

## Prologue

*Mia walked down the street in a hurry, she was late for school again. Mia knew her kindergarten class had probably started already because she was the only child in sight. Usually she walked to school with a fifth grader who lived across the street from her babysitter's house, but today Tracy was out sick.*

*"Maybe I should go back to Miss Mary's house so she can walk with me," Mia thought, but quickly dismissed the notion. She didn't want to upset her sitter. She knew it was time for Miss Mary's news show that she never missed. Mia had been a victim of Miss Mary's wrath once before when she asked her to walk her to school during this time and today would probably be no different.*

*As Mia turned the corner of Crum Ave., she slowed down to make sure she was going in the right direction. "Tracy always walks this way," Mia thought, as she continued. Mia looked up the hill and noticed a tall thin white man outside a house that was under construction. He wore an old, checkered brown and white shirt with dirty tan pants. Mia wondered if he was the new owner of the home or if he was one of the men she had seen after school working outside the house.*

*As Mia approached, she noticed the man smiling and waving to her. She waved back and proceeded to walk by him.*

*"Hi, little girl. What's your name?" He asked.*

*"Hi, I'm Mia," she said and stopped.*

*"Hi, Mia. I'm Michael. Are you on your way to school?"*

*"Yes," said Mia. "Do you live here?"*

*"No, but I'm helping the owners that live here build this brand new house, would you like to come in and see what I've done? I'm almost finished." Michael stretched his hand towards the house. "I could show you a brand new bathtub," he said.*

*"How can you build a brand new house all by yourself?"*

*Mia wanted to know. "Where are the other men that are usually here?"*

*"Today, everyone's working at another house. But I'm here to finish the plumbing. I need to catch up with my work, because I'm a little behind." Michael smiled at Mia.*

*"No, I don't think I can come in," said Mia. "I'm late for school and I don't want my teacher to get mad at me."*

*“Don’t worry about your teacher. It will only take a minute, and after you see the house, I’ll walk you to school. I’ll tell your teacher you got lost, and I found you, ok Mia?”*

*“Hey, you know what I just realized?” said Michael as he squatted down to Mia’s level. “Our names start with the same letter of the alphabet, Mia - Michael, get it? We’re already almost friends.”*

*Michael was such a nice man. Mia could tell and she really wanted to see the inside of that house. She’d never been in a brand new house before or seen a new bathtub. Her teacher had to understand, especially with a grown up bringing her to school.*

*Mia followed Michael into the house and looked around. The house had wooden floors and a really big living room. She walked into the kitchen and skimmed her fingers over the brand new stove, refrigerator, and counters. She ran from room to room in awe of all the amazing space. Her mother’s apartment was nowhere near the size of this place.*

*“How old are you?” Michael asked.*

*“I’m five. How old are you, Mr. Michael?”*

*“I’m thirty-nine. Kind of old, huh?”*

*Mia looked up at Michael’s face and noticed a few lines and wrinkles. “Yeah, I guess Mr. Michael.”*

*“Hey, I thought we were friends Mia? You can call me Michael.”*

*“No I can’t. My mom told me to call all grown ups Mister or Miss. She says it shows respect,” Mia smiled.*

*I understand was all Michael said as he smiled down at Mia.*

*“Can we go upstairs?” Mia asked walking towards the stairway. “I don’t have stairs where I live, but Miss Mary does. She lives around the corner in the blue and white house, do you know her?”*

*“No, I don’t Mia. You know, you’re a very smart young lady, are you sure you’re only five?”*

*“Yes, I just turned five in October,” Mia smiled, proud of the compliment.*

*“In school, don’t you usually take a bathroom break?”*

*“Uh-huh.”*

*“Well Mia, I’ll let you go upstairs after we go to the bathroom.”*

*“I don’t have to go to the bathroom,” protested Mia. “I went at Miss Mary’s house.”*

*“Yes, but don’t you want to be the first to use this bathroom?” Michael asked as he walked Mia towards the bathroom.*

*“When I was a little boy, I would have loved to use a brand new bathroom.”*

*Agreeing, Mia entered the bathroom. She turned around to tell Michael she'd be out in a minute, but he was right behind her. Mia looked up at Michael's face. His expression had changed. The lines on his face had deepened and his eyes looked enraged. This was not the man Mia befriended only moments ago. Michael walked towards Mia.*

*“I can go to the bathroom by myself,” Mia said, shyly trying to back away from Michael.*

*He grabbed Mia's arm and turned her around roughly. Michael shoved Mia violently forward and shut the door behind him. Mia started to scream, but it was too late. Michael lunged toward her and put his hand over her mouth, pulling her dress over her head.*

# Chapter 1

Mia woke up drenched in sweat, her alarm clock jangling.

