

## CHAPTER 1

Callie's head throbbed. It was the type of headache that she had grown accustomed to over the last few months. She had gotten drunk again and now she was paying for it. She couldn't quite focus on her own thoughts because of the echoes, which were getting louder and louder. Even though she was lying in a puddle of water, she thought it was strange how the wetness didn't bother her. The rhythm of the steady stream calmed her somehow. She just wanted to float away, and then all of her pain, anger and unhappiness would be gone forever.

*Please, God, she thought, if you make this hangover go away, I will never, ever drink again.*

"Get up!" the voice said

Callie's eyes flew open, squinting against the spray of water aimed at her face.

"God, is that you?"

"No such luck, honey"

Callie continued to struggle through the fog in her mind as she tried to get her bearings. Little by little the realization of her state became clearer. She wasn't floating into a peaceful oblivion. She was lying on the hard, cold shower floor. The water was from the shower

nozzle and the voice of God and echoes belonged to none other than her older sister, Alise.

“Sober up, Callie! This is ridiculous! You bein’ passed out and it’s not even one o’clock in the afternoon. I had to drag your heavy behind in here just to wake you up! I don’t know why you picked today of all days to have one of your out of control moments!”

*I didn’t pick today*, Callie thought. *You don’t understand how this works*, Alise. She tried to say it but she only managed a few grunts and mumbled dialogue. It didn’t really matter what came out of her mouth. How could she explain this to anyone? She didn’t completely understand it herself. No matter what she did or where she was physically, in her mind she always ended up back in Marlisa’s condo. Reliving the scene from three month’s earlier when she “caught” them in the act. Michael Armstrong, her husband, love of her life, and center of her whole world was in bed with her sister. She wished she could get through this - grieve her marriage without having to see either one of them again but that was easier said than done. She had three children with Michael and she held joint ownership with Marlisa in their recording and music production studio, a thriving business that kept them both financially secure. The worst part of all of this besides the obvious betrayal of both her husband and her sister was that she knew Marlisa had set her up. She was *supposed* to catch them.

Callie had re-played her phone conversation with Marlisa in her head again and again. Marlisa had practically *begged* her to come by for a quick meeting regarding the launch party for a new artist. CM Music Productions had just signed an international distribution deal and would for the first time be acting not just as a production company but also a record label. The new artist had already achieved local celebrity status through recent radio play of one cut from the CD. The song was

called 'Soul Mate' written by Callie a long time ago for Michael. Everything was perfect for Callie: her job, her family and her marriage. Maybe that's why she didn't think twice about how unusual it was for Marlisa to ask her to come to her condo for a meeting. "I'm flying out of town and I'll be packing and just running around like crazy!" Marlisa had said. Don't forget your emergency key. I'll be so busy taking care of things I may not even be home when you come by."

"Why don't you just stop by the office when you're done? That way we could -"

"No, no" Marlisa had cut Callie off. "Just come by my place around one o'clock. See you then!"

Callie closed her eyes tighter and shook her head in fierce denial. The memories were coming back stronger as she sobered on the shower floor. She could see the look on Marlisa's face when she had walked into the bedroom. In the split second before she feigned surprise they had locked eyes. What was that she saw in Marlisa's? Was it satisfaction? Hatred? Both?

The water spray ended and a towel landed across Callie's face. Alise grabbed Callie's hand and yanked her to her feet. "Today of all days" she said as she wiped Callie's face with the towel before vigorously rubbing her hair with it.

"Ow, my head," Callie managed to whimper in a tiny voice as she grabbed her temples.

"Here, take this." Alise offered Callie two Excedrin's and a glass of water. "You should have a headache with your hung over self!" Alise continued to chide. "I found three empty wine bottles on your nightstand! Three! And you passed out on the floor like an ol' drunk. Callie you know it's Ashley's sweet sixteen party tonight! She's been talking about it since last year! And look at you!"

Callie looked past Alise into the large bathroom mirror directly in front of her. Usually the reflection was that of a beautiful black woman with bronze skin, large hazel eyes and full lips that turned easily into a wide bright smile. What she saw now should have frightened her. She barely recognized the woman in the mirror who stood soaking wet in yesterday's clothes. She had hollow, distant, dull eyes complete with dark circles. Her shoulder length hair looked like a tangle of frizzy weeds. She had lost a great deal of weight; skipping meals had taken its toll. She looked as if she had aged twenty years in just the last three months. But what was more frightening than the complete deterioration of her physical appearance was her sadness. Her sorrow was so overpowering that you could *feel* it just by being in the same room. Alise felt it. The burden of her sister's pain hurt her more that Callie would ever know.

"Michael's going to be here" Alise voice softened. "Honey, he has to be here. He's her father. His relatives will be here. *Our* relatives will be here. None of them really knows what happened. You don't have to be hostess to anyone. I'll do that. You just have to get through this one night, for Ashley. Michael moving out and all of this divorce talk have hit her really hard. You can't let your feelings towards Michael, Marlisa and what happened take over. Do you understand?"

