Ghosted
LA TOYA HANKINS

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By La Toya Hankins

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Kathleen took a sip of her Saturday afternoon delight and watched Wonder Woman walk by in front of her home. Dorothy Gale, Moana, and Peppa Pig followed in an exuberant sea of gingham, brown, and pink attire. Kathleen noted each of the four clutched a bag probably filled with calorie-causing confections. The four fictional characters were in good company with the other creatively-attired children filling the sidewalks throughout Kathleen's Carrboro neighborhood. Pumpkins, bats, and spiderweb decorations in front yards confirmed today's date- October 31. Kathleen saw a few adults holding the hands of some of the smallest trick-or-treaters or hanging back a little to give the groups their space. She detected a few older teens performing chaperone duties. Kathleen assumed a deal involving a cut of tonight's bounty proved somewhat of a motivating factor for the teens' good deeds.

The front porch's acacia bench provided her with an optimum view of all the foot traffic circulating in front of her home. Kathleen rationalized it was easier to sit outside and hand out candy to keep from constantly getting up and walking the short distance from her living room to answer the door. The nippiness of the late October weather made her appreciate the light jacket she grabbed before stepping out. A slight breeze tangoed with her new haircut. Kathleen had convinced her hairstylist to perform the big chop and apply a mulled wine color two Saturdays prior. She intended with the new look to camouflage the wisps of silver strands sprouting throughout her penny-colored mane. It was also her way of paying tribute to her favorite season. She meant the shade to evoke images of falling leaves, bonfires lighting up friends' faces, and seasonal libations. Kathleen rejected the notion that bold hair color belonged to the millennial generation. Gen Xers elevated hair color as the perfect accessory, and she would never let anyone forget it.

"Trick or treat." Two little foxes with broad smiles and

pointy felt ears stood expectantly at the foot of her porch steps. Kathleen waved to the adult standing on the sidewalk and placed a handful of small boxes of fruit-flavored gumdrops into the open bags from the bowl to her right. The duo accepted her offering with a cheerful thank-you, then raced back to their companion. With a wave, the trio disappeared down the sidewalk into the approaching twilight.

Kathleen took another hearty swallow of the tart concoction of homemade apple cider, vodka, and ginger ale and waved to a group of passing trick-or-treaters. She should head inside to finish the Hammerstein proposal. She had put it off for three weeks, and her boss was getting tired of her excuses. But, something about sitting on her porch watching the parade of children dressed in costumes and singing out greetings to each other felt so much better than ensuring the firm's client met the city's zoning requirement. Kathleen loved her job, but somehow, it didn't satisfy her like it once did. Then again, not much did, especially since Bethea wasn't here to enjoy it with her.

Bethea lived for Halloween. She always made a point of decorating their house and wore a costume to hand out sweets. Through her, Kathleen grew to appreciate the fun of the holiday. Bethea's tricks often led to such sweet treats, especially when the two retired to the bedroom after the last trick-or-treater left their doorstep. Life was good until Bethea was offered a professor position at her alma mater. Far be it for her to stand in the way of a good Ball and Parlay good time, so Kathleen bid her most fulfilling relationship goodbye. The two kept in touch, but Kathleen had been the only one giving out the candy and enjoying the Halloween cast of characters for the past two years at 21 Chester Place.

"Trick or treat." A solemn-looking girl with a caramel apple-shaped face stood at her porch steps. Kathleen appreciated the crow's wings colored hair braided in two pigtails. The neat style reached the shoulders of a black pinafore dress with white buttons down the front and a white rounded collar. A pair of black stockings and black shoes completed the look. Kathleen recognized the little girl's costume from sneaking to

watch re-runs of *The Addams Family* when she was younger. The girl's choice of outfit surprised her. Most of the children she saw chose more recent characters to emulate. When Kathleen commented on her costume choice before placing the gelatin fish-shaped candy in her bag, the little girl shrugged and glanced over her shoulder.

"It was my aunt's idea. I was going to go as Lola Bunny, but when she said I should pick someone unexpected, I decided to go with Wednesday Addams." The girl's deadpan delivery did her inspiration justice. "She promised I would be the only person out here with this costume, and she was right."

