

Untethered

A NOVEL

ANGELA
JACKSON-BROWN

HARPER
MUSE



HARPER MUSE

Untethered

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1

I SHOULD HAVE STAYED IN BED, I thought to myself. But bed meant nightmares, from my reoccurring dream about leeches crawling all over me to the even worse dream I'd started having about my twin brothers, Aaron and Marcus, being chased down by the Viet Cong. Most nights, sleep was not a place of peace. Most nights, all I wanted to do was to run from the images playing in my mind like something from a really bad movie. Mama said I've had nightmares all my life. I would think, at the age of forty, I would be over such nonsense, but the dreams just kept coming and evolving.

Rather than allow my overactive brain to torture me any more, I woke up with the intention of getting to work early. But, instead of flying down the road toward my office, there I sat, pumping the gas pedal of my eighteen-year-old Chevy pickup in a valiant attempt to get it to crank. It was a cold November day, and my truck was not in the mood to make my morning easy. The truck used to belong to my daddy. He left it to me right before he died,

and all these years later, I still held on to that truck like it carried the spirit of Daddy in it.

I whispered a prayer under my breath: “Please let this old clunker start up, and please, let there be no surprises, no grief, and no turmoil for me or the boys at the group home.” I usually prayed some semblance of this prayer every morning, but this morning felt different. It felt weightier. I added the words my mother would always pray: “Dear Creator, today, I need mercy.”

I was the executive director at the Pike County Group Home for Boys, and the last few years there had been difficult, mainly because of the board of directors. At this point, I had no clue how much longer I would be able to do what had been my absolute dream job, stress and all.

After yesterday’s board meeting, I wasn’t sure if I’d be in that role much longer—whether that meant a firing or a quitting, I didn’t know. Either way, things were not looking good. Samuel P. Arrington IV, the new board president of the group home, had become the proverbial thorn in my side. The group home was situated inside a stately old house that once belonged to Samuel IV’s great-grandfather, Colonel Samuel P. Arrington, a Confederate soldier. Years ago, shortly before I became director, the Arrington family turned the house into a group home for Negro boys who weren’t good candidates for adoption or who needed a place to stay before returning to their family or the foster care system.

Unlike his father, Big Sam, who’d recently stepped down as board president, Sam IV seemed determined to undermine my efforts. I’d been executive director for ten years, making great

strides to change the paradigm for these boys, and in the span of a few months, Sam IV had tried to render null and void everything my staff and I had accomplished. I'd tried reaching out to Big Sam for help, but he said his son was in charge, and he didn't want to have to choose sides.

No matter what I tried to do, from the mentoring program to my fundraising efforts to provide college scholarships for as many boys as possible, Sam IV insisted I was wasting time and resources on boys who didn't need or deserve that type of attention. He never worded it quite that way, yet the message was always clear.

"These boys need to learn a trade," Sam IV said at yesterday's meeting while a huge puff of cigar smoke encircled his head like a lopsided halo. He'd then looked around the room with an expectant expression. Clearly, he assumed the other board members—six white men, six Negro men, and one Negro woman—would all chime in their agreement. But no one said anything, so he continued talking. *"These boys need to be taught useful skills like carpentry or plumbing or welding. The last thing they need is a whole lot of unnecessary book learning."*

Even though the six white men in the room didn't speak up, they all nodded. And even though the six Negro men didn't say a word, I knew they weren't far from agreeing too. On more than one occasion, they'd individually and collectively come to me and said that maybe I should lower the bar a bit, insisting that I was setting the boys up for disappointment with my "lofty goals." The idea that these Negro men, who had overcome the odds to be successful businessmen, clergy, doctors, and lawyers,

would dare cheat my boys out of any opportunities to thrive, kept me gritting my teeth anytime I had to deal with them. They all liked having “board member of a group home” on their résumés, but none of them really believed in what we were trying to do at the group home, which was to radically change these boys’ lives.

The sole woman on the board, Mrs. Adelaide Hendricks, was my only staunch ally, and I knew that most of the time, it was her support alone that kept the Negro men from siding with Sam and his cronies. But she was slated to step down from the board this year, and after she left, I worried that everything would come crashing down.

I took a deep breath and looked down at my watch. So much for leaving early this morning. If I didn’t get on the road soon, I would miss saying goodbye to the boys before they left for school. I closed my eyes and said, “It’s going to be okay,” and then I turned the key one more time. Although the truck sputtered and coughed, mercifully it remained cranked. “Thank you,” I muttered as I eased the truck out of the yard. I hoped all of the noise didn’t awaken Mama. Like me, sleep was sometimes elusive for her, especially with the boys being in Vietnam, so far away from us.

I turned the radio dial until it picked up a station that wasn’t staticky and, almost as if on cue, I heard Big Mama Thornton singing “Hound Dog.” Thornton was the original singer of the song, and I always got excited when I heard her infamous growl on the radio.

As was always the case, I joined in. Daddy, who’d died of cancer shortly after I graduated from college nearly twenty years

ago, loved the blues, and Big Mama was from the same little town where Daddy was born—Ariton, Alabama. She and I were only a year apart in age, and I'd only recently started hearing her music on the radio. I didn't know if Daddy had known her or her people, but every time I heard her on the radio, Daddy felt a bit closer—even when she was singing about a good-for-nothing man, the absolute antithesis of Daddy.

Most days, Daddy's death didn't haunt my thoughts, but other days it felt like January 17, 1948, all over again—a day that, similar to what President Franklin D. Roosevelt said about the attack on Pearl Harbor, “will live in infamy” for me and my family. The twins were only little boys when Daddy died, and now they were twenty-five-year-old men surviving in the Marines. I well remember that cold day when we buried Daddy. Aaron and Marcus had clung so tightly to me and Mama, asking us why Daddy wouldn't wake up. Just thinking about it made my eyes water.

I wiped away the tears and allowed Big Mama to sing me through the back streets of Troy, past Troy State University, until I reached the group home on the corner of South Three Notch and Montgomery Streets.

“Let my boys have peace today,” I said, echoing my prayer from before. I eased the Chevy into the spot marked “Executive Director,” then I reached for my briefcase and threw my oversized shawl across my shoulders as I exited the truck. Before I closed the truck door, I heard loud screaming and yelling from inside the group home. It was shortly after six in the morning—too early for this much commotion.

I dropped my shawl and briefcase and sprinted—bad hip and

all—like I was still on the high school track team. I was used to some noise in the early mornings because the residence housed fifteen rambunctious boys ranging from age eight to sixteen, but what I'd heard was not normal. When I reached the front door, nine-year-old Pee Wee, one of the boys, met me in tears. Pee Wee talked with a stutter that worsened when he was angry or excited. This morning, he was both.

“Miss Katia, c-c-come quick,” he cried. “Chad g-g-got his caseworker and Mr. J-J-Jason cornered u-u-up in the family room. Chad s-s-say he gone k-k-kill . . .”

