

1 MYA

MY SISTERS AND I WERE NEVER ALONE with the woman we knew as Aunt Paula until the day my mama disappeared. Aunt Paula sat at the kitchen table with her arm around Jackie.

“She’ll be back. Everything’ll be okay.” She wound the ends of my sister’s braids around her finger. Paula only had boys, so spending time with us was how she got her fill of pretty dresses, dolls, and braids. “Your mama will be back before you know it.”

It didn’t explain anything, but my sisters didn’t bother to question her any further. They heard what they needed. Mama was coming back, and everything would be fine. So, I kept quiet.

The next morning, we went downstairs, expecting to see Mama there in her robe flipping pancakes. We found Paula instead, lining up four paper-bag lunches and smiling. Mama only ever packed us two lunches. One for Nikki, who like most sixth graders, brought her lunch, plus another bag for me and Jackie because we always ate together, and Jackie tended to forget if Mama trusted her with her own lunch. I started to point out Nat didn’t need a cold lunch since kindergarteners ate hot lunches, but I decided against it.

“Here you girls go. Now, go learn something.”

“Mama be here when we get back?” Jackie asked.

Aunt Paula smiled and nodded.

We raced home, convinced we were due a celebration

because Mama had never been gone from us for longer than a few hours. Folks said she was overprotective, never wanting us to go to sleepovers and things. She liked having us close. Up the porch steps we ran, and Nikki took out her key to unlock the door. Silence met us in the foyer. No Mama. No Paula. Jackie took off running, calling out for her like Mama hid in the back somewhere.

“Mama not here?” Nat looked up at me.

Stunned, Nikki couldn’t move to even close the door. She peeked over her shoulder at the outside world like maybe we shouldn’t be alone in the house, like we might get in trouble.

“Times like this is why you got the key,” I reminded her and locked the door behind us. “When Mama’s at work. She’s at work is all.”

When Daddy moved out, Mama started working a lot. At first she worked the afternoon shift, but she got moved to the morning shift, so she could be home around the time we got out of school.

“She’ll be here soon.” I said.

So, we waited.

We got hungry, so Nikki made us a snack, and we waited some more.

Once suppertime came, Nikki thought we should surprise Mama by making it ourselves. She did most of the work, arguing with Jackie about where Mama kept things and how much of each ingredient was supposed to go in it. I kept watch from the window seat. At the first sight of her, I was gonna yell out, so my sisters would stop fighting and relax. Only, Mama didn’t come home.

The next day we got up and did it all again. Only this time when school let out, the principal called us down to her office. Stacks of files and papers covered every inch of the desk with a few on the floor reaching knee-high. The principal was a burly woman with a high-pitched voice. She directed us to the empty chairs and in one long breath, laid out the problem at hand. Nobody answered when the school called our home phone, and the folks at Mama’s job claimed she disappeared during her shift three days ago. Then she asked if we knew where Mama was. Asked if we had

supervision at home.

“Yes. We’re fine,” I said.

But she didn’t believe me. She said Nat had mentioned it to her teacher who told the secretary who told her.

“Mama must’ve gone to see somebody about a bike for us.”

“Heziah,” Jackie piped. Heziah was her answer to every unknown. Just the thought of him made her smile. She loved Mama’s boyfriend the way I loved our daddy. “She gone to see Heziah, but she be back soon.”

The principal shooed us out of the overcrowded office as she began to make a telephone call.

An hour later, a fiftyish woman in a navy blue suit showed up to take us home. She had two other women with her, both younger and trained to follow orders. They marched us up the stairs and into our bedrooms, lording over us while we each packed one bag a piece. One of the subordinates packed Nat’s bag, which didn’t sit well with Nikki since she thought she was the one in charge.

I had other concerns. “Where we going? You taking us to our Mama?”

“No. You’re going to stay somewhere else for now.”

“Where?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“I’m not going nowhere until my mama get home!” Jackie said, glaring at the woman in defiance. Only one person in our family was as stubborn as Jackie. When my sister put her foot down, she meant it.

