got her that job working for the Paces.”

“His daughter is very pretty, isn’t she?”

“For a brown-skinned girl,” Anita replied with an unimpressed shrug.

The sound of throat-clearing behind them caused both women to turn and look. They found themselves looking into the hostile eyes of two dark-complexioned women, one in

her forties and the other in her twenties, probably mother and daughter and likely friends of the bride and maid of honor. The two gossips quickly turned back around. Anita tugged at her husband's sleeve, as if expecting him to intervene on her behalf, but all he said was, "Serves you right. I've got news for you, Anita. It doesn't matter how light you are, you still can't use the white facilities down South. Your attitude makes you no better than they are."

The ceremony began, and although Anita and Gladys kept their mouths shut, whispered conversations continued among other guests. "The maid of honor is lovely," said one woman to another. "She looks like a young Pearl Bailey."

"I'd love to introduce her to my Harold," her friend replied. "What an improvement she'd be over that woman he's dating. Four years older than him, divorced with a four-year-old son. I don't want my son marrying anyone with a ready-made family. If he was thirty-three, fine, but he's only twenty-three and too young to take on the responsibility of someone else's child." The woman blew out an annoyed breath before adding, "Besides, Roscoe Scott wouldn't be a bad father-in-law."

"I hear she's a sweet girl and that Roscoe has given her everything," her friend replied. "She goes to the University of Chicago and is studying elementary school education. She'll probably get a job working for The Walker School. Roscoe and the Walkers are neighbors, you know." Arnella Hunter Walker and her husband, Sidney, had founded a leading school for Negro children. They educated both local students and youngsters from other parts of the country, who boarded there. In addition to the weekday academic curriculum, The Walker School offered etiquette classes on Saturday mornings. Many middle- and upper-income families enrolled their children in these to prepare them to handle social situations.

The woman speaking lowered her voice from soft to a whisper. "But you should know that despite Roscoe's sterling reputation, the girl's mother—his first wife—is a deaf mute, and she works as a maid for a family who has a deaf son."

"Roscoe must have set that up."

"Yes. They were divorced by then, and he moved them up here from Mississippi. You know his second wife was Thelma Morton of the banking family. She was her father's only child, and she was only thirty-eight when she died of heart disease, just like her mother." With a sly wink, the woman added, "Old man Morton has to leave all his money to somebody. Roscoe will get it, and he'll leave it all to his daughter."

After the ceremony, guests were moved to another room, where they enjoyed cocktails and hors d'oeuvres while the bridal party and their families had pictures taken in yet another room. The Chicago location of the Pace Funeral Home had an adjoining banquet hall that they rented out for weddings and parties, in addition to using it for repast

luncheons. The room could accommodate three hundred people, but its size could be reduced for smaller events such as this one by setting up dividers.

Lorraine and Vernon were introduced for the first time as a married couple and took to the floor to dance to the romantic ballad My One and Only Love. They were soon joined by the maid of honor and best man, the parents of the groom, and the bride's mother, Gertrude Hawkins, with Roscoe Scott serving as her dance partner. The latter couple set tongues wagging afresh.

"They look good together...do you suppose there's some hanky-panky going on? After all, his wife's been dead for two years, and her husband skipped town years ago."

"I doubt it. Roscoe's first wife is sitting right there on his other side. If anything, I'd say she's his date. I know she's a deaf mute, but that doesn't mean she's stupid. And she's a pretty lady herself, with a better figure than the bride's mother. I wouldn't be surprised if they remarried, now that Thelma's passed on."

"I don't know about that. Roscoe and the bride's mother...what's her name, Gertrude? They seem to be having quite the conversation."

"Everything is just lovely, Trudy," Roscoe said. "Are you sure you didn't need any help paying for it all? I'd be happy to make you a loan."

"Thank you for offering, Roscoe, but I'm fine. Vernon's parents paid for the liquor and the food, and of course there was no fee to rent the hall, since they own it. One of his uncles is a baker at the Palmer House, and he provided the cake as his gift to them." She beamed. "That's the nice thing about marrying into a good family. There's usually someone who has the specialty service you need. I paid for the flowers, the band, and Lorraine's trousseau, and Lorraine and Vernon insisted on helping out. I did run a little short, but my employers advanced me some money that I'll pay back over time. They'll subtract it from my wages."

"Well, Lorraine makes a beautiful bride. You did a fabulous job on her dress, and yours, too."

Trudy laughed, something he had never known her to do very often. It was good to see her so happy, he thought. Unlike her daughter, she had dimples. He knew she wanted Lorraine to marry well.

"Thank you. Miriam helped me. Together we sewed up a storm. We made Lorraine some beautiful dresses for her honeymoon. She's going to be the best-dressed woman in St. Thomas." Trudy's laughter faded, but her smile did not. "I'm so happy my baby is married to such a successful man."

Roscoe wanted to point out that Vernon wasn't successful, his family was. He hadn't even

gone to mortuary school like his father and brother and therefore wasn't qualified to be a funeral director, but at least the accounting degree he held from Fisk University qualified him to keep the books of the various family interests, if he could stay sober long enough to do it properly. Vernon spent a lot of time on the road, driving to the various family businesses all over the region to work on their books. Frequent trips away from home never bode well for a marriage, and Roscoe had serious misgivings about its chances for success. Vernon already had a reputation for having a woman in every city with a sizeable Negro population along Lake Michigan, and Roscoe doubted marriage would change anything. For Lorraine's sake, though, Roscoe hoped it would.

Julia had confided in him via sign language that Lorraine had her own uncertainties about marrying Vernon, but was egged on by Trudy, who wanted her to settle down with someone with money and prospects. He personally believed Lorraine would have been happier with David Upchurch, her classmate from New Trier High School who, from what he'd seen at the graduation party he hosted for Julia and her friends, had been crazy about her. Trudy had done her best to break that up, saying that she didn't think David would amount to anything, even though the American Motors plant up in Kenosha, where David went to work after graduation, paid good wages, enough to provide a comfortable living. Trudy said she felt Lorraine should marry someone who put on a shirt and tie to go to work, not someone who would come home with dirty hands and dirty clothes. Roscoe found that amusing...it was as if Trudy believed David wouldn't wash his hands before putting them on her daughter.

He wisely kept his reservations about Vernon to himself, saying instead, "I hope they'll be happy."

"She'll have a much easier life than I did," Trudy said, her voice ringing with pride. "Miriam is lucky to have you to help her."

"Well, she's the mother of my child," he said.

The familiar dour demeanor settled on Trudy's face. "Well, that means nothing to some men. It certainly didn't to my husband."

Guests were served a meal of ham, fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, greens, and rolls, after which Lorraine and Vernon cut their cake. Flashbulbs went off like Fourth of July fireworks as he guided her in placing the first slice on a plate and they playfully fed each other. They made a photogenic couple, him tall and dashingly mustached, her of average height with blemish-free fair skin and perfect teeth, both of them with dark, straight-textured hair.

After the servers had provided everyone with coffee and marbled wedding cake, Roscoe stood and tapped on his water glass with his spoon to get the guests' attention. "I'd like to say a few words. I've known Lorraine since she was a little girl because she's my

daughter's best friend and has been ever since Julia's first day at the Hubbard Woods School. I remember it like it was yesterday. Julia was lonely in her new home and missed her playmates from back home. She came home from the second grade and announced that she had a new friend named Lorraine. I drove up that Friday to pick her up from school, and I took her and Lorraine out for ice cream. I've seen Lorraine many times in the years since." Roscoe left out the fact that he hadn't seen Lorraine at all in the years from her adolescence until Julia's high school graduation party, a period covering of about six years. Once Julia turned twelve he and Miriam agreed she was old enough to take the train the few stops into Chicago alone to see him, making it unnecessary for him to drive up to Winnetka to pick her up. He still considered himself to be a father figure to Lorraine. She had no memories of her own daddy, who'd deserted her and Trudy when she was a toddler.

"I had the honor of giving her away to her new husband," he said. "And as the one who filled that important role, it's my duty to say this to Vernon: Be good to her, son. Treat her like a queen, and give her everything she wants. Because if you make her unhappy, you'll have to answer to me."

The guests chuckled as Vernon bowed and said, "Yes, sir!"

No one seemed to notice that Roscoe was the only one not smiling.

Chapter 2

Lorraine carefully arranged her hair over the front of one shoulder, letting it hang behind her shoulder on the other side. She smoothed the bodice of her sinfully sheer nightgown and adjusted the matching peignoir. The racy outfit had been a gift from the mistress of the house where her mother worked, on whose property Lorraine had lived as long as she could remember. The gesture had come as a huge surprise, for the family tended to be rather demanding when it came to her mother's services and seemed shocked when Lorraine politely declined their offer for her to put on a maid uniform and join her mother in service once she graduated. The idea that she could want to do something more with her life than be someone's maid seemed to be more than they could grasp.

Thank heavens for Julia's father. Mr. Scott knew the most important colored people in Chicago. He asked around and got her a job working at one of the Pace family's businesses, and he also found a respectable family who had a spare room she could rent. She'd met Vernon her second week on the job, and even now she found it mind-boggling that he had chosen her. Chicago was full of attractive young debutantes, girls who'd grown up in Jack and Jill and taken etiquette classes at Mrs. Walker's. Even Julia, who had taken Mrs. Walker's classes, which equipped her to serve as her father's hostess after her stepmother's death, hadn't belonged to Jack and Jill. Julia's parents were divorced, and like Lorraine, Julia lived with her mother, who worked as a maid in Winnetka, north

of the city. Even Roscoe Scott being a leading attorney in Chicago couldn't change the fact that the daughters of maids weren't asked to join the organization for the children of well-heeled, professional Negro families, like the Paces.