Kill was all I needed to hear. “Get my shawl and briefcase and bring them inside. Tell the other boys to go to their rooms,” I instructed as I ran toward the ruckus.

“I ain’t going back to that dopehead,” Chad yelled. “You better step away from me. I’ll kill everybody up in here ’fore I go back to live with her!”

“Put down the chair, Chad,” Jason, the assistant director, said in a booming voice. Jason was a senior studying counseling at Troy State, one of very few Negro students admitted. He’d been raised by his grandparents while his mother and father drifted in and out of jail. Due to his childhood, he had a passion for working with boys like Chad. I’d hired him as a weekend counselor last year, and he soon became my second-in-command. Last month, I promoted him to assistant in anticipation of his graduation this December.

“I’m warning you, Chad—if you don’t put down the chair, I am going to come over there and take it from you,” I heard Jason say as I approached the room.

“You just try, you stupid mother—”

I burst into the room and saw Chad standing in the corner with a chair hoisted over his head.

Jason stood a few feet away, shielding the young white case-worker, Mrs. Gates, from Chad and his wrath.

“What’s going on in here? Chad, put down that chair,” I said as I walked to stand in front of Mrs. Gates and Jason.

“Miss Daniels, step back. He—”

“Take Mrs. Gates to my office, Jason. *Now*,” I interrupted, never taking my eyes off Chad. It wouldn’t take much for him to send that chair flying, injuring one of us accidentally or, in the case of Mrs. Gates, intentionally.

“Chad, put down the chair and calm yourself,” I said as I inched closer to him. Although I’d be considered a tall and big woman, at five foot ten and weighing 190 pounds, fourteen-year-old Chad was an astounding six foot one and weighed about 220 the last time I’d checked his chart. I looked at him as a little boy, but I knew the world didn’t or wouldn’t. They’d only see a dangerous Black man trying to attack a poor, defenseless white woman.

Chad had been in the system off and on since he was a baby. His mother, Lena, was strung out on heroin when she gave birth to him, and a few days later, his now deceased grandmother brought him to the Negro hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama, because he was having seizures from heroin withdrawal. After that, the state took Chad from Lena. Throughout the years, Lena would get clean, and Chad would return to live with her until something catastrophic happened, like the previous time when

Lena's boyfriend, Cobra, and two other men got high and attacked Chad, leaving him with two cracked ribs, face lacerations, and a broken arm. One of the men also sexually assaulted Chad. He refused to say who. The detail about the sexual assault came out during a group therapy session. It had taken hours to calm Chad down, as well as the other boys. That night, one thing he did say and has continued to say is that he'd never go back to live with his mother.

Mrs. Gates knew his story, and it infuriated me that she'd chosen to overlook my cardinal rule: caseworkers must *always* speak to me before they speak to my boys, for reasons like the current situation. She should have known Chad wouldn't react kindly to the notion that he'd be sent back to his mother. And why in the hell was Mrs. Gates visiting the group home this early in the morning? I felt as if she were trying to spirit Chad away before I arrived. This felt calculated, but more than that, it was way out of order.

"That bitch over there talking 'bout me going back to live with Lena. I ain't going back to live with her no more!" Chad yelled, shaking the metal chair over his head like it weighed nothing. Normally, I'd "check" a resident for using profanity, but my priority was getting Chad to put down the chair and calm himself.

"It's okay, Chad. I will handle this situation. Just put down the chair," I said.

"Miss Daniels, I must insist that—" the caseworker started.

I whipped around and faced her, my face hot with anger. "I said to leave the room, Mrs. Gates. You too, Jason."

As the words were leaving my mouth, Chad hurled the chair

across the room. Jason pushed the caseworker out of the way as the chair crashed against the thin wall next to them, creating a gaping hole.

“Do you need me to call the police?” Jason rushed Mrs. Gates toward the door.

“No. I’ve got this.” The last thing I wanted was a bunch of white police officers reporting to a disturbance between a six-foot-one Black boy and a tiny, blonde white woman.

I turned toward Chad, watching him as he stood panting, his hands tightly fisted.

“Enough, Chad. Enough.” I walked to him and put my hands on his arms. He was trembling violently. I took deep, cleansing breaths until he slowed his breathing to match mine, a technique I often used with my boys when they spiraled out of control.

When I thought we were both calm enough to have a conversation, I touched the side of his face, which was wet with tears. “Are you okay?” I asked him.

He nodded. At no time had I feared for myself. My rapport with the boys made me feel safe around them, even when their tempers got the best of them.

“Are you in a safe enough space that I can remove my hands?” I asked, keeping my gaze locked with his. His eyes weren’t as erratic as before. I nearly breathed a sigh of relief, but I knew it wasn’t over yet.

He nodded again. I allowed my hands to fall to my sides.

“Good. However, I do not want you to mistake my calmness as acceptance of the display I just witnessed. That behavior is not and will not be tolerated at this group home. Do you understand

me, Chad?”

“Yeah, but—”

I held up my hand to stop him. “No, sir. I will not listen to ‘yeah, buts.’ You just messed up royally, and you need to acknowledge that fact without throwing in some ‘yeah, buts.’ Do you understand what I just said to you?”

Chad swallowed hard, as if agreeing with me was too much, but finally, he mumbled the words I was waiting to hear. “Yes, ma’am.”

I motioned for Chad to follow me to the couch on the other side of the room. Once we both sat down, I looked at him with all of the steely reserve I could muster. I’d learned a long time ago that if the boys thought I was vulnerable to their tears and tantrums, they’d try to railroad me with their sob stories. God knows that each and every one of these boys had reasons to be angry. None of them had “good” stories. Almost every boy came from a home filled with drugs and abuse, and while I always wanted to honor their truths, I didn’t want those truths to become crutches. I was determined for these boys to leave the group home stronger and better than they were when they arrived. That didn’t always happen, yet I worked my butt off to make sure it happened for as many boys as possible. I wished to God that the board of directors could understand that, but I stopped myself from thinking about them. Chad needed me to focus on him and him alone.

“I want you to tell me what you did wrong, Chad. Starting with your reaction before I even arrived here this morning.”

“Miss Katia, that woman said—”

I held up my hand again. “This conversation is about you. Not her.”

Chad took a deep breath and started over. “I got angry when I heard I was gone have to go back to live with Lena again. Instead of getting angry, I shoulda been quiet and let Mr. Jason talk with the caseworker. Or I shoulda asked them if we coulda waited and talked when you got here. I shouldna thrown that chair and broke up the walls ‘cause I ain’t got no money to fix them. I shouldna been cursing and swearing. I shoulda been calm, ‘cause when we are calm, we can make change happen,” he said, concluding with one of the many mantras I constantly quoted to the boys and the staff.

I took Chad’s hands in mine. “Yes, Chad. You are exactly right. Thank you.”

I released his hand before I stood up and looked down at this young man who was still struggling to calm himself. “I want you to go upstairs and get cleaned up for school. Before you go into the dining room for breakfast, you are to come to my office and apologize to Mrs. Gates.”

