

JESSICA WATKINS PRESENTS

Forever
His **WIFE**

BIANCA HARRISON

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Dedicated To: #LetsFindaCure

Catherine Pack

Rachael Yvonne Pack

Mammie Johnson

Barbara Brown

Mary Hayes

Elizabeth Meadows

Betty Henderson

Anything Goes

Ava was chuckling and drinking uncontrollably. She was with her girls, Karen, Angela and Lisa, in Cancun, their turn up spot. She was trying her best to keep her sanity, but it was proving difficult with all the fine men dancing around her at the strip club. A 215-pound chocolate drop was straddling her in the chair she was sitting in, and it took all she had to keep her hands to herself. She wasn't the only one going wild, all the women were. She could already tell that their girls' trip was going to end on a very good note. Ava looked at her girl, Karen, who was gripping some guy's ass. He was sweating like hell. *Ugh! How nasty!* Ava thought to herself.

Karen was the wild one out of the bunch—tall, blonde, and fit—she was the life of the party. She made sure she had a good time wherever she went. Ava looked up, and Karen was still gyrating on the same sweaty-ass guy. She just *knew* Karen was going to fuck him before the night was over.

“Ava and Angela, you girls better let your hair down and have some fun!” Lisa yelled out, downing another shot of tequila. Ava was enjoying herself to the max, but watching those male strippers made her horny as hell. She couldn't wait to get back home to her husband, Ryan. Ryan was all the chocolate a woman needed. They had been married for thirteen years and had their ups-and-downs but through it all, their bond was still unbreakable.

“Ava!” Angela called out. “We're about to turn it up a notch!” she said handing Ava a shot of tequila. Angela was the one that had it all

together. She was 5'5", curvy, and sassy. She was defiantly down to earth.

They both counted to three and rushed the shot down, chasing it with a shot of Hennessy. Lord knows Ava would be sick in the morning if she kept it up. Angela and Ava were the married ones of the bunch. Lisa was divorced, while Karen was a runaway bride who never made it to the altar. She still talks about it to this day. She says that she was too scared to marry since she's so independent.

Lisa made her way over to the other girls and cited that she had a massive headache and was ready to go. Since they all needed to pack for their next day flight, they decided to join her. Angela went looking for Karen and returned saying she couldn't find her.

"This is so like Karen to pull this mess every time," Ava said.

They all looked at each other and laughed. "I bet she's somewhere fucking ole dude," Lisa said. "Y'all know it's probably true."



Mr. Ridiculous, as he called himself, was tall, built, white, and just right. *Glad I wore this dress with no panties*, Karen said to herself, as Mr. Ridiculous pulled her into a closet. Once inside, she ordered him to put on a condom and then they immediately went to work tearing at each other hungrily. He picked Karen up as she held onto a rail, pressed her against the wall, and spread her legs, entering her. Karen managed to pull her dress over her head so she could be free. Once he paused catching his breath, she kneeled before him taking off the condom, taking all of him in and playing with the tip of his head with her tongue ring. He was moaning and groaning as Karen pulled on him, and then he exploded in her mouth just like that. He

caught his breath, picked her back up, and pushed inside of Karen, bending his back just a little so she could ride him.

“Oooo weeeee,” Karen said. “They don’t call you Ridiculous for nothing.”

A white stripper calling himself Ridiculous...now ain’t that something? But he does have a dick the size of a foot-long sub. He was pushing inside of her like it was his last piece of ass. Ridiculous turned Karen over, and she bent over for him and put her hands on the wall as he spread her legs further apart. Again, he entered Karen slowly. She felt him grind for a bit, and then he gyrated faster, making his balls slap against her ass. Oh, it felt so good. He pulled Karen’s hair then fucked her harder.

“Give it to me,” he said pushing harder.

Hell, Karen couldn’t even feel her pussy the way he was going on. It had felt good at first, but then the fucking started to feel like a beating.

“I’m cumming,” he said, still pushing deeper. “I’m cumming...ahhhh!” He pulled out and then took a deep breath. “Did you cum?” Ridiculous asked Karen.

Karen grabbed her dress off the floor, put it on, and said, “Hell no!” Then she left the closet with him still trying to catch his breath.

Damn, she thought. His ass had a big dick, but he didn’t know how to use it. What a waste! She needed more shots to forget about what had just happened. Karen straightened her dress, shook her hair, and headed back to the scene, feeling all wet and sticky. Not wanting the girls to know where she had been, Karen mixed herself in with the crowd on the dance floor until one of the girls came looking for her. After fifteen minutes of looking crazy on the dance floor, Karen noticed Ava heading her way, so she started dancing like hell.

“Karen,” Ava called out then tapped her on the shoulder.

“Ava, what’s up?” Karen asked.

“Lisa has a headache, and we’re all ready to bounce, so let’s go,” she said, pulling Karen away. “And by the way, where the hell have you been? We’ve looked all over for you!”

“Well, you all didn’t look hard enough.”

They both approached Lisa and Angela who were standing by the door. “Ms. Thang, we looked all over for you,” Angela said as they started walking out the club.

“I was on the dance floor while y’all were acting like Debbie downers,” Karen said.

“Bitch, please. I saw your ass emerge from the back with that nasty ass stripper,” Lisa said.

“You fucked him...didn’t you, Karen?” Ava asked.

Karen looked at her and burst out laughing. “What happens in Cancun stays in Cancun!”

“Yeah, but that don’t mean bring anything back from Cancun as well!” Lisa said, adding in her two cents.

They had hired a driver, so they jumped into the car and, instead of heading to the room, they stopped at the Belgian Waffle Boutique. They were all hungry. Karen noticed a couple of guys from the club approaching them and then smiled.

“What’s up? You ladies coming to the after party right?” one of the guys asked.

“Yes we’ll be there...where is it at?” Karen quickly asked.

Angela and Ava both interrupted and told the guys they were all going to pass because it was going on four o’clock in the morning, and they needed to rest before they headed to the airport. Shit, Karen had figured that she could sleep when she got back home. She worked Monday through

Friday and sometimes on Saturdays. She lived for a good party every now and then.

Ava was already nodding off and the food hadn't even arrived yet.

“Wake your ass up!” Lisa said after taking several Tylenol tablets for her headache.

Ava jumped just when their food arrived, and they all ate in a hurry. Karen noticed Ava had barely touched her food, and asked her for her waffles. Ava told Karen to go ahead because she didn't have an appetite. She felt bloated and suddenly nauseous. She wasn't sure if it had anything to do with all the alcohol she'd consumed or not. Karen didn't care. Hell, she was hungry after all that alcohol she'd drunk. Karen ate as if she had just smoked a bag of marijuana.

After eating and sitting for a while, they all headed back to their rooms. It was now five o'clock, and everyone started to pack before lying down. Karen just threw her clothes in her luggage and passed out.

Hours had passed, and it felt like Karen had just laid down. Their flight was leaving at two o'clock in the afternoon. Ava was feeling discomfort in her abdominal area, and she was still bloated. Ava was already on her period, so she took a Midol to relieve the pain. Ready to get home, Ava tried to call Ryan several times, but he didn't pick up. She left him a message to say she'd be home in a couple of hours and hung up. Angela told Ava that she had spoken to her husband, Carl, and told him they would be home soon.

“At least you talked to your husband. I couldn't get mine to pick up,” Ava said.

“He's probably in a meeting,” Angela said as they headed out with their luggage. Lisa and Karen were behind still out of it with their sunglasses on. The breeze from the beach felt good on Karen's skin. Ava looked at the

area once more before getting into the car.

Shortly after, they'd arrived at the airport to catch their first class flights. The attendant handed out margaritas, and they all immediately perked up. They were more chipper and giggly after a few drinks. As the plane drifted through the clouds, Lisa took them back to their last trip to Jamaica. Angela and Karen laughed the most, while Ava smiled. Then she laid her head back on her headrest. As the girls relaxed, they tried to enjoy every bit of their flight back to reality.

The Beginning of an Era

Ava finally arrived home and sat down for a brief moment before she started unpacking. It was seven o'clock in the evening, and no one was home yet. Ryan had been picking up the kids from her sister's house in the evenings while she was away. Ava picked up the phone and started to dial Ryan since she hadn't heard from him.

"Hi, babe," he answered.

"Hi, sweetheart! Where are you guys? I'm finally home."

"Glad you made it back safely. I'm actually headed over to your sister's house to pick up the kids. I had a meeting that ran over and will be home shortly."

"Oh, okay, I'll see you guys in a bit."

Ava then decided to call her sister, Alisse. She felt some kind of way because Ryan didn't seem excited to hear from her at all. Ava brushed it off and then speed dialed Alisse.

"Hey sugarfoot!" Alisse said as she calls Ava sometimes.

"Hi, sis! What's going on? Are the kids there?"

"Yes, they've been staying here late since you've been gone. Ryan told me that he had meetings and deadlines for things, so Auntie Alisse has been handling your job." She laughed.

Ava loved her sister. Even though they were three years apart, they were very close. Alisse loved her niece and nephew and spoiled them every chance she got. She was engaged with no kids, but she wanted to start a family of her own as soon as she tied the knot.

"Abbie! Jaxon! Ava is home and she's on the phone," Alisse called out to the children.

Ava heard screams in the background, "Yes!" Ava heard Jaxon say. He was a mama's boy.

Alisse came back to the phone and said that Ryan had just arrived, and they should be home shortly.

Ava decided to get up, unpack, and soak before everyone arrived home. Shortly after she climbed out of the tub, the house went from quiet to noisy.

"Jaxon, give it here!" she heard Abbie say to her brother.

Lord, they were at it again, Ava thought. Abbie was twelve and Jaxon was eleven. Both were her pride and joy. As soon as they noticed Ava watching them, they ran to her and fell in her arms.

"Mommy, we missed you!"

"What did you bring us back?" Abbie asked, looking around the room.

"Nothing, but me."

"You always bring us something back from your trips, so where is it?" Jaxon asked, grinning.

Ava told the kids to look in the suitcase next to her bed. They each had a bag with their name on it. After the kids ran from the room to chase down their gifts, Ava noticed Ryan checking the mail. She walked over and kissed him.

"Babe, I missed you," he said as he handed her a single rose.

"I missed you more," she replied, wondering why he seemed distant.

"Tell me all about your trip."

"It was wonderful, just what the girls and I needed! I did scuba diving and a little snorkeling. Plus we relaxed on the beach and got a massage. Then we went sight seeing and shopping. Let's just say that we did a little bit of everything."

“Sounds like you really enjoyed yourself! Maybe we can take a trip back there together.”

“Ryan, I’d like that. Sweetheart you look tired. Come here and let me give you a back rub.”

“Maybe later. We need to talk about Abbie. She had an altercation with another student at school because the girl called her a bunch of racist names.”

Ava immediately called the kids down so that she could hear what happened and decide how to move forward. Both of the kids were in middle school, and she knew some kids could be bullies.

“Abbie, what happened at school?”

“One of the girls started picking on me because the boy she likes has an interest in me. The girl started calling me all kinds of name, even white trash.

The mean girl told Abbie, “Your dad married trailer park trash. You *think* you’re black. Your dad’s sleeping with the help.”

She’d said other racist remarks as well. Abbie said when she got tired of it, she smacked the girl to show her how black she was, and then they went at it.

Ava knew that she and Ryan would one day have this problem. They had talked to their kids about being biracial. Ava had fallen in love with Ryan because of who he was and not his color. Although Ava was white and Ryan was black, she had always had issues with black women giving her the side eye whenever they were out.

Ava wasn’t upset. She was glad Abbie had smacked the little girl. Now maybe she would know to keep her big mouth shut. Abbie was just like Ava. They don’t take any mess.

“Kids, you guys are going to have to learn that words don’t hurt

anyone. Not everyone is going to say nice things about you...that's life," Ryan said.

"Dad, I know. But this girl kept pushing me, and I couldn't take it anymore."

'Baby girl, I understand. Next time walk away. If she puts her hands on you, then you have my permission to knock her out!"

The kids laughed. Abbie had been suspended for a day. Usually, Ava would have been upset, but instead she hugged her.

Abbie and Jaxon went upstairs, and Ava fixed Ryan a stiff drink. The kids had already eaten with Alisse, and Ryan told his wife that he had grabbed a bite earlier. She gave him a massage and then rubbed his feet. Ryan apologized for acting cold with her, explaining that he was just tired. Ava knew her husband, and he wasn't himself. He was the financial controller of a large firm, which could be stressful at times. Ryan pulled Ava up close to him and held her in his arms. He was muscular because he loved to work out; his skin was caramel, as Ava called it, like Blair Underwood. Ryan loved himself some Ava.

"Babe, you remember when I met you years ago at the bank? Who would have known you'd be my wife?" he asked smiling.

"Me," Ava said thinking back to that day like it was yesterday.

Ava was the assistant manager for a large bank across town back then. She had met Ryan when he came in to talk about his company's business account. They went into her office, and Ryan just stared at Ava while she accessed his company's account. She wondered why he'd told her she reminded him of Eva Mendes, the actress. It was flattering coming from a black man, but Ava used to hear that a lot. After she helped him with his business, Ryan asked her out for a date. From that day forward, the two of them were inseparable.

Ava looked at Ryan and kissed him, and then laid her head on his chest.

"Babe, why don't you go upstairs and put on something sexy for me?"

"Ryan, as bad as I want to make love to you tonight, my period is on," she said while stroking him.

Ryan just looked at her. "Damn, Ava, your period is always on. You need to get that checked out," he said moving her hand. "Sometimes I get the feeling that you don't want to make love to me."

"Baby, it's not that! I have no control over what happens with my body. I'm sorry, but I make love to you with my mouth," Ava said winking at him.

"I'll be upstairs!"

Ava went to check on the kids and told them to get ready for bed because it was late. She checked up on Ryan too, who had turned off his phone and gotten in bed.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry."

"It's not a problem. I am used to it now."

"Ryan, don't act like that?"

"Like what? I'm going to sleep."

She lay beside him and started planting kisses on his chest, as she made her way down to his erection.

He pulled her up, "Not tonight."

Feeling rejected, Ava simply lay on her side of the bed. Ryan turned his back to her, and went to sleep. As she tried to figure out what just happened, Ava pondered in the dark hoping that whatever it was would pass.

Bad Bitches

Angela got up early and made breakfast for Carl and Chrissy. After a long flight back from Cancun, she was taking an extra day off to rest. Angela is a dental hygienist, working under a dentist who is a good friend of hers.

It was almost six o'clock, so, Angela went to wake Chrissy so she could get ready for school. Chrissy was thirteen and very prissy, which meant it took her a long time to get dressed.

"Mom, turn off the light!" Chrissy hollered.

Angela went in to check on Carl to make sure he was up, but he wanted her to come back to bed instead. Angela knew what he wanted, so she threw her gown across the bed and hopped back in. Serving her man before work gave him a big ego.

After making love, they lay together for a bit before he decided to get up and shower. Angela joined him in the shower. She rushed so that she could make sure Carl and Chrissy ate breakfast before they left for the morning. She yelled for Chrissy to hurry up since Carl was dropping her off. Once the crew left, Angela cleaned the kitchen, turned off her phone, and headed back to bed.

After hours into her deep sleep, the home phone rang. *Damn it*, she thought. Angela had forgotten to turn off the home phone. Angela decided not to answer it. She thought it was one of those damn telemarketers. However, when she looked at the phone, she saw it was Ava calling.

"Ava, what's the problem?"

"Good morning to you. I knew you were off, so I wanted to do lunch."

"Bitch, I'm sleep and you're talking about food. See you white girls get up too early. Us black people, we like to sleep."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...and you're my black BFF, so get your ass up," Ava said laughing like hell.

Angela remembered meeting Ava years ago when she had come into the dentist office Angela worked at. Ever since then, they had just clicked. Ryan had helped Carl get a job at his company dealing with petroleum, and they both have been very successful.

"Today was my rest day. What did you have in mind? Angela asked.

"How about Neko's Lobster Bar as my treat?"

"Hell, yeah, give me a couple of hours. I'll meet you there. A sister loves free food," Angela said laughing.

"I thought so."

Angela finally got up and got herself together. It was a pretty day outside, so she threw on her Chanel slippers and a fitted sundress, and then she put her hair in a bun. She donned her Chanel shades and jumped in her Acura MDX.

Angela drove for about twenty minutes. When she arrived at Neko's, she gave her keys to the valet. He gave Angela a hard stern look as she walked to the entrance. Angela then turned around because she felt him looking at her.

"I know I look good," she yelled at the young guy as he smiled while she laughed. For a 39-year-old knocking on 40, Angela looked and felt like she was 20 years old. Angela stayed in shape, ate healthy at times, and was still in her prime. She could still drop it like it's hot.

Angela approached Ava, who always wore the finest attire like she was really Eva Mendes. That was her girl.

"What's up, chick?" Ava asked as she stood up and greeted Angela

with her Michael Kors jumpsuit on.

"You look good," Ava said.

"Hell, I was trying to outdo you. But I see your ass outdid me with your Michael Kors attire. And I love the watch!"

"Girl, stop. Don't go there. We're some bad bitches," Ava said.

"No doubt...we have expensive taste."

The waiter came over and took their orders. It was after one o'clock, so it was safe to order martinis. *Don't want to be called a drunk by ordering alcohol before noon*, Angela thought.

Ava handed the waiter their menus and then headed to the bar. Angela was right behind her as they got their food and sat down.

"So, girl, what did Ryan have to say about our lil' trip to Cancun when you got back?" Angela asked Ava.

"Girl, nothing. He didn't ask me much. It was like he didn't care if I was back or anything. He was acting shitty."

Ava talked about Ryan wanting to make love, but she'd been bleeding on and off for weeks and having lower back pains. He'd acted like an ass... like she was seeing someone else and didn't want to have sex with him.

"Girl, you need to see your gynecologist just to make sure nothing's wrong. I know you get the birth control shot, and that could be it. But just go check it out," Angela said to Ava.

"Yeah, you're right."

Ava was also pissed about the incident with Abbie at school and wondered how people could be so cruel.

Angela explained to Ava that color would always be an issue for some people, but Angela let her know that she loved her like a sister. Shit, they went together like salt and pepper.

"Hell, Karen's white, Lisa's black, and that's what makes us a pack,"

Angela said as they both burst out laughing.

Karen called Angela's phone as soon as they calmed down. "Damn, Ava, this chick's ear was ringing."

"What you doing on your day off?" Karen asked.

"I had planned to rest, but Ava called and bribed me with lunch," Angela said as Ava gave her the side eye.

"You two bitches are dining without me?" Karen yelled through the phone. "Wait til I tell Lisa we weren't invited."

"Girl, stop," Angela said as Ava talked smack to Karen in the background.

The waiter came, took their half-empty dishes, and left the check on the table. Angela was still talking to Karen, who was in her office yapping about nonsense. Ava paid the waiter, and Angela left the tip.

"Karen! Karen!" Angela said, trying to get her to breathe in between sentences. "Let me call you back when I'm done with Ava because I know you ain't doing a damn thing at that job."

"You better call back," Karen said and then hung up.

Angela looked at Ava and shook her head. "Your girl is a live wire."

Ava looked at her phone. Now Karen was calling her. Ava shook her head and ignored her call. "I'll deal with her later."

Angela glanced at her watch and told Ava she had to leave. She had a facial appointment that she'd made before she arrived at the restaurant. They hugged each other, and Angela told Ava to make sure she called her gynecologist for an appointment. Ava promised that she would. She got her car from valet and then left.

It Is What It Is

Ava drove down I-60 trying to get to Evans Creek. She wanted to drop by Ryan's office to surprise him. Ava called Abbie to make sure she was okay, because she didn't like to leave her by herself for long periods of time. Abbie was at home because she'd been suspended from school. Ava had given her some chores to do before she left to meet Angela.

Abbie was fine, the alarm was on, and she was watching television. So Ava stopped by the coffee shop and grabbed Ryan an orange crème pastry and an iced coffee that he always enjoyed when the weather became warm. Ava drove ten more minutes before arriving at Ryan's office building. She had a pass, so she buzzed herself in and took a few minutes to talk to Nicole who worked the front desk.

Ava walked to Ryan's office and got there just as a couple of guys were leaving. They all smiled, as Ryan noticed Ava and then gave her a what-are-you-doing-here look.

"Hey, baby," Ava said.

"Hey." He kissed her forehead. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. I brought you something." Ava handed Ryan the pastry and coffee and walked past him through the office.

He smiled and thanked her for the coffee and pastry. He hugged her while taking bites out of his treat.

"So, how has your day been?" Ryan asked.

"It's been good. I had lunch with Angela, checked on Abbie, and now I'm here."

"Babe, you know I don't like you leaving the kids at home by

themselves just yet. You could have eaten with Angela another day and seen me at home later."

"Excuse me for wanting to surprise my husband. The kids are growing up. They're not home by themselves all the time, but only once every blue moon," Ava said, getting pissed.

"Ava, I just don't..." Knock, knock. They both turned around.

"Excuse me, Ryan. I need you to sign off on this contract," said the woman in a form fitting dress showing off her curves. She walked over and gave Ryan a pen to sign the contract, touched his hand, smiled at him. Then she twisted out of the office.

"Who was that?" Ava asked, wondering why the woman looked past her without speaking.

"A buyer for one of our large gas stations."

Ava walked over and grabbed Ryan's hand. "Babe what's wrong?"

"Nothing, sweetheart," he said as he sipped his coffee. "I apologize for pissing you off and getting upset about the kids being home alone."

"Apology accepted!" She started to dismiss herself as they both walked to some of his colleagues' offices and spoke to them. Ava saw Carl and told him she had just left Angela. He said, "I know," as they all talked. Then Ava decided she had to go. Ryan walked her up front, kissed her, and said he'd see her shortly.



Ryan went back into his office, as Sharon walked in and closed the door behind her.

"So, that's Ava."

"Yes."

"What was she doing here?"

"She just stopped by to surprise me. That's all." Ryan wondered what was up with all of the questions.

"She's pretty for a white girl. She has expensive taste. I can tell. So do I," Sharon added.

Carl knocked as he walked in and dropped off a folder that contained contracts that needed signatures. He didn't look at Sharon or Ryan. He just dropped the folder off and closed the door behind him.

Sharon walked behind Carl and locked the door. She turned around to face Ryan, pulling up her dress revealing her red lace thong. Sharon grabbed Ryan's hand and smiled seductively. "Squeeze my ass, baby. You know you want to." Her voice had lowered to an enticing purr, caressing his ears.

Ryan was nervous as hell, and he knew he was playing with fire. He glanced at the door, looked out the window, and checked his watch.

Sharon turned around and bent over the desk, exposing her full round ass to him. "It's hot, wet, and open just for you. I want you inside of me right now. All I need is a quickie. Come on. Don't make me beg. What are you going to do?"

Ryan unzipped his pants and pulled them down. He moved Sharon's thong to the side and started fucking her over the desk. She had a big ass, and she knew how to throw it back. She liked to grind on his dick until he exploded. Ryan gripped her ass, as he went deeper in her jewels. He then pulled out of her, turning her around as he dropped to his knees with her pussy in his face, and then he spread her legs apart. He sucked all her juices while sticking his tongue in her pussy. Sharon exploded when he did that shit. Ryan once again ordered Sharon to turn around, bending her all the way over as he pulled her hair and fucked her harder. Sharon begged him to stop, as he

ignored her ass. *She wanted the dick...the dick she was getting*, Ryan thought.

Sharon was out of breath. There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" Ryan hollered.

"I need you in my office," Henry said.

"Give me a couple of minutes. I'm on a conference call."

Ryan stood there as he heard Henry leave. He was beyond scared, as Sharon turned around on her knees and took him into her mouth. She sucked his balls, played with the tip of his head, and then sucked him until his warm semen swooshed into her mouth. Sharon drank in every drop.

Luckily, Ryan kept wipes in his desk. He hurried and cleaned himself up, wiped down the desk, and told Sharon to hurry out. She said she'd talk to him later, grabbed the folder she'd come in with, and let herself out. Ryan sprayed the room, grabbing a piece of gum out of his desk drawer. Ryan took a notepad and pen, and then proceeded down the hall. He noticed Carl, who looked like he wanted to say something but remained quiet.

When Reality Sets In

After a couple weeks of writing, Ava finally finished her novel titled, "If This World Were Mine." Ava hit send on her laptop and forwarded it to her editor. This would be her fourth book published. Ava had found she had a passion for writing while she worked at the bank. She was able to quit her job after she got a publishing contract. It was a blessing because she could work from home and tend to her family more.

Ava pulled away from her desk to get a refill of coffee and then sat on the couch to catch "The View." Lisa called and interrupted her watching of the show.

"Hi, Missy. What's good?"

"Nothing. I'm sitting in this office ready to go."

Lisa was an office manager for a company downtown. Like Karen, she didn't do anything but give orders.

"You're always ready to go, but what's up with you? Karen told me about your new boo."

"Her big ass mouth! Damn! Let me tell my own business. Anyway, he's someone I've been seeing for a couple months, but I wanted to see where it was going before I said anything to you ladies."

"Well?"

"He and I want the same thing. We've both been married and divorced, and each of us has a son. So we're taking it slow, but it's been nice so far."

"Lisa, if you're happy, then I'm happy."

"Not changing the subject, but have you saw your gynecologist

regarding your issues, Ava?"

"Not yet, since the bleeding stopped."

Although Ava had been able to make love to Ryan last night after weeks of abstinence, her insides still felt sore. Hopefully, the pain was because she hadn't had sex in weeks.

Lisa had to go since people were coming into her office with issues. Ava hung up and laid on the couch until the pain in her pelvic area got the best of her. She decided to call Dr. Patel, her gynecologist, to see if she could make an appointment to be seen that afternoon.

Ava phoned Ryan and talked briefly, asking him to meet her for lunch. He couldn't because of a conflict he had with a conference call.

Ava politely said, "Cool. I'll see you this evening at home."

Ava then headed over to the doctor's office. She knew the wait was going to be awhile, so she went inside prepared. She watched "House Hunters" on the television in the waiting area. She also noticed the lady that had come into Ryan's office a couple of weeks ago at the sign-in desk. The woman didn't acknowledge Ava as she watched her walk to the back.

"Ava Decree," the young nurse called.

Ava followed her to have her weight, height, and blood pressure checked. Then they immediately went into an examination room where Ava undressed and put on a gown. Minutes later, Dr. Kumar Patel walked in with his assistant.

"It's good to see you, Ava. What kind of problems are we having?" he asked.

Ava described the abdominal pressure, bloating, and lack of energy she'd been experiencing. She also mentioned the gas, extensive bleeding, and pelvic pain. She went on about the bleeding and how often it had been occurring lately.

Dr. Patel put on a pair of latex gloves, while his assistant made notes on a tablet. Ava lay back, and Dr. Patel began a full pelvic examination. The pain was unbearable as he pushed and probed. Then announced that he wanted to do an ultrasound because he'd discovered some tumors, and needed to determine their sizes.

Minutes later, an ultrasound technician came into the room with a portable machine that would be used to view images of Ava's ovaries. Dr. Patel studied the images intensely. After fifteen minutes, Ava got nervous watching him. The technician and Dr. Patel looked at each other.

"Dr. Patel, what's going on?" Ava asked, concerned.

"I've detected epithelial tumors outside of your ovaries," Dr. Patel said, as the technician pointed to a certain area on the screen. "I'm afraid to say it, but it looks like this might be a form of ovarian cancer. But, it can be treated with surgery," he told her calmly.

"Cancer? What do you mean I have cancer?" Ava sat up suddenly.

Dr. Patel touched her shoulder and lowered her body to the examining table. "It looks like stage 2, which is indicated by the tumors in your Fallopian tubes. It's serious, but, fortunately, we've caught it in time to prevent it from spreading any further if we act quickly and aggressively. Ava, I suggest we schedule surgery immediately to remove both ovaries and your Fallopian tubes."

Ava started crying after she heard more than she could bear. "Ovarian cancer," she kept mumbling. "Why me?"

"The symptoms you've been experiencing are indicative of ovarian cancer. Typically, this particular form of cancer is silent and could easily go on undetected because its symptoms often mimic those of ovulation."

"I'm not going to accept this diagnosis. I need a second opinion." Ava went to change out of the gown she had on back to her clothes. "Dr. Patel, I

will call you to schedule surgery *if* another doctor confirms the same diagnosis.”

"Ava, I've been your doctor for many years. I wouldn't lie to you about anything. I understand this news is devastating, but I want you to do whatever makes you feel better. Call me or my nurse so we can get your surgery scheduled. We don't want to wait too long.”

Ava took her check out form, and left his examining room, only to end up in the clinic's bathroom crying.



Sharon called Ryan earlier to inform him that she had seen Ava at the doctor's office. She hoped that Ava wasn't pregnant. Ryan wanted to call Ava, but decided to wait and see what her doctor's appointment was all about.

Ryan wrapped things up early at work, and then called Ava to check in so that he could head over to Sharon's place. Driving to the next town outside of Chicago, he arrived at his destination with a dozen roses. Ryan had met Sharon during a meeting last year and immediately landed a major contract with her company. She had moved to the area less than two years ago with her nine-year-old daughter, Tiffany. Ryan respected Sharon as a single mother. She was cool, smart, sexy, and had a great sense of humor.

Sharon opened the door to her lavish condo and beamed when she saw Ryan.

"These are for you, lovely." He moved in for a kiss.

"Thanks." She took Ryan's hand and hugged him.

Sharon had on a fitted red dress that was banging.

"Where is Tiffany?"

"She's at piano lessons, but she'll be home in a couple of hours. I prepared dinner, so I hope you're hungry." Sharon winked at Ryan and headed to the kitchen.

He followed her into the kitchen to pour them each a glass of merlot she usually kept on the counter. Sharon prepared the table, as Ryan walked away from the counter and wrapped his arms around her waist then proceeded to kiss her on her neck.

"You talk to Ava?"

"Not yet, but I will soon."

"She's not pregnant, is she?"

"No. Just because you saw her at the doctor's office doesn't mean she's pregnant. Besides, she and I haven't had sex in awhile. She claims to always be on her period."

Sharon turned to face Ryan "And I don't want you to have sex with her at all. When are you planning on leaving her, or at least telling her about us?"

"Soon, baby, soon. Just give me a little time to get things in order and move some things around, and then I'm all yours."

Sharon kissed him and unbuttoned his shirt, as she pulled him toward the kitchen chair. Ryan quickly pulled her dress over her head and...my, my, my...the girl wasn't wearing anything underneath. She had a fresh wax near her vagina area, just the way he liked it. Sharon stood in front of Ryan, as he stripped naked. She danced and touched her toes, just as Ryan took her from behind and buried his face in her ass. Sharon moaned for a bit and ordered Ryan to have a seat. She sat on Ryan with her back against his chest, facing forward, sliding him inside of her as she gyrated in slow motion. Ryan kissed her back as he felt himself releasing.

"Sharon, I need you to get up. I'm about to release..."

“Ryan, it feels so good to me.”

“Sharon!”

Sharon kept gyrating on him, making him explode inside of her. Ryan lifted her up off of him and laid her on the table. He made love to her there, sending dishes flying everywhere. Ryan gripped her breast as he sucked and nibbled them, one at a time. Sharon was amazing and made him feel good... something Ava wasn't able to do now like she once had.

Shortly after making love, Ryan found himself wiping Sharon down in her hot tub. He relaxed and imagined a life with her. After kissing and nibbling on her ear, they heard the door open and saw Tiffany, who closed her eyes and apologized.

"Sorry, Mom. Hi, daddy Ryan," she said and giggled.

"Hi, Tiffany," they said in unison.

"What are you doing here so soon? I thought you would call when you were on your way home," Sharon said.

"Mom, I did call, but you didn't answer. Practice ended early because Ms. Logan had an emergency. I'm hungry," Tiffany said with so much attitude.

"Go to your room. Let me get out the tub, and then I'll fix you something to eat."

Tiffany did as she was told. They dried themselves off, put on their clothes, and headed downstairs. Ryan picked up the dishes from the floor, and then ate a bit so he could hurry home.

He glanced at his watch and noticed that it was close to his usual time to arrive home. He said goodbye to Tiffany and kissed Sharon. Ryan hated to leave, but he didn't want to cause problems just yet at home. He knew it would be hard to ask Ava for a divorce, but he just didn't love her anymore.

When All Else Fails

Ava had an appointment with Dr. Ian Baker, a gynecologist who later confirmed Dr. Patel's diagnosis. Dr. Baker also concurred that Ava should have the surgery to prevent the cancer from spreading, and, hopefully, eliminate it. She was devastated and at a loss for words. She her mom and Alisse, who had accompanied her to the doctor and asked them both not to say anything to anyone, including Ryan or the kids, because she didn't want them to be concerned or worry.

"Ava, what are you planning to tell Ryan?" Alisse asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I need to have a hysterectomy. He wouldn't know," Ava said, wiping her eyes.

Ava's mom squeezed her tight and told her everything would be all right. Alisse took her hand and hugged her. Ava finally scheduled her surgery and had a few weeks to prepare. Afterward she ran errands, picked up takeout for dinner, and headed home.

Ava had so much running through her mind. Her agent had called several times. Ava called her back to explain her situation and asked her to push the book release back for a few more weeks. Ava's agent wasn't pleased because of the budget, but she understood the circumstances. Ava then called Angela while she waited on Ryan to arrive home. She would talk with him and the kids together.

When Angela picked up, she just cried until Angela asked what was wrong. She told her about her surgery and the cancer. She swore Angela to secrecy, and she promised not to say anything even as bad as it hurts.

"Ava, I'm glad you went to the doctor. I just knew something wasn't right. I am here for you and promise to be by your side every step of the

way.”

Ryan walked in and looked at Ava. He asked, “What’s wrong?”

"Angela, I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

Ava ran into Ryan’s arms and hugged him tight. "Babe, what’s going on? Have you been crying?"

"Jaxon, Abbie, please come down," Ava called out.

“What is it mom?” Jaxon yelled.

“I need to talk to you guys.” Everyone finally took a seat waiting on words to come out of Ava’s mouth.

“I’ll be having surgery in a few weeks to fix a few problems I’ve been having and I don’t want you guys to be worried.”

“Surgery?”

“Yes, Abbie. It’s nothing to be alarmed about.” Ryan took Ava’s hand and squeezed it, as the kids hugged her. Ava made everything sound so positive.

The kids dismissed themselves, while Ryan talked to Ava about the surgery.

“I’m here for you and will accompany you to the hospital, as well as take care of the kids.”

“Thank you for being such a great husband.”

Ava hugged Ryan and then kissed him. She immediately noticed a smudge of makeup on his collar and inhaled the scent of perfume on his skin. But she ignored both red flags. Moments later, Karen and then Lisa called. They were both concerned about the surgery. Karen was dramatic, while Lisa was over the top. For those reasons, Ava never told them anything. She’d figured that Angela would call and tell them. It was cool. They were her girls. She just didn’t want anyone to know that she actually had *cancer* because she would beat it. She didn’t want anyone to worry.

She went to talk to the kids in their rooms. Abbie was very sensitive, so Ava explained that, while she was in the hospital recovering from her surgery, Abbie would be the woman of the house. She told Jaxon that she also expected him to be strong. She told both Abbie and Jaxon that she'd be home recovering for four to six weeks and maybe a little tired, but she expected them to carry their weight. Both kids understood and gave her the biggest hugs ever. When all else failed, she always had her kids. And no matter what, they would be taken care of.

She left the kids room and heard Ryan whispering on the phone. She was positive he was talking to someone he didn't want her to know about. She also felt that he was cheating on her, but she didn't want to believe it. She did everything for Ryan and gave him everything he needed, so he didn't have a reason to cheat. She got on her knees and prayed before she turned in for the night.



A couple of days prior to surgery, Ava had her pre-operative appointment with the RN to go over the procedure. The RN also discussed the time and medication, as well as drew pre-operative blood work. As the day arrived for her to have surgery, she was tired because of a sleepless night. Ava and Ryan decided to arrive at the hospital a little early. They got the kids up to drop them off at Brian's house. Brian was a friend of Ryan's who'd offered to take Abbie and Jaxon to school that morning. After they said goodbye to the kids, Ryan drove Ava to the hospital. She checked in, and when she looked up she saw all her girls: Angela, Lisa, Karen, Alisse, and her mom, Elaine. Ava swallowed hard to keep from crying.

“Everything is going to be okay. I promise you I'll be here when you

get out of surgery,” Angela whispered.

“Thank you. That means a lot to me, Angela.” Ava then noticed Karen talking to Ryan, and the conversation looked intense by her facial expression and mannerisms. When Ava called out for Ryan, he smiled and walked over.

Dr. Patel’s staff came and escorted Ava away to the back to prep her for the procedure. She noticed that her mom and sister were nervous wrecks.

“Ava we love you,” Karen shouted. She blew them all a kiss as she was being wheeled back for surgery. Ryan was quiet for the most part.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

“Just hoping everything will go as smooth as silk. These last couple of days have been stressful. I love you, Ava.”

“I love you more.”

After a couple hours of complicated surgery, the doctor moved Ava to a recovery room where he explained everything about the procedure and told her that she should make a full recovery.

“Even though I was able to remove all the cancer, it could always come out of remission. That means the cancer could return at any time, and you would need to undergo treatments of chemotherapy.”

“Dr. Patel, I’d like you to downplay the cancer as much as possible when you talk to my husband and family.”

When Dr. Patel went into the waiting room, he mentioned cancer as little as possible and noted that everything went smoothly with the surgery.

Ryan was finally able to see Ava in her room and noted that everything went well. He was followed by Elaine, Alisse, and the girls. Ava was mentally drained and ready to go home. The doctor noted that she would be there for another three days. Her blood pressure was slowly returning to normal, which was a relief because Dr. Patel said it had gone up during

surgery. They wanted to keep an eye on it.

Several days passed following the surgery, and Ava was moving in slow motion. Her mom was constantly there to help her while Ryan worked. Every morning, Ava's mom took her to her chemotherapy treatments without Ryan's knowledge. Her hair was beginning to fall out. Her mom didn't like keeping the secret, and she felt that she needed to tell him. But she honored her daughter's wishes. The treatments made her very tired, so she would sleep when she got back home following the appointments.

