

Chapter One

No

The Mysterious Package

It was one week from Ashley's seventeenth birthday and five and a half years since the death of her mother. Although their time together was bitter-sweet and short, she longed for her guidance and care. So much had changed about her since then, and she knew that Michelle would have been proud. Her once stumpy legs that knobbed when she walked had turned into long, shapely, and very feminine specimens. The guys at school complimented her all the time about them. Her breasts had filled out to enormous C cups, pretty big for an about-to-be-seventeen girl. They were brown and luscious just like her mother's. All of her baby fat had melted and toned into a perfectly taut body. She was her mother's replica indeed. Even Christian had taken notice, which is something her father and Jamal would certainly disapprove.

While Ashley stood at the mirror admiring her figure, she could hear her father shuffling around in the kitchen. She thought of Simone as sweet, but she had become all too comfortable with letting her father do everything. He cooked, cleaned, took care of her and Quinton, and the only things that Ashley could see that Simone was good at were sex and spending money-her money. Michelle was very specific about whom she want-

ed to have the money she left, and how quickly did Simone forget her betrayal. The smell of cinnamon applesauce and homemade biscuits awakened the late sleeper.

Simone's slippers scuffed on the carpet as she managed toward the bathroom. Her hair was a tangled mess, remnants of last night's passion. Ashley listened as Simone let out a pleasurable sigh before flushing the toilet, which was common on mornings when her hair looked as it did. She imagined that her dad put it on her again. Standing at the top of the steps, she watched the closed bathroom door, listening to her step mom sing jovially an old love song that she carried into the twenty-first century. It was so old that the only way one would hear it was to play an archive stored on an album. Ashley didn't dislike Simone, she just wished that she was the person she was before she married her father. They rarely spent time together and Simone barely made time to see Ashley dance at school when they had programs. She didn't blame her, she just wasn't her mother.

"Good morning, Ashley," Quinton said as he approached his big sister. He reached upward for his sister to pick him up and she did. He placed a kiss on her lips and hugged her as tight as his three-year-old arms would let him. He had big, brown, dopey eyes that were colored like her father's.

"The girls are going to go crazy over you when you get older," she teased him, referring to his eyes with exaggeratedly long lashes that reminded her of Mr. Snufalufagus from Sesame Street. She carried him down to the bathroom and set the water to a pleasant, warm temperature. When satisfied, she poured a capful of bubble bath into the stream of water and waited until the tub had just enough water and bubbles to cover his navel. She

removed her little brother's clothes and placed him into the tub. While he played with the bubbles, Ashley carefully washed his hair and face right down to his toes. When all was done, she wrapped him with a towel and carried him next door to his room. After oiling his skin and shining him up like a mirror, she dressed him in jeans and a white, dinosaur print turtleneck. Satisfied with his appearance, she helped him walk down the stairs to the kitchen where their father had finished fixing breakfast.

"Oh, my," he teased, "look how handsome you are. Someone must really love you." He kissed Ashley then gently took Quinton into his arms. Chris loved him so much. He brushed his massive curls back and watched as they sprung back into place. It was like seeing his daughter all over again, as that beautiful little person that she was, except this time he had a son. Although Simone wanted to name Quinton after his father, Chris refused, saying that Ashley was his junior; his first child and their relationship was so strong that he could never give another child his name. It was unsettling for Simone at first, but she soon realized that he loved Quinton just as much as he did Ashley. His choice was prudent as the relationship between he and his daughter grew stronger, and unbreakable-or so he thought.

Chris took in his daughter's attire and fought the urge to grimace. She wore a green-sheer patterned, poet-sleeved blouse with a matching chemise that showed off her perfectly full breasts. Her narrow waistline made them appear far bigger than they were. The olive, mole-skin, low-cut pants revealed her belly button and clung to every curve of her youthful body. She was growing all too fast for Chris. Ashley was very popular at school and keeping in line with fashion was important. Ashley was

extremely image conscious, and as independent as she was, she was still led by the crowd, despite the fact that she knew of his disapproval. Chris would kill anyone who touched his daughter in any way other than friendly. She now wore her curls in a wild shag that actually made her look cute, but in a mature way.

He pulled out a chair for her and once she was seated, he placed Quinton in a seat next to her and that's when Simone walked in. The three of them turned around to take in her presence. Ashley was amazed to see how quickly Simone was able to tame her hair into the flip that it was in. Her jet-black, dyed hair rested on her shoulders and flared four tiers of open curls. The sweet smell of her oil filled their nostrils. She melted into her husband's arms and enjoyed a tongueless, deep kiss. *As if she didn't get enough of it last night*, Ashley thought impenitently to herself. She turned to Quinton and made an ugly face and he laughed at his sister while not appreciating fully the nature of her humor.

"Good morning, guys," she sang cheerfully while positioning herself between the two seats and kissing Ashley and Quinton on the cheek.