Regardless of the vast differences in their social standing, Vernon fell in love with her and eventually asked her to marry him. Lorraine could hardly believe it. Tonight she and Vernon were staying at the Blackstone Hotel, one of the finest hotels in Chicago. Just last year this and other downtown hotels began allowing Negroes to check in as guests, not only well-known entertainers like Louis Armstrong, but anyone who could afford the rates. Negro-owned venues like the DuSable Hotel had already begun to struggle since the recent change.

Not only would they spend their wedding night in this gorgeous hotel, but tomorrow morning they were going to fly to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, for their honeymoon, a gift from her new in-laws. Lorraine had never been on an airplane before and never dreamed she ever would. Her mama had been right when she said that marrying Vernon would open up a whole new world for her.

She'd had terrible butterflies about the wedding right up to the day before. She wasn't sure if Vernon was really ready to settle down. At twenty-five he was five years her senior, but he made the most of his single status, dating a number of women, including, if she believed the gossip, a few married ones. She suspected he was more fond of poker than he would ever admit, and she'd witnessed firsthand his tendency to drink more than he could hold. Lorraine wanted the fairytale definition of marriage, where she would keep house—full time after the first baby came—and cook, and she and her husband would hold hands while they took a walk after dinner, then come home and snuggle on the sofa. She imagined them laughing together at Red Skelton's antics or getting caught up in the drama of *Dragnet* or *Four Star Playhouse* on television before retiring to their bedroom to go to sleep wrapped in each other's arms.

Of course, there was more to bedtime than that, and she was about to find out precisely what. Lorraine knew the facts of life, but knowing how it worked and actually experiencing it were two different things. Vernon had been trying to get into her drawers since their second date, and when he kissed and touched her it aroused feelings of excitement that left little puddles in her panties, much to her secret shame. Lorraine felt the beginnings of that same excitement now, and he hadn't even touched her yet. On this, her wedding night, she would enter a world previously unknown to her. Her curiosity about sex and all it entailed would at last be satisfied. She'd done what her mother told her and kept her legs closed until Vernon put a ring on her finger.

"You just wait and see," Mama had said. "Everything is going to be wonderful, Lorraine. You're going to have a wonderful life. The Paces are one of the leading colored families in Chicago, and now you're one of them. You'll never have to scrub other folks' floors and toilets, do their laundry, and cook for them, like me. Maybe Vernon still has a little growing up to do, but marriage brings maturity. It's a commitment. There've been no

divorces in the Pace family, no cases of husbands running off and leaving their families to fend for themselves. And if you're worried about sex, don't be. You'll have a bit of pain, but it'll be over in an instant and after that it'll be all pleasure."

Lorraine felt certain it would be beautiful.

She haltingly opened the bathroom door and turned out the light. Vernon had dimmed the lights. He lay partially reclining on the bed, shirtless, smoking a cigarette. She noted with dismay that the small bottle of Canadian Club on the nightstand was nearly half empty.

She caught her breath when he stood up. He was completely naked, one hand openly, unashamedly stroking the hard penis that hung between his legs. Even in the semi-darkness she noticed it seemed to be several shades darker than the rest of his fair skin, like it was flush with anger or something.

"C'mere, baby," he drawled, slightly slurring his words.

Fighting back a sudden sense of revulsion, Lorraine went to him. He shoved the peignoir off her shoulders and stared at her through heavy-lidded eyes. He licked his lips. "Oh, yeah. You made me wait a long time, but no more." His fingers went to the spaghetti straps of her nightgown, and his breath became audible when it fell to her waist. Unaccustomed to appearing topless in front of anyone, Lorraine raised her hands to cover her exposed breasts, but Vernon clamped her wrists. "Oh, no you don't. I wanna see."

He picked her up by her waist and unceremoniously dumped her on her back on the bed, then knelt over her and began grasping and sucking at her breasts. Lorraine closed her eyes tightly and bit her lip, for it hurt. Vernon made no effort to shield her delicate skin from the sharpness of his teeth, and he squeezed and bit on her sensitive nipples hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Finally she could bear it no more. "Ouch! Vernon, that hurts."

"Aw, stop complainin'," he mumbled.

She gritted her teeth when he roughly reached between her legs, tossing the bottom of her nightgown up around her waist. The moisture that pooled there when he kissed her in the past was absent this time as he dug his fingers into her.

"Damn, baby, how come you ain't wet? You one of those cold fishes?" he asked.

Lorraine bit her lip, but it didn't hurt nearly as much as his crude question had. "No...well, I don't think so. Maybe," she began tentatively, "you should slow down a little, do like you used to when we were dating."

"Lorraine, I've waited so long for you." He sighed. "You're probably right. Between that and...well, the fact that I'm not used to inexperienced women..." his voice faded. He

cupped her face in the tender display of affection she'd become accustomed to but had been sorely absent tonight. "Whattaya say we start this over?"

Hopeful again, Lorraine nodded.

She awoke to the feel of his fingers probing between her legs. Morning sunlight peeked into the room from the small space at the bottom of the windows where the shades ended. She was still sore after last night's initiation to sex and would like nothing more than to sleep, but she told herself she could sleep on the plane.

Her wedding night had been slightly marred by the way it began, but had been saved once Vernon realized he was going too fast. He'd kissed her and rubbed his hard penis against her opening, which brought back all her old longings to feel more. Pleasurable sensations flooded her body, and she responded to his touch. When he climbed between her legs and pushed inside her, she barely felt the pain.

Despite her fatigue and soreness, her body responded to his caresses of her most intimate area as Vernon pressed his front to her back and slid his penis into her. Lorraine's eyebrows shot up. It never occurred to her that there was more than one way to do this...

She repeatedly pushed her hips back and met his thrusts eagerly. His remark of last night still stung, but she'd show him she was no cold fish. This was better than last night, much better...

By the time she had been married for two weeks, Lorraine found that she enjoyed sex in the morning but was wary of it at night, because Vernon was often drunk in the evenings. The pattern had begun during their honeymoon. He ordered his first cocktail with lunch and got more inebriated throughout the day. Sometimes he drank so much he passed out. Lorraine tried to tell herself he was as nervous as she was about being married, and that once they returned to Chicago things would be different.

After being back for a week she knew better.

She felt relieved when Vernon went on the road to balance the books of his family's various businesses. The Paces believed in keeping professional services in the family whenever possible, so Vernon would often be away from home, usually for several days at a time. Lorraine busied herself setting up housekeeping. After returning from St. Thomas, she had moved into Vernon's apartment above the funeral home. The spacious living area with three bedrooms was already fully and exquisitely furnished, but they'd gotten some lovely gifts of linens, kitchen items, and other housewares, and Lorraine set about making a home for them as if her life depended on it, or at least her marriage.

Perhaps Vernon would become more domesticated if he had a sense of home...

The only person she confided in about her increasing unhappiness was her mother. "I think I might have made a big mistake, Mama," she cried into the phone. "Vernon drinks so much...he says crude and hurtful things to me. And sometimes when we make love... he's so rough. I have to soak in a shallow tub with a little vinegar added to the water to ease the pain."

"Oh, baby," her mother said in her soothing voice. "I hate to see you unhappy, but you've only been married a few weeks. I'm sure this is just growing pains for Vernon, a period of adjustment, and that it will pass. I know it's hard, but I want you to hang in there for, say, three months. If at that time he's still acting badly, I want you to speak to his mother. Tell her how you feel."

Lorraine made a humorless chuckle. "You mean, that once I let Vernon get into my panties he's lost interest in me? Because I can't help feeling that way, Mama. It's as if my feelings don't matter to him."

"That's why I want you to speak only to his mother, rather than both his parents. I know it would be difficult for you to say that with Walter present, but Leona is a woman, and she'll understand."

She couldn't argue with that. "But three months is an eternity, Mama!" Lorraine's shoulders crumpled in defeat. She felt like she'd somehow stumbled into the lyrics of Ruth Brown's big hit from last year, Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean.

"I know, honey, but I ask you to wait because you don't want to start complaining about Vernon right out of the gate. Parents, mothers especially, tend to become defensive when their children are criticized. So, for the next three months, I want you to be a model wife. Keep your house spotless. Make him delicious meals. Get his underwear and shirts to come out white as snow when you wash them. And..." Mama coughed delicately..."Be a wild woman in bed."

"Mama!"

"I mean it, Lorraine. This is your husband. It's not only legal, but it's expected. And another thing. I want you to forget about that I-made-a-mistake way of thinking. You need to tell yourself that you're going to be so good to Vernon, you'll make him want to be good to you."

"I don't know, Mama. I've been doing that, but it doesn't seem to make much difference. Sometimes I think I'd be happier if I had married David. Maybe I wouldn't be living in such a large apartment with all these nice things and a washing machine and dryer, but I think I would've been a lot happier."

Lorraine's honesty was met with a prolonged silence from her mother. She held her

breath, waiting for Mama to speak.