Ava's agent called because she had planned to release her book in a few weeks. She wanted to get well so she could do book signings. She also started keeping a journal after the surgery so she could keep everything together as the days went by. Thinking back to the day of the surgery, she dialed Karen's number out of curiosity.

"Well, hello lady, how are you feeling?" Karen asked when she answered.

"Hi, girl. I'm actually feeling better...taking it day by day."

"Did you get my basket?"

"I did. Thank you for the lovely treats. You know I loved it. It had all of my favorites, and I really appreciate you being there during my surgery."

"What are friends for? I don't have many friends, Ava, and you are like a sister to me. I love you," Karen said sounding all mushy.

"Karen, I also called for another reason. I saw you talking to Ryan at the hospital, and you had your hand in his face. What was that all about?"

"Ava, Ava, Ava," she said. "While I was out on a dinner date, I saw Ryan on the other side of town dining with some big booty tramp and her daughter. It wasn't good, Ava."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I made my presence known and snapped a picture with my cell

phone. I was so disgusted when I saw how chummy he was with the woman's daughter, as if he didn't have any children at home."

"This is just making me sick! How dare he...?"

"I didn't make a scene, but I did go by and speak. Girl, believe me when I tell you his heart almost jumped out of his chest. I'm so sorry, Ava. I was going to tell you. I just needed to find the right time, especially since you were having surgery that morning. I confronted his ass and, of course he said it was a business meeting. He claimed that the lady just happened to bring her daughter along since she didn't have a sitter."

"Thanks, Karen, I appreciate your friendship." Ava fell silent.

"Ava, you there? Ava?" Karen called out.

Ava was so distraught that she just sat there holding the phone.

Lies and Betrayal

Finally, Ava's book was released, and companies were shipping out copies as the orders came in. A lot of customers preordered copies of "If This World Were Mine." It had been weeks since her surgery, and Ava felt better than ever. She felt so good that she had gathered enough energy to throw a release party at the Chicago Coliseum.

The girls were just excited as Ava was, so they all pitched in to help with the party. Abbie was great. She designed a dress for her mom and made it too. She promised Abbie that she would wear it to the party. Ryan acted as if everything was cool, which it was. But she knew all about his affair. She just couldn't understand why he would cheat on her. Every time she thought about it, she got depressed.

Ava was heading over to Books Galore in the mall for a book signing with her agent and Karen. She apologized for hurting her with the news about Ryan, but Ava was glad Karen had told her. For all Karen knew, everything was fine.

"Ava, we both love black men...although I will take whatever color I can get," Karen said laughing. "But why are you putting up with Ryan's bullshit?"

"It's complicated." Ava took Karen by the hand. "Ryan and I have kids together, and I promised to stay married to him until death do us part. I love Ryan. I'm not sure what it is; maybe he's going through a phase," Ava said, trying to reassure herself.

Karen hugged Ava. "You are too pretty and sweet for any man to hurt you the way Ryan is mistreating you."

Ava turned her head and wiped tears as they got out of the vehicle and went into the bookstore. Already the line was so long that it wrapped around the corner.

"OMG!" Ava's agent shouted, as she smiled at her.

"Is this for my book?" Ava asked with enthusiasm.

This was Karen's first book signing event with Ava. For the others in the past, she had been at work on the release days. But this time, she had taken the day off. Karen was excited. Karen had helped Ava set up, and she was ready to take pictures for fans who wanted one with the author.

Hours into the event, Ava's eyes lit up when she saw Ryan in line with the kids holding his copy of the book. The sight of them made her day. When Ryan approached the booth, Karen gave him attitude. Jaxon wanted a picture with his favorite author, and they all posed for a family picture with her holding the book as well.

"I'm proud of you," Ryan said.

"Thanks, babe, I'm proud of myself. Thank you for bringing the kids and showing support," Ava told him.

Ryan and the children left. The event continued until six o'clock that evening. Ava's agent informed her that she had booked more signings throughout the month. She was exhausted from those few hours. They had to hurry home so she could change and head to the party.

Hours later, Ava was on her way to the party wearing the gold metallic mini dress that Abbie had designed. Ava took pictures and sent them to her. Abbie was ecstatic. Ava thought, "*This will make her go after her dream as a fashion designer. My baby's got skills.*"

Ava met Ryan at the entrance. As they went in, friends, family, colleagues, and several other authors Ava had invited welcomed them into the venue. She saw Angela and Lisa, and thanked them for an amazing party.

The decorations were sick. Ava was so happy as she and the girls took pictures and danced. And of course, Ava signed more books. She also read a couple of excerpts from her new novel, and everyone was pleased.

Ava noticed Carl talking to Ryan as they walked toward the entrance of the building. Ava motioned for Angela to come over. Ava then cut the signing short and asked her to take a walk with her. Angela looked confused as they headed toward the front as Carl was coming back in.

"Ladies, don't you both look lovely," Carl said looking nervous.

"Thanks! Carl, have you seen Ryan by any chance?" Ava asked.

"Ryan went to the restroom," he said, pointing in the opposite direction.

Still looking confused, Angela looked at Carl and said, "We'll be right back."

Carl just stood there with his hand in his pocket. Ava got outside as people were still coming in and noticed Ryan arguing with the same lady from his office.

"Ryan!" she called out.

He turned around, looking like he had seen a ghost. Then he continued talking to the lady as if Ava wasn't there.

"Who is she?" Angela asked.

"I'm not sure, but I'm about to find out." Ava stormed toward Ryan as he put the woman in a taxi and it drove off. "Ryan, how dare you bring her here! This is *my* event, but you had the nerve to flaunt your mistress!"

"Ava, let's go back inside and enjoy ourselves. We'll talk about it later."

"So, is it true? Is that woman your mistress?"

Lisa ran outside, asking where everyone was, as Ava was too upset to deal with anyone.

She tried her best to pull herself together. She walked past everyone trying to make her way up front as she then gave a heartfelt speech. She thanked everyone for their support and for coming out to the event.

"Ava, are you okay?" Alisse asked.

"No, sis, Ryan's tramp was outside. So no, I'm not okay!"

"Sis, you stay here. I'm about to handle this!" Alisse said as she stormed off.

Ava slipped out of the back door, got into a taxi, and left. She cried hysterically on the way home. She couldn't believe Ryan would disrespect her like that.



When Angela and Carl arrived home, Angela asked Carl, "What the hell was going on with Ryan?"

"Angela, I don't know what's going on...honestly."

"Babe, you know something. You tried to keep us from going outside to see what he was up to."

"Yes, I did. I didn't want any mess going on at Ava's event. That's all!"

Angela wanted to know more, but she also needed to check on her girl. The shit Ryan had pulled was foul. Angela picked up the phone and dialed Ava's number. Her phone went straight to voicemail. Angela tried several more times and got the same thing.

"Hello?" Angela's phone rang as soon as she put it down. She answered it immediately.

"Angela, have you heard from Ava? I'm worried about her," Lisa

said.

"Damn, Lisa, I thought you were her calling me back. I've been trying to reach Ava, but her phone keeps going straight to voicemail."

"I know! That's why I called you." She paused. "Hold on, Angela." Lisa clicked over.

Carl walked back into the room. "Babe, can you call Ryan just to check on Ava?" Angela asked.

"Girl, I'm sorry. That was Karen," Lisa said, clicking back over. "She is also concerned and thought about going over to Ava's house. But I told her to hold off. Maybe she just needed time to herself."

Lisa explained to Angela what Karen had told her about running into Ryan with another woman and her daughter at the restaurant. Angela didn't understand. Ava had never mentioned it to her, and they are very close. Angela rushed Lisa off the phone so she could find out more from Carl.

"Babe, is Ryan seeing anyone at the workplace?"

"Angela, again...I don't know what's going on. Let's just drop it!"

Pissed, Angela just looked at Carl and said, "I hope he's not, for his sake!"

Carl came out from the bathroom and shook his head. "Angela, let Ava and Ryan focus on their relationship. Don't get into their business."

Angela got up, kissed Carl good night, and got in bed without saying a word. She was simply upset about how Ryan was trying to play her friend.

Getting Through the Pain

After Ava's book release, she did a lot of touring to promote her book. It was her biggest best seller, and it had raked in phenomenal sales in its first week. Traveling gave Ava some time to heal, pray, think, and take care of herself. She took the kids along on weekends to show them what she did, and she explained to them that hard work does pay off.

After the incident at Ava's book release party, she confronted Ryan, who stated that Sharon was just a fling. But Ava knew better because she followed him for a couple days just to see for herself. He was still seeing her. Ava was confused, and most of all hurt, so she buried herself in her writing while trying to make her marriage work.

Ava finally got up, went to her closet, and pulled out a red and black jumpsuit that was sent to her as a gift by Osman Yousefzada, a well-known fashion designer out of London. She was a guest speaker at one of his events last year, and he had been generous to her ever since.

She needed to hurry and get dressed because Alisse would be there soon. She was meeting the girls at Turnpike for a girls' night out to celebrate her success. She was really looking forward to it.

"Where are you headed to?" Ryan asked when he walked into the room.

"Out with the girls."

"So you don't want to chill with me? We could go out."

Ava was taken aback. Ryan hadn't said anything to her all day but, now that she was getting dressed, he wanted her to change her plans.

"Sweetheart, we could go out tomorrow...just me and you."

"Ava, I want to go out with you *tonight!*"

"Ryan, what is it? Do you not want me to be happy? Now you really want to go out with me...or is it you don't have plans with your whore tonight?" Ava asked, not realizing what she had just said.

"No, I don't. My whore gave me the night off to spend time with you," Ryan said as he stormed out of the room.

"Asshole!"

Not knowing why Ryan was so angry with her, Ava continued dressing, but she couldn't get Ryan's behavior out of her mind.

She cherished Ryan and even made excuses as to why he was cheating on her. She even went to bat for him with her family because they didn't want her to marry him because he was black. However, when she did, they learned to love him just the same as any other man. She stood up and felt a sudden pain in her lower stomach. She brushed it off as she heard Alisse call her from downstairs.



Arriving at Turnpike, the girls had reservations in a VIP section, which was nice. They all looked stunning. Ava had also invited a few other friends as well, so the turnout was good.

Karen started popping bottles while Alisse started pouring.

Lisa had gotten a cake made that read, 'Congratulations to Our Favorite Author.' She made a toast. All the girls gave wonderful speeches and, after three glasses of champagne, Ava was ready to turn up.

Lisa pulled Ava onto the dance floor. She was feeling good. For a white girl with black friends, Ava could drop it like it's hot, thanks to Lisa and Angela showing her how to dance. They jammed to 2 Chainz and Future. Then the deejay played "Drunk in Love" by Beyoncé. Ava looked over at the

bar and noticed Ryan, Brian, and Andrew, one of Ryan's co-workers and close friends. Ryan was all up in some blonde chick's face and did not notice her. She turned around and continued dancing.

Some young hottie got behind her, touching Ava and grinding on her, so she went with the flow and gave him a show.

"Go Ava! Go Ava!" a drunk Karen shouted and laughed.

Ava's friends watched her grind on the young buck and then back it up.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Lisa said, as she danced next to Ava with some guy. Everyone was having a good time. Then all of a sudden, Ryan came out on the dance floor with an angry face and stood next to Ava.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like? Dancing."

Ryan grabbed Ava's arm.

"Let her go," Alisse said, pushing him.

The guy Ava had been dancing with was long gone.

"Ryan, why do you have to screw up everything?" Ava yelled at him.

"My wife is out here dancing like a whore...or like she's single...is not the business."

"Ryan, what about you all up in that blonde's face at the bar? You were acting like you were single. Plus you're already cheating on me!"

Angela pulled Ava back to the VIP section.

Everyone was looking because Ryan had stirred up such a scene. Ava was so embarrassed that she was ready to leave.

"Ava, not tonight. This is about you," Angela said. "Here take this shot."

They both took one to the head and laughed like hell.

"Angela, you have no idea. Without my kids and y'all, I would be a

basket case.”

As the night ended, the girls were still upset by Ryan’s actions, and Alisse didn’t want Ava to go home. The kids were at her mom’s, so *Whatever happens, happens*, Ava thought.

Returning home, Ava noticed that Ryan was already upstairs. She went to shower. Suddenly, she heard the shower door open.

"Babe, I’m sorry, I had too much to drink," Ryan said. He stripped naked and got in the shower like everything was cool.

"What is going on with you, Ryan? I can’t help you if you don’t tell me," Ava said as water ran down her back.

"Nothing’s wrong. I don’t want to see anyone else all up on my woman."

"Yet another woman is sleeping with my husband."

Ryan tried to kiss Ava’s back, but she pushed him off. "Babe, you’re losing weight. Your booty is getting small."

"Maybe you just haven’t noticed me." Ava was crushed by Ryan’s words, but she refused to show it.

"Ava, I love you." Ryan kissed her and pushed her against the shower door.

He caressed Ava, and she gave in. He entered her. The sex was painful and boring. Something was going on with her husband, and Ava was unsure if she could fix it.

Emotional Rollercoaster

Things seemed to be going smoothly for Ryan, who had decided to make sure that Ava and Sharon were equally happy. His loyal mistress was okay with his arrangement for now. Ryan planned to be exclusively with Sharon eventually, but he needed time to do things the right way, especially for his kids' sake.

Over the last couple of months, Ava had stabilized. She did whatever Ryan asked her to do and more. He knew that Ava loved him like the sweat off his balls, and he loved her too...but, not the way he used to. Ryan thought that something was missing from their marriage. It was not what it used to be. He pitied Ava. He felt happier with Sharon and adored her daughter, Tiffany.

Thinking to himself, Ryan didn't know how Abbie would feel about Tiffany. Abbie was a daddy's girl, and Ryan adored her just as much. Jaxon was his partner in crime, but he was a mama's boy. He wouldn't do well with Sharon. Ryan seemed spaced out as he looked out his office window, trying to figure out his next move. He heard a knock at the door. It was Andrew, who worked in the purchasing department.

"What's up, man?" Andrew said as he came over to shake Ryan's hand.

"Nothing man, just enjoying this view."

"I saw your lil' shorty in here earlier. You get some?" Andrew asked, laughing rather loudly.

"Man, what are you talking about?" Ryan questioned. He played stupid, not letting anyone know his personal business—not even Andrew. They were cool and hung out frequently, but there were some things a man

kept to himself until he was ready to reveal them.

"I'm talking about fine-ass Sharon, who we got that major contract with. I heard you're hitting that."

"Man, I'm about business, and she is, too. She's cool peeps."

"Yeah, right. Ricky hit that, so I know you have too. You think I'm crazy? I know better because I would be hitting that from the back all over that desk," Andrew said cracking up.

They both laughed at his assumptions. Andrew was wild. Ryan had tried to hook him up with Karen, but she was dating someone at the time. Andrew also had a son the same age as Jaxon, which was good. They often took the boys places together.

"Let's do lunch. It's almost that time."

"Sure. Let me wrap up something, and I'll meet you in the lobby in an hour."

Andrew left the office and messed with everyone he saw floating in the hallway.

What Andrew had said about Sharon screwing Ricky was news to Ryan. She wasn't the type to give it up to anybody. Ricky was cocky and selfish. Sharon was the opposite. But then again, Ryan thought how easy it for was him to get in her pants. Puzzled, he dialed Sharon's number.

"Well, hello there," Sharon said as she walked in Ryan's office with her phone in her hand looking at him.

He hung the phone up and motioned for her to close the door. And, of course, she locked it. Sharon had on an ivory dress that flared right at the knees, showing off her nicely toned legs. It hugged her body just right.

"Hi, sexy," Ryan said as he got up to kiss her. "I wasn't planning on seeing you here today, but I heard you were in the building. What brings you by?"

"I had to meet with your sales department and drop off some projections for Ricky."

"Ricky?" Ryan raised a brow. "Sharon, I need to ask you something, and, babe, please be honest."

"What is it?"

"Did you fuck Ricky?"

Looking at Ryan sideways, she responded, "Yes. I fucked him once, which is in the past."

"Damn! So I'm going behind Ricky with his hating ass?" Ryan said, shocked at Sharon's response.

Sharon slapped the back of his head.

"What did you do that for?"

"You've got some nerve! This was before us, and it only happened one time. I'm going behind Ava every day, so until you leave her, you can't question me."

"Sharon, I apologize. Just the thought of you and Ricky's hating ass gives me chills."

"The same goes for you and Ava. Ryan, I don't have a reason to lie to you. I assure you that's all it was...one time."

As bad as he wanted to rip Sharon's clothes off, he couldn't, knowing that Ricky was probably banging her over his desk.

"Can you come over for dinner later?"

"Yes."

Sharon kissed him on the lips and strutted out of the office.



Ryan was heading over to Sharon's when Ava called. "Babe, you

didn't forget about Jaxon's baseball game, did you?"

"Shit!" Ryan mumbled. "I'm on my way. I'm running behind." Ryan turned around to go in the opposite direction.

Ryan quickly called Sharon and told her he couldn't make it and that he'd forgotten all about Jaxon's game. She was a little upset, but she understood that he had to be there.

Arriving at the game in the fifth inning, Ryan could tell that Ava and Jaxon were upset. "You just missed your son's home run."

"I'm sorry, babe. I lost track of time. I'm here now."

"Ryan, people make time for what's important to them. Remember that!"

"Not here, okay? Let's not go there."

The game went on, and Ryan was proud of Jaxon, who played centerfield. The boy could catch like Curtis Granderson. His team was number one in the nationals. Ava clapped and screamed, while Abbie walked around with her friends.

The crowd was rowdy, like the kids were playing for a major league team. Ryan guessed he worked so much that he didn't get a chance to see his kids enjoying what they liked. Although he may have had issues with Ava, she was a damn good mom. Even when she had other places to be, like appearances or book signings, she would catch the next flight to head home for any of the kids' games or recitals.

"Babe, I see you enjoying the game," Ryan blurted out trying to make conversation.

"This is what I do. There was a time when you enjoyed our kids as well."

Ryan didn't respond back because she was right. How did he get to this place? He didn't know. Abbie walked up with one of her friends from

school and spotted Ryan sitting next to Ava.

"Dad! You made it!" Abbie said as if Ryan had never made it to anything.

Abbie's statement made Ryan feel some type of way. "Yes, baby girl, I told you all I was coming, but nobody believed me."

Ava cut her eyes at Ryan and then turned her head. Ryan's phone vibrated several times. He looked at it and noticed it was Sharon texting him and sending him sexual pictures of herself.

One read: *Baby see what you're missing* as she posed in a zebra panty and bra set with her legs open and her hands on her crotch. The next picture came in with her topless, pointing to her breasts and licking her lips.

While Ryan gazed at the pictures Sharon had sent, the crowd jumped up. One of the boys on Jaxon's team had hit another home run. The lady behind Ryan jumped and accidentally hit him, causing his phone to fall out of his hand. Ryan went to pick it up, but he couldn't find where it had landed. He noticed Ava standing with his phone in her hand, looking at the text messages Sharon had just sent.

"It amazes me how some females can be so thirsty, Ryan. I've never cheated on you, and here you are putting your whore before your family," Ava screamed at Ryan in front of the crowd. "How dare you?" Ava yelled and stormed off.

"Mom, what is it?" Abbie asked, chasing Ava.

"Damn." When Ryan looked for his phone, he saw Ava toss it in the trash.

Ryan ran to the trashcan, dug in it, and got the phone out. He walked to the front and waited for the game to end. He wanted to congratulate Jaxon before he left.

"Good game, son." Ryan gave Jaxon a high five.

"Thanks, dad. I'm glad you could make it, but you missed my home run."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I was getting here as fast as I could."

With so much animosity in the air, neither Abbie nor Ava said a word. They all left talking among themselves without acknowledging Ryan.

Ryan contemplated going to Sharon's house but figured he'd just head home.

A Fist Full of Tears

Writing used to be a hobby for Ava, but now it had become her outlet. She wrote every chance she got. She had become very successful with the selling her books, doing free-lance writing for other clients, and going to speaking engagements. Ava had been featured in “Storme Magazine,” a popular publication for entrepreneurs in a diverse culture who are working on a career in literature. She was proud of her accomplishments. When she was first starting out, she was afraid she would be stuck at that bank for the rest of her life.

Shifting her focus from her computer screen, she noticed a text message from Ryan that read: *How about lunch?* She ignored it and walked outside to the patio to get some air. She had thought about divorcing Ryan, but she kept thinking about Abbie and Jaxon. Ava’s father was horrible, and he had left her mother when she put a bat to his ass. Ava never saw him again until he showed up at one of her book signings. She had never mentioned it to her mom. She’d only told Alisse. Both sisters liked to pretend that he was dead, so Ava didn’t want her kids growing up without Ryan.

Ryan was playing games, and Ava was his pawn because he knew she was vulnerable. But it wasn’t just that. She didn’t believe in divorce, but, she made a couple of calls and set up a few appointments. She was not about to let Ryan take her money and use it on that tramp of his.

She had kept looking at the pictures that Sharon had sent Ryan before she threw his phone in the trash. She’d forwarded them to her phone.

"Look at this bitch, posing for a married man in her bra and panties. What make females go after men that are already taken? That’s so

disrespectful," Ava said aloud to herself.

Ava received another text message from Ryan. It asked, *You ignoring me?*

Ava really didn't have time for his bullshit. She went back inside and wrote some more, so her thoughts of Ryan wouldn't distract her. It was almost noon, and she planned on meeting the girls for lunch.

Ava stood up and felt her stomach cramping. She showered and then got dressed. Afterwards she brushed her hair down and left the house.



Ava arrived at the spot where Lisa had made reservations. As she walked inside, the waiter took her outside on the patio. "Hey, divas," Ava said as all the girls stood up and greeted one another.

"Oh my! Karen cut her hair? It looks good, chica!" Ava said.

"Yes, darling, I'm a brunette now," Karen said looking graceful.

"I like that on you. Wow! You look really young!" Ava said.

"We all like it," Lisa added.

"Well, thank you all. My man likes it, too," Karen said.

"Spill it!" Angela hollered.

"Well I met him at a conference I attended a while back for my job. So far, things seem to be going fairly well. The only thing is that he has a six-year-old daughter and he is a single parent. The little girl's mom had died of breast cancer. But I love her to death."

"Aw, you'll be a great stepmom and also be a great mom when you have kids of your own," Lisa teased Karen and winked at her.

"You seem to like him. Give it a shot, and don't run away this time,

girl!" Angela said as they all laughed.

The waiter brought them all water and appetizers that Karen had ordered. Then he sent over an apple martini from the bar and handed it to Ava.

"Sir, I didn't order this."

"The gentleman at the bar did, and he told me to give it directly to you," the waiter said.

Everyone looked back at the guy waving and walking toward their table. The girls had a field day with this because they knew what Ava was going through with Ryan, and they felt that she needed to give him a dose of his own medicine.

"Hi, ladies," the guy said turning his attention to Ava." A beautiful drink for a beautiful lady. My name is Malcolm," he said reaching for Ava's hand.

"*Malcolm*," Lisa said dragging his name out in laughter.

"I'm Ava," she said standing up, motioning for the guy to follow her inside away from the girls.

They both sat at the bar for a brief moment. Malcolm told Ava that he had noticed her when she walked in and, of course, he had read her books. Ava had to quiz him on them just to see if he was lying. He passed.

"I rarely find guys that read."

He looked at Ava and said, "I'm not just any guy." Ava smiled. "You're more beautiful in person," he went on to say.

Malcolm was sweet, but he wasn't really Ava's type. However, he wasn't bad, either. He was smaller than Ryan, but he had a nice tan complexion and was very clean cut.

"Maybe we could have coffee one day."

"I'll like that."

As they shook hands, Malcolm gave Ava his business card as he smiled.

"Thank you." She then walked back to the girls. He left a tip, and then exited the restaurant.

"Don't even ask," Ava said to the girls, getting back to the table smiling.

"Well, if it doesn't work out with Ryan, then there goes your man. I see he made you smile," Lisa said.

"He was nice looking," Angela added.

"What's up with you and Ryan anyway?" Karen asked.

Ava really didn't want to go there since she was trying to block her problems out. But she did anyway. "Well my once fairytale marriage isn't all that. I want you girls to look at this tramp." Ava pulled out her cell phone and passed it around.

"She ought to be ashamed of herself," Lisa said. "Damn, Ava! I've seen her at the office a couple of times when I go to see Carl. I'm going to ask him about this whore. She needs a beat down," Angela said, pissed by what she'd seen.

"Yep, that's the same lady I saw him with at the restaurant," Karen said.

"What are you going to do?" they all asked.

Turning her head so they wouldn't see her tears, she replied, "I don't know." Ava loved her husband, and she didn't believe in divorce.

Nevertheless, she didn't know how much more she could take, either.

Angela held Ava as tears fell from her eyes. The girls all comforted her, while Ava felt like a fool to be staying with a man who was cheating on her.

"You know what goes around comes around, and karma is a bitch,"

Lisa said.

Ava shook it off and gathered herself together so she could eat her food.

"You know we need to go to that bitch's house and whoop her ass," Karen said.

They all laughed because she was serious. Karen was crazy, and they all knew it. The girls asked Ava about her health, talked about their kids, and started to plan a trip to Vegas before the end of the year.

The girls finished their lunch so that they could get back to work, but Ava sat there for a moment before heading out. The breeze was nice, and she wasn't ready to go just yet.



Ava headed to the bank across town and talked to a customer service rep about an account she had. Ava added Abbie and Jaxon's name on the account for the royalties of her books, which were to be automatically deposited. They could only withdraw money with an adult present, which would be Ava's mom or Alisse. She also checked on other accounts that Ryan didn't know about, and she planned on keeping things that way. Ava didn't know what was going on, but she wasn't going to be a fool and let Ryan leave her and take the money she had worked so hard for.

Ava left the bank when she noticed Angela calling.

"Hey, girl, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm good. Why did you ask?"

"I know you. And with all that's going on with Ryan, I just wanted to check back with you."

"Thanks. I'll figure it all out."

"Send me those pictures, so I can ask Carl about that whore."

"Will do," she said as she forwarded the pictures to Angela.

Wifey Material?

Angela was lying in bed when Carl came in to change. He looked exhausted from working late on a project that had to get done. Chrissy peeped in the room and smiled.

"Hi, dad."

"Hi, Chrissy pooh. What do you know good, baby girl?"

"Nothing. I'm just speaking since I haven't seen you all evening. I'm going back to my room now."

Carl smiled and turned to Angela, "Our baby girl is growing up."

"Yes, she is. Time really does fly."

Carl walked over and gave Angela a hug and kiss. "How was your day?"

"Exhausting. I had patient after patient. I'm so tired of looking at teeth. On another note I had lunch with the girls, and guess what?" Angela said, reaching for her phone.

Carl looked on, waiting for her to present whatever it was she was reaching for. Angela showed him the pictures that Ava had sent to her of Sharon.

His eyes got big. "What are these?" he asked as he stared at the photos.

"That's Sharon, Ryan's side piece. She's the company whore! She had the audacity to send those pictures to Ryan."

"So I guess you got these from Ava?"

"Yes. Do you know anything about Ryan's affair with this lady? I mean I'm shocked. To flaunt your whore when you have a wife is so

disrespectful on all levels. I'm trying to make sense of it all." Carl laughed at her, and Angela got all bent out of shape.

"I don't know about his affairs, but I knew that Sharon was always at the office with Ryan. He does work closely with her because of the contract we have in place."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, Angela. I've also heard that she was sleeping with Ricky. Ryan hadn't said much to me because he figures I would probably tell you."

"So this chick is just sleeping with everybody? What about you, Carl? You didn't tap that, did you?"

He looked at her intensely. "What do you mean *what about me?*" he asked as he rubbed her leg. "I got all the woman I need right here. There's no need to go out there and get caught up. Shit, woman, you're crazy. You'll kill a bitch!" Carl laughed as he stripped to his boxers to go shower.

Carl got that right... ain't nobody got time for that, Angela thought. *I will fuck a bitch up about mine.* Angela was professional when she needed to be, but she could turn into a beast when she was forced to as well.

Angela watched Carl go into the bathroom and heard the shower door close. She got up to go join him. She took off her gown and hung it behind the door. Then she opened the shower door quietly while Carl's back was turned and caressed him.

"Hey, hey sexy...I knew you were watching big daddy and wanted some of me."

"Don't flatter yourself."



Carl was at work trying to concentrate on the project he had to get done when he noticed Andrew. Andrew was a male gossip and knew everything that was going on in the office. He was laughing while standing outside in the hall.

"Andrew," Carl called him from inside his office.

"What's up, boss?"

He was a white boy who acted blacker than Carl.

"What do you know good? You ain't got no work to do?"

"Yes, I got work. I'm just coming from Ricky's office. I was reviewing a spreadsheet with him until Sharon knocked on the door. Do you know the big booty girl, who we got the contract with?"

"I thought she just came here once a week for a weekly meeting and for signatures," Carl responded, trying to get the scoop.

"Yeah, she's supposed to keep to her schedule. But since she's been seeing ole boy, she's practically here every day. Ricky told me to give him a minute. It was going to be awhile. He's still seeing her too, I think."

"How you know?" Carl looked at Andrew and laughed. This boy sure knew a lot.

"Ricky told me he was hitting that for nothing, while Ryan is wining and dining her like a fool."

"Man, I got work to do," Carl said, but he couldn't help but laugh.

Andrew got up and closed the door behind him.

Hours later, Nicole, the receptionist, called and said that Carl had a visitor. Nicole sent her up. It was his favorite girl, Angela.

"Babe, what a surprise," he said, standing up to greet his lovely wife.

"I knew you were working hard, so I brought you lunch."

"Hmm, I must have given it to you good last night for you to come all this way."

"You did alright, buddy!" Angela said and kissed Carl on the lips. "I had to come this way to take Chrissy to her dentist appointment. Now I'm headed back to work."

Carl enjoyed seeing his wife every chance he got. She was hot.

Angela and Carl walked out of his office so that he could walk her downstairs. As they came upon Ryan's office, they saw Sharon standing from the hallway wearing a black skimpy dress that hugged her sexy ass. Sharon's body was something serious, Carl had to admit. He had to do a double take and hope that Angela hadn't caught him looking.

Angela did a double take, as well. Then she stopped, knocked, and smiled at Ryan.

"Hi, Ryan."

Sharon turned around and smiled. *Damn, she has nice legs, too*, Carl thought.

"Hi, Angela. It's good to see you."

"Yeah, I bet. So is this Sharon?" Angela asked, while Carl tried to wing her away.

"I beg your pardon," Sharon said, caught off guard by Angela's question.

"You're Sharon, right? I recognized you from the photos I saw," Angela said.

Oh shit, Carl had to get Angela out of there. He glanced down the hallway and saw Ricky, Andrew, and Brent making their way toward them.

"What photos?" Sharon asked, while Ryan stood there wondering the same thing.

"These," Angela said as she pulled out her cell phone and showed Sharon the disgraceful photos she'd taken that were intended for Ryan as he looked on.

"Yes, you're sleeping with my best friend's husband, and you should be ashamed of yourself. This shit ain't classy, and you know he's married. You're sending a married man naked pictures of your ass!"

"You have some nerve! How did you get those? Let me guess. Ava? Did Ryan tell you he was divorcing her?" Sharon asked and threw out there, like Ryan was already her man.

Carl had to grab Angela because she was about to let Miss Thing have it.

"Sharon, let me explain," Ryan interjected. "Carl, please take Angela out and leave."

Everyone was standing around Ryan's office watching, while Ricky laughed. Carl grabbed Angela, trying to get her to leave.

"Divorce, Ryan? Really? For this whore? Ava deserves better than this shit!" Angela said before leaving.

"Angela, please leave now!" Ryan hollered.

They left as Carl heard Ryan's door slam. Everyone was in shock at what they'd heard. Carl heard Ricky say that Sharon was no good, and that she'll bend over for anyone. Everyone laughed. Carl watched Angela, who was pissed, giving looks at anyone who looked at her.

"Baby, calm down. This isn't your problem. Let Ava and Ryan figure this shit out on their own. I'll talk to him when I get back, because I don't like this any more than you do," Carl said, trying to calm her nerves.

Carl kissed Angela and watched her get inside her car. He shook his head and let out a deep breath. He headed back upstairs to find everyone whispering.

"Tell Angela to forward us those pictures of big booty Sharon," Andrew said trying to be funny.

Carl looked at him and knocked on Ryan's door. Sharon was leaving

as Carl walked in. Then she turned her head his way and walked out.

"Ryan, man, I'm sorry about Angela's outburst. What's really going on, man?"

"No problem. That's how women are. So I guess you saw the pictures, too?"

"Yes. Ava was upset, and she sent them to Angela. They are best friends. What do you expect?"

Ryan went on to explain the incident at Jaxon's game when Sharon had sent the pictures. He admitted he planned on leaving Ava because he wasn't in love with her anymore.

Carl was shocked and in disbelief. "Man, Ava worships loves the ground you walk on! Is this about Sharon?" Carl asked. He was puzzled. "You do know that she's still sleeping with Ricky, don't you? Everyone is talking about it."

"Carl, I know all about that. With Sharon it's different. Besides, that Ricky mess is in the past. You know he's a hater anyway, so he's going to talk. A lot has been going on for awhile, and I love Sharon," Ryan said, not sure if he was trying to convince himself or Carl.

Carl was not believing what he was hearing. He had to really take another look at Ryan. This wasn't the friend he knew. Ava was a good woman, and Carl knew she didn't deserve what Ryan was dishing out.

"What about Abbie and Jaxon?"

"I plan on talking to them soon, and Ava too."

"So I take it Ava doesn't know about the divorce you're planning?"

"Not yet."

Not wanting to hear any more of what Ryan had to say, Carl left his office. He couldn't believe that fool. *Damn, Sharon has a nice ass, but she wasn't all that*, Carl thought. *The grass isn't always greener on the other*

side, and Ryan will find that out sooner or later. It's not clear if he's on something or just damn crazy.

Carl got back to his office and called Angela to fill her in on his conversation with Ryan.

“Babe, you wouldn't believe it. Ryan is planning to divorce Ava for Sharon.”

“What! I can't understand what's up with him. He will reap what he sows. Karma is a bitch...and so is Ryan!”

“I don't want you saying a word to Ava. I rather that she fills you in when she learns of Ryan's plan, or you'll have to answer to me for opening your mouth!”

Lies, Lies, Lies

Ryan woke up with a backache and headache from sleeping in the spare room. The bed he'd slept on wasn't as firm as the bed he and Ava shared. Ryan had come home to a pissed off Ava, who was in a rage after hearing from Angela about Sharon being at the office.

Ryan needed to ask Ava for a divorce, but he wanted to wait for a couple of weeks to put things in place and to talk to his kids. Abbie and Jaxon had no idea what was going on between their parents. Ava had always kept the kids busy to avoid them getting involved in adult conflict.

Ryan looked at his cell phone. It showed that the time was 4:30 a.m. and that he had a missed call and voice message from Sharon. Ryan had just left Sharon a couple of hours ago, so he wasn't sure why she was calling. She knew she had to be patient with him. He lay there looking at the ceiling, fantasizing about Sharon dancing for him and making love to him. Sharon's lips were all over his body, making him feel good. Suddenly barking outside interrupted a session of his hands in his pants stroking himself.

Ryan quickly dialed Sharon, even though he knew she was sleeping. He just wanted to hear her voice.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Sharon asked, wondering why Ryan was calling that time of morning.

"Yes. I just wanted to hear your voice. I was thinking about you."

"Is that so? I left you a voice message because you were also on my mind. This only means we are destined to be together."

"I know. I want you to talk dirty to me and put me to sleep."

"Babe, where are you?"

"I'm in the spare bedroom where I sleep, so start talking."

Sharon did what Ryan had asked of her, and he found a towel to put over his manhood because she had him going. Ryan was having phone sex with Sharon's words and his hands. Finally, he felt himself drifting off to sleep. Sharon hung up.



"Kids, I need you to hurry and eat your breakfast!" Ava hollered. Abbie was taking her time, trying to text and eat; while Jaxon played around with Instagram on his phone. Ava had an important meeting that morning with her agent, Elaine, who also shared the same name as her mother. She didn't want to be late because she had to drop the kids off.

"Mom, tell Jaxon to stop taking pictures of me and putting them on his Instagram page!"

Jaxon laughed, knowing that he was aggravating his sister.

"Jaxon, please stop. You know how your sister is," Ava said.

"Mom, look," Jaxon said, as Ava turned around and he took a picture of her with his phone.

"Boy, that's enough! It's too early. No more pictures."

Moments later, Ryan walked into the kitchen looking for his breakfast. Confused, he asked, "Ava, where's my plate?"

"Kids, go get your bags and get in the car."

Once they cleared out of the kitchen, Ryan still stood there waiting for his breakfast and coffee. However, Ava had only prepared breakfast for the kids and herself.

"So you didn't cook breakfast?"

"Yes, I cooked breakfast for me and the kids. You can go to Sharon's house to eat," she said, grabbing her purse.

"Ava, let's not go there. I told you why she was at the office. Who're you going to believe...me or Angela?"

"It's surely not *you*, Ryan. Everything that comes out of your mouth is a lie. I heard you talking to her this morning, you bastard," Ava shouted in a rage, throwing muffins at his ass.

Ryan couldn't say anything, because she wasn't buying it. He ducked as muffins flew everywhere.

"Ava, babe, we need to talk."

"Talk my ass!"

Ava took her belongings and went out to the car where the kids were waiting.



Ava met with her agent, who also had a representative from LifeWorld with her. LifeWorld was a network that aired dramatic, real-life movies on television. Its executives were interested in making Ava's book, "If This World Were Mine," an actual movie for their network. Ava was thrilled, because she had never before thought about any of her novels being turned into a movie.

They all discussed the details, cost, actors, and everything else that was involved in the production of a television movie. After the representative left, Ava's agent, Elaine, got up and did a happy dance. She was more excited than her client.

"Ava, what do you think?"

"Really, I'm still in shock," Ava said as she smiled from ear to ear.

