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By Gwynne Forster

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Editorial Review

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Divorcee Alexis Stevenson wants a stable life for her young daughter, Tara, so she accepts a position as housekeeper at Harrington House. She and Tara soon win the affection of three bachelor brothers and their grizzled cook. Her feelings for Telford, the oldest, metamorphose into a passionate love, one that he feels for her as well. But three secrets keep her from committing to him. Written in a warm, sensual style, this book features well-developed, sympathetic secondary characters, while two strong subplots involve revenge for an old wrong and a former husband who has no feelings for his own child. Forster, a best-selling author of twelve romance novels and five novels, has been recognized with many honors, including the Black Writers Alliance Gold Pen Award and the Affaire de Coeur Award for Best Romance with an African-American Hero and Heroine. *Shelley Mosley*

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About the Author

Gwynne Forster is an *Essence* bestselling author and has won numerous awards for fiction, including the Gold Pen Award, the RT Book Reviews Lifetime Achievement Award.

She holds a bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology and a master's degree in economics/demography and has traveled and/or worked in sixty-three countries.

She lives in New York with her husband.

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Alexis Stevenson had spent most of her thirty years doing what was expected of her. She managed not to fall in love until she met a man of whom her family would approve. Her father expected his girls to lead the pack, and she graduated at the top of her high school and college classes. Indeed, as a model student, her grades were such that her college and graduate schooling didn't cost her wealthy parents a penny, although they provided her with a lifestyle that she neither needed nor wanted. But her academic successes came at the expense of a healthy social life. After she married Jack Stevenson, she exchanged her job as instructor in home economics at the State University for that of homemaker, spending most of her time either planning for or entertaining her husband's business associates, smoothing his rise to the top of the corporate ladder.

Her difficult pregnancy didn't lessen Jack's expectations of her as homemaker or as hostess to his never-ending parade of guests. Even when his boss's daughter announced that she was pregnant and that Jack was the father, she did the expected and gave him a friendly divorce. But when he sought and subsequently obtained a ruling that would allow him to stop supporting their daughter, Tara, when she reached eighteen, Alexis balked.

Now, two years after their divorce became final, two years of legal battling, she had what she wanted, custody of her child, though at an enormous cost—forfeiture of her entitlement to half of their joint property. But she would have given up everything she had for custody of Tara. However, she couldn't revel in victory over a father who cared so little for his child as to give up all rights to her in order to retain all of his wealth.

She had been a fool to cater to him in his quest for status and power. But she'd learned a lesson, and in Jack Stevenson, she had a master teacher. What she learned, she learned thoroughly; it would never happen again.

No one, not her friends, her sister, her ex-husband or his relatives would believe her—daughter of a wealthy family and former instructor in home economics and health sciences at State University—capable of the decision she had just made. Too bad; from now on, she planned to live her own life, not anyone else's. She put the money Jack sent her for Tara into a fund for the little girl's education and prepared to support her child and herself.

Alexis looked around the house she'd lived in for the past two years, took Tara's hand and walked out, locking the door. All they would need she'd packed in her azure Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. She put her daughter in her special chair in the backseat, strapped her in, got in the car and drove off. *Today is the first day of the rest of my life*, she told herself, and put Sting's "Brand New Day" in the tape deck, pushed the button, said good-bye to Philadelphia and headed for Eagle Park, Maryland.

Four hours later, Alexis brought her Oldsmobile to a halt in front of number ten John Brown Drive, known for miles around as Harrington House. She put the car in Park, expelled a long, tired breath and stared at the sprawling white brick colonial house, its majestic setting proclaiming the status of its owners. An array of multihued pansies, irises, primroses, peonies and daisies along with well-spaced oak, birch and pine trees—green and fresh in the noonday April sun—gave the house a serenity and the appearance of a refuge. Well maintained, she thought, but not a human in sight.

"Are we gonna stay here, Mummy?"

Alexis glanced back at four-year-old Tara, the delight of her life. "I hope so, honey. I hope so."

Only the Lord knew what Telford Harrington's reaction would be when he saw her precious Tara. He hadn't asked, and she hadn't told, because she knew that would be the end of the best job offer she'd received in three months of frantic searching.

The picture before her beckoned, though she found the manifestation of wealth unsettling; she'd rather not return to the monied environment she escaped when she separated from Jack Stevenson almost three years earlier, but what choice did she have now?

"Let's get out. Can we, Mummy?"

