

# Second Chances

*A Novel By*  
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“No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive.”

-Mahatma Gandhi



# Chapter 1

## *Lakeisha*

“This is not a race issue. This is a commitment to education issue.”

The room erupted in applause, as though saying the words made them true. A man whistled in the back, cheering wildly. The blonde woman stood at the microphone in a yellow sundress, nodding emphatically at the crowd. Her demeanor was aggressive as she spoke:

“I have *lived* in underprivileged areas. What I am saying today is not about race. And I just want to say to anyone who wants to cry that it *is* a race issue, I'm sorry. That's your prejudice, calling me a racist because my skin is white, and I'm concerned about my children's education and safety.”

Lakeisha felt a strong mix of emotions, none solid enough to grasp onto. Hatred, anger, despair, frustration, they all swirled and ebbed inside her. Her skin was darker than the other people in the room, but that didn't give them the right to treat her like a criminal. To treat her daughter, not yet a teenager, like an animal. She looked down at her innocent child, wondering what was going through her mind.

Kenni was sitting cross legged on the floor, watching the blonde mother currently addressing the crowd with a blank expression on her young face. She had deep black skin like her father but her mother's nose. It was—thankfully—the only trait she had inherited from Lakeisha. All of her good parts came from James.

She always reminded Lakeisha of her late husband, a bittersweet token of what they once had and was no longer. Kenni was eleven, not really sure what was going on at this town hall meeting, yet she could still feel the hatred and fear emanating from the audience of white parents.

The hate wasn't directed at Kenni or Lakeisha. Not precisely. There was never mention of names or examples, only abstract comparisons. The fog of hate was simply present in the auditorium, an apparition filling the air as people vented their frustration and anger.

The bleachers were packed in the school auditorium at Northmont middle school, row upon row of well-dressed white parents. The murmur running through the crowd was that of a cornered animal, ready to strike and protect its young. Most of their white children had been left at home with babysitters while the parents went to do battle.

“I can't believe this,” Nichole murmured from beside her. She shuffled a step closer and folded her arms defensively, frowning. “I can't believe they would *say* things like this.”

Nichole was her elder daughter, having just turned seventeen and soon to graduate from high school. Her skin was lighter than Kenni's, but she still stood out in the crowd.

“Neither can I,” Lakeisha said.

They stood with a small pocket of black and Latino parents, certainly no more than twenty, huddled in the back right corner of the auditorium. Most were stuck standing since seats hadn't been

set up this far back. They didn't feel like mingling, so instead were tucked away and out of sight of the white parents filling the rest of the space.

This group gathered together in quiet desperation, amazed the white townsfolk were so brazen and outspoken about the recent court order: a few weeks earlier, an injunction had been put in place that would add diversity to their school by allowing more students to be bussed in from neighboring districts.

Lakeisha had brought Kenni along because this represented her future. She was one of the students who would be starting at Northmont in a few weeks. After living in a poverty-stricken neighborhood for fifteen years, Lakeisha had finally won the right for her children to change schools, along with a selection of other parents in her district.

It had been a long running lawsuit that would send hundreds of low income children, mostly black, to this highly ranked suburban school. Northmont School District's minority numbers were in the single digits, so the judge thought it would be good for the school as well.

It was too late for Rico or Nichole to benefit from the lawsuit. Rico had already graduated, and Nichole was in her final year, but Kenni and Tyler would have a better chance at a good education. They would be leaving one of the worst performing schools in the state and attending one of the best.

This was supposed to be a public forum, a chance for all of the parents to come together and discuss the new integration plan and how best to enact the new policies.

But that wasn't what this was. It had devolved into a public forum of outrage, a chance for parents to shout and receive adulation. How dare they allow these 'hoodlums' into their school? How dare the judge take away their right to self-segregate?

There was no quiet conversation; no debate. Person after person picked up the microphone only to reinforce the prejudices of the crowd. This was an echo chamber, rising in volume.

Lakeisha was regretting bringing her youngest daughter along now. She had expected...well, she *certainly* expected some sort of response. But this? It was the twenty-first century. She had never expected *this* kind of hatred to be the topic of conversation.

But, maybe she should have. Had things really changed that much in suburban America?

A man walked to the microphone after the blonde woman, big, burly, and wearing a polo shirt: "Maybe we should look at all of this a different way. The state says we can't do anything about it. That the lawsuit is through and their hands are tied. That we can't fight it. But maybe if we change the start time for the school day...move it forward twenty minutes, or an hour. Maybe then fewer children will *want* to come!"

Roaring applause, as though the man had just delivered a stirring speech during wartime. Not as though he had just suggested sabotaging the lives of hundreds of innocent children; not as though he were offering a petty solution to keep disenfranchised children out of this predominantly white school.

