

Chapter 1

“You slept with my aunt?” Tori asked her fiancé, desperately trying to come to terms with the information her mother had blasted to everyone at the packed Thanksgiving dinner table. “Seriously? How is that even humanly possible when you didn’t know the woman four hours ago?”

Twenty-three pairs of eyes were now focused on the not-quite-blissful couple.

“What did you do?” Tori snapped, glaring up at Dallas. **[Naleighna, are they seated at the table with everyone else? If so, why is she looking up at him? If they are not, make it clear to the reader where they are located in the room.]** “Trip over the sheets, and your penis somehow landed in the vagina of a woman twice my age?”

The drumstick in Uncle Bill’s hand paused in midair on its journey to his wide mouth. Cousin Tiny’s fleshy hand flew to her overexposed bosom and now rested somewhere above her heart. Even Tori’s father’s frozen expression of alarm would have been Three Stooges comical if the situation weren’t so tragic. **[Naleighna, the way you balance the calamity of the opening paragraph with this sprinkle of humor in this paragraph is awesome writing.]**

Aunt Yoli was the first to recover. “Did she just say what I think she said?”

In unison, everyone nodded.

“Girl, shut the front door and run out the back!”

A few bursts of nervous laughter rattled around the table, but not nearly enough to chase away the uneasiness that flooded the room after Bernice had blurted out that she’d caught Alicia and Dallas together. Alone. In bed. In the nude.

Dallas Avery was the NBA's most valuable player, and a man most women would give their right and left ovary to call their own. But most eligible bachelor or not, he had set off Tori's bitch meter and it was in overdrive. Even with his chiseled, handsome face, towering muscular frame and million dollar bank accounts, he was now worth next to nothing in her eyes. Too bad her aching heart didn't get that memo.

"See, I told you Alicia wasn't worth a damn," Tori's mother crowed.

Tori didn't know if she was more enraged or hurt that her mother had been all too willing to drive this stake through her heart in order to publicly disgrace Alicia.

Bernice wore a satisfied smirk. "The angel of the family has fallen."

"Hey, Bernice," Bill roared with a hearty chuckle. "How come you checked to make sure that Alicia wasn't close enough to put a hurting on you before you said that?"

"You mean to put *another* hurting on her," Aunt Yoli added.

Instinctively, Bernice inched even further away from the dining room table. Her hands went up to the small scar on her neck, probably remembering that a year ago on this very same holiday, Alicia had ended a vicious blow-for-blow fight with a knife at Bernice's throat.

**[Naleighna, I shortened this to keep the pace fast-moving.]**

"Alicia had every right to take Bernice to the floor last year for that foul mess she said!" Aunt Yoli claimed **[Naleighna, I took out the part about her causing all thoughts of food to be forgotten because Bill is talking about food in the next paragraph.]** The rest of the family finally sprang to life, chiming in at once to defend Alicia, the one woman that everyone could count on to help in the time of need, to lend an ear when it was called for, and to dry a tear when no one else would bother to care. That she would do something as low as sleep with her niece's soon-to-be husband was unthinkable. So the family conveniently sidestepped that issue for as

long as they could.

“If Bernice had said that bull to me back then,” Bill responded, still trying to tackle the last of the drumstick, “an ass whipping would’ve been the least of her problems.” He beckoned toward the last slice of sweet potato pie at the other end of the table. “That has my name written all over it.”

“Alicia’s still got looks and all, but that young stud wouldn’t pick her over Tori,” Martha said flickering [**Naleighna, Flicker and flickering are used about 16 more times. Consider substituting other words.**] a glance toward Dallas. She leaned to her right and whispered loudly in Yoli’s direction, “But, girl, he is finer than frog hair.”

Yoli gave him a lusty once-over. “I’d give him some my damn self. He’s the type of man that can make a woman put a for sale sign on one thigh and an open for business sign on the other. Yes, Lawd!”

Conversation abruptly halted when Alicia brushed past Dallas, slipped into the nearest pair of shoes—her brother’s—and ran out of the front door, oblivious to the fact that she barely had on enough clothing to protect her from the chill in the room, let alone the sub-zero temps of a Chicago winter.

The whole crowd gasped in disbelief as Dallas sprinted from his place at the bottom of the stairs, grabbed his leather coat from the foyer closet and tore out the door after Alicia.

Tori was ready to spit fire.

*He’s going after my aunt? My aunt! It’s my heart bleeding all over the carpet.*

Angry voices volleyed about the dining room. None sounded more venomous than her parents, who had always argued about the close relationship between James and his sister.

Bernice’s head whipped [**Naleighna, various phrases using the word whip is used about 24**

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**times (heads whipping around or whipping about, certain emotions whipping through someone, people whipping off clothes). Consider substituting other words.]** around to her daughter.

“Girl, I taught you better than that,” she yelled. “You’d better go get your man!”