

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 to relive 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. Just let yourself in.”

“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 while wiping 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 than 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. 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 all the accessories that a functional office required. However, it also had a comfortable sitting area with a handsome 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 into her private sanctuary 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.

CHAPTER 2

Alise walked briskly into Callie's house and immediately began surveying the progress. She was carrying a garment bag that held her dark blue silk dress. It was cut low enough in the front to get a man's attention but still respectable enough to wear at her niece's Sweet Sixteen affair. It flattered her generous shape and it was a shape that had taken some getting used to, if the truth be told. She had always been rail thin until the babies came. Now some thirteen years after the last child, she's still forty pounds heavier than she was before and she loves it! A little "junk in the trunk" can be a good thing.

Secretly Alise wondered if her ex-husband Terrence would come tonight. For the most part, he was still on good terms with the family and Ashley had asked her if it was okay to invite him. She also knew that when Ashley invited him it was with the stipulation that he comes without a date. There would be no "other women" drama at this family affair. Alise by no means still wanted that man or anything from him including his name. She had changed her last name from Scott back to Elliot before the ink was dry on the divorce papers. He had cheated on her all through the marriage. But she had to admit that she wanted *him* to want *her*. She wanted him to suffer knowing that he had made a terrible mistake ruining what he had with her and the boys for the single life. She knew none too well how lonely the single life could be and she hoped, no she prayed, with everything she had that

that man was miserable.

Alise hung her garment bag in the hall closet and looked in the mirror hanging above the foyer table. Her thick black hair was cut in a short bob, which fit her round face and enhanced her large almond shaped eyes. Her skin was a little too pale for her liking but that was to be expected coming out of the winter months. She couldn't wait for an opportunity to bake in the sun in order to achieve a beautiful golden brown color. Summer couldn't get here fast enough because right now she looked like a ghost. Sometimes she hated her fair skin.

Alise looked around the downstairs area and was very approving of the décor. The formal dining room table had been set with the fine china used only for special occasions. The table could only seat sixteen so Ashley decided to use it to for the hors d'oeuvre and as a place where the incoming guests could socialize before being led to the entertainment room to be seated for dinner.

The entertainment room was the equivalent of a small ballroom and the caterers had set up round dinning tables with white tablecloths and folding chairs for the guests. Ashley had insisted that the folding chairs had seat cushions to match her color theme of peach and ivory. Each table had a small crystal vase with peach and ivory roses as the centerpiece. As a matter of fact, there were fresh cut peach or ivory roses in crystal vases set out throughout the entire downstairs.

Ashley's dress was a beautiful peach too. She had picked her own color scheme and had been involved with every detail of her party from the beginning. There was classical music playing softly through the downstairs intercom. Another one of Ashley's ideas. They were expecting sixty people in formal attire for what Ashley called 'The classiest affair of the decade'.

Callie had been suspicious when she first saw the original guest list and with good reason.

"I know my daughter," she had said to Alise, "and eighty people, mostly relatives for a sweet sixteen party is making my "spidey senses" tingle."

“She wanted it to be elegant and simple.” Alise said smiling.

“Uh-huh,” Callie had said narrowing her eyes as she looked at Alise. “I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

They both knew there was more to come. From the time Ashley had been old enough to understand the concept of a birthday party she had been extravagant. Her special day could easily last a week, as she would sweetly request a birthday dinner at her favorite restaurant in addition to the party she was already having. Then the birthday party would turn into a sleep over and somehow they would all end up at the beach or some other weekend destination. Simple, no matter how elegant, was never a part of her plans.

The other shoe came in the form of a second guest list of 400 of her closest friends to be held in the largest ballroom of the JW Marriott in DC. Not to mention that Michael was put in charge of booking a Grammy award winning rapper (someone Michael had never heard of) and Callie was in charge of securing Johnny Depp to make an appearance to personally wish Ashley the happiest of birthdays. He was supposed to seal it with a kiss on the custom built stage where everyone could see and therefore envy her forever. This sensational party would immediately be followed by a weekend trip to the Bahamas with ten of her BFFs to complete the birthday festivities.

The Bahamas weekend was an absolute no, however Callie was willing to negotiate on the other plans. The eighty guests to be hosted at home became sixty.

“Unless they are close friends, only one party per guest.” Callie had told Ashley when she noticed names that were on both guest lists (not her or Michael’s name of course). The four hundred was reduced to two hundred, any Grammy winners performing would be via music videos which would be running while their songs played and Johnny Depp or rather the life-sized cardboard cut out would be available on stage whenever she was ready for the big kiss.

“He can’t wish you a happy birthday but you can smooch with him as much as you like.” Callie had told Ashley.

“You’re not funny, Mom,” Ashley replied rolling her eyes and getting up from the kitchen table.

“I’m a little funny,” Callie said aloud to the empty kitchen.