Today was one of those days she could have stayed in her bed, under the sheets, but her instructor had warned students from the beginning against missing Saturday classes. Mia hung her feet over the side of the bed and rubbed her red eyes. The same horrible nightmare had haunted Mia for years; but Mia wished this had only been a nightmare. She also wished it was something she could forget... but how do you forget a monster? How does a five-year-old recover from stolen innocence and abused trust? Just like many molested children, Mia had to undergo years of therapy, and had actually lost most of her childhood memories. Now, sixteen years later, Mia struggled to maintain the boundaries between fact and fantasy. She relied on family stories her parents and siblings told her to place the broken pieces of her young life together. Mia didn't remember learning how to ride a bike, or blowing bubbles at the sky on hot summer days. She was robbed of the memories of innocent tea parties and the cheerful feeling all little girls have when they first learn to comb their doll baby's hair. For many years, Mia questioned the very existence of the God her Pastor tried to hammer into the congregation's head every Sunday. Maybe what she learned in school about evolution was true. Maybe God was just a myth, because Mia couldn't see how a loving, caring God could allow a five-year-old to go through such pain. Where was He when she was lying on that cold bathroom floor in her own blood? Did God forget Mia, or did He even exist?

Real or not, Mia had to believe in something or someone just to get some sort of serenity. If that meant believing in a God she really didn't know, then so be it. Mia walked out of her bedroom and into the bathroom. She turned on the shower and then turned to look into the mirror, her large eyes showing signs of her terrible nightmare. Mia knew she had to push her emotions to the side and snap to it if she was going to make it through the rest of the day.

After showering, Mia wrapped a towel around her thin frame and reached under the sink for the Comet cleaner. One of her stepfather Bruce's many rules was that the tub be cleaned after every use. There was an unspoken rule that when her stepfather said to clean the tub, he meant the entire bathroom. This rule applied to the kitchen as well. Mia scrubbed the tub, and then the toilet, sink, and finally she quickly wiped up the floor. Mia sometimes felt like the poor little girl from the movie, *Mommie Dearest*, who had to scrub like mad to keep her mother from beating her brains out. The house was kept immaculate, because everyone was expected to clean daily or suffer a fierce tongue-lashing from Bruce. Mia wanted to eventually find a place of her own, but the fear of being alone, plus the high cost of local apartments made that dream seem so far away.

After meticulously cleaning the bathroom, Mia quietly walked pass her parent's bedroom, careful not to awaken Bruce. For some reason, he was not too happy about her taking classes to become an Emergency Medical Technician. In fact, every time Mia talked to him about school, Bruce was against it. His attitude was shocking to Mia because he was always so serious about her getting good grades in high school. She was never allowed to get anything lower than

a B on her report card, so when she graduated from high school with a 3.6 GPA, Mia fully expected to go to college. But Bruce was totally against her going, and talked her into taking a job instead. Later, Mia's mother Helen told her that Bruce had a fear of Mia leaving home. He was afraid she'd never visit. Today, Mia worked her way through school without her parents help.

After quickly dressing and straightening her room, Mia wrote her father a note telling him where she would be; another one of her parent's requirements, even if they knew where she was going. Mia walked in the kitchen and placed the note on the refrigerator. She rushed out of the house and into her mother's car.

## Chapter 2

The last thing Mia wanted to do was spend the day at an abortion clinic with Karen. She watched her sister enter into a windowless red brick building. Before Karen disappeared behind the metal door, she turned and smiled nervously back towards the car. Mia pulled the car into the first free space she saw, and then reached behind her seat to grab her purse. This was the third time Karen had talked Mia into taking her to this God forsaken place, and Mia had no idea why she'd agreed to return.

Mia locked her mother's car door, then sat on the hood sulking. She pulled a cigarette out of her purse and lit it, focusing her attention on the Tuesday morning traffic rushing by. She drew hard on the cigarette, staring blankly ahead. Mia shook her head. Karen's attitude was appalling. She wanted what she wanted from Mia and everyone else around her. Karen expected total obedience and actually made Mia feel guilty about wanting to go to work today. Karen totally manipulated Mia because she knew Mia was weak. Karen's strong personality overpowered Mia for so long that it almost seemed unnatural for Mia to tell Karen no; or anyone else for that matter. The two sisters were like night and day; Karen was bold, confident, and very cocky. Mia was shy and withdrawn, and she let everyone around her dictate her every move. Mia flung her cigarette in the street and slowly walked towards the redbrick building. As she opened the doors of the clinic, she took a deep breath. *This is definitely my last visit.*

Karen Hall knew this place all too well, but for some reason this time seemed different. She still felt a cold unnatural feeling when she walked through the front door. Yet this time... she really didn't want to be here. She was sure of all her previous visits; but now the sickness in the pit of her stomach that started when she made her decision to terminate this pregnancy was back. Karen approached the junky reception desk and introduced herself to the receptionist. She was given a pen and clipboard with a number of papers, and told to have a seat in the waiting room. After finalizing the paperwork, Karen placed the clipboard back on the front desk. Just as she returned to her chair in the waiting area, the perspiring plump receptionist called her back to the front. This woman is actually using her fat hand as an imaginary fan. Karen thought.