Kathleen's interest was piqued. This unexpected twist to her standard Halloween experience caused a spark. It had been a while since something as small as a child's costume choice surprised her. The experience of seeing a trick-or-treater dressed as more than the standard big-budget superhero or cartoon character sent fizzes throughout her body, or maybe it was the last few sips of her drink? Regardless of the reason, it was a delightful treat, much more satisfying than the chocolate miniatures she had been eating.

"I like the way your aunt thinks. Why don't you invite her to come up and get some candy as well?"

For a moment, the girl's eyes sparkled. She looked like she was considering smiling, then decided not to ruin her portrayal. Instead, she turned and gestured for her aunt to approach the porch.

Kathleen's hoped her reaction to seeing the guardian didn't betray her thoughts; *Hello Gorgeous*. A long coal wig cascaded around a rich sepia face blessed with lips a shade of ripening pomegranate. Carob-colored eyes rimmed with onyx liner met Kathleen's with a look of flirtatious interest. Kathleen's focus on maintaining the gaze didn't prevent her from appreciating what appeared to be seventy-two inches of well-fed thickness. A raven-dyed dress clung to every curve like a sports car on a mountain road. Kathleen detected a hint of cinnamon radiating from the woman, which just added to the intrigue. She inhaled. There was another scent there—ginger, vanilla, or was it

black licorice? Whatever it was, it earned her attention.

Looking from niece to aunt, Kathleen realized there was no way to deny the family resemblance. The two shared the same rounded cheekbones, Nubian noses, and mouths with lips pursed as if their breath was too precious to be wasted. Then the woman smiled, and a piece of Kathleen's anatomy she'd almost forgotten existed pulsated.

"My neighbor said she liked the costume idea," the trick-or-treater explained before Kathleen could offer an introduction.

"Thank you. I am always encouraging Phoebe to chart her path. Why follow in the footsteps along a way already walked? Life is too short to go with the crowd." Kathleen's pulse accelerated. A woman with a slow sorghum voice never failed to excite. The sound coming out the woman's mouth reminded her of the smoky topping her mother used to enhance the biscuits she served for dinner. That voice was Southern sexiness. Kathleen knew the temperature outside was dropping, but that voice sparked a creeping heat in places one doesn't mention in polite company.

Since Bethea, there had been other women. A girl has needs, after all. However, more than a few seasons had passed since an immediate attraction like this unfurled inside her. She regretted her decision not to dress up more in honor of the season. Here was the image of one of her earliest TV crushes, and she was wearing a blue and white sorority jacket and jeans. At least the jeans had pumpkin decals.

"That is so true. It's so easy to go with the standard. On this of all days, you should be free to embrace the unexpected," Kathleen said. "I have to say I have been out here two hours, and this has been my favorite costume so far. I may be telling my age, but I loved watching *The Addams Family* when I was little. Granted, it were re-runs, but I loved it just the same. My sisters may have loved Herman and Lily Munster, but I was a Gomez and Morticia fan from way back."

Maybe it was the street lights coming on, but Kathleen could swear the woman's eyes glowed for an instant. A faint shimmer radiated from her face. "How interesting. My

introduction to Morticia and her family came from the cartoons that ran in *The New Yorker.* My father subscribed because he said it allowed him to feel connected to his hometown. I remember his excitement when the cartoons started showing up in the magazine. I guess it was inevitable I would become interested in them as well."

Kathleen hoped the fading sunlight would downplay her slight squint of confusion. She remembered reading somewhere that Charles Addams' cartoon started running in *The New Yorker* during the late 1930s. *Phoebe's aunt couldn't remember her father reading them when they first came out. That would mean she is how old? That can't be right.*

The woman continued. "I grew up reading some of the issues after he finished with them. The writing always captivated me. I imagined growing up to become a famous writer. When I realized that wasn't my calling, I went into publishing. It is such a treat to meet someone who appreciates my encouragement of my niece's costume choice. So many other homes we visited, it would seem, had no concept of the inspiration. So thank you. I'm Lena, by the way."

She is gorgeous, and she enjoys books? This treat has got to be a trick. Kathleen's fondest childhood memories involved libraries, bookstores, and school book fairs. She had bookshelves scattered throughout her house, and her holiday wish list usually was filled with books or movies inspired by books. Kathleen couldn't believe the chance of meeting someone like this by handing out candy in front of her house. She extended her hand and introduced herself. Perhaps it was the weather, but Lena's hands seemed a bit chilly. A shiver prompted by their contact moved throughout her body. Even Kathleen's toenails seemed to twitch. Still, Lena's less-than-room temperature touch didn't lessen Kathleen's enticement. Kathleen's mind flickered with the idea of if this is what her fingertips can invoke, what other magic lay in wait in Lena's hands? Kathleen detected a hint of amusement in Lena's gaze. Her eyes turned to Phoebe, who was looking back at the diminishing traffic flow.