After Callie tweaked the birthday plans to line up with how things were really done on planet earth, Ashley sulked a few days but finally came around. One other condition Callie had was if Ashley wanted two parties she would have to plan one of them with the budget Callie gave her. Ashley had chosen to handle the gathering at home and by what Alise could see she had done a brilliant job so far. The party should go on without a hitch.

Michael’s parents had pushed for it to be held at their country club, a club where they were only one of three black families. Of course, if you had enough money and looked white enough they would quietly and begrudgingly accept you. And Michael’s parents were both rich and looked white, right down to the processed hair. Alise was sure his parents hoped that his marrying the very brown Callie was a sign of rebellion that Michael would tire of quickly. Even after nineteen years of marriage Alise believed they still had hope that Michael would come to his senses, leave Callie and come go back to the light side. Take the light skinned children too. Alise had no doubt that if Ashley wasn’t a fair complexioned beauty with long hair they would not even bother to show up much less push for it to be at their esteemed country club. Alise knew what Michael’s family thought of hers. They thought that Michael Armstrong, their only beloved light skinned son, was too good for Callie and her family.

That’s why Alise needed Callie to hold it together tonight. *Do it for Ashley and for your own family. We’re just as good as the Armstrongs*, Alise thought.

She wished she could be more like Callie when it came to Michael’s family. Callie loved Michael and could care less what his parents and other family members thought. She was just comfortable in the fact that Michael openly dismissed their bourgeois attitude. But

Alise couldn't help how she felt. She didn't want her family to be put down by anybody.

"We gotta represent girl!" Alise said aloud.

"Who are you talkin' to Aunt Al?" eight year old Maya said as she bounded down the stairs in a pink robe covering the toffee colored gown which was peeking out from underneath.

"Nobody. Oh, my, you do look gorgeous! Look at your hair!" Alise exclaimed.

Maya twirled. "You want to see my dress? I got this robe on because I'm scared it's gonna get dirty before it's supposed to."

"Before it's *supposed to*? You mean to tell me you have a *plan* for gettin' your dress dirty?"

"No, no, Aunt Al!" Maya giggled. "You know what I mean! I gotta stay looking nice until at least everyone is here!" Maya took her robe off and twirled around again.

"You do look beautiful but I have an idea. Why don't you take the dress off for right now? You can get comfortable and then just put it back on later."

"Cause Grandma sent the hairdresser over early for me and this dress pulls over my head. I can't take it off now or all that stinkin' work goes down the drain." Maya put the robe back on making sure her dress was completely covered again. "It's ok, really. I was just watching TV in my room and got a little hungry. Smelling all that food is making my mouth water!"

"Mine too. Smells like the caterers are doing a fantastic job in there." Maya shook her head in agreement and flashed Alise a mischievous smile.

"Now Maya, don't you go gettin' in their way scrounging around that kitchen for a hand out."

"I won't" Maya yelled as she raced towards the kitchen.

"Maya!" Alise yelled but Maya had already disappeared through the double doors leading into the kitchen.

“Oh, well.” Alise said as she began to climb the stairs. “I got bigger fish to fry - like your mother. Lord, please let that girl be up and getting ready and looking gorgeous. And if not gorgeous I’ll settle for her just looking like she’s alive.”

Alise knocked on Callie’s bedroom door. When she didn’t get an answer, she turned the doorknob and went in. The room was cool and quiet. Too quiet. Alise checked the bathroom and the dressing room. Everything looked just as it had three hours ago when Alise had left. It was 4:30 now and guest would begin arriving for dinner at 6:30. Where was Callie?

Alise walked back to the office and looked in. No Callie. She was about to turn around when she spotted the blue bathrobe slumped down in a lounge chair on the balcony. Alise rushed over to the chair and stood over Callie. She had an empty tissue box in her lap and there were used tissues everywhere - on her lap, on the ground, on the table. Next to Callie lay a wine bottle that Alise picked up. Empty. Not again Callie. Alise grabbed Callie preparing herself for “the shower part two” when Callie jerked awake.

“Huh, Wha...? What are you doing, Alise?”

“I’m getting ready to give you another cold shower. If this is the way you want to play it, suit yourself, honey.” Alise tugged on Callie’s arm.

“Wait Alise! I’m not drunk!”

“Well, somebody is! I sure found another empty wine bottom laying around!” Alise picked up the bottom and shook it at Callie.

“It must have fallen over or something but I didn’t drink it. I mean... I drank some but not the whole bottle!”

Alise eyed Callie suspiciously. She looked down at the balcony’s natural stone flooring. Alise was sure that if all that wine had pored out there would still be some evidence of it left. The floor was as clean as ever.

Callie eyes followed Alise’s to the tiled floor. “Well, I know what you’re thinking and I can’t explain it either. But I just fell asleep. I

didn't pass out. I'm not drunk. Well, no more drunk than I was when you last saw me."

