

SENSE
OF LOVE

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WANASOMA BOOKS

PUBLISHED BY WANASOMA BOOKS

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First printing: April, 2009

ISBN #: 978-0-9822085-1-9

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Book design by Brion Sausser

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Also by Sheryl Mallory-Johnson

L.A. Summer: Friends 'Til the Blood End

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Where do I start when there are so many to thank for bringing this book to fruition? First and foremost, my gratitude goes to God for boundless possibilities and blessings.

I'd be remised if I didn't acknowledge each and every individual that offered invaluable advice on this book: A heartfelt thanks to my husband Rudy Johnson III, Thelma Mallory, Karen Zinn-Amos, Joyce Muhammad, Jamilla McKinney, Markay McKinney, Dr. Lorraine Johnson, Alice Kennedy, LaMar Hasbrough, M.D., Lori McMillan, Debbie Powell, Paul Lapolla, and Sheryl Lee.

My extreme gratitude and respect goes to my husband, Rudy Johnson, thank you for your unwavering love and support. I couldn't have gotten this far without you.

To my two beautiful children, Rudy IV and Mallory, thank you for your tolerance, love, and encouragement.

My utmost love and appreciation to my mother, my friend, Dr. Lottie Perkins, author of "Eating To Die, Changing African American Attitudes About Health." You nurtured my talent before I knew I had it.

I'm forever thankful to my mother-in-law, Dr. Lorraine Johnson, for her creative mind and groundbreaking ideas.

To my father-in-law, Rudy Johnson Sr., my brothers and sisters, Rosalind, Thelma, Edward, Rashad and Randy. Your encouragement kept me going at the times when I really needed it.

To a great editor, Karyn Wilkening at Expert Editing, Inc. Thank you for transforming an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan.

To my readers, simply put, thank you.

PROLOGUE

Pat swore to God if she had a sledgehammer, she would demolish the whole house, cracking tile, splintering wood, and shattering windows. Once that was dealt with, she would locate a butcher knife—*one of her razor-sharp chef specials tucked away in the moving van.*

She would dig it out, return to the house, and lacerate the carpet. By the time she completed her handiwork, the house would fall out of escrow and Lloyd wouldn't get his half of the equity. He didn't deserve a dime of the sweat and tears she poured into making their house a home.

Pat chuckled at her malicious thoughts, though her chuckling was short-lived. With her kids moping as if their world had come to an end, there wasn't anything amusing about her situation.

Standing in the barren kitchen, Pat took a long, satisfying drag of her Salem. Another bad habit she needed to kick, after overcoming her addiction to Lloyd. This, Pat swore to herself, was her absolute last smoke. As she exhaled, Pat stubbed the butt in her Starbucks cup, then tossed her two remaining cancer sticks down the rumbling garbage disposal along with her cold coffee.

Now that all of her belongings were loaded in the moving van, Pat walked from room to room in haste, continuing her final walk through. She had no attachment to the memories held within its dingy white walls. In spite of this, memories she wanted to forget came to mind; like how it had taken her six months to sell the damn house and as long to sort through the junk she and Lloyd accumulated in fifteen years together. Most of the junk was hauled away to the city dump. The more valuable items she kept. Lloyd didn't deserve any of it!

Following a perfunctory check of the three bedrooms, Pat stopped at the hallway bath to retrieve the last roll of toilet paper. She reached for the wastebasket too, another necessity she couldn't afford to leave

behind. The sight of the snapshot she'd tossed days ago halted Pat's steps and heart. Her first mind was to leave the picture in the garbage where it belonged. To bad she had never been one to follow her first mind. She picked up the photo, and was paralyzed by the ancient image.

There they were. The happy couple on their wedding day. Pat had been nineteen, and full of hope and promise; Lloyd had been twenty-one, and full of anything but. If she were as wise then as she thought she was now, she would've been fed up with Lloyd and his bullshit years before she turned thirty-four.

Pat's age rang in her mind like an alarm clock. It took her long enough to open her eyes, and now look what she had awakened to, exactly what she so desperately wanted to avoid—a fresh divorce, and two kids to feed on a low budget.

She didn't have the strength to face another day of uncertainty, another day of heartache, another day alone... *When you don't feel strong, look strong for your children.* Pat told herself. This doctrine she inherited from her mother, but unlike her mother, Pat wouldn't let foregone dreams take her to an early grave.

To rip the false image of marital bliss to shreds, Pat got a good hold with both hands. The initial tear ripped her heart in two. She could feel them rising, the flood of tears she had been holding back. Tears not for the loss of a man, but for the loss of the person she was long before Lloyd Colby swept her dreams from under her feet.

CHAPTER ONE

One Year Later...

DZ Toys didn't carry much merchandise. A sparse supply of dolls lined the back aisle. Releasing a fatigued sigh, Steve wheeled the shopping cart toward the back of the store, with Tia crouched inside, wishing he hadn't promised Tia a toy of her choosing. He should have specified which toy he was going to buy Tia instead of giving her an option she couldn't possibly exercise.

His father never gave him an option. His father had brought home whatever he found at Louie's Liquor next to his auto repair shop: marbles, a racecar for his collection, a Big Hunk—any trinket that made Steve's affliction magically disappear. If Tia were a boy, parenting would be less complicated. Steve was sure of it. He had been spared the winter, with Tia suffering only a runny nose. Now, in the heart of summer, she catches the flu?

"I think we're out of luck, Sneak," he said, using Tia's pet name. "We'll have to come back another day."

As Steve anticipated, Tia's bottom lip quivered, followed by a string of tears. Despite her dark eyes, deep brown skin, and dimpled chin inherited from him, her resemblance to her mother weakened Steve's resolve. Using a pathetic tone, Steve said:

"Tia. Don't cry. We'll look first thing Saturday morning. I promise you."

Along with Tia's tears came a wail.

"Come on, sweetheart. I thought you were a lion. Lions don't cry, remember?"

"I'm not a lion!" Tia shrieked.