

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page featuring intricate black and grey swirls, leaves, and small dots, resembling a stylized floral or vine motif.

Anessia's Quest

Written by
Karen Arnpriester



Reviews

Get your box of tissues ready, sit in your favorite chair, swing, etc. and begin a journey that will stay with you long after you've finished the book. Karen Arnpriester has definitely been blessed with the gift of writing. ... The characters could be anyone around you whether you know them or not. They are well defined. You get to know them and their hearts. Your heart breaks for them and rejoices with them. The situations are so realistic. They are situations you see or hear about each day. Some of them may be experiences you have dealt with yourself. For this reason the book stays with you. You will always see yourself in this book in some way. I look forward to reading more from this author. Her book most definitely blessed my heart and spirit.

Sandra Stiles - 5 Stars www.goodreads.com

This story is one of joy and sadness, triumph and tragedy, love and forgiveness. I laughed, I cried, I found myself wanting the story to continue at its end... to know what lies beyond for Pagne as she continues turning pages in God's unending story. Truly inspiring, Pagne's journey is an amazing reminder that we each have a destiny and role to play in God's eternal plan. Needless to say... I'm a fan! Looking forward to the movie!!!

Pam Rich

This story grabbed me from the start. The characters were well developed and so incredibly real. You really get drawn into their lives. The storyline was creative, captivating and unpredictable, especially the ending! The book was an emotional rollercoaster and touched my heart in so many ways. I highly recommend it to everyone, regardless of your faith.

Barbara Strand – Amazon 5 Stars

This book was surprisingly refreshing for me, since my favorite type of reading is learning manuals or true stories. I read a lot but took time out to read Anessia's Quest. It came with me on a vacation and I just could not stop reading it. I felt emotionally attached to the characters and was feeling their joys and their pains. I even thought about them later wondering how they were doing. The author has a real knack for keeping your attention. I hope there is more to come from this author, she is on to a great start! Two thumbs up!!!

Ava Peterson – Amazon 5 Stars

I Loved this book! I did not want to put the book down. The author did a great job at catching my attention. I definitely laughed out loud with some of the funny moments in this book. Most of the characters in this book really touched my heart. To sum it all up it is a great heart warming, funny, and inspirational book. I hope to see more of Karen's books in the future.

Crystal Quiro – Amazon 5 Stars

It is a very powerful book that points out God is in our lives. It is a book of redemption. I could not put it down!!!

Trisha Timosh – Amazon 5 Stars

I read this book in two sittings. Up to eighty pages the first time, then took an entire morning to finish the rest. And I did need tissue. The story is an emotional ride, the characters are real to you – you care or you hate them or you have hope for them. The author is a natural story-teller.

Jennifer Locke – Amazon 5 Stars

A novel of real-life trials and triumphs, "Anessia's Quest" is an inspirational, well-written, magical story of God's love. Spanning over an entire lifetime, we get to know these characters so deeply. We share their pain, joy, excitement, and shame... but their faith shines above it all. Karen Arnpriester expresses the power of healing as each endures to be the person they want to be, rather than the person they think they are. I am captivated by Anessia's strength and compassion. Truly a book I didn't want to put down.... And when I finally did, I found myself wanting more from this author.

Jana Adams – Amazon 5 Stars

See more reviews and book trailer at anessiasquest.com



Introduction

This is my first attempt at writing, and I can't tell you why this story, or why now. I only know that I had an idea for a beginning, and an end. The characters took me on a sweet and emotional journey. I believe this book is part of my quest, one of my ripples in this realm we call life. I pray that it touches your spirit and gives you pause to consider God's destiny for your life. Are you brave enough to trust and allow God to fulfill His plans in your life or does the ripple stop with you?

I hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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In the Heavens

Psalms 91:11

"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;"

Draken walked swiftly through the marble passageway, which was only lit by a warm, golden glow that's source was undefinable. The excitement was building, as he weaved his way through the network of stone halls, intricate stained glass panels, and vines with incredible cobalt and purple blossoms. Each flower's center had a spray of tendrils that shimmered and flickered with light. They pushed their way in through small openings and cracks, covering the ancient stone walls with their winding tendrils. He had the ability to instantly think himself to her, but instead he savored the journey through the tabernacle. As Draken entered the great hall, he sent groups of colorful butterflies scattering. Some of the butterflies were tiny and flashed bright yellow and orange light, while others were massive and moved almost as in slow motion. Their deep-purple and metallic gold wings didn't shine brightly like the others, but had a velvety luster that picked up the room's light with each flutter. The spaces in between were filled with every size and color of these delicate creatures. This room never failed to take Draken's breath away. There were sculptures in exquisite detail, cast or carved from every precious metal and stone, encrusted with jewels and pearls. Above him were strings of glowing orbs that didn't appear to be connected in any way, glistening shades of pink, lavender, blue and green. Beautiful birds of every description dove and soared in the upper dome. Draken would spend hours in this room, simply appreciating its beauty.

As he came upon an area of comfortable chairs, he saw Anessia sitting on the hard floor in her usual position, both legs folded under her with feet twisted out to the sides. She would sit this way for hours.

"When will you ever discover the comfort of these lush chairs?" he teased her.

She just grinned and said, "Probably never." Draken just shook his head. She liked the coolness of the stone floor on her skin.

Draken sat down in his favorite chair, a opulent purple satin with three times the stuffing most chairs would contain. He waited for her to speak, but silence. After a few anxious minutes, he could wait no longer.

"Well, Anessia. You summoned me here. You said you were ready."

She hesitated, she seemed unsure for a moment and then handed him the delicate gold scroll. Draken, a regal man with long white hair and a full beard, took the scroll and fingered it gently, knowing the importance of its content. He took a deep breath and looked into Anessia's eyes. He loved her eyes, so large, so engulfing.

"I am ready," is all she said. Draken felt the contradiction of relief and dread. This would be a difficult quest, filled with many hardships and pain.

"You will have a lot of sadness to deal with, but you were selected with the knowledge that you are capable. You have a strong sense of justice and love."

"Oh, Draken, I want to make a difference, to be part of these miracles!"

"Once you leave, you realize you will not be able to change your mind. The quest will not be recalled," he reminded her.

"I totally understand. I know that I can do this. I know I can make you and our Father proud. I believe I am the one to help fulfill the destiny described in the scroll."

Draken truly adored Anessia and her tender heart, but she was fierce, one of the most committed wards he had responsibility for. He also knew that the quest was a journey filled with love, joy and an incredible outcome.

"I will make the arrangements. Prepare yourself, your time here is short." They both came to a stand, and with a hug and a kiss on her head, Draken disappeared to carry out the necessary details.

Anessia stood alone and waited until she was sure Draken had left the chamber. She could contain herself no longer. She spun around, her hair flowing and gleaming in the light that was radiating down from above. It was wonderful to have a destiny. She giggled and hugged herself. Anessia then mentally willed her beautiful wings to engage, and she flew out of the windows near the top of the upper dome.

She didn't have to fly very far; there, by the glimmering pools, was Ennett. She slowly dropped down behind him, so quietly that he didn't know she was there. Anessia crept slowly behind him and jumped back as Ennett whirled around. But not quick enough, his folded wings smacked her in the face. "Oh Ennett, I thought I got you this time," she said, as she rubbed her cheek.

"Do you forget that I can read your thoughts? You need to work on shutting down that brain of yours when you plan to attack," he pouted at her, while touching her tender cheek. They both laughed and sat down on the cool grass

next to the pools of crystal clear water. They slipped their feet in and giggled loudly, as the fish nibbled their toes. Anessia loved the landscape outside the main tabernacle. It had sumptuous gardens, streams, and trees that bore delicious fruits. Flowers of every size, color and scent. Some were deep shades that were fuzzy and glimmered, while others were tucked under the shade of the trees with transparent petals that glowed with pulsing light. The aromas were so delicious.

She couldn't count the different species of animals that roamed through the gardens. Every visit was a new discovery. These unique and exotic creatures would wander the gardens and come when beckoned, allowing her to pet and love on them.

"Well, I am assuming that it is time?"

"Yes, it is," she acknowledged.

"Anessia, it is a different realm there," he warned. "There is darkness, despair and pain."

"I know, I can do this. Draken and our Father do not send me to fail."

"I have faith in you, but please be careful!"

They both sat quietly for a short time. "I need to go prepare," whispered Anessia.

"I love you Anessia, I will be here for you always." They held each other for what felt like an eternity but it was only moments in another time.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features the word "Chapter" in a cursive font and the number "1" in a large, bold, serif font. The text is enclosed within a circular frame that is part of a larger, ornate swirl design. The swirls are composed of thin, elegant lines and small, dark leaf-like shapes, creating a delicate and artistic border around the text.

Chapter 1

Leah thought she could bear it no longer ... why didn't this baby come out? She had been pushing and writhing here for hours, hurting so bad that she wanted to die. Finally, the nurse came in and said she was ready to have the baby. Leah knew that she would have feelings for this kid eventually, but right now, she almost hated it. They wheeled her into delivery, and after thirty more minutes, the miracle of birth happened. A little, white skinned, red-haired girl with blue eyes. She looked at her and felt numb. She may have connected better if the baby had looked like her. If she had gotten her golden skin, dark, curly hair and chestnut brown eyes. This baby looked like a stray, not her kid.

Leah had endured a difficult life and tried to bury it with alcohol, drugs and sex. During her drunken months of pregnancy, she thought it would be funny to name her baby girl Champagne, after her favorite beverage. Champagne Marie Crenshaw. Champagne would carry her mother's last name since Leah didn't know which John was the proud papa. Leah had considered having another abortion, but this time was different. This baby would change her life, she just knew it. Leah wanted to be loved and wanted someone to love. She convinced herself that she could be a mom. When Leah was in her seventh month, she had stopped hooking and left Los Angeles. She moved north for a fresh start. Champagne was to find out quickly that her mom would fail miserably at being a mother. She also would find out that there was someone watching over her, protecting her.

When the hospital determined that Leah was ready to be released, she was indignant and annoyed. Three days was not nearly long enough if you asked Leah. She figured she deserved and could use at least another week of leisure

and strong pain meds while the nurses cared for Champagne. Upon leaving the hospital, she brought the baby back to the disgusting motel room that Leah managed to rent with her assistance checks. Leah figured they would do okay since the amount written on those checks would increase with the birth of Champagne. She might have been able to afford a nicer place, but the majority of her money went for her alcohol and drugs. *How was she going to take care of a baby all by herself?*, she thought. Looking around the room, Leah realized that she should have prepared a little more for the baby. She pulled out a drawer, dumped it, and laid Champagne in it. The strong pain meds were wearing off, and they had only prescribed glorified aspirin as far as Leah was concerned. Luckily she had stopped on the way home to pick up a big bottle of cheap wine.

"Well brat, guess the closest I'll come to champagne for awhile is changing your crappy diapers." She laughed to herself, *"That was a good one Leah ... you haven't lost your dazzling wit yet."*

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Several years crawled by, and somehow, Champagne had survived her mother's indifference. On one summer evening, Leah finally could not take it any longer, the pounding on the door was killing her head. What a hang-over she had. When she jerked the door open, she looked into the chest of a police officer. Behind him stood her neighbor, *Miss Nose Up My Butt*. She could tell this wasn't good by the smirk on Miss Butt's face.

"We got a call that you have a toddler playing unattended on the landing," said the officer.

"Well, I don't see no kid out here, do you?" shot back Leah.

"Not at the moment, but your neighbor called quite concerned. She said that it is not unusual to see your front door wide open and your small daughter playing out here by the stairs. Do you understand how dangerous that is?"

"Well yes, Officer, I do. I'm not an idiot. I am always just inside the door, watching her every move. The kid has gotta have some fresh air and sunshine right?"

"Ma'am, unless you use better judgment and find a safer place for your daughter to play, we will be back out with Child Services," threatened the Officer.

"Okay. I will figure out something."

The officer filled out his paperwork and handed Leah her copy. "This call will be documented." He held the paper for a delayed moment, while making eye contact with Leah.

"Thank you Officer," Leah said sarcastically as she snatched it from his hand.

As the officer moved down the stairs, Leah looked over at Miss Butt as she was turning to head back to her door. Leah smiled a big smile at her and then flipped her off with both hands, followed by slamming the door as loud as possible.

"Thanks Pagne, just what I needed." She glared at her sweet face and grumbled, "Worthless brat." Leah had decided that when Champagne was a year old, she did not deserve the name Champagne. She hadn't improved Leah's life, but complicated it. Leah called her Pagne, which was pronounced as "Pain." The fact that she was showing signs of freckles to go with the red hair from her nameless father didn't help either. Leah hated freckles with a passion. Leah plopped down on the ratty couch that folded out to their bed, and turned on the TV as she filled a tumbler with wine.

Leah's lust for drinking would not allow her to survive on the meager assistance she received, so she began hooking again shortly after Pagne was born. Pagne's childhood was a whirlwind of her mother's customers, late nights, and the consequences of being the child of an alcoholic. One thing was consistent, an anchor that Pagne could rely on, her mother's total disregard for her. Pagne was forced to be self-sufficient. She kept herself clean, got herself ready for school, and made sure the trash in the room didn't pile up too high.

When Pagne was eight years old, Adam Williams was her mother's new flavor of the month ... good looking, funny and he actually had a job. Nice change for Leah. Adam always brought a bottle of quality champagne for her and Jack Daniels for him. A few drinks, some laughs and then "Good lovin'," as her mother would say. Leah considered him a boyfriend, so she didn't charge him for her company. Pagne learned to keep out of the way when Adam or other men were there. The close quarters of the motel room made it difficult, but Pagne would lock the bathroom door and climb into the tub, pretending she was in a boat heading to a strange new land.

Pagne would also read with a passion. She loved stories about fairies, far away places, or brave characters who saved the day. She read whatever she could bring home from school. Her mom certainly wouldn't take the time to take her to the library or buy a book. When the tub was too disgusting to get into, Pagne would pile up any dirty laundry on the floor and make a nest. The width of the floor space fit her and the nest perfectly. She wished the walls were more sound proof though. The loud laughing and the noises they made when her mother had sex with the men made it hard for her to read, pretend or sleep. Pagne wasn't sure what they were doing, but she felt uncomfortable hearing them. Sometimes, the men that Leah brought home would hit her. Pagne knew to stay very quiet. She didn't want them to know she was there. Some mornings, Leah's face would be swollen and bruised. When Pagne would look at her with concern, Leah would shrug and say, "Comes with the territory."

Adam never hit her mom. He would always bring Pagne a toy or candy

when he came over. He was nice enough but something made her uneasy about him. He didn't do anything bad, but he always wanted Pagne to sit on his lap. She didn't like it, and she wasn't sure why. Even her mom didn't like it. Leah would jerk Pagne up off of him and plop herself down on his lap, while giving Pagne the evil eye. Leah didn't realize how grateful Pagne was for removing her from the awkward situation.

Even at the age of eight, Pagne was independent. She could get her own breakfast and lunch, toaster pastries or cold cereal. It wasn't so bad when the milk hadn't soured, but usually she ate the cereal dry. She did get free hot lunches at school when she started first grade. Leah wasn't hungry until late evening, since she drank her meals during the day. She would throw something together for dinner, but in her drunken stupor, usually burnt it. Pagne didn't eat much. She didn't talk much either, and doctors thought it was because of Leah's frequent drinking during her pregnancy. But, according to Pagne, she just didn't have anything much to say.

One hot summer evening, Leah had drank herself into a stupor and passed out on the bathroom floor, leaving Pagne alone with Adam. He grinned at her and turned on cartoons. Their TV only had three channels. Luckily, one was cartoons ... most of the time. Pagne loved cartoons. She could watch them all day and just pretend she lived in the TV with them where she could fly like a super hero. Adam sat down in the old recliner and motioned for Pagne to come over to him. When she came close, he reached out and grabbed her by the waist and pulled her up on his lap.

"Your mommy is outta service, so maybe Adam and Pagne will have some fun? You wanna play with me, sweetheart?" Her instincts told her that this was not good. Adam's breath stunk so bad from the liquor. She felt his arms tighten around her. Pagne began to whimper and tried to pull away. Adam was whispering and sputtering spit into her ear.

"Be quiet. I'm not going to hurt you. Trust me, you'll like it ... well, I will." She felt one hand slipping between her thighs and the other sliding up her belly, lifting up her t-shirt. Pagne brought her leg up and slammed down hard, kicking him in the shin with her heel. He grabbed onto her even tighter, squeezing her painfully. She kicked his shin again, and this time he let go. As he grabbed at his leg, Pagne was able to slip off his lap and headed to the front door. Adam came up out of the chair and lunged at her, screaming out with anger and pain. He was behind her and grabbed onto her arms. It hurt terribly. She was kicking and screaming. Pagne's screams woke up Leah, and she came stumbling into the room, yelling for Adam to shut the brat up. She was confused when she saw Adam and Pagne struggling by the door.

"What the hell is going on?" She bellowed.

Adam released Pagne and spun around to Leah. "Nuthin, kid just went nuts on me, she tried to run away." It took a few minutes for Leah's drunken brain

to absorb the situation.

"So my little Pagne didn't wanna play with you huh?" Leah showed no reaction while she tried to remain standing. She managed to focus on Pagne's face and gave her the most hateful glare Pagne had seen her manage. Pagne pulled open the front door and ran out, tears filling her eyes and clouding her vision. Through her tears, Pagne thought she saw white wings fluttering around her. Then black.

When Pagne woke up, she hurt all over. Every part of her was bruised and sore. Her head was pounding with pain. She could hear voices but she didn't want to open her eyes. She would hear a sweet lady's voice speaking to her at times. She was curious about the woman, but decided it was better to pretend that she was somewhere else. Sleep, she just wanted to sleep. It didn't hurt so bad when she slept. In her dreams she could fly with wonderful white wings, as others flew around her. Laughing, dipping, gliding ...

