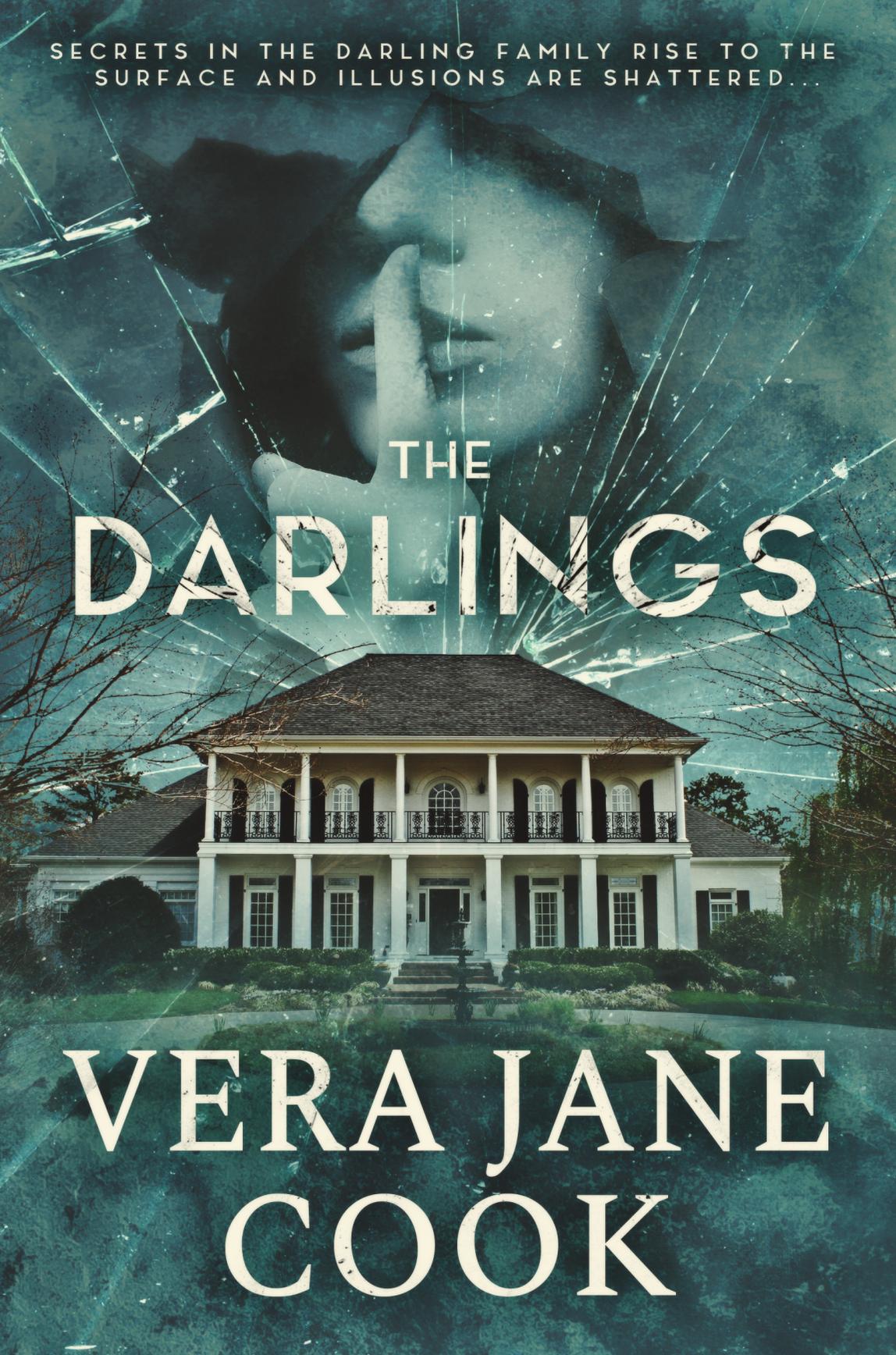


SECRETS IN THE DARLING FAMILY RISE TO THE
SURFACE AND ILLUSIONS ARE SHATTERED...



