

Chapter One: The Call

“How much longer, Aurora?”

The urgency in his voice is unmistakable. It's more of a command than a question.

Aurora hesitates, alert. Suddenly dizzy, the tiny cabin-like space slopes. A rumble under her feet, the cracking of linoleum tiles breaking and the feeling of tumbling into a dark abyss, is very real. With the back of her forearm she swipes the sweat dripping from her upper lip, straightens her gritty yellow apron and tries to steady herself.

I can't -

Aurora silently appeals to the imaginary judge who's glowering at her. She can almost see his arms crossed in stoic contempt for her failure to persevere. She can't quell the escalating panic clambering in her head. The patterns on the kitchen wallpaper are wiggling and flashing too blindingly loud.

Gripping the edge of the stove, she bows her head toward the pot of boiling water and the steam fogs her glasses. Within the brief escape from behind the mist, she can see clearly that her well-ordered plan is starting to break down, becoming gray and murky like the juices and the meat congealing on the counter.

Aurora takes stock of her plight and decides that she'd better get a move on and finish the job as quickly as possible. Spaghetti gets thrown into the pot, her lenses clear, and she notes that the faded green curtains adorning the side window could use a good washing. She shakes her head frowning at the dirty little dust bunnies huddling in the corners and marvels with distaste at the grimy baubles sitting on the counter, serving no purpose in a kitchen.

Aurora fights an urge to tidy up, but then she'd have to give the whole place a swift going over, and that wasn't part of the deal.

She picks up her pace and swiftly slices the plump chicken breasts cooling on a board. Eyeing the pans hanging above her, the rack's rickety-looking hinges invite morbid images. She can almost hear the creaky squeaks of the bolts turning and see the equipment sliding off; clang, clang, clang, toppling down on her head. *The timing would be perfect* - she thinks stepping out of the way sneering, as if she's daring the inanimate objects to move.

William's heavy tread is palpable. Aurora can feel a vibrating tremor as his demanding steps trample over the books, games and apparel that are strewn across the narrow living room of his parent's house. He's grunting with displeasure trying to find a spot amongst the chaos to plunk himself down. She pictures her husband as an uppity bull gnashing his teeth, banging his bulky shoulders against the walls, in an attempt to escape the domestic mayhem.

"Just a little longer and we'll be out of here," she murmurs uneasily, quickening her step.

A sports commentator's voice enthusiastically broadcasts the evening's highlights, and Aurora senses that the din is unnerving William's mother who has come to talk to him.

"Turn that racket down, so that I can speak to you," she says with a sharp snip in her voice. The sound hovers at a high level until the news is over and then the volume lessens.

Aurora closes her eyes and listens because she knows.

Her husband is drawn to all sports with the same craving as a serious addict and even without sound he will continue to watch. She's sure that his eyes have been glued to the screen as she hears him say, "That's not necessary Mom, we're fine. Aurora's almost done. We'll be going soon. Do you need any help with Dad?"

Aurora's father-in-law is laid up in bed from quintuple bypass surgery. He's aggravated by the painfully throbbing scar running down his torso from being filleted like a side of beef. His voice rattles as he calls, "Nancy - I'm thirsty - where *are* you? Are you coming?"

"Yes, yes, Barry - I'm coming - *coming!*"

Aurora's mother-in-law is not used to being 'On Call' and looks visibly haggard. Nancy's mascara is smudged giving her complexion the ghoulish look of a zombie.

Her purple velour jumpsuit jiggles as her hand flaps with forced enthusiasm at her grandchildren before hurrying down the hall in fuzzy pink slippers. On leave from her insurance job to assist her husband's recovery, Nancy is overwhelmed by the daily tasks that William's father has always been home to do. Barry is the domestic in their household, Nancy the breadwinner.

When the hospital nutritionist implored the family to establish a healthier food regime for Barry, Aurora was the obvious choice to do it. As a personal chef, she knows that preparing numerous meals can take a lot of time, often running longer than expected. Aurora's harried now trying to get the job done as fast as she can because William and the children have been sitting around for hours anxiously waiting for her. And everyone is tired and getting agitated.

