

## *Chapter 1*

Chriselle labored up the stairs. She walked past a few empty bedrooms and a full bathroom to the last room on the left. It was her daughter Leslie's bedroom. She entered the room with its soft orange sorbet colored walls, wood floors, white bedroom furniture and orange and fuchsia floral comforter. Sitting in the cantaloupe-colored chair near the window, Chriselle began to think about Leslie and Bryce's wedding earlier that day.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Chriselle reminisced about her daughter's wedding while pulling a tissue from the box sitting on the side table. Those words were life changing. They changed Chriselle's life when she said them over thirty years ago, and they changed her child's life today. Her last child, Leslie, was now officially someone's wife, complete with a change of address form and a moving van.

Chriselle remembered all those years ago when she said those same vows. She had dreams and thoughts about what her life would be like as a Mrs. She just didn't know how big those dreams were at the time.

The look of love in the eyes of Leslie and her new husband, Bryce, said it all. Their deep love and commitment was evident today. No one and nothing in the world could come between them today. Their minds couldn't even comprehend that anything in life could be better. However, sometimes things indeed change and you find out that "forever" means something much shorter.

The traditional wedding vows include a promise to stay together until death. Chriselle wondered if anything other than physical death counted. She felt like she died as a person, as a woman. All those years of raising children, taking care of a house, and over thirty years of being a wife caused her to forget what her life was like beforehand.

Gazing out of the nearby window overlooking the family's swimming pool, Chriselle realized Leslie wouldn't be home making blueberry pancakes for breakfast tomorrow morning. She wouldn't be sitting with Chriselle in the adult Sunday school class as she'd been doing since she became old enough to join her. Instead, she'd be in some exotic location enjoying her first days of marriage not even thinking about the fact Chriselle felt lost.

Chriselle moved to the bed and stretched her body across it, inhaling the residual signature scent of her youngest daughter.

Her thoughts shifted to the nights she sat in this bed with Leslie and read Bible stories. She recalled kneeling on this very floor with her to pray. The memory of Leslie announcing her engagement came to mind. That was when Chriselle felt she'd lost her purpose.

All of her children— three sons and two daughters—had gone on with their lives. How dare they do that? They must have forgotten everything she'd done for them. She wiped runny noses, spent more time in the emergency room than she cared to remember, attempted to mend broken hearts, kept them clean and presentable, and introduced them to Jesus Christ. And what did she get in return? She got an empty house. And she found herself resentful of it. Yes, they often came to visit and brought their spouses and children. Still, Chriselle was overcome by emotional and physical emptiness.

Drew, Chriselle's husband, came into the room just as she crushed her tissue and added it to the pile already established on the bed. She didn't want him to see her like this. She didn't want him to know about her pain. After looking into his eyes, she realized he already knew this pain almost as intimately as she did. He held her in his arms and stroked her hair, his best effort at comforting her. She didn't think he could feel it as deeply as she did. He had a life. She'd been a housewife and mother all these years. Now that the demands were different, Chriselle didn't know what to do with herself. Surrounded by Drew's arms, Chriselle couldn't remember the last time she felt the spark she and Drew once shared. She realized she didn't even feel a tingle. What happened to me? What happened to us?