Pagne woke up to her mother's voice close to her ear. "You gotta wake up. What am I going to do with a brain-dead kid? I can't deal with this Pagne. Wake up now!" Pagne opened her eyes and looked at her mother. Her face was not haggard and worn from worry, but the familiar face of someone hung over. Leah's breath reeked of wine. "Well it's about time. What took you so long ... sweetheart?" Sweetheart was thrown in for the benefit of the nurse who just walked in. "Me and Adam have been worried sick. You scared your mama something awful." As the nurse finished her duties and left the room, Leah moved in really close, so only Pagne could hear. "Pagne, they think Adam hurt you. We both know that's a big fat lie, right? The police are going to talk to you. Mommy can't lose Adam, baby. You gotta fix this."

Later that day, several officers and a very nervous skinny woman named Miss Lament, came into Pagne's room. The officers tried to be friendly and had a teddy bear with them. It was very cute, and Pagne found it oddly comforting to hug. Miss Lament, who didn't smile and had very tiny, beady eyes was trying to ask Pagne what happened with Adam. Pagne decided she didn't have anything to say. She knew that Adam was a bad man, but even at her tender age, Pagne intuitively understood that it was her mother's truth. Leah needed him.

The officers and Miss Lament left very frustrated. Her mother had been waiting in the hall and slipped in. "Good girl. Now we just have to convince the judge. We're going to move in with Adam once this whole mess is cleared up. He's going to take care of both of us. Won't that be nice. We'll be a family real soon!" Pagne didn't respond. "We hit the jackpot, baby," cooed Leah.

That evening, the sweet-talking nurse was on duty. She was taking Pagne's temperature and adjusted her tubing. While she worked, she talked softly to Pagne, assuring her that she would be fine. As she turned to leave, Pagne grabbed her hand, squeezing it tight. The nurse, who's nametag said "Mrs. Greenly," looked into Pagne's eyes. She saw fear and worry in them. She asked,

"What's wrong, hon? You in pain?" Pagne took a deep breath and spoke in a whisper for the first time since waking up.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Oh honey, no one has told you what's going on? Well, I'm not sure why, but you ran out your front door, and then you fell down three flights of cement stairs. You broke your leg, your arm, cracked your head, and have lots of bumps and bruises. You are very lucky that you didn't hurt yourself even worse. I believe you have a guardian angel, dear. Yep, an angel that cushioned your fall. We all have an angel, you know. Talk to mine sometimes, when I'm sad or scared. You should thank your angel for protecting you. They have a thankless job!"

Pagne managed to ask when she would be going home. "You should be able to go home in a few days," the nurse answered. With that news, Pagne began to weep softly. "Oh sweetheart, that's not that far away." She looked into Pagne's face and realized this was something different. "Don't you want to go home?" Pagne just closed her eyes and let go of the sweet nurses hand.

After she left, Pagne whispered quietly, "Thank you." She did see wings, she was sure of it.

Pagne laid in her bed, a cast on right arm, a cast on her left leg, bandages here and there, and a dull headache. Her mom was filling out all the paperwork for her release. Leah looked at the prescriptions for Pagne and was grumbling that nothing was strong enough to do her much good. "The least they could do is give us Valium." Several nurses entered the room and helped Pagne into a wheelchair, Pagne's doctor and a police officer walked into the room. "Now Miss Crenshaw, there are some requirements you must meet to have your daughter home with you," said the officer. "This Adam Williams is not to be within 300 yards of your daughter or your residence."

"But he didn't do anything," Leah insisted.

"That might be, but until the judge makes his determination, the restraining order is in effect," the officer responded.

"Yes, of course," Leah said with attitude.

Pagne's doctor stepped toward Leah and began speaking. "Here is the treatment plan for Champagne's after care. Her therapy is crucial if she is to have a full recovery. I also want to stress that she will need a balanced, healthy diet and a safe, clean environment. Obviously the stairs will present a safety issue, have you made arrangements for assistance?"

"Yes, I have taken care of everything necessary," lied Leah.

"Mrs. Crenshaw, a child services worker will be checking in," reminded the officer.

"Yes, I know, another person up my butt. Can we leave now?"

"Yes, you may. But remember, your court appearance is at three o'clock today. We will remove Champagne from your care if you fail to appear."

"Yes, I know, I know," replied Leah with total disrespect to the officer.

The nurses put Pagne into a cab for the ride home while Leah had a cigarette. Once her nicotine fix was complete, she climbed into the cab next to Pagne. She shot the nurses a hard glare when their faces revealed their disapproval of her indifference. Pagne quietly sat while her mom went on and on about their new life with Adam. Leah talked about how Adam really cared about them, how happy they would all be together, and how Adam would bring money into the house. *She could quit hooking*, she thought to herself. Leah finally shut up and drifted into her fantasy of a wonderful future with Adam.

Pagne considered telling her mother what Adam had done, but she was a smart girl. She knew there was no point, her mother already knew. When they got to the hotel, Leah struggled to get Pagne upstairs, cursing with each step. Once inside the room, Pagne looked around and wasn't surprised to see that everything the doctor had listed was not done. Pagne hopped over to the couch and sat in silence.

"Wanna toaster pastry doll? Know how much you love them." Pagne shook her head and turned on the TV.

A few minutes later, there was a tap on the door. Leah opened it and Adam's head popped in.

"Hey, my two favorite girls. Just wanted to stop by and bring Pagne a get well gift." It was a tin of mints from the liquor store down the street and a car air freshener in the shape of a rose.

"What did you bring mama?" asked Leah with a little girl voice and giggle. Adam slipped a big bottle of champagne around the door.

"Can I come in for awhile?" he asked.

"No baby, not till the court says it's okay. My neighbor next door has big ears and eyes. This should all be resolved this afternoon, you gotta be patient." Leah laughed as Adam tried to grope her through the opening. "We'll all be together soon," assured Leah. Adam looked over at Pagne and winked with a disgusting lick of his lips.

"Okay, but I miss you guys. Good to have you back with us, Pagne." Pagne turned the TV volume up and turned away to look at the screen.

"She'll warm up to ya, baby, just give her some time. I'll call when I get out of court." Leah closed the door giggling. She looked over at Pagne, wanting to share the joy. Pagne could feel her eyes on her, but she didn't respond.

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Pagne was very nervous sitting in the courtroom, waiting to find out what was expected of her. Everyone was so serious, except her mother. She was whispering insulting comments about everyone. Sticks up their you know what's ... and other such childish remarks. When it was their turn to appear

before the judge, Leah bounced up, flicking her hair. Once she was at the front, she realized that Pagne was still struggling to get out of her seat. She smiled and loudly proclaimed ... "It's okay baby, Mommy is here." She went back, and very graciously, helped Pagne into the aisle. Pagne was impressed by her performance. Once she made it to the front, Pagne sat at the table facing the judge.

Leah began by explaining that this whole thing was a misunderstanding. She said that Pagne had been throwing a temper-tantrum, and Adam was trying to keep her from running out of the room. When the judge asked if she had been in the room at the time, she admitted that she had not because she was suffering from one of her migraines and was laying on the bathroom floor for relief. "The cool tile is soothing," she explained.

Pagne's doctor was called forward, and he described the extensive bruising on Pagne's thighs, chest and arms. Obviously, a large man's handprints could clearly be seen in the photos they were showing. Leah did not have any explanation for the bruises. The judge looked at Pagne and asked if she had anything she wanted to say. Pagne just looked out the windows at the beautiful blue sky, wishing she could fly away.

The lawyer, representing Pagne's interests, made a good case that the events before her fall were clearly assault and possibly molestation. The judge agreed, and the restraining order was to stand pending further investigation. Adam had been picked up and interviewed after Pagne was admitted into the hospital. He wasn't arrested, but did have a court date.

Leah went into a rage. "This is ridiculous, you are punishing a good man, my man, for something that was very innocent. This isn't fair," she yelled.

"Well, Miss Crenshaw, if you want to have your daughter in your home, you must honor the restraining order. If you disregard the order, Champagne will be placed in the care of the state until this case is resolved," responded the judge with obvious disdain.

"Well, I don't think me and Adam should suffer because of this brat. We have a life to start. You guys can deal with her," Leah said as she looked at Pagne in disgust. Leah then turned and walked out of the courtroom.

Everyone stood there in shock, not knowing what to say or do. Pagne hobbled over to the window and allowed one tear to roll down her face, just one. Then she looked to the skies and flew far away.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features the word "Chapter" in a cursive font and the number "2" in a large, bold serif font. The text is enclosed within a circular frame that is part of a larger, ornate swirl design. The swirls are composed of thin, elegant lines with small leaf-like shapes and dots, creating a delicate, floral-like pattern. The overall color scheme is grayscale.

Chapter 2

The noise at Langston Hall was incredible ... all the screaming, laughing and yelling. But even harder to bear was the crying at night. Pagne had a room with just three other girls. Since she was still recovering from her injuries, she didn't have to stay in one of the dorms. Her mother had been gracious enough to hand the social worker a box of her belongings before slamming the motel door. She had her few items of clothing, some personal papers and drawings, some costume jewelry she had collected here and there, the bear from the police officer, and Adam's gifts: the candy tin and the stinky rose. These last two items she quickly tossed in the trash. The staff said she could go through the donated items to find more clothes and shoes, but she was comfortable with what she had. Pagne settled in to begin a new chapter of life.

This storage facility for broken hearts and dreams was clean, but stark. No softness or textures. Washable surfaces of mustard gold and brown. A local art class had come in and had attempted to brighten the main play room. They had painted a large, underwater mural on the longest wall. It was a good attempt but inconsistent styles and levels of ability made it look second best. Much like the lives of the children living there. The food was good, better than Pagne was used to having, but institutional and a bit bland. The staff were helpful, but Pagne could feel the wall of detachment they had to erect to protect their hearts.

Her healing was coming along slowly and she eventually had the casts removed. Her arm and leg were thin and weak. The facility got her therapy started, and she was thankful that this was not left up to Leah. The county decided that Pagne would receive better care at Langston Hall during her recuperation. There were no attempts to place her in foster-care.

She had been asked several times if she wanted her social worker to try to set up visitation with her mother. Pagne declined. This facility ended up being her home for nineteen months. Pagne looked at her healed limbs. Her leg looked almost identical to the other, except for the scars where they had run a metal rod through her shin for traction. Her arm, however, was a different story. There was scarring and she had difficulty bending it. Most of the time it hung straight at her side. The doctors had to operate to remove bone fragments and repair some of the tendons. The therapist was pleased with the progress Pagne was making, excited actually. This made Pagne realize just how serious her injuries had been.

Pagne enjoyed her time at Langston Hall. She became friends with several of the kids and started to trust them. Her best friend was Bree, who was wild and crazy, compared to Pagne. She had long, blonde hair and pale blue eyes. Pagne somewhat envied her straight hair and flawless skin, no freckles. Bree laughed and giggled at everything, especially if someone farted or burped. Pagne didn't see the humor in these rude body functions, but would laugh with Bree because her giggles were infectious. Bree would sneak into Pagne's room late in the evening, and they'd sit in the dark whispering and sharing their stories. Bree was one year older than Pagne. She also had a lot more to talk about than Pagne. Bree's family died in a car crash several months ago. She didn't have any other family to take care of her. Her years with her family sounded magical to Pagne. Bree had her own room, a little brother to play with, good food, but best of all was her stories about her mom and dad. They were huggers and cuddlers. Bree talked about the stories her mom would read to her. They would snuggle in Bree's bed and use a flashlight to read in the dark. Her dad would take her fishing and hiking. After Bree would sneak back to her dorm, Pagne would lay in bed and pretend she was in her own room with her parents just outside, discussing family plans. She would drift off to sleep until Leah would show up at her beautiful house, banging on the door, demanding to get her kid back.

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Bree ran into Pagne's room early one morning, very serious. This was unusual for Bree.

"I'm leaving today. They found a foster-home for me," she explained.

"You don't look very happy, I thought that is what you wanted."

"I do, but some of the kids have told me how bad their foster-homes were. What if I get a bad one Pagne? What if they don't feed me, or hit me, or worse?" Pagne wasn't sure what to say.

"The social worker said we just have to tell them if something is wrong or call 911," reminded Pagne. "Besides, a nurse explained to me that we each have

a guardian angel. So you have one too. You'll think I'm crazy, but my angel wrapped me in her wings when I fell, and kept me from hurting my brain or insides."

"Seriously?" asked Bree. Pagne nodded dramatically. "I hope you're right, I would love to have a guardian angel. I guess I'm just nervous. Kinda weird having a whole new family."

"I'm going to miss you Bree," Pagne said sadly. This was her first experience with truly losing someone that was important to her. She did not miss her mom. Bree left with the social worker later that morning. She was laughing and hugging everyone, as she made her way to the large, front entrance. Bree looked over and saw Pagne, tears rolling down her cheeks. Bree blew her a kiss and was gone.

Miss Renee, the only adult Pagne trusted at Langston Hall, slipped next to Pagne and put her arm around her shoulder. She didn't say a word, and just stood next to her. Pagne appreciated the gesture and leaned into her. Miss Renee was young and had just started working at Langston Hall. She hadn't built a wall around her heart yet. Pagne thought she was beautiful. Miss Renee was tall, her dark blonde hair was cut in a short bob, and she had green eyes that sparkled when she smiled.

Pagne was now left with her one other close friend, Itchy. Itchy wasn't his real name, but he was always scratching. He said it started when he had lice so bad that his skin was raw. They shaved his head, and he had to have baths in really foul smelling medication. When Pagne asked him if he still itched, he said only once in awhile. But it was so bad, he would stop in his tracks and just start scratching everywhere. The bugs were gone, so Pagne figured it was just the memory of the bugs that haunted him. Afterward he would go on like nothing happened. Most of the kids would tease him terribly and act like he had bugs that would jump on them. His real name was Arthur, but everyone called him Itchy. He kinda liked it. He dreaded hearing his name when he was home. He usually got screamed at or hit. Arthur was saved from an extremely abusive dad. His mom abandoned him when he was very small. He lived with his dad for seven years and suffered terribly. At least this was what Pagne thought. Itchy wouldn't talk about his dad or his life at all. If anyone tried to talk to him, he turned bright red, clinched his hands, and locked his jaw. Pagne saw the pain and horror in his eyes.

They had better things to discuss than the past. They didn't get to see each other a lot. Boys and girls were kept in separate sections of the facility. When there was shared time and space, they were stuck like glue. When they did talk, it was about their dreams, their plans.

Itchy wanted to be a policeman, a fireman, and a rock-star. Pagne had decided this particular week that she wanted to be a circus performer. The flying trapeze. She figured this was the closest she could get to flying without wings.

It was Pagne's tenth birthday, and after lunch, the staff brought in a glowing cake with ten candles and "Happy 10th Birthday Pagne" written in bright pink on chocolate frosting. Everyone began singing the birthday song and Pagne actually felt special in those few moments. As soon as the song was done, the kids were screaming "Cake! Cake!" The cake was wonderful ... so chocolaty. Pagne loved chocolate. This was only her second birthday cake, and both were here at Langston Hall.

As the kids moved out to the playground, Miss Renee walked over to Pagne. "Happy birthday, sweetheart," she said, as she kneeled down. "Ummm, this is kind of unusual, we weren't expecting her, but your mother is here. She wants to see you. You can say no, but you should know that she is working with the court to get visitation and parental rights reinstated. It might be a good idea to talk to her. I can stay in the room with you if you'd prefer." Pagne's face fell. Her mother? How can that be? She gave her to the state. So many questions raced through Pagne's mind. Could they really give her back to her? What about Adam? Pagne dreaded the thought of being in the same room with Leah, but she needed some answers.

"I'll see her, Miss Renee," Pagne responded. "Would you please stay in the room with us, at least at first?"

"Of course Pagne." They walked the long hallway, holding hands.

When Pagne and Miss Renee stepped into the waiting room, Miss Renee released Pagne's hand and moved to the chair in the corner. Pagne stood there face to face with her seated mother, the woman who gave birth to her, who was supposed to protect her and love her. Pagne felt nothing but disappointment and an anger building. She then felt a light brush against her cheek. She looked and saw nothing. She just smelled a lovely scent that quickly melted away.

Leah rose from her chair and squealed loudly! "Oh my baby! I've missed you so much!" She moved closer to Pagne and squeezed her in a crushing hug. Pagne pulled away, pretending her arm was still tender. Leah just stared into her eyes and grinned. "You've gotten taller, Sweetie. You're such a big girl. Did you miss your mommy? I sure missed you," lied Leah, as she plopped back down in her chair.

Pagne moved over to a chair on the opposite side of the table and sat down, not speaking or looking at her mother. Leah shot Miss Renee a nasty look. "Whats with the guard honey? You in trouble in here?" asked Leah. Pagne realized that she would have to speak to her mother.

Quietly she confessed, "I asked her to be with me." Leah looked shocked.

"You afraid of me baby? You know I wouldn't hurt you," said Leah, glancing over her shoulder at Miss Renee. "I'm hurt that you don't trust your own mama." Leah had a ridiculous pout on her face.

"What do you want?" asked Pagne, coldly.

"Well, you didn't think I'd miss your birthday did you? I brought you a

present. Sorry it looks so messy. The old bat outside had to search it before I could give it to you. Just like a prison in here, huh Pagne? Bet you can't wait to escape!" Pagne looked at the gift bag her mother was holding. Obviously a recycled bag, Pagne didn't think a bag with storks and rattles printed on it was standard for a tenth birthday. The tissue was bunched up, and Pagne could see bright orange knit pushed down in the bottom of the bag. Leah pulled out a sweater, size eight. Pagne thought, *how appropriate Mom. Much too small, middle of the summer and stained.* Pagne figured her mother had found it at the local thrift store or in the lost and found at the motel office. To make matters worse, Pagne hated orange. Her mother looked so pleased with herself and held the sweater up to Pagne. "Looks a little small, sweetie, but sweaters stretch! It's the thought that counts right?" cooed Leah. *This was so ridiculous ... there was absolutely no thought,* Pagne told herself sarcastically.

Leah leaned in close, speaking in a quiet voice, thinking Miss Renee could not hear. "I want to bring you home, baby. It's just not the same without you."

"What about Adam? I thought you two were starting a new life," asked Pagne. "Oh Adam. Well, that ended a year ago. Caught him cheating on me with a fourteen-year-old tramp. Not gonna let some slimedog sneak around on me."