It was then that Callie spotted her black Labrador snoring loudly in the corner.

"There's the culprit, right there. Sleeping it off in the corner!" Callie said pointing. Alise looked over at the dog and back at Callie.

"You see what kind of an influence you are."

They both looked back at Jasmine who had turned on her back and now had all four legs in the air and her mouth open still snoring. She began flailing all four legs in the air and twisting her body as if she was desperately trying to scratch a very persistent itch. Then, just as suddenly as she began, she stopped and with all four legs frozen in the air she began to snore again, this time even louder than before.

Callie and Alise looked at each other and then burst out laughing at the same time. Finally when she could catch her breath, Alise called downstairs for her oldest son Jamal to come and get the dog.

"Take her and put her in the back yard," Callie told him still laughing. They followed Jamal through the office and into the bedroom as he carried a sleepy Jasmine in his arms.

"Labs have very sensitive stomachs and she's going to be feeling pretty sick very soon." Callie continued, "Gotta learn how to hold your liquor if you wanna run with the big dogs, right Jasmine?"

As if on cue, Jasmine raised her head from Jamal's shoulder and burped. Jamal turned up his nose at the smell, "Ugh!"

That set Callie and Alise off into another fit of uncontrollable laughter. Jamal frowned and shook his head not understanding the humor as he looked at his mother and aunt laughing loudly. Then adjusting the big dog in his arms he walked out the bedroom mumbling about not understanding "old folks".

"Drunk dog coming through!" They could hear Jamal shout as he walked down the stairs.

"Do you remember Tuffy?" Alise asked still laughing.

"You mean that three-legged dog that you hid in our house for a

week, talking 'bout we gotta save him from the dog catcher?"

"He wasn't three legged! He just had a bad limp. Couldn't run fast. That's why he needed our help."

"*Our* help? It wasn't my idea!"

"But remember," Alise giggled before continuing, "you feed him your Halloween candy and he got sick and threw up and when Mama saw it, you pretended it was *you* that was sick and had threw up?"

"I had to think quick otherwise we were both gonna be in trouble!" Callie was laughing again too.

"You fell to the ground grabbing your stomach and Mama grabbed you to pick you up and smelled you breath! Oooh, girl! You had ..."

Alise was now laughing so hard could hardly catch her breath.

"I know I know, I know! I picked that day to get my first taste of Daddy's beer. I had taken a can and drank some of it and Mama thought I was sick because I was drunk!"

Callie and Alise were both laughing hysterically at the memory.

"You started walkin' around like you were dizzy and stuff! Stumbling! Everybody got in trouble that day!"

"All because you wanted to save some dog! That's you Alise. Always tryin' to save the world," Callie said wiping the tears caused by the laughter from her eyes. "I just hope I'm not the new three legged dog that you're trying to save."

Alise grinned at Callie and shrugged.

"What if you are?"

Callie walked over to her sister and put her arm around her becoming serious.

"Then you can't let them get me." She hugged her sister tightly and whispered "Alise, please don't let them get me."

"I won't," Alise said softly. "You just get through tonight, honey and I'll help you do that. Now the first thing we need to do is get you in the shower."

Callie rolled her eyes and mumbled "not again," as Alise pushed her in the direction of the bathroom.

Callie took a deep breath before opening the door to her bedroom and stepping into the hallway. She was still feeling a little hung over and not quite like herself. But she hadn't felt like herself since that fateful day when her marriage ended - at least in her mind it had ended on that very day. And soon it would be over legally no matter what Michael wanted.

Callie closed the door to her bedroom and smoothed her dress down. She had showered and dressed quickly, expertly doing her hair and make-up. Her fingers self-consciously patted the puffiness under her eyes. She was aware of the dark circles and large bags or "suitcases" that were still visible under her eyes even after applying what seemed to be a ton of eye cream and concealer. She had done the best that she could with the make up and although she was good, this was a big job and she wasn't kidding herself – she was no miracle worker.

If she was careful she could stay in soft lighting. Callie smiled as she imagined herself darting from one dark corner to the next. The kitchen with its bright recess lighting should be completely off limits but since it was the best place to hide at a function like this, Callie knew it would be hard to resist. It's a good thing Alise would be playing hostess so she could concentrate on looking and acting like her normal self. She reminded herself of Alise's words - *Just get through tonight.*

"The dress looks really good on you." Callie startled at the voice as she looked up into the eyes of its owner; her daughter Ashley. She looked down at her dress before smiling and saying

"What, this old thing?"

Ashley smiled too. The dress was a beautiful antique ivory dress that Ashley had picked out for just for this occasion. It was an off the shoulder design with tiny rhinestones trimming the entire neckline. The form fitting lace design played peek-a-boo with Callie's smooth caramel skin, lying flat across her stomach and thighs before ending

just below her knees. Callie wore a thin rhinestone anklet that was an exact match for the tennis bracelet and earring set she also wore. As a finishing touch, Callie had put on a hint of body shimmer across her shoulders and at her cleavage. Ashley, completely unaware of Callie's tumultuous start, thought she looked beyond beautiful.

