

An Excerpt from

Living Well is the Best Revenge

the debut novel from Elle Bailey

Chapter 1
Living Well

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Chapter 1

Living Well

PAID IN FULL. The dealer stamped the sales receipt and handed it along with the title, registration and keys to Charlene.

“Mission accomplished,” she said as she clutched the keys, grinned a satisfied grin and sashayed through the showroom. Outside, the sales consultant who’d affixed new LVNG WLL personalized plates to the car awaited her. As Charlene approached, he opened the door and helped her settle into her brand-spanking-new, cream-colored Lexus SC430 convertible.

“Thank you,” she said as he shut the car door behind her.

The warm leather seat seemed to embrace Charlene as a forbidden lover during a stolen moment.

“This car fits you like a glove, ma’am. It’s very you,” said the consultant. “Would you like for me to adjust any of the accessories for you?”

She contemplated momentarily. “The top. I want the top down,” she replied and he obliged. It was a beautiful spring morning in Chicago and Charlene wanted to feel the cool lake breeze billow through her hair as she cruised down Lake Shore Drive, or simply LSD, to her luxurious office suite at One Magnificent Mile.

As she drove off the lot and negotiated her way through traffic to the expressway, she telephoned her home computer to review her schedule for the day.

“Good morning, Ms. Brazelton,” said Déja, her computerized personal assistant.

“Good morning, Déja,” she answered.

“Happy 50th birthday, Ms. Brazelton. You have a full schedule today, but I hope you take time to enjoy yourself. After all, this is your birthday and you’ve been working much too hard lately.”

Charlene sighed then responded, “Thank you. I know, Déja. But I was on a mission and now, at long last, it is finished. After this I plan to go on a long overdue vacation so that I can savor the thrill of victory and catch up on some much needed rest and relaxation.”

“Well, that’s more like it,” said Déja.

“What have you got for me, Dee?”

“Laura from Ebony will meet you at your office at 11 o’clock to do an interview about the soon-to-be-released movie based on your book.”

Charlene interrupted, “That’s a lunch date isn’t it?”

Déja responded, “Yes, it is. I couldn’t secure a reservation for you at Boccacio’s due to a private luncheon for the NFL Combine. However, I did manage to get a table for you at the Grand Lux Café.”

“Great,” Charlene said. “What else do we have today?”

Déja continued, “After lunch you have a hair appointment with Weldon, then you’re off to the North Shore Club for an afternoon of pampering with Kiel and company. After your treatments at the spa you have a couple of hours to yourself before Derek picks you up for dinner.”

“Weldon, who is Weldon? What happened to Andre?” Charlene inquired.

“He suddenly had to accompany Oprah on a trip abroad so Charles Weldon is handling his clients while he’s away,” Déja explained. “Don’t worry, he’s the personal stylist for a lot of local news anchors including Diann Burns, Allison Payne and Cheryl Burton.”

“In that case, I guess I’m in good hands because those ladies always look good. So, Weldon it is,” Charlene said. “Besides, today is Friday, one of the busiest days of the week for stylists, and I know no one else can fit me in on such short notice.”

That was the one disadvantage of being one of Andre’s clients. He could be here one minute and gone the next at the request of his most illustrious client known simply by her initial, ‘O’.

Charlene was quite selective when it came to hair stylists. She couldn’t entrust the care of her tresses to just anyone with a cosmetology license. But knowing that this Charles Weldon person had styled fabulous several of the local media personalities alleviated her concerns.

“So Déja, what’s on tap with Kiel this afternoon?”

“You’re scheduled for the ‘Head-to-Toe’ package,” Déja explained. “That includes a signature seaweed facial and body scrub, the hydrotherapy soak, a manicure and pedicure, reflexology and your favorite—the ‘So So Satisfying’ 4-hand full-body massage.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Charlene. “I can hardly wait.” Kiel’s hands should be registered with the authorities as lethal weapons, because he makes me feel like I’ve died and gone to Heaven whenever he touches me, Charlene thought. “Thanks for today’s briefing, Déja. Are there any messages for me?” Charlene asked.

Dee replied affirmatively. “You’ve gotten a few new e-mails. Nothing pressing. Just some birthday wishes.”

“Well, my exit is coming up. I have to go now. If I have time, I’ll check in later. Thanks again, Dee.”

“Don’t mention it. Have a good day, Ms. Brazelton. Good-bye.”

Charlene pressed the OFF button on her cellular phone and placed it in her designer clutch bag on the passenger’s seat. Dee is the perfect roommate, she thought. She doesn’t take up much space. She gives me all my messages. I don’t have to feed her and I don’t have to clean up after her.

Charlene exited LSD and merged onto north Michigan Avenue, Chicago’s answer to Beverly Hills’ Rodeo Drive. She headed one block south, turned right and slowed near the valet stand on Walton Street.

“Good morning, Ms. Charlene,” said Mr. Doc, the valet, as he helped her from her new car.

“Hello, Mr. Doc,” she replied, getting a whiff of his Old Spice cologne.

“Don’t you look lovely this morning. And this beautiful car is especially fitting for a jewel of the Nile like yourself,” he said with a look that suggested the graybeard was undressing her with his 70-year-old eyes. I’ll take good care of it for you.”

Shaking her head and grinning appreciatively she remarked, “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“I can make a few suggestions if you really want to know,” he volunteered.

“Thanks, but I don’t think your wife would appreciate that,” she said as she turned to walk toward the building.

“Well you can’t blame an old man for trying. You have a good day, Ms. Charlene.”

“You do the same, Mr. Doc.”

As she entered the building and made her way up the escalator to the bank of elevators, she replayed the conversation they’d just had. Forget about his wife’s not appreciating it, Charlene thought. I don’t think I would appreciate having an affair with him. I may be 50 now, but if I’ve still got “it”, I want to use it on someone 20 years my junior rather than 20 years my senior.

Charlene got off the escalator at Level 1 so she could take the express elevator up to her suite on the 26th floor. The majestic marble concourse was buzzing with the usual flow of business executives, retailers and wealthy patrons anxious to spend the day being fawned over by the uber-eager sales associates that typified the exclusive shops of tony north Michigan Avenue.

Charlene exited the elevator at her suite and was greeted immediately by her secretary, Matt.

“Good morning, Ms. Brazelton.”

“Hi, Matt.”

“How is the birthday girl today?”

“She’s doing just fine. How are you, Matt?”

“Oh, I can’t complain.”

“Anything I should know about?” asked Charlene as they walked thru the office towards her executive retreat.

“Laura from Ebony will be here in about 30 minutes for your 11 o’clock meeting and I postponed that book signing in Atlanta next week so that you can squeeze in at least one week of ‘R and R’ before the promotional tour for the movie begins.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Matt. Thanks.”

“I’ve got Nancy at the travel agency holding a 7-day, 6-night, all-inclusive package in Grand Cayman. I can confirm it if you’d like.”

“Sounds good, book it,” she replied while leafing through the mail in her in-box situated on Matt’s desk.

She paused momentarily to wonder if her beau, Derek Wright, would like to join her in the tropics. A chill ran down Charlene’s spine as she fantasized about watching the cobalt blue waters of the Caribbean glisten over every inch of Derek’s fine brown frame. She imagined the hot rays of the sun on a mission to seek and destroy the dewdrops lucky enough to cascade from the crown of his

sexy bald head...down the rippling muscles of his bulging biceps...across the sharp creases and crevices of his washboard stomach and just before she could imagine herself entangled in his steamy embrace, she was jolted back to reality.

"Charlene," Matt beckoned. "Ms. Brazelton," he urged while waving his hand in front of her face as if to awaken her from a trance. "Laura will be here any minute."

"Huh," dazed and confused, she replied. "Oh, okay." She regained her focus. "Matt, tell Nancy to make it reservations for two."

"Sure thing, Ms. B."

"Thanks, Matt. I'll be in my office. Let me know when Laura arrives."

"You got it, boss."

