

EXCERPT FROM THE COLOR LINE

OPAL RECEIVES A VISITOR

1972

Opal folded her reading glasses and placed them in their case, then settled back into her chair for a long visit with her family pictures. But the sound of a frantic tapping on her office door startled her back to the present. “Come in.”

The door opened and a dark-skinned teenage girl dressed in a black-feathered “Odile” tutu peeked in. “Mrs. Hawkins? Uh, ’scuse me ...”

“Oh, my, Terry! Don’t tell me our guest is here already?”

Terry bounced excitedly, setting her formal black tutu rustling with a rhythm more reminiscent of ragtime than *Swan Lake*. “Yes, ma’am. And he’s so beautiful! I—I hope it’s all right—I got him a chair and some tea and—well, he’s waitin’ for you.”

Opal kissed the letter from her son, folded it quickly, and tucked it into her skirt pocket as she stood up. “Relax, Terry,” she laughed. “The man’s been on your side of the street, himself, you know. You’ve worked hard, child, and this is where it all pays off. The training is what carries you through these audition jitters, you see? Now get on out there and take your position. I’ll be right out.”

Opal checked her appearance in the mirror hanging next to her office door. As she adjusted a hairpin and smoothed her skirt, she remembered Miss Aida’s good-luck wink and the feel of Madame’s hand on the small of her back, gently pushing her out to center stage. *This time, Shoo-Shoo! Show them who is greatest dancer!*

When she stepped out of her office, Opal’s eyes were instantly drawn to the dark gentleman seated in a folding chair near the recital stage at the end of the long, mirrored room. She lifted her chin and smiled as she took a step in his direction ... As the man rose from his chair, Opal forgot the shades and crossed the room, studying him with each step. He was everything she had expected, and more. His skin glowed with the rich color and sparkle of fresh black coffee, and he filled the room with a quiet dignity. He wore a crisp, pale gray suit with a charcoal shirt and wine-colored tie, and gold cuff links gleamed from the edges of his sleeves when he extended his hands. His smile was dazzling, and intelligence burned in his dark eyes. Opal felt her heart begin to pound as she reached for his hands. “Mr. Mitchell?”

“Ah, Mrs. Hawkins. After all our telephone conversations, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

She turned and smiled at her students. “Class, I’d like you to meet Mr. Arthur Mitchell, Director of the Dance Theater of Harlem. Mr. Mitchell—my dancers.”

Arthur Mitchell bowed slightly from the waist, and years of dance experience were evident in the movement.

After the excited buzz died down, Opal cued the pianist and took a seat in the chair next to Arthur Mitchell. She snuck a peek at him from the corner of her eye and sighed. *It sure is a new day, Madame.*

From the beginning of the first number, she held her breath and mentally danced each abbreviated piece with her students. From *Swan Lake* to *The Firebird*, she willed them to execute each movement, each lift, to perfection. At the conclusion of a short piece dedicated to Katherine Dunham, the lights came up and Terry appeared at the center of the floor. She was now costumed as an exotic bird, complete with red and black feathers trailing from her headpiece.

Her voice faltered slightly when she made her announcement. “And now, Mr. Mitchell—our finale. I guess it’s weird for a finale, but we call it *The Beginning*.”

Opal stiffened in her chair and reminded herself to breathe. She had given the class a free hand in the creation of the full-length finale, which featured the entire corps de ballet in their own homemade mix of African regalia—kente and kuba cloth draped over cocoa-colored leotards, with feathers and cowrie shells decorating necks, wrists, and ankles. Exchange students from West Africa who attended Terry’s college had offered their talents along with four traditional drums called *djembes* to accompany the dancers. And the students had recruited two baby brothers and three little sisters from their own families to portray “the offspring.”

The piece began with the first drummer playing a slow, rhythmic pattern reminiscent of rain. One by one, the dancers emerged to play out their roles in the story of Africa’s bounty. And one by one, the other drummers fell in with the rhythms of life. Opal twisted the fabric of her skirt as she counted the beats to Terry’s entrance—a grand Kitri leap followed by a solo packed with complicated pointe work and rapid aerial combinations. The drums rose to a fevered crescendo, and Terry suddenly appeared like a bolt of lightning high above center stage, the trailing red feathers of her headpiece streaking behind her like a fiery comet. The sight brought an instant flood of tears to Opal’s eyes, and she pressed her palm to her heart. *Oh, Madame ... I think this one’s gonna make it.* She exhaled slowly and finally settled back in her chair.

The final drumbeat signaled a collective shout from the dancers as they fell to the floor in a dramatic cascade of bright colors and rattling shells. Then all was still, and Opal’s eyes slowly opened.

After a long silence, Arthur Mitchell rose slowly and began to applaud. “Bravo!” Leaning closer to Opal, he whispered, “I can’t think of any words ... except that you’ve taught them well, Mrs. Hawkins. I think we might have a few stars in this bunch. Call me tomorrow. I’m particularly interested in the pair that danced that second *pas de deux*, and my God! That soloist in the finale! Breathtaking.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Mitchell. We were hoping you’d like it.”

“I loved it. And I’d love to stay and watch your class—to study your teaching technique,” he said, smiling at her. “But I’ve got a rehearsal of my own to get to. We’re performing at the Met next month. I’ll send you a special invitation.”

Opal's fingers wrapped tightly around the letter in her pocket. "The—the Metropolitan Opera House! How wonderful!"

"And the company is a nervous wreck," he laughed. "So, Mrs. Hawkins, I really must go, but I'll leave you with one thought. From what I saw here today, some of your students will be dancing at the Met in a season or two."

"The Met," she whispered.

Arthur Mitchell smiled warmly at the class as he turned to leave. "Magnificent."