Pagne was so angry. *He can fondle and attack your daughter and you keep him, but he cheats on you, and you dump him. Guess it's not cheating if it's your kid,* thought Pagne, but "Sorry," is all Pagne could muster in response.

"Well, I've met several generous men, but no one I can count on. Figured you and me can take care of each other and be two single gals. It'll be fun Pagne. You'll see."

Pagne looked at her mother in disbelief. "I don't want to come home with you!" Pagne said. Leah jumped up, and stepped back.

"I can't believe you ... you ungrateful brat. How dare you. I am your mother!" exclaimed Leah. "How do you expect me to live, I need the money your sorry butt brings in from the county. I have rights. You are my kid. No one is going to keep you from me." Leah grabbed the sweater and stormed to the door. "Get used to it Pagne, you're mine and there's nothing you can do to change that. So quit pretending you get a different life. This is what fate dealt you. You're mine, and we're stuck with each other!" Leah quickly stomped out of the room. Miss Renee had moved in closer when Leah jumped up. After Leah left the room, she reached out for Pagne and tried to comfort her.

Things were as usual for the next few weeks, until Miss Renee came into Pagne's dorm early one morning. Once Pagne was through with her recovery and therapy, she had been moved into one of the eight bed dorm rooms. "Good morning Pagne, we need to go see Mr. Phillips in the administration office. We need to discuss your case." Pagne got a lump in her throat. She had been warned by the other kids that when you went to see Mr. Phillips, big changes were going to happen. The courts had decided you could either go home, or be placed in

foster-care. Pagne was praying that it was the latter. She didn't know what she would do if she had to go home. She noticed a sweet scent again, the same wonderful aroma that she smelled when she saw her mom. It calmed her, gave her a sense of peace.

"Okay, Miss Renee. Let me put on my shoes." Once she was ready, they headed over to see Mr. Phillips.

When Pagne and Miss Renee got close to the office, Pagne stopped and looked up at Miss Renee. "Will my mother be there?" she asked cautiously. Miss Renee looked at her sweet, freckled face and assured her that she would not. Pagne was relieved and moved toward the office. She had seen Mr. Phillips before, but had not talked to him. He looked like a kind man. "Well, hello there Miss Champagne, please have a seat. That is an unusual name ... Champagne."

"Everyone calls me Pagne, sir."

"Okay then, Pagne, do you know why we are here today?"

"I think so, sir. You're gonna tell me where I am going."

"Yes, dear. We have discussed your case with the judge, your attorney, your mother, your social worker, and Miss Renee. How would you feel about going home?"

"I thought my mom had to do a lot of stuff before I could go there. The other kids said the parents have to take classes and get tests, lots of stuff. I don't think my mom did any of that."

"Well, your case is a little different. The state did not remove you from your mother. Your mother felt she was unable to provide a good home for you, but now she believes she is able to be a responsible parent. Apparently, the person in question, this Mr. Williams, is no longer involved with your mother. The case against him was dismissed, due to lack of evidence." Mr. Phillips paused, "It is the goal of this office to reunite parents and children whenever possible."

Pagne felt her heart clench up. "Sir, do I get a vote?"

"Well, Pagne, we certainly want to hear what you have to say, but this *is* a decision for adults." She wondered if she told Mr. Phillips about the men coming in all night, the beatings her mother endured, and the drinking, if would it make a difference? She decided it wouldn't, her mother was a good liar. *Who would believe her? She was just a kid.* Pagne leaned back into her chair, deciding she didn't have anything to say.

Pagne went into a deep, dark place. She spent a long time staring out the windows wishing she could fly away into the clouds. She started to wonder why she was even here. What was the point of her life? Was she just to be a yo-yo for her mother to play with? She wanted to know what was going to happen next, but dreaded knowing at the same time. Miss Renee tried to comfort her the best she could. She tried to get her to talk, but Pagne had shut down. One afternoon, Pagne approached Miss Renee. She had to try and reach out to someone before it was too late. "Miss Renee, you heard her. She doesn't

love me, she just wants the money she gets for me," Pagne reminded her.

"Oh Pagne, I am sure she loves you. We all say things we don't mean when we are angry or hurt."

"Miss Renee, you don't know my mom." Pagne walked away, defeated.

She moved out to the playground and went to her favorite spot. There was a tree with huge branches that sheltered her from the sun. One branch curved low and was easy to climb onto. From that branch, she could climb way into the bowels of the tree. She felt safe there. She laid back on one of the large branches, staring up into the streams of light that filtered through the leaves. She watched, as butterflies lazily glided through the glittering light. She thought she could smell the flowering vines growing up the trellis close by, but the scent wasn't right. No, it wasn't the vines. She knew this smell, it was the scent that she smelled twice before. The smell of her guardian angel? "Are you here?" Pagne asked. "Is that you?" The scent was stronger, it swirled around her, filling her nostrils with glorious delight. *"It is you ... I knew you were real!"* She thought she felt soft feathers brushing against her cheek and arm. Pagne closed her eyes tight and pretended she could see her angel. Then Pagne heard a whisper, "I am here." Pagne almost fell out of the tree. She was so surprised to hear a voice. But did she hear it? It didn't seem to come through her ears. It felt like a thought, a thought that wasn't hers, a blast that shot through her brain. She quickly looked around, thinking one of the kids might be messing with her, but no one was there. It was her and her angel. Pagne smiled and knew it would all be okay.

Several days later, Pagne was taken to Mr. Phillips' office again. Miss Renee was already there when she came in. Pagne was invited to sit, which she did slowly. "Am I going home now?" asked Pagne. Mr. Phillips looked at her quite seriously for a few minutes, and then glanced at Miss Renee.

"Not today, Pagne. We have revisited your case, and we have some concerns about your mother's ability to provide you with a safe place to live."

Pagne was not aware of it, but Miss Renee had done some extensive investigating after their last talk and she had found out that Leah had been arrested three times for public intoxication, and she also had pending charges for prostitution. This oversight by the county was attributed to a mix-up in social security numbers on Leah's police files.

"We have decided to give your mother more time to resolve her issues. Rather than have you stay here while this time is extended to your mother, we have released you for foster-care placement. Miss Renee will explain the process and your rights after our meeting here. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?"

"No, sir, but thank you, sir."

Mr. Phillips dismissed Pagne and Miss Renee. Pagne felt a huge dread lift, but it was quickly replaced with a new anxiety. What was coming next?

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. The word "Chapter" is written in a cursive font, and the number "3" is in a large, bold, serif font. They are surrounded by intricate, swirling floral and vine-like patterns in a light gray color.

Chapter 3

Miss Renee explained all the rules and safety precautions to Pagne. She would be leaving today. "Pagne, you will love Mrs. Buttonhook. She is an older lady who has been a foster-parent for many years. She is a lovely person, and she absolutely adores her kids. She has three foster-children living with her now. I know she will provide you with a wonderful home." Pagne went back to the dorm to pack up her few belongings. She hugged the girls and asked for permission to see Itchy before she left. Itchy came into the rec room and saw the look in Pagne's eyes. "You're leaving me?" he asked.

"Yep, they found a nice home for me ... at least for awhile. I didn't want to leave without telling you goodbye."

"Sure glad you did." Itchy got real quiet and looked down. "I'm really going to miss you, Pagne. Not going to be the same around here without you."

"I'll see if they will let me visit."

"Yeah, that would be cool ... good luck, Pagne. Hope they don't figure out what a brat you really are!" He smiled at her with a crooked grin.

"You are so mean." she laughed, as she slapped his arm. Pagne watched as he headed out to go back to the boy's area. She thought she saw him wipe his eyes with his T-shirt.

The social worker delivering Pagne to her new home had a name, but Pagne was too distracted to remember. This lady was really chatty. She just talked and talked. Pagne let her ramble, she was too nervous to try to have a conversation anyway. They pulled up in front of a cute three story house. It was painted bright yellow ... banana yellow. Pagne noticed the purple door and shutters. The yard was full of brightly colored flowers. It even had a white picket fence with an arbor to walk under. Pagne smiled to herself and thought, *this is just too*

cute! As they walked up the sidewalk to the front door, Pagne smelled freshly cut grass, flowers, and what she thought to be chocolate chip cookies baking.

When they stepped onto the porch, the social worker rang the bell, and Pagne felt her whole body stiffen. She felt a flush in her cheeks. As the front door opened, Pagne saw a young girl, maybe a year older than herself with white powder on her face and t-shirt.

"She's here!" she yelled as she ran back into the other room. Pagne got a strong whiff of her angel, then it was overtaken with the smell of baking cookies.

As soon as they stepped into the living room, Pagne liked what she saw. It was bright and cheerful. Mrs. Buttonhook came in from, what Pagne assumed, was the kitchen. She was older than Pagne expected, and she was very short and just as wide. Her gray hair was styled in very tight curls .

"Well, hello there, my lovely. You are just adorable. I love freckles! My name is Ophelia Buttonhook, but all my kids call me Grandma." Pagne realized that she had never thought about grandmas or grandpas. She didn't even know if she had any. "You can take your time and figure out what feels good to you. I answer to just about anything." Grandma, which was the name Pagne would chose to use, suddenly swept Pagne up in her arms and gave her a big hug. Between the fleshy arms and her full bosom, Pagne thought she might suffocate. "Forgive me, sweetie, I just gotta hug," Grandma giggled. "God built it into my DNA! Nothing I can do about it."

God? Who or what was this God? He built her? This was a very odd woman indeed, but Pagne felt an instant connection with this crazy lady. She felt herself grinning, without knowing why.

After the social worker talked Grandma's ear off for an hour, she finally left. Grandma then focused on Pagne and smiled as she said, "Boy that woman can gab. I didn't think anyone could out talk me. Let me show you around, sweetheart." First she took Pagne upstairs to the third floor. This was an attic room with steep angles on the walls. The stairs came up into the middle of the room. On each end was a window with a twin bed underneath it. There was a small dresser at each end and a large cabinet in the middle. The walls were painted a soft blue with white trim. There were large bulletin boards on each end of the room. One was empty, but the other was filled with wonderful items that all meshed together.

"Well, sweetie, this bed is yours," she said as she pointed to the twin bed underneath the window that faced onto the back yard. "You can put your clothes in this dresser, and you have more room in the cabinet there. Macey will be sharing this room with you. You met her at the door earlier. Let me show you around the rest of the house, and then you'll have time to put away your things while I fix dinner."

They moved to the second floor. There was a large bathroom with a shower and tub.

"We all have to share this one bath I'm afraid. We came up with a schedule that works out fine. In here is the boy's room. They are at softball practice right now. You will meet them at dinner. Tad and Chad are twelve, and they are twins. My room is right here. If you ever need anything, don't be afraid to knock on the door. Be sure to knock nice and loud. I take my hearing aid out at night. If I don't, I end up laying on that side and my ear aches for hours when I get up. Lord knows you'd think I'd roll over." She chuckled to herself as she moved back to the stairs. "Now downstairs is the living room and kitchen. You've seen the living room, so lets go check on how the cookies are coming." Pagne loved the sound of Grandma's voice. So kind, joyful and full of energy.

"Macey, this is Pagne. Pagne, this is Macey."

"Pagne, unusual name. Is that short for something?" asked Macey.

"Well, yeah. My mom named me Champagne after her favorite booze," replied Pagne.

"Well, I like Pagne better; I consider myself a *pain* too!" Macey smiled big and warmly at Pagne. Pagne knew she would like Macey right away.

"Ohhhh my goodness, Macey, lets get this last batch of cookies out of the oven before they burn. You girls can only have one now, because we'll be eating dinner soon. Pagne I hope you're not picky, we eat very simply here."

"I am not picky at all," explained Pagne, as she helped Macey take the cookies off the sheet to cool. "These cookies smell so good! Sure we can just have one?" Pagne asked, as she stuffed one in her mouth.

Grandma just chuckled, "You're gonna fit right in here Pagne."

Tad and Chad exploded into the house as dinner was being put on the table. "You boys go get washed up quick," yelled Grandma. "Dinner is ready!" Tad ran straight to the stairs, and Chad froze, looking at Pagne.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"This is Pagne, you can dazzle her at dinner. Get up there and wash those hands and face, you're all dirty and sweaty." Pagne felt her cheeks warm as she sat at the table.

Seemed like only a few seconds had passed and Pagne could hear the boys pushing and stomping down the stairs. Tad made it through the door first and sat down with the rest of them. Chad was right behind him. He slipped on a sly grin and stood at the table with arms crossed over his chest.

"Why is she in my chair?" he asked. He then tried to look injured and sad.

"Oh Chad, leave her alone. You know you always sit here next to me," Grandma said, while waving him toward her. Chad looked at Pagne and grinned his biggest grin. Once he was seated, Grandma asked them all to hold hands and bow their heads. Macey leaned over and whispered in Pagne's ear, "Sometimes this can take a long time." Grandma started her prayer thanking her God for the food, for the weather, for her health, for all of them and for all the beauty in the world. After about five minutes, she apologized to God for

being so short-winded and she promised to make up for it during her evening prayers. Macey breathed a sigh of relief.

The dinner was delicious. Roasted chicken with baby potatoes, fresh green beans, and a wonderful fruit salad.

"Grandma, this is so good," said Tad through a mouth full of potatoes.

"Now just eat, and you can talk later. We got cookies for dessert. Macey made them this afternoon," Grandma announced. Tad and Chad started groaning and grabbing their guts like they were in horrible pain. "Now you boys quit teasing her. She is a fine cook."

Pagne felt comfortable joining in; "I had one earlier and they are good, so if you don't want yours, I'll take them." She smiled at Macey.

"Noooo, we want them!" both boys exclaimed.

With an evil grin, Chad asked "Are you?"

"Are I what?" Pagne asked back.

"You know, a pain?" he asked with a snicker. This started a wave of laughter from Tad and Chad.

Pagne wished she had a dollar every time she was asked this question. She decided Chad was deserving of her sarcastic answer. "No, but I can bring it!"

"Ewwwwwwwww, I'm scared," Chad responded with mock shaking.

"Now, now boys, that's enough. Pagne is a fine name, you leave her alone!"

The boys stopped their teasing, but broke out in giggles every time they looked at each other. After dinner was done, each of them rinsed their plates and set them in the dishwasher.

"Will you kids finish up the kitchen please, me and Pagne need to have a conversation."

"Sure Grandma," they all chimed in.

Grandma fixed two big glasses of lemonade and a plate of cookies. She handed Pagne one of the glasses and moved out the back door into the yard. Pagne never lived anywhere but in the motel and Langston Hall, so a yard was a new experience for her. She looked around at all the flowers, vines, bushes and trees. There was an apple tree and a pear tree. Over in one corner was a vegetable garden.

"We grew those beans you had tonight. We get a lot of our vegetables out of that garden. If you like gardening, I'll let you help tend it." Pagne had no clue if she liked gardening, but she liked the idea of making something grow, especially if you could eat it.

"I'd like to learn, Grandma." Grandma made her way to a little patio of large flat stones. Pretty moss grew in-between the stones with tiny purple flowers. There was a small table and chairs for them to sit. They were made of scrolled metal and the paint was chipped and faded. Grandma had placed brightly colored cushions in the chairs.

"Have a seat, hon, I'd like to discuss the house rules." Pagne listened

attentively, while Grandma explained the bathroom schedule, the chore rotation, laundry, and all the daily functions of a family. "I don't have a lot of rules about behavior but the ones I do have are important. Number one is to be respectful of our family. No name-calling, hitting or insults. There is enough of that outside our house, we don't bring it in here. Second, we respect each others personal possessions. Do not borrow or use anything without getting permission. If you need something, let me know, and I'll do my best to get it for you. The last is no lying. We can't deal with the issues of life if we're all lying up in this house. We are a family, and we gotta have the facts if we're going to take care of each other." Pagne agreed to the rules and was happy to be part of this family.

As if they had radar, or they just knew Grandma's body language, the kids headed out the back door as Grandma was finishing. "Can we show her the tree-house now, Grandma?"

"Of course, children. Come in when it starts to get dark. You've got school tomorrow." Grandma took the glasses and headed into the house.

"Come on, Pagne, you're gonna love this!" Macey grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the backside of the yard. As they came around the wall behind the garden, there was an open field. A short distance away was a huge oak tree, gnarled and reaching to the sky. The boys were quite ways ahead and got to the tree first. They scampered up the rope ladder like two squirrels. Macey and Pagne got there as the boys disappeared into a huge wooden shack sitting in the tree. Macey showed Pagne how to climb the rope ladder so that it didn't swing too much. When they got into the tree-house, Pagne was amazed. There were chairs, a table, shelves with books and rocks, dead bugs, and all sorts of treasures. On the floor were huge pillows that now held the twins. "Beat ya again," they taunted.

"So what," Macey threw back. "You had a head start."

"Yeah right," Tad threw in response.

"Stop it you guys. Remember Grandma's rules!" Chad said sarcastically.

"What, you guys don't like the rules?" asked Pagne.

"Nah, they're fine. Grandma is really good to us, and we are all crazy about her, but she didn't tell you the most important rule," explained Macey.

"What's that?" Pagne asked.

They looked at each other and then turned to Pagne.

"Can we trust you to keep a secret?" Macey asked in a whisper. Pagne nodded her head emphatically.

"Gotta promise," Chad said.

"I swear," said Pagne.

"Grandma is bonkers!" Tad exclaimed.

"Tad, that isn't funny. She has some issues, and we help to look out for her," explained Chad.

"What kind of issues?" asked Pagne.

"She forgets a lot, and we just help her."

"Well forgetting isn't that big a deal, right?" Pagne suggested.

The three of them looked at each other and Chad nodded, giving the group permission to reveal the severity of the problem. Macey proceeded to explain. "Well, she forgets what day it is, so we have to be sure to get to school during the week. She forgets to buy food sometimes. She loses everything: keys, her shoes, everything. We try to put things she needs out where she can find them. But the worst thing is, she will forget the stove is on, or food is cooking. She can forget and leave water running in the tub. We make sure her baths are scheduled when we are home; that way we can check the water so the house doesn't flood. We offer to help cook and clean the kitchen so we can be sure everything is turned off. We worry about her during the day, but we can't miss school."