Charlene entered her office through the sliding, frosted-glass door. The room was ever so tastefully decorated. The great windows allowed the bright warm rays of the morning sun to fill the room. Her black marble desk, imported from Italy, was the centerpiece of the room. The custom Corinthian leather chair behind the desk was a gift from an Italian admirer. Her credenza and shelves were full of citations and awards she'd earned for her best-selling book, lucrative business ventures and many worthy community service involvements. The teak wood walls were adorned with original artworks, some from noted artists like Picasso and others from lesser-known, newcomers like Donovan, an African-American artist whose work was featured at auction at the DuSable Museum on the city's south side. In a city brimming with artistic, architectural and cultural offerings, the museum was one of her favorites because its exhibits celebrated the lives, works and societal contributions of Americans of African descent. Rounding out the décor were pictures of Charlene's children, Kendall and Nicolai, which added a familiar feel to her desktop and an Ultimatic which circulated a pleasant lavender aroma throughout the office.

Charlene rested her soft lemon linen jacket on the leather sofa near the door. She went into her private bath to primp before the meeting. A short while later, Matt buzzed her office to announce Laura's arrival.

"Laura Johnson is here to see you, Ms. Brazelton."

"Thanks Matt, I'll be right there." Charlene slipped back into her jacket and went out to meet the journalist.

"Ms. Johnson, how do you do? I'm Charlene Brazelton." Charlene extended her hand towards Laura.

"Laura Johnson, Ebony magazine. I'm very pleased to meet you."

They exchanged pleasantries and agreed to walk down the Magnificent Mile to the Grand Lux Café since it was such a picture perfect day in the Windy City.

Outside, the usual vehicles—cabs, cars and horse-drawn carriages—jockeyed for position on the street. And the sidewalks were equally crowded with tourists, shoppers, performance artists and sailors from the Great Lakes Naval Training Station.

Strolling down the Mag Mile, they passed many exclusive shops and hotels starting with a posh Chanel boutique and the historic Drake Hotel opposite Charlene's office at One Mag Mile. A block away, they passed 900 North Michigan, home of Bloomingdale's, Gucci and Lalique, and opposite Bulgari, St. John and Louis Vuitton.

A block or so away, they passed the Hancock Center and Water Tower Place anchored by mega-merchant Marshall Field's. While Charlene and Laura navigated through the quaint little park at Chestnut and Michigan, scores of people buzzed about enjoying treats from Ghirardelli and Hershey's. Others soaked up the sun as they waited to take rides in horse-drawn carriages. Still others strolled in and out of the Ralph Lauren and Armani salons on the south side of the park.

At Michigan and Superior, the ladies passed Tiffany, Saks and the Neiman-Marcus Men's Store. And between Huron and Erie, the two passed a blinding white Apple store just steps away from Cole-Haan and Niketown.

Across the street from Nike's flagship store, Charlene and Laura spied an all too familiar sight—a block-long line of people waiting to get into Garrett's popcorn shop. And minutes later, they observed a steady stream of customers flowing in and out of Crate & Barrel's 4-story megastore at 646 North (Michigan).

Burberry, Coach and Cartier marked three of the four corners at Michigan and Ontario. While the Grand Lux Café and Ann Taylor shared the space at 600 North on the fourth corner.

The author and journalist turned right on to Ontario and crossed over to the south side of the street. As they did, they took note of the limos parked bumper to bumper outside Boccacio's located directly across the street from the Grand Lux. The trendy new bistro was notorious for serving up sumptuous international cuisine and some of the best live jazz in town both of which served to attract the city's most eligible bachelors and bachelorettes in addition to an A-list clientele. Law makers and law breakers from the mayor to the mob frequented the place. Politicos and powerbrokers including the Obamas and the Jacksons, the Reverend and the Congressman, were among those who had tables there. Notables with names like Jordan and Sosa, Winfrey and Springer, Crichton and Turow, Ebert and Roeper, Common, R. Kelly and Kanye made the spot hot. And supermodel Cindy Crawford, comedian Bernie Mac, songbird Jennifer Hudson, the Bad Boy of Radio, Michael Baisden and sexy screen siren LisaRaye all made appearances there when they came home to Chicago.

In the restaurant upstairs from Ann Taylor, the journalist and the author were seated at a table near a picture window overlooking the boulevard. Charlene ordered a bottle of White Zinfandel to go with her Lemon Chicken Picatta and Laura's Cajun Chicken Jambalaya. And over drinks and appetizers the two ladies got acquainted.

While waiting for their food and drinks, Laura took out her recorder and placed it in the center of the table.

"Do you mind?" she asked, nodding at the recording device. "I like to use it for accuracy."

"No worries," Charlene said.

"Good deal," Laura said, turning on the recorder. "Before I put you in the hot seat, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to give us an interview."

"Thank you for taking an interest in my work," Charlene replied.

"OK, let's get started."

Charlene waited with bated breath as Laura studied her notes then fired off her first question.

"I understand that you have a non-traditional background for a writer," she said. "How or why did you decide to become an author?"

Charlene sipped her water then said, “I was in the process of rebuilding my life after a disastrous marriage and painful divorce. And a friend of mine suggested that writing a book may help me exorcise some personal demons and benefit others enduring similar circumstances.”

“So, you had modest goals for writing your book. You didn’t set out to become rich and famous. You were trying to help yourself and others.”

“Pretty much.”

“And now you have quite a following. Some have even described you as a minister.”

Charlene seemed taken aback by her last remark.

“You seem tense or a little uncomfortable,” Laura observed.

“That’s because I’m not altogether comfortable with that title,” Charlene said.

“Care to elaborate?”

Pensive, Charlene said, “How can I put this without sounding like a coward or worse?”

The veteran journalist knew that it was a rhetorical question, so she sat quietly waiting for a response.

After a momentary pause, Charlene said, “Ministry is messy.” She searched Laura’s eyes for a hint of recognition. Seeing it, the author continued. “When you’re a minister, people bring you the ‘stuff’, the unpretty things in their lives, and they expect you to fix them. And because of your position as an authority figure, you’re obligated to help them.” Almost defensively, Charlene said, “And I can’t solve everyone’s problems. In fact, I can barely manage my own affairs. So, I’m hardly in a position to be a minister.” Charlene added, “But I thought that by writing about my personal pain and revealing how I’ve overcome struggles, obstacles, hurdles and hardships, I thought that I could help others.”

“Because that’s really what helps people, understanding your struggle,” Laura added.

“Exactly,” Charlene quickly agreed. “And I thought that writing about it would give them hope and encouragement that they too can overcome adverse situations.”

“I’m feeling you on that.”

“Thank you,” Charlene said, sounding relieved.

As Laura scanned her list of questions, the waiter and his assistant returned with their food and wine. Upon serving the ladies lunch, they departed and the interview continued.

Laura said, “Given the success of the book, you’ve struck quite a chord with women everywhere. Some might even say that you’ve become something of a ‘shero’. How does that make you feel?”

After a long sigh, Charlene demurred. “I try to be careful about accepting titles or accolades.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, because people are sometimes quick to put public figures on pedestals and as soon as that happens, you’ve deified them. You’ve put on them a burden which they were never intended to carry.”

“I see your point.”

“I’m glad you do,” Charlene said. “I mean, let’s face it. No one is perfect. So, it’s almost impossible to live up to that image or standard. So, I’m trying to avoid falling in to that trap by openly admitting to my faults, flaws, fears and failures.”

“I have to say that I think that’s precisely why people are so taken with you,” Laura remarked between bites of her jambalaya. “It’s refreshing to see someone in the public eye who keeps it real, someone who is not afraid to be transparent.”

“If that is the case, then I’m OK with being called a ‘shero,’” said Charlene. “But if people expect perfection, then I’m not the one. I don’t want to be painted with that brush.”

“I hear you,” the journalist replied. Checking her notes, she said, “Let’s switch gears and talk about the book.”

Charlene readied herself for some of the usual questions and Laura didn’t disappoint. She started with a classic.

“The Me You Don’t See, that’s an interesting title for a book. How did you come up with it?”