THE
DARLINGS



VERA JANE
COOK

THE DARLINGS

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THE DARLINGS

The Darlings
Book One

VERA JANE COOK



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Chapter One

DEBORAH

1993

Deborah Darling turned her hand mirror to the side and surveyed her chin, falling more each year, each line in her once youthful face deepening like unattended cracks in concrete, covered in firming cream but still, unfortunately, duly noted and wept over and bitterly cursed. Getting older was the cruelty of life. How had Dickie remained so unchanged with his pants lying flat against his middle and his hair still thick and full, the white of age, settling foam from a turbulent ocean, wavy and refreshing, on his scalp? Still as handsome as a storybook prince, but despite the languorous stride and that prominent cleft in his chin, Dickie was no ladies' man. She wished he were, but it takes personality to attract women and Dickie had as much of that as he did the energy to mow the lawn. He always said he loved to mow the lawn, but she'd only seen him do it once in all the years they were married. Well, he also fancied himself a master bowler, bragged that he always bowled a 226 but Deborah wouldn't bowl with him; it was too noisy for her to listen to his balls plopping in the alley, and it took too much energy to pretend he was just having a bad day because she was making him nervous. Or so he said.

"In my mind, I'm a master bowler, darlin'. I think, therefore it is so," he'd tell her with one of his sly winks.

Yet, despite all that myopic self-aggrandizement, she fell in love with him, and has remained so. The first time she laid eyes on him in 1960, even though it was evening, there was no mistaking those blue eyes, same color as a blue chrysanthemum. She'd just gotten out of high school and there he was, offering her a cold beer and a Marlboro. He stuttered a bit and blushed. Must have been his shyness that melted her heart. Her Dickie was as shy as a bucked-tooth little boy about to initiate his first kiss.

But Dickie was an odd one, always had been. Well, she liked men who seemed to harbor a world of their own, secrets maybe. Most men let it all hang out, no surprises, but her Dickie was a man of few words, preferring to bite his nails rather than engage in conversation, constantly reading

novels about true crime, couldn't get enough of those bullshit paperback novels, devoured maybe four or five a week. He smoked a pipe, which Deborah adored; it was so upper crust, hardly any men in Pickens smoked pipes, Pickens being Marlboro country, with draft beer and pot bellies and beards that looked like old brooms. Well, at least in the run-down sections with all the auto parts places and the taverns with cheap food. Deborah just loved the scent of Dickie's pipe, it wafted sweet air around him like some protective invocation and camouflaged any unpleasant odor he might have had like bad breath or other untoward vulnerabilities of the body.

"This is the year I get plastic surgery, Dickie. Memorize this face, it will be forever transformed."

She stood in the doorway of the den where Dickie sat propped up in his leather chair, the leather-lined and buttery like old skin that had had too much sun. The chair was near the window that framed the magnolia trees, appearing oppressively still, and the green grass beyond, looking like an emerald field with coquettish bursts of white flowers, the sun appearing like a flame, a huge, hot threat to her comfort level. The fan in the corner of the room sounded like an old man taking his last breath. Deborah put her hand on her collarbone, felt the sweat, and then loosened the top button of her dress.

"Sure enough, Sweet Pea," Dickie said. He was a man of few words, unless he was reading them.

"What crime book has enthralled you now, darlin'?" she asked.

"*Stillhouse Lake*."

"Good?"

"Great," he said.

So be it, a man of few words. Deborah had other things to think about other than her husband's obsession with unhumorous, poker-faced detectives and gory subjects like rape, stalking and the bloody atrocities of dead bodies. But despite it all, Dickie had his charms. His magical way of attracting money for one: he simply inherited it. Deborah liked that, though she didn't marry him because he was rich. Oh no, she married him because he was an enigma, and she fell into boredom easily; Dickie would never bore her. He might infuriate her with his lack of conversation but in his silence, she found a gold mine of intrigue. Her mother always told her that it was just as easy to ensnare a rich man as a poor man, so she better put aside the fool notion of marrying for love and follow the rule of self-preservation.