Elaine and Ava hugged. Ava suggested that they celebrate, but Elaine said that it was way too early. Elaine was going to get with her attorney to go over the documents and contract.

"A movie on Lifeworld!" Ava screamed. "What a dream come true!"

Ava called her mom and Alisse to give them the news. They were also screaming like crazy.

"Ma, can you believe it?" Ava said through the screams.

"Yes, girl. You're talented, so yes I most certainly believe it!"

Alisse cried. She was so happy for Ava. The two had been stuck together like glue since the day their daddy left.

Ava said her goodbyes to Elaine, her agent, and headed to Angela's office. She was so excited she had to force herself to concentrate on her driving. She really wanted to call Ryan. This was a good day for her, but it was sad at the same time because she couldn't share it with her husband.

Ava waited on Angela to get done with her patient, who came out fifteen minutes later.

"Ava, is everything alright?"

"Yes, girl. But I didn't know where else to go to share my good news."

Angela pulled Ava into her office and she shouted, "My book is going to be a movie!"

"What?" Angela started jumping up and down.

"Yes, I just left a meeting with my agent and Lifeworld network. It's official."

"Have you told *you know who*?"

"No, I haven't. I'm not sure if I plan to, although I want to. I will call Karen and Lisa as soon as I leave here."

"You do what you feel. But keep your money separate or hidden. I don't trust Ryan. I'm sorry to have to say that, but you're my girl and I want you to be protected."

"I'm one step ahead of you." Ava understood exactly where she was coming from and getting at.

"That's what I'm talking about," Angela said with a smile.

"I may be a fool dealing with Ryan's cheating, although I have my reasons for putting up with it. But I'm not a fool when it comes to my assets, though."

They both laughed as they hugged again before Ava went on her way.

Ava decided to stop by Ryan's office after all, just for the hell of it. She had left furious that morning, so she knew he'd be shocked by her visit. Ava stopped and got bagels for everyone, since she was in a good mood.

Nicole, the receptionist, sent her up; and she spoke to everyone she met along the way. Ava announced that she had brought bagels and pastries and was putting them out in the break room. Some of the employees followed behind her.

"Thanks, Ava, for breakfast," Andrew said.

"Not a problem," Ava responded, passing Ricky and Brent.

Ava went looking for Ryan, who was coming out of his office.

"Baby, this is a surprise."

"I know. I hated the way we ended things this morning. So I decided to bring bagels for everyone, and see you," Ava said with a straight face, although she really wanted to laugh.

"Bagels?"

"Yes, they're in the break room."

"Ava, I'm sorry about this morning and anything else that I may have done."

"Shhh..." Ava said walking toward him and putting a finger to his lips. She grabbed Ryan by the hand and pulled him close to her, giving him a long deep kiss. He kissed her back with all he had.

They heard someone standing at the door making a noise.

"Excuse me."

It was Sharon. Ava had seen Sharon in the hallway as she passed by. That's why she had kissed Ryan.

"Yes, Sharon?" Ryan said with a stern look on his face.

"I have something for you to sign," Sharon said.

Sharon handed Ryan the piece of paper. He quickly signed it.

She wanted to say something else.

Ava smiled and spoke. "Is there's something else you want, Sharon? Perhaps what you really want is my *husband*?"

"Yes. In fact, there is. Ryan, when you're done with her, I need you to call me," Sharon said, turning to walk out the door.

"Bitch, get out of here. When he's done with his wife, maybe I'll have him call you," Ava said as she turned around and slammed the door in Sharon's face.

"Damn, girl, that door hurt *me*," Ava heard Andrew say.

"Shall we proceed, Ryan?" Ava said to him. Ryan was looking like he had just shitted in his pants.

Three Months Later: Make up to Break up

Ava had been on a high since the release of her book and the filming of her movie. Everything was going rather smoothly, even with Ryan. Months had passed since Ava heard anything about Sharon, and Ryan seemed to be more attentive to her and the kids.

Ava was in Los Angeles for the filming and had brought the family along so they all could have a vacation together. Ryan seemed to be in love with her these days, more than ever before. Had he kicked Sharon to the curb, or had she found a new man? Whatever it was, Ava hoped Sharon stayed away for good.

"Mom, can we go shopping?" Abbie asked.

"Maybe later after we leave the set."

Ryan pulled the kids away so that they could wrap up the scenes. He took them inside the trailer. Ava watched them and was happy that Ryan was spending more time with Abbie and Jaxon.

Later, they found themselves on Robertson Boulevard and then Rodeo Drive, where all of the celebrities go to shop. Abbie took pictures of everything. She even spotted Paris Hilton and took a selfie with her. Ava went into Tiffany and Company and spotted a banging bangle, only to look at the price. It was not so banging then. She found some nice bracelets engraved with 'Our Friendship Will Last a Lifetime' and thought about the girls. The bracelets were a whopping \$800 apiece. Ava spoke with a salesman and decided to order three of them. She also found Alisse something special, as well as a gift for her mom. The items would be shipped to her home in a couple of weeks. The total bill was \$4,000. With her blessings, Ava could

afford to bless her friends.

Ryan grabbed Ava's hand as they walked. They entered Saks Fifth Avenue. Ryan stated, "These prices are *ridiculous*."

Jaxon wanted to go to Niketown, and Ava wanted to go to Neiman Marcus. Abbie followed her mother, and Ryan followed Jaxon.

Ava loved to shop, so she was in heaven.

"Mom, I've got to have this Michael Kors bag. Mom, it's a crossbody bag," Abbie begged.

Ava looked into her daughter's pretty eyes, knowing that she was the one who had created this monster. Abbie's taste was expensive. They looked around as Ava found the perfect pair of Christian Louboutin peep-toe pumps, and then spotted a pair of Gucci sandals, a Celine orange handbag, and a Tory Burch handbag. Ava told Abbie she could get a couple of more items, but they needed to hurry up to meet Ryan and Jaxon.

"Oh my," Ava said, getting to the register. She handed the cashier her credit card and couldn't believe what her receipt read.

"Thanks, Mom," Abbie said, happy as she had what she wanted for the time being.

"Babe, how much did you spend?" Ryan asked.

"A couple of thousands."

"I know we got some money, but are we balling because our account is still the same?"

"This is some money I had put aside for this trip since we've been here filming. We're not balling. We are just *shopping*," Ava said, trying to figure out what Ryan was getting at regarding her money.

They all had dinner at Barneys at the kids' request. Ava was very sleepy. Getting up at the crack of dawn each morning was finally taking its toll on her. The kids enjoyed their vacation. They went to the beach and

amusement park. They also participated in sky diving and lots of other activities. Even Ryan had a blast. As the night was ending, they headed back to pack. The kids watched a movie while Ava and Ryan took a walk on the beach.

Ryan seemed like a different man than he'd been a couple of months ago. This was the man Ava had fallen in love with. There were several people out enjoying the summer breeze.

"You know, Ava, this trip was nice. I admit I needed to get away."

"Yes, it was nice. We got the movie done, and I'm pleased with it."

"I'm so proud of you. You're doing big things."

Ryan took Ava's hand and led her to a tree. They sat and talked as she laid her head on his shoulder. He ruffled her hair with his hand. Ryan started cupping Ava's breast, as he slipped his other hand underneath her shorts.

"I want to make love to you."

Ryan took off his clothes and laid them on the sand. He then removed Ava clothes. She positioned herself near the tree. Ryan slowly entered Ava and made love to her. Ava felt Ryan stroke and grind, taking his time. The pain Ava had felt earlier subsided long enough for her to make love to her husband.

"Sweetheart, you feel so good."

"You feel good, too. I missed you, Ryan," Ava responded while Ryan gave her all of him.

"I love the way you feel. I enjoy making love to you, Sharon. Ahhhh, you feel so good," Ryan blurted out, without realizing he'd called out Sharon instead of Ava.

Ava quickly pushed Ryan off of her. Looking for her clothes in the dark, she scrambled to put them on. "What's wrong, Ava?"

"Do you have to ask, Ryan? All this time I thought you were

changing! While you were making love to me, you had Sharon on your mind!" She screamed, cursed, cried, and threw sand at Ryan.

"Ava, I didn't mean it! Really!"

Ava put her clothes on and ran back to the room in tears. She couldn't believe Ryan had called her another woman's name while he was inside of her.

Ryan ran after Ava, realizing at the entrance to their room that he had no pants on.



Arriving home from vacation and the movie shoot, Ava was drained. She had not spoken to Ryan since he called her Sharon. All Ava thought about was how she could be so foolish and let this man continue to hurt her. *Was it love?* she thought. *Or was she that needy for a man?*

Ava contemplated calling Malcolm, the guy she'd met at the restaurant, just to talk. Instead she found herself sending a text message to the number on the card he had given her. Ava watched her phone, waiting for a response. Ryan walked into the living room wanting to talk. Her phone chimed, and she ignored her cheating husband to check for a message.

'Hi, you. It's nice to finally hear from you,' Malcolm replied.

Still ignoring Ryan, Ava responded to the text message. 'I hesitated at first, but figured I'd better pay it forward since I owe you a drink.'

"Ava, are you listening to me?" Ryan asked. "I'm pouring my heart out, trying to make us work. All you're doing is sending text messages."

"Really, Ryan, what is up with you anyway? Does your sudden interest in me have anything to do with Sharon seeing someone else?"

Meanwhile, Malcolm sent another message. ‘Is that your way of meeting up or should I ask you to have dinner with me?’ he replied and inserted a smiley face.

"There is nothing between Sharon and me. I don't know what happened on that beach, Ava. Say something."

She ignored him and sent another text message. ‘I would love to. 7 o'clock at Alinea?’

"Ryan, all is forgiven," Ava said walking off.

"Well, how about dinner, just me and you?"

"Ryan, I already have plans. I'll make sure to fit you in my schedule next time."

‘See you there!’ Malcolm replied.

After all these years, Ava would not have thought she'd be having dinner with another man, but Ryan had left her with no other choice.

Ryan followed her into the bedroom. She wanted to rest awhile before meeting Malcolm. Ava lay across the bed. All of a sudden, Ryan eased himself under the covers and positioned himself behind her. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. Ava wanted to move his arms, but she thought, *What the hell? I'll just drift off this way. It'll keep him quiet for the moment.*



Ava couldn't believe that out of all the clothes she had, she still couldn't find anything perfect to wear to dinner. Ava finally picked out an old, open-back, knee-length dress that paired perfectly with the Christian Louboutin pumps she had just purchased in LA.

Ava hurried to get dressed with one eye on the clock because she was

meeting Malcolm on the other side of town. Ava decided to wear her hair up. She wanted to look her best, so she took her time with her makeup and sprayed her favorite Jimmy Choo perfume on her pulse points. "Now, this is a red carpet look," she said, smiling at her reflection in the mirror.

Abbie ran into the room with her camera and took a picture of her mother. She loved to copy Ava's style into her own when creating designs.

"Mom, you look good!"

"Thanks, doll. Kiss your brother for me. I'll see you guys in a bit." She grabbed her clutch bag and prepared to walk out, only to run into Ryan.

"Damn, where you going with that dress on? It looks mighty short. Your back and your breasts are exposed."

"Well, thanks Ryan. I'll see you later," Ava said turning around. "Please don't wait up!" she added, leaving the house.

Nervous as one could be, Ava arrived at Alinea, checked herself in the rear-view mirror, got out, and handed the valet her keys. She walked in and found Malcolm waiting for her.

"Hi, you," Malcolm said, hugging her. "You look really good. Is all this for me?"

"Well, thanks and yes." She was sweating like hell.

"Table for two," Malcolm told the hostess. They followed the woman to a table in the back overlooking the river. Ava thought the table was secluded enough to be private, but a few fans recognized her and asked to take a selfie with her.

"I guess you're a celebrity, and it's my honor to have dinner with you."

Ava smiled because she was speechless. She could not relax because this was her first date since she was married. She ordered a shot to calm her nerves, and Malcolm laughed.

"What's so funny?"

He shook his head and asked, "A shot? You look like a martini girl."

"I usually am. I needed a blast of alcohol to calm my nerves."

"I have to admit I was nervous too. But loosen up because it's going to be a good night."

The more Ava and Malcolm talked, the more she became attracted to him. His personality warmed her inside and outside.

They each had a glass of Chardonnay while they waited on their dinner. Ava found out that Malcolm was an investment broker. He gave her many tips on how to maneuver a couple of stocks she was unsure about. Malcolm shared custody of a teenage son from a previous relationship. He also talked about where he lived, his likes and dislikes, and why he was still single.

When it was her turn, Ava didn't know where to start.

"So tell me about your husband."

Ava continued to eat her oysters before she finally opened up about her life. "It's not much to tell. Oh my husband is cheating on me."

"You mean to tell me that your husband is cheating on you?"

He was in shock. "Some men have to pump up their egos when they feel like a woman is more successful than they are. Although your husband may make a decent salary, I'm pretty sure your salary is more due to you taking the initiative with your books, speaking engagements, and, now, this movie you mentioned. Ryan could feel even more threatened, and his behavior would possibly get worse."

Ava had never looked at it like that, but Malcolm's statement kind of made sense.

"You know, I've never cheated on him before, but I am letting him cheat on me. I deserve better."

Malcolm took her hand. "Ava, I will never understand."

"Dinner was nice. It was good to get out and have a great time."

"If there is a next time, I promise to cook dinner for you. I guarantee you will love my cooking."

"A next time?" Ava chuckled. "I'd like that."

"So, I take it There will be a next time?" Malcolm waited for a response, but settled for a smile instead. "I know you're married, so let's toast to a new beginning of simply being friends."

Playing with Fire

Carl seemed to be in a great mood. He walked into the office smiling. The last time Ryan had talked to Carl, he was upset about Ryan's sudden divorce outburst. Since then their conversations had been awkward.

"Hey, man, how was your vacation? Angela told me about Ava's new movie, which will be shown around the world in a couple of months."

Ryan smiled, "It was great. LA was nice, and the movie gave Ava a nice look."

Ryan walked over to his filing cabinet while Carl looked on, breaking the space between them.

"Are you still planning to divorce Ava?"

Ryan looked at Carl, "What is it to you?"

"Ava is good people, man. We can get so caught up in situations that we don't realize how good people are until they are gone."

Carl apologized for meddling, but also updated Ryan on catching Ricky and Sharon in an awkward position when he went into Ricky's office. Ryan acted as though that didn't faze him, but he knew Sharon better than anybody. Her playing with Ricky was a way to get back at him for going on vacation with Ava.

Carl and Ryan chatted for awhile until Ryan was paged over the loud speaker that he had a phone call parked on line two.

He tried to work, but he was distracted with Ava getting in at four o'clock in the morning and Sharon ignoring him. He stopped what he was doing and dialed Sharon's number. He called several times, and his calls went straight to voicemail. He finally decided to leave a message.

"Hi, Sharon. I know you see me calling. I'm just sitting here thinking about you. I miss you. It's been four months already. I knew that waiting wouldn't be easy, but it will be finally worth it. Besides, I got you something and I want to give it to you. So please call me. I love you, Sharon. Call me back," Ryan said as he held tightly to the phone before hanging up.

Ryan sat back in his chair and stared at the family photo that he, Ava, and the kids had posed for last year. They seemed like the perfect family, and he looked happy. He was not sure what to make of the sudden change in himself. He just couldn't get back to being the man Ava once knew. Although he cared for her deeply, his heart was with Sharon.

He dialed Sharon's number again and left another message. "Sharon, baby, if you don't call me back I swear I'm coming to your office with a tent and I'm camping out until you talk to me," Ryan said and hung up.

His phone rang. He rushed to pick it up, only to hear Carl's voice asking about getting together tonight at his and Angela's house. Although Ryan wasn't in the mood, he said yes and hung up. Moments later, Ava sent him a text message about getting together at Angela's house this evening while her mom watched the kids. Ryan agreed quickly, only to turn his attention back to Sharon.

Ever since that day Ava came to the office with bagels and Sharon saw them kissing, his life had gone downhill. When Sharon found out about the family vacation, she stopped speaking to him. Ryan couldn't focus. Enough was enough! It was now lunchtime and the office was empty except for a few coworkers. So he grabbed his keys and headed for the door. Ryan walked out only to find Sharon walking toward him.

"Ryan, we need to talk."

Ryan walked back in his office, and he closed and locked the door

after Sharon came in.

Sharon stood as he embraced her, rubbing her face with his hand. "I missed you. You know that?"

Sharon smiled, but didn't respond.

"Did you get my messages?"

Sharon finally cracked a smile, "Yes, all one hundred and fifty of them."

"Baby, we let months get in the way of us. If we're going to be together, we have to stick it out and be patient."

"Ryan, it's hard, and Ava is making it her mission to keep you."

"Sharon I don't want you to worry about a thing." He then kissed her long and hard, only to come up for air. Knowing that nearly all his coworkers had gone to lunch, he started undressing Sharon down to her purple thong. Her nipples stood at attention while he struggled to get his clothes off. Once he was completely naked, he pulled a chair around.

"Sharon, sit in the chair."

She did as she was told. Ryan spread her legs apart, putting one leg on the edge of the desk and the other one over his shoulder. Ryan went in like he'd been waiting on this meal all day. He got on his knees and began sucking all of Sharon's juices, licking the outside of her minora while he spread her lips apart and played with her clitoris.

Sharon begged Ryan to stop and enter her. He came up and cupped both breasts, and then he sucked them one by one. He then entered her as she requested, pulled out, and entered again, teasing her until she begged for it.

"Ryan, I don't want you to stop. Fuck me, please."

Ryan liked it when she talked dirty to him.

"That's right, daddy. Fuck me harder."

It felt so good getting his dick wet inside of Sharon. She had some

good pussy and knew it too. Ryan could tell how she threw it back.

"Whose pussy is this?"

"It's your pussy, baby," she said as she bounced her titties up and down.

Ryan watched the expressions she made and loved them. She was in her zone.

"I'm about to cum," she said as he went deeper and deeper making her cum. With sweat running down her face, Ryan made her get up and bend over in the chair ass out!

"Bring that dick here so I can kiss it first."

Ryan stood in front of Sharon while she remained in the chair as she took daddy's long stroke in her warm mouth.

"Damn, you have a huge dick."

"And it's all yours," he said, waiting to cum in her mouth.

Sharon knew how to make a man go crazy. Her tongue was a weapon used to make him bust quick. She slobbered, slurped, and drooled all over him. Ryan felt himself about to explode as she tried to pull away. He put his hand on her head, pushing it back and forth, keeping her latched on.

"Ahhhh," Ryan let out a sigh of relief. Sharon did that to him just right.

Hearing voices as people came back from lunch, he quickly told her to bend over. He spread both of her ass cheeks and entered her while grinding in her slowly. Then he sped up the process. He pulled out and licked her anus. Ryan had his whole face in her ass, which made her even wetter. He entered her again, slapping his balls against her ass cheeks.

"You bastard. I don't feel you."

"Well, you gonna feel this," Ryan said fucking her harder while sticking one finger in her anus.

Sharon wasn't into anal sex and had never tried it, but Ava loved it. And he was going to make Sharon love anal sex as well if she planned on being with him. After five more minutes of pumping, they came together as he slumped against the trash can.

"Wow! That was a workout, Ryan!"

"Yep, tell me about it."

They managed to clean themselves up, gather their clothes, and get dressed. Ryan had to Lysol the office down. It smelled just like ass and more ass! He kissed Sharon.

"Thank you for coming by and blessing me with your talent."

"It was my pleasure."

"Oh, I got something for you," he said, remembering the diamond earrings he'd bought for her in LA.

Sharon opened the box and was amazed by the diamond studded hoops he'd bought for her. "Thanks, babe. These are gorgeous!" She took off the earrings she was wearing, replacing them with the new ones.

By the look on her face, he could tell she was thrilled.

"Can you come by later?"

"Jaxon has a game, but maybe I could visit you tomorrow," Ryan lied, remembering the gathering he had just promised to attend."

They said their goodbyes, and then Sharon left.

Ryan was finally able to concentrate, now that Sharon had forgiven him.



Ava was getting dressed when Ryan got home. She had already laid out his clothes for the evening. All he had to do was shower.

One thing about Ava and Ryan was that they always coordinated their clothes whenever they stepped out together. Ryan watched her as he dressed, wondering how she was going to react to him asking for a divorce. Would she let him go? Try to hold on? Go crazy? It was something that he couldn't answer, but he prepared himself for the worst.

After a lengthy drive, they arrived at Carl and Angela's house and were greeted with wine and hors d'oeuvres. It was a small gathering, but nice. Karen and her new man were there, as was Lisa and her new man. Alisse and her fiancée, Justin, Angela's sister, and a few of Angela's coworkers were also in attendance.

"Don't you two look lovely?" Angela said greeting them, without looking at Ryan.

Ryan excused himself and headed toward Carl and Justin. While the fellas talked basketball and baseball, Ryan noticed that Angela and Carl had gone way out with the caterers and live music. With Angela's money, she and Carl had a nice, big, beautiful home.

"What's up, big boy?" Ryan said to Justin, giving him a bear hug.

Justin and Alisse were about to tie the knot. Although Alisse and Ava's tastes in men were different, Justin was cool and well off.

They all walked over to the bar, and he noticed Ava and the girls chopping it up. Getting bored, Ryan excused himself to the restroom to text Sharon.

'Hey, babe. How's your evening?'

Minutes later, Sharon replied. *'It's great. Tiffany and I just came back from dinner. Now I'm about to exhale.'*

"Ryan," he heard Ava call out.

Ryan hurried and responded to Sharon. *'I love you, future Mrs. Decree!'*

Ryan walked out of the restroom.

"We're ready to eat," Ava said.

He followed her out as they all went out on the patio. Ava introduced Ryan to Lisa's friend, Jonathan, and Karen's new man, Chris, who was all hugged up with Karen. They sat at a huge table filled with seafood, steak, kabobs, steamed vegetables, salad, and rolls.

Ryan noticed Ava texting and wondered who she could be talking to besides the kids. He tried to steal a glance, but she turned her back full force and smiled after hitting send. Angela was giving a speech and toast about her joining forces with a dentist she'd admired for many years. She introduced Dr. Eugene Jewel to everyone at the table. They all were excited and thrilled for Angela.

"I'm so proud of you!" Ava said, teary eyed.

They all toasted to Angela's news, as Karen stood up and announced she was pregnant.

"Get outta here!" Lisa said, running over to hug her friend.

"What?" Angela yelled in excitement.

"I'm gonna be an auntie!" Ava, Angela, and Lisa sang as they hugged on Karen and congratulated her boyfriend, Chris.

Ryan couldn't remember his name, so he figured he was the daddy. Ryan looked at the other guests who were waiting for the excitement to end so they could eat.

"With all this great news, let's eat!" Carl hollered.

The food was great, the weather was nice, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The drunker everyone got, the crazier the conversations got. The conversation turned from monogamy to infidelity and then to sex. Ryan remained tight lipped, trying not to say anything to call attention to himself.

"So Ryan, what do you think about monogamy?" Karen asked as everyone focused on him, including Ava.

Ryan cleared his throat, knowing she'd asked him openly on purpose, while he tried to find the right answer to the question. "Monogamy is great when you have the mate you connect with and plan to spend the rest of your life with," he managed to say.

"What about sexual partners outside of the relationship?" Angela asked, adding fuel to the fire.

"I want to hear this," Ava said, while everyone else was curious as to why his wife made such a comment.

"Like I said, if you and your mate connect, a person won't have a need for multiple sexual partners," Ryan said, breaking out in a sweat.

Everyone started talking as Ava blurted, "Oh, I get it now. We don't connect, Ryan. That's the reason you have another sex partner. You even called me by *her* name during sex, right?" Ava said. She stood up to make a fake toast to multiple sex partners.

Ryan was embarrassed as hell.

Ava yelled, sounding drunk, "Ryan fucks Sharon y'all!" She then threw her napkin on the table and stormed inside, as Alisse and Angela ran in behind her.

"I'm sorry, man," Carl managed to say, as the other guests excused themselves from the table and said their goodbyes.

Angela's sister stayed behind to help clean up, as Karen and Lisa went inside to check on Ava.

"Fellas, I'm sorry for my wife's outburst," Ryan apologized while they tried to figure out what was going on.

After a few more minutes of sitting uncomfortably, Ryan went inside to tell Ava it was time to go. He was tired of this bullshit.

"Ladies, I need to take Ava home," Ryan said. Ava's eyes were red from crying; she gathered her things and told the girls good night.

"That's a good woman you have, Ryan. All the ass in the world won't compare to what you have at home. Cherish her while you have her," Lisa said, as Ryan looked back only to turn around without responding.

Lisa thought she knew every damn thing, and Angela was one of those women who liked control. It was the reason why Carl was scared to make a damn move.

Some black girls were a trip, Ryan thought.

They finally left. He drove them home in silence, with the only sound being made by Ava's blonde hair blowing in the breeze. Ava's white skin looked more pale than usual. She usually went to the tanning salon, but it looked like she had not been in months. Ryan, still embarrassed by Ava's actions, only more firmly resolved that he needed to move forward with the divorce before it got any worse.

For Better or for Worse

A couple of weeks had passed since the incident at Angela's house. The girls were coming over for brunch, as Ava hurried to get back to the house with the food. Abbie ran out to help her, while Jaxon played basketball with his friends.

The kids had been Ava's rock, because she and Ryan rarely talked. He was spending more time elsewhere than at home, which she figured meant he went over to Sharon's house often. He wined and dined her and her daughter more than he did his own kids, which was also noticeable.

"Mom, why do you have all this food?" Abbie asked as Jaxon came running down the street.

That boy can smell food a mile away, she thought. "Jaxon, slow down before you hurt yourself!"

"Mom, what you got? I'm hungry again!" Jaxon said, looking through the bags.

"Boy, you better go wash your hands!" she scolded.

"Abbie, put these subs on that tray," Ava said as she watched Ryan walk into the room about to head out as usual.

"Dad, where are you going? Can we go to the movies later?" Jaxon asked.

"Maybe, son, depending on what time I get back."

"So that means no!" Jaxon said, grabbing a sub, juice, and chips, and heading for the table.

Abbie looked at Ava and smiled.

"What?" Ava said.

“Nothing. Ma, I admire you. You know that,” she said as Ava gave her a hug.

"Jaxon, baby, if you want to go to the movies later, I'll drop you and your friends off," Ava yelled.

Boy, he ran back in the room so quickly. "Really? Do you want to go, too, Abbie?"

"Sure. I want to see that new movie “Dark in the Fiery.” I’m going to call Kelly," Abbie said.

Ava poured the juice into a pitcher, and put the dip and chips on a platter.

"So I take it you don't want me to spend time with my son?" Ryan said, not realizing Jaxon was still standing in the corner.

"Ryan, no offense, but you haven't been a father to these kids lately. You're too busy trying to take care of someone else's child. Yeah, word gets around quick. By the way, how *is* little Tiffany?"

"Woman, what are you talking about?" he said angrily. Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Mom, it's Auntie Lisa," Jaxon yelled.

Ryan was so pissed that he grabbed his keys and walked out, which was nothing new these days.

Ava swore she needed to figure out what to do before she lost her damn mind.

The rest of the girls came in moments after Lisa, including Chrissy. Karen had a glow about herself, and Ava was so very happy for her.

"What's up, mommy to be?" Angela joked, rubbing Karen's belly.

"Girl, stop it!" Karen said playfully.

They all went around the table putting food on their plates, and then they all headed out to sit under the gazebo.

"Girl, this food is delicious!" Karen said.

"Mom," Jaxon yelled from the back deck. "Dad just called and said he's taking us to the movies later." He went back inside.

"That's nice of Ryan," Angela said.

"Yeah, right," Ava said. "Girl, please. Ryan is just doing that because I blasted him for spending time with someone else's child. Ever since Angela's gathering, it's been downhill with him."

"No offense, Ava, cause you're my girl, but a black woman would have left his ass a long time ago!" Lisa said with a mouth full of food.

Looking in Karen's direction, Ava asked, "Karen, you've dated a black man before. What do you think of him compared to the others you've dated?"

Karen explained that it was no difference in color. But respect was another thing. If a man didn't respect you, he definitely didn't love you enough. Ava really felt small after her statement. What had she done to make Ryan treat her the way he did?

"Ava, it's a control issue," Karen stressed.

Ava quickly changed the subject and talked about Malcolm. The girls were all in shock that they'd been going out.

"Ava, my girl, is going back to the cream," Angela said as everyone laughed.

"He's just a friend. It's just great to have someone to talk to. He understands me, and it's good to know that I still look good for someone," Ava said smiling, from ear to ear.

Lisa got up and did her little dance called the squirrel. And that's exactly what it looked like.

"We need music. Abbie and Chrissy," Lisa yelled, dragging out the girls' names.

"Shhh. Girl, you're not in the hood!" Ava snapped, getting her to shut up. Lisa laughed like it was funny.

"Yes, Auntie Lisa?" Abbie said over the deck as Chrissy followed.

"I need you to bring a radio down and play some of y'all's music," Lisa said.

Moments later, they found themselves doing the cupid shuffle, the wobble, and a new dance craze called the nae nae. Abbie and Chrissy laughed at Lisa, who was giving them a show. To know Lisa was to love her. Abbie and Chrissy went back inside after snapping a couple of pictures, probably to put on Instagram above a caption that called them old.

Ava knew that ring tone as she heard her phone ringing, but couldn't find it. She finally located her phone under some napkins.

"Lisa, turn the music down. It's Malcolm!"

Ava answered.

"Hi, *Malcolm*," the girls said in unison.

Malcolm was on Face Time, so it was nice seeing him. He smiled and asked about Ava's evening. Of course she was free.

"I'm taking you dancing, diva."

"Dancing?"

"What's the problem? You can't shake?" Malcolm said as Ava fell over laughing.

"Somebody got soul!" Angela hollered.

Ava promised to meet Malcolm at his place so they could have some fun. She was excited like a school girl out of school on a snow day.

"Go get 'em, girl!" Karen said.

Lisa was still trying to dance with two left feet, but they said white girls couldn't dance.

They all calmed down and finished talking. They had so much to

catch up on until Ava saw in her hyperopic vision that Ryan was making his way to the gazebo. All the ladies started snickering, making eye contact with one another. It got quiet when he finally arrived.

"Ladies, are you enjoying this lovely day?" Ryan asked nervously.

"Ryan, what do you need?" Ava asked.

"Food, dear. Is there any left?"

Angela shook her head in disbelief.

"Whatever is left, you may have," Ava said, trying to get him to leave. Hell, she thought he was gone. What did he come back for?

After Ryan disappeared, the girls helped clean up. Ava looked at the time and calculated that she had a few hours before she was to leave to go and see Malcolm.

"Girl, that husband of yours is a trip! I think he's going through a phase," Angela said.

"More like a midlife crisis!" Lisa chimed in.

"You would think, after all these years, you would pretty much know your mate. Clearly that's not true," Ava said.

"Awe, Ava, it will be okay," Karen said, as they all hugged each other.

It felt good talking to the girls. Ava felt like the more time she spent with Malcolm, the less she worried about Ryan. Ava had to admit that she loved her husband and that this thing with Malcolm was strictly fun. Ava didn't want Malcolm to get caught in the crossfire with her and Ryan. He was too good for that.



Ava pulled out of the garage, but she realized that she'd forgotten her purse. She pulled back in just as Jaxon was coming out of the front door with it. "Thanks, son!" she said.

Ava exited out of the subdivision and wound up behind a slow driver. She bypassed the guy trying to get on the expressway and hit Hamilton Mill. Malcolm lived on the other side of town in a very expensive condo. Glancing at her watch, she realized that she was right on time.

She got out her car wearing a fitted lace zigzag dress, which was made for dancing. She'd matched it with a pair of black lace Dolce and Gabbana peep toe pumps. She loved to dress up. It made her feel good sort of like a princess. She looked up and saw Malcolm coming down.

"Don't you look stunning?" he said, smiling like he was going to get some.

"You clean up rather well yourself," Ava said, looking at him in his Armani dress pants, pleated shirt, and Jordan's.

He noticed Ava eyeing the shoes. "What? You don't like my kicks with my attire?"

Ava smiled and said, "They're cool."

"Beautiful, I wouldn't leave you hanging. I got my dancing shoes in the car. I have to look good standing next to you," Malcolm said, making Ava blush.

Malcolm was Ava's knight in shining armor. He was a stress reliever. He was perfect to just kick it with and talk to. That was good enough, without having to be physical.

"So where are you taking me?" Ava asked.

"We're going to LaParellu, where we can dine and have a good ole time," he said. "For a white boy, I got moves, girl. I want to see you do the rumba."

Ava looked at him and burst out laughing. "You want me to do what?"

Malcolm drove to the next city. "I hope you don't have a curfew. This is going to be a long night. We gonna do a little salsa, move on to the cha-cha-cha, get into some hip-hop, and close it out with the hustle."

LaParellu seemed to be the spot. It was a nice atmosphere with a mature crowd. Dancing was everywhere. The food selection was amazing, as was the wine and alcohol menu. *A nice place for a special date*, Ava thought.

"So, what do you think so far?"

"This place is amazing! I've never heard of it before."

"One of my partners suggested this spot, and I've heard nice things about it. I've always wanted to come here, but I needed the right woman to bring with me," he said, winking at her.

Ava gave him the side eye and a sly smile, not showing him the effect he was having on her.

They placed their orders and headed for the dance floor. They did the rump shaker off of Latin music, then the tango. Boy was Ava embarrassed... talk about Lisa. She had two bad feet. Malcolm laughed his ass off.

"You think this is funny?" Ava asked, having the time of her life.

"No, no, you're good. This is all for fun, but follow me," he said leading the way.

Ava caught on quickly or at least learned enough not to make a fool out of herself. The waiter tapped them on their shoulders to let them know their dinner was ready. Ava ordered a glass of merlot, and Malcolm ordered chianti, which went well with his pasta. The night was going rather smoothly.

Malcolm, loosen up, Ava thought. She could tell he had something on his mind. "Talk to me."

"About?"

"Whatever is on your mind."

Malcolm smiled sheepishly. "I like you, you know, but your world is so complicated. Why do you put up with him?" he asked, referring to Ryan.

"I know you do. Honestly, I don't know why I'm still there. Malcolm, I like what we have because it's not complicated. It's more like a breath of fresh air."

He looked at her, not knowing what he was going to say. "You're worth waiting for," he finally said.

Ava couldn't believe what he'd just said. She wanted so desperately to make love to Malcolm, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Ava had made a vow to be faithful to Ryan. That still meant something to her, even though he'd broken his vow to her. Her commitment to God was all she could think about. Would God forgive her? Would he cast Ava aside as a sinner? She wasn't sure, but she was too scared to find out.

Ava took Malcolm's hand and said, "I adore you. You just don't know how you've made me feel these last couple of weeks. Thank you."

They laughed, talked, and danced into the wee hours of the night. They left around two o'clock and ended up by the river, talking and acting silly. They then drove all the way back to Malcolm's condo, where Ava went in and used the restroom before leaving.

His place was decked out. Ava noticed a Scarface picture on the wall. She turned to ask him about it.

"A broker gave me that as a house warming gift. He was just trying to be funny, but I liked it," Malcolm said before she could get her question out. "Would you like some coffee before you leave?"

"No, thanks. I'll never make it home," Ava said, walking to take a look out his balcony.

It felt good out, especially when Malcolm came behind her and held

her tight. Ava felt some type of way as she turned around to face him.

"Shhh, whenever you're ready. Right now, let's just enjoy this moment," Malcolm said pulling Ava in for a final squeeze as she put her head on his shoulder.

Ava lifted her head after a brief moment and said, "Thank you." She found her way to his lips and passionately kissed him good night.

Six Months Later

Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't

Ava was at her desk writing, when she heard someone come in. She went to look and saw that it was Ryan. Ryan and Ava's marriage was rocky. They hadn't touched each other in months, although they still slept in the same bed from time to time. She had tried her best to make things work, but Ryan seemed distant and pushed her away every time.

She went back to writing in her journal, thinking about putting it all together for a book. She had a couple of more book signings this month before she could relax.

The phone rang, and it was her nurse practitioner calling in a prescription for the pain she had been experiencing in her back. Ryan peeped inside the office.

"Do you have a moment?"

"Sure," Ava said. She stopped writing, as Ryan came in and sat down in front of the desk.

"I wanted to talk about our finances, especially our shared account."

"I'm curious because there is nothing wrong with the accounts to my knowledge, but go ahead."

"I know we both have separate accounts plus our main account, but what about the money from the sale of the books and this Lifeworld movie deal?"

Shocked at what he'd just asked, Ava had to clear her throat before she said, "Ryan, what about the sale of the books? My money is my money, and what's yours is yours."

Not liking Ava's response, Ryan raised his tone, "I agree, but when

you make more, that larger portion should go into our joint account."

"Says who?" Ava yelled, getting heated. "If I recall correctly, we both signed a prenuptial agreement that you put together and were so hell bent about when we got married. And now that I've made a name for myself and bring in more than you do, you think you're going to take my money to spend on your cheap broad? I don't think so!" Ava got up from her desk. "I suggest you read your prenuptial agreement. This conversation is over!" Ava walked off with Ryan right on her heels.

Ryan grabbed Ava's arm. "Don't you dare walk away from me, woman!"

"Ryan, what the hell has gotten into you?" Ava looked at him in pain as tears formed in her eyes. "You're not the man I once knew. You get some new pussy, and then do you think you can take it out on me?" Ava removed his hands off of her and headed upstairs.

"Ava, baby, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to grab your arm like that," Ryan yelled up the stairway.

Ava went to shower so that she could feel some relief. She stood there, wanting to cry, but not a single tear came out. The back pain and bloating were getting worse, and all she wanted to do was lie down. Ava got out of the shower and put on some comfy clothes. Walking into the room, she found Ryan sitting on the bed holding a bouquet of lilies he'd dug up from the yard. Ava thought, *This man has to be bipolar*. He made her feel so ridiculous that she walked past him straight to open her bureau drawer. Ryan leapt from the bed, coming up behind her to apologize again.

"You like?" he asked as he held out the bouquet, but Ava pushed the lilies away.

"No, Ryan...only in the yard." She continued to ignore him. She went to her phone and responded to Malcolm's text message so that she could get

out of the house.