“I think there are a few houses we still haven’t visited, so if you are ready, we can move on with it.” Kathleen detected a reluctance in Lena’s voice about leaving her company which she found flattering.

“You know, you don’t need to walk with me if you rather stay here and talk about life experiences,” Phoebe said. This time a smile accompanied her words. “I know how much you enjoy meeting people that can talk about stuff like that. I will see you back at the house.”

“Are you certain?” Lena faced her niece. “I don’t want to take any time away from you.”

“You are always around, and we have plenty of time to hang out. We both know you don’t have too many chances to hang out like this. Tonight is special, and you deserve to enjoy yourself. I will be okay. I promise.” Phoebe’s serious demeanor returned. “Miss Kathleen, thank you for the compliment and the candy. I am going to visit two more houses and then head home.”

It was Kathleen’s turn to confirm Phoebe’s intention. Her neighborhood wasn’t prone to suspicious activities, but she knew the small-town community she grew up in that allowed people to leave their doors unlocked with no fear was long gone. Phoebe assured her that her final destination was only five houses straight down. She would be fine and would call her aunt when she arrived home.

Now it was just the two of them. Kathleen searched for the next step. Then the solution came to her.

“I don’t know how many houses your niece and you have visited, but you probably want to take a break. I have a fire pit in my backyard that I don’t mind firing up. We can sit and chat before it gets too cool.”

Lena’s lips parted to reveal a slight gap-tooth smile. “A fire pit? That sounds like an intriguing proposition.”

The two walked along the ash-colored cobblestones leading into Kathleen’s backyard. The sounds of Lena’s steps seemed to disappear in the night. Not that Kathleen expected her guest to sound like an elephant walking through a bush, but Lena’s silent stride made her wonder for a minute if she was still

behind her. Kathleen's doubt turned out to be unfounded when the two arrived in her backyard.

While Kathleen may trust a landscape company to ensure the grass stayed cut, the flowers bloomed, and the trees maintained their shade in her front yard, she took responsibility for the look of the half an acre behind her home. She had a small vegetable garden and a blueberry bush that always provided enough fruit to keep her in jams. The previous owner left behind a wooden tree swing set that Kathleen occasionally used to relax after work, along with a bricked fire pit Kathleen fired up at least ten times a year. Kathleen gave thanks that her backyard lights come on automatically at six P.M. She may know the inside of her house like the back of her hand, but she wouldn't want to embarrass herself by tripping over her patio furniture in the dark.

"Would you like something to drink? I have soda, water, cider, and some stronger alternative if you are interested?" Kathleen kept a locked portable bar so that she didn't have to go back and forth into her home to replenish people's libations when entertaining. Lena opted for something more substantial. Kathleen was more than happy to oblige.

"Why don't I get the fire going and then step inside to fix you my special fall elixir. I can also whip up some quick eats if you would like."

"Yes to the drink, but a no thank you for the snack. Phoebe's mother fixed a feast before we began trick-or-treating. I assumed she believed her child would be less likely to dive into her candy after a hearty meal. I don't think she knows her daughter so well," Lena chuckled. As if on cue, her phone rang. Kathleen took the signal as time to ignite the flames and go inside to fix their drinks.

The two spent the next two hours talking about books, careers, and past loves. Because of the dropping temperatures, Kathleen had prepared a heated concoction of tequila, nutmeg, and some more of her hot spiced apple cider. Lena murmured her appreciation as her lips kissed the rim of her mug and pronounced Kathleen one of the best bartenders she had ever experienced. During their conversation, Kathleen realized how much this type of

connection had been missing from her life. Since Bethea and she parted, work and occasional visits with family and friends served as her person-to-person interactions. The prospect of possible romantic attraction had not been on her radar for so long that the fact it was sitting almost at arm's length thrilled her.