"All right, Lorraine. Stop right there. You're married to a professional man, one who works with his brains, not with his hands. He's a member of the most one of the most important Negro families in all of Chicago, and now you are, too. Vernon just needs more time to get accustomed to the fact that he's now a married man." After a few seconds, Mama added, "Besides, the Paces marry for life. If he doesn't shape up on his own, I'm sure Leona and Walter will set him straight. I don't believe there's ever been a divorce in the Pace family. They make it work. And what's more, their men don't abandon their families the way your father did to us. Can you say that about David's family?" After a pause Lorraine knew was intended to let the words sink in and remind her that David had been solely raised by his mother, Mama added, "Can David even trace his family back as far as the Paces can?"

"I don't think so," Lorraine said sadly. "He told me he never knew his father."

"You don't remember your daddy, either," Mama continued. "And I can only give you the names of your grandparents. Anything beyond that would be blank on that side of your family. This is why you've been so fortunate, Lorraine. Even though to people like the Paces we're considered nobodies whose family tree is peppered with question marks, you still managed to marry into their family. That's one reason why I don't think it's a good idea for you to make any big waves to Leona and Walter about Vernon so soon. They know how he is. Trust me, it won't come as a huge surprise to them to learn he's not being nice to you."

Lorraine sighed. Maybe she was right...

"There's something else to consider, too, Lorraine." Without waiting for her to ask what, her mother said, "Your future children. You'll want the best for them, just as I've wanted the best for you. All the Paces have been day students at The Walker School. The public schools in Chicago are awful, especially on the south side. I might be just a maid, but at least you had a first-class education at Hubbard Woods and New Trier because we lived in Winnetka. I know their guidance counselors tried to convince you that you're not smart enough to do anything but go into service, but that's the way a lot of white folks are. Even up here in the north they don't want our people to become educated. But your children will have the same advantages privileged kids like Julia have." Again Mama paused. "Would David be able to do that for your children if you'd married him? I don't think so."

"I don't think so, either." The defeat Lorraine felt came through in her weary-sounding voice. "And I do want to have children, Mama, more than anything in the world."

"That's my girl. Before you know it, you'll be having your first. Just hang in there. Can you promise me you'll do that?"

Lorraine took a deep breath before answering. "Yes, Mama. I promise."

A few days later, Julia, who had been staying with her mother up in Winnetka during the summer, took the train into the city to spend the afternoon with Lorraine. She came down on a Thursday, but it being midweek didn't affect Lorraine's work schedule. After her marriage her in-laws requested she give up working at the moving and storage office in favor of being the caretaker of the funeral home. The work was technically housekeeping, but at least she was doing it as a member of the family, not strictly an employee. It equated to a part-time job, with her cleaning in the morning and again in the late afternoon, before most visitors came to pay respects. Lorraine found it unsettling to vacuum around the coffins in the individual chapels. Mopping the floors in the basement, where embalming occurred, was particularly frightening, even when there were no bodies there, and she never did either chore unless her mother-in-law was present in the office near the viewing rooms and her father-in-law was working in the basement.

Lorraine had deliberately asked Julia to visit on a weekday while Vernon was doing accounting in Michigan City, Indiana, to ensure that he wouldn't show up intoxicated. Still, she worried that Julia, who knew her better than anyone other than her mother, might be able to see through her cheerful demeanor and sense something was wrong. Fortunately, Julia's thoughts were elsewhere. She'd met a young student from the Teacher's College at a dance the previous weekend, and they'd hit it off. He was taking her out on Saturday, and even though Julia had just met him, she couldn't say enough good things about him.

Lorraine was delighted to talk about something other than married life. "I'm so happy for you, Jules. He sounds wonderful."

"I have to say, I haven't been this excited about a man since I don't know when. Of course, there's no reason why he still can't turn out to be a prize jerk, but he seems so nice, Lorraine. Soft spoken, a gentleman, tall, dark, and handsome. Just like in all the fairy tales."

Lorraine swallowed at the mention of a fairy tale. A flash of memory came to the forefront of her mind, of her and Julia as little girls at the movie theater with Mama—Lorraine's mother always brought them, because Miss Miriam's deafness precluded her from enjoying movies—watching Snow White warble Some Day My Prince Will Come. Her own prince was turning out to be a toad...

"I'm really looking forward to getting to know him better," Julia concluded dreamily. She looked around the tidy, well decorated apartment. "After all, if you and I are going to have kids the same age, I'd better hurry and catch up to you."

Lorraine looked at her friend curiously. "Tell me, Jules. If you fell in love and got married, would you leave school?"

"Not a chance. If there's one thing my daddy made clear to me, it's that I'm not to drop

out of school. He says education will make things better for Negroes, and that I'm to give back somehow, the way he does with his free legal advice. That wouldn't stop me from getting married, though. But I wouldn't have a baby until after I've graduated. Getting my degree is important to me, Lorraine. My mama and I have lived in a tiny cottage on the Cunningham's property for years. They're nice people, but one day I'm going to have my own house, and I'm going to bring Mama to live with my family. I don't ever expect to be rich, but even to take care of Mama and the children I hope to have will take more than one salary. I'll have to have a decent-paying job, and if I don't get my degree it won't happen."

"Be sure to marry someone who won't mind if your mother moves in with you," Lorraine cautioned. She couldn't imagine her own mother living with her and Vernon, although she suspected Mama would like nothing better; she'd dropped a few hints the first time she saw the large living quarters with its extra bedrooms.

"Yes, that's a must." Julia grew solemn. "Melvin has a small family, his mother and one brother. He spoke very highly of them, which is encouraging. They're both helping him with his tuition. He's almost twenty-four, but he'll just be graduating in December. It's taken him longer to finish because he's been working his way through." She drew in her breath. "I haven't even told you his name, Lorraine! It's Melvin. Melvin Cheeks."

"It sounds like a great name. And I think it's wonderful that he's working his way through college. I wish I'd been able to do that."

Fortunately, Julia didn't pick up on the wistful note in her voice; she kept babbling on about her new acquaintance.

"Melvin will be student teaching this semester," she said, "and he's excited about it. He's going to do elementary education, like me. He says he wants to get kids excited about learning while they're still young and interested. I think that's important, too."

"Something else the two of you have in common," Lorraine said with a smile. She shared Julia's excitement. Melvin Cheeks had to be someone special if he'd captivated her friend so quickly. Julia had her choice of potential suitors, including Gardner McKay, the only Negro student in their class at New Trier High School whose parents weren't employed as servants. The McKays—a postal worker and a school cafeteria worker—rented an apartment in Glenview, on the outskirts of the highly rated New Trier school district. That distinction made him especially appealing to all the girls, as had his intelligence, athleticism, and his extreme good looks. But Julia rebuffed his attentions, insisting that Gardner's interest in her stemmed only from her being the daughter of Roscoe Scott, since he always maintained he wanted to be an attorney.

Lorraine served lunch using the lovely plates and iced tea glasses that had been one of

her wedding gifts.

“Lorraine, these are beautiful!” Julia exclaimed. “You and Vernon have such lovely things.”

“Our wedding guests were very generous...and they have excellent taste.” Lorraine realized that could be taken as a snub against her friends from Winnetka—the daughters of “the help” in other households in the wealthy community—who had gathered at Julia’s to surprise her with a small, informal bridal shower. “And I treasure the gifts the girls gave me, too.”

“I’m so envious,” Julia said, not mean-spirited but with good-natured envy. “How is married life like? Especially the part that takes place behind closed doors? Just in general. I’m not looking for intimate details.”

Lorraine tensed; she’d been dreading that question. “It...takes some getting used to,” she replied honestly.

Julia, her head in the clouds, didn’t seem to notice her tentative reply. “Just think, by this time next year you’ll probably be expecting your first baby. Make sure it’s a boy. I want our daughters to be the same age, so they can be best friends like us.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but you do realize that it’s not up to me.” Lorraine smiled. Nothing made her happier than the thought of her and Julia raising daughters who would be as close as they were....

Chapter 3

As Julia and Melvin’s relationship flourished, Lorraine and Vernon’s marriage continued to unravel. She followed her mother’s advice and spoke to her mother-in-law, who in turn got together with her husband to chide their son for being such a poor husband.

All that did was cause further static between her and Vernon, who turned on her angrily. “What goes on in our household is nobody’s business besides ours,” he yelled. “You don’t go to my parents reporting on me, like my brother used to do when we were little kids.”

Lorraine had been stunned by his reaction. She’d been so confident in her mother’s advice...

Her speaking to his parents changed nothing. Now, in addition to coming home intoxicated, he began staying out later.

It wasn’t all bad, though. Vernon didn’t drink to excess every night. When he returned from out of town, Michigan or Indiana, he was never drunk. During those times he was the husband she always dreamed of having—he kissed her with genuine ardor, telling her

how much he missed her while he was away. He helped her get dinner ready, and complimented her culinary skills while they ate. After dinner, he would help her clear the table to make her cleanup faster.

Sweetest of all were the nights, when he made love to her in the same tender fashion as he ultimately had on their wedding night. He held her close and told her he loved her, and they fell asleep holding each other.

Even during the best of times, Lorraine found herself bothered about two things he did, both related to their sex life. One was his insistence that she take his penis into her mouth. She'd heard of some women doing that, but it seemed nasty to her, considering he urinated through it. Fortunately, Vernon always showered before sex. Even with that, sometimes she felt she was going to gag.