“Actually, a friend of mine came up with it. She used the phrase in conversation one day. And I have to admit, I didn’t understand it at the time. But as I was writing the book, her words came back to me and it really seemed to fit the theme of the book. So, I decided to use that phrase as the title.”

“I see,” said Laura. “And what exactly does the title mean to you?”

Charlene shifted in her seat then replied, “If you think about it, every woman has at least two sides to her personality. There’s the woman she presents to the world and there’s the real woman – the woman she is behind closed doors... the woman she is when no one is watching...the woman who has issues...the woman she is inside.”

Laura nodded.

Charlene continued, “The woman that you see before you is an author and a relatively successful business woman. But the woman that I am inside is not so well put together.”

“Oh no?”

“Heavens no!” she said emphatically. “She’s got issues. She has insecurities. And she’s had a rough go of it for most of her life. But that’s the side of me that very few people get to see. They see my success and think that life’s been a bed of roses for me. But nothing could be further from the truth.” Charlene explained, “For every morning, there was a midnight hour. For every mountain high, there was a valley low. For every one success, there was a string of failures in its wake.”

“And the person who endured those midnight hours—,” Laura interjected.

“That’s the me you don’t see,” admitted Charlene. “The person who endured those midnight hours, the hurt little girl, the wounded soul – that’s the me you don’t see.”

“So through this book, you’re presenting that side of yourself to the world.”

Charlene nodded affirmatively. “Hopefully that’ll give people a more realistic view of me.”

“And a deeper appreciation for you too, I’m sure,” Laura added.

“Let’s hope.”

“OK, now that we’ve discussed the title and premise for the book, let’s move on to some of the controversy surrounding it.”

Charlene took a much needed sip of wine then braced herself for the next round of questions.

“You seem surprised that your book is regarded as controversial,” Laura observed.

“That’s because I am. That certainly wasn’t my intent,” Charlene confessed.

“I have to admit that wasn’t the impression that I got when I read it.”

“Thank you.”

“I viewed it as more or less a painfully honest story of triumph over tragedy. Is that a fair assessment of it?”

“I would say so.”

“That being the case, how do you respond to your critics and those who label it as another male-bashing book by a woman scorned?” asked Laura.

Charlene savored a serving of chicken picatta then cleansed her palate with a sip of still water. “I don’t know how anyone who’s actually read the book could describe it that way,” she said quickly. After dabbing at the corners of her mouth, she rested her napkin then further explained, “In all honesty, the book is actually a love letter to brothers. It shows how most of our problems begin with men. And I mean that in the best possible way. But if they play a major role in creating our problems, they can also play a major role in solving our problems.”

Checking the time, Laura served up the next question. “Considering your spirituality and religious convictions, the language and situations are pretty strong. How do you respond to those who think it’s a bit over the top in some spots?”

“I respond by saying that the message is key. And I hope it’s not lost on the particularly high-minded or narrow-minded.”

“I like that.”

“Thank you.”

“OK, now I have to admit that one of my favorite characters in the book is your significant other. He sounds like every woman’s dream,” Laura said, carefully couching the next question. “You’ve established a reputation for being intensely private, but I have to ask is his character real or imagined?”

“Before I answer that question, let me explain why I value my privacy.”

“I’m sure our readers would appreciate it.”

“It’s simple—the more people (in your business), the more problems. That’s why I work to keep my private life private. I’d much rather talk about my work. Believe me, it’s much more interesting.”

“But you have to admit that your boyfriend is a central figure in the book and your relationship is a big part of the story.”

“Agreed,” Charlene said, nodding carefully.

“So, how can you expect to keep your private life private?”

“I try, that’s the best I can do,” she said. “If discussing some aspects of our relationship helps others, I’m willing to do it. I just don’t want to get to the point of discussing our personal business for entertainment value. That’s where things can quickly get out of control as we’ve seen in any number of cases.”

“Obviously, that makes my job that much more difficult,” the journalist commented. “But let me see what I can do under the circumstances. Let’s start with an easy one.”

Charlene refilled both glasses of Zinfandel.

“How did you two meet?” Laura asked. “Harmless enough?”

“Sure,” Charlene smiled. “I’d love to have a great story to tell such as he conned my assistant in to faking a book signing and when I arrived, the venue was set up for a romantic dinner for two...and we spent the evening enjoying a lovely dinner and discussing my book. That’s the story I’d like to be able to tell. However, the truth of the matter is that we met at a health club.” After a quick sip of wine, she said, “I hope that’s not as trite as it sounds.”

"I'm only interested in the truth. If it's the truth, so be it," Laura said.

"Fair enough."

"In the book, your companion sounds too good to be true. Was that fact or fiction?"

"Believe it or not, it's fact," Charlene said proudly. "His character in the book is very close to his character in real life."

"Wow! I have to admit, I'm impressed and a bit envious."

"Thank you."

"Tell me about Mr. Wonderful – something that wasn't in the book."

"Wow, that's a tough one," Charlene said, pondering the question.

"In the book, he's a good God-fearing man. He's generous and kind and he sounds extremely handsome."

"True on all counts."

"And you two seem to work together like a team. You really seem to celebrate and appreciate one another."

"I'm glad that came across because we are a great team – at least I like to think we are," Charlene said. "And I really do appreciate him. In fact, I guess the thing that I'd have to say about Derek is that he's my hero. He's the type of man who can see the hurts and needs of those around him. And he'll do anything in his power to heal those hurts or meet those needs."

Laura's raised eyebrows indicated that she was impressed.

Once she started talking about Derek, Charlene couldn't stop. Like a June bride, she blushed and gushed over the love of her life. "It may sound clichéd, but Derek is my very best friend," she started. "He's also my coach...my cheerleader... and my #1 fan," she said proudly.

Laura smiled with a mix of admiration and envy.

"There's a quote that I love. The name of its author escapes me at present. However, the quote is 'A good leader inspires others with confidence in him; a great leader inspires others with confidence in themselves.' And my honey is a great leader. He believes in me and he makes me believe in myself," Charlene remarked. "To be honest with you, Laura, I think that's why I love him," she confided. "He makes me believe in myself." Still beaming, Charlene shrugged adding, "And if that's not enough, he knows all my secrets and he loves me just the same."

"Wow! I guess the only way to follow up that type of response is to ask, when's the wedding?" Laura asked, hoping to get a piece of exclusive information.

"Time will reveal," Charlene said smartly.

"Glad to see you didn't play the coy card," the journalist remarked.

Charlene grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"So, there are plans for marriage. You two just haven't set a date yet. Is that it?"

Wisely, Charlene said, "At this point in my life, I've learned to exchange my plans for the Master's plan."

"Can't argue with that," Laura interjected.

"That said, the honest answer to your question, Laura, is I'm content to enjoy this moment...and whatever God has in store for us."

With the interview and their dining experience complete, Charlene pulled out her platinum VISA card to cover the bill. While doing so, she explained to Laura that she was on a tight schedule and needed to leave for her next appointment. The journalist graciously thanked the author for lunch and the two bid one another

farewell with a good sisterly hug rather than the standard stodgy handshake.

Charlene decided to go back to her office building to get her car in case the appointment with Weldon lasted longer than expected and she had to make a mad dash over to the spa.

Adjacent to Carson Pirie Scott's flagship store between State and Wabash, the hair salon was decorated with an art deco theme. The dominant colors were black and white with shimmering silver accents. It was not as busy as Charlene had expected and Weldon was able to get her in the chair as soon as she arrived.

Weldon was one of those pecan-tan complexioned brothers who was fit as well as fine. He was well-manicured and his wardrobe was definitely tailor-made. A ringer for Shemar Moore, Charlene was somewhat intimidated by men like him—men who looked as though they spent more time in front of the mirror than she. The thought of a man primping more than she did was threatening to Charlene's ego if not her femininity. It was unnerving, unsettling and she couldn't tolerate it in her personal life. However, this type of meticulousness was exactly why she only allowed her hair to be cared for by male stylists.

As she situated herself in the chair, Charlene explained, "Weldon, today is my 50th birthday and I want a new look—something sleek and kind of sassy."