“But—”

I shook my head. “No buts. You were wrong. And when we are wrong, we apologize. It doesn’t matter what the other person said or did. We acknowledge our own deeds. You also need to apologize to Mr. Jason and Miss Leslie.”

Chad stood up, his face filled with every emotion he’d been feeling—from rage to fear. He nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Chad,” I said.

He started to leave the room but then stopped and turned

around. “Miss Katia, please don’t let them send me back to my mama. Fix it so I ain’t got to go back. I’ll kill myself before I’ll go back to Lena.”

I went to Chad and wrapped my arm around his shoulders. “No one is killing anybody or themselves. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am, but—”

“No buts. I will do my very best to make sure you are never in harm’s way again, Chad, but you must work as hard as you can to not make my job any more difficult than it has to be.” I couldn’t make too many promises. The courts were unpredictable. All I could do was fight for Chad like I did for all of my boys.

Chad seemed satisfied with my reply and took off for the stairs, running up them two at a time.

On my way to my office, I paused in front of my new secretary’s desk. Leslie had only been working at the group home for a few weeks, but that didn’t stop me from being angry with both her and Jason. I didn’t tolerate inconsistencies with the protocols I had set up with my employees. The main one was that no one could have access to my boys without my prior approval. My staff knew better than to allow anyone to have a conversation with my boys when I wasn’t there. I didn’t care if it was a parent, a caseworker, or President Lyndon B. Johnson himself. All dialogue concerning my boys started and stopped with me. I was quick to say that I ran a benevolent dictatorship—heavy on the dictatorship with rules that directly affected the boys.

“Is she still in my office?” I asked Leslie, referring to Chad’s caseworker.

“Yes, Miss Daniels. Miss Daniels, I’m so, so—”

“We will all talk about this incident later,” I said, my voice a little angrier than I intended. But I *was* angry, and I wanted Leslie to understand that protocol was everything in this line of work. One “small” goof could mess up a young person’s life forever. I’d seen it happen too many times. Before I began my stint here at the group home, I was a caseworker myself. Seldom a month went by when I didn’t witness an innocent mistake causing major headaches. I wouldn’t allow my boys to suffer because of anyone’s negligence, whether mine or any of my staff.

“Make sure Chad comes by my office before he leaves for school,” I said. “He needs to apologize to you, Jason, and his caseworker. He can apologize to the other boys at breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am, Miss Daniels.” Leslie looked like she might start crying at any moment.

I lightly placed my hand on her shoulder. The last thing I wanted to do was destroy the young woman’s self-confidence. “I know that what happened this morning was all a misunderstanding, Leslie. We’ll all discuss this during the morning staff meeting and put a mechanism into place so that nothing like this ever happens again.”

I patted Leslie’s shoulder before crossing to the other corner of the reception area and stopping in front of my office door. I lifted my hands to my head, gently massaging my temples to ward off the headache I could already feel coming. Then I quickly re-fluffed my Afro, a style I’d recently started wearing, much to my mother’s chagrin. She said women of my stature did not need to be walking around with a nappy head. I didn’t argue with her, but I didn’t change my hairstyle either.

“So much for peace today, huh, God?” I said under my breath as I grasped the knob, pulling the door open wide and entering my office.



2

THIS SITUATION IS COMPLETELY UNACCEPTABLE, MISS Daniels,” Mrs. Gates said, speaking in a loud voice as she paced in front of my desk. I was used to her antics, so I forced myself to sit quietly until she wound herself down. She reminded me of that little, yapping Chihuahua Mama used to have—saying a lot and nothing at the same time. After what seemed like hours but was actually only a minute or two, she stopped pacing *and* yapping, and looked at me.

“Are you going to say anything?” she snapped, glaring at me. Clearly, even after all the visits and interactions, this white lady still didn’t understand that trying me wasn’t in her best interests.

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms. “I was simply giving you time to finish. Are you done?”

“This is no joke, Miss Daniels. I should—”

“First, no one is laughing, Mrs. Gates,” I interrupted. I was tired of her and her attitude, and on top of that, I hadn’t yet had one cup of coffee that morning. She was lucky I wasn’t swinging

chairs like Chad. “Second, you are out of line and out of place. If you had something to say concerning one of my boys, you should have contacted me first. Period. End of sentence.”

“As Chad’s caseworker, it is my right and duty to make sure he and his mother, when appropriate, are reunited,” she said with a tone so snide that I felt a curse word rise up in my spirit—one of those words I’d need to immediately fall on my knees and pray about. Instead of losing my religion this early in the morning, I did what I taught my boys to do. I breathed. Deep breaths. Then I smiled, although I’m sure it looked more like a snarl to her. She backed away as if venom were spewing from my mouth.

“Coming to the group home at the crack of dawn—when you knew I wouldn’t be here—was absolutely out of order, and you know it. I run a group home filled with high-risk boys from unstable environments. These boys had never known a day’s peace until they came here. I will not allow you or anyone else to disrupt their routine or their peace of mind.” I enunciated every word carefully and precisely. “I understand that you have a job to do, but neither your needs nor the needs of the foster care system will ever supersede the needs of my boys. Do I make myself clear?”

“I am here to take Chad Montgomery back to his mother.” She placed her hands on my desk and leaned forward with a glare. “She has successfully completed a rehab program, she has been clean for three months, and she attends weekly AA meetings.”

“Three whole months and AA,” I said, clapping my hands slowly. “Well, she’s ready for the ‘Mother of the Year’ award. Will you give her a trophy or should I?”

“Your sarcasm is not benefiting either one of us or Chad. Lena Montgomery wants her child back and there is no reason to stop her from getting custody of him again,” Mrs. Gates said in a stern voice. The caseworker knew all of her Department of Human Services handbooks by heart and could recite protocol better than the originators of the rules could. I respected rules, and as often as I could, I honored them. But it would be a cold day in hades before I’d give Chad up to the system so they could return him to his mother—not without some assurances that she was ready to be a mother to her son again.

“This is not the first time Lena has ‘turned things around,’ according to your office,” I said. “Time and time again she does all of the ‘right things’ and in less than a few weeks or a month, Chad is right back in the system again. Aren’t y’all tired of putting that young man through that torture?”

“The law states that—”

“You will need to submit the paperwork . . .” I started, but Mrs. Gates was ready. She reached into her briefcase and handed me a stack of papers. Of course the paperwork was in order. Some judge likely signed off on it during his lunch break, barely giving it a cursory look.

“This time, we will need to go to court and stand in front of a judge. I am not surrendering Chad without a thorough investigation and the recommendations of a judge who actually knows something about the case.” I resisted touching my pounding temples. I wouldn’t give in to it. Not in front of her.

