Unexpected

1973…

Idella Baxter looked at the clock again. *This makes no sense. No sense at all. When she gets here today I'm going to give her a piece of my—*

The painted metal door opened, and Sadie talked as she sashayed in beneath the Addison Restaurant and Catering sign. "I went to the club last night and I met this fine, fine man." She stopped in the middle of the floor. "Turns out"— Sadie's eyes closed, slowly —"he was the lo-ove master. Heaven couldn't be that good."

"You need to quit," one worker replied.

"What club wuz-it?" another woman said. "Tonight I'm gonna go there and stand in the exact same spot and see what happens to me."

Laughter erupted all around but Idella didn't find it funny.

"Since Sadie will probably never get to heaven,"I— she sealed a large tray of deviled eggs with plastic wrap— "I guess she'll never know if that's true or not."

Sadie cut her eyes. "You just jeal—"

"Is this how young folks in Memphis say hello these days?" Helen pushed a sprig of solid gray hair beneath her hair net.

"Hey Miss Helen," Sadie broke into a too ready smile. "How you doin'? I'm not gonna ask Idella. She's obviously in a bad mood."

"I'm in a bad mood because you're late as usual." Idella glared. "I got permission to leave early today. But because you're an hour late, I've been working like a Hebrew slave to make sure the Breckinridge order will be ready for tonight."

Sadie slowly tied her apron. "You don't look hurt none to me."

Idella put her hand on her hip. "That's not the point, Sadie. We get paid to do a job here. Now, since we both are responsible for this order, if you want to give me your hourly wage for the work I did for you, that'll be fine with me."

"I ain't givin' you nothin'," Sadie said.

"Well you better start getting here on time or I'm going to report you to Mr. Addison."

Sadie's face hardened. "You would, wouldn't ya?" She turned her head. "Just cuz you look like 'em don't mean you have to act like 'em."

"Say what?"

"You heard me." Sadie leaned toward her. "Just cuz you're near white don't mean nothin' to me."

Idella just looked at her. "You know what? I'm not taking this from you today." She slammed the refrigerator door. "And before I prove just how black I am…I'm going to leave." She took the plastic bag with her dress in it from the closet.

"I'm not scared of you," Sadie retorted.

"Sadie. Why don't you leave Idella alone." Helen said. "I get tired of you messin' with her about how she looks, so I know she's got to."

"Well you need to tell her to stop gettin' on my nerves. She thinks—"

Idella closed the bathroom door so she wouldn't hear the rest of it.

Later, on her way home from The Urban League, Idella thought about what Sadie said. She'd had similar conversations throughout her life, and by now Idella was more than tired of the subject. Is she black? Is she white?

My God. Idella turned down East Parkway. *If you must know, I am black. But then that's according to who you talk to. If you talk to folks who know my grandmother, MaMary, then they definitely agree. If you talk to white people who find out that MaMary is my grandmother then they agree. But if you're talking to some black folks*

who simply look at my skin color, my hair and even my eyes they'll tell you and me in a minute, 'She ain't black. I don't know what she is, but she ain't black. She rolled her eyes. *If I had a nickel for every time I had to run the subject of what race I belong to through my mind, at twenty-three years old, I'd be a rich woman today.* She looked down in the plastic bag at the neatly folded Addison Restaurant and Catering uniform she carried. *But right now me and MaMary are so far in the hole we are about as poor as you can get.*

Idella thought of her grandmother. She shook her head and smiled. That's not how MaMary saw it. MaMary saw things differently from most people. She insisted they were rich in a way many people never could be. MaMary said their wealth was in the love they shared. Deep in her heart Idella felt it was true.

