

Charity Begins at Home

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Three women stood on the front porch of Bobbie Mcgruder's large house. One of the women pressed the doorbell with a neatly manicured index finger.

Bobbie's ears picked up the familiar melodic tone of the doorbell chime as it reverberated throughout the house. She folded the washcloth and gave the kitchen counter one last swipe before tossing the cloth into the dirty towel bin. Her guests had arrived, and Bobbie was ready for them.

She walked from the kitchen to the main floor's long hallway and strolled toward the front door. Bobbie stopped when she came upon the opening that led to her living room.

It could use one more quick inspection. She thought her friends wouldn't mind waiting a few more seconds.

Her eyes wandered over the room and stopped when they came upon the crystal vase that lay on the otherwise bare oak coffee table. The sun's light danced within the crystal. A smile brightened her face. Her Henry could be so thoughtful.

Bobbie's eyes left the vase and moved to the floor. The light tan carpet was freshly vacuumed. She was satisfied that the vacuum had not left any marks. This was her living room, not her front lawn.

As Bobbie was about to believe that her home, her showcase, was in order, she observed her white love seat in the corner of her eye. The smile faded from her face.

She walked over to the love seat and repositioned a pillow which had been laying pattern-side-down. One mistake was not going to ruin her afternoon.

The chime of the doorbell startled her.

"Someone's impatient," Bobbie whispered to herself.

She crossed the threshold that separated her hallway and the hard tiled entryway. Her progress was announced by the clicking of her heels. She grasped the golden knobs that belonged to the double solid oak doors. Her velvet-tinted lips stretched and parted subtly against her teeth.

Bobbie opened the doors and her eyes took in the three women who waited on the other side.

"Hello ladies!"

"Hello, Bobbie," the three women replied, almost in unison.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice. We can put this charity luncheon together quickly of course—"

"We've done it before Bobbie." Verna's green eyes met Bobbie's.

"Yes, we have. Verna, your hair is sparkling in the sun. Have you had it done?"

Bobbie, like most women who knew her, envied Verna's Venus-like beauty.

"No. I just washed and dried it at the club." Verna shook her head slightly, letting the loose yellow curls tickle her sleeveless shoulders.

Bobbie's eyes moved from Verna to the two sisters who stood behind Verna.

"Dears, please come in out of the heat." Bobbie stepped back from the open door and the women followed.

Linda hobbled behind her sister Kelly. When she stepped up the single concrete step in front of the open door, pain shot through her swollen ankle.

"Oh my God." Linda's asymmetrical face twisted.

"That's what you get for showing off," Kelly mused.

Linda followed the other women into the living room and helped herself to the oversized white sofa chair.

"Don't mind me, Bobbie. I had a little accident trying to return Kelly's serve during the last set."

"Poor thing. I'm sure your sister won't mind helping you up the stairs to the smaller dining room. I thought it would be nice to have some iced tea and sandwiches while we make our plans."

All three women smiled politely and quickly looked at each other. They were used to coming to Bobbie's house during formal company dinner parties. The 1st Christian Church usually served as the meeting place for the Cupiditas House charity board.

Bobbie led the women down the hallway and up the steep staircase.

"I could use some iced tea, Bobbie. It's hot as hell outside. If it's worse down there, I'm saying my prayers every night. You know...."

"Kelly, Bobbie doesn't like cursing or swearing in her presence."

Bobbie was grateful that Linda corrected her sister. She hated to hear any type of foul language coming from women. Her mother had taught her ladylike manners that did not include cursing or spitting like a man.

"I'm sorry, Bobbie. I guess I forgot my manners," Kelly replied, as her small blue eyes narrowed.

"That's okay, Kelly. If the Lord can forgive us our trespasses, I can forgive you yours."

Bobbie and her guests entered the dining room. The guests' eyes drank in the pure white walls, curtains, and furniture. A silver platter piled high with sandwiches sat beside a large pitcher filled with sweet, cold iced tea. A black briefcase sat beside the chair at the head of the dining room table. A period placed in the middle of stark white paper.