Another woman stood, willowy in a red dress. She took the stage:

"We are talking about violent behavior that is coming in with my second grader, my third grader, and my middle schooler that I'm very worried about. And I want to know—you have no choice, like me—I want to know when they will install metal detectors. I want to know where they will be in our schools and who is going to pay for them."

More cheers. Metal detectors, not books. That was the concern that received cheers from this crowd.

Another man:

“Being from a nearby town, I've watched the dismantling of an award-winning school. I've watched it. I went to private school because I had to—not because I wanted to, but because I had to. So I know the routine.”

And then yet another person voiced their concern:

“We *need* security. The same security they had in their schools. I deserve to not have to worry about my children getting stabbed, or taking a drug, or getting robbed because *that's* the issue.”

And each time, the crowd of white parents cheered and the crowd of black and Latino onlookers withdrew a little further. Lakeisha was heartbroken, but just as determined about her child going to the school as she was before coming to the meeting.

More, even. She'd hoped things would be different, but if she had to claw and fight her way to get her children a better education, she would. It was just disheartening that she would have to fight at all. Why were these people so committed in this battle against fellow Americans?

She thought to take the microphone. To tell her side of the story, the side that was being ignored in this entire discussion. She wanted to defend her family, tell these people that *she* also wanted the best for her children. She wanted to tell them that they weren't different and they didn't deserve to be treated like this.

But she didn't take the microphone. There were a lot of people here tonight to speak, but none of them had shown up to listen.

“It's just...” Nichole started to say.

“...unbelievable?” Lakeisha finished for her.

Nichole nodded. “I don't get it.”

“They are afraid of change,” Lakeisha said. “Everyone is. They just want to give that change a face.”

Nichole was silent for a second. “You mean our face?”

“Exactly.”

Kenni looked up at her mother, a confused expression on her young face. Lakeisha saw the way she scrunched up her nose, the same movement Kenni's father always made when he was concerned about something. It solidified the resolve Lakeisha held in her heart to finish this. They would do this as a family, no matter the cost, for him. It's what he had wanted.

“Are they talking about us?” Kenni asked.

Lakeisha couldn't think of a good answer. Of course they were talking about them, at least abstractly how they believed *them* to be, but that didn't feel like the right thing to tell her eleven year old daughter. How could she explain something like this to her child? Why did she *have* to explain this?

“I don't know,” she said instead.

“They don't even know us,” Kenni replied.

“No,” Lakeisha agreed. “But they think they do.”

A board member stood up, waving his hands to quiet the crowd. “We feel the same way, but there is nothing we can do about it. The courts have ruled and we don't like this any more than you do.”

“We will just leave!” one man shouted from the back of the auditorium.

“They can't do this to us!”

“I don't want my children to be at risk!”

“We shouldn't...”

And on and on it went.

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“I don’t want to go to that school!”

“I know you don’t, honey,” Lakeisha said. It had been almost a two hour drive home from Northmont high school after the town hall meeting, so she was exhausted. All she wanted to do was take a hot bath and relax, but first she had to get her children into bed.

Something Kenni wasn’t interested in right now.

“I won’t go!”

“You have too.”

“But I won’t know anyone there. And all of the children will be white. They won’t like me.”

Lakeisha knelt down in front of her daughter. They were in their kitchen at home, just returned from the meeting, and it was getting late. It was the end of summer, so her children didn’t have school in the morning, but she still had to work.

“They will love you,” she said, “because you’re my little sweetheart. My little angel. How can they *not* love you?”

Kenni frowned. “But what if they don’t?”

“Then that will be their loss. You just need to be strong, Kenni.”

“I don’t want to,” she said, eyes falling to the floor.

Lakeisha gently lifted her chin up so she could look her in the eyes. “I know you don’t,” she said. “But I need you to be strong. For me, and for your father. Remember how much he wanted you go to a better school?”

“I remember,” Kenni said softly. A tear slipped down her cheek. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask,” Lakeisha said. “Now go brush your teeth and get into bed. I’ll be there in a few minutes to tuck you in.”

“Okay,” Kenni said. She disappeared down the hallway, her tiny feet padding against the hardwood floor. Lakeisha watched her go, and then stood up.

A sharp pain flared across his midsection and she cried out. She leaned heavily against the counter, fighting a wave of dizziness.

Nichole came running into the kitchen. “What’s wrong?”

Lakeisha forced a laugh, biting back the pain. “I bumped against the counter,” she lied. “Hit my side pretty hard.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Do you know where Rico is? He was supposed to be watching Tyler.”