'See you in an hour. Lunch on me at SoHo.'

'I'll be there.' A smiley face followed.

She powdered her face, brushed her hair back, and looked for a comfortable pair of flats. She didn't feel cute, but her reflection in the mirror still looked good.

"You're just going to ignore me and leave?"

"Yes, Ryan, I have to be somewhere."

"You look good, but you always do."

Ava looked at him because he hadn't said that to her in forever. She was not sure what his motive behind the comment was, but she would play along.

"Thanks, Ryan, I haven't heard those words from you in a very long time," Ava said as she smiled and kept it moving.



Ava left the house annoyed, wondering how the man she had married all these years ago could be so ruthless and ask about her money. She had never asked about his money when he'd made more money than she did before she started writing. Ava wondered what he was up to and with whom. She'd be damned if he took her money and used it on Sharon! Just the thought alone made her sick.

Driving along Beacon Ridge Interstate, Ava saw a couple and their kids traveling with luggage, and they seemed so happy. Ava wished that she could get back to that place with Ryan. It seems like he had changed overnight, and the man he'd become, she didn't like.

Ava finally arrived at SoHo and was looking for Malcolm when he

crept up behind her.

"Hey, beautiful," Malcolm whispered in her ear. All the tense thoughts she'd had about Ryan turned into a smile, and she credited Malcolm for that. Ava turned around and hugged him.

"Come, follow me," Malcolm said taking her hand.

Ava followed him to a secluded area that seemed to be reserved just for them. "Wow, these are nice," Ava said, taking the roses Malcolm handed her. He pulled out her chair, allowing her to take a seat. Then he motioned for the waiter.

Ava watched and listened to him telling the waiter to bring certain foods to the table and wondered why. Malcolm sat down with a smile.

"What's up with the special food order?"

"I ordered your favorites, which have become my favorites also: grilled salmon Thai, iron steak, crab cakes, calamari, butternut squash, steamed rice...shall I say more?" He winked. "Besides, the owner is my brother."

"Get out of here!" Ava said. "I guess that explains why you get special treatment."

Malcolm shook his head. Ava glanced around the restaurant. There wasn't a familiar face in sight. Realizing that she had zoned out, Malcolm stared at Ava waiting for her to come back to earth.

"My bad, Malcolm. I was admiring the atmosphere."

"What's on your mind?"

"The situation that happened earlier with Ryan," she explained. He had the nerve to ask me about my money. I don't understand why he is so concerned about *my* money."

"I advise you to move your money to offshore accounts, and maybe put them in your kids' names. That way the money can't be tracked by him or

the IRS. If something happened, you could add your sister's name to the accounts. Being an investment broker, this is what I would do."

Malcolm was very knowledgeable in international diversification, Swiss accounts, seizing, and foreign regulations—all of which were new to her. He suggested that Ava keep a couple of thousand—not too much—in a visible account for her royalties and all other assets to throw anyone looking for other accounts off the scent.

"Thanks, Malcolm. That was a lot of valuable information."

"What do you think he's planning?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe he's trying to take my money and leave me for that whore," she said. She was laughing, but deep in her mind she knew it might be possible.

"Ava, why did you marry him...a black man at that?" Malcolm asked. "No offense, but I'm just curious. Your background is totally different from his. That's all."

Ava looked at Malcolm, trying to find the right words. "Well, Malcolm, it was not about the color of his skin. It was about the man I fell in love with. Ryan was no different than any other man. You all have the same thing. Color wasn't a factor to me," Ava said noticing Malcolm's reaction. "Besides I'm sitting here with you, which means I like cream as well."

Just then, the waiter brought all the food items Malcolm had ordered. It all looked divine. A gentleman walked out and introduced himself as Mark. When he started talking about how special Ava was to Malcolm, she instantly knew that it was his brother. They shook hands. Ava looked over at Malcolm giving Mark the thumbs up, letting him know he'd done a good job preparing a nice setting for them.

"Please, if you want anything else, just let your waiter know. It's on the house," Mark said. He left them alone while greeting other customers

seated in the restaurant.

The waiter brought out a bottle of chardonnay and poured two glasses. It went well with all of the food.

The food was amazing. Ava loved all the vegetables, especially the squash and asparagus.

"So, how is it?"

Ava gave it two thumbs up. "Excellent!"

"Don't you have to get back to work?"

"Not until I'm done having lunch with the beautiful lady seated across from me. Besides, I'm the boss."

It was good to see how successful Malcolm and his brother, Mark, were. Their background was very bleak. They had been moved around from foster home to foster home, only having each other to depend on.

Ava's concern with Malcolm was that he seemed content to wait for her. At this point, Ava had no idea where her life was heading. So she didn't want him to miss out on happiness, even if it was with someone else

The Grass on the Other Side

Ryan loved every bit of his weekend with Sharon and Tiffany. Ava was in Vegas for a book signing event and had taken the girls along for a weekend getaway. Ryan had taken Abbie and Jaxon over to his mother's house and had asked her to keep them busy doing whatever they liked. Ryan's mother thought he was out of town on business, but little did she know that he was spending the weekend with Sharon, the other woman in his life.

Ryan and Sharon were in the kitchen baking brownies and cookies while throwing dough at each other.

"So, Ryan, you're planning on telling Ava next week, right?" Sharon asked to confirm what he had told her.

"Yes, that is my plan. I've dragged it out long enough."

"What about the money? You think she's going to give you half from all those books and the movie deal? You are entitled to it, you know."

"I'm not sure, but I plan to fight her for it if I have to. We signed a prenuptial agreement early on."

"A prenup? Ryan, you should be able to fight her on that."

"Yeah, but I'm the one who demanded we sign one when we got married," he said. Sharon walked over to the sink without saying a word.

"What is it? You should be happy."

"Ryan, what did you see in Ava? I mean, is it different dating a white woman versus a black woman? I've never dated outside of my race, so I wouldn't know."

"Are the brownies done yet?" Tiffany asked, running into the kitchen.

"Not yet, baby. Go play," Sharon said, shooing Tiffany out of the

kitchen.

Ryan pulled Sharon to the empty chair in the kitchen and told her to sit.

"Sharon, honestly love has no color. So when you see a black man with a white woman, don't make judgments. People date outside their race every day."

He then looked at her pull her hair back. "I loved Ava for Ava. But don't get it twisted. Ava is a tough woman, but I love you now Sharon. What you give me no longer exists between Ava and me," he said, trying to reassure her.

Sharon smiled like she'd won the Nobel Peace Prize. She got up from the chair and checked on the brownies as Ryan watched her and thought about how good she'll be with Jaxon and Abbie.

Ryan's phone started buzzing. It was Carl calling. Not wanting to talk, he let the voicemail pick it up. Tiffany ran back in the kitchen with a friend looking for the baked goods as Sharon was putting them on a plate.

"Be careful, kids, those are hot. Get a paper plate first."

Ryan listened to the message from Carl: "What's up, man? I was just calling and checking on you since the ladies are away. Wanted to see if you wanted to get together with me and the fellas later and hit up a bar. Holla back and let me know the move. Peace."

Ryan deleted the message. "What is it?" Sharon asked.

"Nothing...just a message from Carl wanting to get together later."

Sharon shrugged her shoulders. She walked over and started rubbing Ryan's head. "This has been a great weekend," Sharon said, nibbling on his ear.

He smiled, hearing his phone go off again. This time it was Jaxon. "Hey son, what's going on?"

"Dad, I'm ready to come home."

"I'll pick you and your sister up tomorrow. I'm out of town."

"Out of town? Mom said you should be at home watching us. Instead you dropped us off. I'm ready to come home, Dad. It's boring here," Jaxon whined.

That damn Ava, Ryan thought. "Jaxon, don't listen to your mom. Maybe she forgot that I was leaving for the weekend. I'll come get you first thing in the morning."

Jaxon hung up abruptly, giving his father the old click. Ryan looked at the phone and heard the dial tone. "I know he just didn't hang up on me," he said, still holding the phone. Sitting there not knowing what to do, he heard Sharon tell Tiffany to stay over at her friend's house for a while and walked back into the kitchen.

"Why is that bitch trying to ruin our weekend, Ryan?"

Snapping out of a daze, he responded, "Huh? Who? You mean *Ava*?"

"Yes. Now she's using the kids against you. I want to see her face when you throw those divorce papers at her."

"Baby, calm down," he said, grabbing her by the waist.

Ryan kissed Sharon so she would hush. He got up from his chair and started taking off his clothes, leaving his cotton boxers and socks on, just in case Tiffany ran back in.

Sharon looked at him. "What are you doing, Ryan?" Sharon gazed at his dick through his boxers.

"Make sure the door is locked. I heard you tell Tiffany to stay at her friend's house for awhile. Is this what you want?" Ryan pulled down his boxers and pointed to his dick. While his dick stood at attention, he started moving his hand up and down his shaft letting out precum.

Ryan headed to the bedroom. He wasn't worried about Sharon. He

knew she would be behind him in seconds. He lay on the bed with his dick straight up in the air, stroking it up and down. She walked in with no clothes on, displaying her belly ring and big bouncy titties. She turned to lock the bedroom door, and all Ryan noticed was that big ass of hers. Her ass was so big you could sit an ashtray on it while you smoked.

"Come kiss it, baby," he demanded Sharon to put her lips on him.

"We gonna do it my way...no more giving orders, Mister."

Sharon climbed on the bed and turned her back toward Ryan so he could play with her ass. She teased him as she eased his manhood inside of her, as she sat on his dick going in and out. She was wet as fuck. She looked back at it while she continued to glide. He watched her grind on him in slow motion. *Damn, this feels so good*, Ryan thought. Sharon slid off, turned around, and sat on Ryan's face. All of that ass covered his nose and mouth; he could barely breathe. Ryan ate her out while she moaned and groaned, leaning against the headboard. Ryan felt her legs tremble as he sucked her clit until she squirted on his face.

"Turn over, babe, and lean face down."

Sharon's head was buried in the pillow as he slapped her ass a couple of times, sticking one finger in her asshole. She squirmed.

"Relax, Sharon."

Ryan leaned over, grabbed the KY jelly from the nightstand drawer, and lubricated his dick and her asshole.

"What are you about to do back there, Ryan? I don't take it in my ass. You know that," she said whining, before he even started.

"Sharon, just relax. It will only hurt when I enter, and that's it. Loosen up. Talk dirty to me or something," he said, while she was getting on his nerves. "Arch your back. That's it!"

Ryan pushed himself into Sharon's ass, as she kept squirming each

time he attempted to enter her. He lubricated her some more as he forced himself halfway in it.

"Ouch! Damn it!" Sharon hollered.

She's about to get on my last nerve, he thought. Ava didn't mind at all.

"I'm almost in it. Relax." Ryan felt her ripping apart, as he poured more jelly on his dick, allowing it run in her ass. He pumped hard. After twenty minutes of sweating, he was finally in there. Ryan fucked Sharon gently, as she wept on the bed. He ignored her cries and fucked her while squeezing her ass. He pulled out, and then stuck his tongue in her ass to help ease her pain. Ryan went back in only to cum in her ass, letting it drip on the bedspread.

"Sharon, sweetheart," he called out.

She looked at him in tears. "I told you to stop. Why didn't you? It hurt like hell," she cried.

"Baby, I'm sorry."

Sharon got up and went limping to the bathroom. All she wanted to do was soak in some warm water.

Ryan beat Sharon to the bathroom and showered quickly. "Babe, I'm going to get the kids and take them home early."

"So you're just going to rip my ass apart and leave?"

"I'll be back. I need to go get them settled first." He tried to touch Sharon and wipe her back before leaving, but she refused his help. Not understanding what got her so upset, he said "fuck it," and left.

The Return of the Beast

Ava finished up her last book signing for the weekend in Vegas. She was surprised from the turnout of all the fans who had read her books. Many of them came out and showed her some love. The girls came along for a fun-filled weekend, and she couldn't have been any happier. Alisse had also joined in on the festivities.

"Can you believe Ryan dropped the kids off at his mom's for the weekend?" Ava asked Alisse.

"For what? I mean isn't he supposed to be watching them?"

"Um...yes. He is probably with that slut, Sharon." Ava put her head down trying not to think about it. "Honestly, Alisse, I'm tired, and I don't know what to do anymore."

Alisse hugged her. "Sis, I worry about you. Ryan thinks the grass is greener on the other side, so let him go there and water it. Divorce his ass and get with Malcolm," Alisse said smiling. "I like him."

The line was getting shorter, and she was glad because her hand had started to hurt.

Elaine, walked over. "I just shut it down!"

"I thought the line was just short," she said.

Angela, Lisa, and Karen came in with Starbucks coffee, just in time to pack things up and head back to the hotel. Ava tried to help Alisse lower the table but bent over in pain.

"Ava, are you okay?" Alisse and Lisa asked.

"Yeah, I'm good. I just pulled a muscle," Ava said. She didn't know what was going on with her body, and she was afraid to find out.

Ava and the girls dined at Spago before heading back to the Bellagio where they were staying just to relax, freshen up, and then hit the strip. Ava ate a couple of bites of her food and wanted to lie down. She tried to keep an upbeat mood since everyone was there for her.

"Geez, that was great. I think I can go for another round of lamb chops," Karen said with her four-month belly poking out.

Ava smiled at the thought of Karen being a mom.

"What're you smiling for?" Lisa asked.

"Damn, Lisa, you notice everything," Angela said.

Lisa waved her hand. "Whatever."

"I was admiring Karen's little belly. I can't believe she's going to be a mom," Ava said as they all laughed.

Karen stood up. "I'm fat, ain't I? Tell the truth, ladies," she said as she sat back down.

They all waved their hands. "Girl, you still look the same," Alisse told her.

They took their carryout boxes of leftovers and headed to the room. As soon as they got in, Ava headed straight for the bed.

"Are we going to the Jubilee show tonight?" Alisse asked.

All the talking they were doing was fading out in Ava's ears. She dozed off for at least thirty minutes.

"Ava, are you okay, sis? You don't look so hot," Alisse said, putting her hand on Ava's forehead. "Ava, sit up and take these aspirins," she said pulling out two.

"Alisse, I don't know what's going on. I've been having pain for awhile. I feel dizzy." Ava tried to sit up, but only flopped back down. "Give me a minute and let me rest. And don't say anything to the girls."

"Ava, promise me when we get back home that you'll go see your

doctor. I'm going with you," Alisse insisted. She walked off. Ava heard her tell Angela she had a stomach bug. They agreed to let her rest awhile.

Ava noticed that the kids were trying to reach her and her mom too. She let all calls go to voicemail. No calls came from Ryan, as she expected.

She drifted off into a deep sleep while remembering the time when Ryan's love for her was one of a kind. He woke her up one day talking about having more kids. The thought of being a mother again was wonderful. They had planned the baby shower, picked baby names, and even planned the christening. Ava's life was wonderful. Confident in her own skin, Ava hadn't cared what anyone thought about their relationship. No one would or could ever come between them until that damn Sharon walked into the picture. She could not stand her. Ava saw Sharon come toward her with what looked like divorce papers and, before she knew it, she tried to kill that bitch. "You whore!" Ava yelled. Ava then choked her. "*Sharon!*" she screamed. "Leave my family alone!" she continued, while choking her. "*Sharon!*" Ava yelped, while trying to wake up.

"Ava! Ava! Ava!" Angela called out as she shook her. "Wake up."

"Ava, baby, wake up!" Alisse said.

Ava opened her eyes, looking around the room with her head spinning. She finally recognized Angela and Alisse. Karen and Lisa ran into the room.

"What's going on?" Lisa asked.

"Ava was having a bad dream," Alisse said.

"It was more like a nightmare. Sharon seems like a problem we need to address when we get back home," Angela said.

"I'm up. I'm sorry guys. I didn't mean to scare ya'll," Ava said looking at her hands as if she was really choking someone.

Everyone cleared the room so they all could get dressed and head out.

Alisse looked back in on Ava again to make sure she was okay.

An hour later they all headed to the limo. Their first stop was the Jubilee show. Then they would club hop from Lax to Club Pure before ending the night at Club Chateau. The nightlife in Vegas was amazing, and everyone was enjoying themselves.

"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," Lisa yelled out the limo's sky roof.

The showgirls' performance at the Jubilee rocked! The ladies even went back stage and learned a few moves. The scene at Lax was popping. Chris Brown and his entourage were spotted, along with Rihanna, Britney Spears, and Justin Timberlake. Angela hopped in a cage and danced like a stripper, and Alisse joined her. Ava managed to have fun despite how terrible she felt.

They all partied until the sun came up. They had a couple of hours to get to the room and sleep before it was time to pack and head back home.



It was so nice to get back home doing what she did best: write. She wrote daily about her everyday life since the surgery. She contemplated writing a memoir about her life, calling it "Life Is Not a Fairytale." The only problem was she wasn't sure about how much she wanted to reveal.

Ryan had gotten up before she did, and he'd left in a hurry. Abbie and Jaxon, on the other hand, were glad that their mother was home. Abbie described the weekend as a disaster. Ryan had picked them up from their grandmother's house, but then left them at home alone. And to think he'd fussed Ava out for the same thing, but she guessed the rules didn't apply to him.

Ava climbed on the bed and wrote some more. She stopped mid

sentence to call Dr. Patel. As soon as she picked her phone up, Alisse called.

"Hey, sis."

"Hey, lady. Did you call your doctor yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I was about to call him when you beeped in."

"I'm just checking to make sure you wouldn't forget. Call me back, and I'll meet you there."

"I'll call you momentarily."

Ava dialed Dr. Patel's office and spoke with the receptionist about an appointment. She was able to squeeze her in that afternoon. Ava called Alisse back and told her to meet her at the doctor's office at 3:45. She then sent Ryan a text message, instructing him to pick up the kids since Abbie had basketball practice.

Thinking about Malcolm, Ava decided to call him. He didn't pick up, so she left him a sweet message. Moments later, Ava received a response from Malcolm.

'Hey, sweetheart. I'm in a long business meeting. It will be awhile. I will call you when it's over. Missing you.'

'*Miss you more,*' Ava replied.

Ava wished it was easy to just leave Ryan and be with Malcolm. Life threw some wild cards at times. Ava leaned her head back on the headboard, thinking.



Finally sitting in the reception area at Dr. Patel's office patiently waiting, Alisse walked in and Ava flagged her. They embraced and then sat down.

"Did you just get here?"

"About five minutes ago."

They sat making small talk while waiting for the nurse to call her name. She was nervous, not knowing what to expect. The last visit wasn't a pleasant experience, so this time she was on edge.

"Ava Decree," the tiny nurse called.

Ava followed the nurse, and Alisse followed right behind them.

Ava looked at the scale when it read 137 pounds. "Oh my, I've gained some weight," she said, covering her mouth.

They went right into the ultrasound room. Dr. Patel wasted no time coming in with a specialist who was going to perform a series of tests. After a couple minutes of pushing on her abdomen, it was obvious Dr. Patel felt something. Ava knew that look.

The ultrasound was performed. Ava watched Alisse, who looked on carefully. Ava watched the doctor and specialist, as they both pointed to the monitor. The two physicians looked at each other.

Dr. Patel put his hand on his chin. "Go back and look at that suspicious area. Scroll to your right."

"What's going on?" she asked nervously. She felt herself about to shake right off the examining table.

"Ava, I wish I didn't have to say this, but the cancer has returned, and it's worse than before."

"What do you mean *worse*, Doctor?"

"Ava, it has metastasized to other organs within your body. The cancer has attacked your abdomen. If you look on the ultrasound, you'll see that it has also attacked your lungs. It does not look good. I'm sorry."

"So what does that mean?" Alisse asked, while trying to read the monitor.

Grabbing Ava's hand, he said, "It means that the cancer is beyond its

early stages, and it will be more difficult to treat because it has spread to various locations inside your body. That's why you've been experiencing such definitive symptoms," Dr. Patel explained.

Ava didn't know what to think as she lay back on the table. While going over the ultrasound, the specialist explained that having ovarian cancer isn't dependent on her having ovaries. She can have ovarian cancer even after the ovaries are removed (although their removal does cut down the risk). Ovarian cancer is recognized by the shape or pattern of the cancer cells, so is very definable. Other cancers have their own footprint. He also explained that not all cancer goes away. It can reoccur as hers had.

"Ava may I speak with you alone?" Dr. Patel asked.

"Whatever you have to say, you can say it in front of Alisse."

"Ava, by looking at this, the only option is surgery and chemotherapy," he said looking at Alisse and then at Ava again. "I'm sorry, but it's difficult to remove the cancer with just surgery since it has spread beyond the abdominal area. And there is no guarantee that even chemotherapy will kill the remaining cancer."

Alisse had tears in her eyes. She walked over to Ava's side and squeezed her hands as tightly as she could and rubbed her head.

"Dr. Patel, how long do I have?" Ava asked calmly as tears began rolling down her face uncontrollably.

"Ava, I give you less than four months. I'm sorry. I'm so, very sorry," he said, hugging her in tears.

"Life just isn't fair! No, my sister is going to be here. We're going to beat this because God has the last say," Alisse yelled out. "No cancer is going to take my sister away from me!" she cried.

"I understand, Alisse. I'm sorry. And, yes, God does have the last say," Dr. Patel reiterated.

The specialist was still in the room. He touched Ava's hand, and then left shaking his head regretfully.

Ava couldn't believe what was happening to her. She was 39 years old. She needed to live for her kids' sake. The more she thought about it, the more she cried and relied on God. Ava held Alisse tight. All she could think about were Abbie and Jaxon, her health, and how long she would be able to fight

When It Rains, It Pours

Ryan walked in the door as Ava was serving dinner to the kids. He said hello to everyone, kissed Ava on the cheek, and asked to talk to her later. Ava turned to Ryan and just politely smiled.

Ryan sat down with the kids and asked them about school. As he joked around with Jaxon, Ryan looked at Ava. She was hovering over the sink. He began asking himself how in the hell he was going to break the news to her, but it had been a long time coming.

"Do you want something to eat, Ryan?" Ava asked.

"Sure."

Ava fixed Ryan a plate then took it to him at the table. Ryan really didn't have an appetite, but figured he better eat something because he did not know how the night would go.

The kids finished their dinner and then went upstairs to get ready for school the next day and go to bed. There was silence in the kitchen, as Ava went to start some laundry. Ryan ate as he sat alone with his thoughts.

After dinner, Ryan headed upstairs to shower. He went in and said good night to the kids before he headed downstairs to talk with Ava. She was eating at the table and reading a *Vogue Magazine*.

"Ava, sweetheart, I've got something I want to tell you." Ryan sat down and began to speak.

Ava looked at Ryan, waiting for him to talk. Then he blurted out, "I want a divorce."

Ava didn't seem shocked. Instead she asked quietly as she continued eating, "Why, Ryan?"

Ryan avoided her question, but went on to say how unhappy he was.

"The love is gone. Ava, I haven't touched you in months. You are a good person. I just don't love you anymore...not like I love Sharon. I'm sorry, but our marriage is over," he managed to say with a deep sense of guilt.

Ava got up and scraped her uneaten food into the trashcan. She walked back over and got in Ryan's face. "You bastard! How could you do this to me? Not once have I ever cheated on you. I was there to meet your every need. I was a good wife! You're not a man! I hope Sharon makes you happy, because what goes around comes around," Ava said calmly.

That night they didn't talk to each other anymore. Ryan went and got the divorce agreement he had drafted, as Ava wept at the kitchen table. He handed her the document. It stated that she could own the house and her car outright. They would split the money in their joint account down the middle, and royalties from the sales of all of Ava's published books during the course of their marriage would be divided equally between them. She glanced at the documents and then turned cold eyes on Ryan. She boldly tore up the papers in his face. The woman that he'd once loved—the mother of his kids, and his wife of thirteen years—had suddenly become a stranger to him.

"I'm sorry, Ava. I never meant to hurt you or waste your time," he said, trying to make the best of the situation.

Ryan really felt bad for Ava, but he couldn't change how he felt about Sharon. Regardless, the kids would be taken care of. Ava cried uncontrollably in front of him, and he was rather relieved that she was releasing her emotions. Now that he had finally addressed the divorce with Ava, the future seemed much clearer.

Ryan went upstairs to call Sharon, who was thrilled that they didn't have to hide their relationship anymore. Although she was happy that he'd finally told Ava, she also felt sorry for her.

"Ryan, we can finally be together. Aren't you happy?"

"Yes, Sharon, I am!"

"I hope to see you tomorrow so that we can really celebrate."

"I can make that happen. Look, sweetheart, I have to go. I'll talk to you soon." They said their goodbyes and hung up.

As Ryan sat in the recliner, he heard pieces of paper being balled up. He went downstairs to check on Ava, who was at the table writing. He went back upstairs and left her alone. Hours later, after he'd drifted off, Ryan heard the same noise again. Ava was still at the table writing and balling up paper, which created a pile on the floor. He wasn't sure what she was doing, but he went back to sleep quickly because he was tired and had a very full evening with Sharon.

Morning came quickly. Ryan felt like he had just lain down. He tried to get up early and leave the house before anyone awoke, not wanting to face Ava. But he had hit the snooze button one too many times. Ryan heard the kids downstairs talking loud as usual, so he got up. He heard Jaxon come upstairs with his big feet.

"Dad, are you coming to Abbie's game later?"

"Yes, I'll be there. Where is your sister anyway?"

"I'm right here, Dad," Abbie said, coming up the steps.

"Good luck, baby girl."

She smiled and hugged him. He gave Jaxon a high five and gave them both money. That had been Jaxon's reason for coming to see him in the first place

"You kids have a great day."

They ran downstairs as they heard Ava call for them because Angela was outside. He wasn't sure why Angela had picked up the kids, but he guessed she was dropping them off at school along with Chrissy. Ryan showered to wake up and then got dressed for work. Ryan made his way

downstairs where Ava was waiting for him. Not wanting to argue, he said good morning and poured some coffee. Ava presented him with her divorce agreement and conditions she wanted met. Ryan read the agreement, which sounded feasible:

She at least wanted a 30-day notice before the divorce was final. She also requested that they live as normal of a life as possible for the kids' sake, not wanting them to know what's going on until the end of the 30-day notice. Also Ryan could have the house, cars, furniture, etc. She wanted nothing except for him to be the best father and husband possible until the divorce was final. Lastly, she wanted Ryan to carry her out from the bedroom to the front door every morning for 45 days, just to recreate how he had carried her out when they'd first wed. That's all she wanted.

Agreeing to all her terms, Ryan was puzzled about Ava's last request. Ryan wondered why she had picked the time span of 45 days. Ava asked Ryan to just do it. That's all she'd asked for to make their last days together bearable. Ryan looked at Ava's frail face and accepted her odd request. Not anywhere in Ava's agreement did she mention half of her book royalties. Ryan smiled. Not sure how he was going to explain this to Sharon, he still kissed Ava on the cheek and left for work without looking back.



Ava knew her time here on earth was limited, so she planned to prepare herself and her loved ones around her. Ava took a moment after Ryan left to touch her cheek where he had kissed her. Then she cried.

She quickly dressed and was ready for Alisse to take her to chemotherapy treatment. Ava didn't know how long she could bear the treatments. They made her sick, and she felt worse most days that she had a

treatment.

There was a knock on the door. She went to let Alisse in, but when she opened the door she was startled. "Mom?"

"Ava, baby, I'm so sorry," Elaine said, collapsing in her arms.

Ava and her mom cried together. She stood there and looked Ava in the face as Alisse walked in.

"Mom, don't worry about me. I've lived a good life. Just help Alisse take care of my kids."

Ava closed the door, and all of them sat at the table. They were silent at first.

"Ava, what about Ryan? And what about Abbie and Jaxon? Have you told them?" Alisse asked.

"No, and I don't plan to. I don't want them to worry. You two are the only ones that know, right, Alisse?" Ava asked, making sure their mom was the only one she'd told.

"Yes, I couldn't help it. I felt like mom needed to know. I'm sorry, sis."

Elaine touched Ava's hand, "Baby girl, what am I'm going to do? The thought of losing you is painful."

"Please, you guys, do not say a word to anyone. Let me make that call. Mom, stop worrying please."

They all got up to go to chemo treatment. Ava gazed out the window on the ride there. Alisse kept watching her reflection in the mirror. Ava was thinking about all the things she had to do. She was going to meet with her agent to change the beneficiary of her life insurance policy. She also planned to meet with her pastor and plan her funeral.

She couldn't bear the thought of leaving her kids. They were her world. She planned to video record herself for memory's sake and to share

with them her perspective of what they needed to know about life.

They arrived at the center. Ava's mom stayed in the car. She couldn't bear to see her in such discomfort. She went to her normal station and what felt like eternal hell, in reality, took only forty-five minutes. Alisse helped her to the car and, when she settled in the seat, she laid her head against the window.

Ava sent Malcolm a text message. She really needed to speak with him and let him know what was going on with her. She agreed to meet him later at his place.



Finally home, all Ava could do was rest. She dismissed her sister and mother, and then called her agent to come over because she felt too tired to meet her at her office. A few hours passed, and Elaine then found herself in Ava's bedroom crying her eyes out. She told her about her cancer reoccurring and the amount of time she had left. She also decided to publish her memoir and would put the final touches on it in the days to come.

Elaine agreed to meet with Ava and her attorney to go over documents regarding her estate, royalties, and other income sources. She wanted ten percent of all proceeds to go to ovarian cancer research.

"What am I going to do without my friend and bestselling author?" Elaine asked, looking at Ava. "I just can't believe this. You are just getting started with the movie, memoir, and Abbie fashions," she said rubbing Ava's leg.

"Girl, you'll do just fine. My legacy will still live on through you and my children. So there will be no goodbyes."

After she was sworn to secrecy, Elaine left to handle some things for

her. Ava felt weak, but she needed to keep pressing on.

She looked at the clock and realized it was time to head to Abbie's game. She'd stop by Malcolm's place later. She wanted to keep life for her kids as normal as possible without them worrying about her. She glanced at herself in the mirror, and she almost didn't recognize herself. Her hair was coming out again, she looked pale, and her weight was declining. She was very afraid about the days leading up to the ultimate outcome.

Watch How You Treat People

Ryan was sitting at his desk feeling some type of way and thinking about how the kids had laughed when he carried Ava from the bedroom to the front door. It had been quite awkward. They both were clumsy, and he almost dropped her. When he'd carried Ava she just closed her eyes, but he couldn't wait to get it over with. Ryan was thinking that he had 29 more days to go. He had called earlier that morning to have Ava dropped from his life insurance policy. It insured him for a million dollars in the event of her death. Since they were divorcing, he needed to cancel all policies that included her.

"Hey, what's happening, man?" Carl said poking his head in.

"Come on in. I'm good, bro."

"Just speaking...on my way to a meeting. How is Ava? Angela claims she hasn't heard from her in days."

"Ava is good. But just to let you know, I did ask her for a divorce. So that may be the reason why she's been distant." Before Carl could get a word out, Ryan held up his hands. "Please don't judge."

"Man, come on. What are you doing? Never mind. It's not my business, although I think you're making a big mistake."

"Well, let me worry about that, Carl. I know the girls will have a lot to say because they always do, but this is *my* life."

Carl left after being paged over the intercom. Ryan couldn't understand why he cared so much, but it was what it was. Ava would find someone else.

Ryan noticed Ricky walking toward his door. He wondered what the hell he wanted.

Ricky knocked and then peeped in. "Ryan, I need you to sign off on

this expense report for some items I just purchased for the maintenance department," he said.

"Let me take a look at it."

Ricky sat while Ryan glanced at the report. Ricky slouched back in the chair. Ryan guessed he was taking too long because there was dead silence.

"Hey, man, how long have you and Sharon been kicking it?"

"Excuse me?" Ryan said, looking over his reading glasses.

"How long have y'all been sleeping together? I'll put it that way since you didn't understand the first question," he said sarcastically.

Ryan looked at Ricky and thought, *This boy ain't my friend, so why the small talk?* Ricky was one of those smooth talkers that could talk people out of anything. He was stocky, built, lean, and handsome for a dude. His cockiness is what Ryan didn't like. He thought he was God's gift to women.

Ryan turned his attention back to him, "Sharon and I are just friends. I'm married, Ricky."

"You're getting a divorce, right? Ava is a nice looking lady. I hope you're not leaving her for Sharon. Yeah, we kick it from time to time," Ricky said with a smirk.

Ryan quickly signed Ricky's expense report and then handed it to him, just to get him out of his office. Ricky got up and was about to leave without saying a word.

"By the way, Sharon won't be stopping by to talk anymore. Her life just became a little bit busier."

Ricky looked back with a grin and said, "Bad mistake, man...bad mistake."

He had no idea what Ricky's comment had meant, but Ryan trusted Sharon. So there was no need to worry. His stomach was growling, and Ryan

couldn't wait to see what Sharon had cooked up for lunch. She had the day off, and she'd asked him to come over.



An hour later, Ryan was sitting at Sharon's kitchen table, powering down some cream corn, fried pork chops, mashed potatoes, and homemade biscuits. Ryan had to admit that the woman sure knew how to cook. Ava could cook as well, thanks to Ryan's mom, but it was always the same things. She usually prepared casseroles, baked fish, steamed vegetables, and pasta. Ava never learned how to cook collards, which were his favorite, or any other soul food. But she had tried.

"You want some more, baby?"

"No. I'm good. I don't want to get too full. Besides, I want dessert!" Ryan said, laughing.

"I'm sure you do, which explains why I'm cooking in heels and just this apron," Sharon said seductively. "Anyway, how is life at home?"

"Awkward. You know one of Ava's terms is for me to carry her from the bedroom to the front door for 45 days to make the transition smoother."

"What?" Sharon gasped.

"Yes. I agreed to it, not understanding why she made such a weird request. Today was the first day, and it was crazy as hell and weird. I almost dropped her."

Sharon laughed at the thought of Ryan carrying Ava downstairs until the divorce. It was ludicrous.

"It would be funny if you dropped her, Ryan," Sharon said with a grin. "Well, no matter what games she plays for the next couple of weeks, Ava still has to face the divorce," Sharon said with hatred.

Walking toward Ryan and sitting on his lap naked, with the exception of an apron. Sharon said, "I can't wait to get you to myself," as she kissed his neck then started unbuttoning his shirt.

Ryan heard his phone go off, but he ignored it. Sharon stood up and threw the apron on the floor, revealing her navel ring and Brazilian wax.

Ryan immediately kissed her enlarged clitoris, as it looked so good to him. But before he could go any further, his phone went off a few more times. He grabbed it just in case there was an emergency and noticed it was from work. Ryan listened to the voice message. It was Andrew, demanding that Ryan return to work. There was an emergency meeting with the head chief, and he needed to be there in twenty minutes.

"Shit!"

"What is it?"

"It's work. I have to get to an emergency meeting."

Sharon looked disappointed. Ryan kissed her a few more times.

"Rain check. I'll have to make it up to you. I'm sorry, but I have to leave," he said grabbing his keys while he was rock hard but heading for the door.

Sharon walked behind Ryan looking sad, "You better!"

Ryan jumped in his ride and put the pedal to the floor. At the first stoplight, he checked himself in the mirror and then called Andrew back.

"Hey, man, what's going on?"

"There's something about finances and the expense report that was signed off for Ricky this morning. You know anything about that?"

"Yes. Damn it! I signed it. I hope his ass isn't trying to set me up. I'm on my way!" Ryan said, hanging up.

I just hope that fool didn't do anything stupid...for his sake, he thought to himself.



Ava was down for the count after her chemo treatment. She didn't know how long she could continue the treatments, because they made her sicker every time. Dr. Patel thought the cancer was getting worse anyway. Ava felt so sick that she couldn't move. She managed to get up after hearing the doorbell. Ava peeked out the window. It was Angela.

"What is she doing here?" she mumbled.

Ava managed to walk downstairs and open the door.

"Well, hello stranger. Is everything okay?" Angela asked, walking into the house and looking around.

Ava closed the door. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

Angela looked at her, "Because you look like hell, Ava, and I haven't heard from you in weeks. I usually hear from you *every day*. You're not answering your phone. I waited this long to stop by, thinking you needed time for God knows what," Angela said loudly, while pacing the floor. "So girl, what's up?"

Ava immediately burst out into tears, grabbed Angela by the arm, and moved her to the couch.

"Ava, what is it? Did I do something or say something wrong?"

"No, no," she said between sniffs. "Angela, the cancer is back. I found out after we returned from our trip to Vegas that I'm dying. I'm sorry I kept this from you."

"No, Ava. There is no need to be sorry. I am sorry that you have to go through this." Angela hugged Ava, rocked her, and cried. Angela took it pretty hard. "I'm here for you. You won't have to go through this alone."

"Angela, I need you to keep this to yourself. I need you to promise

me, you won't tell Carl or anyone else.

Angela didn't understand. But she promised Ava that she would keep her secret.

"Angela, on top of that, Ryan has asked me for a divorce."

Angela jumped out of her seat. "He did what? That bastard! How could he?"

"Angela, I've been dealing with a lot. With the news of the cancer, and dealing with Ryan and his infidelity, it's been crazy."

Have you told him about your illness? What about your mom and Alisse?"

"You three are the only ones that know, Angela, other than my agent and Malcolm. I only told him last night. Ryan doesn't have a clue. So please promise me you won't get emotional and say anything to Karen or Lisa. They will go overboard. You're the only one out of the girls I'm confiding in."

"How did Malcolm take it?"

"Not so good. He prayed with me, made me feel good, and said he had never met anyone like me before."

Ava stood by the window and watched her neighbor in the yard. It would be the little things that she would miss the most.

"You know, Angela, I've lived a good 39 years. I just wish I had more time. My hair is falling out again, and my marriage is fading. What else is next?"

Angela put her hand on Ava's shoulder. "Ava, I'll be here to help you through this journey. Abbie and Jaxon will be just fine. I'll make sure of that. Ryan won't have that bitch looking after them. That's for sure."

"Thank you, Angela!"

Ava updated Angela on her plan to leave everything to her kids. Alisse will be the guardian of their estate and their trustee. She'd added

Angela as well, since she was their godmother. Ava had her will and her accounts changed. And she'd deleted Ryan as her beneficiary and made Abbie and Jaxon co-beneficiaries instead.