"I love this room. Bobbie where on earth did you find a table like this?" Verna let her fingers run over one of the angelic dancing figures that spiraled down the leg of white pine table.

"My mother gave it to me before she passed. She told me it had been made for my grandmother." An image of her mother flashed in her mind.

"Isn't that nice. I bet Henry misses his lovely home. Bobbie, when do you think he'll be back?" Linda pulled out one of the white-cushioned chairs and sat down.

"I don't know. He's in the East working on some type of agreement. I don't keep up with his business affairs. But I am proud of him."

Kelly sat down and took one of the sandwiches from the platter and placed it on the white plate that sat before her. The sauce from the sandwich oozed onto the plate. Her stomach rolled.

"Go ahead and help yourselves, ladies. I'll be right back with the 'slaw that I left chilling in the kitchen downstairs." Bobbie turned and walked out of the room. She reminded herself that Kelly couldn't help her upbringing.

Verna listened as Bobbie's telltale heel clicks sounded her retreat down the hallway. It was safe to

speak.

"Can you believe that we have the privilege of being in Lady Bobbie's house on a lovely summer afternoon?" Verna spoke while she poured iced tea into her glass.

"Shush!" Kelly exclaimed in a loud whisper, trying to stifle the laughter that was building inside her.

"She may have listening devices planted all through out this mausoleum. That briefcase probably has a hidden camera inside and...." Laughter escaped from Linda before she could finish.

"I hope we can sucker ... I mean, convince Bobbie to cater the luncheon. I know none of us wants to pay for it. I especially don't want to work in a hot kitchen, said Kelly as she winked at her sister.

The women burst into laughter. As they laughed, the smell of the roast tickled their noses. The other two took sandwiches from the platter. Dainty triangles sat on each of the guest's plates.

"I wonder what would happen if some of this sauce spilled onto Bobbie's linen. Accidentally, of course." Verna snickered after her wicked remark.

The laughter grew louder and heartier. They even wondered whether club soda would smite the stain demon.

Bobbie returned from the kitchen with a large casserole dish filled to the brim with cole slaw. It was her mother's favorite recipe. Bobbie remembered when her mother gave her all the secret recipes. She wanted her guests to enjoy their lunch.

The closer Bobbie walked toward the dining room, the louder the laughter grew. She couldn't wait to join the festivities.

"What's so funny?" she asked as she walked into the dining room.

The other three women looked at each other and continued to laugh.

"We were just talking about Linda's showboating earlier at the club," Verna said.

Bobbie smiled and set the casserole dish in the middle of the table. She took her seat at the head of the table and placed a sandwich onto her plate. Of course, she was hostess, and no matter how informal the meeting, she was going to maintain traditions.

"Bobbie, these sandwiches are great! The meat is so tender, and the sauce is heaven. Can I have the recipe?" Kelly spoke without swallowing.

"It's a secret recipe I've been working on for the past couple of days, Kelly. I may be able to share the recipe after lunch with all of you. My dearest friends."

Bobbie picked up her plate and placed a small spoonful of cole slaw onto her plate. She then took a bite of the sandwich. The spices of the sauce mingled with the heavy flavor of the meat. She agreed that Kelly was correct. She was providing the women a delicious lunch.

Bobbie couldn't help but look at each one of her friends. She took pleasure in watching the women eat. She ate in silence while they bantered on about this play or that movie. Bobbie was satisfied just listening attentively to the conversation.

"Linda, Bobbie, and Kelly, I think that we should get started with the plans for the charity luncheon. Bobbie, I was hoping that we could persuade you to cook." Bobbie began to glow. Verna really wanted her to cater the luncheon.

"I don't know. Do you all really think that I can cook well enough to sell tickets?" Bobbie's cheeks reddened.

"Sure you could, Bobbie." Linda responded while she wiped breadcrumbs from her salmon-colored polo shirt.

"I'll think about it. I don't mean to get off the subject, but I have some photographs that were taken by a very talented individual who donated them. I think that we could auction them at the luncheon. We could display them on the walls of the church's banquet hall." Bobbie leaned over and picked up the black suitcase sitting beside her chair. She undid the metal clasps, placed a hand deep into the case's opening, and pulled out three manila folders. Each folder had one of her guest's names written in neat black letters across the top. She stood up and walked around the table and placed the folders beside the women's empty plates.