"Hi, Ms. Hall. Is someone here with you to take you home after the procedure?" The receptionist smiled, but her eyes looked blank, as though not really seeing Karen.

"Yes, my sister, and I think that question was answered on the paperwork I just handed you." Karen stared back at the women.

The receptionist collected the fee from Karen then said

dryly, "You can have a seat."

Karen turned on her heels, irritated at the lack of organization. Within moments, a side door opened. Another very large woman dressed in purple scrubs came to the door.

"Karen Hall?" She called.

Karen stood, passed her purse to Mia, who was unusually quiet today, and followed the nurse into an examination room. Karen gazed with disfavor at the steel-gray walls and mangled carpet that appeared to have at one time been a lighter color than its present muddy shade.

Once they entered the small examination room, the nurse fired questions at Karen about her history, both mental and physical.

"Ok, Ms. Hall," she said, having recorded all of Karen's answers on paper. "I think we're done for now. Please take off all your clothes, including your undergarments, and put on one of the gowns in the drawer behind you. I'll go and get the doctor and then we can get started."

The nurse then turned and walked out the door. Karen could not help but laugh to herself at how much the nurse dressed in purple scrubs, reminded her of that purple dinosaur, Barney, on television. Karen knew she'd never let herself get that huge... ever.

Karen took pride in her appearance. She worked out almost daily at the local gym, and what the gym could not do, plastic surgery would. Karen was five feet ten inches tall and a hundred and thirty-five pounds of very well proportioned perfection. She looked like a model, and probably could have been one if her mother, Helen, had not changed her mind about sending Karen to modeling school. As far as Karen was concerned, she could have done a lot of things in her life had it not been for her mother. Saying, "I do" to Bruce, Karen's stepfather, was one of Helen's biggest mistakes as far as Karen was concerned.

Karen believed Helen's total disregard for her was the reason why she was in this clinic for the third time. Instead of being a super model, she was a high school dropout with two kids. The only job that sustained her lavish lifestyle was exotic dancing.

Karen quickly dressed in a paper gown and looked around the examination room as she lay on a green leather table covered by more scratchy paper. There were no windows and the only light in the room came from a huge florescent light fixture in the middle of the ceiling.

There was a soft knock on the door. The doctor entered into the room followed by Nurse Barney who quickly began popping out metal stirrups from the table's end. Karen squirmed as the nurse's cold hands grasped her feet fitting them into the stirrups.

"Hello, Ms. Hall. I'm Dr. Adams. I'm sure you've already met Nurse Roberts. Are we ready to start?"

Karen raked her eyes over the plain-looking doctor dressed in pale green scrubs. Something about him irked Karen, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Well I'm not here for your breakfast buffet. Let's get on with it, doc," Karen answered.

The doctor looked down at his clipboard, tapped his foot on the floor and gazed over at Nurse Roberts.

“So, Karen, this is your third time here at the clinic,” the doctor said. “Have you been using the birth control methods that we discussed the last time you were with us?”

“Well if I did, would I be here now?” Karen said now recalling why he irritated her. He was the doctor she’d seen the last time she was here.

Not answering Karen, the doctor nodded to the nurse who proceeded to prepare the instruments for the procedure. Karen barely listened as the doctor tried to engage her in small talk. She felt a slight pinch as the nurse deposited pain medication into her arm. Karen’s thoughts drifted to her two children, Steven and Monica. Steven was a somber five-year-old boy with the attention span of a puppy. Monica, an outgoing eight-year-old girl, had a tenacious attitude and to Karen seemed incapable of following even the smallest of instructions. Karen loved her children dearly, but she sometimes wondered why these were the two babies that she kept. The first time she had an abortion, she’d been pregnant with twins. Then there were two other babies she aborted that never stood a chance.

Karen flinched as the doctor inserted a long pencil- shaped instrument between her legs. Something that sounded like a fan with plastic wedged in its blades buzzed to life; Karen closed her eyes and swallowed the lump caught in her throat. She barely noticed when the nurse gently grabbed her hand and stroked it lightly. The doctor rhythmically moved the instrument back and forth while attentively staring at the numbers on a monitor directly beside him. Karen’s pulse quickened as a slurping sound surged thru the room. She could feel the beginnings of an emptiness spreading throughout her body. Tears began to spring up, but Karen quickly checked them. However unpleasant the circumstances, she knew that this had to be done. She didn’t have time to regret her decisions or to try to understand her reasons behind them. Life wasn’t a bowl of cherries, and certainly not hers in particular.