Gee, she noticed us, Ashley thought again.

"That's a really sexy outfit you have on today, Ashley. All of that for school?"

This time Chris didn't attempt to hide his distaste. He didn't know why Simone entertained his daughter's new choice in clothing when she knew how he felt about it.

"Ashley, I really don't like you dressing like that," he said scooping scrambled eggs onto her plate. "I think it's too revealing."

"There's nothing wrong with the way I dress, Dad. I

don't know why you're making such a big deal about it. All the girls at school dress like this, so what's the big deal."

"All the girls at school aren't my daughter, but you are, and I know what dressing like that can lead up to," he retorted now making rounds with the grits.

Simone waved her hand no when he approached her plate with the grits. "No grits for me today. Thanks." She looked to Ashley then to Chris. "Ashley's a wonderful young lady, Chris. You don't have to worry about her getting into trouble with the boys."

He placed his homemade applesauce onto each of their plates. Ashley's stomach was churning. This was not the time to have this discussion. All she wanted to do was to have a quiet breakfast and hurry off to school so she could take the test that she had studied so hard for. By now, Chris had poured orange juice into all of their glasses and had taken a seat at the table.

"It's not Ashley that I'm worried about. Boys are tricky at this age, and I don't want my daughter to get caught out there with a baby. I shouldn't have to explain that to you, Simone."

"Chris, for goodness sake, we take her to school and pick her up. She doesn't have time to make a mistake like that. Jesus, if you become any more obsessive you'll sit in class with her. Ashley is about to become a young lady. This is the time you should be getting to know the woman she is about to become."

Ashley filled her mouth with applesauce and biscuit, nodding her head in agreement with Simone's proclamation. The discussion was taking a very unnecessary spin as Chris' frustration began to surface. Ashley was always careful not to get herself involved in these discussions.

"Why is it that every time I try to tell Ashley some-

thing for her own good, you always contradict what I tell her and regard it as nothing? This is my daughter we're talking about her, not one of your patients. Ashley is my daughter and I'm a man, and I know better than any woman how a man acts. If Ashley continues to dress this way, she will eventually sneak around and get herself caught out there with some half-wit boy's child." He turned to his daughter. "Ashley, honey, you are a beautiful young lady, but if you dress like this, the right man won't respect you. Give yourself time to grow up and understand yourself. Your body is a gift and it should only be given to someone special."

"Dad, we're talking about clothes, not boyfriends. I don't have a boyfriend, nor am I interested in one."

"But the image that these clothes present is that you are experienced and ready and willing to experience more."

"Dad, how could you say that?"

"Chris, stop it. There is nothing wrong with your daughter's clothes. She's a young lady and all the girls dress like that. It's the style of today. You want your daughter to be old fashioned? The shunned one in the school? The girls look up to Ashley and want to emulate her. Let her be who she is."

Everyone's attention turned to Quinton who had made a complete mess of himself. There were grits speckling his face and applesauce around his mouth. The sight of him was hilarious. They all broke out in laughter as Chris got a paper towel from over the sink and wet it so that he could wipe off his son's face. Simone watched proudly as Chris cared for his son. The doorbell rung twice and Ashley got up to answer it. She pushed open the swinging door and moved through the living room until

she was at the front door. She looked out through the adjoining window and there was a courier holding a package. She opened the door, and by this time, Chris and Simone emerged from the kitchen with Simone holding Quinton in her arms.

"Who is it, Ashley?" Chris asked as he quickly moved toward the door, noticing the unfamiliar man extending a package for Ashley. It was a small box that was big enough to fit two family-sized dictionaries in it.

"It's a delivery man, Dad. He has a package for me."

"For you?" Chris asked surprised. "Who is it from?"

"I don't know, it doesn't say."

"Can you sign for the package, sir?"

"Who sent this package to my daughter?" Chris demanded of the courier.

"Sir, you can call the number on this receipt and ask if that information is available. My job is to deliver packages to the allotted recipients. I don't even get the calls."

"Then we can't accept the package."

"Dad, don't you want to know what's inside?"

He signed the slip then took the package from Ashley and carried it over to the dining table. Ashley followed him. Chris tore into the box and found a book. Upon seeing it, he handed the box to his daughter, turning to Simone, "It's just a book."

Ashley dashed upstairs to her room with the box and shut the door. She was in that privacy stage and wanted to know privately what was in the book - "Memoirs of my Soul," she read on the cover. She opened the book and it was signed, *From mother to daughter with love, forever. Michelle.* Ashley quickly dropped the book on the bed. "Mom?" she cried.

"Ashley, come on, it's time for us to go!" Simone

called from downstairs, ready to take Ashley to school.

“Okay, I’ll be down in a minute.”

Ashley placed the book in her bag to read during lunch. She grabbed her jacket and slid her arms in, then quickly ran downstairs to join Simone in the car.