“Me neither,” Nat said, squeezing tight to her stuffed teddy bear.

“Young lady, I didn’t give you a choice. Now...let’s go.”

“You can’t make me! You not my mama.”

The front door opened and the standoff ended. Daddy strolled into the foyer, twirling his key around his finger. I was so happy I was about ready to burst. Flew down the stairs and into his bulging arms. Folks said his strength was legendary, and I knew

he'd throw down before letting them take us anywhere.

"I missed you, Daddy!"

"Missed you too, baby girl. Where's your Mama?"

The old woman and her sidekicks joined us downstairs. They were still holding on to our bags. I smiled thinking about what was in store for the DCFS woman and her friends. Nobody messed with my daddy.

"Mr. Morrow, hello. I'm Judith Gibson. I work for the Department of Children and Family Services."

"What you want?"

"Do you live in the home?"

"Not at the moment, I don't." His gaze traveled over to Jackie, who dragged the toe of her shoe along a crack in the floor boards. "But I will be soon. Why?"

"We're taking temporary custody of the girls. Now, we don't want to make this harder on them, so please..."

"N'all. They my kids. I'll take 'em until they Mama get home from work."

"She not at work! She gone to get Heziah!" Jackie said. "He's our daddy now! You ain't nothing!"

Daddy's jaw twitched, his chest swelled, and his mouth spat, "You wanna take one of 'em? Take that one. The rest of 'em comin' with me."

"Daddy, where you live?" Nikki whispered.

But his address didn't matter. The social worker had made up her mind before he stepped over the threshold. She took out some fancy document from her purse and held out the sheet of paper, proving we didn't belong to him no more.

He read it over and said, "She lying! I ain't never did nothing like this here...this here letter say! She the one be neglecting them! Where she is? How she gonna say I ain't a fit parent?"

The woman gave a little nod, and one of the younger women disappeared into the kitchen. Daddy didn't mind. He kept right on yelling. Yelled until the police showed up. They tried to calm him

down, but they were doing it all wrong. Daddy ain't calm down for anybody but me. They were ushering us toward the front door, but I was trying to stay in his field of vision. My calming powers ain't work otherwise.

"Mya," Jackie's hand clutched mine, and I read the plea in her eyes. Last thing she wanted was to be anywhere near Daddy. My sister's fingers tightened around mine.

Folks always thought we were twins on account of how close we were in age. I nodded and walked with her out to the porch. We were down the steps and almost to the gate before we realized what was happening. Two cars—one tan, the other black. One of the social workers was holding Nat's hand and standing in front of the tan car. Nikki was cowering in the shadows of the black car's rear seat.

Jackie said, "We go together."

"No. You're going to this car, and Mya here is going to the black car."

"We go together," I said.

"You girls need to say your goodbyes."

Jackie's grasp only tightened, and I thought my chest might cave in and crush what was left of my heart. First Daddy left, then Mama, now my sisters. I never hated anyone before, but I hated the smug DCFS woman with every fiber of my body.

"No!" My sister let out a blood curling scream, and I pulled her body to mine, clutching at her clothes.

"Please, if you relax..." The woman was saying as she tried to pry us apart.

"GET OFF ME! YOU GET OFF ME! NO! MYAAAA!"

"Jackie...", I said, mumbling, as she slipped out of my grasp. A stranger's hands were guiding me toward the black sedan. I stumbled over the grass, over the curb, failing to see through the curtain of tears. A car door closed, and a second later, we were moving. Nikki was crying next to me, but she didn't make a move to stop them. She didn't even try.

"Please turn around and sit down. We want you to be safe."

D. BRYANT SIMMONS

Jackie's cries rang in my ears, but I couldn't make her out. I pressed my fingertips to the rear window, barely able to distinguish her from the other bodies on our front lawn. Even that didn't last very long before we took a right at the corner and sped away from the only home I ever knew.