"Why don't you guys tell the social worker?" asked Pagne.

"What! Are you crazy? This is the best place I've ever lived. She is good to us. We just have to look after her, the way she looks after us," replied Tad with such passion. "So Pagne, you can't tell. They will move us out of here so fast that your head will spin off."

"I won't. I already like it here, and I don't want to go back to Langston Hall." The group of survivors pinky swore and Pagne was officially a member of the alliance.

~

Her first Saturday there, the kids were hanging out in the backyard. They were supposed to be weeding the garden, but had gotten distracted with horseplay and teasing. The twins didn't fight or argue much, but they loved to wrestle. Pagne and Macey were cheering them on and would clap when one pinned the other. Pagne wasn't sure how it happened, but she got dared to square off with Chad. Tad and Macey were laughing hysterically, as the two of them stomped around in a circle like sumo wrestlers. This was fun, and Pagne got into her character. She grunted and growled, as she stomped and flexed her thin arms. Chad made a quick lunge for Pagne and he missed, as she jumped and turned to one side. He was up on her again and grabbed her arms from the back. The harder she struggled, the tighter he held. Pagne's emotions shot back to the day in the motel room, to Adam's brutal grip on her frail arms. She remembered his reeking breath next to her face. She began kicking and screaming, and she lashed out at Chad with everything she had. Grandma ran out back and was yelling for Chad to let go of her. He was afraid to, because he was not sure what she would do when he did. He finally released her, jumped back, and tucked himself into a roll. Pagne fell to the ground, sobbing. Grandma

shooed the other three into the house. Chad whispered "I'm so sorry, Pagne" when he passed her. Grandma pulled Pagne up and just held her. "You're okay, sweetie. I know Chad wasn't trying to hurt you."

"I know Grandma, I just panicked when he grabbed my arms."

"It's okay, baby" soothed Grandma. She just held Pagne and let her crying slow down, her breathing come back to normal.

They moved to the table and Grandma asked "Would you like to talk about what is so upsetting?"

"I don't know, I'm afraid to say it out loud. I can pretend none of it is real if I don't talk about it."

"I know it feels like that, sweetie, but you know it's lurking in your memories and heart. You know if you don't want to talk to me about it, God will listen."

"You keep talking about this God. I have never heard about him before. Why would I want to talk to him?"

Grandma took a deep sigh. "Well, this is gonna take some time, why don't you go get us a piece of that rocky road cake we made and a big glass of milk. Let the kids know you're feeling better; they are worried."

"Okay, Grandma, I'll be right back." After reassuring the others she was okay, especially Chad, she prepared a tray with two big slices of cake and cold milk. Pagne made her way carefully out to where Grandma waited for her.

As they ate cake, Grandma chatted about insignificant things, encouraging Pagne to join her in conversation. It didn't take long for Pagne to become comfortable, and to trust Grandma. She realized that she ached to talk about the years with her mother, the men that frequented their house, and how unloved she felt. She told Grandma all about Adam, the attack, her injuries, and how her mother picked Adam over her. Pagne revealed how afraid she was that the courts would send her back to her mother. Pagne shed so many tears and reduced the tissues in Grandma's apron to pulp. Grandma sat quietly and listened, frequently squeezing Pagne's hand until she was able to get it all out. Once Pagne was calm and had said everything she felt in her hurting heart, Grandma knew she was supposed to say something wise. Something that would help make sense of this young lady's heartbreak. She had to weigh her words carefully.

"Pagne, I don't know your mama, but she sounds like a broken spirit to me. Most of the time, when people are hardened and selfish, it has come from needing to survive. You say you have never met your mama's family? Maybe she suffered great harm in her life, and now she is doing the best she can. I am not saying that it is acceptable or fair, but when someone is broken, they do unspeakable things. That is why God is so important. He can mend broken spirits, and he can change who we are and how we live."

"But Grandma, who is God?"

"That's a big question hon, and I'll do my best. God is a living power that rules, and He created Earth, our universe, and all universes. He created man to be his companion. He is love and compassion, and he hates sin, because sin destroys his creations. He will remove all sin someday."

Grandma could see the confusion on Pagne's face. She decided one brief conversation would not be enough to explain what men have struggled with for thousands of years. She hugged Pagne and continued to her favorite part. "Once our lives are done here, we will dwell in Heaven for eternity with him and all the angels. We only have to believe and accept his son, Jesus, as our Savior", explained Grandma. She saw Pagne's face light up with recognition.

"I have heard about baby Jesus before. His birthday is Christmas, right?"

"Yes child, that's right. God is his father, and He also wants to have a relationship with you. To help you get through life and the troubles we all will have to endure. God loves you, Pagne, you are his daughter."

"I guess I don't understand why God gave me to my mom. She doesn't love me. Why didn't he give me to someone wonderful, like you?"

"I don't know all the answers, sweetheart, but I do know that he has wonderful plans for you and me, for everyone who will follow Jesus. I know he helped bring us together, and that he wanted us to know and love each other."

"Grandma, you mentioned angels. Do you really believe in angels?" asked Pagne.

"I sure do. I believe everyone has a guardian angel that helps them through life."

"So do I. Grandma, would you think I was crazy if I told you I can smell mine, and sometimes I can see her wings or feel them brush against me." Pagne wasn't sure how much to share but felt safe with Grandma. "What if I told you she talked to me?"

"Why, child, I don't think you're crazy. I just think you are a special young lady that has an open mind and heart and this allows you to see beyond other folks. You are blessed. "

"Grandma, it is okay if I talk to my angel?"

"I think your angel would like that very much. Must get boring hanging around all the time, and no one talks to you," Grandma said. They talked awhile longer and saw that the sun was setting. "Next time Pagne, I'll share my life with you. It's longer than your story and a little sad in parts, but it is my story and I wouldn't change it for anything."

"Okay, Grandma."

They walked into the house holding hands and feeling like this moment in time changed them forever. Pagne stopped Grandma just inside the door with a question. "How would God fix my mother?"

"Well, he knows what is in her heart and what she has endured. He also

wants her healthy and in a loving relationship with you. I would say praying for her is the best way to start.” Pagne gave Grandma a squeeze and ran off to find the others.

The next three years were wonderful. Pagne really came to love this crazy family of hers. She believed that eight eyes could certainly look out for one old lady. She liked her school and her teacher. They went to church on Sundays as a family. They all shared the work, laughed together, and grew closer and closer. Macey told her that she was going to be a dancer when she grew up. The girls would crank up the music in their attic and dance for hours. Grandma would take out her hearing aid, and the boys just got to suffer. Sometimes Tad and Chad would come in to laugh at them and would end up joining them.

Tad wanted to be a baseball player. He hoped he could go pro when he was old enough. Chad played because Tad wanted to. He enjoyed it, but that wasn't his passion. He was a science geek. Chad would talk for hours about microscopes, chemistry and bugs. He loved bugs. He would tell them about every bug in their yard, what they ate, how they multiplied. He would drive them crazy, until they ran away screaming ... no more ... stop! Chad would eventually give in, and they would play endlessly.

The tree-house was their sanctuary. They spent hours up there playing games, teasing, laughing, and debating. It was their place, where they were in control and set the rules.

Pagne loved that she could put her past behind her. It was all about now. No one talked about why they were there. They just were, and they were happy.

Each of the kids would make sure Grandma had lunch for the day before they left for school, so that she wouldn't cook while they were away. The kids always made sure someone came right home if the others had after-school activities. Several times, they found the stove on or the freezer door left open, but it wasn't anything they couldn't handle. It was a good life, loving and caring for each other.

~

While sleeping, Pagne was having the most beautiful dream. She was in a lush garden filled with flowers, butterflies and birds. The birds were singing beautiful songs, and one flew up and sat on her shoulder. There were also angels flying and fluttering about. Pagne realized her angel was near; she could smell her. The scent was so amazing ... it got stronger and stronger. Pagne kept turning and twisting, looking around for her angel. “I know you're here, I can smell you” she yelled in her dream. Then she heard her angel's voice.

“Pagne, wake up, now!”

Pagne sat up and realized the lovely angel smell had turned into stinking, choking smoke. Now that she was awake, she heard the smoke detectors wailing. How did they all sleep through them? She jumped up and woke Macey.

"Get downstairs now. Wake Grandma. We have to get out of the house." Pagne saw her little, white Bible from Grandma on her nightstand and stuck it in the waist of her pajama bottoms. They both ran to the second floor. Macey threw open Grandma's door and woke her by jumping on the bed. Pagne ran into the boys room and jerked them from their deep sleep by screaming their names. Grandma and Macey were first into the stairwell, heading to the first floor. Pagne was close behind, and the boys were following her.

As Macey and Grandma reached the bottom step, Grandma lost her balance and fell hard. She screamed in terrible pain, then whimpered "My hip is broken, my hip." Tad pushed ahead of Pagne to help Macey pull Grandma out the front door. Pagne looked back to tell Chad to hurry and he wasn't behind her.

"Where's Chad?" she screamed.

Tad looked up, confused, "I don't know. He was right behind me."

Pagne ran back up the stairs, screaming for Chad. The flames had now made their way up inside the walls and were breaking through into the hall. Chad was in his doorway with his microscope and an armload of papers. "What are you doing you, idiot?" screamed Pagne.

"I can't leave it behind," he screamed back. As Chad moved toward Pagne, a portion of the ceiling fell, pinning Chad to the floor. Pagne moved in and began pulling the debris off of him. Feeling the heat and finding it harder and harder to breathe, she was struggling not to panic. She finally got him free, but he didn't appear to be breathing. Pagne had no clue how to do CPR, and there was no time. She could feel the heat becoming unbearable. She drug Chad to the top of the staircase and pushed. He rolled down and landed at the bottom of the staircase with a loud thud. Just as Pagne headed down the stairs, the flames broke through the wall, and engulfed her. She had no idea what to do, so she ran down the stairs not realizing that she was feeding the fire that consumed her clothing and skin.

Pagne was in such a panic that she tripped over Chad on the floor and rolled across the room. As she tried to sit up, she saw several firemen enter the living room. "Chad! Get Chad! He's right there." One of the fireman swung Chad up and disappeared out the door. The second fireman quickly reached Pagne and wrapped his jacket around her to smother the remaining flames. He then lifted her up and carried her out of the house. Soon, she was lying on the neighbor's front lawn. Pagne looked over and saw their lovely home crumbling in the flames. She knew that she was burned, and wondered why it didn't hurt more than it did. She closed her eyes and smelled the lovely scent of her angel, then she heard someone screaming, "She's in shock!" as she went back to her lovely dream. She would not understand the importance of her selflessness that night for sixty-seven more years.

Pagne woke up in a strange room, it was brightly lit, and she was disoriented. As her eyes and brain focused, she realized it was a hospital room. She could hear

the equipment beeping and quiet voices in the hall. She realized that her chest hurt, and it was very difficult to breath without making the pain worse. She found the buzzer on her bed and summoned the nurse. As the nurse entered, Pagne tried to sit up, but found it very painful. She hoarsely whispered, "Where is my family? Are they okay?" She saw movement in the corner of her eye. Leah leaned in next to her head from the chair by her bed. "Why, I'm right here honey. All the family you need." Pagne wanted to scream in despair, but she didn't make a sound.

Over the next few days, she found out that everyone survived the fire. Grandma had broken her hip alright, and was placed in a nursing home. It would take several months for her hip to heal, but her foster-care days were over. She had gotten up in the middle of the night to make a cup of tea and left the burner on. Unfortunately, a dish towel was close enough to the stove to ignite and start the fire in the kitchen. The firefighters said that Chad barely survived, but that rolling him down the stairs saved his life, as it got him below the worst of the smoke. He was bruised and had some smoke inhalation issues, but he would be fine in a few weeks. Pagne, however, was not so lucky. She had suffered third degree burns on her neck, chest, arm and shoulder. They would heal with painful treatments, but the scarring would be extensive. She thought about her rotten luck; *of course it was her perfectly fine arm that was burned.* Pagne would fluctuate between self pity and anger. Sometimes she would smell her angel, but ignored her or told her to go away. "Where were you? Why didn't you protect us? Why didn't you protect me?" Then she would cry softly.

Pagne was so sad that her time with Grandma and the kids was over. She had never felt so loved and connected in her life. She tried not to blame God, to wonder why he let her be so happy to just take it away. But there was no one else for Pagne to blame.

To make matters worse, Leah was an every day annoyance while Pagne was in the hospital. She was so rude and demanding of the nurses. Ordering extra food and drinks for herself while she sat in Pagne's room, going on and on about how she was going to sue the county. What were they thinking? Letting an old, deranged woman care for her precious baby. This should be worth quite a bundle. All the pain and suffering she had endured, all the days in discomfort she had spent sitting by her child's bed. The embarrassment she would endure when everyone stared at her disfigured child. It was just unbearable, the burden she must now carry. The local news and paper were willing to give Leah a very public soapbox to vent her rage and suffering.

Pagne almost looked forward to the painful water treatments for her burns. Her mother wasn't allowed in the treatment room. The nurses were kind, and Pagne could see they truly felt her pain - physical and mental.

One afternoon, while still in the hospital, Pagne heard some familiar voices in the distance. She looked up and saw Chad and Tad standing in the doorway.

She squealed in delight to see them looking so healthy and here to see her.

"How did you get here?" she asked. They moved close to her bed.

"Our new foster-parents brought us. After all, you saved Chad's butt. You look good Pagne, for almost being a crispy-critter," Tad said with relief. Chad stayed very quiet and just kept looking at her arm. Tad talked excitedly about their new home and filled Pagne in on all the great details. Pagne was happy for them, but her regret and pain from her own circumstances showed on her face and in her smile. Then, there was that awkward silence, the one you could cut if you had a knife. Pagne didn't have any good news to share and she felt Chad's discomfort. Chad cleared his throat and asked Tad to give him a few minutes alone with Pagne. Tad headed out of the room, making kissing sounds, as he went looking for a vending machine.

Pagne knew Chad needed to unload his feelings, and she patiently waited for him to speak. After a long, painful delay, he finally spoke. "Pagne, I am so sorry. We could have all gotten out of the house in time if I didn't go back for my stupid stuff." The tears began to roll down his cheeks. "I should have been the one burnt, not you." Pagne looked into his sad face and felt her own eyes tearing up.

"Chad, I am just glad that we are all okay." He reached over and gently touched her bandaged arm.

"Does it hurt much?"

"Some," she lied. It hurt a lot.

Chad stood there in more painful silence. They were both relieved to hear Tad coming back in. "Get the mushy stuff over with?" he asked, with a mouth full of chocolate candy. Chad turned and jabbed Tad with his elbow.

"Shut up, Tad."

"Pagne, it was good seeing you alive but we gotta go." Tad leaned in and gave Pagne a soft hug and moved to the door. Chad was trying to hold back more tears.

"I'll try to come again," he whispered, but this would be the last time they would see each other. Chad reached for Pagne's copper curls and gently twirled them in his fingers. He mouthed, "I am so sorry, please forgive me." The pain in his eyes mirrored the pain Pagne was enduring. Pagne took his hand with her good hand and squeezed. She smiled and nodded at him, knowing that if she spoke, it would release fountains of tears. The boys left as quickly as they emerged. Pagne laid back and shut her eyes, trying to close out all the pain. She then heard the unmistakable screech of her mother's voice coming down the hall. "*God, if you are there, please take me now,*" Pagne prayed to herself.

Eventually, Pagne was released from the hospital into her mother's care. She guessed that her mother's threat of a lawsuit was being taken seriously, and the county didn't want to aggravate the situation further. Leah had played the outraged and concerned mother very well on the five o'clock news and acquired

a high profile lawyer.

Pagne was surprised to learn that her mother had gotten a job as retail clerk nine months earlier. Leah's drinking and lifestyle had taken its toll on her looks, and she found it difficult to find men willing to pay her what she thought she was worth. Leah pretended that she left the business while she was still on top, on her terms. This new job gave Pagne some grace of time without her mother around. With the small income her mother was making and the assistance she received for Pagne, they were able to move into a small, one-bedroom apartment. Pagne slept on the couch. It was some time before she could return to school. The pain medications she needed kept her groggy and unable to focus.

She was a local celebrity for a short while because of her heroism. The city and the local fire departments established a college fund for Pagne. Luckily they made sure no one had access to it unless used by Pagne for college tuition. Her popularity was short-lived because a local politician was caught buying drugs from an undercover cop. Pagne was no longer the main attraction for the local news or newspaper and the media had tired of Leah's rantings and her battle now would be fought in the courts.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features the word "Chapter" in a cursive font and the number "4" in a large, bold, serif font. The text is enclosed within a circular frame that is part of a larger, ornate swirl design. The swirls are composed of thin, elegant lines and small leaf-like shapes, creating a delicate and artistic border around the chapter title.

Chapter 4

Pagne's mother still drank, but it seemed to have slowed down a lot. Life was much calmer with Leah. She was home alone most evenings, but Pagne actually preferred that. As she was laying in the dark, she thought she smelled her angel. But no, she had sent her away. Surely she had insulted the angel and she would have moved on. But the scent came again, this time stronger. "Are you still there?" Pagne asked quietly. The smell swirled around her. It was as if it was dancing. Pagne felt an emotional pull on her heart. "Oh angel, I am so sorry I was mad at you. The fire wasn't your fault. You tried to save all of us." Pagne smelled her angel's scent surrounding her, saturating her t-shirt and her pillow. "I'm so glad you didn't leave me."

Pagne began to pray again for her mom, Grandma, and the kids. She also would mention Itchy and Bree. She wondered where they all were. She didn't think to get a phone number for the twins when they visited. She asked about Itchy, and her social worker said that he had gone to live on the east coast with an aunt. Bree just disappeared. Grandma suffered several strokes while in the nursing home and didn't know who anyone was. She wasn't able to track down Macey either. Everyone was taken from her, but she couldn't lose Leah if she tried.