Everything about this evening seemed unreal, but some aspects struck Kathleen as a little odder than others. Some of Lena's references caught Kathleen off guard, but she forced her face not to reveal her thoughts. Her comments about living in Paris, having long conversations with "Jimmy" Baldwin at cafes, and enjoying Chez Bricktop at night caused Kathleen's eyebrows to rise. Then it was the anecdote about being star-struck the first time she met Josephine Baker. The two eventually became close enough that Lena was allowed to babysit some of the members of her rainbow tribe. Kathleen knew all the people she described hob-nobbing with had been dead for decades, yet Lena sat in the backyard looking not a day over the half-century mark. Kathleen was captivated by Lena's conversation even though the math was not mathing as her friend Cami would say when something didn't add up.

"I consider myself lucky to have seen world capitals and interacted with some pretty outstanding people. But when circumstances presented me with the opportunity to spend the time I am assigned to exist on earth here in the Paris of the Piedmont, I embraced it." Lena leaned forward to put her drink on the patio table.

"After such exciting experiences, how did you end up here?" Kathleen asked. Lena shared that when her mother was ill, she moved to North Carolina to care for her. After she passed, Lena decided to continue living in the house that had been in her family for five generations, located just down the street. Kathleen replied she was surprised their paths hadn't crossed until tonight. Lena explained that staying close to home, enjoying her family, and catching up on her reading suited her fine after all the adventures she experienced during her twenties and thirties.

Kathleen nodded. She shared how her decision to move back to her hometown drew inspiration from her parents. The

couple retired to South Carolina and decided to “rent” their home to their daughter for a dollar a month. Since it was a better deal than her mortgage in Indiana, she decided to head South.

“Phoebe and her mother moved in with me when she was a baby. I haven’t charged them anything, but maybe I should pitch the renting idea to them. It would be nice to have some spare cash to tip the delivery people.”

Kathleen and Lena shared a laugh, then settled into that quiet that follows when each wonders what’s next.

“Oh, it seems the fire is drawing lower. I guess that is my cue to head home.” Lena stood up. Without a second thought, Kathleen grabbed her hand.

“Don’t go. I am enjoying our conversation. But it is getting a little bit more chilly than my jacket can handle. Do you want to take the conversation inside?”

Lena nodded yes, and without breaking contact, Kathleen led her into her home.

Twenty minutes later, the two sat on Kathleen’s sofa listening to jazz and passing comments about all possible topics except for the apparent one—Kathleen’s attraction. The scent of cinnamon she detected on the front porch and then later around the fire pit now ensnared her senses. The glow she caught radiating from Lena still existed in the low lights but wasn’t as strong.

“I love Sarah Vaughn. I had a chance to see her perform in person once in London, and it was truly an experience,” Lena responded to the track Kathleen’s streaming service decided to play. She stood up and started swaying to the velvety voiced singer. Kathleen joined her and took Lena into her arms. Lena’s body still held the chill from outside, it seemed to Kathleen, but she didn’t mind it. Lena had removed her shoes when she entered, so the statuesque beauty Kathleen encountered earlier this evening turned out to be a few inches taller than Kathleen’s five-foot-seven-inch frame. Kathleen exalted in the sensation of Lena’s curves being under her fingertips. Earlier in their conversation, Lena had mentioned she enjoyed cycling when she was younger but used yoga to stay supple in recent years.

Kathleen sent up a silent prayer of appreciation for asanas.

The two swayed together until the song's end and continued when the track switched to Nina Simone. It was after "Feeling Good" faded out that Lena made her move. She lowered her lashes and lips and graced Kathleen's lips with her own. The tension occupying Kathleen's spine formed through wondering if she should make the first move evaporated. "It has been such a long time," a voice murmured. Kathleen assumed it was herself, then realized when Lena pulled back to look at her, she was the one who spoke Kathleen's thoughts.

"I'm so sorry for being forward, but kissing you had occupied my thoughts for hours. Please forgive me if I am taking advantage of the situation. It's just been so long since I have met someone like you."

Kathleen explained Lena was not out of bounds. The attraction was mutual, and she said she had been considering kissing her.

"Isn't it funny we are two women of a certain age still trying to navigate who should make the first move?" Kathleen said. "Don't get me wrong; I love the feeling of butterflies that comes from being attracted to someone and trying to map out the way to go. But, I would hope we have lived long enough to be able to know when and how to speak up about our desires."