"I see," he said while inspecting the condition and texture of her hair.

"How long since your last re-touch, Charlene?"

"Two weeks," she replied.

He folded one arm under the other and rubbed his chin with his free hand as he stepped back to study his subject. He ran his fingers through her thick, jet-black locks, then he began to nod as though he could see the new look in his mind's eye.

"Do you mind if I cut your hair?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment. Charlene wasn't too keen on the idea of letting a stranger cut her hair. But then remembering the significance of the day, she responded, "Exactly how much hair are we talking about?"

"Well, let's see," he started to explain.

"Oh, never mind," she interrupted. "Surprise me."

"You won't be disappointed," he said confidently as he wrapped a black nylon cape around her shoulders and escorted her to the shampoo bowl.

The scalp massage was Charlene's favorite part of her visits to the hair dresser. Weldon gently massaged her scalp as he shampooed and rinsed her hair with tepid water. His strong, masculine hands and the rush of warm water over her scalp not only cleansed her pores but also freed her mind. His therapeutic touch helped her begin the transition from an accomplished woman of the business world to an irresistible ingénue.

After he rinsed the conditioner and towel-dried the excess water from her hair, Weldon took Charlene back to his chair where he began to comb and cut her shoulder-length hair. He clipped, cut and trimmed until she had a generous two inches remaining on top and even less on the sides and in back. He had her back to the mirror so she couldn't see what he was doing. All Charlene knew was that locks which were once her pride and joy, now lay limp and lifeless on the floor and on the cape draped over her shoulders. She tried desperately not to worry. She thought about starting up a conversation to pass the time but then decided against it realizing that she didn't want to say anything which would distract him

while he still had the shears in his hands. Instead, she just sat quietly and watched television. In the meantime, the stylist sprayed a thermal styling solution on her damp hair and began to blow dry it. Then he sprayed it with a protective sheen and light sculpting spritz. He curled it in an angular pattern cropped forward then used his fingers to pull select sections of hair toward her face for dramatic affect. He used electric clippers to clean up the faded sides and back. Then with his fingertips he applied a small amount of moisturizing gel to the fine layer of hair that was tapered on the nape of her neck. The master stylist finished his work of art by applying another light coat of finishing sheen followed by a stronger holding spritz. He then presented Charlene with a mirror and spun her around in the chair so she could see her new do, front and back.

“Voilà! My gift to you, madame,” he pronounced with a faux French accent.

Her eyes lit up when she looked in the mirror.

“This is perfect!” she exclaimed. Charlene stroked the fine hair which was once her dreaded “kitchen” and checked out her new hairdo from all angles using both mirrors.

She loved the new cut as was indicated by the hefty tip she included in the check she gave to Weldon.

“A job well done, Weldon. Andre couldn’t have done it better himself. Of course, that’s strictly between you and me.”

“Thank you, Ms. Charlene. Will we see you again next week?”

“No, I’ll be on vacation next week. But I’ll be in when I get back, so keep an appointment open for me.”

“Will do. You know, with that cut you might get carded this weekend,” he teased.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, but thanks for the compliment, Weldon. Have a good one,” she said as she started toward the door.

“You too, baby.”

That Charles Weldon is a miracle worker, Charlene thought. She felt years younger even if she didn’t necessarily look it.

The well-coifed woman checked her Movado timepiece then started the engine of her new car.

“I’ve got just enough time to get through traffic and over to the spa for my three o’clock with Kiel,” she said to herself.

When she arrived at the North Shore Club, Kevin, a full-time college student and part-time valet, opened the door and greeted Charlene as she put the car in park and unfastened her seatbelt.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Brazelton. How are you today?”

Charlene gripped her purse and accepted Kevin’s hand.

“I’m fine, Kevin. How are you?” she asked while making her way out of the car.

“I’m cool, Ms. B. This is a hot car! Do you mind if I--”

She turned and glanced at him as if to say, “Don’t even think about it.”

“Just keeping you on your toes, Ms. B.”

“Thanks Kev, but my personal trainer keeps my toes and every other part of this 50-year-old body in good shape.”

She strolled up the red-carpeted ramp and into the club. Staci, the young, blonde/blue, perky and piss-me-off-petite attendant, greeted Charlene in a soothing if not seductive manner.

“Welcome, Ms. Brazelton. Thank you for allowing us to melt away the pressures of your busy day. Here in the confines of our inner sanctum, you will experience pleasures designed to nourish your mind, body and soul. We are pleased that you’ve chosen our haven of spiritual and physical renewal and rejuvenation for your personal renaissance. It is our pleasure to assist you in discovering your best self.”

“Thank you, Staci for such a warm reception. Today, I’m scheduled for the ‘Head-to-Toe’ treatment. However, I’m pressed for time. So, I think I’ll just have the manicure, pedicure and full body massage. I’ll take a rain check on the other services.”

“Ms. Brazelton, you know our philosophy here at the spa,” she started.

“Put me down for an afternoon appointment one week from Monday, Staci.”

“Very well, then, Ms. Brazelton. Enjoy your treatments today.”

“Will do, dear,” Charlene said as she started down the sleek waterfall-lined corridor to the service area.

As she made her way to the locker room, Charlene passed a glass-enclosed state-of-the-art fitness center, a yoga studio, a Pilates studio, a relaxation area and the spa café. At the end of the corridor, she hung a right and found the ladies’ locker room. The area where the vanity and lavatory facilities were located was tastefully decorated with dark wood paneling, black granite counter tops and ceramic tile floors.

Through a glass door on the far side of the room were the showers, steam room, sauna and Jacuzzi. When time permitted, Charlene would slip in there, park in a cabana chair, place a couple of cool cucumber slices on her eyelids and treat herself to a little steam before her treatments. Given her jam-packed schedule today, she’d have to forego the little luxury.

The changing rooms opposite the vanity were immaculate and elegantly decorated with European artwork and accents throughout. The dressing room she selected had the appeal of a stately English manor—very Laura Ashley. As she disrobed, Charlene enjoyed the pleasant aroma of the fresh Spring bouquet on the vanity. She took off her costume earrings, necklace and bangle bracelet then placed them in her tortoise-shell clutch bag. Slowly and carefully she slipped out of her open-toed, Joan & David tortoise-shell sandals. Next, she eased the double-breasted jacket of her lemon-colored linen suit off her shoulders and let it fall to her wrists then onto the floor. Her pleated trousers and olive camisole followed. Finally, she unhooked her black strapless bra and slipped out of it. She picked up the garments and placed them on the Queen Anne-style chair in her dressing room. An attendant would be by later to hang them in the closet. The only article of clothing on Charlene’s body was the black satin and lace pair of panties which she’d recently purchased from Victoria’s Secret. She turned one direction and then another to size up herself in the full-length, three-way mirror. After deciding that she was satisfied with her curvaceous yet firm physique, she covered herself with a lily white terry robe then put on slippers supplied by the spa. Charlene didn’t care how much the custodians scrubbed the floors, she still had an aversion to walking around barefoot anyplace outside of her home. At last, she made her way to the salon where Carmen and Claudia would tend to her overworked hands and tired aching feet.

There were only two other patrons in the quaint salon. The private, intimate atmosphere was precisely the reason why Charlene preferred the spa's facilities over traditional beauty and nail salons. She spoke to everyone as she entered the room and sat down at the station where Carmen and Claudia were waiting.

"Good afternoon, ladies." The clients responded with a chorus of greetings.

The technicians politely acknowledged her, "Hello, Ms. Brazelton." "Hi, Charlene." "Good afternoon, Ms. Brazelton."

She didn't know all of them but they certainly knew her. That high level of service and personal attention was another reason why Charlene liked the spa. Considering their outrageous service fees, however, she figured recognizing her by face and name was the very least they could do.

"Would you care for some water, juice or refreshments, Ms. Brazelton?" asked Carmen as she adjusted the recliner for Charlene.

"No thank you, Carmen. I had a hearty lunch this afternoon."

Claudia pulled up an ottoman and surveyed Charlene's feet prior to lowering them into a warm, milky solution.