"In a minute, love."

Staring at the unknown, she felt compelled to savor what might be her last minutes as a person free to do as she pleased whenever she liked. When she walked through that door, she would be a servant, a full-time housekeeper. She didn't mind it, nor did she resent it. She'd opened a new chapter in her life, and she looked on it as an opportunity, a lifesaver. A way to support herself and her child. State U now required all of its teachers to have a doctorate degree, which meant that, with only a master's, she had to find other work.

She got out of the car, took Tara's little hand and walked with her up the winding brick path to the door. It opened slowly. "You must be the housekeeper." The voice belonged to a dark-skinned graying man of indeterminate age who looked as if he might at one time have been a bantamweight prizefighter.

"Yes." She extended her hand. "I'm Alexis Stevenson, and this is my daughter, Tara." The man didn't fit the

picture of Telford Harrington that she'd formed in her mind's eye after her one brief conversation with him.

"M' name's Henry, and I'm the cook. Come on..." He noticed Tara. "She's yours?"

Shivers raced through her, but she steadied herself. After all, this was the cook, not Harrington. Still, he probably reflected his boss's attitude about things. Alexis nodded, as if having the child with her were of no consequence.

"Why, yes. She is."

Tara moved closer to Alexis. "My name's Tara. What's yours?"

Henry stared at the little girl and shook his head. "M' name's Henry, like I said. I don't know if this is gonna work, ma'am. Nobody told me nothing 'bout no little girls. Where's your stuff? Might as well get you settled in."

Nothing about his behavior eased her anxiety about Tara; indeed, he behaved as if she needn't hope for understanding. "How about giving me a tour of the house, Henry?" she called after him, hiding her concern.

"Soon as I put together something for you to eat. Course, if you don't like what I fix, feel free."

Henry gave them a lunch of hamburgers and French fries with ginger ale for Alexis and milk for Tara, enough to feed two more people and causing her to think the Harrington men were big meat eaters. Tara walked over to Henry, tapped him on the thigh and thanked him for her lunch. He looked down at her as though making up his mind whether he'd allow himself to be captivated, but Tara smiled and took the matter out of his hands.

Henry wiped his hands on his oversize, blue-denim apron and started out of the kitchen. "Come on," he threw over his shoulder. "This'll take a while. Ain't much changed here since the old man passed, and that was well-nigh twenty years ago."

Alexis glanced around the kitchen, enormous with Chinese-blue brick walls and kitchen cabinets, and a chrome sink, stove, dishwasher, grill and refrigerator. A round table with three curved-back Moroccan chairs rested in a white nook as if forgotten.

Hmmm. How odd, she thought as she walked with Henry through the dim living and dining rooms, rooms that obviously once boasted the elegance of their day. At the end of the hour-long tour, she'd decided that Telford Harrington lived much to himself. His bedroom contained a huge sleigh-style bed with a bedspread to match the tan-colored drapery, a beige-and-brown Tabriz carpet, mahogany desk, oversize brown leather chair and chest of drawers. What appeared to be a violin or a viola rested in a corner. A large black-and-white drawing hung over his bed. Nothing cheerful there. And nothing to calm her fears that he might send her packing, as would have been the case if his room were bright and cheerful.

Three other bedrooms, two of which belonged to Telford's brothers, met the criteria for a master bedroom with anterooms and private baths. Henry had placed her things in a different end of the second floor.

"You might want to ask Mr. Tel if you and your little girl can stay back on the other side in the room on the end by the garden. It's got an anteroom with a nice bay window, and your little girl could have that by herself. Course, I ain't saying he's gonna like none of this, but that's twix you and him."

She wished Henry would stop his frequent references to Telford Harrington's certain displeasure about her child. But she said nothing to that effect, only thanked him. She put Tara to bed for a nap, and walked around the gardens to get her bearings. She loved natural settings—gardens, forests, the ocean, places where a person could feel free. On an impulse, she cut a large bouquet of pink peonies and purple irises, put them in a water-filled vase and placed them on the marble-top walnut table in the foyer. Observing the elegance that the flowers added to the area, she moved the gilt-edged mirror from its dark corner in the hallway, found a hook and hung it above the flowers.

"Now that's *really* an improvement," she said to herself.

"The men won't like you making changes, ma'am," Henry said, coming up behind her. "They like things the way they is."

"I can imagine. What are you planning for supper?" They wanted a homemaker, and she intended to turn that mausoleum into a home.