Well, according to Deborah she had lucked out, had married for love *and* money. Deborah's mother was beside herself with pride. Out of a

family of four daughters, her Debbie had risen to the pinnacle of success while her sisters put up with a hard life, one poor girl with a drunk for a husband, the other with a cheat, and no husband at all for Deborah's youngest sibling. Miranda fancied herself a femme fatale, one of those obnoxious man-crazy bozos who spent their money on breast enhancements and went around with no hair anywhere on their bodies. Deborah didn't even want to think about why waxing all your pubic hair was a good thing. What the hell kind of statement is that? Deborah wondered.

Deborah recognized Dickie's talents early on when he borrowed a hundred dollars from her and invested it in the stock market, in some little company called Bethlehem Steel. She kept putting a hundred dollars in that Bethlehem Steel stock every month and watched that little stock come to pay her fifteen thousand a year in access income. Dickie put his family money into stocks that took off like a speed boat demanding space on a narrow river. Dickie's talents were commendable, they sure enough were, just as his thoughts, as ambiguous as his version of reality and revealed in the curious and enigmatical facial expressions that traversed his smile. Her husband reminded her of a silent mime artist with a big frown painted on his face, interpretation of his movement lingering in the intrigue of his tenebrous silence.

Deborah was used to Dickie. He was an amusing companion when he was present, a generous husband and father. He caused no waves but was not without complexities, and Deborah saw Dickie's unspoken secrets as deeply perplexing as Sunday's crossword puzzle, sometimes rising to the surface like a tornado with winds of enormous strength, threatening damage enough to drown her. Best to ignore a hurricane and find comfort in the delusion that it will pass right over you. Best to ignore the damn Sunday crossword puzzle, too. That just made Deborah feel dumb.

She took herself out to the sunroom, where the privacy of her thoughts were enfolded by the French doors she closed behind her. Here, she could worry over her children in the sweet silence of the room. Her son, Barnaby, for one; his wise-cracking uncensored remarks were as unpredictable as weather, so impulsive, she was always afraid he'd say something sarcastic to the wrong person and get himself beaten up. Yes, he was always speaking his mind like someone else she'd known. Hot to tell off anybody, no matter who it was. Why the president of the United States wouldn't even be able to avoid Barnaby's barrage of sarcasm. He was fiery as a July noon. July noons in Pickens, South Carolina, made her think of an inferno taking down your house and burning your lily-white skin to a crisp.

Good thing Deborah knew how to befriend those sultry summers, a little frozen daiquiri, a white lace folding hand fan, and a porch chair to put her feet up on. Deborah had a folding fan that matched the color of the walls for every room. It was her intention that no amount of sweat should appear on her peaches and cream complexion, though this day was not so oppressive as summer days were known to be in Pickens. Her sunroom, as always, was a haven shaded by trees, so much so, the Lord's blessing and the protective stance they commanded caressed her. Trees were a godsend, letting the sun in and keeping the heat out.

Bless those beautiful lofty green gods, she thought.

Though today, they just stood there, tipping neither left or right, grinning in their defiance of providing a breeze. Still, the temperature, at least, was below eighty, thank the good Lord.

Her son liked the heat and probably would have died had he been born in some cold Midwest city, where your ears fall off with the first snow and your hands grow numb with the frost, where the chill hurts your teeth and stops the flow of blood in your poor shivering body. Lord, almighty, not for Barnaby, though Deborah might have liked it. Her son would rather sweat than feel the cold. Even with a mountain of water pouring off him, wetting his dark hair and leaving rings under his shirts, he was a handsome devil. Women flocked to Barnaby, birds to crumbs thrown to the ground. The boy had matinee idol looks, enticing those sweeping birds to his scent. Too bad Barnaby couldn't tell which of those birds wanted to be held in his hands and stroked and which were planning to peck out his eyes.