"Oh, where'd you go?" she asked.

"Well, Boccacio's was our intended target," Charlene started.

Just then everyone, seemingly on cue, chimed in with comments and questions about the new hot spot.

"Should we believe the hype?"

"How was the food?"

"Did you see any VIPs?"

"Whoa, what's with the 20 questions?" Charlene asked. "One at a time, ladies. One at a time."

"OK, first things first," Carmen insisted. "Did you see any celebrities?"

"I can't say that I did," came the reply. "The restaurant was closed for a private event," Charlene explained.

"Bummer," Carmen lamented.

"It was a luncheon for the NFL Combine."

"Oooh, la, la," she quickly perked up. "What I wouldn't do to lunch with the next batch of billionaire ballplayers," Carmen said fiendishly.

Claudia rolled her eyes. "Don't pay her any attention, Ms. Charlene," she said. "So, where'd you wind up going for lunch?"

"We went across the street to the Grand Lux Café."

"Hey, now," Claudia said cheerily. "I've heard that place is pretty nice."

"It is," Charlene agreed.

"How's the food?"

"Excellent."

"Any celeb sightings?"

Charlene replied, "As a matter of fact, I did see Judge Mathis, Jenny Jones, Bill Kurtis and a few other media-types go in to a private room where the Sun-Times was hosting a reception."

"I declare," Claudia said. "You lead the most interesting life, Ms. Charlene. You're always rubbing elbows with the jet-setters and go-getters. That is so cool. I want to be just like you when I grow up."

Flattered by the young lady's admiration, Charlene smiled pleasantly.

As they continued chatting about various topics, Carmen rubbed Charlene's hands and wrists with a moisturizing lotion. Next, she covered Charlene's cuticles with a creamy cuticle remover then covered them with plastic and placed them in warm mitts to intensify the conditioning treatment.

Meanwhile, Claudia sloughed the dead skin cells off Charlene's heels. A foot file and callous remover were her weapons of choice in the battle to find baby-soft skin on the soles of her client's feet.

Like a queen on her throne, Charlene was in her glory with attendants pampering her and catering to her every whim. She could feel the tension release its stranglehold on every cell in her body. This is life as it was meant to be lived, she thought.

After treating and trimming Charlene's cuticles and nails, Carmen was ready to apply the finishing touch.

"What nail color would you like, Ms. Brazelton?"

A brief pause and Charlene responded, "Let's try something scarlet today, Carmen. I've got a dinner date with Derek tonight and I want to wear something bold and daring."

"So how are things with Derek and you, Ms. B? You two have been an item for quite some time," Carmen said.

"I'm happy with the way our relationship is progressing. We've known one another for about five years and we've been dating for the past three."

Claudia, trimming Charlene's toenails, lifted her head and joined the conversation, "Soooooo...do you think wedding bells will be ringing for you two anytime soon?"

"Actually the topic has yet to come up in conversation."

Carmen applied a red velvet nail color on Charlene's ring finger. Incredulously, she continued. "You mean that you two have never once strolled by Cartier or Tiffany, checked out the serious 'blingage' on display and even thought about tying the knot?"

"Well, the truth of the matter is he's hinted around a few times but I've really been the one dodging the bullet. Once bitten, twice shy kind of describes my feelings on marriage. Besides, I'm no spring chicken and given the fact that I've spent the better part of the past 10 years trying to mend the pieces of my broken life as well as my broken heart, I never really considered a second marriage as an option for me."

"Ms. Charlene!" Claudia sounded astonished as she halted the work in progress on Charlene's feet. "You look and take care of yourself better than many women half your age! And check out that fly new haircut you're sporting today. Girlfriend, you've got it going on for a woman of any age. Any man would be lucky to have you in his life."

"I know that's right! Say that again," agreed Carmen. "Don't let one bad apple sour you on the whole bunch. They're not all bad and from what you've told me, Derek seems to be good-looking in addition to being a good catch."

"What's even more important is the fact that he knows how to appreciate a woman and treasure her as a gift from God," marveled Claudia.

"Speak, sister!" Carmen exclaimed.

"Just like Eve was the crowning glory of God's creation and a tailor-made gift from God to Adam, Derek knows you're the crown jewel of his soul and a personal gift from God to him. Nowadays, too many men have lost sight of that fact."

“That they ever even knew it would be cause for celebration,” Carmen added.

“True,” Claudia affirmed as she applied the final strokes of top coat to Charlene’s toe nails. “The point I’m trying to make, girlfriend, is that he’s the last of a dying breed.”

“Men like him are almost extinct, Ms. B. It’s sad but true,” Carmen said as she sprayed nail enamel dryer on both sets of nails.

Claudia looked squarely into Charlene’s eyes and offered a final appeal, “Take it from me, Ms. Charlene. When love calls, you’d better answer.”

They finished lecturing and polishing at the same time. Charlene admired their handiwork as they helped her out of the leather chair and into the relaxation room. She sank into a cocoon of a chair and allowed the soothing sounds of Kenny G’s classic, Songbird, to carry her away while her nails dried. With her head pressed against the headrest, she managed a response before they shut the door.

“Thank you, ladies, for your service and advice. I will take it into consideration.”

“Do that because I need every chance I can get to catch a bouquet,” quipped Claudia.

“You’ve caught enough bouquets to stock a flower shop!” Carmen shot back at her.

“Talk to the hand,” she sassed as she flashed her hand up toward Carmen’s face.

“Ladies! She’s all mine now,” came a deep sensuous voice with an intriguing accent.

Charlene lifted her head to gaze upon the man behind the unfamiliar voice. He was standing in the doorway of the adjacent room.

“Leave us!” he demanded while snapping a towel to shoo them away from his client.

Giggling, the two bobbed and weaved to dodge the towel-whips. They managed to escape unscathed and returned to their workstations in the salon.

Manuel shut the door behind them then turned his attention to Charlene.

“Hola, Señora Brazelton.” My name is Manuel and I will be giving you your massage. Kiel, your regular therapist, had a personal emergency so he is not with us today.”

“Pleased to meet you, Manuel,” Charlene replied. Her curiosity piqued, she inquired about his background.

“Your accent is unusual, exotic? Where is your home?”

“Brazil. Sao Paulo actually. My accent is a corruption of Spanish and Portuguese.”

“Aaah, I see.”

“My family is originally from Barcelona, Spain. My mother and her family moved to Brazil when she was a young girl. Years later, she met and married my father who was a native of the land.”

Charlene nodded as she listened to his bio.

“I grew up speaking both languages. English is my third. Sometimes when I speak English, the influence of the other two languages is evident.”

“Mm...hmmm. That’s very interesting.”

“Can I bring you a glass of juice or water?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Very well. Let’s give your nails a few more minutes to dry, then we’ll move you into the massage studio next door for your treatment.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Charlene agreed as she resumed her comfortable position.

Her therapist exited the room, gently closing the door behind him.

As the windmills of her mind churned, Charlene calculated the tale of the tape. Manuel was a fine young man, half Latino, half Mandingo. He stood an even 6’0 tall and his 180 pounds were well distributed and well-defined. His skin was naturally tanned and his black wavy hair was cut close on top and faded on the sides and in back. His face was clean shaven except for the cute little mustache which outlined his upper lip and the adjoining goatee.

Though drowsy, Charlene surmised that she was in for a real treat.

A while later, Manuel returned to the relaxation room where he found his patient snoozing.

He touched her hand.

She lifted her head and followed his direction as the newly nick-named “Dr. Feel Good” ushered her into his operating room.

The studio was warm and inviting. The lights were low. Fragrance from vanilla-scented candles filled the air, and Boney James’ Sweet Thing made the would-be seduction scene complete.

Since she was a regular client, Charlene knew the drill. While Manuel stepped out of the room, she disrobed and slipped under the cover atop the table. She lay on the table face down with a warming blanket draped over her body from waist to toe. Minutes later, he knocked on the door.

“Are you ready, Charlene?”

“Mm...hmmm,” she mumbled. She was already on the highway to Heaven.