It had taken Ashley more than four months to find just the right dress for tonight. She had wanted her and her mother to match her color scheme of peach and ivory. She had wanted them to be connected tonight; a team and she wanted everyone to know it. But that was back then. Back before the anger and hurt feeling had come between them. Back when they were as close as mother and daughter could be and when Ashley seemingly worshiped the ground Callie walked on. It almost felt like it used to as they stood smiling at each other in the hallway. But then Callie felt the wall come up between them. She could see the unforgiveness in Ashley's eyes and now what began as a happy, memorable moment had suddenly turned awkward.

Ashley couldn't seem to forgive Callie for not being able to forgive Michael. She was old enough to put all the pieces together and had figured out Michael had betrayed her mother. She only recently found out about the very last piece – the woman in question was Aunt Marlisa. Ashley had been crushed with the realization.

Aunt Marlisa was the fun aunt who wore young funky clothes. She used to come and get her on the weekends and let her stay up all night if she wanted to. Ashley remembered the "sugar comas" she would fall into after pulling all nighters of cookies, candy and ice cream with Aunt Marlisa. She knew her Mom would have had a fit if she knew just how far her aunt let her go on so many things. But that's what made Aunt Marlisa so great. She didn't treat her like a baby. She bothered to ask Ashley what she thought and what she wanted and then she *listened*.

Of course, Aunt Marlisa would always make her promise never to tell anyone, especially Callie. And Ashley never did. Not Callie, not Michael or her other sisters. She knew Callie didn't approve of a lot

things her Aunt Marlisa did, but she also knew that Aunt Marlisa trusted her, little Ashley, with so many of her secrets. She understood Aunt Marlisa in a way that no one else did. Maya was too young and Vanessa, who was only a year and a half older than Ashley, was too judgmental.

Vanessa had just started college and wanted to be a psychiatrist, which was fitting since she was always analyzing people and making conclusions about their behavior. She thought Aunt Marlisa just did things to get attention. Like when she upholstered her car seats in leopard print. Obviously, that was a ploy to get people to notice her, not to mention ghetto. Ashley thought it was stylish and bold. She really liked her aunt that's why it hurt her so much that she would do this to her mother.

Even so, Ashley thought Callie should give Michael another chance and not send her dad out of their life. Michael had moved out and she hadn't seen him as much these last few months. He spoke to her every day on the phone and was able to pick her up on the weekends but Callie wouldn't see him. He was not allowed to even come in the house and Callie never came to the phone when he called for her. Ashley knew her father was trying very hard to make them a family again but her mother wouldn't even speak to him. If she loved him and if she loved her children why wouldn't she try to make it work?

Ashley knew Aunt Marlisa may have been the reason that they separated in the first place, but she believed Callie is the reason that they're still apart. Her mother simply didn't love them enough to get past this one mistake. That's what Aunt Marlisa had said. She had also told Ashley how sorry she was for everything and how hard she was trying to fix things but Callie wouldn't let her. Aunt Marlisa had said that Callie had everything but was willing to throw it all away because she was selfish. Ashley agreed.

She loved her mother but she trusted and believed her aunt. Aunt Marlisa had never lied to her before, unlike Callie who wouldn't even

tell her the truth about why her Dad left. She still wanted to treat her like a child and like she couldn't understand grown up things. She was sixteen and not a baby. Aunt Marlisa understood that and she wanted to fix what had gone wrong in their family. Why didn't her own mother care about her as much as her aunt did?

Ashley's eyes clouded with tears as she stood and looked at her mother in the hallway. She missed her Dad a lot but she missed her Mom even more. She wanted to run to her mother and hug her just to feel safe and loved like she used to. But that's what a child would do and Ashley reminder herself again that she was no longer a little girl.

Callie needed to realize that as long as she refused to make them a happy family again, then everything that happened to unravel the family now was her fault. If she didn't love her family enough then Ashley would no longer love her the way she used to.

After the party she was going to ask to live with her Dad. That would be a blow to her mother and she knew Callie would try to talk her out of it. Maybe then her mother would see how much the family was splitting apart and would allow her Dad back in the house. It was worth a try.

Ashley's smile had long faded from her face when she averted her eyes and walked past her mother down the stairs. Callie watched her with a heavy heart. She desperately wanted to reach out to her, to hug her, love her and do whatever she could to make things good again, but that would take the kind of energy that Callie no longer had. She was an emotional wreck and couldn't help anyone not even herself. In her current state, trying to make Ashley understand and trying to be strong for her would only make things worse. Callie closed her eyes and took a deep breath and whispered, "Just get through tonight".