Barnaby worked with numbers, like his father, moving money around like a mad scientist. Though Barnaby didn't solve the crimes in paperback detective stories like his father, he was as good as his father with funds and stocks. Barnaby could turn a dollar into a gold piece and make you think your trust in his expertise was the smartest thing you'd ever done. He'd take home every cent you had and promise you a rich retirement in some million-dollar old-age retreat. People swore he saw into the future and trusted him with their fortunes, even though he wasn't even thirty years old. Why, her Barnaby could talk the devil into quoting the Bible and lining the pathway to heaven with gold. Truth was, though, as young as he was, the son of a gun knew what he was doing, predicting the market like some crazy seer.

But smart as he was, having an appetite for brainless women would surely put that boy in an early grave. That was his weakness, a pretty face and a witless mind, full of nothing but foolish desires. Passions of the heart make a man turn on himself, do the devil's bidding. Deborah's

brow furrowed deeply thinking about Barnaby. Fool of a man, handsome but foolish. Isn't that what they say about women, too pretty to be smart? Well, could have said the same for him when it came to women. He didn't carry her genes, but he didn't carry Dickie's either. Dickie was made from gentlemanly stock; Dickie was refined and levelheaded. Barnaby was a dandy who believed that getting laid was a man's godly Bible and should be read aloud daily.

Where then did this witless Don Juan of a son originate? Had she had an affair that spurned him, like burning coal inside her belly?

Well, of course she had had an affair, doesn't every woman have an affair at one time or another? The man was Jeremiah Lennox, who had swept between her legs and stolen her vows from her, sweet words of promise she'd sworn to Dickie, *and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live*. It couldn't be avoided; Jerimiah had the good looks of a fictional god; looks he'd passed on to Barnaby, both with black curls and white teeth and powers of seduction. Jerimiah had been a force to be reckoned with, a force like ticks on your dog and the tornado that might tear the roof off your house.

Protect yourself Deborah, she said to herself the first time he had looked over the hors d'oeuvre tray at her mother-in-law's gracious front parlor, looked over and met her eyes and boldly held them. She told her best friend, Lottie Lacock, "He's put a spell on me like some mighty drug, Lottie."

"Protect yourself," is what Lottie said back. "Hell, if the town finds out you're bedding down with a Black man, they'll hang you right along with him."

Well, he wasn't very black, could have passed for white on a dark night or in a dark bar. He shouldn't have been messing with her, either. She was a White woman from upstate where people paid a pretty penny for views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Innocent, pure and clean as the driven snow, she was. Didn't stop her, though, it was a thing of passion, and she was a bit hungry for that, a bit hungry to feel she'd succumbed to a state of delirium whenever Jeremiah captured her tongue in a kiss and spun it around like a game of tag.

She hadn't been married to Dickie all that long, a little over a year, the first time she'd spread her legs for Jeremiah behind a bush in Kings Park. Dickie was sweet and mild and how fulfilling it was in the beginning. She thought she liked that, but Dickie made love like she was a follow the dots instruction sheet for putting together a table. Jerimiah was hungry and fierce, like a shark in an ocean full of fish, and he made love as though the table was already sturdy, worthy of his weight and hers, or better yet,

to hell with the table — if it collapsed under them who gave a rat's ass? That's what making love should be, reckless.

Well, sex is not the reason for choosing anyone. That's what she told Barnaby when he got mixed up with Mindy Peach, sassy little girl Deborah never liked with her honey blonde hair, her Southern lilt, and those hips that never stopped swaying.