She wished she could speak to someone about it, but it was too personal to discuss with her mother. Mama hadn't been married in many years, but she had a long-term involvement with the man from the landscaping service who serviced her employer's lawn, and Lorraine felt fairly certain they did more than hold hands. The man was separated but not divorced, so he hadn't escorted Mama to Lorraine's wedding or any other function, although their relationship was an open secret among the domestic staff of Winnetka's households. She simply went along with Vernon's request. Sometimes he reached his climax while she was doing it and she got a mouthful of sticky liquid. While he lay groaning and spent on the bed, she quietly went to the bathroom and spit it out, then rinsed thoroughly. She found that most disgusting of all.

The second issue concerned her the most. Vernon always pulled out of her just before he climaxed. Not once had he ever spilled his seed inside her. She knew she would never get pregnant if he continued to do that.

One night, feeling particularly emboldened after what had been a perfect evening, she brought it up. "Vernon, is there some reason why you never...why you always pull out of me before you climax? I was hoping we could have a baby."

He seemed genuinely taken aback by her question. "You know, I guess you're right. I never really gave it much thought. It's just something I've always done if I wasn't wearing a rubber." Hugging her, he said with a chuckle, "The last thing I wanted to do was become a daddy. But I've never been married before, and now it's different. I didn't even realize I was still doing it. I'm sorry for being such a dunce, Lorraine. We'll get started on Project Baby right now, hopefully a little girl who looks just like you."

He rolled her on top of him and began kissing her again, and she straddled him. In the months she had been married she'd become accustomed to varying sexual positions. She was ready for him, and leaned forward and raised and lowered her hips on his hard length, eliciting pleased moans from them both. This time Vernon didn't pull out.

Lorraine envied how easily and often he achieved release. Nothing like that ever

happened for her. Was there something wrong with her? Was she a cold fish? This, too, was a subject she felt too embarrassed about to broach with her mother.

She wondered something else. Vernon seemed to get so much pleasure out of her putting her mouth and tongue on his genitals. It felt so good when he stroked that sensitive bud between her thighs...how would it feel if he were to lick her down there?

She felt almost ashamed by the thought, which seemed just plain wicked. She knew she would never bring it up to Vernon. He seemed perfectly content with their sex life, and Lord knew he enjoyed it...but he didn't seem particularly concerned with her enjoyment.

Lorraine's life was far from the storybook she'd hoped for, but the prospect of a pregnancy on the horizon considerably improved her outlook. She would have a baby, and then after a few years she would have another. Her children would be the lights of her life, and she'd raise them lovingly and with every advantage the Pace money could give.

Everyone around her seemed to be getting the romance that her own life lacked. Her brother-in-law, Clarence, had gotten engaged to a girl named Katherine Stokes. Katherine came from a solidly middle-class background, and Lorraine got the distinct impression that her in-laws were much more pleased with Clarence's choice of a bride than they'd been with her. She saw no reason to take out her jealousy on Katherine, who was a nice enough girl. Katherine had even invited Lorraine to be a bridesmaid at the wedding next spring, which would be a much larger, grander affair than the basic nuptials Lorraine and Vernon had.

Julia was also in love. Lorraine enjoyed listening to her friend's stories about Melvin. He'd met Mr. Scott at the time he and Julia began dating, since Julia stayed with her father during the college semester, but did not meet Miss Miriam until she came to Chicago for Thanksgiving. Melvin surprised both Julia and her parents by communicating with Miss Miriam with a few phrases of sign language he'd learned just for the occasion.

"He's so wonderful, Lorraine," Julia had gushed when they met downtown to do their Christmas shopping and have lunch. "With all he's got on his plate, working, classes, student teaching...he still found time to find someone who could teach him a little sign language. Mama was thrilled, and even Daddy was pleased."

"I'll be they were. I'm happy for you, Jules. It sounds as if Melvin is The One."

"I think he is. I've never been in love before, Lorraine, but I am now." Julia drew in her breath, then released it in a dreamy sigh. "And there's more. I think my parents might be inching closer to reconciliation."

"I'm surprised it's taking so long. It's been nearly three years since your stepmother passed." Lorraine still remembered what a striking couple Miss Miriam and Mr. Scott had

made at Julia's graduation party as they greeted arriving guests.

"Yes. The gossips can't say anything about her not being cold yet." Julia chuckled. "Of course, they don't know that my parents got back together informally the night of my high school graduation."

Lorraine smiled. Julia had confided in her that her parents tried to cover the fact that her mother had slipped into her father's room late at night when they thought Julia had fallen asleep, but Miss Miriam's loud moans gave away the charade. With no hearing ability, Miss Miriam couldn't realize how much noise she made, and she supposed that short of clamping his hand over her mouth—which could be difficult in certain positions—Mr. Scott couldn't really keep her quiet.

"They've been seeing each other for two-and-a-half years," Julia said. "I think they need to realize that they might as well make it legal. That way they won't have to pretend for my benefit that nothing's going on."

"And your mother's still young," Lorraine pointed out, her eyes sparkling with humor. "Maybe you'll get a baby brother or sister out of it."

"You're more like a sister to me, Lorraine, than a sibling twenty years younger could ever be," Julia declared. With a sigh, she added, "I guess it's possible for my parents to have another child, but I doubt they'll want more. I just want them to be together. It's been wonderful spending Thanksgiving and Christmas with both of them. We could have been together all these years, since Thelma was gracious enough to invite Mama and me to spend the holidays with them, but Mama refused to set foot in what she considered to be Thelma's house. She told me she couldn't bear to see Daddy with another woman."

"She never stopped loving him," Lorraine speculated.

"No, she never did. And I wasn't going to leave her to spend the holidays alone. But Mama's very happy these days, now that they've reunited."

Lorraine wondered if she would ever be truly happy.

She missed her period in March. She waited three weeks, afraid she was simply late, before she saw her doctor. To her joy, her pregnancy was confirmed, and she was given a due date of mid-November. She and Vernon celebrated, and it looked like he might finally be ready to settle down, nearly a year after their wedding. Lorraine felt happier and more optimistic than she had in a long time. Maybe Mama had been right...

Vernon made visible efforts to be a better husband once they were expecting. He cut back on his drinking and didn't stay out late as often, and Lorraine tried not to think

about what he might be doing during his trips to Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. He'd always been careful, had never shown any signs of being with other women, like lipstick-stained or perfume-scented clothes, but a sixth sense told Lorraine his womanizing hadn't stopped...at least not yet. At least he was trying...wasn't that what counted?

Then, in August, everything changed. Vernon brought her to the doctor for her regular checkup, who informed them that they were to have no more sexual intercourse for the remainder of her pregnancy, until they received a green light from him at her six-week post-birth checkup.

She noticed the change in him immediately as he slowly regressed back into his old habits. Night after night, she made dinner, and when it had grown cold she put it away, bathed and got into bed, feeling unwieldy and unloved. She lay in bed alone, and when she finally fell asleep her cheeks were stained with dried tears, and one night she suddenly knew she couldn't stand this any longer. This wasn't the life she wanted, wasn't the type of marriage she wanted, or the atmosphere in which she wanted to raise her child.

Normally she fell into an exhausted sleep after waiting up for him, but by mid-September, once she made up her mind to tell him it was over, she simply dozed until she heard him enter the bedroom. Clumsily she managed to sit up.

"Sorry I woke you."

Lorraine could tell from the way he spoke that he was drunk. "It's after three a.m., Vernon. Where the hell have you been?"

"I went out for a few drinks after work."

"The bars don't stay open this late." Lorraine crossed her arms over her chest. "What's her name?"

He sneered. "What difference does it make? It's not like I'm getting any from you."

Lorraine fought to control the sudden quiver in her lip. "You know what the doctor said. No sex from my seventh month until six weeks after the baby."

"Plenny o' women have sex right up until the very last minute." His alcohol intake caused him to slur his words.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, resting a palm on her swollen abdomen. "I don't want anything to interfere with the well-being of the baby. I'm sure there's a reason we were told not to."

He casually removed his shirt and draped it over a chair. "Come on, Lorraine. You were

just lookin' for an excuse not to have sex. After the baby's born you'll be sayin' you're too tired. I can already see the baby replacing me in your affections."

"At least my affection for the baby is innocent and doesn't involve breaking any commandments, which is more than I can say for you, Vernon."

"Don't start with me, Lorraine; I'm not in the mood."

"To hell with your mood!" she shouted.

"I'm going to sleep. If you wanna talk, we can do it tomorrow. Unless you want to talk to my parents again," he taunted.

"I'm through with talking. I'm going to take action."

Vernon removed his trousers and placed them over the chair back. He turned to her. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said, I'm through. I can't take any more of this, Vernon. And what's more, I won't."

His eyes became slits of suspicion. "Oh, yeah? Whatcha gonna do about it?"

"I'm getting out of here, for my own sanity. This isn't my idea of what marriage is supposed to be like."

Vernon's handsome face twisted into a sneer. "What would you know about what marriage is supposed to be like? You doan even know your own daddy. He took off like a stripper's bra."

She blinked back tears. "Maybe I don't know what it's supposed to be like, but I know this isn't what I want. Making dinner every night and then holding my breath, wondering what time you'll get home, or whether you'll be drunk or sober when you do. Crying as I sit down to eat by myself and put away the food when you're not home at eight o'clock. Knowing you're with another woman. Your whims and moods aren't supposed to be the center of my universe, Vernon, and I don't want my child growing up thinking that's how it's supposed to be."

"Whattaya you gonna do, take my baby and go back to Winnetka? Raise it to be a butler or a maid? My son or daughter, a servant?" He snorted. "Tha's what I get for marryin' the daughter of a domestic."