"Ryan won't be getting a dime of my money. You know he had the nerve to ask me about the money from my royalties and movie deal? The thought that he'd felt entitled to my book royalties was absurd.

"He had the nerve to ask what? Come again?"

"I wrote those damn books, not him!" Ava yelled. "Oh and get this. He had me taken off his insurance policy, and we aren't even divorced yet. The company had called me right after Ryan removed my name to make sure I was aware that I was no longer a beneficiary.

"Damn! That's cold. He's something else, Ava. But you're smarter, and Ryan won't know what hit him!" Angela said in disbelief. "But he asked about your royalties in the divorce terms? He's got some nerve. That's just like a greedy ass black man. I wouldn't leave his ass a dime either."

They sat there for awhile reminiscing about the past and how Angela was going to miss Ava. Angela offered to help Ava pick out wigs, to her chemo treatments, and do anything else she could. Ava knew she could always count on Angela.

"Angela, please help look after my kids along with my mom and Alisse. I've been video recording daily to leave them something to remember me by. Abbie is growing up into a beautiful young lady, and Jaxon will be a handsome young man."

"Ava, don't worry. Alisse and I will make sure they will be well off. I got you!"

"I know, girl, I know. I just need to be reassured."

Angela ended up staying longer than expected and cooking for Ava. Afterwards, they ate and sipped tea. Hours passed by, but Ava didn't care.

Before she knew it, the kids were home, so she tried to act upbeat and entertain them. She didn't want them to know that something was off.

She was trying to enjoy every moment she had left with Abbie and Jaxon. She told them she loved them every day and made sure she kissed and hugged them every chance she got.

It's All or Nothing

Ava got up and prepared breakfast. She was moving slower than usual. She stood by the stove in pain, but she didn't say anything because the kids were coming down.

"Mom, what's wrong? You look awful," Abbie said with a concerned look on her face.

"Baby, I'm fine. You kids hurry and eat."

"Mom, I'm worried about you. You're losing weight. You on a diet again?" Jaxon asked.

"Kids, I'm fine, and yes, Jaxon, I'm dieting," she said. "Do I look that bad?"

"No, Mom, you look great. You're just smaller," Abbie said intervening.

Ava saw Ryan come down the steps with his briefcase in tow from the corner of her eye. Jaxon was stuffing food in his mouth, when he noticed Ryan. "Dad are you ready for mom?"

"Ready for what?" Ava asked.

"To head upstairs so that dad can carry you back down," Jaxon said.

"Yes. Let's get this over with," Ryan said.

Jaxon backed away from the table with food still in his mouth, and took her hand. He walked Ava upstairs to the bedroom, with Ryan and Abbie following closely.

At their starting point. Ryan swooped Ava up gently. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and then leaned on his chest.

Abbie starting clapping. "It's nice to see Mom and Dad this way," she said.

"Yeah, that's how you carry a woman, Dad," Jaxon said as he stood back and watched.

Ava inhaled Ryan's favorite cologne that she'd bought a dozen times. She loved the smell of Black by Ralph Lauren. She closed her eyes and whispered to him, "Please don't tell our kids about the divorce." Ryan nodded, feeling somewhat upset by what Ava had asked. But he continued walking her downstairs through the sitting room to the door, where he gently put her down.

Jaxon gave Ryan a high five when he met his dad back downstairs.

"Jaxon, I suggest you carry me tomorrow," Abbie joked.

"Girl, please," Jaxon said.

Ava managed to clean the kitchen while everyone was preparing to leave for the morning. After she took her medication, she climbed back in bed. Ava felt weak and opted out of going to her chemo treatment.

Hours later, she awakened to her phone going off. It was Lisa wondering where she'd been hiding. Lisa and Karen had been worrying about her. She confided in Lisa about the divorce, and she went off the handle. Her inability to control her emotions was the reason why Ava couldn't tell her or Karen about the cancer. Karen may have been white, but she was one to be reckoned with.

"Ava, fuck Ryan! Hell, you got a man! I suggest you get it popping with ole boy. What's his name again?"

"It's Malcolm, Lisa."

"That's right! From his picture, Malcolm reminds me of Robin Thicke," Lisa said laughing. She started singing "Blurred Lines."

"Lisa, you're crazy. Anyway, I have to go. I'm going to meet up with Mr. Thicke," Ava said, mocking Lisa.

"Alright, chick. We'll get together later for dinner."

She finally got up and managed to get dressed. She adjusted her wig, the one Angela selected for her, which resembled her natural hair. She was able to fool Ryan and the kids by keeping the wig on. She only took it off and switched them out when they weren't home. The wigs she had hid were very similar to her own hair. She looked at herself in the mirror and wanted to break down. She quickly turned her head to keep from looking at herself. She had to hurry. She had promised Malcolm she would meet him for lunch, since he had the day off. Ava drove the long way to Malcolm's condo, which gave her time to call and speak with her mom and sister. Alisse was the best sister in the world. She was handling a lot of things for her. She arrived at Malcolm's. He opened the door and greeted her with a bouquet of a dozen roses, lilies, a periwinkle, a mimosa, a lemon blossom, and a honeysuckle. She immediately fell in his arms with great emotion. This man was heaven sent when she needed him the most.

"Malcolm, thank you! They are gorgeous. I'm so flattered, but why the different flowers?"

"Ava, please have a seat." Malcolm then pulled out a piece of paper. "Ava what I'm about to read to you is something I wrote from the heart. The reason for the different flowers is because they are for a special lady," Malcolm said as he sat next to Ava, turned toward her, and looked into her eyes.

"Ava, sweetheart, I'm not sure how we ended up here at this moment in time. Maybe it was destined for us to meet each other that day in the restaurant, but ever since then we've become closer each day. I'm not sure what the future holds, or if there is a future for us, but I do know that I care for you deeply. I hope and pray that we'll have more time with each other.

2 Roses (red) – Is for the passion and love I have for you.

2 Roses (coral) – Is the desire we have to one day be together.

2 Roses (pink) – Your grace and sweetness is one of a kind.

2 Roses (dark pink) – Thankfulness for the day I met you.

2 Roses (white) – The purity of our relationship.

2 Roses (pale pink) – The joy I feel when I see your smile.

Lilly's – Purity of the heart to honor and respect you as a married woman.

Periwinkle – Sweet remembrance of you when you're not in my presence.

Mimosa – The secret love I have for you, Ava.

Lemon Blossom – Fidelity in love. I promise to be true to you until the day you die.

Honeysuckle – Bond of love. Ava, I love you!

"Ava there are so many flowers that symbolize my love and affection for you that this is nothing. This arrangement says it all. Ava, sweetheart, I love you."

After Malcolm's heartfelt words, Ava hugged him. She was so emotional. She then took his hand. "Malcolm, I love you, too," she told him as they embraced and kissed passionately. Ava couldn't remember the last time she'd felt like that.

"Malcolm, thank you for everything, and I do mean *everything*. I was just looking for a friend to talk to, but you ended up being so much more." Ava wiped tears from her face and his face as she continued. "I may be here months from now, even years, who knows...but I do know you've shown me that love still exists."

They both sat there in silence for the next fifteen minutes, while she laid her head on his chest. Malcolm caressed Ava's hair, which made her uneasy because of the wig.

"Take it off."

"Huh?" Ava said, caught off guard.

"Take it off...the wig. I don't care what you or your hair looks like. I love you for you, Ava."

Ava couldn't believe that she was doing as Malcolm had asked. She slowly took the wig off. Malcolm watched as she began removing the wig cap. Ava sat there feeling embarrassed, ugly, and ashamed. Her hair had come out quite a bit. The only person who had seen her hair was Angela. This was something she should've been sharing with her husband and not another man.

"Thank you for taking it off. Ava, you're still stunning. Beauty at its worst and its best...that you are."

Although Ava didn't feel beautiful, Malcolm had made her feel like the first lady of the United States of America. She stood and walked over to the mirror Malcolm had in his dining area to put her wig back on.

"Here, let me help you, Ava," Malcolm said walking over to help her.

Once Ava's wig was back on her head, she turned to Malcolm who was admiring her. "What?"

"Nothing...I just want to commend you for being a trooper. From your courage in battling cancer to your devotion to your mission of motherhood...I really admire you."

"Malcolm, please promise me that whatever happens you won't forget me. I just hope that you'll find someone to be as genuine to you as you are to me. I'm not dead yet and maybe I won't be anytime soon, but I want nothing but the best for you."

He nodded, they both smiled, and then they embraced.

"Shall we? I'm starving."

"Yes, let's go eat!" Ava said.

My Sister's Keeper

Angela couldn't help but think about what Ava was going through twenty-four hours a day. It made her sad to know that her friend was dying, and she couldn't do anything about it, or even tell anyone. She'd promised not to even tell *Carl!*

The thought of Ryan's actions made her sick to her stomach.

Angela did accompany Ava to a couple of her chemo sessions, until she stopped going. Ava figured if she was going to die, she'd rather do it without chemotherapy. It made her even sicker and wasn't really helping.

Angela heard the door open and shut. She walked into the kitchen to meet Carl and Chrissy.

"Hey, fam. How are ya?" she said to the both of them.

"Good," Carl and Chrissy said at the same time.

She kissed both of them, cherishing every moment. Ava's situation had her thinking twice about family and life.

Angela sat on the bar stool, making small talk with Carl who looked frustrated. Chrissy ran upstairs to practice her dance routine for a school play.

"Today was hell, Angela. I had two meetings regarding upcoming projects that will require me to work closely with Ricky. He's cool, but shady at the same time. I have to watch him."

"What do you mean *shady*?"

"He's a manipulator, not to mention arrogant and cocky. He got Ryan written up. I'm not sure exactly what went down, but Ricky got Ryan to sign off on an expense report that he had rigged with stuff that didn't pertain to work. Ryan didn't read it or look at it carefully, but signed his name anyway. Ricky had never gone to Ryan to sign off on anything before, but this time he

did."

"Well, that's Ryan's ass. He should have read it. I have no sympathy for the guy." Angela looked at Carl and shrugged her shoulders.

Angela watched Carl looking in the fridge. After finding nothing to eat, he poured himself a shot of Hennessy.

"What's for dinner?"

"Pizza, I guess. I'll order one in a few minutes." Angela grabbed the pizza menu off the refrigerator before she dialed the number. It took all of five minutes to place the delivery order. Carl sat on the stool beside her.

"Did you know that Ryan had asked Ava for a divorce?"

"Yes, there's a lot going on with Ava, and it's sad how he's treating her," she said. "Ryan will get what's coming to him sooner or later."

"What's going on with Ava?"

"Something personal. She swore me to secrecy," Angela said as her eyes began to swell up with tears. The thought of her friend's pain brought out her emotions.

"Okay. Anyway, whatever it is, we need to stay out of their business and let them handle it, okay, Angela?"

Angela smiled and nodded her head. They heard the doorbell ring, and they assumed it was the pizza delivery guy. But Chrissy ran to the door like it was for her. It was Lisa.

"What brings you by, chick?"

"I just happened to be in the neighborhood," Lisa said smiling.

"Yeah, right," Carl and Angela said as he excused himself.

Angela grabbed Lisa a bottle of water from the fridge. She looked like she was coming from the gym and was exhausted.

Lisa sat on the stool. "Girl, did Ava call you?"

Angela shook her head. "No. Why?"

"Anyhow, Ava and Malcolm were having lunch when they ran into Ms. Thang—Sharon, the whore."

Angela laughed like hell as Lisa kept using her hands, motioning obscene signals.

Angela immediately grabbed the phone, called Ava, and put her on speakerphone. The phone rang a couple of times before Ava picked up.

"Hey, chick. Lisa just told me about Sharon. What the hell happened?" Angela asked.

"Girl, Sharon walks over to our table, being nosy and trying to case out Malcolm. I asked her why she was there and if she was planning to go after Malcolm like she had Ryan. Home girl got upset!"

Lisa was getting angry herself. "Now Ava, how the hell do she get mad when she's sleeping with your husband!?!?" Ava got even more agitated and upset when she tried to go into detail on how Sharon had walked over to the table, pretending to play nice when she was really being nosy. The heifer wanted to know who Malcolm was. "I politely told Sharon to leave because I was on a date. Angela, she had the nerve to say, '*Good. In that case the divorce should be final right away!*'" Ava quoted her word for word.

Carl ran downstairs when the pizza delivery guy rang the doorbell. When he walked into the kitchen and heard Ava talking on the speaker, he tried to join the conversation. However, Angela shushed him. "Lisa and Angela, I promise you Sharon will get what's coming to her, whether I'm dead or alive!"

"Girl, don't worry about her. People who bring misery to other people are miserable, and they will always be miserable," Lisa said.

"Ava don't let that low down heifer bother you. I promise I will call you back later," Angela said.

Carl stood there trying to figure out what was going on.

"Babe, Sharon invited herself to Ava's table while she was having lunch, gloating about the divorce. Now tell me that ain't foul?"

"Angela, stay out of it. Let Ava handle it. I hate what's going on. That girl, Sharon, is a mess. She's in Ryan's face one minute and then she's in Ricky's face the next one. Anyway, y'all ladies carry on," Carl said, taking his plate of food upstairs.

Lisa and Angela continued discussing the situation. Angela almost let it slip that Ava was sick. She caught herself and changed the subject. They talked about Karen and throwing her a baby shower in a couple of months. One thing was for sure: they would all remain close because of Ava. Her spirit was warm and genuine.

After Lisa left, Angela sat downstairs alone and ate a couple slices of pizza until Chrissy ran in, interrupting her.

"Mom, you love me right?" Chrissy asked, showing all her pearly whites.

"Child, what do you want?" she asked, knowing, something was up.

"Can you buy me an iPad?"

Angela looked at her...like...seriously. She cut a smile and said, "No!"

"Please. I could have yours, and you could get a new one," Chrissy begged.

"Chrissy, I'll think about it."

Chrissy gave Angela the biggest hug ever and planted kisses all over her like she had said yes.

The joy of being an only child....Angela couldn't help, but love her back.

Too Good To Be True

It was a rainy and gloomy day, and all he wanted to do was sleep. He woke up to Sharon's noise. She was banging pots and pans in the kitchen. He started to yell at her to quiet down a little, but then he figured he'd let it be. He put his head under the pillow. He was so exhausted from a long week at work and being out late last night.

He occasionally stayed at Sharon's place on the weekends, now that his divorce was in progress. He had moved a few pieces to Sharon's spot since she'd cleared space for him in her closet and garage. But there were little things that she constantly did that were starting to get on his nerves, which gave him second thoughts. Ryan was also a little upset with Sharon for announcing to everyone that they were a couple last night at an engagement party for one of her close friends. Ryan wasn't ready to meet either her entire family or her friends just yet. He was not divorced from Ava yet. But Sharon had insisted that people would find out about them soon. She had also given a toast to the lovely couple. Then she had the audacity to toast to *their* future. It turned the focus to them.

Just then Sharon walked down the hallway, heading toward the bedroom. Ryan played possum, not wanting to be bothered. The bedroom door opened. He heard her steps approaching the bed.

"Ryan. Ryan," Sharon whispered, shaking him.

His head was still buried underneath the pillow. He mumbled, "Hmmm..."

"I cooked your favorite breakfast."

Ryan mumbled again and removed the pillow from his head. He noticed Sharon sitting on the bed still in her gown with a tray heaped with

French toast, cheese eggs, grits, bacon, and grapefruit juice. It looked fantastic, but Ryan was still upset with her. He sat up, and Sharon placed the tray on his lap. He began to eat.

"How did you sleep?"

"Fine."

"That's it?" Sharon said, noticing Ryan looking at her with angry eyes. "Are you still upset with me about last night?"

"I am! Sharon, I can't be all out in the open like you want me to be until after the divorce from Ava is final."

Ryan noticed Sharon folding her arms ready to explode, so he had to fix the situation quickly.

"Babe, I know we are taking risks going here and there, but I don't want it to bite me in the ass later."

Sharon stood up, while he continued eating. "Ryan, you're contradicting yourself. We're out all the time. Maybe we don't venture out in town, but people do see us. Besides, my friends and family know nothing about you," Sharon said like that was supposed to make him feel better.

Ryan finished his breakfast and put the tray on the nightstand. He was about to get up and shower when Sharon shed her gown and hopped in bed.

This was one time that Ryan was not in the mood for sex. It seems like sex was all he and Sharon had in common these days. She fondled Ryan, but he just sat there not even excited by her touch.

"Ryan, babe, stop acting like a puss!"

Again Ryan didn't budge. Sharon then got under the sheets, pushed Ryan back with her hand, and started slurping on his wood. This usually got him going, but this time it did nothing. Sharon slurped, slobbered, and sucked Ryan's balls. After awhile, she finally came up for air when she realized he hadn't responded.

"Baby, what is it?"

"Nothing," Ryan responded. "Turn around and get on all fours," he demanded. Ryan knew exactly what would get him in the mood. He threw Sharon a pillow because she was going to need it.

"You really want this, Sharon."

"Yes, babe, I do!" she said moaning like an owl in heat.

Ryan played with Sharon and got her wet by entering the tip of his dick in her. She moaned for Ryan not to stop. He inserted a finger in her ass, while he gyrated in her. It had to feel good to her, because she didn't tell him to stop. While Sharon moaned out loud, Ryan grabbed the KY lubricant jelly she kept in her nightstand and rubbed his dick. He squeezed some on Sharon's ass and rubbed it in, sat back, and then jabbed his dick in her ass hole as hard as he could.

"Ouch!" she screamed and squirmed. "Ryan you're hurting me!" Sharon yelled. She yelled some more and screamed for Ryan to stop.

Ryan pumped slower, and then his rhythm sped up. Ryan squeezed and rubbed more lubricant on her to make it easier.

"Baby, you said you wanted this. You didn't mean it? I don't like it when you lie to me," Ryan said in between strokes as sweat ran down like water on his face dripping everywhere.

"No, Ryan. Baby, please stop. You're hurting me!"

Ryan heard a knock on the door.

"Mom, are you okay? Open up!" Tiffany cried outside the door.

"Baby, Mommy is okay. Go back to your room," Sharon said calmly.

Tiffany knocked a couple of more times, and then it got quiet.

Ryan heard Sharon's cries, just when he was going to explode. He pulled out, slapped her ass, and cum dripped from her ass to the sheets.

"Get out, Ryan! Get the fuck out now!" Sharon screamed as tears

flowed down her cheeks. She then put a pillow in between her legs.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Sharon?"

"Ryan, don't you dare act stupid! You fucked me when I told you to stop. What has gotten into you?"

"So now I'm a *rapist*, Sharon? Is that it? Damn you! You asked for it, so I gave it to you," Ryan said cold-heartedly, heading for the shower.

Minutes later, Ryan came out and found Sharon in the recliner dressed in her robe. She got up, shot him a look, and walked past him, slamming the bathroom door behind her and locking it.

Ryan threw on his clothes, grabbed his keys, and left. He didn't speak to Tiffany, who he passed by where she was sitting outside her bedroom door in the hallway.



Hours later, Ryan found himself interacting with his family. He played basketball with the kids, who had a blast. Ryan noticed that Ava slept most of the time he was there.

Ryan was still cordial, although Ava knew where he'd been all night. She didn't say anything.

Ryan went into the kitchen and asked Abbie about Ava. "Is Mom okay?"

"Yes, Dad. She's not feeling well, and she's tired. That's all."

Ryan walked into the room where Ava was sleeping and sat on the sofa across from her. He wanted to watch her sleep, for some odd reason. He noticed that Ava had changed her hair color. There were wrinkles in her face, and she was pale. The color of her nails was also different. Ryan realized that he hadn't looked at her in a very long time. He had not noticed the changes in

her appearance.

Ryan sat there thinking about how much he had put her through over the last couple of months and how it was affecting her mentally. Ava squirmed on the couch, but dozed back off. Finally, Ryan got up and headed toward the kitchen to cook. It was something he rarely did. He looked in the fridge and then the freezer, but he found nothing. He then looked inside the pantry and grabbed a couple cans of salmon. He figured salmon patties would be good. Ryan started some rice, prepared the salmon patties, and placed them in the frying pan filled with hot vegetable oil. Ryan looked down at his vibrating phone and saw a picture that Andrew had sent him of Ricky and Sharon having dinner.

"That bitch," Ryan mumbled. He went into the garage and quickly called Andrew. "Yo man, what the hell is this?"

"Chill man. I saw your girl and Ricky having dinner on the patio outside of Lucky's Bistro. They didn't see me, though."

"She isn't my girl!"

"Whatever, man. Everyone knows you're both hitting that. You don't want to believe she's involved with Ricky, but there's your proof. Anyway, keep this between me and you."

"Whatever!" Ryan said and hung up.

Andrew was full of shit. He would be in Ricky's face tomorrow. And then he'd be in his face the next day. Ryan could see why Ricky had it out for him, trying to get him fired and all, but his little game was over!

Ryan heard someone at the door and noticed Ava. "Are you cooking? This salmon is burning!"

Ryan ran inside, turned off the stove, and disconnected the smoke alarm that was blaring loudly.

The kids ran downstairs yelling like the house was on fire.

"Dad, what were you trying to cook?" Jaxon asked.

"Dinner." Ryan threw out the food, including the boiling rice.

"So what now?" Abbie asked.

"Chinese food!"

Ryan knew that it was Ava's favorite food. He asked her if she wanted to join them. Ava declined because she wasn't in the mood for going out. He decided to call and have the food delivered. Ava left the room, and he noticed how small she had become. At that moment, he started blaming himself. He shook the feeling and turned his attention back to the picture on his phone that Andrew had sent. He stared at the picture like he was looking for something, which only showed Sharon and Ricky sitting close together at a table. He was furious!

Ava walked in, observing him until the doorbell rang.

"I got it!" Jaxon ran to the door like he had money.

Ryan grabbed his wallet and smiled at Ava, as he walked past her.

The family sat and ate at the table together as a unit. It was something that Ryan missed. They all engaged in small talk, and it gave him a chance to see what was going on with his kids. Even Ava talked, although it was a little awkward knowing they'd be divorced soon. Ryan knew it was tough on her, but they both did well in playing their parts.

After dinner, Ryan grabbed a cold beer from the fridge and headed to the sitting room to watch the football game.

Ava peeped in. "Thank you for dinner."

"No problem."

Ryan watched Ava walk off and followed her with his eyes. He didn't know what had gone wrong between them, but he wasn't trying to make it right. Ryan's focus turned back to Sharon and that damn picture. Ryan decided to call Sharon. He dialed her number, and it went straight to

voicemail. He dialed it again, and this time it kept ringing. The third time he left a message.

"Hey, babe. I'm just calling to check on you and Tiffany. I'm really sorry if I hurt you and about how I left things. Call me when you get this message. I love you," he said and ended the call.

Ryan wondered if he was doing the right thing by divorcing Ava for Sharon. Both women had great qualities, but did he know Sharon well enough to be with her forever? He wondered.

Friends until the End

Angela sat at the restaurant anxiously waiting for the girls to arrive. It was Lisa's birthday, and they all had decided to do brunch. Angela had bought them all gifts to show how much she appreciated them in her life. Angela looked at her watch, wondering why they were all so late. But soon she realized that she was early because the battery in her watch had died. She sat there for about fifteen more minutes before she saw Alisse walking toward the table, followed by Ava.

"Hey, ladies," Angela said, getting up to greet them. She gave Ava a big hug. Angela noticed Ava didn't have her wig on, but was wearing a scarf instead.

"I love the scarf, lady. So how are you, Ava?" Angela asked before the rest of the girls got there.

"I'm good, Angela. But I could be better," Ava said, slightly loosening the scarf around her head. "You like? That wig was making my head sweat."

"Yes, it's very stylish, and so are you. I'm glad you could make it. I told you we could have come to you," Angela said, putting one hand on top of Ava's hand.

Ava just smiled. She excused herself to the restroom. Alisse stood up to walk with her.

"I got it, sis," Ava said, walking off.

Alisse turned her focus to Angela who was almost in tears. "Angela, it's getting worse. I don't know if I can watch my sister leave me like this! It's not fair!" Alisse said, as tears ran down her face.

"Alisse, life isn't fair," Angela said, wiping her tears. "We can't do

this here. Gather yourself. Ava would have a fit if she knew we both were not taking this well. All we can do is be there for her.”

They both took out their compacts and powdered their faces just in time, as the other girls walked in. Angela adjusted the table so that Karen could sit at the end in case she needed to go to the restroom. They all greeted one another. Ava came back to the table and cracked a smile.

"Happy Birthday, Lisa!" Ava said, hugging her.

"What is this new do, Ava? A scarf? I kind of like it!" Lisa said, pulling on it, as Ava held on tight, not wanting it to come off.

"I'm trying something new. That's all.”

The waiter brought over a bottle of wine as they all watched Lisa open her gifts. Lisa got sentimental and gave the girls individual speeches on how much she enjoyed their friendship. The waiter came back over and took their orders. After the gentleman left, Angela told the girls she also had something for each of them.

She pulled out the bag from her huge purse and handed them each a tiny box that contained a keepsake necklace. The necklaces read "Friends" on the back of the heart shaped pendant that opened displaying a group picture of them taken at the gathering a few months ago.

"Aw, Angela, this is really nice. I'm flattered," Alisse said as she looked at the necklace.

"I love you, Angela," Ava said, smiling at the photo.

Angela watched each of the girls admire their necklace. She was glad to have them as part of her life.

"How thoughtful," Lisa said.

"Yeah, how thoughtful of you, Angela. I love you all to pieces," Karen said, bringing her body and *belly* over to kiss Angela on the cheek.

"I just want you all to know how much I appreciate you. I have never

had girlfriends like you all before. A long life is not promised, and I cherish each moment with you ladies," Angela said.

They all toasted one another. They ate bread from the breadbasket the waiter had brought over. They did a bit of catching up and took a trip down memory lane. There was so much laughter at that table that Angela thought the restaurant manager was going to kick them out.

Finally, their food arrived. Angela watched Ava eat a little bit and play with the rest of her food. She felt helpless like she needed to be doing more for her. Ava caught Angela looking at her and gave her a slight smile. Angela continued eating before she suddenly noticed a big booty woman sitting across from them. She realized it was that damn *Sharon*.

At that moment, Angela didn't want to turn the attention to her and cause a scene. She just played it off and kept eating. Lord knows she wanted to go jam the bitch.

"Lisa, what do you have planned for later?" Angela asked.

"My bae and I are going to the Jazz Festival over on Clayton, and I can't wait!" Lisa said with excitement.

Ava stood up and excused herself again to go back to the restroom. Alisse excused herself as well.

"Angela, what do you keep staring at?" Karen asked.

"That bitch at that table! How dare she show her face in public?"

"Who?" Karen demanded to know.

Angela didn't say a word, but took a sip of her wine to calm her nerves. Lisa nudged Angela on the arm. Angela turned around, noticing Lisa and Karen were waiting on an answer. Just then Ava and Alisse walked back toward the table. En route, Ava bumped into Sharon.

"Oh, shit!" Angela jumped up and sprinted toward them.

Lisa followed behind her, while Karen struggled to maneuver around

the table.

Angela got there just as they started bickering with one another.

"My, my, my...what do we have here? Is this your entourage?"

Sharon asked as Lisa and Angela approached them.

"Is there a problem?" Lisa asked confused.

"No, Lisa. This is the bitch that's been screwing around with Ryan. Slut bucket!" Ava said.

"This is the home wrecker named Sharon? Oh, hell naw, Ava! We should beat her ass!" Lisa said, getting heated.

"Bitch, who you calling a home wrecker?" Sharon asked. "As I recall, Ryan pursued *me*."

At that moment people started turning their attention toward them. Sharon's crew that had come in with her walked over and asked what was going on.

Ava explained to them and everyone else in the restaurant what was going on and what a low class whore Sharon was. One of Sharon's friends told her they'd had no clue that Ryan was married. One of Sharon's girls grabbed her purse and left. She said she didn't want to be a part of Sharon's mess.

"Ava, Ryan is no longer your problem. Give him a divorce and move on, sweetheart. You're walking around here with that damn doo rag on your head. You really do think you're black huh? You ain't black, chick!" Sharon said with so much attitude and hatred, as if Ryan was actually married to *her*.

"Bitch, you got some nerve trying to insult me when you've been sleeping with my husband! I don't have to act or be black to be married to a black man. That's what you call ignorance, Sharon! Every dog has its day, and yours is coming real soon!" Ava snapped back.

"What goes around comes around. The same way you got him will be

the same way you lose him!" Alisse told Sharon.

"And who the hell are you?" Sharon asked.

"I'm going to be your worst nightmare if you don't back off!" Alisse said.

Sharon kept talking smack. Ava wanted to tear into her. Angela grabbed Ava just in time because she was going to hurt Sharon as angry as she was.

All of a sudden, Lisa got in Sharon's face and called her every nasty name in her vocabulary, from tramp stamp to whore spreader. Angela tried to diffuse the situation when management stepped in. They all headed back to their table to collect money to pay the check.

"Don't worry, Ava. I'm going to beat her ass for you. That's a foul woman. One thing I can't stand is a trifling whore!" Lisa said.

"Oh trust me. She's going to get it!" Angela said. "Right now this isn't the time or place."

"You see her friends left her. They had no clue how low down she is," Alisse pointed out.

They all watched Sharon twist her ass out of the restaurant before she gave them all the middle finger like a child.

Angela couldn't believe what had just happened! Ava put her head on the table, as Karen rubbed her back.

"Why Ava got to act black just 'cause she snagged Ryan? I mean, she's crazy," Alisse said.

"Lisa, I just got two words for you: *whore spreader*," Angela said laughing.

"Girl, that's a bitch who spreads her legs open to anything," Lisa said. None of the other girls had a clue what that meant.

Poor Karen was getting upset because she couldn't do anything

because she's pregnant. Angela knew she would have swung on Sharon in that restaurant. She was one white girl a sister didn't want to mess with.

Lisa wanted to fight. All she kept talking about was going to Sharon's house. Angela just knew in the end that Ava would get the last laugh, and Sharon would be the laughing stock.

Whenever you do wrong, it will always come back to bite you in the ass. Sharon was one of those women who cared only about herself. God would see to it that she ended up by herself, after all was said and done.

Preparing for Takeoff

Ava watched Abbie and Jaxon leave for school and wondered how they would adjust to life without her. She prayed every day that her kids would be just fine. The feeling Ava had knowing her time was limited was painful.

Ryan came downstairs looking for his briefcase. Ava pointed to the chair. Ryan grabbed the briefcase, and everything fell out.

"Shit!" he shouted.

Ava walked over and helped him gather the documents. She had her hand on a folder as Ryan's hand touched hers. As awkward as it was, Ava quickly moved her hand.

"Ava, I'm so sorry for making you uncomfortable."

Ava burst into tears and covered her face with her hands. Then she leaned against the chair. Ryan rushed to her side and consoled her. "Ava, I'm sorry about everything."

With all that she'd been going through, everything seemed to make her cry.

As he hugged Ava, she wiped her tears and got close enough to smell his scent. As he consoled and held her, it brought back so many memories and reminded her of the man she'd fallen in love with. After that quick flashback, Ava pushed him away. He stood there with his hands up as she walked off. Ava looked back and noticed he was still standing there, but she kept walking. Moments later, Ava heard the garage door open and shut, and he finally pulled out of the driveway. Ava was so emotional and stressed out about everything.

Ava pulled herself together, headed upstairs, and pulled out the camcorder. She went into Abbie's room first, pulled out her photo album, set

the recorder, and sat in a chair. Ava decided to record herself for Abbie and Jaxon's sake, hoping it would help them understand why she had failed to tell them she was sick and what the cancer had done to her.

The recorder was on. Ava proceeded as she took off her wig and then started to talk.

Abbie. Oh, how I love you and Jaxon so much. You guys are my pride and joy. Your mom is sick, sweetheart. I started off having ovarian cancer, and now it's terminal abdominal cancer. I was given a short time to live because of how badly it has attacked my body. You see my head. I've lost all of my hair and my weight has dropped, which is why I've been sleeping so much. But through it all, I didn't want you guys to ever worry about me. I will be just fine.

Ava paused in between talking. She cried and enjoyed pictures with Abbie through the recorder. She talked about her growing up, mentioned the birds and the bees, and told her if she needed anything or anyone to talk to, Alisse would be there. She would take good care of her and her brother. Ava talked about an hour and closed out with the promise that she'd always be by her side as her guardian angel. Ava stopped the recorder to look through Abbie's picture book one more time. *Oh how time flies*, she thought.

Ava took the camcorder and went and set it up in Jaxon's room to do the same thing. She pulled out his picture book, sat in the chair, and hit record.

Son, this is for you. Ava paused and, after a brief moment, she continued.

Mom is really sick and has been for awhile. I have abdominal cancer, and it's terminal. That means it's a progressive disease that can cause me to die. I've been battling it for months now. My hair is gone, my weight has dropped, and I get weaker every day. I didn't tell you guys because I didn't

want you to worry. I know you will be okay. You're my big man. I want you and Abbie to always look out for each other.

Ava paused again, holding up pictures to the recorder. She repeated basically, what she talked about with Abbie, but told him if he had boy questions to go to his father. Jaxon was a mama's boy, so she didn't know how her passing would affect him. Ava tried to make both of them feel comfortable and not sad. She wrapped up the recorder and blew him a kiss. She told him that this is not a goodbye, but a "see you later, son."

Ava glanced at Jaxon's photos and smiled. He was her son...brave and full of life.

Ava's body started to ache as she moved around. She put her wig back on, took the recording equipment into her bedroom, and found herself recording again. This time it was for Ryan. There was so much she had to get off her chest. Their life was once filled with so much love, but it would end with so much pain.

Ava got comfortable in the chair and hit the record button.

I don't know where to start, but I have so much to say. First of all, I'm sick. I've been diagnosed with stage 4 terminal abdominal cancer. The surgery I had a couple of months ago, which you thought was just a hysterectomy, started off as ovarian cancer. I had received the diagnosis a few weeks prior to the surgery. After the surgery, it was gone. Now it has reoccurred in my abdomen and spread to other areas of my body. I'm dying, Ryan. I kept it from the kids because I didn't want to worry them, and the same goes for you. When you asked me for a divorce, I didn't feel the need to tell you.

Ava took her wig off and held it up to the camcorder. "You see, Ryan, I've been through hell—from losing my hair to chemo treatments to weight loss—while you abandoned me for that whore! I loved you until death!"

Ava paused and cried. She became angry. Ryan, you hurt me badly. With all that has transpired, you will not get a dime of my money. I worked too damn hard to earn it. You had me taken off of the insurance policy before we were even divorced; therefore, you won't be getting anything from me!"

Ava calmed down, wiped her tears, and continued. "Through it all, I still love you and always will. The only thing that I ask is the kids' approval of whomever you decide to marry. Please be the best father possible to our kids and take good care of them.

Ava went through their wedding album and held up pictures from the good and bad times. She talked about them being made for each other. Never in a million years would she have divorced Ryan.

"Ryan, I forgive you. You will always have a special place in my heart." Ava blew him a kiss and smiled. "I love you, Ryan." Then she hit the stop button on the recorder.

Ava didn't hold back tears this time. She let them fall as she gathered the pictures and put them back. Ava's next task was to write each of her girls a letter, as well as her mom, Alisse, and Malcolm. She wanted them all to know how much she loved them and to explain to Karen and Lisa why she'd failed to tell them about the cancer.

After spending the entire morning recording, she sat at her desk to write her thoughts out on a notepad. She started with Karen first. She wrote about how it all began. She wrote, but balled up the paper. Then she wrote again as she stopped and cried. She sucked it up and wrote Karen a five page letter, inserted pictures, and sealed it with her initials. She then continued with Lisa, Angela, Alisse, her mom, and, finally, Malcolm. Writing and reminiscing took her hours, but she would do it again if she had to. She took out the gifts and bracelets she'd had delivered from LA and decided they would each get theirs along with their letter.

She glanced at her phone and noticed two missed calls from Malcolm. Never had she met anyone like him. She thought God had sent him to help her deal with her illness because, without him, she would have been dead months ago. She smiled knowing that someone cared.

She took out the letter she'd written to Malcolm and read it once more. She had sealed everyone else's but not his.

Dear Malcolm,

How can I thank you enough for being my guardian angel? If only I had more time to show you how much you mean to me! You've been a great friend for only a short period of time, but I still I feel like I've known you a lifetime. I've grown over the last couple of months because of you. You've made me accept me for me and given me that desire to love again.

I hope that you'll find someone just as good as me to love you the way I couldn't. Timing was bad for us here on earth. The next lifetime will be better. You will always hold a special place in my heart and, because of that, I have truly fallen in love with you. If only I had the chance to make love to the one man who put my needs first! Thanks for all of the pep talks, date nights, and walks in the park, and, most importantly, your love. You've encouraged me to stay strong and fight. Malcolm, my battle is over. I've fought a good fight, but I did not win.

Malcolm, I LOVE YOU! This past month has been hell...fighting cancer and going through a divorce...but you've helped me through it. I have to go for now. I'll see you on the other side.

P.S., Keep being that wonderful soul that you are. You're going to make a great husband and parenting partner to a very lucky lady.

Love,

Ava Decree, aka Your Sugarfoot

Ava folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and included a

picture of them taken at his place. Ava placed the necklace Malcolm had given her for Mother's Day inside the envelope as well. Finally, she sealed it with a kiss.

Ava thought that when bad things happened like an illness, life was looked at from a whole other angle.

Through the Good and the Bad

Ryan's mind had been on Ava for the last couple of days. He'd noticed she had been spending more time with the kids and more evenings at home. Ryan knew she had completed another book, which had been keeping her busy. Plus her movie was due for release soon. He was so proud of her.

The divorce was getting closer, and they still hadn't told the kids. He wasn't sure if he was having second thoughts, but, as he carried Ava down the stairs that morning, he smelled the fragrance on her blouse. He hadn't looked at Ava carefully for a long time. When she wrapped her arms around his neck, Ryan felt a sense of intimacy returning. The last couple of days had made him feel some type of way. Even the kids got excited when it was time to carry Ava downstairs. Ryan wanted to call Ava, his wife, to tell her how much he loved her, but he felt something holding him back.