Callie walked downstairs into a hub of activity. It appeared that all of the invited guests had arrived as well as some uninvited guests. Michael's parents Ursula and Monroe had taken it upon themselves to invite a few of their country club friends and they were all seated front and center at the table reserved for the immediate family. Callie saw

her nameplate on the floor next to the toe of one of Ursula's satin shoes. It was just as well. She hadn't planned on sitting any where near Michael anyway. Let the great Armstrongs take over. Alise, however, was not as accommodating. She grabbed Callie's arm and pulled her into the kitchen and started fussing before Callie could even protest.

"Girl, do you see what's going on out there! I told that damn Ursula that that table was reserved for Ashley and y'all. I told her immediately family – that means mother, father, sisters, and brothers! I even pointed out the nametags and everything! Next thing I know, Shannon come walkin' by me talkin' 'bout 'Oh Mother, over here, over here. This is the family table'" Alise had imitated Shannon by changing her voice to a falsetto, sticking her nose in the air and waving her hands in a beckoning motion.

"Then I look up and they all sittin' down at the table. Hell, except for some of Ashley's friends, we *all* family here tonight! And aunts ain't never meant immediately family. Shannon so educated with all her college degrees but she didn't know that? And then on top of that, they have the nerve to have some people that are strangers, complete *strangers* at the table!" Alise eyes had grown large as if to emphasize the outrageousness of it all.

"Alise I really don't have the strength to go off on nobody right now so-"

"Well, I got plenty of strength" Alise cut in "Girl, I'm strong enough for the both of us and I'm going out there and *correct* this situation."

Alise stormed to the kitchen door and turned and wagged a finger at Callie " If you hear the sound of fisticuffs and then a body gettin' slammed across the table, just rest assured I won't be on the receiving end of any of that!"

Alise pushed through the door as Callie calmly watched. She stood alone in the kitchen when she was surprised by pangs of hunger.

"No wonder", she said as she looked around the kitchen and saw

all the delicious food waiting to be served. Callie had not eaten since the previous evening and she suddenly realized she was famished. She picked up a stuffed pastry of some kind and took a bite.

Oh, heaven, Callie thought as she munched on the seafood pastry. The only thing that would make this better was a glass of wine.

Callie was quick to spot the uncorked wine bottle sitting next to a silver platter of wine glasses. She grabbed both the wine bottle and a glass and walked over to lean up against the sink. She poured the wine, took a sip and looked out the window into the garden.

This was always a calming view for Callie. It was not yet officially spring, but the flowers were already so colorful and beautiful. The weather had been unseasonable warm for the time of year and everything was in a rush to bloom. It all looked so fresh and new. She could see the water falling gracefully from the fountain and immediately felt at peace. She opened the small window so that she could hear the sound of the water, hear the birds and smell the flowers.

“Aw, peace, quiet, serenity” she said before taking another sip of wine, this time closing her eyes to savor the taste, sounds and smells. She heard before seeing her eldest daughter enter the kitchen.

“Mom, you have to come get Aunt Alise! I think she’s going to kill Grandma Ursula!”

Callie slowly took another sip of wine before calmly saying, “Well, if you can get past the whole *murder thing*, I mean, getting rid of her is not necessarily a *bad* idea.”

“Oh, Lord! Where’s Dad? I need somebody sane!” said an exasperated Vanessa as she ran out the kitchen.

Callie was on her third hors d’oeuvre when the kitchen door flung opened again. It was a red faced Ursula, clearly enraged

“Where’s my son!” she screamed at Callie.

Callie continued looking out the window and immediately thought of the singsong children’s retort that was one of her favorites when growing up.

“In his skin

Drinkin' gin
He jump out
You jump in"

"You are so classless," Ursula said haughtily. "Not only are you drinking but you're *singing* about drinking when you're probably already *drunk* at your daughter's affair. I cannot imagine how low my son had to stoop to pick you up to marry."

"Yeah, and I wonder how low he's gonna have to stoop to pick you up off the floor. You just keep talkin', Ursula."

"You have no respect to threaten me that way!"

"Ursula, I'm just trying to mind my own business in my own house. If you don't like it you can -"

"Mom!" Vanessa yelled coming up from behind with Maya following closely. "You're not helping anything," she said just as Ursula grabbed her chest.

"My heart!" she squealed nearly collapsing in Vanessa's arms as Maya pushed a chair under her grandmother.

"Call 911!" Vanessa yelled to her mother.

"Why?"

"Mom! She could be having a heart attack!"

"Yeah, right. She's had more heart attacks than Fred Sanford. She's quite talented actually. As a matter of fact, I saw her first performance when Michael introduced us. It was good, not great," Callie took a sip of wine and looked pensively off into the distance while Ursula moaned, "but then I was only his girlfriend. Now I have to admit she put on a *spectacular* performance when your father announced that we were getting married. Can you believe that? She would rather have a heart attack than say congratulations. If I hadn't been preoccupied with rating the styling of her presentation, I would have *really been insulted!*"

"Mom, please! Can you help?" Vanessa pleaded while placing a damp linen napkin to her Grandmother's forehead.