"Whatever I find in there." He pointed to the pantry. "Some chops, baked potatoes and beans, apple pie...something like that. They ain't hard to feed."

"I'll do the marketing from now on, Henry. We'll sit together, plan the menus and make out the grocery lists. Okay?"

"Don't matter none to me. Mr. Tel said I'd take care of the upstairs and the kitchen, and you see to the downstairs. Twice a week, Bennie comes in and does the heavy cleaning."

Just as he'd written into her contract. "Thanks, I'm sure we'll get on well."

She opened the windows downstairs, let the breeze flow through and immediately felt better about her new job. She found table linens, place settings and flatware and set the table in the breakfast room. Then she cut more flowers and put them on the table along with long tapered candles that she discovered in the linen closet.

Henry stood in the doorway scratching his head and shaking it. "Like I said, I don't know if this is gonna work. The men eat in the kitchen, and I ain't seen none of this—" he waved a hand around the breakfast room—"since Miss Etta passed. Course, like I said, that's twix you and Mr. Tel."

"How long have you worked here, Henry?"

""Bout thirty years, since the boys were little. Why?"

She raised an eyebrow. "And you call Telford Harrington Mr. Tel?"

"Humph. I call him anything I want to. I figured that's what you'd call him."

She liked Henry, but she didn't think he'd appreciate her telling him that. "What time do we eat dinner?"

"You mean supper? Whenever they gets here...sometime 'round six or seven."

She'd have to work on that. Around five, she bathed Tara and dressed her in a yellow pique dress, braided

her hair and secured the ends with matching yellow bows. Then she showered, put on a floor-length yellow T-shirt that flattered her svelte and curvaceous five-foot-seven-inch frame, secured her permed hair in a French knot and waited for the verdict. Hers and his. Thinking of what she had to lose, tremors raced through her, and she groped her way to a chair. With three hundred and eighty dollars to her name, Telford Harrington would have to see reason or she'd have a problem.

She'd hung up most of their clothing when she heard the doorbell ring but, thinking that anyone who lived there would use a key, she didn't move from the closet. She couldn't. The colors of her clothing danced in a mirage before her eyes, and her feet would not budge.

Tara. She had to find Tara. If she'd gotten into something...She looked around for the child, didn't see her and walked quickly toward the stairs in time to hear a deep male voice—one she wouldn't likely forget—explain, "Well, hello to you, too, and who *are* you?"

"My name is Tara. What's yours? Do you live here?"

"I certainly do."

"What's your name?"

Alexis raced down the stairs and stopped, for he had looked up in her direction, and from that distance, his masculine persona, strong and heady, jumped out to her. Lassoed her and claimed her. She shook her body the way one rids clothes of wrinkles and got a grip on herself. "My name's Telford," she heard him say to Tara, though he'd locked his gaze on Alexis. "I'll be right back."

He stopped before reaching her and stared into her eyes. She tried to look away, but couldn't. He seemed to pull her to him the way a magnet captures steel, and she realized that she was closing the distance between them. Her whole body slammed on alert, tingling with a strange new vibrancy, with life, and a blaze leaped into his eyes. The expression burning in them nearly unglued her. She felt him then; oh, how she felt him! He rimmed his top lip with the tip of his tongue, bringing her back to herself and to a halt two steps above him. If she trusted her judgment right then, she'd swear that he shuddered as though tension seeped out of him.

"I'm Telford Harrington, and something tells me you're Alexis Stevenson." That didn't sound as if he was happy about it, either.

She took the hand he extended and shimmered with awareness from her scalp to the soles of her feet. He jerked his hand away from hers as if she'd scalded him. What a mess! Maybe she'd better leave right that minute and take her chances somewhere else.

"Yes," she said, as though leaving hadn't occurred to her. "I'm glad to meet you."

He remained there, a breath away, eye to eye with her though she stood two steps above him. "You didn't tell me you had a child. If you had, I'm not so sure I'd have hired you."

"You didn't ask me, nor did you mention it, so I figured you didn't think it relevant."

"If you had three kids, would you still think that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what I'd think if I had three. I'm just thankful that I only have to support this

one." She said that pointedly to ring his bell of compassion, if he had any.

He looked down suddenly, and she saw Tara pulling at his pants leg. "Mr. Telfry, Mr. Henry said supper is ready, and I'm hungry."

"Mr. Telford, honey," Alexis corrected.

Users Review

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