"Protect yourself," she told him, but Mindy drew him in like a long slow breath, and the stupid son of a bitch just sat back and drank in her lies like lemonade. But Deborah saw right through her: she was a liar and a user for sure. And lemonade can be bitter. Deborah nodded her head thinking, Lord, he's a dumb one. She'd tried to tell him that little Mindy Peach was as toxic as the poison used to kill mice, but who did she listen to when Jeremiah Lennox was panting in her ear like a goddamned jacked-up Casanova.

Let's see, how many years did Jeremiah get for the murder of Fletcher Smith? Deborah thought back ... thirty-five to life. Hell of a sentence to pay for doing nothing but being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Fletcher Smith was a wrung-out drunk, guilty of nothing but grabbing the wrong woman's tits at some bar at the edge of town in the fall of 1963. Halloween night it was, everyone dressed up as something or other, though the theme was *Gone with the Wind*. Poor Fletcher got drunk and stupid, and then a pistol blast to his head blew it off right in the alley behind Smith's tavern. Now we know women don't do things like that, but a woman did Fletcher in. Deborah saw the swish of a skirt fly past her for certain, but Jeremiah deserved the blame.

Deborah didn't take well to men who used her up and spat her out, spat her right back to Dickie, who was all too willing to look the other way when Barnaby came out with black hair and black eyes, shooting the same kind of bullshit as Jeremiah Lennox by the time he was three years old. But Dickie treated Barnaby no different than he treated their daughter, Robinette. Deborah always thought he even loved Barnaby more because Barnaby was a boy. He somehow saw his own image in her dark little son, dark being hair color, not skin color. Barnaby's skin was as White as hers. Jeremiah Lennox was not very dark far as Deborah could remember. But some said he was Brown, and some said he was White, but Deborah knew he was Black, 'cause he'd told her some White shit raped his great, great grandmother and all the descendants of that son of a bitch came out the womb looking as ambiguous as could be — maybe White, maybe Black, take your pick.

Barnaby had Jeremiah's wit and his impressive height, which was well over six feet. Barnaby had his lean frame and his way with women, too.

But somehow Dickie didn't see that. He just saw Barnaby, his brilliant little boy who trailed behind him ever since he was a child, hanging on his every word, and Dickie liked that. Her son managed to hold Dickie up the way she couldn't. Deborah never was that kind of woman, never cared if a man couldn't take care of his own ego, so she didn't feed egos. Far be it from her to lift a man's sense of himself and pretend he was God's gift when he wasn't. Dickie was her son's world, though, the master of his misguided fate, the hero of his storybook with so many slayed dragons and so many pages of pretty little girls, the fairy tale that was supposed to end well and wouldn't, not if he were panting after Mindy. Yes, his goddamn fairy tale ended with Mindy Peach, how happy an ending could that be? Well, Barnaby kept her husband's ego 'bout as high as the stars in the sky and maybe that's what it was all about, male egos and all the crap you had to keep tossing into it. She was sure Mindy was good at that.

"Papa, Papa, build me a tree house."

And there Dickie went with his hammer and his nails, sweating in his pale blue shirt, sticking nails between his lips but he hammered and he hammered, and Barnaby watched in awe as that pile of plywood took shape, finally looking like some mighty little low-country house in a tree.

Deborah and Dickie had themselves a real low-country home as gracious as any in Charleston or Savannah. Dickie's family were all from Greenville and then moved on over to Pickens, buying up land and making themselves rich on the backs of slaves back in the days. The Civil War tore the South apart, but their home had never been destroyed by ravaging Yankees, nor their spirit. Dickie's ancestors did not succumb to defeat. They went on making money, talking sweet and owning dry-goods stores and restaurants and some even became men of God and preached the gospel. Dickie's ancestors were bankers, some were teachers he'd tell her, but mostly bankers with big cigars and slender fingers and minds that went down a one-way street to riches.