"I'm not going to back to Winnetka. The baby and I will stay right here in Chicago. And you'll pay our expenses." From what she'd heard, Vernon would have to pay her alimony.

"No fucking way. You aren't goin' anywhere, Lorraine. Nobody in my entire family has ever gotten divorced, and I ain't gonna be the first. You're stuck with me, sweetheart. So stop complainin' and le's go to bed."

Lorraine felt an almost blinding white-hot rage. "One, you're not getting in bed with me after you've been out having sex with another woman. I can smell her perfume on you."

He plopped on the bed. "Hardly the first time...done it plenny o' times. You never complained before."

That's because I was a fool. But of course she couldn't act on a mere instinct; before tonight he had always been careful to not leave any calling cards behind. He'd gotten downright bold. Choosing not to address his comment, she plunged on. "Two, I'm going to file for divorce, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"You go ahead and do that. I'll paint you as a woman with an agenda, who bartered sex for marriage...who wasted no time going to complain to my parents and hinted she wouldn't want to have to seek a divorce..."

Her jaw dropped. "But I didn't do it because I was looking to get money!"

"The judge will think you did. Then you got pregnant, thinking that the baby would be your meal ticket to get me to support you the rest of your life." Vernon's laugh sounded evil.

Unable to listen to his cruel words any longer, Lorraine left the room, needing to clear her head. She didn't care if she did have to pick up a mop and broom, she wasn't staying here any longer. She'd made a mistake, and it was high time she admitted it.

She was about to cross into the living room when she heard lurching footsteps behind her. He grabbed her arm, and she whirled around. "Let go of me, Vernon." She tried to wrench free, but he was too strong. "Go to sleep. You have to work tomorrow."

"I don't punch a time clock. I can start work when I'm good and ready. Maybe I'll just stay here and keep an eye on you."

Lorraine made a face at the nearly overpowering smell of alcohol on his breath that assaulted her nostrils. "I want to be alone for a few minutes. I have to work tomorrow, too."

He grunted. "Yeah, I guess it takes a lot of planning to come up with the best way to clean toilets and pews." Under his breath he muttered, "Just like your mother."

In an impulse reaction, Lorraine raised her free palm and slapped him hard across the face. "Don't you dare say a word against my mother. You're not fit to breathe the same air she does."

The slap caught Vernon off guard. He loosened his grip on her arm to rub his cheek. She immediately turned away and took steps toward the living room, just passing the steps that led to the office, viewing rooms, and chapels, crying out when he pulled her back. "Don't you ever slap me, you bitch." He raised his hand to her.

Lorraine cried out as his open palm slammed against the side of her face...and then she lost her footing and fell toward the open staircase. Her reflex attempt to grasp the banister failed, and she went down. Her body repeatedly thumped against the hard wood steps, covered only by a runner in the center. Her belly slapped against them painfully, then her back and butt as she tumbled. The front of nearly every step hit different angles of her head, causing pain and more pain in rapid succession. She mercifully lost consciousness before she landed at the bottom.

Vernon stood helplessly watching as she fell. The slap that made her lose her balance happened so quickly, but it seemed to take an eternity for her to reach the bottom of the seventeen steps, where she lay still without making a sound. Good Lord...was she dead?

If she was, there was nothing he could do about it. He headed back to their bedroom. Best to get out of here and pretend he knew nothing about it. He hadn't meant for her to fall, but if it came out that he'd pushed her, he'd be arrested and sent to jail, especially if she was dead. If she wasn't dead, maybe she wouldn't remember what happened.

Scared sober, he gathered his thoughts as he quickly dressed. It wouldn't do to go back to Angie's...the police would question her and she'd tell them he'd left and then come back. Instead, he'd park the car somewhere between her place and here and sleep in it. His parents would give him hell for staying out all night, the way they'd gotten on him when Lorraine complained to them last fall, but it wasn't a crime for a man not to come home at night. Everyone would think Lorraine simply stumbled walking past the stairs in the dark of night and fell.

He smoothed out the side of the bed where he'd laid down so briefly, then grabbed his keys and wallet and headed downstairs. He glanced at Lorraine's body, still unmoving, lying in a crumpled heap in the corner. He hated like hell to leave her there and not call for help, but he didn't know how he could call an ambulance without implicating himself. It was three-thirty in the morning. His parents would arrive by eight-thirty or nine, just about five hours from now. They would find her and get her to the hospital. It might be too late for Lorraine, but maybe they could at least save the baby.

Vernon knew he needed to get out of here right away, before early risers started to get up and someone noticed him getting in his car. He took one last look at the form on the floor, then quietly went out into the night, leaving her lying unconscious in the dark.

###

Want to find out what happens next? Be sure to read **Secrets & Sins** by Bettye Griffin, coming Fall 2013! Click [here](#) to check the availability of this eBook, and either order from my website at a discounted price (available in a format for all devices), or from major retailers like Amazon and Barnes & Noble!

A Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this prequel to **Secrets & Sins**. Please share [this free link](#) with your friends who enjoy a good story.

As for Lorraine and Julia, some (not all) of the questions you may have about them will be answered in the following pages, which are the opening chapters of **Secrets & Sins**. At the time this prequel is being uploaded, **Secrets & Sins** has not yet been published, but please check my [eStore](#), where prices are always discounted, to see if it's ready for purchase (the product page will have links to Amazon and Barnes & Noble, if you prefer to purchase from those sources). My eStore will also list my other books. If you'd like to be notified when this eBook is published, you can send me an email at bettye @ bettyegriffin.com (no spaces) with "Secrets & Sins notification" in the subject line and I will inform you!

Now, the opening chapters of **Secrets & Sins**!

Excerpt, Secrets & Sins

Chapter 1

Chicago, Illinois, 1955

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, but the voice that answered Roscoe Scott's call was heavy with sleep.

"Wake up," he said. "Come to my office. I need you for a job."

"Yeah, sure. Be there in an hour. Get some sandwiches, will you?"

Roscoe rolled his eyes. Wilbur Slye, "Sly" to his friends, had come to Chicago from the same Mississippi town as Roscoe to seek his fortune, but had drifted into a life of petty crime. Roscoe had defended his boyhood friend when the law caught up with him, but he'd been convicted and served several short stretches in jail. Then Sly fell in love and reformed himself in order to win the hand of his lady love. For the last seven or eight years he managed to avoid arrest, even though his work wasn't entirely legal. He'd found his niche, working as a bouncer at bars at night, and as an enforcer during the day, going after people who had slacked off on paying their bills due to Roscoe and other independent colored businessmen who got stiffed by their clientele. Sly was a menacing-looking man, six foot three, built like a linebacker, and could run like one, too. The brother could look mean, too, when he wanted to, although to Roscoe, Sly's menacing expression reminded him of a sulking child. That was probably because he remembered

Sly, who was three years his junior, as a child.

“Just get your ass over here,” he growled, and hung up.

Roscoe sent his secretary to the coffee shop for club sandwiches and Cokes. Sly wolfed his down, then said, “So who owes you this time?”

“It’s not a collection issue. I need you to find somebody for me.”

“Who?”

“Vernon Pace.”

Sly nodded. “I heard he jacked up his wife.”

“Yeah. She’s in the hospital with a broken back. Her baby died a few hours after birth, and the doctors just told her she’ll never have another one.” Roscoe watched as Sly’s eyes narrowed and his hands clenched into fists, making him look quite fearsome. His friend was a giant, but a gentle one who treated his own wife like a queen. He knew Sly was likely thinking of someone doing that to his own daughters, at least after they were grown. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “Imagine doing that to a woman.”

“Where’s the muthafucker?” Sly growled.

“I hope he’s still in town. The Paces own funeral homes plus other businesses in Indiana and Michigan, even up in Wisconsin, and they have family in all those locations. But I think he might just be keeping a low profile. He knows the police aren’t gonna much care, and besides, it’ll be next to impossible for Lorraine to prove that he pushed her. I want you to find him and bring him here, anytime after dark. Ethel will be gone by then, and Julia won’t be here until about nine-thirty, after visiting hours at the hospital are over.” Roscoe wanted neither his secretary nor his daughter to know about any possible strong-arm tactics he planned to use on Vernon to get him to do the right thing. “I already told Lorraine I’d handle the divorce for her, and I want to make sure he doesn’t give her a hard time. I want him to provide for her, and I’ve made up a document for him to sign attesting to that. So far, Lorraine has covered for him and not told the doctors that he struck her and caused her to fall down those stairs. I’m going to tell him that if he doesn’t agree to pay her alimony, she’ll tell the police he did it, and he’ll be arrested.”

Sly picked up his ever-present toothpick and reinserted it between his teeth. “I can probably find him easy. He has a couple of favorite bars, and sometimes he goes to Al Giddings’s barber shop. They usually have a card game going in the back.” He leaned back in his chair. “He’s a punk, Roscoe. His family’s got money, and he thinks he can get away with anything. Whatcha gonna do if he sits there and taunts you, says to let the bit—uh, let the girl make her own way?”

Roscoe smiled. “That’s why I want you here when I talk to him. And why I don’t want anyone to know that he left with you. Get into his car and crouch in the back seat, then take over the wheel and drive him here.” He provided Sly with the make, model, color, and license number of the vehicle Vernon drove.