"I couldn't agree more," Lena said. She paused, then reached behind her. Kathleen heard the sound of a zipper descending, then seconds later, Lena's dress laid in an inky pool of material on the floor. Kathleen's eyes feasted on a canvas of unblemished skin, flawless except for a slight scar near Lena's collarbone. A blessing of breasts appeared restrained by an indigo merry widow. Toned thighs and sculptured calves led upward to a pair of color-matched panties

Kathleen stood struck. A woman—a significantly attractive woman—was standing semi-nude in her living room. This was certainly not how she expected her Halloween night to end. She expected to give out all her candy, have a cocktail with her dinner, maybe watch a movie, and call it a night by eleven. Now, it was approaching midnight, and she had a better way to

bring a close to the night's activity. Without speaking, she pulled her sweatshirt up and over her head and unbuttoned her jeans. By providence, she'd decided to wear a decent bra and panties today. While they didn't match, they were suitable enough not to embarrass a soon-to-be lover.

"So now that we have that settled, shall we adjourn to another room?" Lena inquired. Kathleen's smile signaled her desire to oblige. The two made their way upstairs. Kathleen steered Lena to the guest bedroom located down the hall since she knew her bedroom was in no condition to entertain guests. Last weekend, her sister's visit required her to change the sheets and straighten up, so Kathleen knew the bedroom looked decent.

"If you want to freshen up, the bathroom is through there. I am going to step across the hall to the other bathroom to prepare." Lena nodded and disappeared behind the violet-colored door. Kathleen raced across the hall into her bathroom and embarked on the quickest tops and tails wash-up in the history of hooking-up. She rummaged through her underwear drawer for something appropriate to wear and settled on a two-piece camisole, and tap pants set she purchased as a fiftieth birthday present to herself. Kathleen opened her nightside table to find her dental dams and lubricants. It may have been a minute since she was last on the sexual field with a partner, but she didn't plan to play without the proper equipment.

When she returned to the bedroom, Lena had turned on the bedside lamp, and the soft glow illuminated her frame. The sight snatched Kathleen's speech so that all she could do was giggle. Lena's eyebrows rose then she joined Kathleen in laughter. Soon the sounds of merriment turned into moans of sensual appreciation.

Kathleen and Lena touched, tasted, and tried so many positions Kathleen didn't know existed. One minute, Lena's feet were planted firmly on the bed while Kathleen feasted on the petals between her thighs. The next minute, Kathleen lay on her stomach while Lena explored a part of her anatomy Kathleen never considered an erogenous zone. Lena's cool touch ignited a flame in Kathleen that even her repeated tongue tricks failed to

extinguish. Then again, it was Lena's oral skills that seemed to stoke the fire. Kathleen knew it was now Sunday, and one should never take the Lord's name in vain. But she couldn't help but thank the Creator for the way Lena was navigating her body. She charted destinations long since untouched and even managed to find new locations to inspire shrieks.

"You know, I never knew the inside of my elbow and the back of my knees could be so pleasurable." After coming up for air three hours before dawn, the two sat in Kathleen's kitchen, eating the fried egg sandwiches Kathleen made for them. Lena had put her dress back on, and Kathleen was wearing a pair of college sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"Well, I am glad to have introduced you to some new sensation. And thank you for sharing that little thing you did with your thumb and forefinger. It was pretty delightful."

"At your service," Kathleen dipped her head in acknowledgment of the compliment. "Perhaps, we can get together another time, and I can show you some more tricks I have picked up during my travels."

A smile attempted to settle on Lena's face until being replaced with a look of apology. "I would love that, but I don't know how we can manage it." Lena glanced at Kathleen's clock and rushed her words. "I have kept you up long enough, and I don't want to overstay my welcome. I'm going to head home." Lena sprang up from the table and went into the living room.

Kathleen followed her and struggled to express herself. It had been so long, she almost forgot the rules of engagement when it came to one-night stands. Number one, don't expect a hook-up to turn into anything more. The evening had been so wonderful she didn't want it to end, certainly not like this.

"I understand. It's late, and you shouldn't be walking alone. Let me drive you home."

"You don't have to do that; I only live down the street. I will be fine."

Kathleen insisted, and after a few minutes of back and forth, Lena consented to Kathleen walking her home. Since the temperature now hovered in the upper forties, Kathleen grabbed

a coat for herself and Lena. During the fifteen-minute walk, the two exchanged a few words, each affirming they had a lovely evening with each other. Lena didn't explain why they couldn't see each other again, and Kathleen didn't trust herself to ask why. At Lena's door, the two exchanged a kiss. Kathleen headed back home, mumbling to herself along the way.