School was her sanctuary. Pagne was now thirteen, in the eighth grade and she was making friends, but Pagne was cautious. She lost everyone that ever mattered and she didn't think she could survive if it happened again. There was one boy that intrigued her though. His name was Lenny. He was cute, funny, and so smart. Pagne would catch herself daydreaming about him in class. She found his dark hair, olive skin, and deep brown eyes mysterious. Lenny had a broad, white smile, and he was charming; he reminded her of Aladdin in the animated movie.

They had several classes together. She felt a dark side to Lenny though. He didn't talk about his family and never seemed to be looking forward to anything. Maybe that's why Pagne was so drawn to him.

They became best friends over the next few months. They would hang out after school every day, sitting under the trees talking about their future plans. Lenny wanted to be a writer, and he would let Pagne read some of his short stories. They were wonderful, but none of the characters seemed truly happy. There was always some kind of barrier that kept joy from his characters.

Monday after school, Pagne asked Lenny to meet her at their place. She really needed to talk. He showed up with several candy bars from the school's vending machines. "Thanks, Lenny. Can I save it for later," she said softly. Pagne was visibly upset and Lenny moved in closer to her.

Pagne looked deep into Lenny's eyes, looking for trust she supposed. "I need to talk, but this might change things for us," she whispered. Lenny took her hand with a reassuring squeeze. "Pagne, you're my best friend. Nothing you say will change that." They both sat down in the cool grass in the shade of a large tree.

Pagne began sharing her story with Lenny. She explained that her mother had been a prostitute, how they lived, and she even told him about Adam and the fall. Her tears would come and go. When she talked about the fire, the painful treatments and the permanent scarring, she fell into quiet sobs. Lenny wrapped her in his arms and held her while she cried. "Pagne, I know the scarring is a crappy thing, but you have to know that you are beautiful," Lenny said lovingly. "I love your eyes," he whispered as he gazed into them. "You are beautiful inside and out." Pagne relaxed and just laid in to Lenny's chest. Feeling her heartbeat line up with his. This soothed her, and their deep connection became stronger. Pagne was young, but she knew she loved Lenny, she needed to love him. Someone.

"What's going on Pagne? Why tell me this now?" Pagne looked at Lenny and then dropped her head.

"My mother is seeing Adam. I saw him drop her off last night, and the way they were talking sounded like they have been seeing each other for awhile. She doesn't know that I know." Pagne felt that sense of hopelessness fall over her again. She was just beginning to feel normal. School was fun and challenging, she had friends, she had Lenny. Pagne knew that she was old enough now to fight Adam if she had to, but she could envision the nightmare that her home life would be.

"I don't know what will happen, Lenny. I can't live around both of them, but I don't have anywhere else to go, except for Langston Hall or maybe foster-care. I have no idea where they will put me. I could lose everyone again." She moved in as tight as she could into Lenny's arms and whispered. "Lenny, I can't bear to lose you. They could send me anywhere, and I might never see

you again. Except for my angel, I will be all alone again."

Lenny held her, totally confused. How he could proceed with his plan? He had thought that when he left school today, that he would never see Pagne again.

Lenny knew every bit of Pagne's pain. He had just found out that his father, Leonard, was coming back home. His dad said he was clean for good this time, no more meth, but Lenny didn't believe him. He had seen the cycle too many times. It would be good at first, the honeymoon, Lenny called it. But it would change quickly and dramatically. His father's favorite hobby was beating and humiliating his wife. When his dad thought she'd had enough, because he certainly didn't want to kill his meal ticket, he would focus on Lenny. First it started with taunting, jabbing and slapping. When Lenny wouldn't man up and hit him back, his dad would get rougher, calling Lenny insulting names. These sessions would always end up with punches and humiliation. It didn't matter if Lenny defended himself or not, his father would work up in a rage and become vicious. The beatings became more brutal as Lenny got older.

When Lenny was small, he thought his life was normal, that all daddies were big, mean and violent. When he got old enough to realize his father was an animal, Lenny tolerated it because he felt the need to protect his mom. After seeing her allow this man back into their home and back into her bed time and time again, Lenny figured she liked it and deserved it. She never pressed charges, and she never stepped in to shield Lenny. Lenny eventually decided that because she didn't protect him, she was on her own.

His dad would tire of them eventually and would disappear for months at a time, flopping wherever he could and bingeing on whatever drugs he could find, but meth was his drug of choice.

Lenny had found out that morning, that his dad would be home when he got back from school. He had decided that tonight would be the night of resolution. His dad would be settled back in by the time he got home. He would be sitting on the couch watching his wrestling. Mom would be so happy that her man was back. She would be convinced that this time would be different, wonderful, normal. She would be cooking his favorite dinner: steak and baked potatoes. They lived on macaroni and cheese or hotdogs when he was gone, but Mom made sure Dad ate the best.

Lenny struggled with the decision ... himself or the animal who was his father. If just himself, his pain and anger would be done, but the animal would still be free to roam. If he only killed his father, Lenny would have justice and revenge, but he would be locked up the rest of his life knowing he could never be with Pagne. A heavy price to pay. Lenny had stolen an old gun from his friend Rob's house. He could picture it in his mind. His mother would dutifully set up a TV tray and bring Lenny Senior his dinner and beers, while his father screamed at the wrestlers on TV. Lenny would calmly walk in, aim and then

pull the trigger. He would be at close range, sure to kill. He wanted to see the shock on his father's face. Lenny decided he would then take his own life, finally peace, he hoped. His mother would get to live with the guilt and heartache of their deaths. All would be fair in the world. He was ready, he had a plan.

But then Pagne needed to see him, and he would get to smell her, touch her one last time, and dream about what could have been. Then goodbye, it would be the last goodbye. Once she revealed why she was upset, he realized she needed him. He had to protect Pagne. She said that she couldn't bear to lose him. This changed everything for Lenny, all of his plans vanished. He broke, he let all the rage, and the hurt and pain gush out. Pagne was alarmed and thought she should get someone to help, but Lenny grabbed her hand. "Please don't leave, just stay with me." Pagne sat quietly, while Lenny cried softly at times and punched the ground mixed with muffled screams at others.

They ended up laying on their backs side by side, looking up at the late afternoon clouds that drifted by. Pagne tried to get Lenny to talk about what had him so upset, but he wasn't ready. He couldn't even find the words to describe all the emotions and feelings he had. He did know that he felt drained and oddly relaxed. "Guess I just needed to unload," is all he would say. "You said something weird earlier, Pagne. Do you really have an angel?"

"Oh yes," Pagne confessed, as she turned and propped up on her good elbow, well the better one anyway. Her face was lit with a glow. "You'll think I'm crazy, but I can smell her. Sometimes I see the edges of her wings. They have even brushed my cheek. She's even talked to me a couple of times." He looked at her with a big grin on his face.

"Are you serious? Pagne I knew you were a little ditzy but I never thought you were crazy."

"You can laugh, but it's real. You have one too. You're just too stubborn to smell him."

"Why a him – why would I want to smell a guy? What if I want a girl angel?" he asked with a wink.

"They are with you all the time. Do you want a girl angel in the bathroom or shower with you? That would be creepy!" Pagne said. Lenny began to laugh quietly as that mental picture developed. Pagne looked at him with irritation and Lenny finally burst out laughing. Pagne joined in and allowed the stress to be relieved with their shared peals of laughter. They both were amazed that they could laugh. The laughter became giggles and then quiet again.

"Nice thought, having someone watching your back. Mine is fired, he hasn't helped me any."

"I don't know how it works exactly. I know that they don't keep you from everything bad, but if you try to listen, they will warn you," Pagne explained. "My angel woke me up the night of the fire. We would have all died if I didn't smell her and hear her."

Lenny took Pagne's hand in his and gently felt the softness of her skin. "Pagne, I don't know if I believe you, but it sounds good enough to pretend that I do."

What Pagne didn't realize was that, her needing Lenny gave him a glimmer of hope, a reason to endure. He would not be taking anyone's life today to end his pain.

"Kinda strange really ... when I lived with Grandma, she talked a lot about God. How he gave us these angels to guard us. I don't know everything about Him, but I believe that there is something after this life. Something incredible. Because so far, this living thing sucks!"

"Amen to that," said Lenny with conviction.

It was so difficult to leave. They found sanctuary in each other. They agreed that Pagne would not do anything hasty. She would make sure that Adam really was dating her mom. Lenny said that he would never leave her, that he would follow her wherever she ended up. Pagne thought this was a romantic, ridiculous pledge, but it filled her with joy. She had no clue how serious Lenny was.

Pagne ran up to the apartment, filled with excitement and disbelief of what her and Lenny shared that afternoon. She truly felt happy. What a wonderful feeling that was! As she reached for the door to unlock it ... the door swung open. She was suddenly overcome with the smell of her angel. It was overwhelming and made her dizzy. She grabbed the door jam to steady herself. There stood her mother with a ludicrous grin on her face. "Oh baby, you're finally home. We've been waiting to share the good news." Her mother whipped her hand up in front of Pagne's face displaying a pathetic ring. Pagne was speechless. "Isn't it beautiful? Adam proposed to me just this afternoon." She reached for Pagne and pulled her into the room. Leah leaned in to whisper in Pagne's ear, "It's a real diamond, baby." Adam sat on the couch with a huge smile on his face.

Pagne was still recovering and looked from one face to the other. "Mom, what are you talking about? How did this happen?"

"Well, baby, I didn't want to upset you. You and Adam got such a rocky start." Leah paused to get her breath. Pagne could see that she was excited. "You can call it kismet or fate, but a couple of weeks ago, Adam came into the minimart where I work, to pick up some beer, and we were shocked to be looking at each other over the counter. He stopped drinking the hard stuff, hon. We got to talking, and we decided to go get a beer after work. Well, all that chemistry was still a churnin', and we've been dating ever since. I wasn't sure how to tell you, and I wanted to see if it was going to last before I said anything." With that Leah floated across the room and plopped down next to Adam. His hand immediately settled on her very upper thigh and squeezed. Pagne felt her face flush hot and surely red. They looked like a couple of hyenas grinning at each other. "Aren't

you going to congratulate us, dear?" asked her mother.

This was insane, they both acted like nothing had happened. That they would even think she would be happy for them was bizarre. Pagne ran from the apartment and didn't stop until she reached the schoolyard trees. As she ran out the door, her mother's words swam in her head ... "Don't worry, darling, she'll adjust. After all, it's about my happiness right now."

Pagne fell to the ground. She was not crying, because there were no tears left. She just felt numb. It was interesting, she barely smelled her angel, almost as if the angel was testing her to see if she was welcome. "Hello, Angel. I really do need to give you a proper name if we're going to keep this up. How about Angelica? Nah, that's too corny. You're a tough angel right? Cause I certainly needed a tough one. How about Chantal. That's pretty and strong. Okay, Chantal, you have my permission to enter my space." The smell flooded in. Pagne arched her back, breathing Chantal's glorious aroma deep into her lungs. Pagne felt calm and so full of love. How did this creature she couldn't see face to face fill her with such love? Now Pagne had a plan, she had choices!

"God, I don't know if these are the right words, but I can't do this alone. My angel helps me, I know, but I need everyone I can get to make it through this life. I need you, God. I accept your son, Jesus into my heart. Oh yeah, think I'm supposed to ask you to forgive all my sins. Okay, hope that does it. Not sure what I do next, but maybe the angel can give me a clue." she whispered. Pagne didn't realize how powerful her words were, from her mouth to God's ear. She was not alone, nor had she ever been alone.

Pagne waited until dark to return home. Not really home, she reminded herself, but a dwelling. Yes, that suited it much better. Pagne quietly went in, hoping to be unnoticed. Her mother, sitting on Adam's lap, turned a drunken glare at her. "Go ahead and sleep in my room tonight," she said. "Adam and I will be up late celebrating our engagement, and we don't need you around spoiling the mood." Pagne was relieved and slipped past them to the only bedroom. She couldn't help but notice the half-empty bottles of champagne and Jack Daniels sitting on the coffee table. *Guess he broke down for this one night of celebration*, she thought sarcastically.

Pagne was in a deep sleep, dreaming of her and Lenny flying through the clouds. She sniffed all the angels that whipped past them, trying to find her angel. "That's her," Pagne shouted. The closer they got to the angel, the stronger the scent was. Suddenly, it became overpowering, and nauseating. Pagne's eyes flew open. There in the doorway, stood the silhouette of Adam. She couldn't see his face, but could hear him licking his lips. "You awake Pagne?" She said nothing. "Ahhh Pagne, I see your eyes are open." *The light from the kitchen was shining in her face*, she realized. "That's okay, baby, just heading out, but I wanted to tell you how happy I'm gonna be when I'm your daddy. You're developing quite nicely, you have a very cute, little figure. Figure I can get past

those scars, especially in the dark. I'm looking forward to finishing what we started!" With that, Adam turned around and staggered out of the apartment. Pagne ran to the front door to lock it behind him and saw her mother, almost naked, sprawled on the living room floor. Her mouth wide open, drooling while she snored loudly. Pagne looked down at Leah and felt utter disgust for her mother, and then spat on her. She went back to the room and braced a chair under the knob since there was no lock.

Pagne left early the next morning, before her mother was even awake. She ran all the way to school and waited for Lenny to get there. He finally showed up, very early too. His face was red and puffy on one side. Pagne looked at him and touched his cheek. "What happened?" she asked with concern.

"Oh, just tripped in my room, landed on my face. I know, a real klutz." Pagne almost challenged this lame excuse, but knew Lenny was not ready to talk.

"Oh Lenny, it's happening. They are getting married." Pagne repeated all the gory details starting from the blast of smell at the door, the ring in her face, the flying dream, and Adam in her doorway. She didn't tell him about spitting on her mom; Pagne didn't want him to see that side of her.

"I'm so sorry! What are you going to do?"

"I know a lady at Langston Hall I trust, Miss Renee. I'm going to cut afternoon classes and take the bus crosstown and see if I can talk to her."

"Want me to go with?" he asked. After the emotional display Lenny had yesterday and the bruised face this morning, Pagne thought it would be a good idea. In fact she had hoped he would offer to come. She played helpless and said, "If you would come, I would be so grateful, I've never taken the crosstown bus alone before," and then she batted her eyes.

"You're a goof, Pagne. You don't have to play me to get me to go." They agreed to meet at lunch break and slip off the school grounds. Pagne had gone through her mom's purse before she left and had found enough to pay for both of their fares. She was prepared in case Lenny would go with her.

It was a stealth operation. They met at the designated time and place. They nonchalantly walked to the trees that lined the edge of the schoolyard. Lenny had enough change on him to get two bags of chips for their lunches. They were starving because they both left home without eating breakfast. They watched the kids run and play, then slowly head back to the school entrance. Lenny and Pagne didn't speak the whole time, almost as if they would be invisible if they didn't make any noise. Once the final school bell rang, they casually strolled off the grounds. Once they were out of view, ran to the closest bus stop. They jumped on the bus, panting and feeling very adventurous.

"That was easier than I thought!" Lenny proclaimed.

"Yeah, we're regular super-spies, we are." They both laughed.

"How are we going to explain not being in class this afternoon?"

Lenny asked.

"Don't know yet. I have to think about that on the way home."

When they reached Langston Hall, Pagne was feeling a little nervous. She wasn't sure what she would say, or what Miss Renee could really do for her. Pagne went up to the main entrance and stepped into the lobby. Lenny was a few steps behind her. The secretary slid the glass window open and spoke, "Good Afternoon dear, how can I help you?" Pagne didn't recognize her.

"I would like to speak with Miss Renee, please. Can you tell her that Pagne is here?"

"Well, I would, but Miss Renee no longer works here." She started to slide the glass window closed. Pagne put her hand in before it shut. "Please," she said, "Can you tell me how to find her? It is very important."

"Of course, dear, I should have one of her cards." After a few minutes of the sound created by shuffling papers, Pagne heard, "Here it is." The receptionist handed Pagne the card.

"Thank you, very much," Pagne said. Then they stepped outside. Pagne looked at the card, and read: Miss Renee Landor, Court Appointed Special Advocate for Children. She was familiar with the address on the card. "Her office is close to the courthouse," Pagne explained to Lenny.

"How far is the courthouse from here? Can we walk?"

"Oh sure, it's only about five blocks." They headed in the direction of the courthouse.

When they found the building, Lenny explained that Suite 300 on the address meant she was on the third floor. They took the elevator and came out to the landing, and just in front of them was Miss Renee's office. Her name was on a metal plate on the door. Pagne tried the door, but it was locked. She felt a dive in her stomach. "Oh no, she's not here," whispered Pagne.

"Well, let's try knocking," Lenny suggested. They both tapped the door and waited, but they heard no one inside. "Let's wait for a while. Maybe she will be back." They both quietly sat with their backs to the wall. Pagne felt her hope slipping. *This was a bad idea. They would both be in trouble for cutting school. Her mom would just yell, but Lenny might get it much worse.* They waited an hour.

"Lenny, we better head back. We're going to be in a lot of trouble as it is, and the ride home will get us back even later." As they got up to leave, the elevator bell rang and the doors opened. There was Miss Renee, searching her bag for her keys. "How could I forget those papers? I am such an idiot," she muttered to herself. She almost ran into Pagne and Lenny. "Oh my goodness, I'm sorry" ... then came recognition. "Pagne? Pagne is that really you?"

"Yes Miss Renee and I need your help." Miss Renee motioned for them to follow her while she found her keys and unlocked the door.

"Please, come in." She flipped on the light and moved around to her chair

behind the desk. This had to be the smallest office Pagne had ever seen. There was room for a small desk, a small book case, and two small chairs in front of the desk. The room had no windows. "Welcome to my closet," she said as she twirled around with her arms out, like someone displaying a grand room.

"How long has it been Pagne? I almost didn't recognize you, you've grown up so much." Miss Renee settled in to her chair and motioned for them to sit down. "Who is your friend?," she asked.

"Oh I'm so sorry, this is my best friend, Lenny." Lenny reached out to shake her hand with flushed cheeks. *Wow, her best friend*, Lenny glowed.

"So nice to meet you, Lenny." Miss Renee then focused on Pagne, "How have you been, dear? I heard that you were hurt in a fire and that you have been living with your mom."

"Yeah, I messed up my good arm and shoulder, but we all got out alive."