“He’s at Anita’s house,” Nichole replied. “Headed over right after we got home. He did put Tyler to bed, though.”

“Such a hurry to go?”

“He’s in love,” Nichole said with a laugh.

“He didn’t say anything.”

“He called me,” Nichole said. “A while ago.”

“Oh.”

“You really need a cell phone, Mom,” Nichole said.

She waved her hand in dismissal. “Can’t afford it right now. But I’ll look into it later. I promise.”

“Okay. But I’m telling you, they come in handy.”

“I’ve gotten by this long without one,” she said. “I think I’ll be alright.”

Nichole headed back into the living room. Lakeisha grabbed a drink from the fridge and then followed. Her side was still hurting, but it was a dull pain now.

“Is Tyler asleep, or watching TV?”

“Asleep,” Nichole said. “Out like a light. Boy can that child snore.”

“I know,” Lakeisha said, laughing. “You should have heard his father. That man sounded like he was sawing logs all night. If Tyler is anything like him, we’ll need to put sound proofing in his walls so we can get some sleep.”

“I remember,” Nichole said. “Before the accident the entire house would shake when Dad went to bed.”

“Yeah,” Lakeisha said. She turned to her daughter. “You have that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“The look you get when you want to say something.”

“It’s nothing.”

“What is it?”

Nichole bit her lip. “Is it really worth it? Sending Kenni, I mean. They don’t want her there.”

“They’re just overreacting.”

“But what if...I mean, I’m sure she will be safe, but...”

“That sounds like something *they* would say,” Lakeisha said. “We can’t stoop to that level. Kenni will be fine, and after a few days no one will even remember tonight’s meeting. It just takes time for things to become normal, and once they do people realize they were freaked out over nothing.”

“I know, I just mean...this was something *Dad* really wanted...”

Nichole trailed off, realizing what she was saying. Lakeisha sighed.

“I’m doing this for him. You know that, right?”

Nichole nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

“Did you think about going to Northmont too?”

“I did,” Nichole said. “But I’m not going to transfer. It’s my senior year, and it would be too hard to transition.”

“That’s alright,” she said. “You have too many friends. Too much to give up. It’ll be rough for Kenni, but she’ll be alright. She’s a strong girl.”

“She is,” Nichole agreed. “And she’ll get through this.”

“How about the college hunt? Still searching for somewhere you want to go?”

“I think I decided on one I like.”

“If you need any help, let me know.”

Nichole smiled. “I will, Mom. I promise.”

Lakeisha knew Nichole would never ask for help. Lakeisha had never gone to college, though she’d always wanted to, so it wasn’t her area of expertise. She helped as much as she could, and her goal was to make Nichole as strong and independent as possible.

College was simply outside her world of knowledge. She was intensely proud that Nichole was going.

“Maybe you should look for a part time job. Or an internship.”

“I don’t know about an internship,” Nichole said. “It seems like a lot of work and I won’t even get paid.”

“It’s worth it, though,” she said. “For the experience.”

Nichole shrugged. “Maybe. I’ll ask around and see if any law firms are accepting resumes. It can’t hurt.”

Another sharp pain ripped across Lakeisha’s abdomen. She doubled over in pain.

“Mom?”

“I’m alright,” she said, gasping. She forced herself to stand. “Guess I hit my side harder than I thought.”

Nichole wasn’t convinced. “Should we get you to a doctor?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said. “I just need some sleep.”

She forced herself to smile and then walked down the hall to her bedroom. Agony threatened to rip her stomach open, but she refused to show it.

She made it inside the room, locked the door, and let the pain overtake her. She buried her face into her pillow and curled into a ball, crying.

Ten minutes later, the pain subsided. She lay on the bed, exhausted and with a sheen of sweat on her skin.

The episodes were getting worse and more frequent. They had started in her side a few months earlier and gradually spread, covering her entire midsection and intensifying.

She had gone to the emergency room when it first started. The doctor said it was probably indigestion or gas. They hadn’t bothered to run any tests and told her it would pass, but come back if it got any worse.

The bill she received had been in the hundreds for a simple examination, something she couldn’t afford; she hadn’t made a second trip.

A few minutes passed and she was feeling better. Good enough to get up and walk around a little bit. She wandered to the kitchen and opened the back door, breathing the cool night air. The house was quiet, which meant her children were asleep.

She lay back down in the lonely bed, wishing like she did every night that she still had her husband beside her. He died five years earlier in a car accident, only months after Tyler was born. He had left her alone to raise the children with barely enough life insurance to pay for his funeral.

He was the one that had fought to get his children into a better school. He was the one that believed in the future, that his children deserved a better life than their parents had. He was the one that put their names on the lawsuit and demanded equality from a deaf world.

And he was gone.