The entire evening had been unusual. Kathleen had anticipated another year of simply handing out candy to the neighborhood children and then heading to bed. Instead, she ended up immersed in conversation with a woman whose tales about her life didn't sync up with her apparent age. Kathleen then had to consider Lena sharing she didn't like to rush into being too intimate with someone. Yet, Lena had no problem disrobing after a few drinks and slow dancing to some jazz tunes. She committed herself to their lovemaking in a way Kathleen realized hadn't been her experience in several years. Even Bethea fumbled a little bit their first time. Lena maneuvered her way around Kathleen's body with no hesitation. Kathleen had to admit that even if tonight was one and done, it was a fantastic way to close out a holiday that had so many different memories for her.

"Well, what can you do?" Kathleen asked herself as she prepared to climb into bed. "At least I ended the night on a good note. Everyone can't say they made love to their fantasy woman, but Lena did give me that chance."

Sunday afternoon found Kathleen back on her porch nibbling on the leftover candy. Her guest bedroom still smelled faintly of cinnamon, and Kathleen considered letting the sheets stay on the bed a bit longer. Then she remembered Lena's abrupt dismissal of the two of them meeting up again. The thought gave her the motivation to strip the bed and toss the sheets in the washing machine. She even cracked the bedroom window open for good measure.

"Hi, Miss Kathleen." Phoebe looked completely different without the black pigtails and black dress. This little girl wore a purple sweatshirt with silver unicorns and khaki pants. A ponytail pulled high on top of her head replaced the braids, and her demeanor was far from the sullen girl collecting candy less than

twenty-four hours ago. This young woman radiated happiness, and Kathleen noticed even boasted a retainer, judging by the tell-tale silver line in her mouth.

"Well, hello, Phoebe. What brings you this way? If you are looking for some leftover candy, you are welcome to it. You were my last one of the night, so I would be glad to share with you."

"That would be great, but I am not here for more candy. My aunt would like to invite you to our house for dinner. She is cooking her famous Morrocan chicken, and she remembered how much you said you enjoyed trying different meals."

Kathleen considered the invitation. *So last night, you said we couldn't have another bedroom encounter, but you can invite me to dinner*? Kathleen had to admit it was different from what she was used to when it came to dating, but she never turned down a free meal.

"Tell your aunt I would love to come for dinner. Let me know what time and what I should bring."

Phoebe responded the time was now, and all she needed to bring was her appetite and willingness to be open-minded.

"She didn't tell me too much more beyond that, but I have an idea of what she wants to talk about with you. But my mom always says I should leave the adult business to the adults. So I will leave it at that," Phoebe said.

Kathleen shrugged her shoulders and went inside to grab her house keys. During their walk, Phoebe shared her favorite school subjects, her thoughts about being an only child, and what houses disappointed her when it came to Halloween snacks. Kathleen agreed that raisins are fine for bread, covered in chocolate, or tossed with bran flakes, but are not suitable Halloween treats.

"You made it. I was worried you would say no." Lena stood in the foyer of her home, her face a canvas of relief. The slinky temptress from last night now wore a tunic the color of an oyster shell over a pair of loose nutmeg-colored pants. The curves were still there, and the face was still flawless. Lena had pulled the sleek blackness of the hair Kathleen assumed was a wig into a topknot. *Even when she looks like a suburban yoga mom running*

weekend errors, her beauty stuns, Kathleen thought.

"I am still putting the final touches on the vegetables, and I anticipate the chicken being ready shortly. Phoebe, why don't you show Miss Kathleen around."

Phoebe agreed and took Kathleen on a tour of the downstairs. The house was remarkably bigger inside than she imagined when she walked in, but the furnishing made it feel like a home. Kathleen appreciated the earth tones with splashes of plum decorations in the living room. The furniture appeared to be solid family heirlooms but not museum pieces. A female voice called Phoebe to come upstairs and finish cleaning her room. Phoebe heaved a dramatic sigh and left Kathleen alone. Kathleen took the opportunity to look closely at the certificates and pictures hanging on the wall and sitting on the scattered tables. Kathleen smiled at the photos of Phoebe in the classic childhood poses of holiday finery, school programs, and vacation getaways. Similar images of women who bore a strong resemblance to Lena also occupied space. Kathleen noted the university degrees confirming graduation from familiar colleges. One of the most ornate diplomas belonged to Lena. Kathleen's look of appreciation for Lena's achievements turned to astonishment when she realized the significance of the numerical year. She processed the date written in ornate script on the diploma and convinced herself it couldn't be right.