Callie looked away from herself in the mirror and back at her sister. Expressionless, she turned and walked out of the master bathroom, down the short hallway into her dressing room. Moments later she re-appeared wearing a thick blue terry cloth robe, walked to the other side of the spacious bedroom and disappeared again through a doorway that led to the adjacent office.

Alise went into the dressing room to get the discarded wet clothes that lay, just as she suspected, in a pile in the middle of the floor. She picked them up and took them into the bathroom, dropping them into the tub. Grabbing another towel, she quickly wiped the puddles from the Italian tile floor and made a mental note to send Tess, the housekeeper, in to clean up properly on her way out. Alise slowly walked to the other side of the bedroom and stood at the office door.

This was Callie's haven. Her office. Callie had stylishly decorated it in warm browns and vibrant rust and gold accents. There was a beautiful large mahogany desk and matching bookshelves and it had all the accessories you would expect to see in an office. But it also had a comfortable sitting area with a beautiful deep-seated leather couch, a stereo, plasma TV, small refrigerator, coffee maker and a small private bathroom. It was all very elegant but still relaxed and cozy, which is just what you would expect from Callie. The far wall had four giant floor to ceiling windows and a set of large French doors, which led out to a spacious balcony overlooking a serene lake and wooded area. Picture perfect on a beautiful day like today. It was Callie's most personal and special space in the large custom designed home.

This was where Callie came to think in peace. Where she worked tirelessly into the night and the place where she was the most creative. And it was off limits to everyone unless you were invited in and that included Alise. Going into the office was Callie's way of saying, "go away".

Alise heart broke as she watched Callie sitting in a lounge chair on the balcony and staring at the lake. The only time she could remember seeing Callie this sad was when Daddy died. It took a long time to make her smile again.

Alise flinched when Callie reached for the bottle of wine she had removed from the office refrigerator that was now sitting on the small table beside her lounge chair. She poured herself a glass of wine and just stared at it in her hand. She held the glass by the stem and twirled it slowly in her hands before setting it down on the table and pushing both the glass and the wine bottle to the far end. That one gesture gave Alise hope that she had gotten through to her.

Wine had become Callie's new best friend over the last few months. Wine didn't judge you. It didn't drag you into the shower and give you lectures and tell you to get yourself together. It was a good listener, it gave you comfort and it helped you forget the pain – not remember it. What other friend can do that? Certainly not Alise. That's why wine had slowly but surely pushed Alise into a distant second in the friendship category. Alise couldn't help but feel a twinge of hurt knowing that Callie was pushing her away again even now. She sighed and walked over to pick up her purse from the bed before walking out of the bedroom.

"Maybe I got through to her," Alise thought as she walked down the stairs. But even as she said it to herself she didn't believe it.

Callie heard a car start at the front of the house and looked back towards the office door and her bedroom. Alise was gone. Callie thought about Alise. She loved her sister a lot. She has been her protector ever since she could remember. Their mother had suffered from depression and their father traveled almost nine months of the year, so many times she and Marlisa had to depend on Alise to take care of them. She knew Alise felt helpless watching her younger sister suffer but Callie felt powerless too. She never knew loving a man could control her life like this. And she loved Michael more than she had ever imagined.

He betrayed her but Callie knew he loved her even now and that made it so much harder for her to pick up the pieces. He has been fighting against their break up, first the separation and now the impending divorce. Not a day goes by when he doesn't tell her in one way or another that he loves her and wants her back. Callie snubs his every attempt scared to death that it will be his last. She loves him with all her heart but she also hates him with that same heart. One day she'll have to come to terms with her battling heart but for now it took all that she had to deal with the anger. As long as she had her anger she didn't feel the hurt so much.

And the anger boiled with such intensity that it should have frightened Callie rather than comforted her. She wasn't just angry with Michael and his choice to destroy her and their family but her rage was directed at Marlisa too.

Her baby sister and good friend had obviously played her for a fool. They were only one year apart and had been inseparable ever since Callie could remember. They had taken baths together and dressed alike and had stayed awake in the bedroom that they shared whispering and giggling late into the night. They had shared a lot of little girl secrets, the kind of secrets too childish to tell Alise who was so much older. Marlisa had been so sweet and so easy going that Callie could remember more than once rolling up her sleeves to fight on her behalf. Callie was determined that no one would ever hurt Marlisa and over the years Marlisa began to rely on her as the big sister rather than Alise. Alise was Callie's protector and she in turn had become Marlisa's. Callie was more than aware that Marlisa was not just a part of *her life*, she was a part of *her being*. That's why the hatred she felt for Marlisa was tearing her apart.

Michael and Marlisa. It was hard to accept that two people so close to her heart could get together and conspire against her.

But when Callie found herself teetering dangerously on the emotional edge she would force herself to remember all the good things she still had in her life. She had three beautiful healthy daughters. She had her very own successful business. She was living in an affluent suburb of Washington DC and she knew financially she could do just about anything she wanted. She knew what it was like to be in love. Some women never experience that. And she had big sister Alise, her very best friend.

“You need to count your blessings, Callie,” she said before grabbing the bottle of White Zinfandel and putting it up to her lips.