

It's not pizza if it's not Patsy's

Callie Michaels shook her head in amusement as she watched her friends scatter to the different racks of clothing. Individually, they were unique. But as a group, they were extraordinary. Alexia Grant, Bianca Bertoli, and Danielle Hamilton—their backgrounds were as varied as their personal tastes. And yet, they were the glue that held Callie's dysfunctional life together. Her eyes glanced at her Tag Heuer watch, marking the time. They had a date for lunch and she refused to be late.

Fashion was Callie's forte, and if there really was a *fashion police*, she would be the head of the precinct. So when she found Alexia admiring herself in the mirror, she immediately came to her rescue. Animal prints were one thing but looking like Jane of the Jungle was quite another. And when Danielle made the mistake of strutting past her in an extreme mini skirt, she questioned her motives, stating that perhaps a thong would be less revealing. Reluctantly, Danielle added a couple of inches to her hemline. But the kicker was when Bianca showed up in army fatigues and combat boots. Callie dragged her to the Baby Phat rack and insisted she drop the Destiny's Child survivor-look because yesterday's fashion was such a faux pas!

She felt like a sheepdog, rounding up her friends and herding them to the cash register.

And what a spectacle! Their purchases were extravagant, and the salesclerk's eyes widened in delight as he swiped their American Express cards and mentally tallied his commission.

On their way down the escalator, they stood frozen on the steps



in exaggerated poses, much like the women that Callie's mother photographed would do. They looked liked models—tall and leggy—with long, perfectly styled hair. And they were dressed in the latest designer fashions.

When the escalator reached the bottom level, they broke their poses and rushed to the department store exit, attempting to squeeze all their purchases through the swinging doors. And they burst outside laughing—their arms loaded with more bags than even the savviest of shoppers could carry.

Jolted by the cool, brisk air of New York City in the fall, the girls were reminded that Christmas was just around the corner. Shoppers were everywhere and it was a miracle they avoided a fatal collision with all the foot traffic.

Alexia was immediately mesmerized by the gorgeous window display—and like a zombie, she burrowed her way through the crowds. Bloomingdale's did a great job of decorating for Christmas and they certainly knew how to attract teenage girls.

Callie breathed a sigh of relief as she hailed a cab. Noticing her missing friend, she yelled out, "Alex, get your butt over here or we're leaving without you!"

Alexia knew all too well that Callie meant what she said. And since she was from Los Angeles, she couldn't risk being left alone in the city. So she marched to the beat of Callie's drum and obediently delivered her bags to the back of the cab.

It took some effort to fit all their packages into the trunk, but with Callie's German ingenuity, she managed to do just that with a little room to spare. Then Alexia, Bianca, and Danielle jostled one another over the window seats. The only spot relinquished without argument was the front passenger side, which was Callie's. It was hers by right as unnamed, but acknowledged, leader of the group.

"I need to make a stop before we go to the restaurant," she said to the girls. "I have to pick up Zoey's Christmas present." Then she proceeded to give the driver specific directions to Tiffany's.

Her friends readily approved, knowing how much Callie was looking



forward to spending time with her mother—something she didn't get to do very often.

The cab pulled up in front of the famous jewelry store and Callie jumped out. "I'll be back in a sec," she announced. And just as Alexia was about to unbuckle her seatbelt, she popped back in as if she were a mind reader. "Stay in the car, Alex. This isn't about YOU."

Disappointed, Alexia sat back in her seat, rolled down her window, and took in all the unfamiliar sights and sounds of the city.

Callie's face was well known to the staff at Tiffany's since her mother was the preferred photographer for their jewelry line. They could tell by her demeanor that she wasn't there to browse or chat, but rather to pick up the package that had been set aside for her in the back. She returned to the cab swiftly and immediately resumed barking orders.

She checked her watch again. "There's a \$20.00 tip in it for you if you get us to the restaurant by noon," she informed the driver. It was going to be close, but Callie knew money was a universal language and that even a magic carpet couldn't have moved them through the streets any faster. The swarthy immigrant happily put the pedal to the metal.

In one of the speediest cab rides she had ever taken, Callie and her friends arrived on time and in one piece. She sorted their purchases and shepherded the girls into the restaurant. The maitre de knew her by name, and led the group to a table where Callie's mother was waiting, looking as usual—gorgeous, casual, and elegant, all at the same time.