“There is no need for all of that, Miss Daniels. We can—”

“This is going to a judge, and we are all going to be in the

room with the judge so he can hear Chad's case properly." I didn't care about her glaring at me. They always wanted to hurry up and wash their hands of Negro boys like Chad. If Chad were white, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. Mrs. Gates never would have tried to bypass me and she absolutely would want to ensure that Chad was returning to a safe environment. As overworked as she was, I knew she'd make the extra effort to try to protect a white child. I'd seen it time and time again.

They knew Chad wouldn't be safe with Lena, but they saw him as collateral damage. I'd first read about the term in an article by Thomas Schelling, an economist, who wrote about the concept in the early 1960s. He was referencing civilian casualties during war, but it was a perfect term to describe young Negro boys in the system. Everyone who worked in this field had unrealistic caseloads, so when it came down to who got sacrificed, they would rather it be the Negro children.

"This could take weeks or months to resolve if we do it your way," she said angrily. "Judge Smith signed off on Chad returning to his mother. There is nothing left to do but surrender him to me so that he can be returned to her."

"No," I said, looking at her unblinkingly. I was not surrendering Chad to her. Not like this. Not without everyone doing their due diligence to determine his mother's fitness. "I understand you are given much latitude when it comes to deciding when a boy can be returned to his parents, but with this particular case, you should be in agreement with me that we must do everything possible to make sure Chad is protected and Lena is ready to be a mother to him again."

“There is no way anyone can be absolutely sure that something bad won’t happen again. But the law is clear: children belong with their parents, and it is my job and your job to return them to their parents without giving any resistance,” she said.

“Children belong in safe spaces,” I said firmly. “And my job is to protect Chad Montgomery. Whether that be from his mother or a system that couldn’t give two flying figs about his safety. I thank you for the paperwork—now, as I have already said, get me and Chad in front of a judge.”

“You do realize I could call the police and have Chad arrested for his violent behavior? Or I could just take him with me—I have legal documents saying I have the right to do so.” Her eyes were fiery with emotion. Now she was the one who looked like she wished she had a chair to hurl.

I pointed toward the wall near the door. “Do you see those photos over there, Mrs. Gates?”

She glanced at the wall. “Yes, of course. I see them. Yet I don’t see how any of this relates to Chad Montgomery.”

I stood up and walked over to my “wall of honor,” as I called it. “This young man,” I said, pointing at the photo at the top of the corkboard, “is entering his second year of law school. This young man below him is an assistant defensive football coach at Tuskegee Institute. This young man at the bottom right is a high school English teacher, and the young man beside him graduated magna cum laude from Howard University in May of this year. Do you want to know what all of these young men have in common?”

She sighed long and hard, but I had a point to make, and her

snotty attitude wouldn't stop me.

"These young men were once residents of this group home," I said, returning to my desk where I gingerly lowered myself into my chair. My sciatica was messing with me again. Stress.

"The system said they weren't going to amount to anything, but they came here, and we helped them prove the system wrong. Don't make me call your supervisor, Mrs. Gates." I wasn't entirely sure that calling would make a difference, but I knew Mrs. Gates well enough to know she would hate being "reported."

"Fine," she said with a huge sigh. "I'll file the necessary paperwork for a judge to intervene with a hearing, but you know as well as I do that the judge is going to see it my way. You are just delaying the inevitable."

"Be that as it may, I will be awaiting the formal paperwork from the courts," I said. It could be weeks, even months before the case went in front of a judge—at the very least, after Thanksgiving, maybe not even until Christmas or New Year's. The court system was so bogged down that we both knew nothing would be done about changing Chad's living conditions anytime soon.

I just needed to buy some time. If Chad's mother followed her usual trajectory of drug addiction, before a judge could review the case, she'd once again be strung out on heroin.

Mrs. Gates seemed poised to say something else, but then we heard a light knock on my door.

"Come in," I called out.

Chad entered the room. He was cleaned up and dressed for school in a pair of freshly pressed blue jeans and a white

button-down shirt. His expression could be perceived as sullen by those who didn't know him, but I knew he was scared—terrified that in spite of all of my efforts, I wouldn't be able to protect him. I wanted nothing more than to embrace him, but he needed to own up to his behavior more than he needed hugs.

“Chad, do you have something to say?” I prodded.

“Yes, ma'am.” His tone was wooden. “I'm sorry for cussing at you and throwing that chair, Mrs. Gates. I just . . . I . . . I won't do it again.”

I was proud of him for not trying to deflect responsibility. I nodded, then looked at Mrs. Gates.

She sighed and then crossed her arms. “Thank you for your apology, Chad. Unfortunately, I will have to document your behavior in your file. I understand that you have reservations about returning home to your mother, but trust me when I say it is for the best.”

Chad looked at me with panicked eyes. I had to say something fast or all the good he'd done with his apology might be wiped away by another impulsive outburst.

“You aren't going anywhere today but to school and back here, Chad.” I smiled at him. “I promise.”

I watched as he began to do the deep breathing we'd taught him and angrily swiped away a tear. “You're dismissed, Chad. Go and eat something before you have to leave for school.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said and rushed out of the room.

“You are not doing these boys any favors by coddling them so,” Mrs. Gates said. If I had to hear one more white person tell me what was right for my boys, I might scream.

“What do you know about these boys besides what’s in your files?” I snapped. “How many Black boys have you raised? How many Black boys are members of your family? You don’t know anything about these boys other than what the DHS handbook tells you. Next time you want to come to my group home, Mrs. Gates, you call first. Otherwise, we are going to have issues with each other. Good day.”

“You will hear from me soon, Miss Daniels,” she said and huffily marched out the door.

I had some choice names to call her, but I released all of that and went to the dining room to check on the boys. All of them were sitting together at the family-style table. The room was usually filled with lots of noisy chatter and laughter. Today, everyone was silent, barely eating their food. Pee Wee was trying to coax Chad into talking to him. I was pleased that Chad didn’t snap at Pee Wee—he just shook his head.

Pee Wee had come to the group home a week after Chad did, and before long the unlikely pair became like brothers. Chad took up for Pee Wee if any of the other boys tried to pick on him for his stuttering or short stature, and when Chad’s temper flared, Pee Wee was usually able to make Chad smile and forget his bad mood.

All eyes turned to me when I walked into the room. I went and sat at the head of the table. As often as I could, I tried to take my meals with the boys.

“I know you are all confused by what happened this morning,” I said, looking from one boy’s face to the next. “A lot of emotions were on display, and I am sorry you all had to witness it. But I

hope that you won't let it mess up your day. Your job is to go to school and learn new things, and my job is to take care of everything else. Am I understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they said in unison.

"Chad, do you have something to say to the group?" I asked. The boys knew the routine. They put down their knives and forks and looked at Chad.

Chad stood up and made eye contact with each boy, like I had taught all of them to do. "I'm sorry for messing up everybody's morning. I let myself get mad and I shouldn't. Forgive me?"

"Yes, Chad," everyone said, Pee Wee loudest of all. "We forgive you."