Karen opened her eyes and stared at a water spot on the ceiling that seemed to be getting closer to her face. She blinked rapidly and tried to remember if she missed the white sale at Macy’s department store. Those were the last thoughts she recalled before the nurse tapped her on the shoulder and helped her to a sitting position. Karen hadn’t even realized she’d been moved into a different room to recover.

The chubby nurse looked at Karen and asked, “Are you alright, Ms. Hall?”

“What do you think?” Karen snapped. “How long was I asleep?”

“About an hour,” said the nurse. “You’re a cheap date. All I gave you was a little Morphine.”

“Sometimes a little is all it takes,” laughed Karen. Nurse Roberts laughed also.

“You know, Ms. Hall, I see young women like you all the time and I know why you’re so uptight and angry. Can I share a thought with you?”

“Not that I need to hear what you think, but I’ll let you humor me for a minute,” Karen said folding her arms.

Nurse Roberts took a deep breath, as if trying to retain her composure. “Women like you look for love in all the wrong places, and they don’t seem to be able to see beyond what looks good, or feels good. You have so much beauty

on the outside, but if you could just focus on that inherited inner beauty God gave us all, you could help other young women out there that are going down the road you've already traveled."

Karen laughed and clapped her hands loudly. "Well, Nurse Roberts," Karen said. "I applaud you for your wonderful speech. But what I don't understand is how can you preach to me, while working in an abortion clinic? Lady, you got the wrong one if you think I'm going to let you talk my ears off with that foolishness."

Nurse Roberts' pale white face turned beet red as she picked up her clipboard and quickly reviewed the post-op instructions the doctor had provided. When Nurse Roberts finished, she left the room closing the door sharply behind her.

Karen hadn't meant to be so rude... but then on second thought, yes she had. She hated the disappointed look that had shown in Nurse Roberts' eyes. Karen didn't want or need anyone's pity, especially the pity of a grossly overweight woman who obviously had too much time on her hands. "*How dare that lump of lard feel sorry for me.*"

Karen slowly glided her legs to the floor and stood wearily in the small room. She slid the hospital gown off her body and quickly dressed. Karen could tell the pain medication was wearing off because of the sharp jabs of pain she felt when she bent to put on her Donna Karen shoes. She picked up her remaining items and left the room. Karen cursed Nurse Roberts for not being professional enough to walk her out to the waiting room.

## Chapter 3

Helen looked at her office phone as it rang for the third time. She knew it was Bruce calling to ask about Mia and Karen's whereabouts. It was totally unlike Mia to take off work or borrow one of their cars to take Karen anywhere. Bruce was a smart man and very overprotective of their three girls; Karen was twenty-three, Mia was twenty-one, and Sasha was eighteen.

Helen knew exactly where Karen and Mia were, but she would never tell Bruce that Karen was pregnant again. She did not want to hear him ramble on and on about the number of abortions Karen had already had, nor did she want to be reminded of how she never listened to him concerning the girls. Helen learned a long time ago that the best way for her to deal with her husband was to ignore him until absolutely necessary. She didn't need him to go rushing around town looking for Karen, or cursing her out on the telephone while she was at work. So, for now, Karen's mistake would be just that... a mistake that Helen was sure Karen would soon forget.

Helen began working on the pile of paperwork on her desk. Mr. Clarke, her supervisor, didn't like to see paperwork left untouched. He controlled the entire Textiles Division at the Federal Trade Commission, and Helen was his personal secretary. They'd worked together for the past twenty-two years and had developed an understanding of each other's likes and dislikes. Helen knew Mr. Clarke didn't like a lot of confusion or untidiness in his department. He was a kind, understanding man, but didn't allow employee personal problems to invade his work place. Helen switched her personal telephone line to voice mail. She didn't want Bruce's persistent telephone calls to disturb Mr. Clarke who was in the next office. As Helen thumbed through her files, she glanced up at the clock on the wall across from her desk. It was just after one, and she was sure Mia would've called by now. Mia was Helen's reliable child. She never gave them any trouble and always seemed to come through whenever Helen needed. Whatever was delaying Mia's call, Helen was sure it was warranted.

Helen picked her water bottle up, and began to drink. She swiveled in her chair as her thoughts drifted away from work and back to Bruce.