Manuel appeared beside the table. He bent down and whispered into her ear.

“My technique may be a bit different than what you’re used to. I’m going to use a style and technique that’s popular in my country.”

Unaware of what lay ahead, she mumbled her agreement.

Manuel poured a capful of massage oil into his right palm and returned the bottle to the stand just behind him. He rubbed together his palms to evenly distribute the solution then he pressed his hands into the small of Charlene’s back. He held his palms there momentarily then began to work his way down her body. He pulled back the cover to expand his work area. Seemingly irritated that she was still wearing her underwear, he pulled them down mid-cheek—a move which immediately triggered a response in Charlene.

Obviously, he’s not shy, she thought.

Manuel continued kneading and stroking her posterior region. He tugged so on her underwear that she almost regretted having worn them. Almost.

After what seemed an eternity, Manuel moved on to other parts of Charlene’s gross anatomy. Her thighs, calves and feet received the necessary treatment, then he worked his way back up to her buttocks where he spent more quality time.

“How am I doing?” he whispered in her ear.

Uncertain of what to say, Charlene played opossum.

Finally, Manuel moved north of the equator.

Charlene was relieved.

He waged war on several knots in her back. Some conceded defeat, others held their ground mightily.

He massaged her scalp and nearly every vertebrae in her neck.

Charlene allowed herself to relax a bit since the attention was off of her gluteus maximus.

Again he whispered in her ear. “Charlene, it’s time for you to turn over on your back.”

“Okay,” came her dreamy response. She tried to sound relaxed even though all of her self-preservation instincts were on full alert.

Manuel raised the warming blanket and sheets high in the air to obstruct his view as Charlene rotated on the table. When she was in position, he lowered the drape. Oddly enough, the bed-size linen which was supposed to cover her torso and mid-section, barely covered her nipples which stood at attention under the circumstances.

Clearly, we have some cultural differences at work here, Charlene reasoned. She had to try to put a positive spin on the situation. The alternative was unthinkable. And, though she didn’t want to seem distrustful or rigid or rude, she was concerned about being exposed. So, when Manuel turned to get more massage oil, she wiggled into a position which provided a little more coverage.

Aaaah, problem solved, she believed.

Again, Manuel started by pressing his hands deep into her flesh. This time, her shoulders were his intended target. He used intense circular strokes to work out the kinks in her collar and the surrounding area.

That feels so good. His hands are amazing! Absolutely amazing, she mused.

And just when Charlene thought it was safe to go back into the water, so to speak, it happened.

Once again, his hands were south bound.

All of Charlene’s efforts to conceal her private parts were for naught.

He takes the phrase “full body massage” literally, she realized. Nothing was off limits save her nipples. It was a full contact, full body massage.

What to do, what to do, she panicked.

Eventually, and not a moment too soon, Manuel moved on to Charlene’s arms and hands. First, the right, then the left.

Charlene quietly breathed a sigh of relief as he neared the home stretch—her legs and feet.

This should be harmless, she thought.

Wrong!

After pulling and massaging each toe on Charlene’s right foot, Manuel did the unthinkable. He lifted her leg off the table and put her foot in his chest, thereby leaving Charlene in the perfect position for a pelvic exam.

All of her business was on display.

As if by reflex, Charlene’s eyes bulged and her mouth opened as her leg was hoisted in the air. She was aghast. Her brows furrowed and her eyes darted from one side to the other as she tried to imagine the thoughts crossing his mind.

As Manuel’s hands pressed onward and upward along her inner thigh, it hit her like a ton of bricks.

Oh, my goodness! her inner voice cried. I didn’t even shave down there! She was mortified.

Oh, my goodness! Thank God I kept on my underwear!

A number of thoughts continued to race through her mind as he returned her right leg to the table and lifted the left.

Am I in a health spa or a “massage parlor?” This is just ridiculous! It’s unbelievable! I don’t believe it!

As Charlene mulled over whether or not to speak to Manuel or his manager about his technique, he lowered her leg to the table and indicated that their time together had come to an end.

Not one moment too soon, she thought.

Manuel rinsed his hands then addressed his client.

“So how was everything, Charlene? Do you feel relaxed?”

“Among other things,” she griped as she lay on the table nearly nude.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said that was something,” she backpedaled while grappling for the cover.

“Come again?”

“I said that was something...it was something...different.” That was the best she could offer under the circumstances.

“Different. As in good?” he probed eagerly.

She didn’t want to tell an outright lie, so she couched it as best she could.

“It was definitely different than anything I expected.”

Charlene struggled to find the appropriate words. Sensitive to intercultural issues, she didn’t want to offend Manuel and she didn’t have the heart to break his, so she decided to do what she does best. She treated him to the spin cycle.

“It was unbelievable,” she declared convincingly.

“Good. I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he said proudly.

In that instant, Charlene knew she’d missed her calling. She belonged on stage or better yet, in politics.

Dr. Feel Good continued supplying his patient with post-operative instructions.

“Remember to drink plenty of water and try to soak for at least 30 minutes this evening to help cleanse the oil from your system.”

“I will.”

“Would you like some juice or water before you go?”

“No, thank you, Manuel.”

“Very well. I’ll wait for you just outside the door while you slip back into your robe.”

“That’ll be fine.”

No sooner than the door shut behind him, Charlene grabbed the terry robe and wrapped it around herself. She tied it tightly. After that Sex and the City experience, she didn’t know whether she should report a crime or smoke a cigarette.

Manuel escorted Charlene to the ladies’ lounge and bid her farewell. Once inside her private dressing room, Charlene quickly changed in to her clothes then she visited the restroom and made her way to the lobby.

As she paid for services rendered, Charlene noticed the clock on the wall behind the counter. It was after five o’clock and Derek was coming to pick her up at 7:30.

It's time to put the "rush" in rush hour, she thought as she exited the building.

Charlene pulled her 2-seater Lexus into the driveway at her condominium nestled in the heart of Chicago's Gold Coast. Patrick, the doorman, signaled for the valet who met Charlene as she approached. "A beautiful car for a beautiful lady," admired Patrick as she passed through the breezeway into the lobby.

She acknowledged the compliment and continued toward the elevator without missing a beat.

When the elevator doors opened to her penthouse, Charlene immediately noticed the heart-stopping spray of yellow roses with sprigs of green foliage on the desk in the corridor. She rushed over to read the card.

Mom,

Life may not be the party you hoped for, but while you're here you might as well dance.

All my love,

Kendall

Charlene beamed as she folded the card and returned it to the envelope. After unlocking the door with her key card, she picked up the flowers and entered her domain.

Chic. Très chic, in fact, was the only way to describe this lady's lair. The spacious 3-bedroom, 3-bathroom hideaway was as eclectic as it was elegant. Spectacular views of the lake shore or cityscape could be enjoyed from nearly every room in the home. Polished pine woodwork provided the framework for the neutral color palette with varying shades of taupe, tawny and clay which brought warmth to the open and airy penthouse.

The great room featured a camel-back sofa as its centerpiece and two oversized ginger suede chairs. Ethnically-inspired chintz pillows provided a splash of color for the ensemble. Glass-topped ivory-tusk tables accented the pieces and luxurious mohair carpet covered the hardwood floor beneath the furnishings. Photographs of various events in the lives of Charlene and her loved ones as well as a large oil painting and two huge floor plants were the finishing touches that breathed life into the space.

Across the sitting area, a custom-made maple curio with mahogany shelves housed the impressive collection of tokens acquired during Charlene's more than 20 trips abroad. Among her favorites, three 24-karat gold eggs from Singapore bearing the Mandarin symbols for good luck, prosperity and long life; four miniature porcelain masks from the opera in Beijing; a Lalique crystal koala with black opal eyes reminiscent of her adventures down under; a sculpture made of blown glass which she commissioned in Venice; a unique multi-colored glass

ornament discovered at a boutique in the Burgundy region of France; and, finally her most coveted possession, a limited-edition Swarovski crystal candlestick to commemorate her trip to Geneva. Charlene was a recovering shop-a-holic and never was it more apparent than when she traveled the world. Evidence of her escapades in markets and malls from Milan to Mozambique was scattered about her well-appointed home.