"Bobbie, I don't think the reverend will go for the idea. I mean he wouldn't even let us have the Halloween Ball in the hall last year. You know he—" Bobbie placed a cold hand onto Verna's shoulder.

"That's a valid point, Verna. That's why I wanted to let the three of you be the judges. You can decide whether or not it would be a good idea to approach him with the idea." Bobbie turned her head when she finished and looked into Kelly's eyes.

Bobbie returned to her seat and the women picked up their folders. With Bobbie looking on, they opened the folders. Bobbie's smile was genuine, but the others smiled uncertainly.

Linda's eyes widened as she tried to understand the image she held in her hands. Her peach lips quivered. Her hands whitened. The picture had captured her sister Kelly naked and straddling Bobbie's Henry.

Kelly and Verna mimicked Linda's repulsion when they looked upon the image of each other's adulterous acts caught on film.

"What's this?" asked Verna, in a small, wavering voice. She shut her eyes but the image of Linda and Henry was already burned into her brain.

Bobbie's lips stretched into a smile and the light began to dance in her dark brown eyes. The women had enjoyed lunch. She hoped they would enjoy the photographs. She did.

Each guest dropped her photo onto the table, providing each a view of the other's photographs. The sickness twisted their stomachs. Three hearts pounded hard and fast. Each woman began to understand that Henry did not have just one mistress. They were actually a part of a private collection.

"Bobbie, it didn't mean anything. Henry—" Kelly wanted to explain.

"I don't care why or when. I love Henry. I understand that he had a love that he needed to share with each one of you for some reason." Bobbie sighed, reached for her glass of iced tea, and took a swallow.

"Look, Bobbie. Henry loves you. It was just sex." Linda's eyes watered.

"You need to understand, darling. I am willing to share Henry with you. You will always have a part of him." Bobbie placed a hand on her chest.

"What are you talking about?" Verna asked, trying unsuccessfully to calm her unsteady voice.

Bobbie looked at Verna. Verna's photographs were the first given to her by the private investigator. The photographs disgusted Bobbie, but in them Verna remained glorious.

"I was mad. Hell ... Did I say 'hell'? I was upset when the private investigator delivered the photos. I almost wanted to forget. But one of you wouldn't let me. I came home one day and found in my bed, my bed, an unfolded corner of the second blanket beneath the comforter.

"About two days ago I decided to share Henry. He shared my house. I guess I could share him.

"I knew that Henry, being a loving man, wouldn't admit his follies, to keep from hurting me. So that night I put some of my mother's favorite poison mixture into Henry's nightcap. It was so peaceful. He always looked so sweet when asleep. Death seemed to make his sweetness angelic." The women stared at Bobbie. Their tongues had lost their quickness.

"I knew that Henry outweighed me by about seventy pounds. That wasn't a problem. I keep my body toned. I have to look fabulous in all those dinner gowns.

"I don't want to bore you with all the details. I decided to make parts of Henry into a wonderful roast. I sliced it this morning for the sandwiches. What a mess! I had to bleed him in my kitchen yesterday morning.

"It took me all this morning just to put the kitchen back in order. I also took the time to place the rest of Henry downstairs in the basement in case any of you girls want to take more of him home with you.

"You know what? I didn't plan this out completely, because I put the rest of Mother's poison into the delicious sauce and iced tea. I guess none of us will need the leftovers.

"At least we all get to have Henry to ourselves." Bobbie finished and took another sip of her iced tea. She had timed it perfectly. She thought that she could feel her blood begin to boil.

Kelly and Verna screamed. Linda remained silent. Her eyes were empty and her brain broken.

Kelly's hand shook uncontrollably and knocked over her glass of iced tea. Sweet, deadly brown liquid spilled off the table and onto the plush white carpet.

As her heart began to slow and breathing became more and more of a struggle, Bobbie wondered whether the stains would come out of the linen and the carpet, and if her very dear friends appreciated her generosity.

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