Idella took in the dogwood trees that were in full bloom. They lined both sides of East Parkway and decorated the crystal blue sky with puffy branches of white. The view was a stark contrast to the previous street. Idella couldn't help but admire the flowers and carefully edged lawns that enhanced the expensive houses. *If you can call these houses*, she thought. *My God, I wonder how many people could live in one of these places*. *MaMary and I make out fine in the shotgun house we live in. When I think about it, these houses look more like hotels than homes. And the funny thing is you never see anyone going in and out of them.* She checked to make sure she was right. *I've never seen one person go in or come out. Not one. Maybe they wait until ordinary folks like me aren't looking. Maybe the splendor of such a human being would burn my ordinary eyes.* She laughed to herself, but stopped when a car door slammed close by.

Idella walked a few more yards pass a barrier of tall manicured hedges. She was shocked to see a young black woman about her age, walking from a side driveway toward the front of a huge house. She was dressed impeccably, with shoes that totally matched a pantsuit of unusual green, and her hair looked as if she had just come from a downtown beauty shop. Her purse hung on her arm as she proceeded up the driveway then cut

across the rich, green grass. Idella stared.

She didn't see Idella and that was fine with her. It gave her an opportunity to study her further. Magnetized, Idella admired how she held her head high as if she knew she was somebody. As if she knew where she was going and what the world thought of her. Idella thought she had never seen anyone her age so….

Suddenly, the woman dropped to the grass as if an unseen force from the sky knocked her down. Her body began to quiver. Then it trembled and quaked as her head thrashed about violently.

Idella was stunned, but that only lasted a moment. MaMary had experienced seizures so Idella knew what to do. She ran toward her. On her way across the lawn she picked up a sturdy stick to keep the woman from swallowing her tongue.

Oblivious to her new dress, which had taken two months to get it out of the lay away, Idella dropped to her knees beside her.

"Hold on," Idella said. "Hold on. I'm going to help you."

She threw the plastic bag with her uniform in it to the side and removed the loose bark from the stick. "Here, I gotta put this in your mouth." It took some effort to hold the woman still enough to place the wood inside her clenched teeth, but Idella managed to do it. Out of breath, she looked down at the woman then up at the house. Idella didn't want to knock on the fancy door and tell the white people inside that there was a black woman on their lawn who needed help. But when Idella looked at the unconscious woman again, she felt she had no choice. She patted her shoulder. "I'm going to get you some help. I'm going to go right up to that house and get you some help."

Idella ran to the door. At first, her knock was hesitant. But when she looked at the woman who continued to spasm, her knock grew stronger. Then she saw the doorbell and Idella pushed it, hard. Moments later a maid opened the door.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm so sorry." Idella apologized. "I don't want to cause any trouble for anybody, but there's a woman out here who's having a seizure." Idella

pointed. "I didn't know what else to do. Do you think someone here could help her?"

The maid looked at Idella, opened the glass door and stuck her head out. "Oh sweet Jesus, it's Miss Patricia! It's Miss Patricia!" She flung the heavy inner door open. "Miss Rachel! Miss Rachel!"

Through the glass Idella watched her run up a curved staircase.

"Miss Rachel!" the maid yelled

"What is it?" Idella heard a faint, cultured reply.

"It's Miss Patricia. She's having one of those seizures out on the front yard."

"Oh no!" A beautiful woman in a cloud of peach material hurried down the stairs. "Don't just stand there, Ruth, go get Sam. Go get him," she ordered the maid as she ran toward the front door.

Idella stepped back as the woman rushed past her, ran across the grass and knelt beside Patricia. "Oh, my baby! Goodness. My Goodness. You're going to be alright, Sweetness. You're going to be alright."

Idella couldn't believe her eyes. She couldn't believe it. A black family lived in this house; a black family with a black maid. She watched Rachel soothe and pat her daughter's hair as the tremors subsided.

"You're going to be alright." Rachel repeated before she looked up and down the street apprehensively. "Sam, what took you so long?" she demanded as a large black man in overalls came running from the back of the house.

"I was in the back doing some work, Miss Rachel."

"Well I need you to get Patricia up off this lawn. She doesn't need to be laying out here for everybody to see. Pick her up, Sam, and get her in the house."

"Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am." He scooped Patricia up as if she was nothing. Idella watched as Rachel reached the house first. She opened the door so he could carry Patricia inside. Rachel was about to close the door when she noticed Idella for the first time. "Who are you?"

"Miss Rachel." Ruth said from somewhere inside. "She was the one who told me Patricia was out there."

"Thank you." Rachel softly touched Idella's arm. "Thank you so much." Her gaze swept Idella's face. "You must come in. Please come in and close the door."

Request

Idella stepped inside. Immediately, her feet sank into a thick, tan carpet. It blanketed the entire area, then disappeared into rooms off both sides of the foyer and up the staircase. She didn't know what to say or do, but her hazel eyes had a life of their own. They widened as she looked at the expensive statues, paintings and furniture.

"Ruth," Rachel called as she mounted the stairs, "get this young lady whatever light drink she wants. And put her in the sitting room. I must see after Patricia."

"Yes, ma'am. I will take good care of her," Ruth replied.

"Sam did take Patricia to her room, didn't he? I'm just so upset." Her hand went delicately to her forehead. "I should have instructed him to do so. I know he took her to her room, didn't he?"

"Of course, Miss Rachel," he maid said. "He wouldn't take her anywhere else. He's probably placed her on the bed right now."

"I don't know what else could happen to us in one day." Rachel sounded distress as she reached the top of the stairs. "I don't know if I could take anything else today, not one more thing."

Idella watched Rachel disappear down the hallway above her.

Ruth watched as well. "Well you heard what Miss Rachel said." She tugged at her maid's apron. "So you can come with me to the sitting room."

"Yes, ma'am," Idella replied, acutely aware of everything including her new dress that now had a grass stain on it. Idella covered the stain with her plastic bag.

She followed Ruth who walked with an air of confidence. She watched the maid carefully slide open a pair of doors decorated with rectangular panes of frosted glass.

"And, here we are." Ruth announced. "You can have a seat wherever you wish."

Idella picked the chair that was closest to her. It faced a large window that looked out onto the street.

"So, what would you like? Ice tea? Lemonade?"

But Idella didn't hear the question. Her eyes remained focused on the window. She could see East Parkway clearly. Idella thought of the times she had walked down the street wondering what went on in these houses. Now here she sat in one them, having a glimpse of the world that always seemed so far away. "A sitting room," she said, unconsciously.

"Yes Miss, this is a sitting room," Ruth said. "Have you never been in a sitting room before?"

Idella looked at her. She shook her head. "No, ma'am, I haven't."

Ruth's face relaxed. "Well, before I came to work here, neither had I."

They smiled and Idella felt comfortable enough to share what she was thinking.

"It's just that I always wondered who lived on this street." She sat forward. "Why I know I've walked past here and wondered who lived in this very house. I never imagined that the people who did, that they were…." She looked down.

"That they where black like you and me?"

"Yes." Idella looked at the maid.

"Well they are, honey. And believe you me, there are many more like them here in Memphis. And as I've come to know, they are everywhere in this country, but it's a closed group, you know. You either have to be born into it or invited in."

"Really?" Idella's eyes widened again.

Ruth laughed. "Don't take me so seriously, even though I am telling the truth." She cleared her throat. "But it's not for me to be telling you about it. My job is to offer you some ice tea or lemonade."

"I'll have some ice tea," Idella said

"All right then. I'll be right back." Ruth walked out of the room.

Idella looked around. She touched the soft, burgundy material of the chair in which she sat.

"How's she doing, Sam?" she heard Ruth ask somewhere nearby.

"She's doing okay. Coming around. But it's Miss Rachel that I'm more worried about."

Ruth's voice lowered. "That woman's your boss and another man's wife. She don't need you to worry about her. I've seen how you've been looking at her lately."

"And I don't need you to tell me what to do. I'm a grown man."

"Well you better act like it," Ruth said. "Act like it and think like it. You're just a gardener here. And if you ever start thinking you could be more you're going to get in trouble. I recommended you for this position because you're my cousin and I care about ya."