They'd married when Mia was five and Karen was seven. Sometimes things were wonderful, but other times they were horrible. They had their son Marcus shortly after marrying, but he was born very sick, with numerous heart problems. He spent most of his short two years of life in and out of the hospital before he died on the operating table. Even though the doctors assured Bruce that some babies were born with birth defects that could not be explained, Bruce, to this day, blamed Helen for prenatal habits. He would complain that

maybe she didn't eat enough when she was pregnant, or maybe Marcus wasn't his child because he couldn't possibly make such a sickly baby. Bruce could not handle the fact that sometimes children die. During that time Bruce's conduct infuriated Helen and she resented him for not supporting her through this most difficult time in her life. Even more

puzzling was how he supported her when Mia went through her horrific molestation ordeal, particularly since their relationship was still new.

Three years after Marcus died; Helen gave birth to a healthy baby girl named Sasha. Bruce didn't hold her or even change one diaper the first few months or so of Sasha's life. He again blamed Helen for not giving him a healthy boy and again told Helen that Sasha had to be another man's child.

Bruce distanced himself from Helen even more after the doctor informed them that, because her blood pressure grew to dangerously high levels during her pregnancy with Sasha she probably should not have any more children. The truth was Helen couldn't imagine getting pregnant again because of the difficulty she had giving birth to Sasha. She also didn't want to give Bruce another reason to question her faithfulness to him. He was so paranoid about everything, even though Helen gave him no reason to think she was disloyal. Helen could only guess Bruce's lack of trust came from his own mother's indiscretions. Bruce's father wasn't in their home full time, only making appearances once or twice a month. His mother worked two jobs to make the rent in their humble two-bedroom, one-level house. She had four children to look after and the money Bruce's father gave her was not enough to take care of them. Bruce's mother would have a male friend over from time to time, which enraged Bruce and his other siblings. They knew if their father popped in, he'd have all their heads. Bruce's two sisters helped their mother wash the laundry she took in while she cleaned offices downtown. The only way out of poverty for Bruce, as well as his siblings, was to join the Armed Forces. Bruce served in the Army, his sisters joined the Navy, and his brother enlisted in the Marines.

Even though Bruce was overbearing at times, he did have some good character traits. Mia and Karen weren't Bruce's biological daughters, but Mia was clearly his favorite. They watched sports together, worked out in the basement on Bruce's weight machine, and sometimes played cards with him and a few neighbors. Mia was more like a son than daughter to Bruce. In some sick way, she filled his strong desire to have a male child. Then there was Karen. She and Bruce fought like cats and dogs, but Karen could call Bruce and ask him for his last dollar, and he'd give it to her. While growing up, Karen had a natural love for fashion and expensive clothing, and Bruce would make sure she was dressed in the latest jeans or tennis shoes that hit the stores. If Bruce didn't have enough money when he took the girls shopping, he'd make Mia and Sasha wait until his next payday because Karen would cause so much commotion. He felt that giving Karen pretty things was his responsibility, and that every young girl should have the best money could buy. But, in Helen's opinion, Bruce spoiled Karen rotten because she had the biggest mouth. Helen knew Bruce wanted a better family life for his children than he had, and because of this his dictatorial behavior grew out of control when he felt them slipping out of his grip.

Bruce sat down and lit another cigarette, slightly annoyed at his wife, Helen, for not answering his phone calls all morning. Bruce needed to know what was going on with his girls. Mia had just been promoted on her job and didn't need to be tied up in any of Karen's nonsense. He looked up at the clock. It was 2:30 in the afternoon.

Bruce called Helen again, no answer.

"She must really think I'm a fool!" Bruce said out loud.

Helen didn't know Bruce had taken the day-off. If it hadn't been for Sasha telling him Mia took their mother's car to pick Karen up earlier that morning, he would have assumed Mia just borrowed the car because she was running late for work.

He took a long drag from his cigarette and then mashed it into the ashtray.

"I'm going to give them one more hour," Bruce said.

"Then I'ma take a ride."

The smell of popcorn wafted thru the air and the chatter of women grew stronger as Karen approached the clinic's waiting area. Two petite women sat side-by-side clutching each other as if their lives depended on it. Karen glanced at them, loathing the tears that slid down each woman's face. "*Someone doesn't need to be here,*" thought Karen. An obese teenage girl chewing gum, sat with her boyfriend who entertained himself looking at the other women around him. Karen stopped by a soda machine that sat in the corner of the waiting area by a table of old Jet magazines. Her eyes scanned the numerous faces in the room, stopping on Mia's cinnamon skin-toned face and almond-shaped eyes. Karen nodded and watched as Mia slowly stood. Mia wore a plain black pantsuit with cheap brown clogs. *How disgusting.* Karen thought as she glared at Mia. She watched as Mia pushed her smart cut bob behind her ear and smoothed it down on her square jaw. Mia's style of dress was totally opposite from Karen's. Mia dressed in a style Karen could only describe as, low budget. Mia never brought new shoes or clothes for that matter, unless the old ones were worn out.