She loved her white-shuttered farmhouse with its long porch and gardens of magnolias and trellises of roses in every color. Dickie didn't like to tell people he was from a long line of slave owners. He said slavery was a sin against humankind, a black stain on the soul of our nation. Lord, her Dickie could have been born in the city of New York, where liberalism was a prerequisite for a lease and the calling card of acceptance into the Democratic party of misguided values. He was over the top, her Dickie, not that Deborah believed in slavery, she didn't think about it; she was modern, it had no place in her world. She paid her help and loved them like family. There was Deasia, their cook, big heavy-set woman who

laughed constantly. Deborah didn't understand what she had to laugh about, she was so poor, but she found everything funny, including the time Deborah asked her to cook lobster and she screamed and screamed when she threw those lobsters in the pot, then laughed for days about it, said it was the worst thing she'd ever done.

When Barnaby skinned his knee as a child, she laughed, and it would make Barnaby laugh, too. She even laughed when Dickie had a car accident and came back with bandages all over his head. Deborah and the children had been horrified, but Deasia laughed so hard, she almost tripped over herself, said he looked like a monster, a funny monster who just might turn into a living mummy and kill them in the night. Deborah had chastised her for that, for scaring the children, but she'd laughed herself. "Those Negroes find humor in the weirdest things, they love to laugh, those Negroes," she told Dickie.

Well, Deasia was family, just like Heaven, little Black girl who came to clean two, three times a week. And then there was Héctor, the gardener and Booker, Dickie's driver, and Deborah's driver sometimes. But Deborah did like to drive herself, made her feel free driving down the highway alone without Dickie telling her she was 'bout to kill them both.

Dickie didn't know everything, Deborah thought. Didn't know or care that his son was being seduced by a girl with no brain and no future, not even for bearing children. She said she didn't want them, they were bound to ruin her figure and put her in the poor house. Barnaby just laughed and agreed. Anything the girl said, Barnaby just laughed and agreed. At times, he was as scatterbrained as Deasia.

"Time for my walk, Sweet Pea." Deborah looked up at her husband in the doorway, dressed like some movie actor with his seersucker blazer and his pleated white pants. Of course, he was, she thought. Of course, he was. No sense taking a walk that's going to mess up your clothes or put sweat on your brow, no sense looking anything other than perfect. Well, no. No telling who he'll meet in Mile Creek Park.

She smiled. "Enjoy, darlin'," she said, noticing how nicely he'd tied the ascot at his neck.

Deborah was thinking about the first time she discovered Dickie had appetites she couldn't satisfy, not with her recipes. It was right after Fletcher Smith's murder. Nothing in any cookbook on earth could muster up a sauce for 'penis' soup when there was no penis to throw in it.

"Just an urge, nothing to worry about," Lottie Lacock told her.

Uh um, she thought and went to her room to stare up at the sky for hours.

"You know men have all these weird sexual yearnings," Lottie called

later to say.

Well, it *was* nothing to worry about, was it? That was right after her affair with Jeremiah, so why should she care that Dickie was a complicated man and every now and then he liked to put a penis in his mouth. Lord, is that what they did? Lord, she just wouldn't think about it. Who knew what the hell they did? It was trivial, another one of Dickie's odd little quirks, like how he liked to birdwatch in the spring and rattle off the name of every goddamn bird in Pickens till she thought she'd strangle him, and the way he put cherry soda in his white wine and mustard on French fries. Well, why should she care about this little sideline interest; she was the only woman in his life.

She'd seen Dickie talking to the man everyone called Ginger Tea. Ginger was a man who dressed up like a woman every so often and paraded himself around town. He was married to a woman like a normal man, and Deborah had seen him several times out of his costume looking like an aristocrat, sucking on oysters and sipping Champagne. An aristocrat, that is, till he opened his mouth and sounded like a woman, a woman with a five o'clock shadow and muscles popping out of his shirt that looked as thick and hard as concrete walls. Talk about ambiguous! My God, why would any man or woman want to be as ambiguous as that? Deborah had jumped back the first time she ran into him at the supermarket, and he was wearing an orange turban on his head, several strings of beads and pedal pushers.