SPRING 1987

2 PECAN

CAN'T MOVE FORWARD HOLDING ON TO THE past, said the woman in my mirror. I reached high above my head, wrapping a strand of hair from the crown of my head around the spongy blue roller, and snapped the plastic prong in place before reaching for another one. My beauty, which I used to question, now seemed more like fact than fiction. Sure, up close my face showed signs of wear—wrinkles in the corners of my eyes and crescent-shaped indentations framed my full lips, but my skin glided over the hills and valleys of my body with defiant radiance. Smooth as butter under the melancholy hues of midnight. Complementing the crimson gown with its empire waist and black lace trim. Nowadays they considered it vintage but it was brand new when I bought it. Although the youth had long since drained from my eyes, I wouldn't trade none of my scars to get it back. 'Cause for all the old fractures, sprains, and cuts that had healed over I got something couldn't nobody take. I got wiser. And I got Nikki. Mya. Jackie and Nat. Jenna and Callie. With all the pain the past brought me it also gave me my girls, and taught me about miracles. Was a damn miracle what the body could endure.

But still, every night I said those words to myself. Nighttime was when I needed the reminder that nothing good came from holding on to the past. When the day was all said and done, I thought about the things I should've said but didn't. Things I wish I'd done differently or not at all. Ricky Morrow sat at the top of the list. I was down to only ten wishes a day. Ten times I wished I'd never married that man. Ten times I reminded myself I wouldn't have my girls if I hadn't married him. Wasn't fair that they were

tied to him. Just looking at 'em sometimes sent me reeling into the past. It helped some that I never had to set eyes on Ricky. Any photograph he was in was safely locked in a box in the attic.

"I could watch you forever." Heziah smiled. "I could die right here and now watching you put curlers in your hair and I'd be a happy man."

"Guess that makes you a simple man then, don't it?"

"As simple as they come."

Heziah Jenkins, was the second man to love me but the first to have my whole heart. He was an honorable man. Came to me when I didn't believe they existed. He saved my soul just by being him. Couldn't write off all men knowing men like Heziah was walking the earth. Couldn't settle for Ricky's sort of love after I'd tasted what Heziah had to offer. Of course he ain't save me from my regular ole man. That was my doin'. I saved myself. After twelve years at the mercy of Ricky Morrow. After bruises I hid and lies I told. After being raped. After having a nervous breakdown and spending months in a psychiatric care facility. After the state took custody of my kids. I saved myself.

"How I get so lucky?" Heziah said as I put the last roller in my hair.

"Well move over, lucky man."

I flicked a hand at him and he laughed while scooting over to his side of the bed. If I splurged at all with the household expenses it was on bedding. On pretty pillows and expensive sheets, because nighttime was the only time I was at the mercy of my thoughts.

"Nice and toasty."

"You're welcome Belinda. See. It's the simple things that make you love me."

"Is it now? Tell me about these simple things."

"Flowers on every occasion. Our anniversary," he ticked off each item one at a time on his fingers. "Mother's Day—,"

"We ain't been married but three years."

"That's three anniversaries, three Mother's days, three

birthdays—wait, no. Four birthdays,” he paused then quickly added, “Three Valentine’s Days too! All of that adds up! Plus every night I warm your side of the bed.”

“And I haven’t had to change a light bulb in I don’t know how long.”

“See. Lots of reasons to love me.”

“I guess you’re right. Okay simple man. I guess I best get around to loving you then.”

I laughed more with Heziah than I ever had before. We laughed more than any couple should who’s got teenagers that think they grown. Once the laughter had died down he held me close and we drifted to sleep in each other’s arms.

I awoke as the sunlight peeked through the bedroom curtains with only gratitude on my mind. Snuggling deeper into the soft sheets, I counted my blessings. I was free. I had five of my girls back under my roof. And I’d slept peacefully. No dreams about the past.

3 JACKIE

FAST GIRLS ALWAYS GET THEMSELVES INTO TROUBLE,” Nikki’s bitter drawl bounced off the murky yellow walls of my mama’s kitchen. “It’s true, Mama,” she insisted.