Mia grabbed Karen's designer Coach Bag and placed it on the same shoulder as her own purse, obviously a Kmart brand. Mia closed one of the many books she was always engrossed in, and pushed her oversized glasses up on her nose.

"Thank God you're all right," Mia said greeting Karen. "You were in there for hours."

"I'm fine, Mia, and stop dragging God everywhere you go."

Mia's cheeks reddened as she glanced around the waiting room. Snickers came from the people who'd heard the comment. Mia grabbed Karen's arm and led her towards the exit. Karen regretted the insensitive remark as soon as it came out of her mouth. She hadn't meant to loud talk her sister, but Karen hated the fact that Mia saw God in everything, but only when it seemed publicly correct. Neither one of them went to church every week. While growing up, church was a joke to them. All she and Mia did was laugh at the church folks perpetrating about their holiness. Karen was appalled to hear the Pastor actually speaking against nonmembers of The Greater Faith Community Church. He told the church that Greater Faith was the true way to heaven because God had placed a special blessing there. Karen remembered grabbing her children and rushing out the doors after hearing this, but not before getting into a confrontation

with an usher. The ushers made a game out of rushing around the sanctuary, forcing people down in their seats if they made one false move while the pastor was preaching, and Karen getting up in the middle of a sermon was viewed as unholy. Karen didn't understand, nor did she want to be seriously involved with a church that demonstrated such a double standard. How could the Pastor tell the congregation that there was only one true and living God, and then act as if he was a god himself? He walked around with a cloud of arrogance, Karen knew, no man of God should have. Regardless of how Mia felt, Karen understood more about the Bible than she led on. She knew their Pastor should show a measure of meekness and deliver the Word of God with accuracy. She didn't expect him to be a punk or anything, but he could at least be accessible to his own church people. Karen knew for a long time that there was something wrong with the Greater Faith Community Church and unlike Mia, Karen only walked through the door of that church when she wanted to.

Karen felt bad for Mia, always trying to please, doing everything for everybody, but never reaping any positive benefits. Everyone called on poor Mia for everything, and she never seemed to complain. Karen thought Mia was stupid and weak, yet Karen was also the main one that took advantage of Mia. Karen wanted Mia to stick up for herself and stop pretending to be happy when deep down inside Karen knew she was miserable.

Karen thought about how she'd just embarrassed her sister and said, "Stop Mia, wait, I'm sorry."

"I'm fine," Mia answered as she pushed the metal doors of the building open, walking out into the brisk fall air.

Mia stopped short of their car and pulled a cigarette out of her pocketbook. She lit it and inhaled deeply glancing back as Karen sauntered across the parking lot.

"Slow down, Mia," whined Karen. "The pain medication those idiots gave me is wearing off, and I'm cramping bad. I just want to go home and forget about this whole day."

Mia walked back and helped Karen ease into the car. Walking around to the driver's side, Mia tossed her lit cigarette into the street and sat in the driver's seat. She slowly pulled out of the parking lot, being careful not to jar Karen too much in the passenger's seat.

"You stink," grumbled Karen as they made their way out of the District of Columbia into Maryland.

"I don't see how you can smoke a whole bag of marijuana but complain about cigarette smoke," said Mia with a sideways glance at her sister.

"Well, I don't see how you can smoke a whole pack of cigarettes and not try one joint," said Karen while scrunching up her nose at Mia.

"I don't think I'll ever get high, Karen. People act crazy when they're on drugs and the last thing I want to do is end up in some kind of rehabilitation center or on the corner selling my behind just to get a fix."

"Weed don't make you crazy or put you on nobody's corner." Karen slumped down in her seat. "It just mellows you out. Besides, I think you feel that way because daddy acted a fool when he got high."

Mia looked over at Karen and raised her eyebrow.

"Whatever you're thinking about me, just stop," Karen said as if reading Mia's mind. "I don't use cocaine or heroine like he does."

"Like he used to, you mean," corrected Mia.

“Whatever. When I go off on people, it’s because they make me!” Karen shouted.

Mia glanced at Karen. “Yeah, like the time you stabbed me in my back with that pencil because I wouldn’t let you sit by the window on the school bus. Or how about last year when you put a gun to my head because you felt like I shut your kitchen cabinet too hard. Or wait... how about the time we were in high school and you tried to rip my shirt off in front of everybody. Then, of course, there was the time you put bleach in the pot with the hotdog I was cooking, like I wouldn’t smell the strong aroma steaming out of the boiling water.”

“Is that what you’re talking about, Karen?” asked Mia. “If I can remember correctly, each of those times you were never provoked.”

“I’m not talking about you, you’re my sister and sisters fight,” Karen said with her eyes closed and her head leaning back on the headrest.