"Help how? Clap? I'm not falling for-"

“Mommy, she might be dying!” Maya cried.

Callie looked in the fearful eyes of her youngest daughter and then at Vanessa who was clearly afraid for their grandmother. Ursula was slumped in the chair with her eyes closed gasping for air.

“Ok, don’t worry girls. I’ll get Michael- oh, there he is. He just walked by.”

With that Ursula sprung up and stormed out the kitchen yelling for her son. Stunned, Vanessa and Maya looked after her with mouths open and eyes stretched wide before looking at each other in complete disbelief.

“What the f-”

Vanessa quickly covered Maya’s mouth. “Hold that thought, Missy!” she said grinning.

Now it was Callie’s turn to be surprised. She stood with her mouth open looking at her youngest daughter feeling something between shock and amusement. Callie then looked at Vanessa who began backing towards the kitchen door with her hand still clamped down over Maya’s mouth.

“We’ll just go find Dad. Which way did he go?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see Michael,” Callie said with a sly smile.

“Ohhh,” Vanessa said still backing up as the realization of her mother’s ploy dawned on her. She looked down at Maya’s eyes above her hand as they darted back and forth between her sister and her mother in confusion.

“We’re just going to find Dad anyway,” Vanessa said and still grinning, she dashed out the kitchen door with Maya in tow.

Callie shook her head and laughed softly to herself. She would have to have a talk with Maya a little later. Right now all she wanted to do was to relax. After pouring another glass of wine, she reached for another delicious stuffed pastry to munch.

So far this party is pretty good, Callie thought pleasantly. Maybe, just maybe she could get away with hiding in the kitchen all night. After all, she had everything she needed to make this a perfect evening

- good food, good drink and no company. Callie began to dance the waltz when her Aunt Mattie walked through the door.

“I have to warm up my tea. Those waiters are terrible out there. Besides, I had to get away from your Aunt.”

Callie knew her Aunt Mattie was actually referring to her own sister Harriet.

“You know what she said to me?” Aunt Mattie said while putting her cup of lukewarm tea in the microwave. “Callie, how do you turn this thing on?” Callie set the microwave timer and turned it on while Aunt Mattie continued speaking.

“That woman, that woman is gonna make me slap the taste out of her mouth. She always gotta get her digs in. She askin’ why my kids ain’t here at yet *another* family function. Then talkin’ bout how we as black people need to learn how to support each other, especially family. I know she don’t want to get me started ‘cause I’m tired of keepin’ my mouth shut. I’ve held my tongue too long. I remember the way she used to treat Momma. Cussing her out over the phone and hanging up. Momma used to cry and I didn’t say anything then, but I have held everything in too long! I promised myself...”

Callie drifted off. Trained to say ‘uh huh’ at the right moments. She watched an ant crawl up the window screen until it reached the top and was out of sight. Then she looked at the clock above the kitchen table for a moment and watched the second hand moving before studying the numbers on its giant face. Whose bright idea was it to keep track of every miserable second of a person’s miserable life?

Callie let her eyes drift around the kitchen as her Aunt Mattie continued to talk frowning while she thought of Michael. Why hasn’t he come looking for her? He apparently hadn’t noticed that she wasn’t at her own daughter’s sweet sixteen. He apparently hadn’t noticed a lot of things, like how much he really hurt her or how much she cried over him or how much she still loved him and missed him and wanted him back but didn’t know what to do about it.

Callie wondered if she fixed herself a plate and snuck up the back

stairs if her Aunt Mattie, who continued to talk, would even notice she was gone. She just liked to hear the sound of her own voice because all of her stories seem to go on forever – present story included. This must have been how the people who followed Moses into the wilderness felt. First a little chat about the Promised Land and the next thing you know it's forty years later. Finally Callie heard the familiar beeping sound.

“Oh, a minute's up already?” Aunt Mattie said opening the microwave. She took her cup of tea out and walked toward the kitchen door that led into the dining room.

“For your sake Callie, and for respect for your family, I'm gonna try my best to hold it together. But I can't promise you like I want to 'cause I might have to pull that heifer's hair out before I leave here tonight.” And with that she was out of the door.

“Just get through tonight. Just get through tonight. Just get through tonight.” Callie said it over and over again until she thought she felt sure of herself again. She put her wine glass down and went out the kitchen door and was stopped in her tracks by what she saw on the other side of her dining room table. Marlisa.

Alise grabbed her by the shoulders pushing her back into the kitchen.

“Please Callie, don't do anything. Please. I'll get rid of her. Just stay here, *please Callie*. Are you listening to me?”