"Almost done honey, it won't be long now," she calls out in a strained attempt to be civil, suppressing the urge to scream, *Keep it together for God's sake - I'm going as fast as I can!*

She takes a breath and stirs the caramelizing onions. They smell tantalizing, but she resists slowing to taste them; hustling to finish the dish. "Almost done," she moans faintly, putting a lid on the pan.

Aurora seals more Tupperware containers and labels them with heating instructions. Peering over the breakfast bar, she watches her husband stretch his arms out wide and sigh audibly. William is restless. He sits, gets back up, and paces. His long fingers comb through the salt and pepper hair fallen on his high forehead. Aurora retrieves the runaway wisps that have escaped her bandana, tidies herself up, and continues to assemble a few more meals. She gets it that William would much

rather be at home on this Sunday evening, lounging in front of his widescreen TV with his multi-continental sports channels. If the children were tucked neatly in their beds, the obligation to mind them would not be his burden. Her annoyance is mounting because William seems so 'put out' even though he'd made all the arrangements. Aurora wishes that he would just suck it up and deal with it - like she's doing.

Preoccupied amid her task she observes with detached curiosity, William striding over to the children. The boys have been building a Lego wall for over an hour, but a tinkling, a jangle, and one of the large green foundation pieces whizzing past her work area signals to Aurora that peace time may very soon be over and the threat of war forthcoming. Just as an image of diminutive soldiers with swords in hand sporting fierce expressions crosses her mind, her pint-sized Titans clash and a ruckus ensues.

"That's *mine* - let go!"

The television blares with raucous cheers and Aurora can picture the fans going crazy. Whatever the success is, be it a goal or touchdown or home run, the bravado's crescendo helps to drown out the children's whining and ever-growing cache of accusations and charges.

At first Aurora is unmoved; shrieks and bouts of hysteria are often the background melody between the feisty siblings. Still, she works faster. The two weeks of meals for her father-in-law are nearly completed.

"Simmer down boys, I'm almost done. Start cleaning up now," she calls out to them.

"You let go - it's *mine*!"

"No - it is *mine*. Give it back! You've had it long enough!"

Aurora's six-and-a-half-year-old, born with a benevolent disposition, rules over the one minion in his little realm generously, to a point, but now he wants his treasure back while his three-year-old rival jealously covets the prize he's conquered, and will not give it up. They tussle and tug, and the smaller one strikes and punches with itty bitty white-knuckle fists.

"Hey, enough already! Now *Stop*!"

William's imposing voice booms and Aurora is incited to look up right as her husband leans down to slap her toddler. A shrilling scream pierces Aurora's ears and she winces as she sees William swatting the boy on his backside, tossing him like a flimsy rag doll. As the child springs forward, an electric jolt and gush of heat like fireworks of red explode in Aurora's head, blinding her. She loses her equilibrium and sways like a drunkard toward the counter.

"Jesus - what - in the name of God - are you *doing*?" Aurora's cry is a high-pitched outburst; she's trembling, still holding tightly to the knife.

Looking over at his mother, the astonished little boy is white-faced with shock at the newness of never having been physically disciplined before. Enticed to react by Aurora's exclamation, he lets out an agonizing squeal, "Papa *hit* me!"

And both boys start to howl.

The pot of boiling pasta is foaming. The pan of onions is steaming. Aurora quickly turns the heat off both burners and dashes from the kitchen in determined pursuit of her husband.

Heads simultaneously turn, and miniature bowtie mouths silently open wide in wonder, as the

children's eyes trail the blurry yellow streak of their mother's unrelenting form racing toward their father.

Aurora is in a flurry of such fury, as they have never seen before.

"Ooh, come on," says the older boy gravely. Taking his charge's hand, the little brothers scamper down the hall to their grandparent's bedroom. Aurora sees her son squaring his shoulders as he reaches to knock on the door. "Grandma, Mama and Papa are *arguing*," he announces at the opening, his small chest puffed up, chin raised, sounding authoritative.

After a few seconds Aurora hears her mother-in-law's voice, "Come in boys and sit on the bed with grandpa. We'll find something for you on the television."

Aurora has a mental picture of her boys being sucked into a void, their slender bodies shrinking to fit through the keyhole as the door closes with a thud.