A brick column with a built-in dual-faced fireplace served as a partition separating the great room and dining area which comfortably seated six. The mahogany and maple theme continued with the dining room table which was complemented by russet, velvet, armless chairs. Sconce light fixtures were flanked by African artifacts on the walls that were parallel with the table. While the wall opposite the fireplace was decorated with a beautiful hand-crafted tapestry from Senegal. An exotic silk floral arrangement centered on the table provided a hint of softness to the area.

Just off the dining area, the gourmet kitchen could be found. The Sub-Zero was disguised with a maple face to correspond with the rest of the cabinetry in the kitchen. Black granite countertops matched both the electric range situated on top of the island at center-stage and the oven built in to the room's lone wall. Incandescent light streamed into the room via recessed canisters overhead. At the far end of the room, the modest breakfast nook boasted a tall, black granite-topped table with four complementary bar stools. Finally, Charlene's collection of gourmet cookbooks, savory spices, top-of-the-line appliances and fine wines covered the countertops and completed the heartbeat of the home.

The remaining rooms on the first level of Charlene's posh penthouse – the Jack-and-Jill suite, guest bath, office and bonus room – were decorated in a similar contempo-exotic fashion.

The au naturale color scheme continued on the second floor of the domicile. Atop the rail-less wooden staircase, romantic French doors gave way to the queen-suite. Those who entered the room were immediately spellbound by the breathtaking view of Lake Michigan provided by the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows parallel to the entrance. The terrace immediately outside provided the perfect setting for prayer and meditation when weather permitted. Otherwise, from her four-poster mahogany wood canopy bed at the core of the room, Charlene spent many mornings marveling at the spectacle of the sun rising over the expansive body of water just outside her bedroom window. The bed was dressed with a clay-colored goose-down comforter and an assortment of olive and almond pillows. Positioned on opposite sides of the bed were nightstands of the same magnificent mahogany. In them, Charlene stored books by some of her favorite inspirational authors. The modest library was the only source of entertainment allowed in her private sanctuary. Lastly, candles were strategically placed about the room to help create a tranquil and inviting ambiance when life demanded it.

Continuing through the suite, Charlene's extensive designer wardrobe was painstakingly arranged in the dressing room which separated the bed and bath rooms. Clothing was arranged according to function and season. Shoes – the same. Her collection of negligees and other delicates was wrapped and racked. Fragrances, hats, scarves and other accessories were displayed as if in Marshall Field's rather than a private residence. In addition, Charlene's swimwear, daywear and exercise gear were stored in an island located at the center of the room. Inside the same island was the vault which secured her diamonds, pearls and other valuables.

Concluding the tour of Charlene's home was the majestic master bath. The focal point of the room was a platform which encased a Jacuzzi tub as wide as it was deep. To one side of the baptismal pool was a caramel-colored, double-basin vanity made of marble. It spanned the length of one wall. On the other side, a cylindrical, glass-enclosed shower occupied one corner and the water closet the other. The vanity and matching marble floor were two of few departures from the woodwork and cabinetry employed throughout the room and the home. Flowers and candles placed in various pockets of the room made it seem comfortable and cozy. Last but not least, Charlene's favorite tunes were piped in through a state-of-the-art home management and intercom system.

In the great room, Charlene put the vase of roses on the center table in the sitting area. She strode back to the secretary in the foyer and leafed through the mail which Mrs. Byram, her housekeeper, had collected for her. Most of the mail appeared to be birthday cards from family and friends so she put it aside for the time being choosing instead to focus on a gift addressed to her from her good friend, Lauryn, who'd recently vacationed in Paris and Monaco. Charlene read the card.

Lovely for lovely.

XOXO,

LOL

The short and simple salutation was a sure sign that the young corporate exec was somewhere holed up in an office working, so she decided to e-mail her thanks rather than call. After slipping the card back into its envelope, the birthday girl unwrapped the bow and took the lid off the azure blue gift box. Inside, she found a fancy French fragrance.

"Jaipur Saphir by Boucheron," she said, reading the label.

She sprayed a little of the eau de toilette on her wrist and studied it. Fresh. Floral. Warm with just a hint of sensuality. Very nice, she thought.

"Girlfriend has great taste," she said as she put the perfume back in its package and proceeded to check for phone messages. She wanted to be certain that dinner with Derek was still a go.

Charlene activated her personal assistant with the remote for her home management system.

"Good evening, Ms. Brazelton. Welcome home. How was your day?"

"It was great. Are there any messages for me?" she inquired.

"Yes. You have four new messages."

"Good, let's hear them."

"Sure thing, Ms. Brazelton. Here is message #1."

(Beep)
Hi Mom,

This is your son, Nicolai. I called to wish you a happy birthday. I bought a card for you, but I forgot to send it. So, I'll read it. Here goes...

Live...as though Heaven is on earth...
Love...as though you've never been hurt before
Sing...as though no one can hear you and
Dance...as though no one is watching you

I'll be home in a few weeks and I'll hook you up for your birthday and Mother's Day when I get there. Call me when you get home.

Love you. Peace.
(Beep)

Charlene smiled and shook her head. Nicolai, a junior, Bio/Pre-Med major at Morehouse, already had been accepted to medical school at Duke University. He needed only to survive final exams at "The House" and then he'd be home for the summer. Charlene could hardly wait. Nic and she shared a strong mother-son bond. She adored him and he was fond of her too. On many occasions, he'd told her that she was the benchmark against which all of his potential mates would be measured. In his words, his ideal mate would have to be independent and intelligent; strong yet submissive; classy, sexy and cool. Charlene wanted to add another attribute to the list, African-American, but she knew to hold her tongue. She'd taught her children to believe what she wanted to believe in her heart—that love knows no color and we all belong to one race, the human race. But life had taught her some hard lessons and one of the hardest was that race matters. Though she didn't want to pass on prior generations' biases to the next, the lioness did want to protect her cubs from the biting sting of reality. It was her duty, she reasoned. Just as quickly, she realized that all things considered, Nic's wish list was a pretty tall order for a woman of any race. And the fact that he even had a profile of an ideal mate was cause for celebration. Too many men viewed the ideal woman in terms of her physical dimensions with 36-24-36 being the benchmark. Her son wanted substance over style and that made Charlene proud. The birthday girl turned her attention to the next message being played.

(Beep)
Ciao Bella,

This is your daughter, Kendall, sending you birthday greetings from Milano. I hope you received my token of affection. (Charlene nodded and smiled as she looked again at the beautiful roses and card.) My externship is rapidly coming to an end. I'll be returning to the States in June, but I'm already planning our next holiday on the Continent. Here in Milano and also in Firenze, I've discovered some of the most wonderful boutiques and shoppes this side of the Atlantic. They're simply fabulous and a good spree would serve both you and the local economy well. More later. I have to run now. Fitipaldo and I have tickets for the opera tonight.

Ta-ta.
(Beep)

Charlene rolled her eyes.

"She's so damn proper and so much like her father I could just scream! And who is Fitipaldo? What happened to Olivier? And Guillaume?"

Ms. Kendall epitomized the stereotypical pampered bourgie princess. Nothing less than the best suited her fancy. A Northwestern grad, she was in Europe fulfilling the work experience requirement for her master's program. After spending two years abroad, she'd begin her graduate program at the Harvard School of Business where she would pursue an MBA/JD with a concentration in International Business. Kendall had aspirations of becoming a tax attorney and owning an asset management company. For all of her achievements in the academic and professional worlds, however, the accomplishment of which Charlene was most proud was Kendall's ability to "think globally and act locally". Kendall had started a charitable foundation for inner city youth. It was a faith-based leadership development program for at-risk youth and it promoted values such as scholarship, leadership, Christ-like character and service. Almost single-handedly, Kendall had networked and negotiated with wealthy individuals and corporations to secure the funding necessary to establish the foundation. Charlene grudgingly admitted to herself that Kendall's confidence, sophistication, negotiation skills and business savvy, admirable for a woman of any age, were qualities which she'd more than likely inherited from her father. By that same token, she couldn't help being concerned that some of her ex-husband's insecurities also may have been passed on to their darling daughter because if she wasn't dating Fitipaldo, she was dating Esteban or Jean-Jacques. Srinadh or Kim Lee Wang. Cody or Tyler. Never were her romantic interests named Roscoe or Fleetwood. Hiawatha or Jamaal. Still, Charlene loved Kendall nonetheless.