"I'm so sorry, Pagne, I know burns can be very difficult to treat." Miss Renee could not help but cringe when she saw the scarring on Pagne's exposed lower arm.

"I wanted to find you to see if you could tell me what my rights are. The lady at Langston Hall said you weren't there any more and gave me your card. Back with my mom has been okay, but I just found out that she is going to marry Adam." Pagne went into the details and her fears. After Pagne finished, she felt as if some of the burden had lifted off of her.

"Well, Pagne, this is quite odd that you would come looking for me now. After knowing you and seeing the struggles you and other children were having, I wanted to be able to do more for kids like you. I left Langston Hall and started training to become a children's advocate. I just recently opened this office. I would love to help you. Let me contact your social worker and get your current details. This will take me a little while, but your mother will not be notified of my investigation until we have a plan worked out. Okay? Can you hang in there for a little while longer?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"I also need Adam's full name. I want to run a criminal check to see if he has any prior charges that can be used in our arguments. Please fill this out so that I have all your current information," as Miss Renee set a piece of paper in front of Pagne.

After Pagne finished the form, she and Lenny stood up to leave. Miss Renee walked them out of her miniature office. While waiting for the elevator, Miss Renee hugged Pagne and whispered in her ear, assuring her everything would be fine. She shook Lenny's hand and told him how nice he was to help Pagne, and that she was a very special young lady. Lenny agreed. She gave Lenny one of her cards and told him that if she could ever be of help, he should not hesitate to call her. She then lightly touched his swollen cheek. She sensed that this young man had secrets he was not ready to share.

Pagne and Lenny made a mad dash for the bus stop. It was almost four thirty and Pagne knew that her mom would either blow up or not even notice she was late. She could tell Lenny was very nervous, but he pretended that he was fine. Lenny's stop was first. He held Pagne's hand for several seconds, just gazing into her eyes, and then he bolted out the door. When Pagne reached her stop, she began a frantic prayer, as she got off the bus. She walked the three blocks to her apartment. When she got home, no one was there. *Ahhhhhhhhh, such a relief*, the thought, but there was a note on the refrigerator:

OUT WITH ADAM, WILL BE LATE
SCHOOL CALLED
YOU GOT SOME EXPLAINING TO DO
MOM

Crap, thought Pagne. She thought she would have till tomorrow before she had to explain cutting school.

Pagne wasn't sure where she should sleep that night. She didn't want to make her mom even more upset by being in the bedroom, but she didn't want to be in the open livingroom, asleep, when they came back. She would feel vulnerable if Adam came in with her mom. Pagne decided to pull the couch away from the wall and make room to curl up without being seen. Pagne wrapped her blanket around her and squeezed into her cave. She quickly slipped into deep, fitful sleep.

The next morning, she woke up to snoring, loud snoring. She slipped out and it was clear. She tiptoed to the bedroom door and heard two distinct snore patterns. Pagne guessed that Adam and her mother came in so drunk, that they passed out with no regard for where Pagne was. She quietly got cleaned up and dressed for school. She was grabbing a toaster pastry and thought she was going to make a clean getaway, but when she turned around to leave, there stood her mom. She looked terrible: eye makeup smeared, bed hair to the worst degree, and huge bags under her eyes. Pagne had to think quick.

"Hey mom, you need a Bloody Mary?" This was her mom's self-treatment for a bad hangover. "I can make you one," Pagne offered.

"I do need one, but don't think you can butter me up. The school left a message, and I wanna know why you cut school yesterday? You off laying with the boys? We don't have any room for another bastard kid here," Leah explained with total disgust. Pagne wanted to scream at her, and remind her that she was not like her, but she held her tongue.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong, I got really bad cramps, and I knew the nurse couldn't give me anything. I came home and took some medicine at lunch. I laid down with the heating pad and fell asleep."

"Sounds like crap to me Pagne. You weren't here when I got home from

work. Adam wanted to take us both out for Chinese," Leah challenged. Pagne got the sense that her mother thought missing Chinese with her and Adam was supposed to disappoint her.

"I woke up about four o'clock and was feeling better, so I went to the library to work on my history report." Pagne was hoping Leah would want that Bloody Mary more than explanations. The lies were getting thick, and she was afraid she'd slip up. Leah never bothered with Pagne's homework, so she had no clue what Pagne was supposed to be doing. Her mom looked at her for a few seconds.

"I think you're lying to me, Pagne, but I guess I don't have to worry about no boy knocking you up with all the scars you got. Make me a drink and then get to school. I'm not writing you a note for this, it's your problem." Pagne made the Bloody Mary and headed for the door. Pagne escaped and felt exhilarated because she managed to slip through the minefield without blowing up. She hoped that Lenny fared as well.

Pagne decided that her story would work for the school too. They warned her and threatened detention if it happened again, but they cut her some slack because she was a good student and was always in class. Pagne watched for Lenny all morning. He wasn't in their science class. She didn't know exactly where he lived or his phone number. She was worried sick but couldn't check on him. She ate lunch alone, picking at the free food she qualified for. By the time PE started, and no Lenny, Pagne was frantic. The gym teacher kept yelling at her to get her head into the game. Pagne just couldn't focus on softball.

After school, Pagne ran to their spot, the cluster of trees. She saw someone sitting on the ground with his head on his knees. It was Lenny. Pagne ran to him. "Lenny, where were you today, I imagined all kinds of terrible things." As she was standing in front of him, Lenny slowly looked up. His face was terribly beat up. He had a huge, swollen eye that was gashed and clotted with blood, a busted lip, and several chunks of hair missing. "Oh Lenny," Pagne dropped to her knees and sobbed uncontrollably.

"I'm okay," he said without any conviction. "I didn't know the school would call my mom so quick. Dad was waiting for me. He had a lot of time to get worked up." Pagne moved to his side and tried to hold him, but he grimaced. "Careful, Pagne. I think I might have some broken ribs."

"When did this happen?"

"Last night. I got out of the house and hid behind some dumpsters. Guess I finally fell asleep. I came here when I woke up."

"Lenny, we gotta call Miss Renee. Your dad can't do this and get away with it."

"No," Lenny said. "They will take me away, and then I won't be here for you."

Pagne got very brave in those next few moments. "Lenny, if you are dead

or in the hospital, you won't be here for me either. I need you alive and safe. I will be fine, but we have to get you help. Please let me call her." Lenny was lost in those pleading eyes of hers, and he knew how close he came to dying this time. If the neighbors hadn't banged on the door until his mom opened it, he wouldn't have been able to get away.

"Okay," he agreed.

Lenny was too embarrassed to walk into the school office, so Pagne helped him to the nearest public phone. When they reached Miss Renee, she insisted that they call 911 immediately, and she would meet them at the hospital emergency. When the police arrived, they asked a few questions and rushed them to the local county hospital. Miss Renee was already there. The nurses took Lenny right into an exam room, and Pagne waited outside with Miss Renee. They examined Lenny, took xrays and got him started on pain medications. By the time Pagne was able to see him, he was already getting his color back and looking like himself, except for the swollen half of his face. She moved one of the chairs up by his head and held his hand. Lenny assured her he was going to live and was feeling better.

Miss Renee came in with the doctor and he listed Lenny's injuries. Along with his stitches for his eye and face, Lenny had three broken ribs, a cracked jaw, several fractures in his hand that had made contact with Leonard's face, damaged spleen that would need to be removed and multiple deep tissue bruises. Pagne thought this man was truly a monster to beat his son so viciously. Lenny could be hospitalized for five to seven days.

The police had picked up Lenny's dad. The neighbors agreed to come forward as witnesses and his father still had Lenny's blood on his knuckles and clothing. He was screwed. Lenny had managed to give him a black eye and he was missing his two front teeth. Leonard tested positive for meth and the police also found meth amphetamines in the apartment. He was looking at serious charges and Pagne hoped they would let him rot in jail.

Pagne stayed by Lenny's side everyday after school until almost dark. Leah didn't argue because she and Adam were focused on themselves. On the second day of his hospital stay, Lenny's mom walked into his room and froze. Seeing the amount of damage in the bright lights must have shocked her. Pagne could see the tears welling up in her eyes. "Oh Lenny, my baby, I'm so sorry your father hurt you." She moved to the side of Lenny's bed and reached for his hand. He pulled it away and turned his face toward Pagne.

"Want me to leave?" Pagne asked.

"No, please stay," he said with a tone she had not heard before.

"Lenny, I know you're mad, honey. I should have protected you. I didn't know he would hurt you so bad." The tears started to roll down her cheeks.

"Mom, where were you yesterday? Why weren't you here?"

She didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"Well, you know he is my husband." She paused for a few moments, "I was trying to find a lawyer for him and to see if we could make bail. They said he has to stay in jail until his court date."

Lenny closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. When he opened them, he looked up at the ceiling. He began to speak so coldly, rage just under the surface. "Mom, thank you for giving birth to me, but you've never been a mother. I want you to get out. I don't want to see you ever again."

"No, Lenny. Please. I love you," she wailed. "You can't leave me all alone!" Several nurses came in and escorted his mother out, explaining that the stress was very harmful for Lenny, and things would be sorted out, but not today, not in his room. They could hear his mother's sobs fade as she was taken away.

Lenny squeezed Pagne's hand. "Thank you for staying. I needed your strength and both of our angels," he said. "Think I could have a little time alone?"

Pagne leaned over, hesitated a moment, then lightly kissed him on the forehead. "I'll be back tomorrow morning. It's Saturday." Lenny nodded, as his eyes filled with tears. As Pagne walked out of his room, she began to pray that his heart would be able to bear the pain. She thought she caught a faint whiff of her angel. "Please stay with him right now," she asked. "He needs you more than I do." Pagne left the hospital to face her own nightmares.

When Pagne returned to the hospital Saturday morning, Miss Renee was in Lenny's room. He seemed to be dealing okay with his mom and the process that would be taking place when he was ready to leave the hospital. His first stop would be Langston Hall. They were considering foster-care or possibly a group-home. After Lenny had all of his questions answered, Pagne and Miss Renee went down to the cafeteria to discuss her case. Lenny told Pagne not to be gone too long. He missed her, and the good cartoons were coming on. Pagne just rolled her eyes.

Miss Renee got a coffee and an orange juice for Pagne. They sat down, and Miss Renee pulled out Pagne's file. "Well," Miss Renee started, "I'm surprised. No criminal charges have come up on Adam. He's had a few tickets, several divorces, but nothing we can use. Your mother did fulfill all the court's requirements and isn't in violation. At this time, I'm not sure that we have a legal grounds to remove you."

"Can't I just say that I don't want to be there?"

"They will certainly listen, but "

"I know, It is a decision made by adults."

"I'm sorry, Pagne. You know that if Adam or your mother are abusive, that we will move on it quickly."

"Why did I get her as a mother? What did I do so wrong?"

"Nothing sweetheart, it's not you. Your mother is broken."

"Yeah, but does that give her the right to break me?" Renee so wished she

had an answer that made sense.

Pagne went up to Lenny's room. He was laughing at the silly cartoons. This was the first time Pagne had heard him laugh since the beating. He asked her how things were going with Miss Renee. "Fine, will take some time, but fine." She didn't want to pile any more on him right now, he had more than he should deal with already. She focused on the cartoons and forced herself to laugh with him.

Pagne knew that only God could help her and she prayed at every opportunity. She so wanted to smell her angel. Where was she?

Pagne left Lenny's room Sunday evening to head home. She was later than usual. When Pagne opened the front door, the apartment was dark and she thought no one was home. She walked in and switched on a light. She saw her mother sitting at the table. Her mother whispered, "Turn it off." Pagne turned off the light and shut the door. Pagne was nervous, her mother never sat in the dark. She was afraid of the dark.

"What's going on Mom?" she asked.

"Well, where do I start? Oh yeah, got a letter today, the lawyer says we don't have a case for your burns. He said that all of you kids knew she was forgetful, and you covered for her. That puts an equal amount of burden back on you and off the county. So nothing, zip. Luckily, the county covered the medical bills." Pagne just sat quietly, not knowing what to say, waiting to see if her mother was going to explode. Maybe she would end up in the hospital next to Lenny. She knew her mother had big plans for the money and thought everything would be wonderful when the county paid up. "So, I'm real angry and call Adam to vent, thinking he'll step up and say that we don't need it. He makes enough to take care of us". Pagne was confused by the calmness in her mother's voice. It was haunting, like she was telling a story about someone else. Leah was also sober, this confused Pagne.

"Adam then tells me that he doesn't have a job. He lost it month's ago. He's been living on his credit cards. He saw us in the paper when you got burned. He read that I was suing the county, then he just had to find out where I worked and happen to come in. Chance meeting and all that crap. He was counting on our settlement to get him square again. He was only marrying me to get his share. He told me that I'm a dried-up, old woman, and he has to be drunk just to look at me or touch me." Then the calm broke. Leah began crying so profoundly that Pagne's eyes were tearing up.

"Oh, Mom. I'm so sorry." She really was, her mother's pain was so intense that it engulfed the room.

"Well, he's worthless and we're better off!" Leah yelled. But Pagne could tell these were just words. "Go to bed now, it will be better in the morning," Leah assured her. Pagne moved toward the bedroom doorway. "Oh yeah," Leah continued, "I told him I wouldn't give him back the ring, and

he laughed. He said it was the cheapest thing he could find at the pawnshop, eighteen ninety-nine. Ain't that a hoot? I might head out for a while, but I'll be back before morning. Go ahead and sleep in the bed. I changed the sheets, didn't want any of that man's stink left."

Pagne didn't know whether to comfort her mom or just go to bed. They had never been affectionate, so she quickly got ready for bed and fitfully slept. She tossed back and forth while dreaming, nightmares really. Lenny's dad showing up in Lenny's room, blood flowing, diamond rings shattering when hurled on the floor, and tears in the dark. When Pagne woke up, the sky was cloudy and it looked like it was going to rain. She laid in bed, trying to remember what day it was. She dozed off and when she woke again, the rain had started. She could hear the drops hitting her window. Then, there it was, the scent of her angel, mixed in with the smell of rain. "Hello" Pagne cooed with a silly smile on her face.

Then she heard her whisper, "You will endure." Pagne jumped up, knowing that something was terribly wrong.

Her mother was not in the apartment. There were no notes or messages on the phone. Pagne didn't know where her mom had gone. She decided Leah had passed out somewhere and was sleeping it off. Pagne realized that it was Monday, so she got ready for school and left. Why did the angel tell her she would endure? It haunted her all day. Pagne went by the hospital after school but only stayed a few hours, because she was actually worried about her mom. When she got home, the apartment was exactly as she left it, and there was no sign that her mother had been home. She called Leah's job to see if she was at work. The owner answered and was very agitated that Leah had not come in and hadn't called.

Pagne knew that her mom could party for days without checking on her, but she hadn't missed work since she got the job. It was the only thing that made her feel good about herself. Pagne wasn't sure what to do, and she knew if she called Miss Renee or the police, she would be removed and taken to Langston Hall. Pagne wouldn't be able to spend the afternoons with Lenny, and that just wasn't an option. He only had a few more days before he was released, and she was all he had. Pagne locked herself in the apartment and decided to give her mother some time.

Several more days came and went. Lenny was being moved to Langston Hall the next morning. Leah still had not come home and all her clothes and personal items were still in the apartment. Pagne checked her job again, but she was told the Leah didn't work there any more.

Pagne went to school as usual and in her third period, she was called to the principal's office. When she stepped in, she saw two police officers. "Hello Pagne," one officer said. "We need to know when the last time you saw your mother was?" Pagne debated about lying but realized in her gut that something

was wrong or they wouldn't be here.

"Five days ago," she admitted.

The principal looked very upset. "Have you been alone all that time?" he asked.

"Yes sir, except when I was in school or visiting my friend in the hospital. Have you found my mother?"

The second officer led Pagne to a chair, "Please sit down," he instructed. Pagne knew that in the movies when someone had died they told you to sit down.

"Is she dead?" Pagne blurted. Tears were welling up in her blue eyes, making them bluer than normal. Pagne was surprised at her reaction to the possibility that her mother could be dead.

"No, honey. She's alive. She was found in an alley, and the police brought her to the hospital. Does your mom drink a lot?" Pagne nodded her head. "Well, she got very sick from all the alcohol in her body. The doctors are taking care of her, and she will get better. She isn't making a lot of sense right now, and we don't think you should see her yet. We are going to take you by your apartment and let you get some things. You've stayed at Langston Hall before, right?"

"Yes, a few years ago."

"So nothing scary, just a safe place to stay for a little while until we can figure things out," the officer said gently.

Pagne was able to pack up her few belongings. Then the officers took her to the hall and Miss Renee was waiting for her. Pagne was so relieved to see a face that she trusted. "Hello Pagne, I'm quite upset with you that you didn't call me when your mother took off."

"I couldn't leave Lenny alone Miss Renee. I didn't mean to do anything wrong, I thought my mom would come back any day."

"I know, but you being alone in the apartment all that time was not safe."

"I'm sorry," said Pagne quietly, even though she was not.

"Let's get you settled in. I don't know much about what happened with your mom except that she was very sick, but she is doing much better. She is sleeping a lot and doesn't want any visitors. Can you tell me what happened?" Pagne shared the events with Miss Renee.

"Lenny doesn't know I'm here. If I don't show up after school, he will be really worried."

"I'll call him and let him know where you are. You okay here?" asked Miss Renee.

"Yes, I'll be fine."

"I have to leave, but I'll keep in touch and let you know when I have news about your mom."

"Thank you, Miss Renee," Pagne paused, "I love you." Miss Renee looked into this lovely face and knew that this is what she was born to do. "I love you

too, Pagne."

Pagne was taken to her dorm room so she could get settled in before dinner. She waited to get an update on her mother before she went to bed. Miss Renee called, and explained that Leah was doing well and they thought she would be released by Tuesday of next week. The doctors were testing her for liver damage and other complications common with excessive drinking and alcohol poisoning. Leah still insisted on no visitors and Pagne was hurt, but relieved at the same time. She found it difficult to sleep. She would see Lenny tomorrow and that was great, but added to her insomnia.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. The word "Chapter" is written in a cursive font, and the number "5" is in a large, bold, serif font. They are surrounded by intricate, swirling floral and vine-like patterns in a light gray color.