Sharon and Ryan were finally getting back on track after the incident involving anal sex at her place. When he had questioned Sharon about dining with Ricky, she'd explained that he was someone she could talk to. Therefore, she had called him to talk about some things, including Tiffany's dad. Ryan didn't buy it at first, but meeting Ricky's fiancée made him less suspicious. Sharon insisted that Ryan stop listening to everyone and trust her. She had even offered to give the account to someone else if it would make him feel any better. That way she wouldn't have to deal with Ryan or Ricky in a business setting.

Ryan apologized for his actions so that they could move forward. For some reason, he felt torn between letting Ava go and moving on with Sharon. He looked up and found Andrew standing at his desk.

"I guess people don't knock these days."

"I did knock, but somebody's mind was off in space."

Andrew handed Ryan a folder with contracts to look over and sign off on. Ryan told him it would take some time to review them thoroughly. He wasn't making the same mistake he'd made with Ricky.

"That's cool. I got a lot of other work to keep me busy."

Ryan could tell Andrew wanted to ask him something or say more, but Ryan pretended like he was swamped with work. Andrew walked off after Ryan's phone rang.

The receptionist put Brian through.

"Hey, man, how's it going?"

"It's going. It's work, and that's about all. I got up with Brent last night. He asked about you."

"Word, man, we got to get together soon. I've been busy. You know my situation, and it's not getting any easier." Ryan put Brian on speaker, got up, and closed his door. There was no telling who was listening.

"Well, you know what I say. It's cheaper to keep her. On the real, Ava has given you thirteen plus years of her life. You two have history, man. Life is short. Whatever you have with Sharon won't add up to what you and Ava had. Remember you cheated on Ava, so you brought these problems on yourself. The pussy may be really good with Sharon, but is that enough?" Brian asked getting deep.

Ryan understood what Brian was saying, but no one knew Ava or Sharon better than he did. "I hear you, man. I've been sitting here wondering whether I'm making the right decision or not," Ryan confessed.

"Are you happy with Ava?"

"Yes. No. I mean...I can't really answer that. I was, but then came Sharon. So my attention turned to her."

"What is there about Sharon that makes you happier with her?"

"Again, I can't really give you a good answer. Brian, what I'm trying to say is I'm happy with Sharon. The sex is amazing, but she's no Ava. I wish Ava had some of the qualities Sharon has, and I wish Sharon had some of the qualities Ava has."

"Then you're more screwed up than I thought, Ryan. Those are things you can correct with Ava. I can't tell you what to do, but make sure it's not too late to fix it. Look, I have to go. I have someone at my door. We'll get together soon," Brian said and then ended the call.

Ryan thought about what had Brian said, but he needed more. Ava was his past, and Sharon was his future. Everything was in place with the divorce. In less than thirty days, it would all be over. Ryan did give Ava a thirty-day notice leading to the divorce as he'd promised in her agreement.

Ryan sat trying over and over again to convince himself that he was making the right decision, but deep down inside he was having second thoughts.

Putting Everything into Perspective

Ava finally put the finishing touches on her memoir. She clicked the send button on her laptop and forwarded the completed manuscript to her editor. Ava had created a to-do list to help her prepare for whatever was ahead. She checked off her next task.

She had visited Jehovah Shalom Gardens yesterday, where she met with Pastor Boeing as she prepared to put together her own memorial service. They discussed her eulogy as well. She had made the decision to be cremated after her close family and friends had viewed her remains for the final time if they so chose. She wanted her ashes to be spread around Lake Vale. Ava had left special instructions with her pastor, who would see to it that everything went according to her plan. Doing things this way made everything as simple as possible for her loved ones.

Ava even had her will notarized and all banking information put in place, but there was one thing she had left to do on her list. She'd been avoiding Malcolm. He had called and left messages. He'd even reached out to Angela. Ava cared for him so much that she had come to the conclusion that he deserved better. Ava was near death, and being in his presence only made matters worse. She had befriended Malcolm just to get her mind off of Ryan and his infidelities. But she ended up caring for him and developing love for a man she couldn't be with.

As Ava stood in the mirror and looked at her weakening body, she noticed that she was getting thinner and thinner. Ava had no appetite. She had discontinued chemo altogether. She'd begun vomiting every day, and her pain was getting worse. Dr. Patel prescribed her oxycontin, since she was still functioning well.

Elaine came over every morning after Ryan and the kids left. She also had a nurse check in every other morning to get her blood count. Ava felt fatigued, but she managed to get around. Ava heard noise downstairs, and instantly pulled her shirt down and threw on her wig.

"Baby, you have company downstairs," her mom called out.

"Who is it?" Ava yelled.

"Malcolm," Ava heard a male voice say.

She would know that voice anywhere.

She thought to herself, *What is this man doing in my home? If Ryan came home, he would have a fit.* But the thought of Malcolm coming to see her made her smile. Ava walked slowly down the steps and found Malcolm waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

"What a surprise."

"I'll leave you two alone. I'm going to pick up your meds, Ava," Elaine said.

They smiled at one another, as Ava led Malcolm to the sitting area. He looked around, picked up photos, and admired her safari collection. Then he stared at a photo of her during happier times.

"You have a nice home, Ava," Malcolm said, taking a seat right beside her.

"Thank you. You look great," Ava said, turning to him. "It's been awhile."

"Yes, it has been. I've been worried about you. I know you've received all of my messages and texts. What's going on?"

"Malcolm, I'm sorry. I did plan on contacting you today," she said as he looked at her like she was lying. "I've been trying to get everything in order on my end. I've gotten sicker, and I honestly think you deserve better."

Malcolm took Ava's hand and brought her closer. He looked into her

eyes. "Ava, let me decide what I deserve. Your well-being has become my concern. I took a chance coming to your home—a place you share with your husband. That means I care."

Ava knew he would find the right words to say. She embraced him. "I promise to do better and stay in touch."

"How are you really doing? I'm concerned. I would like to know what your doctors are saying...your aches and pains...as well as your appetite."

"I'm still able to get around. I have my good days and bad days. Malcolm, there's not much the doctors can do. I'm just letting the disease run its course."

Malcolm placed Ava's feet on his lap so he could massage them as they talked. Ava touched briefly on how she and Ryan were doing in terms of the divorce and how they were still moving forward with it. She also told him that she had not told Ryan about the cancer. "I really think you should tell him, Ava. This is something serious, regardless of what you both are going through. But I also understand why you have chosen not to."

He then started massaging her shoulders. "I promise to always be here for you."

"Thank you, Malcolm. I am forever grateful for your kindness."

He helped Ava from the couch as he heard her mom's car pull in the driveway. She immediately fell in his arms. Ava found Malcolm's lips and kissed him deeply. She pulled back and gazed into his eyes.

"Malcolm, the one thing I want to do when and if I get well is make love to you...that is, *after* the divorce is final," she said, smiling.

"I'm holding you to your word, princess."

Elaine came in as Ava was walking Malcolm to the door.

"Malcolm, wait I got something for you," Ava said. "Mom, can you go get that box beside the bed."

Ava playfully joked with Malcolm, who pulled her hair out of her face and kissed her again.

"Here you go, baby," Elaine said as she handed Ava the wrapped box.

"Malcolm, this is for you. I wrapped it especially for you. Promise me you won't open it. I mean, this is a keepsake only if something happens; you know, if God decides to take me home."

She gave him the gift-wrapped box, and he shook it.

"Ava, I don't know what to say. I want you to live your life to the fullest. God's plan is just that: His plan. If something happens, I'll be there to catch you," he said, winking at Ava. "Besides, I won't have a reason to open this."

They said their goodbyes, and Ava whispered to Malcolm, "I love you."

As soon as she closed the door, she saw Elaine standing right behind her.

"Mom, please don't judge me," Ava said as she slowly walked back to the couch.

"Baby, I wouldn't dare do that. I'm filled with awe when I look at your situation and all that you're dealing with. I really admire you, Ava. I wish you could have met Malcolm earlier, though. He's a nice guy."

"Yeah, he really is. He came into my life when I was at my worst, Mom. I don't understand."

"Baby girl, it's not for you to understand. It's all part of God's plan. It's called *fate*."

Elaine took off Ava's wig and massaged her head. Ava was glad to know that her mom would be okay if something ever happened to her. She was also glad that her kids would have a good support team besides Ryan. Family was everything to Ava, which was the reason she kept holding onto

Ryan.

One Week Later...

It was Ava's 40th birthday, and Angela was excited to get all the girls together with a slew of business associates, family members, and friends for a celebration. Ava wasn't in the mood for a grand celebration. And, because she wasn't at her best, Angela had put her differences with Ryan aside and talked him into having the dinner celebration at their place, under the condition that she wouldn't say anything negative about him.

Ava was getting weaker day by day. Although Ryan didn't know what was going on, he knew something was wrong with her. Ava didn't want a celebration, but Alisse had talked her into it and promised it would be short and sweet.

Angela had someone go by Ava's house to take her a couple of designs to wear for the evening. A professional had been hired to do her makeup and hair, so she wouldn't feel or look uncomfortable in front of everyone. Although Angela didn't want to admit it, she just had a feeling this would be their last gathering together. So she wanted to make it special.

Karen had called Angela the night before and begged her to tell her what's going on with Ava. When Karen had phoned Ava, she'd told her she was talking out of her mind. Angela had almost blurted it out, but she'd caught herself. She wanted so desperately to tell Karen and Lisa that their dear friend was dying. Angela had told herself that she would be at peace if the Lord were to take her, but one could never prepare for the death of a loved one.

Time was ticking, Angela had to hurry and pick up the balloons, cake, and portrait she'd had painted for Ava. Angela and the girls thought it would be a perfect gift for the occasion. Although Ryan didn't want to be involved,

he'd been very helpful where Ava was concerned, even though she knew it was too late for that.

"Babe, where are you headed to?" Carl asked walking into the bedroom, noticing Angela putting on her shoes.

"I'm going to pick up a few things for Ava's party."

"Are you wearing *that*?" Carl replied, looking at her gear.

"No, silly, I'm taking fancy clothes. I will change before the party. What time will you be arriving?"

"I'll be there. Babe, what's going on with Ava? She looked sick the last time we stopped by. I didn't want to say anything, but something ain't right, Angela."

Right there at that moment, she could have broken down. Angela wanted to tell Carl so badly, but she couldn't. "Baby, she is. I can't say. Remember? I'm sworn to secrecy, but I promise to tell you in due time."

"Angela, is she dying and does Ryan know?" Carl kept pushing.

Angela didn't say anything. She grabbed her bag containing her change of clothes and her makeup bag before she headed downstairs with Carl right behind her.

"Angela, answer me!" he said grabbing her arm. "Carl, I can't right now. We'll talk about it later!"

"I'm calling Ryan to see what he knows!"

"No! Okay, Carl! She has cancer and she's dying! Baby, my best friend is *dying* and I can't do anything about it! That's why I want to make her birthday party so special. It may be our last time together. That's why I've been spending so much time with her!" Angela hollered and collapsed to the floor in a ball, crying like a baby.

Carl got down on the floor with Angela and held her. "Baby, I'm sorry. I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

"Promise me you won't say anything. No one really knows, Carl. That's why I promised to keep the secret. *Ryan* doesn't even know. He knows something is wrong, but he hasn't pushed to find out either. It's not like he cares anyway. He's divorcing her!"

"I promise not to tell him, Angela, but I do feel like he should know. Besides, I think he's having second thoughts about the divorce."

Angela got herself together and wiped her face, "It doesn't matter because the damage has already been done."

Angela headed out the door, running into the sun, which blinded her as usual. Carl stared at her. She looked back, thinking that he was going to say something. But he blew her a kiss and stood there until she drove off. This was one time that Angela hoped he would keep his mouth shut. Carl wasn't a talker when it came to other people's business. But in this case, it was different because he had heart. She prayed that Ava's illness wouldn't slip from his lips.



Angela arrived at Ava's home to find the place decked out. Alisse and Justin had done a marvelous job decorating so far. The theme was "Old Hollywood Glam, Aged to Perfection." The decorations were fabulous and colorful, and the backyard was nicely done.

There was the gazebo, tables, chairs, a photo booth, and a small bar section. She had hired a bartender and a deejay for the evening. She placed the tier Chanel cakes she'd had made on the table and spread balloons all over the place. She added alcohol to the bar and placed sanitizer throughout the area.

Lisa arrived with gourmet cupcakes and things for the chocolate bar she wanted to set up. Jonathan was on her arm, and he offered to help. Ryan came in and offered to help, but Angela wasn't so sure what his motives were.

Angela sneaked upstairs to check on Ava. She peeped into the room as the makeup artist was putting the finishing touches to her face. She looked like the old Ava. She was stunning.

"You like?"

"Hell, yeah! You look *amazing*, Ava!"

"I chose the black Kami Shade sequined gown with the slits on the sides. It's doesn't show my skinny legs and arms like all of the other dresses do."

"How do you feel?"

"Right now I'm okay, but earlier I was throwing up green stuff. I just need to make it through this party. You know I didn't think I'd make it to see my fortieth birthday. And lo and behold, I did."

"You'll make it to next year, sis." Angela said, smiling.

"I want to lie down and take it easy until the party gets into full swing."

"That's fine. I'll come up and get you."

Angela left Ava alone and headed back downstairs. She bumped into Karen who looked bigger by the day. Karen was now seven and half months pregnant with a baby girl. Angela was so happy for her.

They hugged, and then she sat down, saying she was tired.

"Where's the birthday girl?" Karen asked.

"She's sleeping. She said she'll make a grand entrance," Angela said to everyone, lying so Ava could rest without distractions.

"Angela, you remember Chris, my baby daddy," Karen said as she

noticed him sitting on the other side.

"Yes, I do, girl. You're too funny. *Baby daddy*," Angela repeated, shaking her head.

I could have sworn his name was Bob, Angela thought. She was glad she wasn't drinking, because there was no telling what she would've called him.

Angela went into the spare bedroom and changed into her Hollywood attire. She asked the makeup artist to stay and fix her up as well. Angela wore an off-white, back-drop, shimmery dress with gold pumps. People were starting to arrive, so she hurried as Lisa barged in to get her makeup done before the lady left.

"Girl, how many people did y'all invite? There's a lot of people on the deck," Lisa said.

Angela laughed at how Lisa talked sometimes. She was business and hood at the same damn time.

"Not many...maybe forty people at the max."

"It doesn't look like it! I hope the food doesn't get gone. I want to take a plate for later," Lisa said, laughing at her own statement. The makeup artist even laughed.

She shook her head. "Girl, let's head downstairs."

Alisse passed Angela and said she was bringing Ava out now, which was cool by her.

She went out back, mingled with the guests, and made sure everything was happening on cue. She noticed Carl talking to Brian, Ryan's close friend, as she approached him. Moments later, they all looked up and saw everyone clapping as Alisse welcomed everyone to Ava's "Hollywood Glam Bash." Ava followed her sister, totally stunning in her long, gorgeous gown. Angela noticed Ryan smiling when Ava walked down the stairway.

Everyone approached Ava taking photos as Angela stood there and watched.

"You're not going up there?" Carl asked.

"Not now. I want everyone else to have their moment with her."

Carl grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

The deejay was playing all of Ava's favorite songs. The waiters approached the guests offering them hors d'oeuvres and glasses of wine. Angela noticed Ava's publisher, her editor, and some of her author friends that Alisse had invited. Stars from her movie, friends, and family were all around. She also noticed some of Ryan and Carl's coworkers. She wasn't sure why they were there at Ava's event when Ryan wasn't feeling the party at first.

Ava didn't want the party to last too long, so Angela attempted to speed things up. Alisse kicked things off followed by dinner. Angela hoped she could get Ava to mingle a bit, take a couple of pictures, and talk privately with her before she got tired.

Dinner was followed by a toast from Ryan. Everyone who knew about Ryan and Ava was shocked he was even speaking. He had been on his phone all evening but eyeballing Ava at the same time. Lisa nudged Angela in the leg when Ryan started to speak.

"Ava, Thank you for your loving spirit. You are a phenomenal woman, mother, and wife. Happy Birthday." Cheers, Ryan said as everyone took a sip of their beverage of choice.

Angela looked at Karen who asked, "What was *that* all about?"

Angela shrugged her shoulders.

Guests talked excitedly, and soon their chatter turned into laughter. Elaine went to check on her. She was sitting at the table up front.

Angela saw a nice looking gentleman stand up to propose another

toast and realized it was *Malcolm*. "What the hell? What is he doing here?" she mumbled.

"This toast is to a special lady with a loving heart. I met Ava months ago, and her spirit is the same now as it was then. It's good to see everyone that loves her in the same room. It says a lot about the way you all feel about her. I just want to wish you a happy birthday, Ava. May your happiness last forever," Malcolm said as he sat down next to Alisse.

Angela pulled out her phone and texted Alisse quick!

'What's Malcolm doing here?'

Angela heard Ryan ask who that guy was. The look on Lisa's face almost gave away who he was. She was glad that Ava had found someone else.

'I invited him. I thought he should be here.'

A waiter brought out the cake as Alisse helped Ava up to stand. Everyone sang happy birthday, and Ava managed to blow out the candles. Ryan walked over to Ava and presented her with a tiny box. Ava looked surprised. She told him she would open it later. Ryan walked off as Ava cut the cake and handed everyone a piece. Malcolm walked over to speak with Ava. He dotted her nose with frosting. Ryan looked on in disbelief, still trying to figure out who the guy was. Malcolm stated he was leaving and left something for Ava with Alisse.

"I hope you like them," Malcolm said, giving Ava a hug before leaving.

"Them?"

"You'll like them. I guarantee it."

"Thank you for coming. It's always good to see you," Ava said with a smile.

She then turned her attention to Angela, Lisa, Alisse, and Karen. Lisa

presented her with the portrait they had made, and she loved it. It was a picture that Ava had taken in Cancun. Angela had fallen in love with it. Ava had no worries at that moment. She was *banging*, and Angela wanted her to remember that.

Everyone was in awe of the portrait. Ryan stood back and looked on. Chris held onto Karen as she gave a speech about how she and Ava had met. Then the celebration turned very emotional from Lisa, Angela, Ava's agent, Elaine, and, most of all, Ava's kids. Alisse had them come down for a brief moment to present their mom with a rose for each year of her life. Ava knew she was loved.

"I don't want to get sentimental, but I appreciate everyone here and those who have made this day so special. To my lovely kids, family, friends, and business associates, I love you all! Now let's party!" Ava said.

Angela could tell that Ryan felt some kind of way because Ava hadn't mentioned him in her speech. He stood off in the cut.

The kids went back upstairs, and the deejay started spinning. Everyone was having a good time. People were dancing, drinking, mingling, and taking pictures in the photo booth. What they had put together in Ava's honor was more than she could've asked for. But Angela could tell that her best friend was getting tired of her battle with cancer.

"Angela, come on," Lisa called out for her to join them in the photo booth.

They took about 10 pictures from Hollywood Glam showing how silly they all could be.

"Karen, you got to move that big belly," Ava said.

"No. I'll just turn the other way, so my belly won't be everywhere," Karen said.

After taking pictures, Ava went over and touched Karen's belly and

talked to the baby. "Auntie hopes she'll be around to meet you, princess. I know you're going to be gorgeous. Auntie has left you something," she said.

At that moment, Karen wanted to question Ava regarding her comments, but she opted out.

Elaine walked over and told Ava to sit. Angela motioned for all of the girls except Karen to start cleaning up, so people could go home. Carl stopped Angela and pulled her out onto the dance floor. They did the cupid shuffle and then "The Wobble" came on. All of the ladies went crazy. After dancing and having a good time, Angela looked around for Ava who had disappeared into the night. Angela managed to have a good time, but she was concerned about Ava. She left the festive scene and went inside the house looking for Ava. She noticed Elaine crying in the doorway.

"What's going on?" Angela asked.

"Ava started vomiting, so we brought her inside. Now her breathing sounds awful. She's saying things that don't make any sense. Angela, I'm scared!" Elaine said.

"Have you called her doctor?"

"No. She doesn't want a doctor. She knows, Angela. She doesn't want a doctor or hospice. She just wants to be at home."

Angela started to go into the room, but Alisse stopped her. Angela respected Alisse's wishes to let the family be together in peace. She turned around and bumped into Carl. Looking directly into Angela's eyes, he said, "I demand that you tell Ryan that Ava is dying of cancer." "No, Carl! Not right now."

"I'm giving you twenty-four hours, Angela. If you don't tell him, you'll leave me with no choice but to be the one who does!" Carl said as he stormed off.

Angela didn't know what to do. She wanted to go get the girls and tell

them of Ava's illness, but she couldn't. So she sat on the stairway with her head resting in her cupped hands.

When the Heart Speaks

Ryan tossed and turned before he finally got up to cook breakfast. He noticed that the kids were still sleeping, so he woke them up to join him at church. Ryan hadn't been to church in awhile. He figured when Pastor Boeing saw him, he would throw the Bible in his direction. Ryan peeped in on Ava and noticed Alisse and Elaine by her side. He wondered what the hell was going on and why they'd stayed the night. Ryan went over and shook Ava. She moaned.

Elaine jumped up. "Ryan, what are you doing here?"

Ryan looked around the room and then back at her. "I live here. Remember?"

Alisse got up, shook Ava, and asked if she was okay.

"What's going on? Is Ava sick?"

"No. She just doesn't want to be alone, Ryan," Alisse snapped.

"Let me speak to my wife in private!" he insisted.

"Now she's your wife? Remember your divorce is almost final," Elaine said, motioning for Alisse to give them some space.

Ryan was so ashamed because of Elaine's comment, but it wasn't anything but the truth. He had asked Ava for a divorce. That wasn't a secret.

Ryan sat and rubbed Ava's hands. He noticed that the tiny box he'd given her for her birthday wasn't opened. Ryan picked up the tiny black box and opened it for her. Ava looked distressed and tired. Ryan pulled Ava's wedding ring out of the box. He'd had it redesigned.

"Ava, you are my wife until death do us part." He placed the ring back on her finger where it belonged, but it fell off. Noticing how tiny Ava's hands had become, it suddenly hit him how much pain and bitterness she had

buried in her heart.

Ryan saw a tear roll down Ava's face. He wiped her face.

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry for the hurt and pain I've caused you with Sharon and my selfish actions. I see it in your face how bad I've treated you. I've had time to think about us, and it's you I want."

Ryan waited for Ava to respond, but there was nothing but silence. She seemed like she was in and out of consciousness. He thought maybe she was still out of it from the party.

"I understand if you choose not to talk to me after all I've put you through. I promise to give you some time to think about us being together as husband and wife again. I would have the ring resized for you."

Ryan left in a state of shock. He wasn't sure what he was doing at that moment. That's why he needed to go to church. Then he would go see Sharon afterwards.

The kids were downstairs eating and fully dressed. Ryan went to get himself together and passed Alisse along the way. She looked like she'd had a long night.

Ryan hurried so he could be on time for the ten o'clock worship service. The kids couldn't believe he wanted to go to church, especially Jaxon.

"Dad, it's been a long time since you've stepped foot in the house of the Lord."

Abbie chuckled at Jaxon's comment. Ryan slapped Jaxon upside the head playfully and told him to come on.

"Dad, I wish Mom was coming with us," Abbie said.

"I know, sweetheart. She's tired from the party," Ryan said lying. He wasn't sure what was going on with Ava, but he planned to make it right.

Ryan drove until he reached the Salem Baptist Church parking lot.

The kids attended church often. Elaine or Ava would take them. Ryan was nervous, but he walked anxiously to the door. The usher opened it wide, and he could have fallen to his knees from all of the stares. Ryan found a section in the middle of the church for him and the kids to sit.

It was stuffy, and he felt confined between all the people crowded close together on the pew. The choir started singing a hymn, but it gradually turned into one of those Fantasia Barrino breakdowns. The lady singing looked familiar. Ryan watched her dance and shout with no shoes on, before he realized it was Ricky's fiancée. Ryan looked around the church searching for him, but he didn't see him anywhere. Moments later, he saw a smooth looking guy over in the corner ushering. It was Ricky. *When did he become a member?* Ryan silently asked himself. They made eye contact, but Ryan quickly turned his head. He didn't care for him one bit.

The order of service resumed. One of the deacons read the Scripture, and then they took up a collection, which lead to prayer. When Pastor Boeing asked those in need of prayer to come to the altar, Ryan looked at his kids and stood up. They followed him to stand in line for prayer. Sweat was running down his forehead. Ricky stared at him. Soon Ryan found himself face to face with the Pastor.

"Welcome back, Ryan. I'm glad to have you in the house of the Lord," Pastor Boeing said, laying hands on him.

Pastor Boeing began to pray over Ryan without asking if there was anything he would like for him to ask God for on his behalf. He did the same thing to Abbie and Jaxon as well as the other members standing in line. Finally, Pastor Boeing began his sermon, and all Ryan could say was, "Boy, is he on fire!"

"Please, church, turn in your Bibles to Saint James, chapter four and verse seven. I want to speak on temptation and the desire to sin. All is

forgiven when we submit ourselves to the King himself. And the Scripture reads: "Submit yourself therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

The Pastor preached and, although the sermon spoke directly to Ryan, he couldn't help but think about what he had put Ava through. Every time Ryan looked up he made eye contact with Ricky, who he knew would run straight to Sharon and tell her that he had seen him at church.

After service, Ryan hurried out of the church before anyone could stop him. The kids wanted food, so they stopped at a burger joint, grabbed some take out, and headed home.

Once home, Ryan noticed that Elaine was still there. Alisse was gone. Elaine was preparing a pot of soup. Ryan wanted to ask her why she was still there, but he didn't want to start a big fuss. He went in to see Ava, but the kids had reached her first. She was still lounging around. He spoke, but she was too busy listening to Abbie talk about church. Ryan figured he would let them have their moment, and he would have his later. But he needed to go see Sharon.

Ryan quickly changed and texted Sharon to tell her he would be right over to talk. Then he headed out. Elaine didn't say one word to Ryan. He guessed if his son-in-law was cheating on his daughter and the whole town knew, he would give the man the cold shoulder, too. But he was going to make it right once and for all.

He drove off, honking his horn at the neighbors down the street. He put his Maze featuring Frankie Beverly CD in the changer and headed south. Listening to "Joy and Pain" took him to a whole other place. After twenty minutes of driving, he noticed a couple of cars at Sharon's condo. He didn't want to get out because he didn't want to engage himself with people or her family and friends at that moment.

He finally got out after sitting in the car briefly waiting on people to come out, but no one left. He wished Sharon would have told him she had company. Then again Sharon loved attention. Ryan rang the doorbell before he remembered that she had given him a key. He placed his key in the lock to open the door, but someone opened it for him. That person happened to be Ricky. *What the hell! Not again!* Ryan thought.

Sharon met Ryan at the door. "Hey, baby," she said, pecking him on the cheek.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, eyeing a couple of people in the living room. At that moment, Ryan wanted to leave.

Sharon introduced Ryan to her friend, Rhonda, and her spouse, Ricky's fiancée, Sherry, who had been whooping and hollering in the choir loft, and her aunt, Rose. They had all stopped by at the same time.

"Hey, I saw you at church today," Ricky's fiancée, Sherry, said.

"You were at church today and didn't take me?" Sharon asked with her arms folded.

"Yes and yes," Ryan said to both Sherry and Sharon.

"It was good to see you there," Ricky said, trying to act sincere.

"Yeah," Ryan said, brushing him off. Ryan didn't care for Ricky or this friendship with Sharon and now his fiancée. It put him on edge.

"Well, I guess we'll be going," Rhonda said, and everyone else followed her lead.

Ryan sat on the couch looking around, waiting for Sharon to come back in from walking everyone out. He didn't know how he was going to do this and explain to Sharon that he felt the need to stay with Ava, but what should he say? He had to end their relationship once and for all.

Sharon came back in and his heart started pounding as she sat next to him on the couch.

"So you went to church this morning, huh?"

"Yes. The kids and I did. It felt good. I haven't been in awhile. I'm surprised Ricky didn't tell you I was there. When did he start going to church?"

"He didn't mention it. He's being going for awhile now. That's how long you've been away, I suppose. My Aunt Rose stopped by and brought me dinner. I was surprised to see everyone else."

"Where's Tiffany?"

"With her father, who just happened to be in town and decided to take her for the weekend. She'll be home later."

Ryan started playing with his hands. Sharon's baby daddy was someone they rarely discussed since he stayed miles away. But it bothered him that she discusses him with Ricky. Sharon noticed that Ryan was in deep thought.

"Baby, we need to talk," he blurted out.

"I agree, we do. You go first."

"Ladies first," Ryan insisted.

Sharon got up to grab her purse off of the coffee table. She pulled out a zip lock bag containing a couple of digital wands. She pulled one out and handed it to Ryan.

"What's this?" he asked knowing what the hell it was.

"What does it looks like? I took eight of them. It's a pregnancy test, stupid."

Lord have mercy, Ryan thought as his heart dropped!

"You're pregnant? I thought you had that five year thing inserted?" Ryan said, trying to make sense of things. He didn't want a baby!

"I think so, but it's not 100% accurate. I'm excited! Ryan, I love you. Your divorce is almost final, so it's the right time."

For some reason Ryan couldn't help but think this was a set up to keep him. She was going to flip when he told her about Ava, but right now that was on the back burner. "Sharon, I don't know what to say. I think it's too soon. The ink isn't dry on the divorce papers yet!"

"But it will be," she said, catching an attitude.

Ryan wiped the sweat from his face and looked at her. Sharon rubbed his face and smiled as if he was supposed to be happy. Ryan was really at a loss for words, trying to think of ways for her to get rid of the baby. Ryan loved Sharon, but he wanted to stay with Ava. After giving his situation some serious thought, he would like a baby only if it was done the right way. This was all *wrong*.

Sharon stood up and took Ryan by the hand. He knew what she wanted. It's always sex with her, which was really good, but it was getting old. A man needed more.

Ryan followed Sharon's lead, went into the bedroom, and undressed just for the hell of it. He figured he'd make love to her this one last time and tell her the news about Ava tomorrow.

"Love making is good for the baby, you know," Sharon said taking, Ryan's hand and rubbing it against her stomach.

"Who else knows about the baby?"

"No one, although I wanted to tell Aunt Rose. She said I had a glow about myself."

One thing for sure was that Ricky didn't need to know about this.

Ryan motioned for Sharon to get on his dick, which was at attention as he stroked himself. He wanted her to do her job. Sharon crawled on the bed like a tiger and took over. She took his balls in her mouth, licked his shaft, and then took his dick into her mouth. She slobbered Ryan down.

Sharon's warm mouth felt good on his wood. She could be another

super head. She did her job well.

"Baby, you sucking the venom out of me," Ryan said moaning and groaning, but trying not to cum.

"I want to suck you dry! Cum, baby, cum."

"I don't want to right now," he managed to say.

"Cum in my mouth...I want to taste you."

"Aw, damn, damn, damn! It's coming. I need you to lock your jaws tight, Sharon. I want you to suck it all out."

The way Sharon sucked him and played with his balls at the same time left Ryan empty. He busted one good nut in her mouth. Some semen somehow sloshed in her hair.

After that, she straddled Ryan and glided up and down. He bounced her around, played with her clit, and then flipped her over to eat her out. Ryan wanted Sharon to skeet like a water hose. He found her spot, and all he heard was, "Ryan, I love you!"

Sharon held her ass up as he felt her exploding. She came as he'd thought she would: just like a water hose. Ryan got on top of Sharon and made love to her like it was their last time.

After their make out session, Ryan held Sharon and admired her body. It was flawless. She had it all: ass, tits, and a flat stomach with no cellulite. It was nice to look at, but her personality was what had attracted him to her. Ryan had fallen for what he saw. After talking to Brian, he'd done some serious thinking and soul searching.

"A penny for your thoughts? Ryan, you made love to me like never before."

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and continued playing with her hair. He wanted to tell her the truth at that moment, but he couldn't bring himself to confront her.

The baby news kept playing in his mind over and over again. His kids wouldn't accept that child.

It's over, he thought when he left Sharon's place. Ryan couldn't keep hurting Ava. She deserved better. He promised after today, he was going to make it right and get his wife back.

Timing Is Everything

Ava's illness was weighing heavily on Carl. After he had noticed how sick she really was, he demanded that Angela tell Ryan first thing tomorrow or he would.

I should not have told Carl, she thought to herself. Although Ryan wasn't shit these days, she knew in her heart he *did* need to know since he was Abbie and Jaxon's father. She wasn't being selfish. She had simply been respecting Ava's wishes. She had hoped that Carl would've understood that. She went by Ava's earlier and she was in the bed looking out in space. She hated seeing her in that state of mind. Seems like everything with her changed so suddenly overnight. She wanted to tell the girls so badly that it was killing her inside. So she understood Carl and why he felt Ryan should know.

Angela had reluctantly promised to stop by the office to tell Ryan about Ava's condition in person. Afterwards, she would call the girls and tell them as well. She just hoped that her dear sick friend would understand her reasoning. Angela didn't want Lisa to get all bent out of shape like she usually did when something terrible took place. Karen was the same way, but she was much calmer than Lisa, she would worry her ass off.

Angela went to the bar for a night cap, she needed a drink. Before she could pour her beverage of choice, she heard Chrissy call her name.

"Yes, Chrissy," Angela yelled.

"Good night, Mom," she hollered from upstairs.

"Good night, baby. Don't forget to say your prayers. I love you," she yelled.

"Love you back."

Angela took one shot after another, left the glass on the bar, and headed to bed. She usually didn't drink like that unless there was something bothering her or if she simply wanted to get wasted.

When Angela walked into the bedroom, Carl was still up. She didn't say a word. She threw her robe on the couch and climbed in bed.

"So you're not talking to me?"

"I'm good. I don't have anything to say."

"Angela, I think we need to tell Ryan about Ava before it's too late."

"I agree."

Angela finally got comfortable in the bed. Carl reached his arm out for her so that she could lay her head on his chest shoulders. Between work and Ava, Angela didn't know whether she was coming or going.

"Babe, do you think Ava can beat this battle? And do the kids know what's going on?"

Angela lifted her head and looked down at Carl, "To answer your questions, no and no."

Carl looked stunned. If Ava did make it through, it would be a miracle. Angela had seen her test results. She was with her for the doctor's visit. It was going to take a miracle.

"I'm sorry, Angela. I know Ava's your best friend, and I hate she's going through this alone. It must be hard for her dealing with cancer and a divorce," Carl said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"She's not alone, Carl. She has great support. She doesn't want the kids to worry and Ryan...well, his priorities are elsewhere these days."

They watched the news a bit before the lights went. She was exhausted and needed some rest. She did not doze off like she thought, so she got up and prayed. After about forty-five minutes of fighting sleep, she was finally out for the count.

The Journey

Ava couldn't move. She had a difficult time coming to grips with the painful reality. Jaxon came into the room followed by Abbie, and she hugged her kids for dear life.

Ava rubbed both of their heads as she was waiting for Abbie to complain about her messing up her hair, but she didn't. Instead they hugged her like she needed them to.

"I love you guys, you hear? I'll always be here for you guys, no matter what. Take care of each other," Ava managed to say between slurs and dizziness.

The kids looked at Ava in turmoil, trying to figure out what was going on with her. Then Ryan came in without a word and swooped Ava up. Abbie and Jaxon stayed back silently. Ava wrapped her arms around Ryan's neck, but she was too weak and her arms couldn't hold on.

"You okay, baby?" Ryan asked.

Ava gave a smile. He continued whispering in her ear. "Ava, I never stopped loving you."

The kids finally followed and clapped when they reached the front entrance. To them, seeing their father carrying their mother out every morning had become an essential part of their lives.

Ava gestured for the kids to come closer and hugged them tightly again. They were quiet, but hugged Ava back for dear life.

The car horn blew outside. Ava released the kids and told them that she loved them and always would.

"We love you, too, Mom," Jaxon and Abbie said.

Ava heard them talking as they walked down the hall, especially

Jaxon, "What's up with Mom?"

"I don't know, but I'm worried," Abbie said as they grabbed their back packs and headed out the door.

Ryan sat Ava on the couch and spoke, "Ava, by carrying you each day, I realize now that our marriage lacked intimacy. I've fallen back in love with you. I love you so much, and I hope you still feel the same way."

Ryan touched Ava's face before he added, "I'm sorry, again, for everything. I realized the mistake I was making. Now I want to make it right. Ava, I don't want a divorce."

Ava lifted her arms up to caress Ryan's face, but her weakness wouldn't allow her to. Ryan got up and looked back at Ava. "I'll be back shortly. There is something I have to do. I promise you, when I get back, it's me and you."

Ava gave Ryan a warm smile before he turned to leave. Alisse came in when he was heading out.



Ryan drove to the office to pick up a couple of files so that he could work from home and spend the day with Ava. On the way, he suddenly took a detour and drove to Sharon's place. Ryan called Sharon, asking her to stay put until he got there. He ignored all calls as he noticed Carl was trying to get in touch with him. Ryan called his attorney and told him not to file or sign off on the divorce documents, which were to be finalized that day.

Driving, Ryan realized he loved his wife more than ever. She hadn't fought him on the divorce. All she wanted was for him to be happy, whether it was with her or Sharon. Ryan became sad as he thought about how much weight Ava had lost because of him and how much she'd sacrificed during

that difficult time.

If anyone loved hard, it was Ava. One thing Ryan knew was that Sharon couldn't compare to her. What he and Ava once had was solid until he'd decided that his marriage wasn't good enough. Ryan hoped he could get back what he'd once had: his life with Ava and their children.

Ryan pulled into the driveway of Sharon's condo and jumped out of the car. He left the engine running and his door unlocked. He ran to the door as his heart beat swiftly. Sharon opened the door.

"Ryan, what is it?" Sharon asked.

"I'm sorry, Sharon. I wanted to tell you this yesterday, but I'm not going through with the divorce. I love Ava too much to let her go. I'm so sorry."