A soft feminine voice with a slight southern drawl warmed Charlene's heart as message #3 played.

(Beep)
Hi Charlene,

This is your play mom, Mother Shaw. I'm just calling to wish you a happy birthday. I also wanted to see if you received your postcard. My sister, Maenolia, and I are really having a good time here in Hawaii. It's absolutely beautiful. Mr. Shaw would have loved the islands and all the pretty Polynesian girls were he still with us. You are such a dear for sending us on this trip. Thank you so much. Let's see, that makes Barbados, Alaska and now Hawaii. If you keep giving us a vacation per year for life, I'm going to try to live forever. (Laughter)

Oh and before I forget, I talked to my son, Joshua. He said to thank you for your generous offer to buy the house. But there is another family that we want to help just like we helped you. So, he's going to keep it.

Give my best to the children, dear. And I'll see you soon.

Love you.
(Beep)

She's such a sweetheart, Charlene thought. I'll have to pay her a visit when she gets home.

As message #4 began to play, a smooth bass voice filled the room and Charlene melted inside.

(Beep)
Happy Birthday, Baby,

I hope your day is going well. If not, I'll make it all better when I get there. In the meantime, I've got a surprise for you. I had one of your gifts messengered over to your house today. I asked Mrs. Byram to make it an interesting find. Have fun on the hunt. The other gift, I'll give you tonight.

I'll see you at 7:30 sharp and dinner is at 8:00.

Later, baby.
(Beep)

Intrigued and excited, Charlene frantically raced around the living room hoping to find the first clue. She turned over sofa cushions and sifted through papers and magazines atop various tables. Then tucked in the corner of the frame holding the oil painting, she noticed a small envelope which read, "READ ME!" :-)

At once, the birthday girl hurried over to the far side of the room towards the painting. Eagerly, she opened the envelope and read the card.

Roses are red
Violets are blue
Here's a birthday surprise
especially for you

To find your gift
search every cranny and nook
every cupboard and drawer
and every Good Book

"Every good book, every good book," Charlene said aloud, keying on the last phrase in the clue. Then her face brightened as the answer came to her. Like a kid on Christmas morning, she raced to her office and opened the doors of her bookcase. There on the top shelf sandwiched between a Bible, Concordance and other inspirational books, Charlene found the gift from her dearest.

She took a seat at her desk and opened the small white gift box wrapped with the pretty red bow. Inside, she found a lovely 14K white gold and ruby pendant, with a matching pair of earrings and bracelet. The pendant featured graduated round-cut rubies and diamond accents. Charlene recognized the design as that of a journey pendant. The journey collection was a celebration of love. The graduated gemstones symbolized relationships changing and growing. As she gazed upon the delicate piece of jewelry, she was genuinely touched by the thoughtfulness and symbolism of it. Just as she started to try on the ensemble, she noticed another envelope taped inside the box top.

Again, the envelope read, "READ ME!" :-)

Charlene gladly followed the instructions. She opened the second envelope and read the card.

Now that you've found gift #1
I hope you're ready
to have some more fun

To find gift #2
seek help from your kids
peek under pillows and blankets
open closets and lids

"Seek help from your kids...open closets and lids," Charlene repeated the last few lines, hoping to make sense of the clue. After a minute or two, the answer came to her. She sprang from her chair, sprinted to Nic's bedroom and threw open the closet door. Inside, near a rack full of baseball caps, most of which came from a store called Lids, Charlene found a medium size white gift box wrapped with a bright red bow. Thrilled, she took a seat on Nic's bed and ripped the bow off the box. Inside, she found a sexy pair of red satin sling-backs.

Wow, these are hot! she thought, while admiring the shoes. Just what are his intentions? she wondered as she slipped on one shoe and rifled through the tissue paper in an effort to find the other. Before she could get her hands on the left shoe, Charlene found yet another envelope that read, "READ ME!" :-)

As she'd done the previous two times, Charlene eagerly opened the envelope and read the card.

Last but not least
there's gift #3
Where to find it
is no mystery

The present is hidden
in your sanctuary
amid clothes, hats and shoes
made of fabrics that vary

In an instant, she knew the location described by this clue. Immediately, Charlene took off the right shoe, tossed it back in the box and sprinted upstairs to her bedroom. There on the island in the center of the room, she found a large white gift box wrapped with a big red bow.

Her eyes lit up at the sight of the gift. It mattered not what was inside, she was just happy that Derek had been especially kind on her big day. Eagerly, she walked over to the counter and picked up the box. Instinctively, she shook it to try to determine what was inside. Unfortunately, all she could make out was the sound of tissue paper rustling against the cardboard box. So, she set the box on the counter, ripped off the big red bow and peeked inside. There she found a beautiful red silk strapless dress with a matching pashmina shawl. As she held it up to survey it, Charlene unleashed a megawatt smile. The dress looked exactly like one which Derek and she had seen recently at a fashion show for one of her favorite designers, Barbara Bates. As the super slim model walked the runway in the stunning dress, Charlene readily admired it. Evidently, Derek had taken note. He'd had the designer replicate the dress for her.

Unbelievable, she thought, smiling to herself all the while. He's the best man I've ever known. And I'm never going to let him go, she told herself.

Holding the dress close to her frame, Charlene strode over to a full-length mirror and twirled from side to side imagining how good she'd look once it was on her body. After admiring her image from all angles, she slid open a mirrored panel where her social dresses and evening gowns were stored. She pulled out a garment bag, situated the dress and wrap on the wooden hanger inside then rested it on the valet overhanging the door. With her wardrobe decided, Charlene retreated to the lavatory to draw her bath and prepare for the evening.

As water rapidly filled the tub, Charlene added droplets of an aromatic oil, sandalwood, to help her relax. She also lit a few candles to usher in a calming presence.

Back in her dressing room, she bypassed the panel where hundreds of pairs of shoes were stored by function, season and color. She walked over to the island and pulled out the drawer where her undergarments were stored. Panties – satin or lace. She couldn't decide.

“Eenie, meenie, minie – no.”

Wanting to avoid visible panty lines, she opted for a new black satin thong. She also picked out the strapless bra which matched and laid both on the island in the dressing area. After selecting her undergarments, Charlene undressed and slipped on a navy robe with a soft floral print and a pair of comfortable slippers.

The diva decided that she was in the mood for some music, so she descended the stairs and queued up *My Funny Valentine* on a Miles Davis CD. Before returning to her suite, she picked up the presents from her inamorato and made her way to the gourmet kitchen for a glass of Beaujolais Nouveau. After a couple sips of wine, she retreated to her oasis.

Charlene set her Waterford wine goblet on the platform encompassing the Jacuzzi. Satisfied with the water temperature and level, she turned off the faucet and turned on the jets. She eased out of the robe and let it drop to the floor. Then slowly and carefully, she eased her left foot and then the right one into the near scalding hot water. As her body adjusted to the temperature, Charlene lowered herself into the tub. A steamy mist rose from the water liberating her pores and leaving her skin aglow.

With most of her body submerged, Charlene rested her head on a bath pillow. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply to drink in the potent fumes of the bath oil. While enjoying the therapeutic soak, Charlene allowed her thoughts to flow with the beat of Miles' music. She started to reminisce on the events of the past few decades. She thought about the brokenness she'd experienced and overcome after she left that pathetic little shell of a man whom she'd once called her husband. As she continued her journey to a place of inner peace and serenity, the floodgates of her memory broke and it all came rushing back to her as clearly as if it had happened just yesterday.