"Yes, I graduated college twenty years before you were born." Kathleen turned swiftly at Lena's voice. "A proud Bennett Belle Class of 1950 stands before you, asking you to let me explain."

Kathleen's mouth dropped open as she sat down on the nearest couch. The realization that the woman who made her mouth water just by walking down her driveway was at least ninety years old was just too much. The witty beauty that engaged in such stimulating conversations last night was older than her grandmother. The skilled lover whose hands proved to have magic in them could be older than sliced bread. *Damn.*

"There is no other way to say it but flat out. I'm a ghost," Lena said softly, sitting down in a burgundy armchair adjacent to

Kathleen. “I died in this house fifty years ago, and except for one night out of the year, Halloween, I can’t leave the grounds.”

Kathleen’s eyes widened. What kind of Dia de Muertos stuff is this I am hearing?

“On the day I died, my baby sister and I had a big fight about her becoming pregnant. I didn’t like her boyfriend, and the feeling was mutual. Lucinda dropped out of college because of him, and both of them worked odd jobs to support themselves while they worked on their art. She was such a talented photographer, and I knew she could make it big with the right encouragement. Instead, she decided to throw it away with some charmer who I felt didn’t have any ambition.”

Kathleen listened as Lena explained that she decided to work out her frustration by hanging up some pictures Lucinda took during a summer trip to Portugal. After working on the hallway walls, she tackled the wall beside the staircase leading to the second floor.

“I guess I was so angry at all that talent going to waste that I wasn’t as careful as I should be when I was positioning my ladder. While I was hammering away, a sense of clarity came to me. I realized my sister’s pregnancy was a gift. I owed it to her and my unborn niece or nephew to be that supportive force in their life. I pledged that no matter what, I would always be around for them. The next thing I know, the pictures, me, and the ladder were on the ground at the bottom of the stairs. I got up and dusted myself off and felt light as a feather. My neck felt a little sore but otherwise, no problem.”

Lena paused and asked if Kathleen was okay and if she wanted something to drink. Kathleen nodded and said the more potent, the better. Lena nodded and headed toward the kitchen. She returned to the living room with a bottle of wine and two glasses a few minutes later. After a period of appreciation for the vintage, Kathleen nodded for Lena to continue her story.

“When my sister arrived, I didn’t tell her about my fall. We were too excited about planning for the newest arrival. Lucinda and I made big plans, and I insisted she move in with me so I could help. Between the inheritance from my parents, my work in

publishing that turned out to be very lucrative, and solid investments, I knew I could provide a good environment. All was well until it came time to walk my sister to her car. When I tried to step out onto the porch, I ended up back at the base of the stairs, where I fell."

Lena said she and her sister struggled to understand what was going on until they decided to reach out to an older cousin known for her spiritual connection. The cousin explained the fall probably killed Lena, but she didn't transition because Lena expressed a profound but unfilled purpose before she died.

Kathleen wanted answers to so many questions, but the intoxicating smell of the chicken wafting through the air distracted her. Kathleen's desire to satisfy her curiosity about Lena's existence had to take a back seat. First, she wanted to figure out how a meal prepared by a deceased cook tasted.

Lena introduced Kathleen to Phoebe's mother, Erica, when they entered the sapphire-colored dining room. The woman, an older version of Phoebe, offered a hearty hello and hug. She joked that she was a living and breathing woman who appreciated Kathleen's willingness not to run screaming into the street when she found out about her aunt Lena. Dinner was a feast of chicken thighs braised with garlic, onions, and olives over a bed of couscous with a side of roasted carrots that were so good, Kathleen considered bursting out in song. It would seem that being dead didn't limit Lena's ability in the kitchen or the bedroom.

Kathleen fought not to stare at Lena during the dinner, but she couldn't help it. Despite knowing her human form only existed within her home, Kathleen still found her attractive to the point of distraction. The two constantly made eye contact, and Lena touched her when handing her food dishes or filling her wine glass. The touch was still cool, but Kathleen experienced a warm sensation nonetheless.