Alise was more than a little nervous now. Callie had “the look”. When joking, Alise called that look in Callie's eyes the “high beams”. Her eyes were somehow bright and dark at the same time. Piercing. Angry. Scary. Callie was eerily calm. She flicked her “high beams” at Alise and said quietly, “Move.”

Alise knew she had no chance with Callie but maybe she could still do damage control. She ran out of the kitchen ahead of Callie pointing to Marlisa

“You need to leave right now,” she said.

“I have a right to be here. My niece invited me and-”

Alise didn't see the shoe but she heard it whiz past her ear right before popping Marlisa in the mouth. Marlisa's hand flew up to her mouth. Her eyes, already wide in disbelief, grew even larger when she removed her hand and saw the blood. The party had turned silent and everyone seemed to have moved into the dining room to find out what was causing the commotion. Marlisa dabbed at the blood flowing from her lip with a napkin.

"You're crazy!" Marlisa began to shout, more for the sake of her new audience than to Callie. "You're acting crazy at your own daughter's party!"

"Leave now." Callie said in a tense but surprisingly controlled voice. She was oblivious to her audience and was focusing intently on Marlisa. Alise pointed towards the door, afraid to say anything for fear it would set Callie off. Everyone else stood in silent shock with mouths ajar. You could feel the tension crackling throughout the room.

"Why are you doing this ,Callie? I'm not going -"

"If you say another word, I'm on you," Callie warned.

"If Michael says-"

In the blink of an eye Callie tossed aside a dining room chair and climbed on the table. She half slid, half crawled across the table before crouching and launching herself at Marlisa, sending dishes smashing to the floor. Somehow in mid air she caught Marlisa by the throat on the other side of the table forcing her to fall backwards to the floor. Now the previously silent room was filled with shouts, gasps, people running to get out of the way of flying food and more dishes breaking. Someone was yelling 'call 911'and someone else was yelling 'She's killing her!'

Michael and Uncle Fred were trying to pull Callie off of Marlisa while Jamal was desperately trying to pry Callie's fingers from around Marlisa's neck. Just then, one of the younger cousins came in yelling that the dog had gone crazy.

"The dog is running in circles and then she threw up!"

“The drunk dog got out!” Jamal looked up at his mother.

“You go get the dog; I’ll take care of the chocking!”

Jamal got up and ran out while Alise took over, finally removing Callie’s grip from her sister’s throat.

Marlisa was helped to her feet rubbing her neck and crying. Callie, realizing she was still being restrained by Michael, twisted away from him.

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled looking hatefully at Michael.

“That’s why he came to me,” Marlisa managed to say in a raspy voice still rubbing her throat. “Careful she got another shoe!” someone in the crowd yelled. Michael restrained Callie again but not before she snagged a handful of Marlisa’s hair and yanked her backwards pulling out her clip on extensions. Marlisa set off a high pitch shriek as she and Uncle Fred struggled to release the rest of her hair from Callie’s grasp. Callie managed a kick just as they were pulled apart hitting Marlisa squarely in the chest. Uncle Fred ushered a hysterical Marlisa quickly out the room and to the front door.

Again Callie snatched herself away from Michael and tried to follow them to the front door but Michael blocked her path. He then ushered her into the kitchen out of the eyesight of the gawking guests.

“She’s gone, Callie,” Alise said coming into the kitchen moments later. “I saw Uncle Fred put her in the car. She’s gone.”

Callie took a deep breath and seemed to deflate like a beach ball. She turned to go up the back stairs leading from the kitchen to the second floor but her way was blocked by a teary-eyed Ashley.

What have I done? Callie thought, seeing the pain and embarrassment on her child’s face. This should have been a happy occasion for her but instead it was turned into a battleground. Whatever happened to “just get through tonight”. Why couldn’t she control herself?

“I hate you.” Ashley told her mother.

Callie just looked at Ashley. She wanted to hug her and tell her she was sorry for the second time tonight. She knew Ashley would

push her away and with good reason. What kind of mother can't comfort her own child? Callie, feeling like damaged goods, just looked at Ashley.

"I hate me, too," she finally said.

Ashley broke out in tears and ran up the stairs. Callie slowly walked up the stairs behind her.

Alise was true to her word as hostess. With Vanessa's help, she saw everyone out including the caterers, the company that had rented out the extra furniture and the cleaning crew hired to come in afterwards. The house was clean, quiet and back to normal, if only in appearance. Maya had been put to bed and even the dog was all settled.

"All in all, things went pretty well," Alise said examining her shoe with the broken heel and her torn dress. She looked at Vanessa who was sitting on the stairs, her dress and hair were disheveled and her eye make-up so smeared she looked like a raccoon.

"Yep," Vanessa replied, "just another family function. Hey, did you see *your* cousin, 'cause he ain't no kin to me, stuffin' shrimp in his pockets?"