"Thank you, Chad. Thank you, everyone," I said. "Someone explain why we accepted Chad's apology just now." Everything was a learning opportunity at the group home, and I wanted the boys to see merit in what we asked them to do, from taking out the trash to mowing the yard or saying "I'm sorry" when they did wrong.

Pee Wee raised his hand, waving it frantically.

I couldn't help but smile. He was such a lovable child. Always wanting to make sure he was on my good side.

"Yes, Pee Wee."

"We forgive Ch-Ch-Chad because we want to b-b-be forgiven when we m-m-make mistakes," he said, smiling broadly.

"That's right, Pee Wee," I said. "Good answer."

Jason entered the room and looked from the boys to me. I nodded, signaling to him that I was done talking.

"Y'all go wash up one more time and meet me out at the van,"

he said. "It's time for school." The boys got up and carried their plates to the kitchen. Instead of race to the various bathrooms, they moved slowly and quietly, especially Chad. It was clear that they were all still a bit rattled. During their time together, they bonded like brothers, and whenever they saw one of their brothers in distress, they took it hard. Managing the emotions of fifteen rambunctious boys was no easy task. I was grateful for my staff. We worked well together, and even though I was displeased with this morning's outcome, overall, they'd done the best they could.

I watched as Chad hesitantly walked up to Jason with his head down. Jason didn't move. He simply waited.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jason," Chad finally said, raising his head and looking Jason in the eyes. "I didn't mean to disrespect you that way. You been nice to me, and I was awful to you. I won't do it again."

Jason considered Chad for a moment and then offered him a hand so they could do one of the elaborate handshakes Jason had taught the boys. "You and I are good, man. Just watch that temper of yours. Don't let nobody get inside your head like that. Every situation can be figured out. Breaking up walls ain't the answer. Now, go finish cleaning up for school."

Chad smiled for the first time this morning. "Yes, sir. Thank you." He hurried out of the room. I could see a lightness in his steps that almost caused me to tear up. We could offer them crumbs, and it would often be better than what they'd ever been offered before.

Jason came to the table and sat beside me, appearing almost as gloomy as the boys had looked. He was an earnest young man

who took his work here seriously. He reminded me of my brothers in a number of ways. Studious. Hardworking. And anxious to gain my approval.

“I apologize, Miss Daniels,” he said. His voice was solemn, and his eyes were shining but he held back the tears. “I take full responsibility for everything that happened this morning. I should have been more proactive with shutting things down until you arrived, especially once I knew why she was here. I just didn’t expect Chad to have that kind of reaction. With her having all the paperwork, and her insisting on seeing Chad, well . . . I just . . . I didn’t think.”

I nodded my head in agreement. I didn’t believe in letting people off the hook when they messed up, even when it was unintentional. This work we did was important and none of us could risk falling down on the job.

“Thank you for your apology, Jason. You’re right. Balls were dropped today. None of you followed protocol and as a result, things got out of hand. Thankfully, we all survived. When you get back from taking the boys to school, we’ll have our staff meeting. The other houseparents plus the on-site counselors will be here as well, so we can all go over this incident together. No one is guilt-free, but as a team, we will fix what is broken and move forward.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, getting up. “I’d better get the boys to school. Don’t want them to be late.”

“That sounds good,” I said, getting up too. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

I made my way into the kitchen, where Mrs. Dorothy Kennedy

and Miss Theresa Grant were washing dishes and talking animatedly to each other. I was in desperate need of some coffee, and the heady scent of freshly brewed java was wafting throughout the house. I didn't have an appetite, but the coffee was calling my name.

Both Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Grant had worked as part of the kitchen staff since the group home opened. Every meal they cooked was like Sunday dinner, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all wrapped up into one. Both women were amazing cooks and made sure we ate well. The boys called them Mama K and Mama G and it was typical to find one or more of the boys seeking them out for hugs, advice, or a freshly baked cookie from the cookie jar they kept on top of the refrigerator. Mama K and Mama G never overstepped their boundaries, but they were always ready to share a scripture or say a prayer with anyone who needed it, resident or staff.

When I entered the room, they both stopped talking and looked up, smiles on their faces as usual. It was a relief to see both women. I often sought their counsel as much as the boys.

"Good morning, Miss Daniels," Mrs. Kennedy said, walking over to the coffeepot. "I already know what you want." She poured me a cup of coffee, splashing it lightly with cream. She handed it to me, and I took a sip without even blowing on it. I coughed but continued to drink the fiery liquid that was burning my throat. I needed that caffeine in the worst kind of way. As I drank, I could feel the coffee-induced calm begin to wash over me. I felt the urge to do what my boys did, and seek solace from these older, nurturing women, but I just smiled.

“Do you want some breakfast, Miss Daniels?” Miss Grant asked. “You’ve had a long day and it ain’t even started good. You need some fuel in your gas tank. There’s some eggs, toast, and bacon over here with your name on them.”

“No, thank you. Thank you, ladies, for the coffee.” I hurried out of the kitchen and down the hallway. Leslie wasn’t at her desk, so I was able to make it into my office unnoticed. I wanted to take a couple of aspirins, but before I could reach inside my desk for the bottle, the phone rang.

I stared at it like it was a two-headed snake. Something wasn’t right. I just knew it. I had a sixth sense that dated back to my childhood. On the night Daddy’s mama died, when I was only five or six, I felt her spirit hover above my bed, reach down, and give me a ghostly kiss, and then evaporate like a cloud. No one believed my story, but ever since then, I’d had premonitions and ghostly visitations. Whoever was on the other side of the phone did not have good news for me.

“Hello,” I said into the receiver.

“Baby,” Mama said. That one word made me sink into my chair, bracing myself for what I’d hear next. “It’s your brothers. They lost. The government letter say they lost.”

I shook my head without saying a word. Not this. Not this of all things. Not my brothers. I squeezed my eyes tight, trying to get a feeling about their whereabouts and their condition. I didn’t sense them being dead, but I didn’t sense them being alive either. I didn’t know which was more frightening.

“Baby, are you there?” Mama asked, her voice cracking.

“I’m coming home now, Mama,” I said and hung up the phone.

I jumped up and grabbed my things. Even as fragile as Mama was, I needed her to wrap her arms around me and reassure me that my brothers would be found and be alright. Right before I ran out of my office, I stopped myself and took several deep breaths. In and out. In and out.

“Please,” I said, the only word that would come out of my mouth at that moment. I prayed God could interpret everything that was encompassed in that one word. I prayed that God was, as Mama always said, on the throne and in control.



3

LESLIE HAD RETURNED TO HER DESK, so on my way out I explained what was going on and told her to let the staff know I wouldn't be long. I hoped I wouldn't be long. But I didn't know what Mama was going to tell me or the frame of mind we'd be in once the telling was done. Leslie reassured me that she'd relay the message and if I needed to postpone the staff meeting, to call and let her know.