Her daughter first, and then the other girls, greeted Zoey with international hellos and European kisses, which just missed her cheek. With a nod, she indicated that the maitre de should use an empty table as a storage area for the packages, and the girls chaotically arranged themselves in their seats.

Callie—usually the one with the most to say—was silent as she watched her mother ask how everyone was and about their families. Her friends, because they knew her so well, could see a wistful look flit across her face. But when her mother finally addressed her, it had vanished—replaced by an air of defiance.

Zoey took a good, long look at her daughter. Behind that tough



exterior, hid a sensitive and vulnerable little girl. And though she would never openly admit it, she realized the chip on Callie's shoulder was a direct result of the neglect and empty promises she was forced to endure over the years.

Zoey's career came first, and when other mothers were playing *make believe* and reading bedtime stories, she was out clawing her way to the top. And it paid off. She achieved world renowned celebrity status in high fashion photography. Her calendar was booked months in advance and she made more money than most CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Life was good. Now, if *only* she could get past the guilt that consumed her each time she looked into the eyes of her neglected child.

"What's wrong—why are you staring? Did you forget who I am?" Callie taunted. If the truth were known, she would have given up every ounce of privilege for just one uninterrupted weekend with her mother. And while she loved her independence, she would have gladly traded it for even the slightest amount of parental supervision.

"No, just thinking how grown up you are. Seems like only yesterday you were toddling around, taking the film out of my camera."

Callie rolled her eyes, "I'm sure that went over well!"

Zoey continued, "I remember one Christmas—you were about two. You gathered all the film in the house and used it as tinsel for the tree. You were so proud of your work."

The girls laughed. And Callie had to smile, too. "I don't remember doing that."

"Well you weren't very old, and we didn't have any film left to capture the moment. The only record is in my memory."

"I can't even remember being at home for Christmas—let alone having our own tree," Callie divulged. "You sure it wasn't somebody else's kid?"

"Real funny," Zoey replied, accustomed to her daughter's subtle digs. "This was at your grandparents' in Wisconsin. But it's not like you've ever suffered at Christmas."

"No, you're right. I have everything *money* can buy."

Zoey was about to argue the point when the waiter arrived and asked



if they were ready to order. He clearly recognized her by now and appeared a little star struck, which only managed to frustrate Callie even more.

“I’ll have the organic veggie pita with low fat Swiss and a cucumber salad. DRESSING ON THE SIDE. And a diet Coke with lemon,” Callie said emphatically.

Danielle politely asked for the same, and Alexia made it a trio.

The waiter looked to Bianca who was still browsing the menu. “I’ll have the medallions of beef in béarnaise sauce, red potatoes, sautéed mushrooms, and” was all she got out before Callie interrupted.

“BIANCA!”

“Oh Callie, stop being such a drag. We’re in the city now. We’re supposed to be having fun.” But Bianca saw the look of horror on Callie’s face and relented. “Oh fine... just give me what *she’s* having!”

Zoey objected, “Bianca, get what you want.”

“That’s okay, Zoey. We wouldn’t want to upset the nutrition Nazi.”

The waiter stood dumbfounded, not knowing which order to write.

“You heard her,” Callie snapped, “She wants what I want.”

Zoey felt badly for the flustered young man and quickly interjected, “Make it easy on yourself. I’ll have the same thing.”

Unfortunately, he made the mistake of asking for an autograph and was forced to suffer Callie’s wrath. She slapped the menus into his stomach. “Sure, Dude—right after you bring our lunch. I’m starving!”

Embarrassed by her daughter’s behavior, Zoey flashed a smile and graciously added, “I’d be happy to.”

As soon as the waiter was out of sight, she turned to her daughter with exasperation, “Grow up, Callie! You’re getting too old for this.”

“I will, if *you* will,” she responded in a contentious manner.

Danielle, having the utmost respect for adults, came to Zoey’s rescue. “You shouldn’t speak to your mother like that, Callie.”

“Well if she ever acted like a mother, Dani, I wouldn’t.”

Zoey had about enough of her daughter’s insolence. “Okay, knock it off!”