Sly smacked his right fist into his left palm. "If he makes a smart-ass remark I'll knock him all the way to Eighty-Eight." He referred to their Delta hometown. What kind of man messes up a woman so she can't have babies? If that was my daughter I'd snuff him out like the snake he is." Sly and his wife had two young daughters and a son.

"I admit I wanted to kill him myself. Lorraine is like a second daughter to me. But you've got a good thing going, Sly, and so do I. We'll both have to control our tempers, because I'm afraid that if I slug him even once I'll forget myself and keep going until my fists get tired. We'll just get him to sign that document and make sure Lorraine is taken care of, and then I don't ever want to see that smug mug of his again."

In her twenty-one years of living, Julia Scott had never realized how hard it was to try and comfort someone when all you wanted to do was cry yourself.

Still, she dutifully rocked the mother of her best friend in the back seat of a taxi. "It'll be all right, Miss Trudy," she soothed. "Lorraine is still young. She'll put this whole unpleasant episode behind her and move on."

"But I was so sure Vernon would be a good husband to her, Julia! He comes from such a good family. Can you blame me for wanting her to marry him? I envisioned her having a wonderful, happy life. Nothing like mine, filled with cooking, cleaning, and ironing." She sniffed loudly. "If only I knew then what I know now..."

The magic words, Julia thought. She couldn't help feeling annoyed with Trudy Hawkins for practically pushing Lorraine into Vernon's arms. He had a well-earned reputation as a ladies man, and he had both the looks and the money to back it up. Lorraine had been just twenty and had serious misgivings about his ability to settle down. A good mother would have urged her daughter to follow her instincts and say no, or at least insisted she put it off six months or a year and let time prove whether or not he would be true to her, but instead, Trudy had encouraged Lorraine to accept Vernon's proposal and marry him quickly. Julia's own mama, who was deaf, recognized Vernon for what he was at the wedding and told Julia in sign language that a tomcat like that couldn't overcome his ways any more than a leopard could change his spots. But Trudy Hawkins had been blinded by the Pace family's prestige and money. Her first name should've been Sadie, Julia thought with bitterness. But instead of running after a man herself, she shoved her daughter at one.

But part of her felt a little sorry for Miss Trudy. For the rest of her life she would have to cope with the part she'd played in the high price Lorraine had paid for entering into marriage with a playboy whose drinking was clearly out of control.

"I was only thinking of her, Julia," Trudy cried, as if she were looking to her daughter's friend to assure her she wasn't to blame. "I didn't want her to have a hard life like me. I wanted her to have a solid marriage with a good provider who'd take care of her and stick by her, not leave her high and dry. I was only thinking of her."

"I know you were, Miss Trudy," Julia managed to say through gritted teeth. She didn't relish trying to convince the older woman that she had no fault in this, but she had to say something comforting in this tragic situation. As heartbroken as she was for what had happened to her friend, Julia couldn't truly blame Trudy for wanting a good marriage for her daughter. Life didn't hold many choices for poor colored women, and both Trudy and Julia's own mother worked as live-in domestics for wealthy white families in the north Chicago suburbs. Unfortunately, Trudy had allowed her hopes for an easier life for Lorraine to override her gut instincts about Vernon's limitations. Lorraine felt she could count on her mother to help her make the right choice. It had been a tragic mistake, for Vernon Pace had no business marrying anyone. A dapper dresser whose trademark was his spit-polished wingtip shoes, all he'd wanted to do was drink and bed down with as many women as he could. He'd probably only agreed to marry Lorraine because she refused to sleep with him otherwise.

Julia closed her eyes in relief when the cab pulled up to the colored hotel where Miss Trudy was staying, courtesy of Julia's generous father. "You try to get some sleep, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Trudy sniffled again, then blew her nose. "Let me give you something for the cab."

"No, that's all right. I'll take care of it. Don't worry, my daddy will reimburse me."

"Roscoe's a good man. That was so sweet of him to pay for my room so I wouldn't have to commute to Winnetka every day." Trudy broke down again. "Oh, Julia! You don't know how lucky you are to have such a good daddy to help you. My man ran out on me when Lorraine was two." Another burst of tears. "I only wanted the best for her, I swear."

Julia didn't doubt that, and she felt herself softening toward the older woman. "Of course you did, Miss Trudy. Now you go on in and get some sleep." Julia gently pushed Trudy out of the back seat. She leaned back and sighed, then gave the driver the address of her father's law office.

Chapter 2

Stony Island Avenue was fairly quiet on this early September evening. The days were getting shorter; the sun set during rush hour. Like the rest of the businesses on the block except for bars, restaurants, and a stray store here and there, the law offices of Roscoe Scott were closed, but Julia knew he would be there. He'd promised to wait here for her when she left Lorraine's hospital room so they could ride home together. Julia had been staying with him at his home in Bronzeville since she'd been attending the University of Chicago, because it was easier to get to her classes from here in the city than from her mother's cottage on the grounds of her employer's estate in the monied suburb of Winnetka. Julia wished she could see her boyfriend, Melvin, tonight, but she knew her father would never permit him to call on her after nine o'clock at night. She truly loved Melvin, but right now she needed her father more.

Julia paid the cab driver, then slipped into the stairwell leading to her father's second floor offices above a bank. She heard voices from her father's inner office and called out to him. The tall frame of Roscoe Scott quickly appeared in the doorway, closing the door behind him. Julia, in need of comforting, ran toward him, letting her tears fall freely. Miss Trudy had been right about one thing: She was damn lucky to have her father in her life.

"Oh, Daddy, I feel so bad," she sobbed. "Not only did Lorraine lose her baby, but the doctors told her she won't be able to have any more children. Something about the way she fell and the damage to her insides."

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry," Roscoe soothed, his hands rubbing her back. "I visited Lorraine this morning. She's practically like another daughter to me." For a few moments they just stood, the only sound Julia's muffled sobs. "I know it's awful, Julia," he added, "but I'll tell you the same thing I told her: She's a wonderful girl with a lot to offer any man. She'll get through this, and she'll find love again. With a better man than Vernon Pace," he added gruffly.

"Is anything going to happen to him, Daddy? This is all his fault. He's the one who hit her. All right, so I'm sure he didn't mean for her to lose her balance and fall down the stairs, but if he had kept his hands off of her she wouldn't have taken that fall. Lorraine said he was drunk." Julia's lower lip protruded, her hostility apparent in the hardening of her features. "He hasn't even been to the hospital to see her. He actually went back out and left her lying on the floor unconscious." A fresh wave of tears poured from her eyes. It made her physically ill to think of her friend lying at the foot of the stairs, bleeding and wracked with pain, until she summoned the strength to get to the phone and call for help. Julia imagined Vernon sprucing himself up afterward, putting on those damn wing tips he always wore, combing his hair, and, after preening like a peacock, passing Lorraine's unconscious form as he went out for yet more drinking and carousing, ending up in bed with yet another of the easy young girls of Chicago.

Roscoe shrugged. "I'm afraid nothing will happen unless Lorraine tells the police what really happened, but she just told them it was an accident. At this point she just wants him out of her life. She's not interested in getting revenge."

"But Daddy, it's not fair for Vernon to go about his business like nothing happened. Lorraine's life is changed forever. Her baby died, and she won't ever be able to have another. Even once she's single again, what man is going to want to marry her?"

"Julia, there are plenty of people, men and women alike, who aren't able to reproduce." The stern tone of Roscoe's voice reminded Julia that his own late wife had been too sickly to carry a baby. She opened her mouth to say she didn't mean anything against Thelma, who passed shortly before Julia graduated high school, but her father continued talking.

"Lorraine is a beautiful young lady, inside and out," he said. "I'm sure she'll find another husband before too long. In the meantime...well, she'll go on, that's all. Just because she has to."

"Do you really think it's all right for Vernon to get off scot-free? His parents visited Lorraine while I was there. They say they haven't been able to find him."

"Maybe he went someplace to sober up. I wouldn't worry a whole lot about Vernon, Julia. The guilty usually get punished, one way or another."

Julia began to feel better. Her father was so wise. She decided to share her latest worry with him. "Daddy, Miss Trudy is expecting Lorraine to go back to Winnetka with her when she's discharged from the hospital, but I don't think she wants to go. She likes it here in the city." She chewed on her lower lip. Maybe her father could help. He always had...

He didn't let her down. "She doesn't have to go to Winnetka. She can stay right here in Chicago. I'll see if I can find her a job after she recovers, and she can move in with us while she convalesces from her broken back and—" his voice grew tight—"her female surgery. There's plenty of room at the house, and I can arrange with Mrs. Walker next door to have her housekeeper look in on Lorraine a couple of times a day and see that she eats breakfast and lunch while I'm at work and you're in class. She helped me out when Thelma started to fail," he added solemnly. His tone became reassuring. "So don't you worry, Julia."

She let out a relieved breath. "Thanks, Daddy. You always take care of everything." She looked at him questioningly at the sound of a thudding noise coming from inside his office.

He glanced at the closed office door. "Uh, look, sweetheart, I'm with a client right now. Why don't you just sit out here and read a magazine, and I'll be with you in a few minutes to run you home."

"All right, Daddy."

Julia glimpsed through an issue of Jet magazine, which featured ongoing coverage of that horrifying Emmett Till murder last month in Mississippi. Her father, who ranked among the most prominent colored attorneys in Chicago, had served as an adviser to Mrs. Mamie Bradley, young Emmett's grieving mother. The teen's brutal murder in the Delta town of Money occurred just fifty miles away from Roscoe's own hometown of Eighty-Eight.