"Oh, so sorry," Deborah had said and jumped as if a mouse had crossed her path.

"Oh, dear." Ginger put his hand to his chest and beat it a little because he'd been startled.

Deborah stared at him. She couldn't help herself. "No bother," she said and smiled halfheartedly.

"Dearie," he said. "You best look where you're going."

Deborah shook her head and briskly walked away after she made some *tsk* sound. The bastard had knocked into her and he's telling her to look where she's going? Bastard made a weird-looking woman with his oversized tits and some long dark wig that was so full it could have had animals living in it. His face still looked masculine with his long nose and twitchy dark eyes. Just as ugly as he could be, she thought. She'd heard Fletcher's widow Rhonda had married him. What the hell was wrong with her?

Later that evening, she told Dickie about it, and he didn't say a word, just nodded his head. Then she finds out her Dickie is a friend of this she-man. There he stood on the corner of Airy Spring Road, talking to

this person like they were old friends. But the kicker was the kiss that Ginger Tea placed on her Dickie's cheek.

"My God, my husband is one of those men," she told Lottie.

"One of what men?" Lottie asked.

"Queer," Deborah whispered. "My Dickie is queer. He kissed that she-man back."

Poor Lottie didn't say a word, just nodded like it was not unusual.



"Is Barnaby here yet?" Robinette asked as she came flying down the stairs from her room, from her almost a woman-cave with pictures of Martina Navratilova plastered all over the walls as if they were joined at the hip, best friends for life, blood sisters. She also had Mariah Carey's music blaring from her stereo and a million hats hanging off the walls looking deranged, like big straw Martian spaceships, headless Martians 'bout to swirl around the room and whisk her off into oblivion. Robinette didn't wear the hats, said she just liked to sketch them because they reminded her of old-fashioned pretty girls with all those long bows and little flowers on the rim. She said it made her happy that women didn't wear those silly hats anymore, 'cause women have come so far, so far that they can cut their hair short and wear caps and not have to 'fem' themselves up so much with bows and corsets and other such nonsense.

Weird thing for her daughter to say, but Deborah thought that both her children were little strangers that had slid from her belly. Her belly had been the receptacle that gave birth to these odd little people. She expected one of them to turn out like her, but then she had to accept that she was unique, and her children were not, for neither of them resembled her in any way.

"Not yet," she said as her daughter slid into the kitchen, most likely to talk Deasia into making her a tuna sandwich, so she could go out to the back patio and sit out there in the sun — without a hat — and try to tan her White body, which would most likely burn and peel and look like absolute shit inside of twenty minutes.

Robinette was a pretty girl, Deborah observed, but not pretty the way Barnaby was handsome. Robinette was cute, kind of boyish with that chestnut hair she kept short and those long, endless legs. Her small breasts were pert. Deborah took credit for that, her daughter had her breasts, but the buck stopped there. Deborah was a brunette like her daughter, but her eyes were green, like Scarlet O'Hara's. Robinette's eyes were blue like Dickie's, like a deep, blue sky at dusk. She was not tall and thin like her daughter; she was short and a tad round in the middle, used

to be called an hourglass figure; now it was just called plump, like a meaty bird. When Deborah and Lottie Lacock were kids, Lottie used to tell her that she had piano legs and after Deborah cried and cried and examined her legs in the mirror for days on end, finding no resemblance to a piano leg, Deborah told Lottie she resembled Bela Lugosi. What are friends for if not to air their cruel little personalities to each other so they could grow up to pretend they had not a mean bone in their bodies?

Deborah loved Lottie, really, she did, even though Lottie wasn't that savvy and had never married. Obviously, she never married because she couldn't hold a man's attention for more than five minutes, not talking politics and films that were made a hundred years ago and books that no one had ever heard of. Hell, with men, you got one subject: THEM — and you best know how to act stupid and not bring up things they might not have knowledge of, or even worse, beyond their intellectual capacity.