"So, how did you find out that you could leave the house on Halloween?" Kathleen asked as Phoebe cleared the dinner dishes.

"One year, when Lucinda and I were giving out candy, my niece, Geneva, ran out of the opened door. Without thinking, I ran out after her. I don't know who was more surprised when I

caught her on the bottom step. We called our cousin again, and she explained on All Hallows Eve, the dead could walk the earth. So on that date, I would take my niece trick-or-treating and see how the world had changed within the year. I did it for her until she got too old then I would go out on my own. That is until Geneva's daughter Erica and her daughter moved in, and I had a trick-or-treat companion once more."

Kathleen's mind grappled with Lena's explanation. Her mind formulated a multitude of questions. How could this woman, who appeared to be flesh and blood just a few hours ago in her home, be a spirit? Her questioning of the reality of the situation expanded to consider the sad fact a woman who lived such a vibrant life could only experience the world one day out of the year.

Erica offered to clean up the kitchen, leaving Lena and Kathleen alone at the dinner table. The two sat silent for a minute and then Lena took Kathleen's hands in hers.

"I know it may seem that being able to leave the house once a year would get lonely, but it's not that bad. My nieces keep me entertained, and the many streaming services keep me abreast of the news. I have a wonderful screened-in patio that allows me to sit outside and experience the seasons." Lena seemed to read Kathleen's thoughts. "I would say being able to make sure my nieces are taken care of has been fulfilling, but until last night I didn't realize how much I missed the company of a woman that could fulfill me in so many other ways. Your conversations fed me in ways I had forgotten. Your appreciation of poetry, music, and an occasional trashy novel made me want to be alive for the first time in decades if for nothing but to be able to be in your presence whenever I want."

Kathleen's words got lost from her mind to her mouth. She hadn't heard such sentiments in so long she almost doubted she deserved them. Kathleen *hmphed.* How ironic she would feel the most alive she had felt in a while on the day of the dead. Being desired would do that.

"I know this is a lot to put on you. I appreciate your willingness to listen." Lena released Kathleen's hand. The second

their fingers lost contact, Kathleen missed the feeling. “After my incident, my family held a memorial for me. I often spoke about my desire to be cremated, so no one thought anything amiss with the announcement. The notion of being missed is a familiar feeling. But meeting you and knowing we can’t be together has made me realize the ache of missing someone.”

“Who says we can’t be together.” Kathleen was as surprised as Lena appeared to be hearing the words. She also detected a faint intake of air which indicated Erica and Phoebe, who were probably listening, also were caught off guard

“I mean, you demonstrated as long as you are here, there is no limit to how you can interact. So what if we can’t go out to eat, take in a movie, or go for a drive? There are plenty of delivery apps. I have a wicked DVD collection if we get tired of the services, and traffic down here is a nightmare.”

The shimmer Kathleen detected the night before emerged brighter, and it seemed to surround Lena’s body. Lena leaned over and bestowed a kiss that left Kathleen breathless.

“So what do you say you give me the tour of the rest of the house,” Kathleen asked. “I am interested in the patio you mentioned.”

Lena stood up and extended her hand. Kathleen’s heart beat a joyous rhythm. She guessed the trick of Lena not dying because she pledged to be there for her lineage turned out to be the best kind of treat Kathleen could receive. And she didn’t even have to dress up in a costume.

THE END

ABOUT LA TOYA HANKINS

La Toya Hankins is a native of North Carolina and currently resides in Raleigh, NC. A graduate of East Carolina University, she earned her Bachelor of Arts in journalism with a minor in political science. During her college career, she became a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and later served as second vice president for one of the largest graduate chapters in North Carolina.

After working as a regional reporter and features editor in the Charlotte metro area for seven years, she entered the world of banking. Presently employed with the State of North Carolina, she divides her time between being a proud pet parent of an 8-year-old terrier named Neo and volunteering in the community.

Currently serving as the co-chair of Shades of Pride, organizer of the annual Triangle Black Pride, Hankins is an active supporter of LGBT issues and addressing health disparities that affect her community. Her literary influences and loves include Zora Neale Hurston, Walter Mosley, Anne Rice, and Pearl Cleage. Her motto, borrowed from Hurston, is “I do not weep at the world, I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

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