"Come again?" Sharon said, reaching over to touch his forehead, "Ryan, do you have a fever? I'm pregnant. Remember? Stop with the foolishness."

Ryan moved her hand away. "Sharon, carrying Ava each day made me value my marriage. My marriage was boring because I had made it boring. Sharon, I am supposed to hold and love Ava until death. I'm sorry, but I won't divorce her."

Sharon's hand went across Ryan's head and slapped him in the face. He grabbed both of her arms to keep her from hitting him.

"You bastard! You've been playing me all this time, knowing you weren't going to divorce her! What a coward!" Sharon yelled. "Only bitches pull some shit like this!"

Ryan tried to push Sharon into her condo as she got louder and louder.

"Ryan, you're going to get what you deserve! You can't go around hurting people! And, as for the baby, stay out of our lives!" she said, then she

slammed the door.

Ryan walked to his car and looked back. He felt very bad. It was never his intention to hurt anyone. Ryan jumped in his car and headed to the nearest floral shop to order a bouquet of flowers for his wife.

"What would you like for me to write on the card, Mr. Decree?" the florist asked.

"I'll carry you out every morning, each day of the week, any time of day, until death do us part," Ryan said, smiling.

Ryan sent Ava a text message: *'I stopped the divorce. I love you too much, until death do us part. I love you, Ava.'*

Ryan stood there waiting for a response, but got nothing. He left the floral shop, and then stopped at the jewelry store to pick up Ava's ring, which he'd had resized. Ryan wanted to ask Ava to marry him again and renew their vows. He then left the store and looked at his phone. He thought it was Ava, but it was a text message from Carl.

'911-911-911 please call me.'

Ryan got in his car and dialed Carl's number. Then he saw that Angela was calling him, but he ignored her.

"Hey, man, is everything good? I mean what's up with the 911 text?"

"No, man, Ava has been keeping something from you. I just found out, and I thought as a friend you needed to know as well."

"What is it?" Ryan yelled.

"Ryan, Ava has terminal cancer. She's been battling it for months. She didn't want you or the kids to know because she didn't want you guys to worry about her."

"What? Who told you? *Angela*? My wife is sick? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes, man. I'm sorry, but Ava is dying. With the divorce and her

illness, she decided it would be best not to say anything.”

Ryan was so angry with himself. He just hung up the phone. Carl called back several times, but Ryan didn't pick up. He hurried out of the parking lot en route home to comfort Ava.



Ava's organs were shutting down, and she knew it. She tried to text her girls, *'I love you.'* After several failed attempts, she thought the text went through.

Alisse walked into the room and noticed Ava texting. Then she started reaching into the air as if someone were there.

"What is it, Ava?" Alisse asked, running to her side.

Alisse knew it was only a matter of time before Ava would leave her. She had already called Ava's doctor, who was calling in hospice. Alisse had done all she could to make sure Ava was comfortable.

Alisse took Ava's phone and read the text Ryan had sent. She shook her head. She wanted to call him so badly, but she was still angry about how he'd treated her sister.

"Text Ryan, Lisse," Ava slurred. "Tell him I love him too."

Alisse texted her mom, telling her to hurry over. Then she sent Ryan a message as Ava had asked her to.

Alisse noticed a text from Karen. *'Love you more!! Ava, are you okay?'*

Alisse watched Ava, who was confused about where she was.

"Grandpa there you are. I'll be over to join you shortly."

"Ava, Grandpa is not here."

“Yes he is. He is motioning for me to come to him. Lisse, where’s mom? I’m going home.”

“Grandpa has been dead for a decade. Ava, where is home?” Alisse said, as Ava seemed to come back to reality as she went in and out of her delusions.

"Lissee, water," Ava slurred as her breathing became labored.

Alisse squeezed Ava’s hand and kissed her cheek. “I love you, sister.”

Alisse then left the room to get water as Elaine banged on the door. Alisse let her in and rushed to fill Ava’s cup with water. They both headed to the bedroom and found Ava unconscious. Elaine ran to her side as the cup of water fell from Alisse’s hands. She stood there because she knew Ava had sent her out of the room so she could die in peace.

"No, Ava! Baby, wake up!" Elaine yelled desperately checking for her daughter’s pulse.

Alisse knew Ava was gone...she was tired.

"Don’t just stand there! Do something!" Elaine yelled at Alisse.

Alisse ran over to help her. "Ava, wake up! Please come back to us." Alisse put her arms around Ava trying to lift her.

Alisse heard Ryan call out from downstairs, as he ran upstairs holding a bouquet of flowers. He called out for Ava and ran over to her. He noticed her stiffness and all the commotion. The bouquet immediately fell out of his hands.

"Ava, *nooo!* Sweetheart, wake up! "Ryan cried and shook her. He wanted her to open her eyes. “Baby, I need you to wake up. I need you, Ava! Baby, I’m sorry. Please wake up!” Ryan shouted.

Ryan looked at Alisse. "Why didn’t you tell me, damn it? Why didn’t you?" Ryan yelled, wiping tears from his face.

Ryan cried and blamed himself. "This is not happening!" he

screamed. He fell to his knees in disbelief, banging his head on the floor while Ava lay lifeless on the bed.

Too Soon

After receiving Ava's last text, Angela knew in her heart that something was wrong. She left work in a hurry, calling Karen and Lisa as she drove to Ava's house. They were furious with Angela after she told them about Ava's illness and what doctors had described as her inevitable death. Lisa got so mad that she hung up on her. She panicked and called Carl just when Alisse beeped in on the other line and gave her the news. She had to pull over on the side on the road and let it all out.

After a few minutes of crying, Angela regained enough strength to drive. She finally made it to Ava's house where Carl met her in the driveway. Angela ran into his arms like a little sad girl seeking the comfort of her father. They made it into the house, when Angela saw Lisa and Karen who had beaten her there. Lisa cut her eye at Angela like a mad woman.

Elaine was coming down the stairs, and Angela felt nothing but pain for her.

"I'm so sorry, Elaine," Angela said, crying.

"Baby, it's okay. Ava is at peace now. There will be no more suffering. She wouldn't want us to cry, now would she, Angela?"

"No," Angela said between sniffs.

Angela walked over to the girls with Carl right behind her.

"Lisa and Karen, I'm so sorry."

"Save it!" Karen snapped as Lisa looked on in tears.

"Ava told me to keep this from you two because she knew you would freak out. I had to respect her wishes no matter how hard it was," Angela said.

Right then Lisa hugged Angela and Karen joined in.

"We're all we've got!" Lisa said, trying to remain calm.

Alisse walked over. "You all may go see Ava one last time before they take her," she said.

They all looked at each other, but no one budged.

"Come," Alisse told them, leading them to Ava's room.

As they all walked slowly, Angela noticed every picture on the wall. Ava was beaming in each one, and that made Angela happy to know Ava had once lived a happy life.

When they got to the room, Ava's lifeless body was propped up in bed as if she were only sleeping.

Angela went over and kissed her. "My friend, you will be missed dearly. No one can *ever* replace you," Angela said as she gently massaged Ava's hand.

Karen was shaking, but she did go over, say a few words, and kiss Ava on the cheek. Karen then ran out the room in tears. Carl went after Karen to make sure she was okay. Lisa was brave. She had her moment, and then she gathered herself together and said her final goodbye. Sad as it was, Angela didn't know what to feel, especially since she had been so close to Ava through her transition.

Elaine called for the girls as Ryan and the kids drew near. Abbie and Jaxon were total wrecks when they learned of their mother's passing. It was heartbreaking. Lisa left, but Angela stayed with Alisse and Elaine to comfort the kids. They were taking it hard. When they broke down, everyone else broke down as well.

"Mom, please come back! Why, God? Why did you take my mom?" Abbie hollered as she cried hysterically.

Jaxon, on the other hand, climbed in bed with Ava as Ryan and his friend, Brian, tried to pull him out. It was way too much to bear. Angela held

Abbie when she went over and kissed Ava.

Finally, Ryan found it impossible to control Jaxon, who kissed Ava and demanded that she wake up. The nurse asked them all to leave as the staff of Jehovah Gardens, the funeral home that Ava had chosen, arrived to take her away.

As they all stood downstairs, Angela looked at Ryan, who also was an emotional wreck. She walked over to pay her respects. Ryan didn't say a word. He fell to his knees as Ava's body was lifted from the bed and placed on the stretcher. The gentlemen covered her and wheeled her away. Alisse had taken the kids into the other room to calm them down, which was perfect timing.

"Baby, are you okay?" Carl asked.

"No, not really, but I'll be someday. Ava wouldn't want me to cry." She was trying hard to fight tears through her sadness. Although Ava had prepared her for this day, but the real thing was worse than she expected.

Angela went in to talk with the kids. They didn't understand, and it would take some time for them to accept that Ava was gone. Angela promised to always be there for them. She then went to check on Ryan. He was blaming himself. At that moment, Angela really felt sorry for him. After all he had put Ava through, she wanted him to feel her pain. Angela knew it would happen, but she wished it was under different circumstances.

Ryan was really at a loss for words. "Angela, how do I help my kids through this ordeal when I can barely help myself, huh?" Ryan asked while rubbing his head.

"Carl and I are here for you, Ryan. I made a promise to Ava to watch over you all."

Ryan looked at Angela, "Why, Angela? Why didn't you tell me about my wife's illness? Did you hate me that much?"

Angela was about to answer, but Alisse cut her off. "Would it have mattered, Ryan? You were divorcing my sister. You were too busy with your mistress to even notice that Ava was sick, so no one had to tell you anything! Just the day before, you were at *Sharon's* house while my sister was fighting for her life. This is a small world, Ryan and people do talk!" Alisse snapped.

Angela gently grabbed Alisse's hand to get her to walk with her.

"Yeah, I guess I deserve that, Alisse. I'm the bad guy! Regardless, I should have known about Ava before today!" Ryan shot back while Alisse was exiting the room and stormed off.

She was mentally drained, and the chaos wasn't helping. Her main priority was helping the kids and the family deal with their loss. She walked over to where Karen sat rubbing her belly. She was admiring Ava's photo album. She took a seat. Lisa came over and flopped down on the couch as well. She took each of the girls by the hand. They immediately embraced each other.

"I'm sure going to miss her. Ava really did know how to light up a room," Angela said.

"Yes she did," Karen added. Karen then took their hands and placed it on her belly for them to feel the baby kick. After a brief moment, she announced, "My princess will be named *Ava*."

"Aw, that is so sweet of you, Karen. I bet Ava is smiling up in heaven," Lisa said, still rubbing Karen's belly.

"Ava, huh? I like," Angela said smiling. "Ava would really love that, Karen. She would."

As they went through the photo album together, they reflected, laughed, and even cried at the memory of Ava's last days, especially her birthday party. They noticed the portrait she had placed near the fireplace.

What Really Matters

The news of Ava's death spread like wildfire. Given Ava's popularity as author-turned-movie-producer, every news channel was airing coverage of her life.

The last twenty-four hours were unreal. The kids weren't doing well, and Ryan was coping the best he knew how. Never in a million years would he have seen her death coming. Ryan should have known something was wrong with Ava due to her sudden weight loss and her behavior. Overall, he should have paid more attention to the signs. Ryan had thought they had a second chance together. The only thing he had now was Ava's last text message. But what really hurt the most were all of the preparations for the funeral that Ava had endured by herself.

Ryan sat alone thinking about what he had done. The thought of Ava going through that journey alone without him made him sadder than anything he could ever imagine.

Ryan cried all night thinking about Ava, his kids, and most of all his actions over the course of the year. Ryan screamed and kicked until he saw Jaxon standing in front of him.

"Dad, get up!" Jaxon yelled.

Ryan couldn't move or even face his kids because of how he had treated their mother. Abbie ran into the room, and at that moment Ryan knew he had to protect his kids and be the father that they knew and loved. Ryan held both of the kids and promised them everything was going to be all right. They had so many questions that he couldn't answer.

"Dad, did you know mom was sick?" Abbie asked.

"I remember the morning before school when she died. She hugged us

tight and kept telling us she loved us. She kissed us many times. I thought it was strange, but now I understand why," Jaxon said, recalling Ava's last moment with them.

Ryan rubbed both of the kids' heads. "Mom didn't want us to know. She knew we would be worried," Ryan said, trying to reassure them. "Yes, Jaxon, now that I recall your mom's actions, she knew it was her time and wanted you two to know she will always watch over you. Ava is right here," he explained, pointing to their hearts.

Ryan sat holding the kids until they fell asleep. Tomorrow would be tough for all of them. Ava's service would take place, and her body would be cremated shortly afterwards. It was the way she wanted it. Ryan had been given no say whatsoever in Ava's wishes because he'd been non-existent during that period of her life, which was something he would always regret. Ryan just hoped and prayed she had read his last text message declaring his love for her. Ava had replied, but he wondered how that was possible if she was dying at the time.

He looked at his phone and noticed all the missed calls and text messages. Some were from family, friends, and colleagues, and the rest were from Sharon. He wanted to text her back to let her know he was okay, but he figured he needed to keep a distance from her and focus on his children. He didn't need any distractions. He turned off his phone and the television and rested his head against the pillow, hoping to get some shut eye.



Arriving at the church was one thing; seeing Ava one last time before the cremation was another. Ava had left instructions that if the kids wanted to

say goodbye, they could see her before she was cremated. Ryan was able to go in with Jaxon and Abbie who took it as well as he'd hoped. He believed the visit from Pastor Boeing had helped them as well as the DVD's Ava had prepared for them before she'd passed. Angela had brought over the discs Ava had made while she was sick.

The kids had watched their disc yesterday, but Ryan had decided to watch his later after the service. Watching the disc with the kids, and hearing Ava explain how sick she really was, made him feel nothing but guilt. All along, Ryan had thought the wigs Ava had worn were her hair. He had no clue. The woman he'd married was gone. Now Ryan had to raise Jaxon and Abbie as a single dad.

After viewing Ava's body earlier that morning, Ryan had to clear his head before going into the church. He sat in the car with the kids, massaging his temples. Sitting there, he heard a tap on the window. It was Angela. Ryan and the kids got out of the car and walked inside the building with Angela and Carl. Ryan greeted Pastor Boeing, who prayed with him and the kids. Together they walked into the huge room where a big portrait of Ava was on display. Ryan walked over and admired her beauty, smile, and, most of all, how happy she was. He touched the portrait as if she could feel his hands. The kids leaned against Ryan as tears ran down his face. An usher brought over tissues for him to wipe his tears. Ryan took a few and thanked her. Then he grabbed the kids' hands and guided them to their seats while everyone watched them.

As people started entering, there was a projector showing all of Ava's favorite memories. Ryan was proud to see their wedding photos, the kids' births, and Ava's graduation. There were scenes of family, and of Ava being Ava with her girlfriends. Boy, had she enjoyed life.

Ryan noticed some familiar faces and some he didn't recognize at all.

A news crew was outside, and he whispered to Alisse to get rid of them. He was greeted by Brian, Dr. Patel, Ian, and Sherry Baker. Brent, Andrew, Ricky, Ava's business associates, editor, agent, and a host of relatives he hadn't seen in years were also present. One face he remembered in particular was the white guy who had attended Ava's party. He'd also given a toast. The mystery man greeted Elaine, Alisse, Angela, and the girls. Then he walked over to Ryan and the kids to offer his condolences. Ryan was tempted to ask about his relationship with Ava and why he was there, but he figured the timing wasn't appropriate.

The service was about to start. Printed programs were being distributed. Abbie smiled when she opened the obituary and saw an old picture of her and Jaxon with the caption, 'My World.' There was also a special message to them that Ava had written before she'd passed. The way Ava had set everything up really made it easier on the kids, but it was hard for Ryan.

Pastor Boeing stood up and prayed. Then he read a Scripture and spoke briefly about death and how to comfort those hurting.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Ava who is comforted by The Lord our Savior is not suffering anymore, nor does she have any more pain! Ava is safe in His arms now and forever," Pastor Boeing stated. "To Ava's grieving kids and husband, please don't be upset because you didn't know of her illness. Be grateful for the reasons why she kept it from you. Ava had her way of doing things. And sparing you all from worrying was her main priority. Yes, Ava and I spoke on many occasions, and she explained to me her reasoning. I had to go along and respect her wishes. You see you don't have to worry about a funeral or any other expenses, Ryan. Ava did this so you could focus on the children

without any worries. She'll always be with you. Please know that she was ready and she's safe. Church, let us pray," he said.

After moments of silence, many of people who knew Ava gave remarks. Her agent and close friend, Elaine, spoke very highly of her. Angela, Karen, and Lisa all read one touching poem they wrote together. Then the guy from the party stood and gave a brief remark on how Ava had touched his life. Again, Ryan was curious to know who that guy was. As he looked back, Ryan noticed Sharon sitting in the crowd. He became *furious* because of her presence. He immediately turned his head away from her. Ryan hoped that no one saw her, or she would be thrown her out.

Ryan's kids surprised him when they stood up and shared special memories about Ava. Afterwards, he felt compelled to speak. He stood speechless at first. There was so much he wanted to say about the woman he'd wanted to spend the rest of his life with, but he kept it brief. He sat after he became overcome by emotion; Abbie and Jaxon comforted him.

He looked back again and was relieved that Sharon had disappeared. The memorial service ended with the cremationist presenting Ryan and the kids with Ava's urn as she'd requested. Her ashes were to be spread over Lake Vale while her favorite gospel song, "Way Down in the Valley," was being sung.

Ryan saw the kids finally smiling for the first time in days as people greeted them and talked about what a good person Ava was. Ryan saw the mystery man who'd given the remarks walking out the door. He followed him.

"Hey!" Ryan called out, and the gentleman turned around. Ryan didn't know what to say. "I noticed you at the party the other night, and now you're *here*. I'm curious. How did you know my wife?"

"I'm Malcolm," he said as he extended his hand out to Ryan who then

shook his hand. "I met her awhile ago, and we became really close friends. She was a very special woman, Ryan."

"How close?" Ryan asked.

"Excuse me?" Malcom replied.

"You just recently showed up to two important events concerning Ava without her ever mentioning you as her close friend. I'm just curious, that's all."

"Please know that Ava died in peace. She had a true friend to talk to about the divorce and her battle with cancer. *I* was there for her when you weren't," Malcolm said with cockiness.

"Were you having sex with my wife?"

"Shouldn't you be in there comforting Abbie and Jaxon? But the answer to your question is *no*, Ryan. Ava was faithful to you until the end. Plus she was way too classy to live an adulterous life. Everything isn't about *sex*, but of course you wouldn't know that," Malcolm shot back. He turned and walked away.

Ryan followed him. "So my wife confided in *you*?"

Malcolm kept walking toward his Benz. He put his shades on and turned to Ryan before opening his door. "Yes, she did. She needed someone to talk to. Ava was a rare woman, but you couldn't see that, Ryan. I cared for her deeply and, yes, I will always love her. I'm glad she found peace, Ryan." Malcolm got in his ride and sped off.

Ryan walked back inside the church to find everyone watching him. They'd all witnessed the scene. Ryan wasn't furious with Ava. He wanted to know if there was something more to what Malcolm had said. Honestly, he couldn't be angry with anyone but himself. If anything had occurred, it was because he had pushed Ava into the other man's arms. Ryan would forever regret doing that.

"What was that all about?" Alisse asked.

"Nothing. I know you've already met Ava's friend, Malcolm, I just wanted to know who he was!"

"Yes, Ryan, he was a very good friend to Ava," Alisse said not blinking an eye.

Ryan didn't say anything more.

Ava's mom, Elaine, had taken it all in. She continued watching Ryan as he greeted those who'd come to mourn Ava's passing. Abbie took her mother's picture, while Jaxon stood with the pictures that were all used on the projector. All went with Alisse. Ryan was really ashamed that he'd had no input in Ava's memorial. He turned around at the sound of a male voice.

"I'm sorry about Ava, man. I had no idea she was sick," Ricky said.

"Me either," Ryan said without realizing he'd just misspoken to Ricky of all people.

"You didn't know she was sick?"

"Excuse me," Ryan said and walked away.

Ryan wanted to get Abbie and Jaxon and head home.

Elaine walked toward him. "Ryan, tomorrow morning we're expected to meet with the attorneys to go over Ava's will at ten o'clock."

"We?"

"Yes, *we*," Elaine said and walked off.

Ryan knew something was up. Why was Elaine involved in Ava's will? *We? I was Ava's husband*, he thought. She still loved him, and she knew he loved her. With everything else going on, Ryan wasn't sure if he was interested in the reading of the will or not.

Pushing Forward

It was very hard for Alisse to accept that Ava had succumbed to cancer. Although she was in a better place, Alisse really wished she was still alive. Ava had been her sister and her best friend. Now Alisse had no one she could really talk to. She used to talk to Ava every day. Her sudden absence weighed on heavily. During Ava's sickness, she had promised her she would be a spokesperson for women with ovarian cancer.

Elaine and she had gone to see their gynecologist to be screened for ovarian cancer, and neither of them had it. She had learned that it was very hard to detect that type of cancer, but getting an annual exam was necessary. She felt the need to stay on top of Abbie to make sure she gets a yearly exam, once she was of age.

It had only been a couple of days since they'd said their goodbyes to Ava, and a lot had transpired. Ryan was not happy with the stipulations in Ava's will. He had announced that he would be contesting it.

Because Ryan had been in the process of divorcing Ava, he had removed her name as a beneficiary from his life insurance policy. Ava had willingly signed the documents at Ryan's request. And in turn, she had excluded him from all entitlements to her money and life insurance benefits. Everything was to be divided between Abbie and Jaxon, and it would be disbursed when they each turned 21. Alisse had been appointed trustee over the children's inheritance, the copyrights of Ava's books, and her movie royalties. Ryan was *furious*. The thought of him cashing in on the life insurance policy himself was repulsive while Ava was sick.

Ava's last book, which was her memoir, was to be released next week, and people were already raving about it. Alisse had received an

advance copy of the book that would shed light on Ava's dreadful journey through cancer and divorce. Ryan would not be happy when he read it. After all, he had treated Ava like crap until the last few days of her life when he'd suddenly experienced a change of heart regarding their divorce. But by then it was much too late.

The kids were doing fairly well, but still they were struggling to adjust without Ava who was their world. Abbie had become distant, so Alisse had encouraged her to seek counseling if her father would consent.

Alisse also had also taken on the tasks of promoting Ava's book and movie herself. She would also bring Abbie, who could answer questions and sign the books on behalf of her mother. Alisse liked the idea, thanks to Ava's agent and publishing company. Ava had planned everything as she'd wanted it, and so far so good. Alisse gave each of the girls their letter that Ava had written exclusively for them. They'd all beamed at the thought of their beloved friend thinking of them while she bravely approached death. Malcolm had received his letter prior to the girls, and he'd responded by calling Alisse in tears. It was a very touching moment. He'd told her that he had never met anyone like Ava. He regretted that they hadn't been blessed with more time together.

That's just like Ava, putting everyone else first! Alisse thought. She was one amazing woman.

Malcolm had also stopped by and stayed, wanting to check up on how Ava's kids were coping and to talk about her spirit. Meeting someone like her had forever changed his life, and Alisse could see why Ava had been smitten by Malcolm. He was a charming man. He was quite handsome too.

Just as Malcolm prepared to leave, Ryan pulled up with the children. Alisse was hugging her sister's special friend goodbye. Malcolm waved, but Ryan ignored him. However, the kids waved back.

"I see he's become a regular, Alisse...an honorary member of the family, I would say," Ryan quipped.

Feeding into his smart remark, Alisse bit back. "Yes, he is a *regular*, more like family. Mom and I love him!" she said, cracking up.

Ryan didn't see anything funny. "I don't want to see him near my kids, Alisse. I mean it!" he said, acting as if Malcolm was a threat. But what Ryan was really mad about was Ava's will.

"Ryan, don't worry. He won't socialize with Abbie and Jaxon. End of conversation."

Alisse could tell that Ryan was agitated, hurt, and feeling the pain he had brought upon himself. And he was frustrated that he wouldn't be living off of Ava's money. *You have to always treat people how you want to be treated*, she thought.

"Look, Alisse, I'm sorry. I'm dealing with a lot. I put your sister through hell, and I didn't realize it until it was too late. I made a mistake. I can admit it. I made a mistake!"

Alisse told the kids to give her and their father a minute to talk. When they exited the room, Alisse gave Ryan the benefit of the doubt. She could forgive him, but she would never forget how he had treated her sister.

"I need you to help me with the kids. I'm sorry if you and Elaine hate me for how I treated Ava and flaunted my relationship with Sharon in her face. Ava didn't deserve that. I really do miss her, Alisse, I do," Ryan said and broke down in tears.

Alisse noticed Jaxon standing at the door listening. "Dad is okay, Jaxon. Go check on your sister," Alisse told the child.

"Ryan, I forgive you because Ava forgave you. She realized that you loved her regardless of your stupidity and infidelity before she passed."

"But I wasn't there for her, Alisse. I wasn't!"

"Is it over with Sharon?"

"Yes. I broke it off the morning Ava died."

Alisse had heard from a friend that Ryan was at Sharon's house the Sunday before Ava's death, but Alisse appreciated hearing Ryan's confession. Did Ryan deserve her forgiveness? How could she push forward knowing that her sister hadn't deserved to be mistreated. Ava would have given anything to please Ryan, yet he had cheated on her and asked her for a divorce on top of it. Now he wanted half of her hard-earned money. God didn't make any mistakes. Therefore, Ryan would suffer for his sins. Everyone would reap whatever they'd sowed.

Alisse reached over and placed her hand on Ryan's shoulder to let him know she was there for him if he needed her. His troubles had just begun. He was going to endure more pain from his peers, family, and, mostly, the media, once Ava's memoir hit bookshelves.

Love and War

Weeks had whizzed by since Ava's passing, and life hadn't been the same for Ryan. A huge slap in the face came when he'd learned that he wasn't entitled to any of Ava's earnings. Ryan had never seen that coming. He couldn't blame Ava for protecting her investments and all other assets. But Ryan didn't know she had it in her. After all, he'd been in the process of divorcing her. It wasn't about the money. Ryan just felt foolish because he'd looked stupid during the reading of the will when everyone else present was entitled to something. Ryan was assured that his kids would be well off no matter what. She had made sure of that. Ryan would receive nothing, and he couldn't blame Ava for that.

Ryan watched the news for a bit. He turned to CNN and learned that Ava's movie would be released in a couple of weeks. Her memoir would be released this week. Ryan was clueless about Ava's book. His head had been so far up Sharon's ass that he'd forgotten about his wife who'd needed him. Therefore she had returned the curse and excluded him from her will. But Ryan had been completely in the dark until now about Ava's memoir. He figured her last writing project was just another novel until the CNN correspondent mentioned "Life Is Not a Fairytale: Secrets, Deception, and Ava's Marriage," a tell all book.

The correspondent displayed a preview copy of the book, and Ryan was still in shock because of its title. He heard Abbie call out for him and was frozen when he saw the actual cover of the book. It was a mix of happiness and sadness that was displayed in an image of her life.

"This is Ava Decree's final book. It will be released before her movie airs on LifeWorld. She died so young and full of life. This book shares the

triumphs of her personal life. I can't believe the way her husband treated her! The poor woman was dying, for God's sake!" one reporter said to another.

"Oh, my God!" was all Ryan could say. He was curious about what Ava had revealed in her last book. Abbie walked into the room, and he quickly turned off the television. Ryan didn't want his children to read or hear about anything their mother's final book. Ryan had brought nothing but shame to his family, and this would ruin them knowing Ava was sick without his support.

"Yes, sweetheart."

"Dad, I miss mom. It's not fair. I don't know what to do," Abbie said, crying on his shoulder.

Ryan comforted his daughter the best he knew how. He missed Ava too. At night Ryan found himself talking to her and prayed that she was listening.

"Mom is not far away, Abbie; she wants you to be strong. Although your mother is not here physically, she is here spiritually." He rubbed Abbie's shoulder as she glanced at the photos of Ava on the coffee table. Then she laid her head back down.

"I hate the fact that mom didn't tell us she was sick. But I'm grateful she made us that video. It's just not the same."

"I know, sweetheart, I know. I miss her too, but I promise to do all the things your mom did and take care of you and your brother."

Ryan had taken a leave of absence from work to get things back in order and to focus on the kids. He was giving Abbie and Jaxon time to heal as well, before sending them back to school.

Abbie got up from the couch and started to walk off. Ryan told her to check on her brother who was very quiet, which concerned him.

He reminisced about Ava and how caring she was when they first met

and courted. The love they made was all gone. He had taken Ava for granted, which was something he never thought he would do. He also remembered the time when she first told him she was pregnant with Abbie. He was overjoyed. He'd nearly scared Ava to death with his excitement. *Just the little things*, he thought, *just the little things*.

He poured himself a drink and went upstairs. He closed the door behind him and put in the disc Ava had made for him. He cried as soon as he saw her face on the monitor. He touched the television screen, wishing he could caress Ava's face. He sat back in the recliner and listened to Ava talk about how sick she was. "How did she keep that from me? Why wasn't I more attentive?" he asked himself.

Ava took her wig off, revealing her baldhead. She had lost all her hair fighting for her life. Ryan could barely recognize his wife. Ava was frail, very thin, and pale. Although he had seen Ava's appearance from watching Abbie and Jaxon's discs, this time around it seemed fresh because she was talking to him. Ava thought that Ryan had abandoned her. She lashed out at him for not fighting for their marriage "*You see, Ryan, I've been through hell...from losing my hair, chemo, and weight loss while you abandoned me for that whore!*" Ava hollered.

Ryan paused the recording just to get himself together. If he could apologize a million times to Ava he would.

"I didn't mean to break up our home," Ryan yelled, wishing she could hear him.

"*Till death do us part!*" Ava screamed! They had often said those words to each other.

Ava yelled, screamed, and cried through her pain, telling Ryan he wasn't getting a dime of her hard-earned money since he'd taken her off of his insurance policy. But through it all, she told him that she still loved him.

He felt so ashamed, knowing all Ava asked for was for him to take care of their kids and to obtain their approval of whomever he married. Ava held up pictures Ryan hadn't seen in years and their wedding album. She reminded him of the life they'd had together before Sharon entered the picture.

"How could you, Ryan? You cheated on me and flaunted your relationship with her in my face. I tried to hide it from our kids, but it was eating me up inside as well as the cancer. I'm fighting a battle between my love for you and a war with the illness. I can't win for losing."

Ryan wanted to turn off the disc, but he needed to understand what Ava had endured. Ryan didn't blame her. He understood what he'd put her through. But it was good to know that Ava did forgive him in the end. She blew Ryan a kiss through her tears, smiled, and said, *"I love you, Ryan."*

Ryan broke down at that moment, beating himself up for what he had done. And during the process, Ava was taken away from him. Ryan played the recording over and over again just to hear Ava say, *"I love you, Ryan."* He looked up and found Abbie and Jaxon peeping in the doorway.

"Dad, you cheated on Mommy?" Abbie asked.

At that moment, Ryan had only a blank stare in response to Abbie's question. He didn't hear the door open.

"Dad, did you hear Abbie? We heard what Mom said. How could you?" Jaxon yelled and stormed off with Abbie right behind him.

"Kids, come here!" Ryan yelled and jumped up. "Jaxon! Abbie!" he called out.

The doorbell rang, but he wasn't in the mood for visitors.

Ryan ran downstairs and opened the door to Alisse.

"We need to talk," Alisse said, holding up Ava's memoir. "Wait, what's going on? You look a mess. Your eyes are bloodshot red and you smell like alcohol. Where are the kids?" Alisse asked in a hostile tone.

"Alisse, now is not the time! What do you want?" Ryan yelled.

"This, Ryan," Alisse said pointing to Ava's book. "Shit just got real. You got bigger problems. Now I got to steer my niece and nephew away from the mess you made," she said, throwing the book at him.

Pain and Joy

The last couple of weeks had been hell. Angela had picked up the phone a few times and dialed Ava to vent, and then realized she was no longer here. Angela wanted to go to her grave just to talk, and then remembered that Ava had been cremated.

Angela tried to help Alisse put out fires and steer Abbie and Jaxon away from the media since Ryan was catching hell himself due to Ava's memoir. Angela had read Ava's book from beginning to end like she'd always done with Ava's other books. The memoir was her best work simply because it was her own story. Angela found out things she hadn't known. Now she truly understood why Ava had put up with Ryan and his infidelities. Ava had kept a journal throughout her life, which Angela had never known about. It detailed her childhood, and things about her father, marriage, author status, and battle with cancer. She had also inserted pictures that made it so real.

Ava's father, who she never talked about and who Angela assumed was dead, had tried to molest her when her mom was asleep and found Elaine behind him with a bat as he lay on top of Ava. Angela had spoken with Alisse about the issue that led the girls to pretend that their father was dead. They had packed up, moved, and never looked back. It was something that Ava had pushed out of her mind. Alisse did mention that their dad had shown up at one of Ava's book signings but, other than that, they had no clue where he was.

Angela sat at the table looking through the book and reading online reviews from Ava's book when Carl walked in.

"Hey, beautiful," Carl said pecking Angela on the cheek. "What's

going on, or should I ask how your day was?"

"Nothing. I'm just reading the comments and reviews about Ava's book. Other than that, my day has been okay."

"Speaking of the book, everyone is talking about it. I've read a couple of chapters and was blown away. Then the pictures of Ryan and Sharon got everyone at the office talking. We haven't seen Sharon since Ava's passing. I wonder how she feels about the situation," Carl said popping open a soda.

"That poor Sharon doesn't have any feelings because if she did she would not have slept with Ava's husband," Angela said just thinking about the time she last saw her at the restaurant. "Right now Ryan really does need some support. This is just karma coming back at him because of how he treated Ava. She made sure he would get his after she was gone."

"I heard Sharon wanted those pictures removed and contacted an attorney."

"Yes, I also read that online. The only thing that could be done would be to blur out the faces going forward when they reprint editions because so many have already been distributed."

"It's a really crazy situation, yet sad."

"Sharon was so proud to have Ryan on her arm in public while he was still married. And she had opened her legs to him, but now she is embarrassed," Angela said. *Just like a trifling female*, she thought.

"I think when or if Ryan decides to come back to work, he will lose the contract he has with Sharon due to their involvement. I tried to tell him, but he was in way over his head."

"The kids are coming over this weekend, if you don't mind."

"Not a problem. I can imagine Ryan needs a break with all he's got going on. I called him, but he hasn't returned my call."

Angela heard Chrissy running down the steps yelling, scaring the shit

out of her and Carl. "Mom, Auntie Lisa said answer your dang phone. Auntie Karen's on the way to the hospital to have the baby," Chrissy said catching her breath.

Angela jumped out of the chair, searched for her phone, and realized it was in her purse on silent. "Shoot!" she said trying to retrieve it. Angela saw the missed calls and texts from Karen and Lisa.

Carl was standing in the way. Angela pushed past him to find her shoes.

"Mom, can I go with you and see the baby?" Chrissy asked.

"Sure, baby. You better hurry."

"Babe, Chrissy don't need to see all of that stuff," Carl said sternly.

"Good Lawd, she's not going in the delivery room, Carl!" Angela said locating her shoes, keys, and purse.

Chrissy was right behind her. They both headed for the door.



Finally at the hospital, Angela had time to call Alisse and tell her about Karen, who was in the delivery room having contractions and waiting for an epidural. Karen had dilated five centimeters so far, and she was in so much pain.

Lisa walked over and asked Chrissy what she was doing there.

"I want to see my new relative," Chrissy joked.

Lisa then came over and sat beside Angela, "You know, I wish Ava could be here."

"Me too. I think about her every day, Lisa. It's still so unreal."

They got up and looked through the door at Karen who looked as

though she was in major pain. Karen noticed them at the door and yelled, "I can't do this shit anymore!"

"Relax, Karen, and breathe," Angela said.

"Breathe my ass!" Karen shot back.

As they stood there, Angela noticed Abbie and Alisse walking toward her.

"Auntie Angela," Abbie said, running into her arms.

"Hi, sweetheart. It's good to see you!" Angela said embracing her.

Then Abbie embraced Lisa.

"Thank you for bringing her," Angela said to Alisse.

"We're taking Ava's place," Alisse said, smiling.

Angela held her hand and smiled back, just knowing Ava was already there.

Abbie spotted Chrissy and jetted. They all stood there and watched Chris hold Karen's hand. They all felt Ava's presence at that moment.

They sat briefly listening to Chrissy and Abbie talk nonstop while playing with their iPods. It was good to see Abbie smile. Moments later, Chris called for the girls to come in the delivery room. Alisse stayed back with Chrissy and Abbie. Angela and Lisa entered the room. Angela held one of Karen's hands, while Chris held the other. Lisa tried to relax Karen as she pushed. After a twenty-minute battle of huffing and puffing, the baby finally popped out and what followed was a hot mess.

"It's a girl!" the nurse announced.

Everyone was overjoyed, but Lisa almost passed out. Karen lay back trying to catch her breath after all that pushing. Chris cut the umbilical cord as Angela watched Karen wipe tears of joy from her eyes. The baby cried as the nurse got her cleaned and weighed her.

"She's healthy at eight pounds and five ounces. She's a big girl," the

nurse told everyone.

Chris took the baby from the nurse and kissed her. Nobody was sure where Karen had found Chris, but he was defiantly a keeper. Angela went to the door and motioned for Alisse and the girls to come in. They all stood around watching Karen with her newborn. She was so happy. This was the same woman who'd said she didn't want kids, but now she was happier than anyone had ever seen her. Angela heard Chris on the phone calling their parents to tell them the news. He wanted his mother and father to bring his daughter by to meet her new sister.

Karen motioned for them all to come closer. "These are your aunts and cousins," Karen said to the baby.

Chrissy and Abbie were excited.

"She's so pretty!" Chrissy said.

"What's her name?" Abbie asked.

"Ava...named after your mom," Karen said.

Abbie put her hand over her mouth and turned to look at Alisse who was holding her.

"Thank you, Auntie Karen. Mom would like that."

They all were emotional at that moment. "Ava is here with us. I felt her and y'all know she would've said, 'Karen push harder, damn it!'" Karen said, laughing through tears.