“Don’t talk about your sister like that.”

Never understood what I did to get on Nikki’s bad side, but she was determined to turn everybody against me. Really, she should’ve been thanking me. She got to be the responsible saint because I played the bad girl so well. Truthfully? She loved every second.

“I’m just saying one of these days Jackie’s gonna get herself in trouble. Sneaking around doing God knows what.”

Nikki didn’t swear. Didn’t even name call, unless talking about me. She sat at the kitchen table, shelling peas while Mama stood over the stove, seasoning the pork chops. At barely eighteen, my eldest sister dressed like a middle-aged woman of the Christian persuasion. Every blouse buttoned up to her chin, and every skirt hit below her knees. Even her shoes were the ugly missionary variety, as if she needed to advertise her commitment to Jesus Christ. A virtuous Christian woman. Mama never used the word before, but that’s all Nikki talked about—her virtue. Far back as I can remember, Nikki was the impressionable one. Didn’t even take two years to turn her into a Bible-thumper. She nearly broke her neck accommodating her foster family’s outlook. So without warning, we—mainly me—wasn’t good enough for her. I didn’t say grace before every meal. Didn’t go to church. I had too

many boyfriends, a flair for the dramatic, and unlike her, I actually dressed my age.

“Hey, Mama,” I sashayed into the kitchen, smiling as Nikki’s face contorted in disgust at the length of my skirt. “You need some help?” I asked.

“No, baby, I’m fine.” Mama studied me from top to bottom and smiled. “Going somewhere?”

“Yep.”

I’d paired an electric blue miniskirt with neon yellow tights, a matching bodysuit, and big black belt, which added definition to my youthful waist. Straightened my hair and pulled half into a ponytail on the top of my head and added a pair of thick gold hoop earrings.

“Gina’s having a party. Everybody’s going.”

“You didn’t even ask if you could go,” Nikki snapped. “Mama, tell her she’s gotta ask first. She can’t just come running downstairs announcing she’s going to some party. It’s disrespectful.”

“What do you care what I do? You don’t even live here.”

“See. No respect for anyone.”

“Not anyone. Just you.”

“All right, you two. Quit it.” Mama shook her head. “You two do this every time. And Jackie?”

“Yes, Mama?”

“Boys gonna be at this party?” She’d gone back to the pork chops, turning each piece over to double-check the seasoning covered the meat evenly.

“Boys are everywhere. I mean unless you want me to become a nun and lock myself in a tower somewhere.”

“Don’t get smart.”

“I’m not. I’m simply saying it’s basically impossible to avoid boys. Not my fault they exist. Not like I’m searching them out. They find me.” I shrugged as the sound of Nikki’s scoffing from the kitchen table resonated behind me. “Okay, if it’ll make you feel better, I promise not to talk to any of them.” I grinned and raised

my right hand in a solemn gesture. "I cross my heart."

No surprise when she nodded. My mama was pretty easy to convince. But then she said, "Take your sister with you."

Nikki and I gasped at each other in horror. She couldn't be serious! The oven rattled as Mama extended the door to the open position, allowing her to slide the pan of meat into the heat. She stood, washed her hands, and rubbed them dry on the front of her apron. "Mya. Take Mya with you, and you can go."

Nikki exhaled, and I shared in her relief, if only for a moment....Mya and I didn't share the same friends. We didn't do the same things. She'd be miserable with me.

"Umm...everybody's expecting me, so I don't have time—"

"Well, if that's your choice...we happy to have you stay for supper."

"But, Mama! Mya hates parties! She's not gonna wanna go!"

I unknowingly stumbled on a better argument. Mama didn't want to make Mya do something she didn't wanna do. Nobody did. Mya didn't even have to say anything. If she cut her eyes at you, you knew better than to propose whatever you thought of proposing. Worked on everybody except me.

"How about I ask her, but if she says no, can I go on my own?"