"What? Don't tell me, let me guess, it was Ricky, wasn't it?"

"Sure was. This time he came prepared and was puttin' them in little plastic baggies. I guess he got tired of picking off the pocket lint and God knows what else from his last batch of smuggled shrimp. What gathering was that?"

"A holiday family reunion. Your mother's idea. She wanted the family to get together for something other than a funeral."

"Oh, yeah. Now, that was some party, too."

"Girl, don't get me started! But I think this one will go into the family hall of fame."

Alise and Vanessa laughed thinking about the party that would be the talk of the family for a long time.

“If there’s no drama then it ain’t our family involved,” Alise said limping in her broken shoe as she gathered her things.

“I already told you, they ain’t none of my people,” Vanessa said grinning at her aunt hobbling around and then seeing for the first time a few hors d’oeuvres hanging from the back of her hair.

After pointing out her unique hair ornaments, Vanessa gave her aunt a hug and watched her get into her car and drive away. Now Vanessa looked at the long staircase and sighed. What a day. Somehow she had to find a little more strength to make it up the stairs. She had to check on her mother and Ashley. She had to pretend for Ashley’s sake that she wasn’t so pissed off at Aunt Marlisa for having the audacity to show up at her mother’s house, especially knowing her Dad would be there too.

Maybe if she explained things to Ashley she would understand why their mother reacted that way. They hadn’t seen each other since that day in Aunt Marlisa’s condo. She knew her mother took careful steps to make sure they wouldn’t run into each other. For goodness sake, their mother didn’t even go into her own office any more. Her assistant Marvin picked up the slack in the office. Vanessa was convinced that if Ashley knew, then she would understand why Callie had such a bad reaction to seeing the woman she had avoided all this time standing boldly in her own home. She was being violated and disrespected all over again. Aunt Marlisa deserved everything she got tonight. It took all Vanessa had not to cheer her mother on. It was just unfortunate that it happened at Ashley’s expense.

Vanessa quietly opened the door of Callie’s room and peeked in to see her mother resting quietly in the dark. Vanessa knew better than to believe her mother was asleep. Her mother hardly ever slept any more. She closed the door and walked to the other end of the hall to Ashley’s room. Vanessa knocked quietly.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Vanessa”

“Come in.”

Vanessa could tell by her voice that Ashley was still crying but she wasn't quite prepared for the red eyed, make-up smeared mess that sat up in the bed.

"Wow, you look terrible. So, I guess asking you how you're doing is a dumb question, huh?"

Ashley smiled thinly. Vanessa's weak attempt to lighten the mood seemed to have worked a little.

"How could she have done that, Nessa?"

"Well, maybe it's time you knew the whole story. I know Mom and Dad didn't think it was necessary for us to know all the details, but there's a reason Aunt Marlisa is not welcome in this house. Um, well it's like this, um..."

"Relax, I know the whole story so you're off the hook."

"What do you mean you know the whole story?"

"I'm not a kid. I can put two and two together. I figured out there was another woman and I figured out she was Aunt Marlisa."

"You *KNEW!*" Vanessa eyes widened in disbelief, "and you still invited her!"

"I had already invited her, I just didn't *uninvite* her. It was my party and I should have been the one to decide who could come – not Mom!"

"How could you do that to Mom – and to Dad too?"

"Dad didn't go crazy so don't put him in this! I talked to Aunt Marlisa after I found out and she said she was trying to make up with Mom, but Mom wouldn't let her. She said Mom was going to hold this one mistake against her for the rest of her life! She didn't want to lose me like she lost some of the other people in her family that turned against her!"

"People turned on her for good reason! She came here to stick it to Mom and she used you to do it! And you let her! She's just a selfish, jealous, petty 'ho!"

"Well, I like Aunt Marlisa and I've forgiven her so *I* wanted her at *my* party!"

“Well, then *you* can take responsibility for this mess tonight! I hope your party turned out the way you apparently wanted it to. Happy Sweet Sixteen, dumb ass!”

Vanessa slammed the door behind her and marched down the hall back to her mother’s door. She stood a moment to catch her breath. Not only did her mother have a back-stabber for a sister but she also had a back-stabber for a daughter. Aunt Marlisa had always been able to get to Ashley but this was ridiculous. Ashley should know better.

Vanessa quietly opened the door and tip toed over to her mother’s bed. She climbed in next to her mother and rested her head on her shoulder like she used to when she was a little girl. Instinctively Callie’s arms went around Vanessa.

“Mom” Vanessa whispered

“Go to sleep, Vanessa.”

“Ok, but Mom?”

“Yes, Vanessa”

“I love you, Mom. I don’t hate you at all.”

“I know Vanessa.”

“I’m on your side. I just wanted you to know that, but I’ll be quiet now.”

“Ok,” Callie whispered and smiled sadly in the dark.