“All I know is,” lectured Mia, “you better start controlling yourself before you hurt somebody, or somebody hurts you. With your crazy behind.”

“OK, counselor,” Karen said and laughed.

Mia reached forward and turned the radio dial to 95.5, a popular urban radio station in the Washington D.C. area. Karen looked out the window at the passing cars as Mia stopped at a red light. Mia glanced over at her sister as an old song that they listened to as teenagers came on the radio. The corners of Karen’s mouth slowly turned up into a smile when she heard the overload of percussion instruments and the rhyming lyrics. The music could only be classified as Go Go, an original style from D.C.

“Mia turn it up, that’s my song!”

“SARDINES, HEY, AND PORK AND BEANS,” they both shouted!

Karen and Mia sang along with the Junk Yard Band.

“Go Go songs today can’t compete with anything we used to jam to,” Karen yelled over the music.

Mia smiled then said, “You got that right, Karen. All they have nowadays is rump shaking music and gang bangin’ rap songs. When we were growing up, basically all young black kids in the D.C. area listened to, was Go Go music. Every now and then, rappers like Grand Master Flash, Curtis Blow, or Run DMC came out with a nice song, but their lyrics were never too offensive.”

“Yeah,” agreed Karen. “Old school rap was nice, but Go Go music was always my favorite. It didn’t become popular until E.U. came out with Doin’ the Butt in that movie, School Daze.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Mia. I loved listening to Chuck Brown, and Rare Essence at nightclubs, and Junk Yard downtown on Seventh Street,” said Mia. “Remember how they would beat on trash can lids and rusty old pails?”

“Yep, that’s how they got their name. We had so much fun back then. Now, you can’t go into the clubs without getting into a fight, or getting shot at.” Karen shook her head at her own words.

“That’s why I don’t go to clubs,” said Mia.

“Girl please! You don’t go to clubs because you’re just afraid somebody might ask you to dance,” laughed Karen.

Mia ignored Karen and concentrated on driving. It was true, she couldn’t dance as well as Karen and throughout their childhood Karen had no problem pointing it out. After years of ridicule from Karen, Mia had grown self-conscious about dancing in front of people.

“You know Karen, I wonder why we loved this song so much? I would never eat sardines and beans.”

“Don’t be so high and mighty now. When it was just me, you, and mom, we ate whatever she put in front of us,” reminded Karen.

“Have you ever thought about how hard it had to be for mom? Think about it, she lost our biological dad in a car accident when I was six weeks and you were two years old.”

Karen looked down towards the car floor as if in deep thought. “Why did mom have to marry Bruce? Her sisters were willing to help us.”

“Why do you hate him so much, Karen?”

“Shut up Mia. You hate him too! Or maybe you really don’t because he didn’t black your eye and Social Services didn’t take you out of the house and put you into a foster home for a year like they did me. He shoulda’ went to jail, and he probably would have if you and mom had told the truth about what was going on in our house.”

Mia glanced over at Karen as she mentally recalled the entire ordeal.

Mia was in the ninth grade and had just returned home from school. She was horrified to see Karen sitting on the front porch weeping. Karen wiped her tear-streaked face as she tried to explain to Mia the quarrel that had taken place a few hours before. Mia was not surprised to hear that Karen and Bruce had fought. What she was surprised at was the huge red swollen circle around Karen’s right eye. Bruce often hit them, but never in the face.

“What happen to your eye?” Mia had asked Karen.

“I stayed home from school today,” Karen said, as she choked back tears. “Keith came over...”

Before Karen could finish, Mia’s eyes grew wide and she covered her mouth with her hand. Karen didn’t need to go any further. Mia knew what had taken place.

“Daddy came home and caught us in his bed,” Karen continued. “We didn’t hear him come in the front door and before I knew it he rushed in the room and pulled Keith off the bed by his neck. Then he took off his belt and started beating me like a mad man. I think either the belt or his fist hit me in my face, but whatever it was I think I’m going to have a black eye.”

Mia stared at Karen as if she had spoken in a foreign language.

“Where is daddy and who is Keith?”

“Keith is some boy I met at the mall last week. He grabbed his clothes and ran out of here butt naked like a little punk. I don’t know where daddy is, but if I were you, I’d go

in the house and hide because he's pissed.

That was one of many memories Mia wished she didn't have. Their home had been an absolute wreck for months. Karen went to school the next day bright and early, making a special stop in the nurse's office. She'd told the nurse that her stepfather blackened her eye and showed the nurse the other trauma the belt left on her body. The nurse quickly called in the principal, who in turn called Child Protective Services. The authorities quickly infiltrated their home, questioning Mia about the incident and any other beatings. Mia lied to the social worker because it seemed to her they were more concerned about where her mother was during the beatings. They wanted to know why Helen would allow their stepfather to spank them in the first place.