They all laughed knowing she would say that, but she would also be very happy and proud.

"Another Ava, huh? I wonder if she's going to act anything like my sister," Alisse said.

"I hope not; we already have an Abbie who is the spitting image of Ava," Lisa said laughing.

They all stayed awhile, but left later to give Karen and Chris some

space as other family members started to arrive. Angela was so glad all her girls had found nice guys and were in a place in their lives where they could focus on everything that mattered. Ava had put them all together, and for that Angela was grateful. She knew what true friendship was all about. The bond they shared would remain as they stuck together. Through the pain there was also joy.

This Too Shall Pass

After weeks of putting the finishing touches to Ava's last project, the moment had finally arrived. The premier and screening of Ava's debut movie, "If This World Were Mine," was now a reality. Alisse had been working day and night to make sure her sister's legacy lived on through her books, her movie, and her children. She had also signed on to become a spokesperson for Susan Wright, an ovarian cancer fighter who had won her battle with ovarian cancer, launching the fight against the disease and making it a movement.

Alisse was so excited about being a spokesperson and also getting Abbie involved. Alisse had promised Ava that she would do everything in her power to end ovarian cancer—learning, understanding, and talking about the disease to help others become survivors since this disease is considered a silent killer among women.

As she selected the dress she was going to wear to the premiere, she noticed a separate text message from Abbie and Jaxon. She smiled as they sent photos of their attire. They were ready to go. She had to hurry because the limo would be there shortly. She showered before she slipped on the red one-shoulder strap gown she had chosen to wear because red was Ava's favorite color. She put on Givenchy signature sandals to match. She had hired Ava's makeup artist from her fortieth birthday party to assist her and do her hair. Elaine was already downstairs dressed and waiting for Alisse. An hour later Alisse emerged, looking like a million bucks. The limo arrived just in time, rallying Elaine who had dozed off waiting for Alisse.

"Dang, what took you so long? The movie is probably over," Elaine said.

"Perfection, Mom, perfection," Alisse said grabbing her clutch.

They were heading to the AMC Hollywood Cinema along with several of Ava's friends she had worked with, other authors, and family members. Several celebrities would also be in attendance. Alisse was nervous and sweating at the same time.

Elaine noticed Alisse's anxiety as well. "Girl, what's wrong with you? You're shaking and ruining your makeup," she said.

"I don't know. I just wish Ava was here. Mom, I really hope this event will turn out alright. I just want to make her proud."

"Alisse, sweetheart, you already have," Elaine leaned over and put her hand on Alisse's knee. "Baby girl, you did well. Don't worry so much. Ava is looking down at you clapping. I wish she was here, too, so she could see all that she was aiming for and that she finally did it."

Alisse pulled out the picture she had stuffed in her clutch of Ava and smiled. "She will always be with me."

Arriving at the venue was like a dream come true. Alisse had never been to a premiere, so didn't know what to expect. The press was everywhere outside of the red carpet that met them as they exited the limousine. Fans were there as well, watching as people arrived while yelling. *This is something else!* Alisse thought.

"This is overwhelming," Elaine, said looking at the crowd.

They exited and walked the carpet. Photographers took their picture as they entered.

"Ava! Ava!" Alisse heard fans yell.

Alisse looked back to see Abbie, Jaxon, and Ryan exit their limo. Jaxon was wearing a shirt designed with Ava's picture and the word "MOM." The crowd went wild.

"RIP Ava, we love you," a fan said.

Elaine and Alisse waited for them to enter. A journalist tried to ask Ryan questions and Alisse heard one say, "Ryan, why did you do it?"

Ryan smiled and kept walking. They all greeted each other and walked around the rope that led them to the VIP area.

"Alisse," Elaine called out, Ava's agent. "Hi, kids, Mama Elaine, and Ryan," she added as she hugged Abbie and Jaxon.

"Everything looks nice," Alisse said.

"Thank you. It's all for Ava. This is a big deal. The movie was given five stars from the Global Chain Theater Production. That's great! This is Ava's moment," Elaine said.

They all continued to walk, take pictures, meet and greet, and answer questions before finally taking their seats. The crowd clapped as they all entered. There was an announcer at the top. The theater was already jam-packed with people. Alisse saw the girls and waved at them as they sat on the opposite end. There was an introduction before the movie. The lights went out, and the movie began.

The movie was full of anger, resentment, secrets, and laughter among the characters. The main characters were gay. They kept seeing the opposite sex not disclosing their sexual orientation and it caused so much drama, putting others lives in jeopardy.

"I couldn't believe that shit really happened." Elaine mumbled. Alisse was laughing at the fact that her mom was cursing the entire time.

The movie took the audience on a roller coaster ride. There was so much emotion tied to the movie that people were in tears. After watching the full one hour and fifty-three minutes of "If This World Were Mine," Alisse had tears in her eyes. Elaine was already wiping her face. Everyone applauded and smiled as the ending was a special dedication to Ava. Ryan hugged both of the kids as he, too wiped tears from his face. The lights came

on, and Elaine, Ava's agent, stood up to speak.

"I'll like to give praise to Ava. She is one hell of a woman gone way too soon. She has definitely left us with a banger. Her work will live on, and I'll make sure of that. To her family, friends, and colleagues, I want to extend a special thank you to all for coming out and supporting Ava. She is smiling down with a stamp of approval. This was a remarkable experience, and I was glad to have worked with Ava and be a part of something that was phenomenal."

After the viewing, Alisse had a chance to sit down with different networks in attendance to help promote the movie and talk about the disease that took her sister's life. Afterwards they all went into the ballroom for food and drinks as Alisse met up with the girls to ask what they thought about the movie.

"Ava was great at producing behind the scene. I mean the actors and concept were a dream come true," Lisa said.

"Just imagine if Ava was here what she could have become. Now it's up to us to make sure her legacy lives on," Karen added.

Angela was silent. She knew she was thinking about Ava, so she didn't interrupt her thoughts. As they all gathered for a toast, Abbie and Chrissy walked over with their cups of grape juice, holding them up. The girls counted down. Ryan, Carl, and the other fellas stood and talked. Moments later, their laughter turned into frowns as Lisa noticed Sharon pushing her way through the crowd. She handed Ryan some papers. She looked pregnant.

All Alisse heard was Ryan shouting, "Sharon, you've got some nerve. How did you get in here anyway?"

"Just know you've been served. I'm suing Ava's estate for posting those pictures of me in her book without authorization!" Sharon yelled in

Ryan's face.

"You won't get a dime! You're just a money hungry-thirsty bitch, Sharon. Get the hell out of here!" Ryan said in a tone that shocked everyone.

"Bitch, Ryan?" Sharon said in anger.

Alisse then signaled for security to come throw Sharon out.

"This bitch is something else! Ava is no longer here, and she's still popping up at every event. I'm about to whoop her ass myself," Angela said.

Elaine realized where the commotion was coming from and told Sharon to leave or she would throw her out herself.

"Ryan, you will never see your child," Sharon yelled.

"Is she pregnant with your child?" Elaine asked Ryan, demanding an answer.

"Dad, what did she just say?" Abbie asked him, not realizing she was still there.

"That baby is not mine!" Ryan said snapping at everyone looking in his direction.

Alisse directed security in Sharon's direction as Angela and Lisa walked behind her. People were starting to look in their direction as a result of the commotion, and Alisse felt embarrassed. Elaine was very upset as well.

Alisse heard a loud scream, and people started running to see what was going on. As Alisse approached the crowd, she saw Sharon on the floor holding her stomach in pain. Sharon didn't notice the steps as she stormed off in a rage. Alisse looked on and shook her head in disgust. Angela and Lisa smirked. They both looked at each other and turned around as they started walking back to the party. Alisse did the same. None of them gave a damn. Alisse heard Sharon scream, moan, and cry. None of that fazed her. "Sharon got what she deserved!" Alisse said.

Trouble Don't Last Always

Sitting outside the waiting room and learning that Sharon had lost the baby at fifteen weeks was difficult in a way. Ryan was relieved, but he felt bad in a sense. Ryan peeped in the room where Sharon lay in a daze, and then he walked back to the waiting area.

The doctor had explained that the baby would not have made it anyway due to the fall that caused the placenta to detach. Sharon blamed herself for causing a scene and being angry. Ryan would not have come to the hospital if it hadn't been for Carl. The kids went home with Alisse after the incident, and Abbie wasn't speaking to him. Ryan needed to sit down and talk to the kids about this woman. Too much had happened, and the media had put a spin on everything, making the situation seem worse than what it really was.

Ryan looked up and saw Sharon's mom walk by with Tiffany and one of her close friends. Ryan really wanted to make sure everything was good so that he could leave. Carl had texted Ryan, and he'd texted back, updating him on Sharon's status. Ryan then called Alisse to make sure the kids were okay. She kept the conversation short.

"Hi, Mr. Decree, Sharon would like to see you now," the doctor stated.

Ryan got up, tempted to leave. "Doctor, is she going to be okay?"

"Yes, sir. She's just traumatized after losing the baby. Give her some time. She was really looking forward to having this baby, but she really needs your support right now," the doctor said and walked off.

Ryan headed down the hall and opened the door to Sharon's room, where all eyes were on him.

"The man of the hour," Sharon's mom said, rolling her eyes.

"Hi to you as well," Ryan spoke. He looked at Sharon. Then spoke with Tiffany and hugged her. Sharon's mom had her friend take Tiffany out the room. "Sharon, how are you?"

"Ryan, I lost our baby! So you can say I'm a mess right now."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, right. You say you're sorry for sure, but you're happy on the inside. You didn't want Sharon to have this baby. You're married for God sake!" Sharon's mom interrupted.

"Mom, please," Sharon said.

"Sharon, it's okay. I'm going to leave. I will talk to you soon," Ryan said trying to keep his mouth closed so he wouldn't curse her mom out. Ryan wasn't going to tolerate her bullshit and backlash any longer.

Sharon pleaded for him to stay, but he walked toward the door. Sharon started blaming her mom for him leaving.

Once Ryan left the hospital, he promised to leave everything that had to do with Sharon there. No more going backwards. He didn't plan on talking to Sharon soon. She had cost him enough. It was getting late, and Ryan was exhausted.

He drove home, thought about picking the kids up, but decided he'd deal with them tomorrow. He turned on the radio and listened to a radio personality who was at the event, talking about the viewing party. He spoke highly of Ava's debut movie and asked everyone to keep her family in their prayers. Ryan didn't hear any negativity for once, but the focus was on how good of a mentor Ava had been.

Ryan listened to the quiet storm on the radio, and he heard Whitney Houston's song, "Why Does It Hurt So Bad." He immediately broke down in tears and had to pull over. Ryan rested his head on the steering wheel as he

sobbed. *If I could get one more chance with Ava, I would do things differently*, he thought. Ryan didn't even notice Ava or how sick she had become, and she was a woman who lived in the same house as he did.

Ryan picked up the phone and dialed Carl a couple times, then hung up. He called back, but he didn't answer. Ryan got himself together to continue driving. He wove out of his lane a few times as his thoughts flashed back to Ava. If things had been good between them, he could have helped her beat that cancer. The thought of her going through her sickness alone was beating him up inside. Ryan drove until he reached his subdivision and pulled up in the driveway. He didn't bother pulling up to the garage. Instead he got out and looked at the manicured yard and the flowers that were neatly planted. He walked over and started pulling every single flower out the ground.

"Why? Why, God? Why did you take her from me? Are you punishing me?" Ryan yelled, kneeling down and sobbing in the flowerbed.

Ryan couldn't help how he was feeling, and he couldn't take it anymore. Ryan felt a hand on his shoulder. He jumped and turned around to Angela and Carl. Ryan then grabbed Angela's legs and started sobbing again.

"Ryan, please stop! You're going to wake the neighbors. I know you're hurting, but Ava wouldn't want you to feel sad. She loved you."

Carl pulled Ryan up and hugged him.

"Man, Angela is right. Ava only wanted you to be happy. She made that clear."

Ryan stood there with tears and snot running everywhere.

"How could Ava want me happy when I cheated on her, Carl? I hurt her so bad, and look what it did to Ava and our family. And you think she would want me to be happy?"

"Yes, she would, Ryan. You have no idea how much that woman

loved you. At times it made me mad, but Ava's love was unconditional," Angela said to Ryan, demanding that he pull himself together.

"Ryan, where are your keys? Let's get you in the house," Carl insisted.

Ryan gave Carl his keys and followed him. He was a mess. Life had changed, and the one person he could count on was no longer there.

Angela fixed Ryan a cup of tea while he went upstairs to clean himself up. A little while later he came back downstairs. "Guys, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break down like that and for you both to come running to my aid. I had a moment because I miss the hell out of my wife."

"What are friends for? I knew something was wrong when you kept calling and hanging up. We all miss Ava too," Carl said.

Ryan sat down, and Angela handed him the tea. They all talked for awhile and recapped the incident that had taken place at the viewing party. Ryan eventually would have to talk about Sharon's appearance, so what better time than now?

Ryan looked around the room and everything was Ava, Ava, Ava. The room seemed to be spinning. He shut his eyes because he was seeing things and felt her presence. Ryan stood up and reached his hands out to her.

"Ryan, what's wrong man?" Carl asked.

"Ryan, what are you reaching for and what do you see?" Angela asked.

Ryan ignored Carl and Angela as he continued looking over in one direction. He saw Ava's face from the picture on the wall, and it appeared to be her in the flesh walking toward him. Ryan started sweating as she got closer and didn't know what to say. He held his arms out for her and he smiled, calling her name. He walked over to meet her and then, all of a sudden, Ryan stumbled and fell over on the couch.

Catfight

Days had passed since Ryan's melt-down. Carl and Angela had left him on the couch as Angela slipped a small dose of Benadryl in his tea. She was hoping the Benadryl would make him drowsy, although she knew he had been drinking earlier. Ryan was going through spasms of guilt brought on by Ava's death.

Alisse stopped by Angela's, and they talked about how well Ava's projects were doing since her death, as well as Alisse being the spokesperson for the Susan Wright campaign against ovarian cancer. They also discussed the kids and how Ryan had the family in counseling, which Angela thought was great to help deal with all of the issues that had surfaced.

"You know, Angela, I said it best: What goes around does come back around," Alisse said as she sat on the barstool.

"You're right! I really feel sorry for Ryan, but I also felt my best friend's pain. You have to always treat people like you want to be treated."

"I do know and feel that Ryan is really sorry and that, if he would have known about Ava's illness, he would have made some changes. But why would she have had to be sick for him to change, I wonder," Alisse said as she thought about the situation.

"That is something we will never know, but I do know Sharon thought she would end up with Ryan. You see how quickly the tables turned on that home wrecker. God don't play! There is never a happy ending for women who open their legs to married men. You feel me?" Angela said to Alisse who gave her a high five.

Angela cleaned the kitchen and grabbed her purse so they could head over to the spa and meet the other ladies. Angela was overdue for a back

massage. Alisse talked nonstop on the drive to the spa. Angela wanted to tell her so badly to hush just for a moment so she could listen to the radio, but decided to let her babble. For once, Angela could not wait to get to the spa. She then noticed Karen and Lisa as they approached them. Lisa checked them all in as they waited for a moment. Then they followed the Chinese lady into a room of luxury and changed into their attire that was laid out for them to put on. There was a room full of chocolate, appetizers, fruit, water bottles, and a bottle of wine.

When Angela went out into the hall on the other side, there was a fish aquarium. They all headed up to the rooftop that overlooked the shores of Lake Tahoe. It was nice. This was Angela's first time at this spot, and she could see why it cost so much because everything was gorgeous. There was a section reserved just for them. The area was full of nothing but the best, including wine and light appetizers to go with the pampering.

"I could get used to this," Karen shouted running a strawberry through the chocolate fountain.

"Yeah, this is where all my money went, but I won't complain," Angela said.

They all headed to the massage tables. The masseuses were ready for them. As the masseuse kneaded deeply into Angela's back, she started drifting off. Then Alisse started babbling again. The conversation changed when Lisa started talking about crazy shit that had them all laughing out loud.

The spa outing was just what they'd all needed. They all agreed to do it more often. Since Ava's death they all couldn't get it together, but knew they had to continue living and keep her memory alive.

"So, how is baby Ava, Karen?" Angela asked.

"She's good. She's growing so fast. I wish I could pause time. My baby girl is not a baby anymore," Karen said.

"Naw, Karen, let her grow up. You're already complaining about not getting enough sleep!" Lisa said while laughing and throwing a grape at Karen.

Shortly after the massage, Angela headed over to get a facial and a manicure. She thought it felt so good to relax for a moment until she heard Alisse talking Lisa's head off while they enjoyed foot scrubs. Karen was laid out in the tanning bed. Angela glanced up and noticed how Lisa was throwing back one glass of wine after another while she tried to tune Alisse out. Angela laughed and placed the cucumbers back on her eyes, shaking her head. Hours later they all felt rejuvenated, so they decided to have dinner on the mountaintop before heading back. They had to hurry and get dressed because there was another party waiting to use the room to change. Angela was dressed first and decided she would go check them out and wait in the lounging area.

Angela went to the front desk and picked up their care package that the staff gave to all parties after their visit. She signed them all out. As Angela turned around, she bumped into Sharon and some friends.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. Oh, I remember you, *Lisa*, right?" Sharon said.

"No, it's *Angela*."

"That's right. How could I forget?" she said grinning as if something was funny.

Angela smiled at her and thought that some people you would just have to play nice to, but this chick was different.

"How is Ryan? The baby? Oh, that's right, I remember. You didn't end up with either," Angela said, bursting her bubble.

"Oh, that was cold!" one of Sharon's friends said.

"You are such a bitch!" Sharon said in anger. "How dare you bring up

my baby? Ask Ryan about us," she mouthed off, looking pathetic.

"Your ass just seems to pop up everywhere these days, Sharon. You're kinda like a popcorn whore!"

"Oh, I got your popcorn whore!"

At that time, the rest of the girls approached the area.

"Is there a problem?" Lisa asked.

"No, just playing catch up with this home wrecker," Angela said.

"I'm not going to take anymore of your name calling and bullshit, Angela! You don't know me. I would hate to bust your ass in the mouth!" Sharon said as she started getting loud in the lobby, showing out for her girls.

"Woman, please. I know that you're a trifling bitch that will do anything to fuck another woman's man!"

Angela must have struck a nerve. Sharon slapped the shit out of her. Before Angela knew it, she kneed Sharon's ass in the gut. Management ran out just in time because it was going to be on between Sharon's crew and Angela's.

"I'll see you in the streets," Sharon yelled as they were whisked away to their room. At that moment, they all exited the spa standing in the front entrance as Alisse said she forgot her makeup bag and went back in. Angela was so frustrated, she wanted to go in and whip Sharon's ass for the sake of Ava. Lisa stayed ready, and Karen just always went with the flow.

"Alisse's ass didn't forget her makeup bag, it's right here!" Lisa said pointing to it.

They all went back in because Angela had a feeling that with Alisse being Ava's sister, she was going to make sure Sharon knew it. The front desk clerk called the management staff as they hurried to find Alisse.

Lisa opened the door to the changing room and as Angela had thought: Alisse and Sharon were neck and neck. Everyone stood by and

listened. Angela watched Sharon's friends closely in case one of them wanted to jump bad.

"Too bad your sister isn't here to defend herself," Sharon said to Alisse wondering why she was in her face.

"It's too damn bad, but that's okay, Sharon. As I recall my sister was too white to be married to a black man. As I recall that ass of yours wasn't good enough to keep the same black man you've opened your legs to," Alisse said to Sharon with a smirk on her face.

"Damn, I know that stung!" Lisa hollered.

"Another thing, Sharon, what's your take on interracial relationships? Is it supposed to be blacks date only blacks, and whites date only whites, huh?" Alisse asked boldly.

"Oh my," Angela heard someone say.

"Girl, I'm not going there with you. You don't know the story, and you're clearly angry over something you know nothing about," Sharon said, raising her voice.

Before Alisse could speak, there was a knock at the door. One of the staff peeped in, stating the masseuses were ready for Sharon's party.

Angela signaled for the girls, but Alisse wouldn't budge. Angela figured that woman was not worth their precious time. They'd already spent enough energy on her as it was.

"That's what I thought!" Alisse said. "Ladies, don't let this chick fool ya. I know all too well," Alisse said to Sharon's friends and walked out. The girls all followed in a single file line like puppies.

"I hear them bitches in there talking," Lisa said.

"Let 'em talk. Hell," Angela said.

They all burst out in laughter at what had just happened, Wow! What a day. Angela couldn't stand that damn girl. Sharon just did something to her.

Angela cringed at females like her. They jumped on the shuttle that transported them to the mountaintop. The breeze felt good. Angela looked at Alisse and smiled.

"Did you want to whoop Sharon's ass?" Karen asked Alisse.

"Oh, hell yeah, for my sister's sake. I was tired of her mouthing off like she was a victim. I couldn't sit back and not say anything. I wanted to hit her, but I know I would have gone to jail since I went back in there like a fool."

"Talking about you left your damn makeup bag..." Karen said laughing.

"Hell, I wouldn't have cared. Y'all asses would have bailed me out," Lisa said, laughing. "I was waiting on something to pop off."

"Girl, I spent all my money at this luxury spa. Ain't nobody got time to be getting you outta jail," Angela said.

"You just better be glad she slapped your ass first and it got stopped before you really went in on her ass, or you would have needed me to come get you out of jail," Lisa said.

"That's right," Karen said.

Angela shook her head. They made their way to the mountaintop, and the set up was nice. After that encounter with Sharon, Angela couldn't wait to sip something. They all made a toast to Sharon's dumb ass and were glad they didn't have to beat nobody down!

"To the whores all over the world...karma is a bitch!" Lisa yelled.

"Oh, hell naw," Angela said.

As they downed a bottle in a quick five minutes, Angela couldn't help but notice that this crew was all right with her. *My girls*, she thought, *my girls*.

When Guilt Sets In

After the girls had dinner on the mountaintop, they ended up at Sax Contemporary Lounge to hear some live music where the Blueprint band was playing. Alisse thought it was a nice and relaxing evening with the girls after all the chaos that had happened earlier. Alisse looked around the room and saw how couples were reacting to one another as well as the singles that were out prowling. The band was playing while she sat and looked at the crowd without noticing the guy standing in front of her asking for a dance.

The gentleman held out his hand, but Alisse said, "No, thank you."

He asked the other girls, and then finally moved to the other table after no one budged.

Lisa got up went to the bar. Karen kept texting Chris and checking on baby Ava.

"What's wrong?" Angela asked.

"Nothing. I'm just chilling," she said as she continued looking around. She felt like her zest for life had died when Ava died. Everything around her reminded her so much of Ava. She couldn't fill her shoes, but she was trying so hard to even fill in her absence with her girls.

Alisse looked at Karen and wondered what she thought of her...how she really viewed Ava. Then there was Angela who had it all together. How had she and Ava become best friends? What did they have in common? She wondered the same about Lisa. She was a free spirit just like Ava had been, but rough around the edges in ways.

Alisse started to get teary eyed and knew this was not the place or time. Ava had been gone for awhile now, but she seemed to always be with her wherever she went.

Angela slid over and pinched Alisse, "Shake it off. Ava is okay."

Alisse looked at her and smiled. "How did you figure I was thinking about Ava?"

"Girl, I know that look, and besides, your ass is about to cry!" she said laughing. "I find myself doing the same thing, and I have to shake it off. I miss my girl so much, but I know she would want us to be happy."

One thing for sure, Angela was right. She tried to enjoy the band and free her mind.

Alisse glanced at her phone for any missed messages. She read one from Justin about how much he missed her. The other one was from Abbie begging her to come and get her. She refused to stay with her dad. There was one text message after the other from Abbie. She tried calling her, but got her voicemail instead. She tried to reach Jaxon. He picked up, but Alisse could barely hear him with the band playing in the background.

Alisse asked Angela if they could leave since she'd ridden with her, but Karen said she'd take her because she had to leave and get back to her baby. She hugged Angela and Lisa, and exited the Lounge with Karen.

Unsure of what was going on, she had to get the kids. She had promised Ava that she would look after them. Karen drove, they talked briefly, and the ride back seemed like it had taken forever. She was finally picking her car up from Angela's house to head over to Ryan's place.

She called and notified Justin of her plans before heading home. She then called Ryan not knowing what to expect, but he didn't pick up. After driving for awhile, she finally reached their neighborhood and pulled into the driveway leaving the car running and ran to the door.

"Who is it?" Ryan asked.

"It's me, 'Lisse."

Ryan opened the door with a wife beater, sweats, and hair all over his

face, smelling like he'd been drinking.

"What are you doing here?"

"Abbie called me to come and get her. I tried calling you. What's going on, Ryan?"

"You tell me. You run over here every time the kids call like you're their mom, Alisse!" he said, being a smart ass.

"Yes, I do. Abbie and Jaxon are my sister's kids!"

Ryan got in Alisse's face, "They are *my* kids, Alisse. Whatever I say goes! My wife birthed them, not you!" he hollered.

"You mean the dead wife you cheated on, Ryan?"

"Is that all you got, Alisse? Ryan cheated, cheated, cheated, cheated, cheated! Damn you!"

"Stop it, you guys, stop it!" Abbie hollered as she entered the room hearing every word that had been said.

"I'm sorry, baby girl, I'm sorry," Ryan said as he tried to hug Abbie. Abbie then pushed him away.

Jaxon came down with an overnight bag and said he was going with Alisse.

Alisse asked the kids what was going on. "Dad's drinking habit...it's getting worse. The more he drinks, the angrier he becomes. I can't take it, auntie," Abbie said in tears. "Then I saw the disc mom recorded for dad. It breaks my heart to know he asked her for a divorce, while he was running around town with that lady, Sharon.

"Abbie, why did you watch that video? That was for your *dad*," Alisse said.

"Auntie, I already knew. I had heard it when Dad played it for himself. And then the lady showed up at the movie premiere. I had to see Mom and hear it for myself coming from her," Abbie cried.

Jaxon took the bags out to the car and didn't mutter a word. Alisse could tell Ryan's affair and poor choices were affecting the kids.

"Abbie, can you go to the car while I talk with your father?"

"Abbie, Jaxon, where the hell do y'all think you're going? I make the decisions around here!" Ryan yelled for them to come back into the house.

"Kids, keep walking," Alisse said.

Alisse closed the door and told Ryan to sit his ass down. He argued with her back and forth until he gave in. Finally, he sat down and listened to what she had to say.

"First of all, you are Jaxon and Abbie's father. But, as Ava had it in her will, they could live with me. Ryan you are in no shape to care for these kids at the present moment. *I* have the right to take them from you. Remember, Ryan, the kids have the option to live with me if they want to..." Before she could continue Ryan cut her off.

"So you're doing me a favor? Is that what you're saying?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. Look at you. You're drinking yourself to death. You don't know how to interact with those teenagers of yours. You are so torn about what has transpired in your life that you don't see the needs of your own children." Ryan got up, wiped sweat off his face, and headed toward Alisse. She stopped him dead in his tracks.

"You just have my kids back in this house by tomorrow afternoon. You hear?" Ryan yelled.

Alisse looked at him and turned and walked out of the door. This was an issue all by itself.



Alisse cooked the kids breakfast and promised to talk to them soon. Too

much was going on with Ryan. He needed to take care of himself before he could take care of Abbie and Jaxon.

Alisse knew Abbie was only acting out. Jaxon usually held everything inside until he exploded. Alisse wanted the kids to release whatever emotions they were holding onto so that they could move forward.

Jaxon walked into the kitchen, looking just like his mom, and sat at the table.

"Good morning," he said.

"Morning sweetheart. How did you sleep?"

"Good. But think I slept on the wrong side. My neck hurts."

Alisse fixed him a plate of his favorites. Then Abbie walked into the kitchen, looking tired with her hair all over the place.

"Good morning everybody," she said.

"Good morning. How did you sleep and why didn't you tie your hair up?" Alisse asked.

"Good! At least Dad's not here to yell at us like he does all the time," she said.

Alisse fixed Abbie a plate, and then she sat down with the kids at the table, and told them to start talking.

"Nothing is the same since mom died," Jaxon said.

"Dad is angry all the time. I asked him about that lady, Sharon, and he went nuts," Abbie said. "I even heard him talking to himself about how she'd ruined our family and he can never get mom back because of her," Abbie added.

"Is that right?" Alisse asked curiously. Ryan was really handling Ava's death in very unhealthy ways.

"Dad is drinking more and more. I never saw him that way before Mom died. He is not the same person, and I can't stand to be around him. I

want him to get help," Jaxon said.

"When I see that Sharon lady, I'm going to beat her ass, Auntie!" Abbie said.

"Abbie, watch your mouth!" Alisse snapped.

"Auntie, she is a whore that tried to tear our family apart. She slept with Dad while he was still married to Mom. So, yes I'm going to beat her ass!"

Alisse looked at Abbie and couldn't believe what she was hearing. What is the world coming to? Her mouth, her anger, and frustration were at another level. Cursing? Alisse was shocked.

"Abbie, watch your mouth! Your Dad's situation has nothing to do with you. Things happen, but you have to let adults handle their problems. It's not your responsibility to fix it," Alisse said snapping at her.

Alisse talked to the kids some more, but she knew she needed to talk to Ryan. She excused herself from the table and phoned him in the other room. Ryan sounded much better than he had last night. He agreed to come over so they could talk, and hopefully get everyone back on track.

The kids cleared the table as Alisse had told them to. They got dressed. Their Dad was coming over. They weren't pleased, but Alisse really needed to help them through this transition.

As time went by, Alisse phoned Angela, who had left her a message earlier to see if everything was okay since she had left the lounge in a hurry. Alisse filled her in, and she wanted to rush over. But Alisse told Angela to stay put. She would let her know about everything after their discussion. A little while later, the doorbell rang. It was Ryan. The kids didn't bother letting him in, so Alisse had to get the door.

Ryan greeted the kids and gave them both a hug before sitting. He looked sober and clean, which shocked them. Alisse motioned for Abbie and

Jaxon to take a seat as she sat across from them. Alisse started the conversation. She had written down notes based on what she'd gathered from the kids' earlier discussion with her. She handed a copy to Ryan.

As Ryan looked over the sheet, his eyes started to tear up. He immediately broke down in front of them all. Alisse didn't know what to do. She didn't know whether to simply watch him or grab some tissues. But all she could see was the image of her sister crying to her about how Ryan had treated her. Ryan looked remorseful as he cried to his kids. Maybe Alisse was still bitter about how he'd hurt Ava because she didn't run to his aid. She knew she had to get over the way Ryan dealt with the situation. Alisse sat there emotionless and watched in anger, but her God wouldn't let her stoop that low. She grabbed some tissue and went to Ryan's side. She tried to comfort him the best she knew how.

Ryan looked at the sheet again and apologized repeatedly to the kids, and he promised to be a better dad and not to drink again.

"I'm just trying to deal with Ava's death the best I know how. I hurt your mom badly, and now I'm hurting you guys. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" he cried out.

Jaxon hesitated at first, but then finally got up and hugged his dad. Alisse looked over at Abbie, who was also crying. She finally joined her brother, and gave Ryan a hug too.

"I know I haven't been the best father lately, and I'm sorry. Jaxon, I haven't been that man for you to look up to, and Abbie I haven't been the man you need in your life. I love you guys so much, and we need each other to get through this. Do you guys hear me?"

Alisse watched as the kids comforted Ryan, and then she exited the room to give them some space. She picked up Ava's picture off the console table and embraced it as if she was standing next to her.

"Sis, I sure do miss you," she mumbled, as Alisse heard Ryan tell Abbie she reminds him so much of Ava. *That she does*, Alisse thought.

Moving On

Sharon stopped by the house to tell Ryan she'd been transferred from her job. She also wanted to see how he was holding up. Although the kids were in school, Ryan tried to be cordial to her, but it was something about her being brave enough to stop by the place where Ava had once lived. It was disrespectful to not only him, but to Ava as well.

Therapy was really helping Ryan because he previously would have slammed the door in Sharon's face, but he had to remember that she was also a victim and didn't know how to let go of what they'd once had. Ryan stood in the door as Sharon talked.

"Ryan, I'm really sorry about Ava's passing. I dropped the lawsuit against her estate. I just did that because I wanted you to hurt just as bad as I was hurting." She also told him about the incident at the spa with the girls, and expressed remorse about what happened at the viewing party. She apologized for causing pain. Sharon claimed that she only wanted peace now, but she couldn't understand how Ryan had left her out in the cold after losing their baby. Ryan thought, *Here we go again.*

"Sharon, I'm truly sorry for my part in our affair. I did love you. Right now my life has totally changed. My kids are my first priority. Not only have you been through hell, my name is still being dragged through the mud by the media. I really do apologize," Ryan said to her as nicely as he could.

Sharon stood there teary eyed. She wanted to say something, but stood quiet for a brief moment. "Ryan, I loved you with all my heart and I still do. I had even started making wedding plans. I just couldn't understand how things went so right, but ended up to be so wrong. Tiffany started calling you Dad, and that meant a lot to me, but yet you abandoned us. I really don't

know how to deal with this.”

Ryan reached out and hugged Sharon because he really felt sorry for her, but at that moment he couldn't give Sharon what she wanted or deserved. Ryan was in a place to honor Ava and his kids, even if it meant being single for a very long time.

“God put us in positions sometime to make us realize things—even mistakes. Sharon, you are the most loving and caring woman I know, but I'm not the man for you. In due time, you will forget all about me. Time, sweetheart, time.”

"That's easy for you to say. I guess Ricky was right about you after all."

"I guess so...whatever that means. Look, I have to get back in and start dinner. Kiss Tiffany for me. And Sharon, I truly hope you find the happiness you deserve. I really do mean it. You're a good woman," Ryan said as he kissed her on the cheek before turning around to walk back in the house.

"Thanks. It's too bad it isn't you, Ryan It's too bad," Sharon said as she headed toward her car.

Ryan looked out the window and noticed Sharon sitting in her car crying. He had hurt her just as much as he'd hurt Ava. He looked up at Ava's picture and thought there wasn't a woman in this world that could take her place. Had Ryan known Ava was sick, things would have been a lot different.

Sharon finally drove off. As she looked back, she caught Ryan looking out the window. He jumped back and took a call from Carl.

"Hey, man. How are you?" he asked.

"I'm good. I'm taking it one day at a time," Ryan said, keeping it short.

"Good to hear. You up for dinner later?"

"Nah, I'll have to pass. I'm about to start dinner for the kids. How is work?" Ryan asked, wondering.

"It's work. There's been a lot of whispering about you know what, but nothing major. So when are you coming back?"

"I'm not sure, man. They took the contract I had with Sharon and gave it to Ricky after everything exploded in the headlines. So I'm not sure if I even want to come back to work. I really need to focus on the kids."

"What? Man, I had no idea! No wonder Ricky's walking around here like he is the man. Damn!"

Ryan listened to Carl a bit, and then his mind started wondering how would he make it staying at home. Ava didn't leave him anything, but he also had a couple of options. Ryan just didn't want to go broke in the process.

"Look, man, I have to go. I'll call you soon," Ryan said as he clicked the end button on his phone.

Ryan sat there contemplating his next move. He thought about starting his own company, but the more he thought about it, he wanted to work with Alisse on Ava's projects and get more involved with cancer awareness. He didn't know how Alisse would feel since they hadn't seen eye to eye lately, but it was worth a try.

He owed it to Ava to do right by her in death because he'd failed as her husband. The guilt was weighing heavily on him as the months went on. He still thought about her pretty face. Ava had always reminded him of the actress, Eva Mendes, with her almond complexion. He had told her that when he'd met her at the bank that she would be his wife, and that she was.

Ryan got so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't hear his phone ring. It was Angela, who was just checking in. He didn't answer because he didn't feel like talking to her, but he did phone Alisse.

Alisse agreed to hear about Ryan's idea and what he wanted to do.

And, of course, she thought it was about Ava's money and not her legacy. He pleaded his case to Alisse, but she wouldn't cut him any slack. He wanted to strangle her ass through the phone, but he kept his cool since she was Ava's sole executor. He felt like there wasn't a point in talking to Alisse. She was protecting Ava, and she didn't give a damn about his feelings.

Ryan hung up feeling like crap. "Asshole!" he muttered.

How could Alisse not let him be involved in Ava's projects? Alisse was like a sister to Ryan once, just like Ava had been his wife. He just knew that time played a part in everything. If only he could get that back...time...it was everything and more.

Epilogue

One Year Later

One year after Ava's death, Ryan was finally at a place where he had found peace. His life had changed dramatically. As Ryan left the podium after giving a speech in front of hundreds of cancer survivors, he felt a lot had been accomplished.

Joining Alisse and being a spokesperson on Ava's behalf had also brought Ryan and the kids closer. Abbie was now fourteen, and Jaxon was thirteen. They kept him busy nonstop. Ryan was more involved with Jaxon and his baseball as well as Abbie and her basketball.

He had been celibate for over a year and it was hard, especially for a man. He hadn't run into Sharon nor had he heard from her. He prayed that she had found happiness wherever her heart had opened. He had hurt her, as well as everyone else. And he hoped she, too, had found peace.

On the other hand, He was not looking for a mate. He'd gotten back into the church and talked with Pastor Boeing on a daily basis. Between projects and the kids, he didn't have time to date. Ryan saw Ricky from time to time at church, but not often. Alisse and Elaine had forgiven him, and they all agreed to move forward and bury the past.

He visited Lake Vale and talked with Ava on a regular basis to clear his mind. The kids and he had celebrated Ava's birthday, their anniversary, and Mother's Day, which would never change. One day he would see her again, and he promised not to let her slip away. He learned that it was the small details of their lives that really mattered the most, especially in a relationship. When the time came and it felt right, maybe he'd find someone just like Ava...but in due time. Right now, he embraced life and all that it had

to offer, while he kept Ava's legacy alive.

The End...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Starting out writing short stories, Bianca decided to write her first novel two years ago. After writing on and off Bianca knew it was time to complete what she had started. In a six-month time, not only was her first novel completed, but her second novel was birthed as well. With great imagination, creativity, and faith, Bianca's hobby became a profession in 2013.

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Much love,

Bianca