Shaky and apprehensive, Aurora rushes up to William. Wary of advancing any closer, she stands about a foot away and yells at him. "You - you - what was *that* all about? And why did you have to *hit* him?"

In a fit of haste, as if her hand is moving without her command, Aurora strikes at William with fierce viciousness. It's a stretch, but as fast as a snake bite she connects with his lower lip and her fingernail slashes a tiny bit of flesh.

Instantly blood oozes from William's pursed lip. Blackish droplets plop onto the beige carpet making dark little stains. The surging flow is mesmerizing.

Aurora stares at William's face, then at the floor; both scared and fascinated.

William seems stunned as well. His look visibly changes like captions in a sequence of still photos from surprise to disbelief to annoyance. He wipes his mouth and examines the blood on his fingers. He slowly grabs a towel from the counter to dab at the cut, never taking his suspicious, scowling eyes off his wife. "For Christ's sake Aurora, what was *that* for?"

Puzzled and awkward, Aurora inadvertently lowers her head and draws a hand up toward her brow.

In reflexive defense William's hands shoot out and clamp down on Aurora's wrists, immobilizing her. "What-the-*fuck* - you wanna hit me again? Man - what's up with you?"

"Hey - I wasn't going to - I just - let go of me!"

Aurora's fingers whiten and go numb as William applies pressure. She grunts and moans trying to push against him as he effortlessly forces her down onto the floor between the living room and the kitchen walkway. Painful electric sparks shoot up her arm when her elbow hits the hard surface. Fiery brown eyes squint furiously at her husband. "Oww - you're hurting me - you - you, *animal* - get your hands off me - if you don't let go right this minute I swear - I'll - I'll call 911 - or something - I mean it - let go -"

"Whoa - stop it - all right? Come on Aurora - I just reacted -"

Aurora recoils as William's spittle sprays her face. She tries to shoulder him away, but he bears down on her and presses his knee against her thigh.

"Hey - calm down -" he says hoarsely, trying to keep her down.

"Calm down?" she yells at him. "You're telling *me* to calm down?"

You calm down and - let - go - of - me -"

Aurora wriggles out of William's stronghold and staggers to her feet. Seeing the cordless phone on the counter, she scrambles to get it. Wild eyes flit from her husband to the phone. With a sudden impulse, she hits the numbers 911 - but in that same instant she steps back, aghast.

Aurora freezes.

She stares at the device in her hand thinking, *What am I doing? This is crazy!*

Paralyzed and dumbfounded with fright, she lets go of the phone and it slips from her hand, dropping with a thumping sound onto the carpet.

William's face is flushed as he sidesteps Aurora and bends down to pick up the phone. "Oh, right - is that it? You think there's a threat here? That I'm a *threat* to all of you? Well then baby, maybe you should call!"

He taunts Aurora by waving the phone above her head.

"Nooo -" she wails. Aurora claws at William's arm frantically trying to retrieve the remote, but he whirls away.

He hits the off button cancelling the connection and throws the beeping handset onto the countertop where it bounces a few times toppling jars and figurines, sending them flying.

"Good God woman, what's gotten into you? It was a smack on the popo. Do you seriously think I'd *harm* my son?" He stares at Aurora; the blood continuing to drip from his lip.

Aurora's legs turn to jelly. "No," she whispers, dropping with despair into a nearby chair.

"NO is right, Aurora. It's ridiculous." William returns the phone to its cradle and crouches down. "Are you okay? You must know that I would never hurt any of you - don't you?"

Aurora can't look at her husband because she can hear the torment in his voice. If he *ever* - he could do much damage with one blow. And she knows he would never harm any of them. She wants to say that, but she can't speak. She wants to explain her actions, but she doesn't know why she reacted like that. All she can do is lower her head and nod in acquiescence.

William tentatively brushes a lock of hair from Aurora's down-turned face and tenderly tucks it behind her ear. Laying a hand on her shoulder and squeezing gently he says, "Listen baby, it's been a long day - we need to get home. You finish up, I'll get the boys, and then we'll get out of here - okay?"

Sitting listlessly twisting the hem of her apron, Aurora's tightened knuckles begin to burn, and she faintly hears the worn fabric start to tear.