There was a pause.

"Does she have these often?" Sam asked.

"No. They started late in her teens from what I've overheard Miss Rachel say. The doctor first called it adolescent epilepsy. But here Miss Patricia is twenty-four years old so I don't know about that. But this one has Miss Rachel totally upset because she ended up falling out in the front yard."

"What do you mean?"

"She's upset 'cause Miss Patricia fell out on the front lawn where anybody and everybody could see her. You know how concerned with appearances they are around here. And I can understand that. How's it gon' look to the neighbors? How's it gon' look to their friends, that Miss. Patricia's got epilepsy?"

"It's a disease," Sam said. "Even I know that.' So what can they do 'bout that? Folks should take it for what it is."

"Now you've worked here long enough to know that Miss Agnes is intent on

getting Miss Patricia married, and having her married with the label of an epileptic would not do at all."

"Did you get the young lady something to drink?" Rachel's voice floated in.

"I'm on my way right now, ma'am. I'm gon get her some ice tea."

"I plan to join her so make that two," Rachel instructed as she appeared outside the sliding glass doors. "Here you are." Rachel came in and took Idella's hand out of her lap. "I just can't thank you enough for saving Patricia. I don't know what would have happened if she had remained out there all alone and you hadn't come and told us. I can't thank you enough." Rachel repeated.

"It's no problem, ma'am. I was glad to do it," Idella said.

"Here, come let's both sit on the settee. You will be too far away in that chair. I want to know who you are." Rachel descended onto the small couch. Idella sat beside her. "What's your name?"

"Idella Baxter."

"Idella Baxter." Rachel smiled and her eyes beamed sincerity. "Do you live around here?"

"In a way I do. I live several blocks from here. I was on my way home when I saw"—

she hesitated—"your daughter."

"I see." Rachel continued her line of questioning. "Are you married?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not married. I live with my grandmother, MaMary. She was sick not too long ago. I was worried about her, but she's doing much better now." Idella looked down. She felt perhaps she'd said too much.

Ruth brought the ice teas and placed them on a table, then slipped out without saying a word.

"That's quite a responsibility to be looking after your grandmother. I know how it is when you have a family member that's getting older. I can really sympathize with you."

"Thank you, ma'am," Idella replied into Rachel's light brown eyes.

"Do you look like your grandmother?" Rachel asked. "You're such a pretty girl."

Idella looked down. "No, ma'am. MaMary and I don't favor at all. I hear that I take after my mother's side of the family."

"You hear?" Rachel looked surprised.

"Yes ma'am. I've never met my mother." She paused. "It's a long story."

"Well, you don't have to tell me about if you don't want to. The past is the past and there's nothing we can do about it. Isn't that right?"

"That's what MaMary says. She says we've got to look forward to the future and the best way to do that is by working hard in the present."

"And where do you work?" Rachel asked.

"I work for Addison Restaurant and Catering. It's one of the largest, if not the largest, black catering companies here in Memphis."

Rachel threw back her head and laughed. "Oh really? I know all about Addison Restaurant and Catering. My husband owns it. My name is Rachel Addison."

"My goodness." Idella looked around the room again and then at Rachel.

"This is some coincidence," Rachel said.

"Very much so," Idella replied, more nervous than ever.

"And I pay attention to those kinds of things. I really do," Rachel said. "Because all the while I was up there with Patricia, I was thinking about how in the world can I help the young woman who saved my girl. How would I be able to help you?" she said charmingly. "And here you are already employed by my husband. And I know how much you girls make because for awhile I did the books for the company here at home, and now Patricia has taken over that job. So I am more impressed with you, Idella, than ever; impressed that you are taking care of your grandmother on such an income. You must be a very special young lady."

"I don't think so." Idella shrugged. "I love my grandmother and she loves me. So

we take care of one another."