I mumbled something but my main goal was to get home as fast as I could. By the time I turned onto Hubbard Street and neared the little white house with the white picket fence that I shared with Mama, I was nearly frantic.

I just kept repeating Mama's words. *They lost*. What did that even mean? Were they lost together? Did they somehow get lost separately? I didn't know, and as usual, my imagination was beating me up worse than the shaking and shimmying of Daddy's truck. I was grateful that my group home boys were at school, because I needed to be with my mother.

My mind drifted to the twisted dream I'd had about the twins the night before. Had God sent me a sign? Was that awful nightmare of them running in the jungle God's way of warning me that my brothers were in danger?

Once I reached our yard, I jerked the truck into Park and raced into the house. Seemed like running was all I'd been doing for such a long time.

Mama was in her favorite rocking chair by the front window, holding the letters from the government in her lap, still and unmoving. Her hair was uncombed, white curls splayed around her head. I had short, coarse hair like my daddy. Mama and the twins had what some deemed "good hair," curly and fine in texture.

She looked so fragile. Almost like one of my old discarded baby dolls I'd neglect for a good book back in the day.

"Mama," I called out.

"Both telegrams came today," she said as I walked closer to her. "I got one for Aaron and one for Marcus. They coulda just sent me one. They twins. One can't move without the other. One telegram woulda sufficed." She held them out for me, as if she needed to pass the burden off to someone else, and like always, I was that someone. My whole life had been about seeing after other people. My daddy. My mama. My brothers. The boys at the group home. All I'd ever known was giving to others and figuring out how to fix their problems. Right then, I needed her to hold me and tell me things would be alright. Yet she needed such reassurances from me more, so I had to set aside my grief and my fears to assuage Mama's.

I took the telegrams from her, my hands shaking as I wondered

how in the heck I was going to be able to fix this. I began to read the first telegram out loud:

“I regret to inform you that your son, Private First Class Aaron Lamont Daniels, has been reported missing in action since 2 October 1967.”

“Why you think they just now contacting us?” Mama mumbled. “My boys been lost for over a month and the gov’ment just now seeing fit to let me know something. I coulda been praying different had I known they was missing. Just ain’t right. Just ain’t right.”

“I know, Mama,” I said. I kept reading.

If further details or other information are received, you will be promptly notified. You have my sincere sympathy during this time of anxiety and uncertainty.

I glanced at the other telegram. Just like Mama said, it was identical. The only difference was that it had my other twin brother’s name, Marcus Harold Daniels III. He was the oldest of the twins by seventeen minutes. Even though the telegram didn’t say it, I could imagine that Marcus had gotten captured while trying to protect his younger twin brother, as he had done their entire lives. It was because of Aaron that Marcus was in the military. Aaron, who’d always had a fascination with the military, secretly joined the Marines. Once we discovered what he’d done, Marcus immediately joined the Marines too. “*We both got a better chance of surviving together,*” he’d told Mama and me.

Although it nearly cracked my heart open to know they were

both missing in action, I felt some semblance of gratitude that they had each other—at least I hoped they did.

“What we gone do?” Mama asked, shaking her head, tears streaming down her face. “I can’t lose my boys.”

Daddy’s death had nearly destroyed Mama. For weeks after he died, I couldn’t even grieve. I had to tend to her and the boys. I cooked. I cleaned. I read the boys bedtime stories. I went to the funeral home and took Daddy’s good suit for him to wear one last time. I even selected his casket and arranged the program. I tried not to let my imagination wander to having to do the same for one or both of my brothers. I didn’t think Mama could survive losing them. I didn’t know if I could either.

I put the telegrams on the side table and knelt beside her chair, taking her hands in mine. “I will figure this out, Mama. I will get on the phone and see who knows what.” I summoned every ounce of conviction I could find, saying the words for her and for me.

“You think they alive?” she asked, looking at me hopefully, like a little girl needing her mother’s assurance.

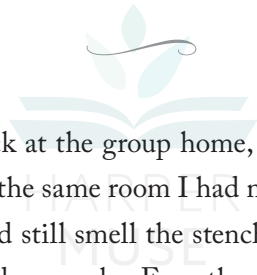
I didn’t know if they’d be found alive. From what I’d read in the newspapers about prisoners of war or soldiers missing in action, I didn’t hold a lot of hope, but I couldn’t say that out loud. The best I could do was kiss Mama’s forehead. She sighed, a heavy sound emerging from the very depths of her soul.

“You’ll find them for your mama.” She said this as a statement, not a question. I prayed she was right. She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and reached for the telegrams. She pressed them to her chest as she started singing one of her favorite hymns,

“Farther Along.”

As she continued to sing softly, a smile now affixed on her face, I got up from the floor, my hip crying out in pain. I grunted but was able to stand.

“Be right back, Mama,” I said and hurried down the hallway to the bathroom, my strong emotions nearly crushing me. Once in the bathroom, I closed the door behind me. I turned on the water in the sink and the tub, as loud sobs wracked my body. I didn’t want her to hear me cry, but I had to let it out. I knelt, hoping prayers would come, but none did. All that came was grief—unquenchable grief.



When I arrived back at the group home, everyone was waiting for me, gathered in the same room I had met with the board the previous day. I could still smell the stench of Sam IV’s cigar in the air. It nearly made me puke. Even though it was cool outside, I walked over to the window and cracked it a bit to let in some fresh air.

“Are you okay, Miss Katia?” Jason asked as I walked back to the long table and sat down at the head. Jason was to my left, and to my right, Leslie was preparing to take notes. Two of the houseparents, Mr. and Mrs. Grambling, an elderly Negro couple who had worked with the group home since it opened in 1953, had been here the longest, along with Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Grant. Whenever anyone had questions about protocol, on the rare occasion that they couldn’t locate me, or if they couldn’t find

Jason, they'd reach out to the Gramblings. They ate, breathed, and slept this group home and I appreciated their dedication.

David Snell, another recently hired houseparent, was slightly older than Jason, and along with being a houseparent, he was the youth minister at one of the white Baptist churches in Troy. When he applied for the job, I was worried about hiring a young white man to help mentor and support Black boys. But it didn't take long for me and the other staff to see that David's passion to serve was sincere. He always treated the boys with the greatest love and affection, but he was also stern when necessary.

Cairo Fieldings was an ex-con who'd come to me shortly after I started working at the group home. He'd been arrested numerous times since he was a teenager, but he promised me he was done with that life. At first, he begged for food and clothing. Over time, I started giving him jobs to do around the group home, like mowing the grass or deep cleaning the house and preparing rooms for new arrivals. Eventually, he expressed an interest in becoming a houseparent. I was unsure about it, but Mr. Grambling spoke up for him and said the boys needed to see someone like them who had turned his life around. I checked with the board and the Department of Human Services and they weren't concerned about Cairo's past, so I gave him a chance and he'd been with the group home ever since.

Finally, there were Mr. and Mrs. James, another Negro couple who had only been with us for a few weeks. They started around the same time as Leslie.