She cannot move, cannot think.

"Come on Aurora - no more of this - it's over."

William puts his arm protectively around her bent body, quickly kisses her cheek, and rises.

Aurora measures the back of his frame as William treads steadily down the hallway to gather up the children. She closes her eyes and can taste a sourness of bile in her throat.

Gulping for air, she looks around disoriented.

Everything is blurry.

The collection of family portraits hanging in the living room look like they're tilting. The faces of her husband's relatives are leering at her. Knick-knacks scattered on the bookshelves seem to

be jiggling. She pulls the elastic band at the nape of her neck, and the thick mass of golden hair escapes the tension from the bun. She drops her head into her hands and covers her ears hoping that the rumbling thunder pounding in her head, will stop. Behind her closed eyelids the dramatic scene, clip by clip reenacts in her mind: *His form looming over the child - His arm raised - That awful scream -*

Aurora knows she's overprotective of her children, but she shudders realizing what she could be capable of doing if anyone ever posed a real threat to her precious family.

In a daze, the rest of the meals are completed, assembled, and everything is put away. William grips Aurora's arm helping her down the path. She leans heavily on him, grateful that he's holding her tight; she's weak and unsteady going down the bumpy stone walkway.

His father is consigned to his bed, but William's mother comes out with them. Laying a coat over her shoulders she seeks and commandeers her youngest grandson, taking his hand. "It's late - you must be very tired - when you get home, go straight to bed."

The little rascal nods obediently, smiles sweetly, swiftly breaks loose and runs to his brother. They dash gaily down the sloping yard.

At the car, Nancy's staid expression and evading eye contact speak to Aurora, but William seems unaffected by his mother's silent reproach.

Nancy helps to buckle the kids into their seats, and fussily nuzzles an ivory powdered cheek against each of their faces. The boys respond in kind by lightly patting her face and giggling. Without comment, she hands her son a tissue for his unremitting bloody lip.

Aurora is embarrassed and thinks she should make an attempt to explain, but the opportunity is lost when Nancy loops around William, embraces her and says, "Thanks for cooking all those meals, Aurora. I know it wasn't ideal to do it here; we do appreciate it. Now it's late, you'd better get on your way."

William and Aurora watch, arms entwined, as Nancy climbs the short hill to her house. Halfway up the lawn she turns and waves them on, indicating they needn't dally any longer.

Aurora can't help but wonder how much her in-laws could have heard.

She thinks, *Okay, the door was closed, but the noise would have been hard to ignore.*

She exhales and tries to put it out of her mind.

William plays with the buttons on the side of his leather seat and fiddles with his shoulder strap.

Aurora turns around to check on her sons before swiveling to clip her own belt in. "Settle down now boys, we'll be home soon," she says in a soothing voice.

William waves to his mother who is waiting on the paved terrace in front of her entrance.

"Drive safely - no more arguing -" Nancy calls out from her landing, waving back at them.

“Oh yeah, she heard it all. Loud and clear,” Aurora says softly, but William doesn’t hear.

“Don’t worry, Mom, we’re fine.” William closes the window, winks at his wife, and turns smiling to his sons.

“Okay space cowboys, we’re ready for takeoff. Time to go home.”

He leans over and lays a protective hand on his wife’s leg.

Their eyes lock and they sigh at the same time.

William adjusts his rearview mirror, motioning for Aurora to look back at the boys.

Their flopping little heads are nestled against the padded car seats; their eyes are closed; they’re steadily drifting off into dreamland.

Aurora wiggles in the cushioned seat, tucking her legs up, getting comfy. With a long, ample yawn she relaxes into the chair.

“Finally, this day is done. I can’t wait to get home,” she says, exhaling slowly.

Their car starts to back down the drive, but William has to brake for an oncoming vehicle.

The flash of car lights arouses Aurora. She leans forward, straining in her seat to see out of the driver’s side window, and catches a glimpse of lettering on the side-door of the oncoming car. Her breath catches and she sits up straighter.

William puts the car into park, turns off the engine and focuses on the road as well.

In sudden recognition, Aurora’s hands shoot to her mouth and she whispers, “Oh, my -” as a black and white police car slowly advances toward them.