

Bearing Witness: Not So Crazy in Alabama

CHAPTER EXCERPT

CHAPTER TWO: PARTS UNKNOWN

For years, dear old mom tried find the perfect house. She went north to the Bronx, south to Brooklyn, west to New Jersey, and east to Long Island. The houses were either too old, too small, too far, the neighborhoods too rough, or the school systems too inadequate

After years of fruitless searching, my mother decided that she wasn't going to find her dream home in NYC. She would head home, south to Montgomery.

Oh yes, she would have a house. She would be one of them – a member of the sorority of homeowners. No longer the changeling.

She talked about it all the time – the house. Showed me the blueprints like they were some kind of an ultrasound. The house was her baby all right built from the ground up.

On a plantation no less.

Oh it's true. I saw the sign as we pulled into the subdivision from the airport – "Liliefield Plantation" right there chiseled in cement, surrounded by brick, complete with up-lighting and freshly planted pansies.

For a moment, my heart stopped.

With the exception of the first one, a Tara-like home with its white columns, it was clear we weren't on a real plantation.

To the right was a pond with a fountain shooting water high into the air like a geyser, each drop illuminated by underwater lighting. To the left was another pond and a gazebo.

As we drove through the neighborhood, my mother, seated in the front, kept looking back to see my reaction. I believe she was hoping for a few oohs and ahhs. Didn't happen.

We turned the corner and there it was. The house. A red brick one-story deal complete with a two-car garage.

When I walked inside, I knew to take my shoes off and tread lightly on the beige carpet. How did I know? It was probably the look my mother gave me.

I noticed the wallpaper with its minute stripes and flowers. Immediately to my left was a laundry room, with a full-size washer and dryer, sink and ironing board.

Then I entered the kitchen. It was massive with its white wooden cabinets and island where you can prepare food domestic diva

style. The kitchen wasn't anything like the one in our apartment in Harlem with its fluorescent yellow walls, so small that two people couldn't move around without bumping butts. At the far end of the room was a glass table with a perfect setting for four nonexistent people waiting for a dinner party that never takes place.

The entire house had a look but don't touch feel.

I was shown my bedroom. Funny, it was the same twin bed trundle that I slept in growing up – so high above the ground that I needed mountain climbing gear to get up and down. The bookshelf was the same, as was the dresser and chest of drawers.

But this house wasn't my home.

Parents claim that they don't have favorites. But I knew I wasn't my mother's favorite. The house was. I don't blame her really; a gal like me is an acquired taste.

They say it's difficult for two women to live together under one roof. What an understatement. Try next to impossible.

I couldn't do anything right.

I used too much heat and hot water and my mere presence didn't go with the decor. I don't see why not. Everything was brown or beige with a touch of blue or green and given my wardrobe and skin tone, I thought I blended in rather nicely.

We also had our own personal water wars.

I was accustomed to taking long hot showers. Long hot showers. I knew that I hit it right when my skin turned a white ashen color and was so dry it required at least a half-jar of Vaseline to remove the scales.

To keep the peace, I tried to limit the washing of my body to a prompt five minutes way down from my usual thirty.

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It seems that I would just have gotten in the shower and turned the water on when I heard.

"Carla!"

"Yes?" I yelled back, allowing the water to wash over my body.

"Carla!!"

"I'm in the shower," I replied.

She knew where I was; you could hear the water running from the front yard.

"You've been in there three minutes," she said. I could just see her looking at the digital alarm clock beside her bed.

Three minutes. No way. Only two minutes left. I had to make it fast. I dispensed with my three-soap ritual: Dial, to clean and disinfect; clay soap, to get rid of any remaining impurities; and a heavily scented soap, to top it all off. I also scrubbed every inch of my body with a hard bristle brush to rid myself of dead skin.

No wonder it took me so long.

But no time for that, I thought. Although I only scrubbed the essential parts and used two of the three soaps, I always went over my time limit.

How did I know my time was up? Waterproof watch?

No.

I'd hear: "Carla get out of the shower."

The steam wasn't good for baby's wallpaper.

Everyone loves a new baby. It gets all of the attention.

It was perfect. I was not. We were both handcrafted – I, in the womb; it, in the pages of *Architectural Digest*. If she couldn't get the child she wanted, submissive and adoring, she certainly got the house she wanted.

I hated having to play big sister to a three-bedroom house.