Realizing she crossed the line, Callie felt the need to further express



her feelings. “I’m sorry—I’m just not as impressed with you as everyone else seems to be.”

“And I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Callie’s friends knew better than to get involved in a mother-daughter cat fight, so the table remained uncomfortably silent for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, Zoey broke the tension by asking the girls about their plans for the Christmas holiday.

Alexia’s extended family—meaning hordes of stepbrothers and sisters—were gathering in Malibu. Some years she wondered exactly who her stepparents were as they seemed to change as often as the daily news. Danielle’s family would be having a traditional Hampton holiday, which she found incredibly boring. And Bianca would spend most of the time playing hostess in her father’s restaurant. Granted, it was an upscale restaurant, but Bianca was the only one in the group whose family actually expected her to do work. Most of the girls at Ridgecrest Prep didn’t even have to do the dishes! They had maids for that. But Bianca’s was a rather old-fashioned Italian family, and the only way to get out of doing chores was to either blackmail one of her older brothers or beat them to a pulp, which didn’t happen very often.

Danielle finally asked, “So what are you two doing?”

Zoey answered before Callie could make another snide remark. “We’re going skiing...in Aspen. Our reservations were confirmed this morning.”

“What? Really?” Callie asked in a rush, both delighted and apprehensive at the same time.

“Yep, Roxanne called me with the confirmation number while I was waiting for you.”

“And what are the odds this time, *Mother?*”

“I’ll cover any bets you place,” Zoey answered smugly, knowing her daughter was *way* too good a poker player for a young debutante. “My agent cleared the whole month, and we’re going! I promise.”

Callie’s face broke into the first real smile they had seen since arriving at the restaurant, and the remainder of the meal passed in happy chatter. She even reminded her mother to sign an autograph for the waiter



before they left.

After lunch, Zoey escorted the foursome to the limousine that was waiting to take them back to their exclusive boarding school. She hugged each of the girls and wished them well on their mid-terms.

When it came to Callie, she squeezed extra tight, whispering into her ear, “I love you, Baby. Take care of yourself.”

“I always do,” she replied, breaking their embrace.

Callie felt pretty good by then, and once settled in the limousine, wrote a note to the driver and passed it through the window partition. She announced that they had one last stop to make before heading home.

The girls were used to Callie making plans without consulting them and they trusted her judgement, but they were a little shocked at the run down area they drove to. And it wasn't until they approached Patsy's—one of the most famous pizzerias in all of New York City—that Bianca's face lit up.

“Does this mean what I think it means?” she asked enthusiastically. “I haven't had pizza since summer.”

“Yeah well...it is almost Christmas, and I was pretty rough on you back at the restaurant,” Callie admitted, acting like an apologetic parent might.

But when the limousine pulled up to the curb, Bianca completely changed her mind, “On second thought, why don't we just head back to school. I have a paper due tomorrow.”

This made Callie suspicious since Bianca never thought of homework before she thought of food, especially when it was this close. She quickly realized the problem. A familiar delivery van was parked directly in front of the limousine. On the back doors, in big bold letters, were the words *BERTOLI GOURMET MEATS*, and Callie knew from experience that it belonged to one of Bianca's many uncles.

“C'mon B, what are the odds?” Callie said, trying to remember exactly which uncle owned the meat business.

“Are you kidding? They're completely stacked against me!” she insisted.

Bianca loved the men in her family, but she was getting tired of being



viewed as just another insignificant female. “Oh all right. It’ll be worth it...” She paused before finishing her sentence, “...to watch YOU pig out on a big, fat, greasy piece of carb-filled dough!”

Callie cringed and smacked her best friend in the arm as Danielle responded with “Ew!” and Alexia added, “Gross!”

And sure enough, when Bianca and Callie entered Patsy’s they were affectionately accosted by Uncle Vito who insisted on introducing them to everyone in the joint, including the customers.

Bianca was completely embarrassed by the time they got back to the limousine, but she did have good news. The pizza was FREE! And Uncle Vito—while making them very late—totally redeemed himself by presenting the girls with a huge gift basket of gourmet cheeses from his van. Callie didn’t make the connection then, but the name on the gold cellophane wrapper read *MICHELSON & MEYERS GOURMET CHEESE*.

And the pizza? Well, it only lasted about six blocks.