Such a dedicated group of individuals. They were like family. If the truth be told, I spent about as much time with them as I

did my own family. Seeing their sympathetic faces almost did me in, yet I couldn't give in to my sadness. Right now, there was work to do.

"I'm okay, everyone," I said, forcing a smile upon my face. "We have much to talk about today." I tried to summon normalcy. I needed to put aside my personal feelings and emotions and focus on why we were here: the boys. "We need to unpack what happened this morning with Chad Montgomery and make sure nothing like that happens again. We also need to discuss the other boys and their progress. The holidays are coming soon. Most of the boys, God willing, will be returning to their families. I need you all to help set up the initial visits with their families before we relinquish the boys to them. Jason, please debrief the staff on what happened this morning."

I tried to pay attention to everything people said, but my mind kept drifting back to my missing brothers. On more than one occasion, Jason reached over and lightly touched my arm. Usually I could figure out what I'd missed and rejoin the conversation. We came up with some clear rules about caseworkers and the hours they were allowed to visit the group home. We also discussed specific punishment for Chad's behavior. We'd limit his television watching and ensure he and his therapist spent additional time talking about ways he could better control and manage his anger.

"Chad is a good kid," Jason said. "And he wants to do the right thing but he gets afraid when he senses things aren't going to go the way he wants them to."

"Fight or flight," I said. "That's his way of coping, but we have

to teach him—teach *all* of the boys—that there are other ways to cope. He’ll get it. It will just take time. But until then, let’s avoid doing anything that pushes Chad into believing fight or flight are his only options.” The discussion went on a few more minutes and then we transitioned to talking about the other boys.

Jason brought up each boy, and one by one, we discussed their progress or any issues that needed addressing.

“Miss Katia,” Jason said softly. I looked at him absently, realizing I had blanked out again. Thoughts of the jungles of Vietnam were crowding my mind. I sighed. There was no way for me to finesse this particular mind lapse. I had no clue what they were talking about.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying not to be embarrassed. “Would you repeat your question?”

“Larry Holten, the new boy, is still stealing food from the kitchen and hiding it underneath his bed in a shoebox,” Mr. Grambling said. “I told that boy the food ain’t going nowhere, but he still does it. Ants and roaches is gonna be all over the place. I just need some guidance on what y’all think we should do.”

“From what I gather, it’s something he’s always done,” David Snell said. “I asked him about it yesterday and he said when he’s in foster care, sometimes there’s not enough food, so he would hide food for himself and his little brother. He apologized, but I don’t even think he’s conscious of doing it. It is as much a part of who he is as walking or breathing.”

“When his therapist comes tomorrow, let her know what’s going on,” I said. “In the meantime, maybe offer him an apple

or an orange that he can keep on his dresser. Just so he can feel safe for the time being.”

“Feels like that’s giving in to bad behavior. If we let him have food outside of mealtimes, the other boys will think they should be able to do the same,” Mr. Grambling said in a gruff voice.

I looked over at him and smiled. He sometimes struggled with my methods. Before I started working at the group home, the houseparents were allowed to spank the boys or severely punish them by taking away their meals. I stopped all of that immediately. I had grown up in a household where my parents didn’t use corporal punishment; instead, they would talk to me and my brothers. They emphasized love and respect over everything else. They always said, *“We can’t teach you to be the kind of person who doesn’t hit, if we are constantly hitting you.”* I wanted that same environment for the boys. It took a while to get everyone on board, but things had gotten better because the boys knew that no matter what they did wrong, there would be consequences, but no physical violence of any kind was tolerated—from the adults or the children.

Once we had discussed every boy in detail, I adjourned the meeting and told everyone to go to lunch. I was exhausted. My tank was empty, so for the rest of the afternoon, I sequestered myself in my office and threw myself into processing the stack of paperwork on my desk. I went back and forth between dealing with the paperwork for the group home and making calls about my brothers. The hours went by in a hurry and by the end of the day, my head was spinning from all of the unsatisfactory calls I had made to various ones in the military who I thought might

have some information for me and Mama. Every single person I spoke to, all the way up to a harried Department of Defense secretary, said the same thing: they were sorry for my family's "anxiety and uncertainty," but they had no new information.

By the time I called the last person on my list, it was four thirty, and the sounds of the boys' laughter and talking filled the hallways, a sound that usually brought me the greatest pleasure.

School was out and they were clearly happy to return to the place that felt most like home to many of them. Any other time, I'd be waiting for them at the door, greeting each boy, asking him about his day. But today, I needed the sanctity of my office. I needed the neutrality of the paperwork that demanded my attention but required nothing of me besides my thoroughness and my accuracy.

Not long after the boys entered the house, I heard a light knocking on my door. I felt like hiding under my desk. I wasn't ready to see anyone. I needed another few hours to regroup, but I didn't have that kind of time. I was needed—here and at home. There was nowhere for me to hide.

"Come in." I took off my reading glasses and placed them on my desk as Chad opened the door and walked into the room, an uncertain look on his face.

"You still mad at me?" he asked, stopping in front of my desk. He shifted from one foot to the other, his eyes squarely on the floor.

"Look at me, Chad," I said. He didn't move. "Chad. Look at me."

He looked up, apprehension in his eyes. He was such a big

little boy. So afraid that his number one ally—me—was going to abandon him like everybody else in his life had.

“I’m not mad,” I said, observing him closely. “You apologized and I forgave you. That’s the end of that.”

He observed me just as closely, as if he were trying to figure out my mood. “You look sad ’bout the eyes. You okay, Miss Katia?”

His astuteness stunned me. I cleared my throat. “I’m okay, Chad. It’s been a long day. How was school?” I wanted to shift the focus off me.

“Okay.” He paused for a moment and then said what I knew must have been on his mind all day. “Miss Katia, is that white lady gone send me back to live with Lena? I don’t want to go back to live with her.”

“Mrs. Gates,” I corrected. “You know her name. We use names around here.”

“Is Mrs. Gates gone send me back to live with Lena?” Chad had a fearful look on his face, as if he were bracing himself for my answer.

I sighed and got up from my chair, making my way around the desk to where Chad stood.

“Let’s go sit. You’re too tall for me to talk to you while you’re standing and I’m not.”

He went over to the couch, and I followed him. After we both sat down, I gathered my thoughts before responding to his question.

“Chad, what is the one thing I always tell you boys?” No matter how tired or overwhelmed I felt, I wanted to make sure Chad

wasn't confused about anything pertaining to his case. Some things I couldn't resolve but the things I did have power over, I wanted him to know about, from my mouth to his ears.

"You say you won't ever lie to us. You say, no matter how tough the truth might be, you'll always tell it to us."

I reached over and took his hands, big bear paws within mine. "I will fight with everything in me to keep you safe. But I'm just one person. I don't know what a judge will say."

Chad jerked away his hands, balling them into fists, his face instantly growing dark with anger. "I could just run away. I don't need nobody to look after me."