Chapter 5

Pagne woke up early and took extra time to fix her hair and select her outfit. She wanted to look her best when she saw Lenny. The morning dragged. She had breakfast; met with her social worker to discuss her situation. Just as she guessed, the court would determine her fate once her mother was stable and could appear before the judge. The limbo would normally drive her mad, but waiting for Lenny overrode anything else in her head. Why wasn't he here yet? She prayed that there were no problems leaving the hospital and that he was fine. She prayed that he wasn't going to another facility that she was unaware of or that his mother had figured out a way to take him home with her. All these concerns melted away when she saw him coming into the cafeteria at lunch. Pagne couldn't contain her squeal of delight. He was beautiful, still swollen and purple in spots, but beautiful. His head was shaved very close. When Lenny heard Pagne, he looked embarrassed and thrilled at the same time. They ran to each other and held one another. After a few minutes, they realized that everyone was staring at them and giggling. They broke away quickly and said hello in unnatural voices.

Pagne led Lenny over to her table. "How are you feeling? Get your room assignment yet? Are you hungry? What do you think of the place?" So many questions bubbled up. Lenny was grinning at her.

"Slow down Pagne," he said. "To answer your questions, I feel like crap, yes, no and if you're here and my family isn't, it's great." Pagne started to laugh, but the seriousness of his last answer brought her back to why he was here. She kissed her fingertip and touched it to his lips. He closed his eyes until she pulled her finger away.

"One last question ... why did you shave your head? I love your hair."

"Well, I don't think having chunks of scalp showing is the latest rage, although I'm cute enough, it might have caught on." Pagne rolled her eyes at him. "Figured I'd let it all grow in together. It should grow quick, ya think?" Pagne ran her hand over his short stubbles,

"I don't know, Lenny, it's kinda growing on me." Pagne then felt embarrassed by the physical contact and pulled her hand away. "If you're not going to eat, come with me." She jumped up and led him out of the cafeteria doors to the yard area, over to her tree. "This is the tree I told you about." She climbed up onto the sweeping branch and motioned for Lenny to follow her. She didn't move up any higher. Pagne didn't know how sore he still was. Lenny pulled himself up without too much pain, but they stayed on the bottom branch. Lenny looked up into the heart of the tree.

"Pagne, this is incredible. I can see why you would love this tree. Maybe in a few days, I can climb higher."

"No rush," Pagne soothed. "This tree has been here a long time and it isn't going anywhere. Each limb can be a step up every day." Lenny grinned at her. "I like the sound of that."

The next few days were wonderful. She couldn't see Lenny as much as she wanted, but they cherished the time they had. Each day, Lenny would go up another branch to their tree sitting. They would lay along the thick, woody arms and daydream about life and their futures. Pagne was comforted in the fact that she was always a part of Lenny's plans, and he was part of hers. While in the tree, Pagne heard her name being called. Sounded like Miss Renee.

Pagne yelled down, "Yes?"

"There you are. This is such a great tree," Miss Renee said, as she stood under them, looking into the canopy of branches and leaves. "I wish I had my jeans on, I'd join you up there." Then a long pause. "Pagne, I have some news, Mr. Phillips is waiting for us in his office." Pagne slowly climbed down while looking at Lenny's scared face. "She won't be long Lenny. You okay up there by yourself?"

"Sure, Miss Renee. I'm feeling pretty much back to normal."

"Wonderful, Lenny. I'll send her right back."

"Okay" he whispered.

Pagne was silent as they walked to the front office. Miss Renee seemed to want to be quiet too, so they continued on without a word.

"Hello again, Pagne," Mr. Phillips said, as he motioned for her to sit. Miss Renee pulled up a second chair next to her. They both faced Mr. Phillips, as he sat behind his desk. "Pagne, we brought you in here today to discuss your case and what we think is the best plan. Miss Renee will give you the update on your mother and the court's position."

Miss Renee turned toward Pagne and laid her hand on Pagne's knee. "Things are a little complicated Pagne. Your mother was feeling much better

and left the hospital last night, without letting anyone know. They found her bed empty on the early morning check and notified the police. The police went by your apartment and all of her things are gone. We have no idea where she is and what little she had in the bank was withdrawn early this morning. They did find this note on the kitchen table."

CHAMPAGNE
I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME.
MOM

Pagne didn't know what to say. *Why would she call her by her full name? Why didn't she say more? Why couldn't she say Love, Mom?* Pagne brought the note to her nose, thinking maybe the note would smell like her mother. Instead, she could smell a faint scent of her angel. She cried while Miss Renee held her and assured her she would get through this. Mr. Phillips left the room to give them some privacy. Through her sobs, she asked Miss Renee what this would mean for her. Where would she go? Miss Renee told her that she would stay here until the courts could confirm and declare abandonment. Once the legal issues were resolved, she would be placed into a foster-home. Miss Renee assured her that she had a wonderful home in mind for her and that she would be safe. It was here in town, and she could stay at her school. Pagne dreaded to ask, but she had to know. "Will Lenny stay close by if he goes into a foster-home?" Miss Renee looked into those hurting eyes and put a hand on each cheek. "I will do everything possible to keep him close Pagne. I know how much you both need each other." Pagne hugged her and asked if she could go back to the tree. *Back to Lenny* she thought.

"Sure, hon, we'll talk soon."

Pagne ran to the tree, praying that Lenny hadn't left and he hadn't. He saw her face and knew that she would share when she could. For now, they just laid in the branches, watching the light flitter through the leaves. Lenny reached over and intertwined his fingers in hers. "Always, Pagne. Always," he uttered, almost soundlessly. She closed her eyes and thanked God for Lenny.

It had been two weeks since Pagne's mother left the hospital, and there had been no word from her. They did a search to see if any family could be located, but there was no one. The judge finally declared abandonment as cause to give the county guardianship over Pagne. Miss Renee came into Pagne's room early one morning. "There is an opening at the foster-home I told you about. I'd like to move you in there tomorrow. This is a special family Pagne. I believe you could be there a long time."

"You're sure I can stay at my school?"

"Yes, same class, same teachers. We worked it out with your principal. They

are excited to have you back." Pagne missed her friends and teachers.

"Have any decisions been made for Lenny?"

"Not yet, we're waiting for a local family to have an opening. Lenny can stay here till we can work something out."

Pagne met up with Lenny and headed out to the tree. "I saw Miss Renee earlier. Did she come to see you?" asked Lenny.

"Yes, the home she's been waiting for has an open bed. I'll be leaving tomorrow at noon."

"You're sure you can come visit?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, Miss Renee promised. I will come as much as I can. We can talk on the phone too," Pagne added with encouragement.

"That will be great." Lenny responded with very little enthusiasm. "My mom keeps requesting visitation," Lenny threw in from left field.

"Think you might agree to see her?" asked Pagne gently.

"Nah, too much has happened. She made her choice and it wasn't me."

They heard the call for dinner and scrambled out of the tree. Tonight was pizza night and they didn't want to be last in line.

Pagne had mixed emotions of excitement and trepidation. She didn't want to leave Lenny, but she knew he could leave Langston Hall at any time. If she stayed, she could be without Lenny and miss out on this home. She trusted Miss Renee when she said it was the perfect place for her. Pagne packed up all her belongings. Lenny had given her one of his tshirts so she could smell him while they were apart. He also gave her a notebook full of his poems and stories. He had written many just for her. She treasured this book more than anything she owned. Miss Renee was ready to leave, so they traveled the twenty miles to Pagne's new home. Miss Renee was filling Pagne in on the dynamics of the house. The family consisted of a father and mother, a nine year old son and another teen girl that just turned fourteen, a year older than Pagne. They also had twin babies that were going through heroin withdrawal. Their mother was currently in a rehabilitation program, and since she was doing so well, the twins would be returned to her in a few months. Pagne had never been around babies and thought that it would be fun.

When they pulled up to the house, Pagne was surprised to see that it was a newer home and in a nice neighborhood. They walked up to the porch and rang the bell. A woman in her mid-thirties, not beautiful, but very striking, opened the door. Her name was Pam Masters and she had bright amber eyes and deep raven black hair. "Hello Pagne, that is what you like to be called right?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Pagne will be just fine."

"Well, Pagne, please come in. I'm really happy to meet you."

Pagne and Miss Renee stepped in. The livingroom was simply decorated, but it was warm and inviting. There wasn't a lot of clutter or knick knacks like at Grandma's house. They took a seat on the couch. Pagne knew the drill, Miss

she thought. *Could it be?* She hadn't noticed any pictures while in the room. The screaming got louder as they reached the twins room. Pagne's heart melted when she saw the tear streaked faces of Matt and Mattie standing in their cribs. "They are adorable," she cooed. Matt and Mattie were cookie cutters of each other. Mattie, just had a girlie look that Matt thankfully didn't have. They both had golden brown eyes and black hair that fell in glorious curls. They were a healthy chubby, but not fat. "How old are they?" Pagne asked.

"Well, they were ten months last week." Pagne looked around the room. There were bold crayon colors everywhere. One wall was a hand-painted mural of a adorable bear standing on a tree stump, holding onto another bear that was drifting up with a balloon tied to his tail. Clouds on blue sky filled the rest of the wall. "We got them when they were a month old. They were hospitalized for the first month due to the drugs in their systems. I am trained to work with babies born with drug complications. It is a difficult first year for them. They go through withdrawals and have other issues we try to work through," said Mrs. Masters.

"How long do you keep them?"

"That depends. If the mom can get herself clean and functioning, the court tries to reunite them. If the mother does not complete everything required by the courts in a set timeframe, the babies are available for adoption. They don't want these little guys caught up in the system for very long. They need extra love and attention."

"Isn't it hard to give them back," Pagne asked.

"Yes, very. But what we do is really important. It isn't about us, it's about helping these babies to have a safe, loving environment that will give them a great chance at life. It is wonderful when you see a baby reunited with a mother who has worked hard to get her life back on track. Our son, Richie, he's nine, wasn't so lucky. His mother wasn't able to stop drinking and died from alcohol poisoning when he was just over a year. He knows we aren't his biological parents, but he knows we couldn't love him any more if we were. He was permanently affected by the alcohol his mother used while she was pregnant, and we knew it would be difficult to find an adoptive family for him. We adored him so much and decided to adopt him ourselves. He has been such a blessing. I hope that you will be patient with him. He has issues with remembering, so we have to remind him of important things. Richie also has difficulties with controlling his impulses and judgment. It can be hard at times, but we have to remember that Richie doesn't make mistakes on purpose."

"I understand," assured Pagne. "My mom drank when she was pregnant with me, and they think that's why school has always been a challenge for me."

"Oh, hon, I'm so sorry you have that burden. I think you might be very good for Richie. He is very bright but he gets so frustrated. He knows that he isn't like the rest of the kids his age. Here at home, we use the K.I.S.S. approach

with Richie. Keep It Simple Sweetie. Richie responds much better if we use few words and only one instruction at a time. We may have to remind him several times. We can ask him to go pick up his room, and he will make it to his room but then forget why he went in. We'll find him rearranging his socks."

Some things were beginning to make sense to Pagne. She had always needed to make notes, and used a checklist when she had a lot of things to do. Especially in school.

"Richie is getting a lot of help at his school. They have some special classes for kids that struggle like Richie."

Pagne was looking forward to meeting Richie. And Bree, she wanted to ask about Bree. "Mrs. Masters?" Pagne said, not sure what she should call her. "I knew a girl at the children's home a few years ago named Bree. I'm wondering if she could be your Bree?"

"What was her last name? Bree is a very popular name."

"We were pretty little, I don't think I ever knew. Her family died in a crash."

"Could be, but why don't you ask her yourself? She just came in the front door. Bree!" Mrs. Masters yelled, "we're in the twin's room." Mrs. Masters lifted Mattie out of the crib. "Gotta change these wet diapers." Pagne heard someone running up the stairs and as Pagne stepped into the hall, she saw her Bree. They both squealed and grabbed each other laughing.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. The word "Chapter" is written in a cursive font above a large, bold number "6". The entire title is enclosed within a circular frame that features intricate, swirling floral and vine-like patterns extending outwards. Small leaves and dots are scattered along these decorative swirls.

Chapter 6

"It is you!" Pagne said breathlessly.

"Oh my gosh, Pagne, I knew a new girl was coming, but I never imagined it was you."

"This is wonderful," Mrs. Masters yelled out. "But you girls can catch up in a minute ... Matt is trying to climb out of the crib and I'm up to my elbows in baby poop." Everyone started laughing and Bree ran in the room to grab Matt. As Pagne came back into the room, she saw a loving family. Bree was throwing Matt into the air while he giggled and grabbed her long blonde hair. Mrs. Masters was patiently redressing a wiggling Mattie. Pagne wanted to be part of this family so badly, but she was scared to assume they would feel the same. After all they already had each other. Maybe they only had an empty bed to fill, but the space in their hearts was all used up.

Bree, whirled around and saw Pagne standing there with a look of longing on her face; a look Bree knew all too well. "Hey Pagne, wanna hold him?"

"Let me give her Mattie, so I can change Matt, I'm sure he is soaking wet," said Mrs. Masters.

"Yeah," said Bree, as she sniffed Matt's behind, "and he stinks too!" "Ewwww Matt," teased Bree, "you sure can dump a stinky load." As Mrs. Masters handed Mattie to Pagne, she groaned. "Bree, you lucked out this time. Give Pagne the rest of the tour, but you get poopie duty next time."

"Okay, Mom," Bree cooed. She shook her head at Pagne and twisted her face into a grimace.

Bree, Pagne and Mattie moved into the hall and began the tour. "Have you seen our room yet?" asked Bree.

"Oh yes, it is awesome! I love everything about it. I haven't put anything

away yet."

"Did you see the closet?" Pagne shook her head no. "Oh my gosh, it's a whole other room. It is incredible." Pagne laughed to herself, knowing she wouldn't need more than two drawers. They moved from one lovely room to another. Richie's room contained books, videos and trains. Trains were on the sheets and his walls, and an actual train set was on a narrow ledge close to the ceiling and encircled the whole room. Pagne guessed Richie was a train fanatic.

One wall was painted like a blackboard, and was covered with drawings. Some were obviously Richie's, but some were beautiful, detailed sketches. Pagne asked, "Who drew these?"

"Me," beamed Bree. "I had to stop though, Richie won't erase them and I didn't want to fill up his wall. They did the wall for Richie, to encourage his coordination and his ability to express his feelings. If it was up to him, he'd have me cover the whole wall."

"Bree, these are really good! Those were your drawings on the bedroom wall?"

"Yes, Mom decided I needed a gallery and got all those frames for me to fill. I didn't want to use up the frames on the new girl's side of the room, in case she had her own drawings or pictures. The last girl, Nancy, couldn't care less, so I used all the frames."

"I don't have anything to hang either, so feel free to put them back up."

"Maybe I'll do some new ones that you can keep. Then you will have something of your own to hang." Pagne told her she would like that, a lot.

Mattie was starting to get heavy and tired of being held, so they did a quick peek of the Masters room. It was breathtaking, decorated in purples, royal blues, greens, gold. It looked like a room out of an interior design book. "Mom and Dad have asked us to give them this space, so we don't enter without knocking."

They moved downstairs, Mrs. Masters and Matt were already in the family room. The room was designed for family living. The door was gated to keep the babies from wandering the house or crawling up the stairs. They had toys and things to climb on in one corner of the huge room. It was a virtual playground. Matt was already crawling into the mini playhouse. Mattie squirmed and fussed to be put down. Pagne gratefully set her on the floor. Pagne was surprised how heavy a baby could get. The rest of the room was designed for fun. There was a large, flat screen TV mounted on the wall, comfy couches, huge pillows on the floor, and shelves full of every game available with a table close by. Wii and PlayStation were set up on another large TV. Anything breakable was high enough that the twins couldn't reach, which created a wonderful room that allowed everyone to relax without having to watch the little ones every second. Their home was warm and comfortable but visually delicious.

The kitchen was huge. The pantry was filled with everything you could ever want or need. Bree whispered that, while both of her parents were incredible cooks, Pagne should be prepared for some odd foods. They loved to experiment with foods from other countries. "For the really strange meals, they only ask that we taste it and then we are free to heat up a pizza. Dad encourages us to cook too. It's a lot of fun. Mom stays out and let's us go crazy. We mostly make desserts. Dad has a real sweet tooth!" Pagne looked forward to these evenings of group cooking.

"Bree, why don't you show Pagne the back yard? Then, I'll need some help with dinner and the twins."

They headed out the patio door and walked into a beautiful, but functional, oasis. There were flowers and trees everywhere with several fountains that emptied into rock beds. There was a large main deck, and several smaller decks that were scattered through the yard. One with lounge chairs, and another with a small table and darling chairs. This deck was in the center of a lovely shade garden. A huge mulberry tree created a canopy over the deck and garden. The main deck was partially covered with outdoor furniture, a large table, and a built in BBQ grill that had a sink, fridge and stove. "Dad loves to BBQ," Bree commented.

Over in one corner was a fort and jungle gym setup. It was one of the nice ones made from wood with a canvas roof on the fort. "You can find Richie up there, when he's not playing his games," Bree shared. "You'll love Richie. Did Mom explain about his issues?"

"Yes, some," Pagne answered.

"He can get worked up and sometimes he lashes out. It's not often, but you can tell before it happens. He'll start to tense up and turn red in the face, and he won't talk to you. When this happens, we stop whatever we're doing or saying and give him a minute to calm down. If that doesn't work, and he comes at you, we just hold him very firmly and talk softly to him. He rarely has these outbursts any more. When I first came here, it was really hard to deal with." Pagne's apprehension showed on her face. Bree saw her concern and assured her that it had been a long time since his last outburst.

"How long have you been here?" Pagne asked.

"Well, a total of two years, but they adopted me eighteen months ago."

"I just figured you had been here since you left the Hall."