Mia knew deep down inside that Karen still held resentment towards her as well as their mother for not telling the truth to the social workers. Mia, to this day, regretted letting Karen down, but she didn't have a choice. Bruce told her she'd never see them again if she told the judge or the social workers the truth. Mia watched as the social workers harassed her mother. She watched her mother quickly slip into a deep depression because of the threat of losing all her children, so the only logical thing for Mia to do was to lie. Bruce cried like a baby and promised Mia he'd never hit them again. Of course that promise was never kept, but Bruce did get a little better after undergoing court ordered counseling. Karen stayed in the system only temporarily because her foster family could not control her. Within a year, Karen came back home, pregnant and resentful at age fifteen.

Mia didn't know what to say to her sister. Karen was made to look like a liar by both Mia and Helen. They didn't back her claim of child abuse against her stepfather, which caused Karen to have major abandonment issues. Karen blamed her parents for all her pregnancies and just about every other mistake she made in her life. After she returned home from foster care Bruce's guilt, always buying her whatever she wanted only enabled Karen's behavior. Helen, on the other hand was never much of a disciplinarian. She just went along with everything Bruce said and the few times she decided to stand up for herself, Bruce quickly put her in her place.

Mia's thoughts of the past were broken by Karen's voice.

"Do you really want to know why I can't stand him?"

"Can't stand who?" Mia sighed.

"Daddy, Mia." Karen said, a little irritated. "I can't stand him because he thinks he can apologize to me now after all these years."

"Sometimes I think he just let the things that happened to him when he was younger, get to him." Mia said.

"What are you talking about?" said Karen frowning.

"I went with daddy Saturday so that he could cut granddad's hair and grass. After daddy finished, they were sitting around talking and daddy was telling granddad how he missed his mom since she died and that he really wanted granddaddy to know that he loved him. At first I was thinking granddad was going to show some kind of empathy towards daddy. But instead, he was so cold it was unbelievable. Granddad told him to man up and stop acting like a woman. On the way home, I asked daddy if he was okay and all he said

was granddad treated him like that his whole life and that granddad didn't know how to show love. He said if it killed him, he was going to make sure his family stayed close. I just sat there, I couldn't say anything."

"Yeah, granddad is a mess," Karen giggled. He says whatever he wants. But you know, he don't like me no way, so I could care less what that old fool says out his mouth. And daddy needs to stop trippin' because he ain't keeping us close by acting the way he does."

As the song ended and a commercial came on, Karen looked over at her sister with a somber face.

"The only thing good that came out of her marriage to daddy was Sasha." Karen said.

Mia glanced over at Karen. "Why do you keep talking about the past?"

"I'm not the one with the memory loss. You forgot a lot of things that I remember, so I wouldn't expect you to sympathize with me."

"Karen, that was a low blow, and you have no idea what I remember."

"Sorry," was all Karen said.

Mia knew she couldn't change Karen's mind about the way she felt about their step-father, and she wasn't sure he deserved defending, but she wasn't going to allow Karen to make her relive the past any longer. They dealt with things differently. Mia's ability to survive was wholly based on forgetting. No, she didn't fully forgive Bruce, but it was easier for Mia to ignore her true feeling, then it was to confront Bruce. Mia felt sorry for both Karen and her dad because they were so much alike, and they both obviously had mental issues. Bruce's father abused him, so he abused his children. Bruce felt abandoned by his mother, and so did Karen. Mia was determined not to let anyone destroy the peace she'd created for herself or to allow Karen to make her depressed.

Karen sat back in her seat, annoyed at the Wonderful World of Disney that her sister skipped in and out of regarding their childhood. She was sure Mia remembered how they all lived in terror. They had to rush around the house cleaning and putting everything in its proper place before Bruce arrived home from work. He'd come home and beat them like they were old dirty rugs if one dish was in the sink. Then he'd apologize afterwards and tell them he was teaching them to keep a clean house for their husbands. Karen could not understand how Helen could deny that there was a problem with her crazy husband. A perfect house of misfits was what they were and Karen knew that she would never return to that house. She was happy being in state- assisted housing and not having to get up at the crack of dawn to clean and scrub every inch of Bruce's house. She felt a sense of accomplishment when her pretty face and perfect body made men crumble in her presence. If Karen couldn't afford something, one of her suckers provided it for her. Karen's only concerns were the ghastly parenting

skills she'd inherited from her parents, as well as, her rotten love life. No matter how hard she tried, each relationship she involved herself in, ended in violence. Karen tried her best to be an excellent mother, but she frequently lost patience with her children and abused their little bodies the same way her step-dad had abused hers.