"Okay," I said slowly, as if I were considering his suggestion. "If you think you're prepared to live on your own, who am I to stop you?"

He looked at me quizzically. My words did not match up with what he'd expected me to say. "You would just let me leave? You would just let me go without a fight?"

He appeared hurt by my nonchalance, but I wanted him to see for himself how ridiculous and dangerous his impulsive idea was.

"Well, I would tell you that you need money to live on your own, and as far as I know, you don't have any money or at least not enough money to take care of yourself, which means you would have to get a job and because of your age, legal jobs would be impossible," I said. "So, how do you think you would be able to support yourself?"

"I know people," he mumbled. "Somebody would help me out."

"No one on the streets helps folks out without a price, Chad,"

I said. “You know that. I don’t want you to make a hasty decision because you’re afraid. Give me a chance to figure this situation out. Don’t do something that will make things worse. Will you do that for me? Will you just hold on and believe that I am fighting for you day and night?”

Chad was quiet. Normally, he was the kid with the slick mouth—no matter the question or point being made, he had a quippy response. I was surprised that he just sat and watched me intently. At last, he spoke.

“Your eyes are puffy,” he said. “You been crying?”

I thought about lying to him, but I tried my best to always be honest with the boys. “I got some bad news about my brothers.”

“Them,” he said, pointing at a picture on my desk of the twins wearing their Marine uniforms.

Chad was such an observant child. He saw things most children his age didn’t even notice. It worried me some. He looked like a grown man, and sometimes he sounded like one. I prayed no one ever took advantage of my gentle giant.

“Yes,” I said.

“They dead?” he asked, looking at me intently. “They get shot up by them Viet Cong? I heard tell on the news that they some badasses.”

“Watch your mouth, Chad. Say it different.”

“I’m sorry. I should have said, them Viet Cong is some bad men. Is that better?” He looked at me for approval and I smiled, even though this conversation was breaking my heart. I didn’t want to entertain the idea that either of my brothers might be dead instead of missing. Missing was bad enough, but at least

they might be captured somewhere, maybe by people who could see the tragedy of this war and might practice a hint of compassion toward my little brothers. I couldn't make myself believe that every person over there wanted this war any more than many of us over here. I had to believe that there was goodness everywhere on God's green earth, including in the place where my brothers and others like them were fighting for their lives.

"I pray they aren't dead, Chad, but unfortunately, I don't know for sure. All we know is that they're missing in action."

Chad nodded. "My uncle Lennie died over there. He wasn't my real uncle, but he looked out for me when he could. He was a junkie, too, but he wasn't as bad as Lena."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Chad. This war is brutal. A lot of good men and women are dying over there. My sincere prayer is that it will end soon."

Chad stood up. "I should go do my homework."

I smiled. When Chad had first moved into the group home, getting him to do his homework was almost impossible, but now, six months later, he seemed to like to get his homework done, and he even went out of his way to help Pee Wee with his. Every Friday after school, if the boys had done their work and tried their best, Jason took them to Dairy Queen for ice cream, and so far Chad hadn't missed a trip. At the morning staff meeting, we'd discussed whether he should forgo Dairy Queen due to his behavior, but I argued in his favor. Rightly or wrongly, I blamed his caseworker for his behavior more than I did him.

"Let Mr. Jason know if you need help with your math," I said.

"I don't need any help," he said with a wide grin. "My teacher

say I'm good with numbers, and if I keep on, I could work for NASA someday."

"Oh. So you want to work for NASA?"

He nodded, and his face radiated with pride. When Chad acted the way he was supposed to, he was the sweetest boy. It was hard to believe he was the same young man who had smashed a wall with a chair earlier in the day. Thank goodness the damage was minimal. Cairo Fieldings had already patched up the wall and repainted it. Even if you stood close to it, you couldn't tell that anything had happened.

"Yes, ma'am. I want to be just like Scotty on *Star Trek*. I want to 'boldly go where no man has gone before,'" he said, proudly quoting the line from his and the other boys' favorite show. We didn't let them watch much television, and I wasn't exactly pleased with the skimpy outfits of the women on *Star Trek*, but I did like Uhura—and I did like that half the boys were into science and math, hoping that someday they, too, might fly around the universe like Captain Kirk and the crew of the *USS Enterprise*. Almost all of their playtime was spent pretending they were the *Star Trek* crew. They even allowed Pee Wee to join in. He always wanted to be Mr. Spock but inevitably, they'd offer him the role of Chekov or Sulu. It was always interesting watching them play, a sweet reminder that as tough as they could act sometimes, they were simply boys.

"Alright, Mr. Scotty," I said. "You go get that homework done. I'll check in on you before I leave."

"Yes, ma'am," he said and started walking toward the door, but before he left the room, he stopped and turned to face me. "Miss

Katia . . .” His voice trailed.

“Yes. What is it?” I watched as he struggled, almost like he didn’t want to say whatever it was that was on his mind. “Just say it, Chad. Whatever it is.”

“I . . . I wish you were my mama,” he said and then hurried out the door.

I was stunned. Not so much that he wished I was his mother. Other boys had said similar things to me over the decade that I’d worked at the group home. I usually let it flow over me, but his words hit differently.

My thoughts rushed back to last year, when I’d had an emergency hysterectomy. I’d always had difficult periods, but they got so bad last year that I’d double over in pain while walking from the house to my truck. One day, while I was getting ready for work, the pain became so intense, I passed out. The next thing I knew, I was waking up inside the Negro hospital in Tuskegee. I remembered looking around wildly, relaxing only when I saw Mama sitting by my bed. A doctor stood next to Mama, his skin dark like mine. There was something reassuring about having a Negro doctor—that is, until he shared his news.

“Miss Daniels, my name is Dr. Shaw, and I am going to be honest with you,” he said, gazing down at me with the utmost compassion. “There is an unusually large-sized mass inside your uterus, and although I won’t know for sure until we get inside, I don’t think I will be able to save it.”

“A hysterectomy,” I said as Mama squeezed my hand. “But I don’t have any children. I’m not married. This isn’t right.”

He went on to explain everything to me, but all I could think

about was the family I thought I still had time to have. With this news, I could no longer see that in my future. Unlike most women, I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about getting married and having children. I was busy taking care of Mama, my brothers, and the boys at the group home, yet the thought of not being able to give birth was devastating.

Just like the doctor had warned, there was no saving my uterus. When I awakened after the surgery and saw the look on Mama's face, I instantly knew.

I cried in her arms, and then, in true Katia fashion, I tucked my pain away and focused my attention on everyone else. Right around that time was when I first dreamed about the leeches crawling all over me.

Mama said it was God telling me I needed to put myself first. I didn't know about that. I just knew that I had to figure out how to move forward with a future that held no babies and, as far as I could see, no husband. And now, Chad saying he wished I was his mother opened up every bit of heartache I thought I had packed away, and I didn't know how to cram those emotions back into the suitcase again.