Mama smiled, tilting her head to one side as she said, "I reckon that won't be a problem because you can be downright convincing when you wanna be."

As I climbed the stairs to my sister's bedroom, my brain ran through all possible ideas and strategies. Nothing seemed likely to work. I was a naturally persuasive person, so I'd just have to rely on my instincts. I knocked sweetly and waited for Mya's raspy alto on the other side. I was about to knock again when I heard the sounds of mischief behind me. Instinctively, I understood. The frustration had been a new sensation but was working its way around to being common place. Little sisters. Natalie was a doll. She did a poor job of preparing us for what was to come. I crossed the hall, pushed in the door to my bedroom, and smothered the impulse to scream my head off at the sight of all my makeup and hair products strewn across my bed.

My closet door muffled the giggles. They shushed each other, still having as much fun as when they started. Five girls living under the same roof would be trying for the most patient person, which I was not. Especially when plagued by two devilish three year olds.

I yanked open the closet door. "Get out of my clothes! My stuff! My Room!"

The twins darted around me, running full speed into the hallway. Wasn't the first time I'd caught them playing with my caboodle and wouldn't be the last. Heziah said that they only did it because they looked up to me, that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, but I found it annoying, and it ruined my mood. Being convincing didn't happen magically. I had to be in the right mindset. I needed to focus. My intention was to approach Mya in a blasé fashion, but even I wasn't that good of an actress, so I decided to use my frustration to my advantage.

"Ugh, do you believe them?" I invited myself into her tiny bedroom and flopped down on her bed.

Mya was the only one of us that was fair-skinned. The rest of us were some shade of brown with a little cocoa or honey sprinkled in, but Mya's fair skin appeared even fairer contrasting with her midnight waves. They were woven into a regal braid and adorned by a purple scrunchie at the base of her neck. Her knees pulled up to meet her chest, as she sat at the head of her bed with her nose buried in a book.

"How come they never get into your stuff? I never see them dressing up in your clothes. It's not fair."

Mya shrugged and turned a page. "My clothes aren't that interesting."

"Whatcha reading?"

"A book."

"Yeah, I see that. What's it about? Is it good?"

"I wouldn't be reading it if it wasn't good."

I nodded. That made sense, and Mya was nothing if not logical. Her attention turned to the page on the right, and I glanced

at my watch.

“So...whatcha doing? Got plans for tonight?”

“Why?” She asked without altering her gaze.

“I gotta get outta this house. I’m so sick of...you know...stuff. Don’t you ever wanna get out and have some fun?”

She answered my question with the turn of yet another page.

Mya was the star of the girls’ track team. She was obsessed with the Black Panthers and spent every minute she wasn’t running reading biographies of the more prominent members. Our ideas of fun couldn’t have been more different.

“Mya. You should come with me. It’ll be fun.”

“No, thanks.”

“Don’t you wanna know where I’m going? It’s a little get-together....Food. Some music. And probably a little dancing.”

She finally lowered the book enough to look me in the eye. “You mean a party. Not interested.”

“Nope, not a party. It’s a get-together.”

“Still not interested.”

“Aww, come on. I wanna hang out with my sister. We don’t spend enough time together.”

Her brow furrowed and she laid the book face down on her bed and shifted her legs until she was sitting Indian style. When we were younger, Mya and I had been inseparable, but that was BFC, before foster care. I’d missed her. I truly did. I’d just never said it aloud until then.

“So, what do you say? You gonna come with me?”

“We could hang out here...”

“With Miss Holier-than-Thou downstairs and the twin devils running around? No, thank you. Come on, let’s go. Just you and me.”

She was still resisting, so I dug deeper.

“Folks are gonna think you’re antisocial.”

“Maybe I am.”

“No, you’re not. You’re funny and nice and gorgeous. Come with me. I’ll...I’ll do your chores for a week.”

Mya’s eyes sparkled. “A month.”

“Three weeks. That’s it. So, what’s it gonna be?”