Julia hadn't been kidding when she told her father that he took care of everything. He was truly her hero. It made her proud to say she was Roscoe Scott's daughter. He easily could've abandoned her and her mother, Miriam, to whom he'd never been married—a fact not known to the general public. He'd been the son of one of the better-off families in their hometown—his father delivered mail to the colored residents—while Miriam had been a penniless deaf mute with good looks and an hourglass figure as her only assets. Eventually Roscoe had married someone else, the daughter of his mentor. Thelma Morton Scott didn't possess a lot of physical strength—she had a heart condition—but she had the ability to give wonderful dinner parties at their home, as well known as much for an interesting mix of guests as they were for the wonderful food. Miriam Dunstan—she informally adopted the surname Scott and maintained the fiction that she and Roscoe

were divorced—could never have managed to entertain the most prominent colored people and wealthy white liberals among Chicago's population. In spite of extraordinary beauty, a deaf woman had few prospects, whether in Eighty-Eight, Mississippi, or in Chicago. But Roscoe had taken care of them. He'd graduated from the University of Chicago School of Law, following in the footsteps of the school's first black graduate, the respected attorney Earl B. Dickerson, and started his career, handling criminal cases and doing pro bono work for the NAACP. Through his connections he met a wealthy couple from Winnetka who wanted a housekeeper who could communicate with their adolescent son, who was deaf, and he arranged for Miriam to get the job. Mother and daughter left Eighty-Eight for Chicago in Nineteen Forty-One, when Julia was just seven years old.

From that point on, Julia had become a "daddy's girl." Roscoe had taken an interest in her grades, brought her to his home for weekends, brought her to the circus and live plays, enrolled her in Mrs. Arnella Hunter Walker's famous charm school for young ladies, and always assured her that she would go to college. Julia knew she had been blessed. Maybe if Lorraine had a father to look out for her, she wouldn't be lying in that hospital room right now.

Lorraine had tried to cover, and Julia hadn't pried, but she sensed her friend wasn't happy in her marriage to Vernon. She'd been thrilled to learn she was pregnant, but now she was devastated at the loss of her child, who died just four hours after birth. Julia, deeply in love with Melvin Cheeks and with dreams of marriage and motherhood herself, was equally excited about being a godmother.

It seemed to Julia as though she sat in her father's waiting room for an eternity, lost in the world of 'If only...' Then she heard muffled voices and dragging sounds coming from her father's office, as if he had someone in there helping him rearrange the furniture. She put the sound of the noise out of her mind, thinking about how she and Lorraine had planned to take their children to the park together, and how their offspring would also be best friends. Of course, Lorraine's baby would be older than Julia's, but they joked that Lorraine would have a boy. By the time she had a girl, Julia—or so she hoped—would be married to her boyfriend, Melvin Cheeks, and they would have a baby girl around the same time Lorraine and Vernon had theirs. Now that would never be.

A new wave of tears overtook her as she struggled to cope with how Lorraine's entire future had changed. Her nose became congested, and she got up and went into the bathroom for a tissue to blow her nose. The toilet roll was empty, as was the dispenser that held those hard brown paper towels. Daddy's cleaning woman must not have shown up tonight. Julia hated to intrude on his meeting, but she had no choice. She needed to blow her nose, and she had no Kleenex in her purse.

She knocked on her father's door, then entered without waiting for a response as she wiped her eyes. "Daddy—"

"Julia, don't come in here!" her father shouted.

She stared unbelievably at the scene in front of her. A mop in a bucket of water leaned

against the side of her father's desk. On the edge of the desk sat a kitchen knife stained with blood, and her father and a man she didn't recognize were bent over a rolled-up rug on the side of the desk, from which two shoe-clad feet protruded.

Men's shoes. Brown wing tips, polished to the nines, worn with argyle socks.

The type Vernon Pace always wore.

She took a few steps forward to see better and gasped when the man's head came into view. The body in the rug was Vernon!

She turned wide, questioning eyes to her father, who hastily grabbed his coat and ushered her out of the office. "I'm taking you home right now."

"My God, Daddy, what—?"

"No questions," he said roughly, practically pushing her out the door. "I want you to forget you were ever here tonight. And I certainly want you to forget what you saw."

She nodded, still dazed. Amazingly, her nasal passages had cleared, probably from shock. Those feet belonged to a dead body, but this wasn't The Wizard of Oz, and those feet didn't belong to the Wicked Witch of the North. This was horrifyingly real.

Dear God! Her best friend's husband was lying dead in her father's law office. How had he gotten there?

Julia descended the stairs as if in a trance. The brief ride to the house was accomplished in silence. Her father went back out immediately after dropping her off, and the next morning he acted as though nothing had happened.

Julia dared not ask any questions, but inside she felt numb. She kept remembering how her father had given Lorraine away at her wedding, kept hearing his toast at the wedding supper, when he warned Vernon that if he ever hurt Lorraine he'd have to answer to him. Everyone had laughed, thinking it was cute. But it wasn't cute anymore, for Vernon had hurt Lorraine, and now he was dead. Her father was, after all, a criminal attorney. He knew a lot of criminals, and that big, fierce-looking man helping to clean up looked like he could snuff out someone's life in a heartbeat.

At the hospital tonight, Lorraine told her that her father promised he'd take care of her divorce. Had he lured Vernon here by promising not to press criminal charges in exchange for a quick divorce? Had that big brute of a man been lurking in the shadows with knife in hand, waiting to pounce?

Julia had always known her father to be an honorable man, but it looked like he'd made good on his threat regarding Vernon. The bloody knife suggested that Vernon had been alive when he came to the office. Surely it was no coincidence that he ended up dead. If her father had conspired with the other man to have Vernon killed, that made him an accomplice, and just as guilty as the one who'd stabbed him.

And now that she knew about it, she'd just become an accomplice herself.

Chapter 3

Kenosha, Wisconsin, March 2010

Julia, wearing a surgical gown, sat up in bed in her cubicle in the preoperative area of the local hospital, a cell phone held to her ear. "I love you, too, Melvin," she said to her husband of fifty-four years. "And I'll be back home just as soon as they discharge me. All right, sweetheart." She held the phone in front of her and clumsily depressed the End button with a finger bent from arthritis, then handed it to her eldest daughter, Faye. "Thanks, dear. I promised your father I'd talk to him before they put me under."

Faye shuddered. "Mama, I wish you wouldn't use that expression. It's creepy."

"Oh, come on. You know what I mean. It's only a colonoscopy. You're a nurse, for heaven's sake."

Robin, Julia's younger daughter, chimed in. "When you talk about being put under, Mama, it sounds like you're about to be buried."

"In that case allow me to clarify," Julia said, laughing. "Before they put me under anesthesia, not in the ground."

"Good morning, Mrs. Cheeks." A nurse greeted Julia as she pulled aside the curtain and entered the cubicle. "I've got a pill for you to take to put you to sleep for the procedure."

"I'm all set," Julia announced. "I figure the sooner they get started, the sooner I can get home." She swallowed the pill with a sip of water, then leaned back on the gurney against the pillow. "I do hope Scott will get to the house and sit with your father," she said, obviously worried. "He's not there yet."

"He'll be there, Mama," Faye assured. "And Daddy'll be all right if Scott is a little late. His issues aren't so bad where he can't manage, and I know he might be a little forgetful, but it's not like he won't remember why you aren't there, or to forget to turn off the stove when his egg is done." Melvin Cheeks suffered from a neurological disorder similar to Parkinson's disease, as well as mild dementia.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. I'd just feel better if I knew he wasn't alone in the house, so I hope Scott doesn't let me down."

"He probably just had a date last night or something," Robin offered.

Julia sighed at the thought of her middle child and only son. "Yes, I understand he has a lot of 'dates.'" Her droll tone made it obvious that she considered 'date' a euphemism for 'bed partner.' Sometimes I think the older he gets, the more irresponsible he becomes. I can't believe he left a wonderful wife to go out and sleep with a different woman every night of the week. He should come to his senses and beg Lynn to take him back...not that she'd take him after the way he treated her. All I can hope for is to live long enough to see him settled down with some other nice girl."

"You're not going anywhere, Mama," Robin said. "And as for Scott, he's just having a midlife crisis." She grunted. "I guess he and Avaughn started theirs at the same time."

For a moment silence hung heavily in the air. The topic of Robin's ex-husband, whom she'd divorced a year ago after nineteen years of marriage when she learned he'd been having an affair, remained a sore subject. They managed to be civil to each other while forced by economics to continue sharing their house, which still hadn't sold, but once Robin learned that he'd gotten his girlfriend pregnant, relations between them had swiftly deteriorated. Robin had struggled unsuccessfully for years to conceive, and news of her ex's impending fatherhood sent her, at forty-seven, into a depression as severe as the one she'd had throughout her thirties while at the height of her infertility.

Finally Julia spoke. "I'm really uncomfortable with the idea of the two of you sharing that house after your divorce," she said. "It can only lead to trouble. Why don't you move back in with Daddy and me, Robin?"

"I can't do that, Mama. I'd still be responsible for half the mortgage and utilities. If I'm not there, it'll be like Avaughn has an invisible roommate. He'll be able to entertain his baby mama, even move them in." She made a face.

"In other words, he won't have any incentive to sell the house," Faye concluded.