"That is so refreshing to hear." Rachel patted Idella's hand. "I've got an idea. We are considering a companion for my mother. She has been ill recently as well, even though she will not admit it. And I've been concerned about her." Her fair-skinned brow creased. "I want her to have someone who could just be with her during the day, make sure she's not alone when she's doing the things she does around the house. It really wouldn't be a difficult job, and somebody like an older woman would be perfect. Now just from talking to you, and the kind of woman you've grown to be, I believe your MaMary would fit that description. Do you think she would be interested in the position?"

Idella paused. "I don't know. But I don't see why not?"

"I don't see why not either," Rachel replied. "I think it would be the perfect setup. That way you and Patricia could get to know each other a little better as well. And frankly, I'd like to see more of you myself. It's quite obvious you love your grandmother, and I feel it's very special that you're not afraid to express it." Rachel smiled again. "A girl like you, well I would like to do whatever I can to help her. And believe me, the Addisons have quite a bit of pull in this community."

"Miss Rachel, I don't doubt that at all," Idella replied.

Possibilities

This is my boss's family. Idella's case of nerves increased. "Are you certain you want MaMary to come work here, in the house?" Something inside made Idella question such a move. It sounded like a grand opportunity, and it wasn't that she didn't think well of Mr. Addison. From her viewpoint, he was a high class man and whenever she interacted with him, which wasn't often, he treated her well. But Idella had to admit she had heard things, rumors about him: rumors about drinking, gambling and women. Idella had decided it was pure gossip. She ignored the rumors. The truth was it was a matter of survival. Addison Restaurant and Catering kept food on the table and allowed her to buy the medicines MaMary needed. Not that at seventy-two years old she needed that much. In general MaMary was healthy … at least her body was although her memory was not the best.

Idella looked away from Rachel's probing eyes. MaMary said a blow on the head she received during the fire that changed everything was the cause of that. Many times MaMary shared with Idella how she grabbed her up off the pallet right before a burning piece of wood came down in that very spot. It hit MaMary instead. MaMary said it was all she could do to get out of that house full of smoke. Her inner guidance led her to the door and out onto the yard where she collapsed with Idella pressed to her chest. Although MaMary said she was able to save Idella's life, her son, Idella's father, who had been drinking, didn't respond to her cries burned to death in that fire.

Idella looked at Rachel. "It's not that I wouldn't like MaMary to work. If something was to happen… I mean if she wasn't able to do what was expected of her, I wouldn't want it to affect my job. You see, it's the only income we have."

"Why wouldn't she be able to do the work? She'll simply be a companion for my

mother. It won't be difficult, Idella. And I do want to do something for you." She touched Idella's hand. "The more I think about it, the more perfect it sounds. Look at it this way. We both have needs. We need someone to be with my mother, Agnes. And you and MaMary could use the financial help."

Three strong knocks sounded from somewhere upstairs. "What in the world may I ask is going on around here?" a strong, elderly female voice demanded.

Rachel rose from the settee and made Idella stand with her. "Now you go home, and you talk to MaMary about this." She lowered her voice. "And come back tomorrow and let me know what she thinks about it. In fact, bring MaMary if you can. Will you do that, Idella?" Rachel led her toward the front door.

Idella looked into her kind eyes. "Yes ma'am, I will. I will."

Rachel opened the door to let Idella out.

"What is going on around here, I said?" The voice was much closer.

"Goodbye, Idella." Rachel dismissed her.

"Goodbye, Miss Rachel," Idella replied as she glanced at the top of the staircase.

A thin, extremely fair skinned woman was slowly heading down the stairs with a grayish-white braid that tumbled over her shoulder and lay against her breast. Her dusty rose dress fit tightly down to her waist then opened into a wide belled-bottom. She walked with a cane and Idella knew she had sounded the commanding knocks a few moments earlier. Idella felt she was looking at an old photograph, before Rachel closed the door.

"Who was that young woman?" Agnes demanded. "And why hasn't anyone told me what's going on around here?"