"Exactly. And I'll be stuck indefinitely in a part of my life that's over." Robin patted Julia's leg through the thin blanket that covered her. "Don't worry, Mama, it'll be fine."

Julia sighed. "I don't know why you two had to buy that big house by the lake anyway."

"Because it was what I wanted," Robin replied softly. "I felt I deserved to get something I wanted out of my life."

"Of course you do, dear. I didn't mean to suggest otherwise."

"I know you didn't." Robin knew she'd been feeling overly sensitive lately. It had everything to do with her upcoming forty-eighth birthday. Her life had taken a cruel turn in the last year, and if that wasn't bad enough, in two years she'd be fifty.

She looked at her mother curiously. "Shouldn't you be getting sleepy, Mama?"

"I feel fine. Now, tell me why you're smiling like that. I already know it's not an offer on the house, but you seem a little cheerful about something."

Robin smiled. "I can never hide anything from you," she said affectionately. "The girl who's organizing my class reunion told me last night that one of the guys asked her about me. He said he'd heard I was divorced and asked if I was coming. I haven't seen him since our twentieth reunion ten years ago, and even after all that time he was still the best-looking guy in the class. Of course, I was with Avaughn then, so all I could do was admire him from a distance. But he was single then, and apparently he still is." Robin's eyes shone. "So even though the reunion isn't for another two months, I'm kinda excited at knowing he asked if I was coming."

"Sounds promising," Julia said.

"Still single at forty-eight? Has he ever been married?" Faye asked, a suspicious undertone in her voice.

"I don't know," Robin admitted. "But I'm sure he's not gay."

"You can never be too sure."

Robin bristled. "Listen, Faye, there are plenty of men who get married and have kids and then come out. Some men just aren't the marrying kind." She thought for a minute. "Does anyone think Al Pacino is gay?"

"Or what's-his-name?" Julia contributed. "Shirley MacLaine's brother."

"Warren Beatty," Faye supplied. "He's married, Mama. Has been for years, although he was in his fifties when he finally said 'I do.' And to a much younger woman; I think she's about my age or maybe even a little younger."

"Well, I remember when he was a notorious ladies man. I can't say I'm surprised he married someone a generation younger." Julia grunted and mumbled, "These old men are always chasing after young tail."

Faye thought it odd that her mother seemed bothered by older men marrying younger women—it wasn't as if her father had a roving eye—but her thoughts were with Robin. She glanced at her sister, who was still seething over her remarks. Robin's recent divorce had made her super-sensitive these days, but any woman with a lick of sense would be suspicious of a forty-eight-year-old man who'd never been married.

She decided to change the subject. "Mama, I can't believe the pills haven't knocked you out yet," she marveled. "Most people don't last two minutes after taking that pill."

"Just call me Superwoman," Julia boasted. "Seventy-six years old, and invincible." She focused on her younger daughter. "This young man you had a crush on in high school. Do I know him?"

"No, but you're probably familiar with his family. They're pretty prominent in the communities on both sides of the lake."

"What's his name?"

"Pace. His first name is Vernon."

Julia's eyes grew wide, and then she slumped forward, eyes closed.

"Mama!" Robin cried out, alarmed.

"It's all right, Robin," Faye soothed, her fingertip pressed to Julia's throat. "It's just the sedative kicking in. She's got a strong pulse."

Robin lowered her chin to her chest. "It was more than medication, Faye. Did you see that wild look in her eyes?"

"She probably realized that, in spite of all that bragging she did, that she was about to pass out. Of course, if she did that without the sedative, I'd be in the hall screaming for a doctor right now," Faye said with a laugh.

Robin joined in. "That's a relief. For a minute there, I thought she was reacting to hearing Vernon's name."

"Just a coincidence. I mean, how crazy would that be?"

The nurse brushed aside the curtain and stepped into the cubicle. She confirmed Julia was asleep and informed the sisters that she'd be transported to the procedure room at any moment now. "Come on, Robin," Faye said, "Let's go to the waiting room."

Julia saw vivid images in her sleep. There she was, fifty-five years ago, a young woman of twenty-one, shaken from the sight of what instinct told her were Vernon's feet sticking out of that rug, even before she got closer and saw his face. Scenes from both before and after that pivotal moment replayed themselves.

She didn't mention a word of what she'd witnessed to anyone...not the next day when she sent a message to her mother...not when she talked to her boyfriend, Melvin, the next day, not even at the hospital when Lorraine mentioned how Vernon's family members said he'd disappeared. The Paces, and Lorraine as well, believed he'd skipped town to avoid being arrested for assault or worse, since Lorraine's injuries resulted in the death of her baby. Then she kept hearing Robin saying, "His name is Vernon Pace...Vernon Pace... Vernon Pace." She could still hear the name when she opened her eyes.

Julia dreaded seeing her daughters. She remembered being shocked to hear Vernon's name, but nothing after that. Damn that anesthesia. Had the alarm she felt shown in her face? If it had, Faye and Robin were sure to ask about it.

She smiled weakly as her daughters noisily pulled aside the curtain and approached the large cushioned chair where she sat upright.

"Welcome back, Mama," Faye said with a smile.

"You feeling all right?" Robin asked.

"Maybe a little sleepy." Julia's words came out slightly garbled. "What happened to my teeth? I don't remember taking them out."

"Robin and I were on our way to the waiting room when the nurse said she'd forgotten to have you remove your dentures," Faye explained. "We called out to you and tried to wake you up, but you were out like you'd just been punched by Floyd Mayweather," she added with a laugh.

"Finally, Faye put on a surgical glove, reached in your mouth, and took them out," Robin concluded. "It was pretty funny, almost as funny as the anesthetic putting you to sleep so suddenly. Mama, why'd you look so funny when I told you Vernon's name?"

"Did I? I don't remember." She paused. "But since you brought him up, tell me, is he part of the family who owns all the funeral homes?"

"Yes. Do you know the Paces, Mama?"

"I know of them. One of my friends from high school used to date one of them." Julia sought to change the subject. "So tell me, does this young man work in the family business?"

Robin nodded.

"Wait a minute," Faye said through the beginnings of full-blown laughter. "This guy you're so looking forward to seeing at your reunion. He's an undertaker?"

"Yes...what's wrong with that?"

Blood rushed to Faye's brown face, making her complexion brighter, and she dissolved into uncontrollable mirth that shook her entire body. "What's wrong with that? Come on, Robin. It's bad enough to see dead people, but this man touches them. If you don't care where your man's hands have been, you might as well start dating a gynecologist. They make a lot more money." She laughed once more.

Julia, momentarily forgetting her dilemma, joined her, then, seeing Robin's distress, gestured for Faye to stop as she struggled to regain composure. "Robin, we don't mean to laugh."

"No, we don't," Faye said through one last giggle. She cleared her throat. "We really don't," she repeated, this time sounding more convincing.

"There's nothing wrong with making a living by burying people," Robin said indignantly. "It's a decent, honest living. Besides, before you call someone else's profession disgusting, Faye, maybe you should look at your own. You spend all day treating skin ulcers and wounds. Is Godfrey ever reluctant to touch you because of where your hands have been?"

Julia leaned back into the pillows, for once content to listen to her daughters bicker as Faye rushed to her defense and that of her husband. She knew that Robin, sensitive about her inability to conceive and living in an incredibly stressful situation, was a little envious of Faye's long and stable marriage and her two grown daughters. Normally Julia would attempt to bring a halt to all the fussing, but this time she sat back in her bed and became lost in two very pressing concerns.

Her first was for Robin. Like Faye, Julia found the whole undertaker thing a little distasteful, but if Robin didn't mind, she certainly wouldn't object. But the fact that this younger Vernon was a member of the large Pace family and had obviously been named for his late uncle unnerved her. The Vernon she'd known was a ladies man who couldn't keep his penis in his pants, and was well on his way to becoming a drunkard as well. What type of man was his namesake? If he was anything like Vernon I, she didn't want him anywhere near her child...and the fact that the child in question would soon be forty-

eight years old made no difference.

As much as Julia wanted happiness for her baby girl, she already worried that a relationship between Robin and Vernon Pace had the potential to bring out the secrets she'd worked so hard, and for so long, to conceal. Even her late mother, God rest her soul, had gone to her grave not knowing the entire truth, only the part of her father's betrayal that couldn't be concealed. That betrayal haunted Julia for years and had kept her from fulfilling her daddy's deathbed wish. After all this time—Roscoe Scott had died in Nineteen Ninety-Five—she'd stopped thinking about it, was no longer haunted by it, and when she said her final goodbye to her father as his casket was lowered into the ground in the Mississippi town where he'd been born, at last she felt she could put the whole sordid mess behind her. Only one person still alive besides Melvin knew the whole truth... and Julia never expected to see that person again.

But all that might change if anything serious developed between Robin and Vernon's namesake. The entire Pace family, whether they lived in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, or Wisconsin, knew what transpired less than a year after Vernon I's murder, and if they weren't suspicious of Roscoe before, surely that changed after his subsequent action. Roscoe, to his credit, had done such a masterful job of covering his tracks that they had no proof. But if the Pace family were ever to find out that Robin was Roscoe Scott's granddaughter, all the Scott family secrets could spill out like ketchup out of a bottle.

Julia always presumed that both sordid secrets would die with her and Melvin. It just wasn't fair to be threatened with exposure after over fifty years.

But if anything of substance did develop between Robin and Vernon II, how on earth was she supposed to keep the truth from coming out?

Secrets & Sins, coming Spring 2013!

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