Rachel walked over to the staircase as her mother reached the bottom. “Her name is Idella, Mother, and we’re thinking about hiring her grandmother to be a companion for you over the next month or so.” Rachel’s voice turned childlike. “You know you haven’t been feeling that well.”

“I am fine,” Agnes replied. “I don’t need a companion, a watch dog or anything else. I told you that before.”

“I know”— Rachel folded her hands—“but it’s our job to look out for you, Mother. And at this point Roger and I think—”

“That husband of yours thinks?” Agnes walked away.

Rachel fell in behind her. “We believe a companion would be in your best interest and in the interest of the household. She could always do other things as well, Mother. You needn’t worry. She wouldn’t be under foot all the time.”

“And where did the girl come from?” Agnes asked. “She looks somewhat familiar. Is she a friend of Patricia’s? Although I believe I know all of them.”

“No, ma’am, she’s not. Actually she works for Addison Catering.”

“Addison Catering?” Agnes clicked her tongue. “With looks like that if she had the right family, she could go far. But I would assume being a waitress for us implies that her bloodline is not of the right type. If Patricia looked like her”— Agnes’ eyes narrowed as she stared out the window— “there’d be no stopping us. But life dealt her the hand it has, and she’s going to make the best of it.”

Rachel crossed her arms as if to protect herself from the uncomfortable subject.

“How were we to know that Roger’s family had such black sheep in it? And I do mean black. There’s no other way Patricia’s skin would be so brown if it hadn’t been for his ancestors. It surely didn’t come from my side of the family.” She looked at Rachel. “But all that is spilt milk. And there’s nothing we can do but wipe it.”

Rachel changed the subject. “I’ve asked Idella to ask her grandmother if she would work here for a couple of months or so. And see how things work out, of course.

And then we can make a decision from there."

"Her grandmother," Agnes showed dissatisfaction. "So all this hoopla is around a possible companion for me?"

"No, Mother." Rachel took a deep breath. "We had quite an incident."

"An' incident'? Whenever you use that word, Rachel, it means so many things. Can you be a little clearer, please?"

"Well," Rachel paused. "Patricia had another one of her seizures. This time it happened in the front yard."

Agnes turned and looked at her daughter for the first time. "Patricia had a seizure on the front lawn?"

"Yes, Mother, she did. But we got her inside very quickly. It was Idella who found her, and helped her. She let us know poor Pat was on the—"

"Out in the yard!" Agnes nearly bellowed. "My granddaughter laying on the lawn for all the world to see having what you call a seizure. And of course they are not seizures. I have told you that once before. I don't care what that young doctor says. He is too young to be practicing medicine anyway. Epilepsy. There is no epilepsy in this family. None of my descendants have epilepsy. Something else is wrong with Patricia. I don't know what it is but we will find out when we have a doctor who is qualified to diagnose it correctly. So at this point I don't want you or anyone else in this house to use that word, 'seizure', again. Patricia does not have seizures." She shook her head. "What man would want to marry a girl who's an epileptic?" Agnes struck the bottom of her cane against the carpet. Then she stopped and pressed two fingers against her closed eyelids. "And how is she doing now?"

"She's resting in her room. A little upset to say the least . But I think she'll be fine. I've called Dr. Simpson to come and see her."

"After this I don't want that doctor in this house again." Agnes glared at Rachel. "You find somebody else, somebody who can give me a real diagnosis for my

granddaughter, and you get him in and out of here before Gerald comes. He's coming here to see Patricia this evening—

he and his grandmother. It would be a total disaster if he even got a whiff that Patricia was an epileptic." Her hand sliced the air. "Even that stupid doctor says that whatever she has can go away at any time. So I pray it goes away today. It has taken me quite a while to set this meeting up between Patricia and Gerald, and I won't have anything messing it up." Agnes squinted with determination. "Gerald is the right man for my Patricia. He's the right man for our girl." She looked at Rachel with pride. "A marriage between Patricia and a Campbell will be a match made in heaven."