"On no," laughed Bree. "This is my fourth foster-home placement. Tonight we'll catch up. Let's go help, Mom." Bree turned to go back into the house, and Pagne followed. They found Mrs. Masters in the kitchen, trying to prepare dinner with Matt on one hip and Mattie hanging on one leg, while complaining loudly.

"Help!" she laughingly yelled out as she saw the girls. "Wanna cook or herd?" asked Bree.

"I'll herd," volunteered Pagne. These little ones intrigued her. Mrs. Masters handed Matt to Pagne, and Bree scooped up Mattie, and took her over the play area. Pagne followed her with Matt. The twins were adorable. The more comfortable they got with Pagne, the more they climbed on her. Pagne laid on her back and sat them both on her stomach. While holding her knees to support them, she would buck and wiggle, which made them both giggle loudly. Pagne loved to hear them giggle.

Much too quickly, it was time to feed them, and the playing came to an end. Each one had their own high-chair. Mrs. Masters liked to feed the twins first, so she could actually eat dinner with the rest of the family. Bree and Pagne each took one and proceeded to feed them. Bree was quick with the twist of her wrist to catch the food that Mattie spat back out, but Pagne got more food on Matt's face than in his mouth. Matt had food in his fingers and in his hair, it was a mess. "I'm sorry. I'm so bad at this," Pagne admitted.

"That's okay, hon, it does get easier. They are very quick and love to wear their food." By the time the meal was done, Matt had managed to get food from his ears to his toes. "We need to take him outside and hose him down," Mrs. Masters teased, smiling at the squirming ball of flesh that was covered in sweet potatoes and turkey. She came over with a warm, wet cloth and had him sparkling clean in a matter of a few minutes. "There, that's better. You did great for your first time. The first time Bree tried, she ended up with food in her own hair, on the floor and Mattie was still starving."

"Did not," laughed Bree.

"Well almost. It was a sight!"

Pagne liked this woman. Her kind face, her ability to tease without humiliating. She hoped she would be here for awhile.

"When will Mr. Masters and Richie be home?" asked Pagne. She was anxious to meet them.

"Very soon," answered Mrs. Masters. "Richie has tutoring two days a week after school. Mr. Masters, Brent, picks him up on his way home from work. Lets get the table set, they should be pulling up about now."

No sooner than the words came out of her mouth, the door flew open and Richie yelled "Mommomomomomomom! I got a B!" Richie flew into the kitchen and grabbed his mom around her waist. "I got a B Mom. I didn't think I could even get a C, and I got a B!"

"That is wonderful, Richie! I am so proud of you." She leaned down and hugged him with a grunt.

Richie quickly ran to Bree, and they did a loud high-five. Richie was big for his age, with brown hair and honey colored eyes. He was adorable, a few freckles sprinkled over his nose. You would have taken him for ten or eleven, but the pitch of his voice and his behavior were clearly that of a younger boy.

"Good job Richie, I knew you could do it!"

Richie then saw Pagne. He looked at her oddly and then grinned. "You're the new kid they said was coming," he said with no shame.

"Well, yes I am. My name is Pagne."

"That's a silly name. That's not a girl name."

"Well, it's a nickname."

Richie looked at her squinting while tilting his head to one side, and then he slid into a chair at the table. "What's for dinner mom?" His interest in Pagne abruptly ended.

"One of your favorites," she said. "Liver and onions." Pagne quickly got a sick feeling in her stomach. She could never swallow liver.

"Your teasing, Mom. You hate liver."

Mrs. Masters laughed and said, "That's right, I forgot." Pagne was so relieved. Baked pasta, fresh green salad and French rolls were being placed on the table.

"Where's your dad?" asked Mrs. Masters.

"The car was sounding funny, so he's yelling at it."

"Oh nooo!" Mrs. Masters exclaimed. "Guess the mechanic didn't fix the problem." She looked at Pagne and explained that the car had been in the shop last week. Mrs. Masters and Bree removed the trays from the highchairs and pulled the twins up to the table. *How sweet*, Pagne thought, *they included them even though they were already fed.*

A few minutes later, Mr. Masters came in, wiping his hands with a rag. "You'd think for the amount of money they charge, you could count on them to fix the car," he muttered.

"Dear, I'd like you to meet Pagne. Pagne this is my husband, Mr. Masters, I mean Brent." She seemed a little flustered.

"Hello, Pagne. Unusual name."

"Yes, Sir. I get that a lot."

"I'm sure you do. Nothing wrong with being unusual. I like it." He grinned at her.

"Wash up, hon. Dinner is already on the table," encouraged Mrs. Masters. Mr. Masters quickly washed his hands in the kitchen sink and joined the rest of the family at the table. He was an average-looking man. Six foot, sandy blonde hair, and not fat, but a few extra pounds. His eyes were striking. A bright green with splashes of gold. He had such a broad smile with perfect, white teeth. Pagne could see the joy in his heart through his eyes and smile. He grabbed Mrs. Masters's hand and leaned in to kiss it.

"Smells wonderful, doll. I'm starving." Mrs. Masters, glowed. Pagne saw the connection between Mr. and Mrs. Masters immediately.

"Well, hello all. How was your day? Mine sucked, and I'll bore you with every detail when you are all done describing yours!" Everyone but Pagne groaned.

"Not again, Dad. We don't want to know," teased Bree.

"You guys are killing me. The only good thing about a bad day is getting to complain later to all the people who love you!" he chuckled.

They ate dinner with light conversations, laughing, teasing and had seconds on all the wonderful food. The twins were given pieces of bread, some pasta, and anything that they could have without choking. They were so cute, with food all over their faces and fingers. Pagne was relieved that she wasn't getting the third-degree right away. She knew they would have questions and house rules to discuss. She didn't mind that, but she enjoyed just being included and not treated as the new kid.

Mrs. Masters suddenly remembered, "Want to hear something very cool?" she asked Mr. Masters.

"Sure, hon, what?"

"Pagne and Bree already know each other, they were at the Langston facility at the same time."

"Wow, that's great. Small world!"

"Yeah," Bree added in, "we even liked each other."

"Good," said Mr. Masters, "then no arguing over the bathroom."

"Well, don't count on that, Dad, after all, we're teenagers now!" Bree responded with conviction.

After dinner, everyone but the twins got up and rinsed their dishes and put them in the dishwasher. In about ten minutes the kitchen was clean and the twins were wiped down and playing. *How nice to have everyone helping. Made is so much quicker*, thought Pagne.

Mr. Masters was looking through some paperwork on the desk, "Hon, know where the mechanics number is? I'm going to have to see when I can bring the car back in. He better not try charging me more to refix his mistake."

"His card is on the fridge, Babe." Pagne loved the pet names they had for each other.

"After you call, why don't you join Pagne and I in the living room. I think she might have some questions for us."

"Sure, I won't be but a few minutes."

Mrs. Masters spoke to Bree, "Will you bathe the twins for me so that I have some time with Pagne?"

"Sure, Mom. I'll yell if I need help."

"Thanks, hon. Richie, need you to take care of two things for me."

"Okay," Richie agreed.

"Put away your school bag and jacket, and empty the kitchen trash. Then you can have free play time."

"Got it, school stuff and trash." Richie jumped up to grab his things.

"Pagne, want to get something to drink before we sit down?" asked Mrs. Masters.

"No thanks, I'm fine."

Mrs. Masters fixed herself a glass of iced tea. "Let's go in here where it's a little more quiet." Pagne followed Mrs. Masters into the living room. Pagne would have normally been very nervous, but instead, she felt very peaceful. She sat in one of the comfy chairs that faced the couch. "Well, Pagne, you've seen a typical day around here. Do think you could be comfortable living here?"

"Oh yes," Pagne said. "I have never been around babies, and they are so much fun. I think Richie and I have a lot in common, and we can learn from each other. Bree was such a good friend and it feels like a miracle to be back with her! I haven't been in a real family before." Pagne felt awkward. "You know, a mom and dad with kids?" Pagne said, which made Mrs. Masters smile.

Mr. Masters came into the room shaking his head. "The mechanic is trying to tell me it must be a new problem. I told him, that's odd when it acts the same way. Sheshhhhhhhh. I'm bringing it back in on Friday. Can you follow me over and drop me off at work. If he can finish Friday, I'll have Mike from the office run me over to pick it up."

"I hate to load the babies up only to turn around and come right back. Can we go over early and drop off the car and the keys. That way I can get back before the girls leave for school, and they can be here with the babies."

"Sure, hon. That will work out fine."

"Well," Mr. Masters said to Pagne, as he sat next to Mrs. Masters. "What do you think of our little tribe here?"

"I think it is wonderful," Pagne let slip. She tensed as she scolded herself, *Pagne, this is not your family, not your life. You are just a visitor!*

"I'm glad. I get good vibes off you, Pagne, I think you will fit right in, but we have something very serious to resolve first thing."

Pagne was a little concerned, "Yes?"

"What would you like to call us? I know it's awkward to know what to call someone when you hardly know them."

"I'm not sure," Pagne admitted.

"Well, we are too young and too cool to be Mr. and Mrs. Masters. That was my parents." Mr. Masters's father had died several years ago, and his mother lived alone in Washington state. His sister, Angie, lived near her with her family.

Mrs. Masters smiled and lightly smacked his thigh. "We would prefer Pam and Brent for now. Okay with you?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

"If and when you feel comfortable enough, you can call us mom and dad if you'd like, but no pressure. Only if you decide to, okay?" said Pam. Pagne nodded her head yes as she thought of how she would love to think of these people as her mom and dad, but that would open her up to so much disappointment if they didn't want to keep her. She wouldn't get attached, using Pam and Brent would suit her just fine.

"Has Pam gone over the house rules?"

"No, we just started talking," Pagne answered.

"Okay, good. We are a family here, and we want everyone safe and happy. No matter what is going on out there in the world, we want to share joy and love in our home. The rules are simple: be kind, help out, take responsibility for what you do or don't do, and laugh ... you gotta laugh!" Pagne liked these rules. "As things come up, we will discuss and resolve them as a family. Sound like a way you can function?"

"Oh yes, definitely yes." *Again, too much enthusiasm*, thought Pagne.

"Good. I'll let you and Pam finish up with the details. I'm gonna go help Bree get the babies ready for bed. Gotta get my twin time in." Brent kissed Pam on the head and patted Pagne's shoulder on his way out of the room. He stopped, turned around, and looked straight into Pagne's eyes. "We are so glad that you are here, Pagne. We look forward to getting to know you," he said sincerely. With that, he was running up the stairs, yelling, "Where's my babies?" Pagne heard Matt and Mattie squealing with excitement.

Pam watched him adoringly as he went up the stairs. "He is such a good man, Pagne, I am so lucky."

"I think you both are very lucky." Pagne's heart was softening, even as she fought to stay indifferent.

Pam looked at her with surprise and then reached over and squeezed her hand. "Yes, we are, aren't we? I wanted to talk to you about how we deal with chores, schedules, laundry, school, and other boring stuff. I won't keep you long, I know you and Bree have a lot of catching up to do." Once Pagne had a good understanding of the workings of the house, she felt comfortable enough to ask a few questions.

"You and Mr. Masters, I mean Brent, seem to love kids so much, why don't you have any of your own?" Pam's eyes suddenly teared up. Pagne felt so bad because she realized she touched on a very tender place in Pam's heart.

"We both wanted kids, but I found out when I was very young that I would never be able to have children." Pagne thought about how sad Pam must have felt when she found out she couldn't have a baby. She cautiously pressed, "Is it too personal to ask why you couldn't have children?"

Pam looked down at her hands. "No, but it's hard to go into all the details. Lets just say I was hurt many times as a young girl and it left me unable to have children. I don't know if Bree told you, but I was in the foster-care system all my life. Now my family is something I never take for granted." Pagne was shocked. Pam was so lovely, smart, giving and happy. She never would have guessed that she had been an abused kid in the foster system. It gave Pagne hope that she too could be a survivor, like Pam.

"Well, enough seriousness for tonight. I see Bree hovering at the top of the stairs. Get up there before she pops!" Pagne rose from her chair, turned to leave the room, but then turned back toward Pam. She was still sitting there just

staring at her hands in her lap. Pagne came up to her and lightly touched Pam's hand with her fingertips.

"I am sorry if I upset you," Pagne quietly whispered.

Pam looked up at her with a deep sadness in her eyes. "It's okay Pagne. I don't think about the past very often anymore but it's good to remember. It reminds me that what Brent and I are doing is very important." She patted Pagne's hand gently. "Better get going ... I swear to you, she could pop!" Pagne grinned with that and watched as a tender smile appeared on Pam's face.

Pagne realized she had forgotten to ask about Lenny and church, but decided this wasn't the time. Pagne left the room and ran up the stairs and was suddenly face to face with Bree. She had her hands on her hips and exclaimed "Finally!" The girls ran to their room, giggling with delight that they had found each other.

Once they got into their room, they both fell down on their beds. "This seems like a miracle, Bree. You don't know how many times I wanted to find you. I asked a few of the staff, but no one could tell me anything or wouldn't."

"Well, I believe in miracles," said Bree "and this is proof." Bree put her finger to her lips and said "shhhhh." The girls tiptoed to the door and listened. Suddenly, Bree swung the door open, and there stood Richie with a glass in his hand. He had it pressed up to the door until Bree pulled it open.

"Richie!" Bree yelled. "You know that is not cool!"

"I just wanted to know what you were talking about. You coming down to play Kingdom of Hearts with me?"

"Not tonight Richie. This is my friend, and we haven't seen each other for a long time. We want to talk about girl stuff like boys and clothes."

"Boring," Richie said.

"Tell you what, give us tonight to talk, and tomorrow you will have two sisters to play with. How does that sound?"

Richie looked at Bree and then at Pagne. "You promise?"

"Cross my heart!"

"Okay, guess I can play alone." Richie looked so forlorn and then his face brightened. "Maybe Dad will play."

"I think he will. Go ask. You gonna let us talk tonight without hanging outside my door?"

"Yes," Richie agreed, as he ran down the hall yelling ... "Dad!"

"The girls kick you out, buddy?" Brent asked as he stepped out of his bedroom.

"Yep, they wanna talk about girl stuff."

"Ewwww," Brent said. "Let's me and you go have some man-fun!"

"Yeah," said Richie, "man-fun!" He turned around at the top of the stairs and stuck his tongue out at Bree. She laughed and closed the door.

Once she was sure they were gone, she motioned for Pagne to come by the

closet. "You gotta see this!" Pagne went over to the closet, and Bree opened it with a "Tada!" Pagne had never seen a closet so big. It would make a perfect room for Pagne and everything she owned. One side of the closet was full of clothes, shoes, jackets, hats, and anything else a girl could want.

"That's all yours?"

"Sure is. You're close to my size. You can borrow whatever you want."

"I'd be afraid I'd mess it up. I can't replace it you know."

"I'm not worried," assured Bree. "While Dad was putting the twins to bed, I snuck some stuff up here for us to snack on." Pagne saw cookies, chips, sodas, and fruit.

"Wow, Bree, how long you think we'll be in here?"

"Well, I didn't know what you liked, so I got a little of everything I could find. I figure it's going to be a long night, and as long as they don't hear us moving around, we can stay up for hours."

They decided to get their pillows and blankets and make nests in the closet. It was very private and cozy. This became a tradition with these two sisters. So many stories, secrets, and tears would be traded in this small corner of their world.

They did rock, paper, scissors to see who would start. Bree won. Pagne's first question was "Why four foster-homes?" Once settled in with snacks of choice within easy reach, Bree began her tale. "You remember when I left that day? The day you cried your eyes out," teased Bree.

"I didn't cry over you ... I had something in my eye, I mean eyes."

"Yeah, right. That meant a lot, Pagne. That was the first time I felt loved since my family died. Anyways, I went to a family... I'll call them 'The Deranged!' It was crazy, no order and no schedules. There were four other foster kids, and no one seemed to care what any of us did. Cold cereal, macaroni and cheese, peanut butter sandwiches pretty much summed up most of our meals. 'The Deranged' really played it up when the social worker was coming; they acted like we were one, big, happy family. I didn't know what foster-homes were supposed to be like, so I didn't know to complain when the social worker would ask me how things were going. They had us do a lot of chores, which wasn't so bad. At least it was something to do. I was only there four months because the social worker suspected what was going on and made a surprise visit. Neither of 'The Deranged' parents were home, and we were there alone for the weekend. That is not cool with the workers! Well, they pulled all of us out that day, and they lost their license. I didn't really get to know the other kids that well. They were older and didn't really seem to want to get to know me. That was good in a way I guess, I didn't miss anyone when I left. They took me straight to another foster-home instead of back to Langston Hall."

"This second family was much better, Mike and Susan Baker. They had a teenage daughter, Lisa, that still lived at home. She was really nice. I was the

only foster kid for awhile until they took in Megan. We became really good friends. The Bakers were really sweet, and I had a good life there. Just when I thought it might be permanent, their son, Ben, got real sick. He got cancer which shocked everyone because he was so young, only twenty-three. He couldn't work anymore. The Baker's didn't want to stop doing foster-care, but Ben, his wife Anne and their two little kids had to move back in with them. There just wasn't room in the house for all of us. Mrs. Baker cried for days before we left; it broke her heart. I went back to the Hall for a week, I think. Somebody told me that you were back with your mom and I hoped it was better for you this time. While I was there, Itchy went to live with an aunt back east. Boston, I think."

"The third family, the Sneekinbackers, were a nightmare. Howie and Estelle fought all the time! Howie's son, Paul lived with them. Estelle couldn't stand Paul, and didn't want him there. Then Howie would get mad at the way she treated him. Me and another boy, Stevie, were strictly income for Estelle and slave labor. Howie, at least, would be nice sometimes. They fed us okay, but nothing extra. Howie was gone most of the time, and Estelle lived on the computer".

"Well, one night, Estelle found out that Howie had posted dating ads on four different websites, or at least, those are the ones she found. Oh man, did she explode. When he came home that night, they started yelling, throwing things, and then Estelle jumped on Howie's back and was just beating the crap out of him. We were all watching from upstairs. Paul called 911, and the police arrested Estelle. Howie was all bloody; he had scratches all over his face, and she even bit his ears. He was a mess." Bree started to chuckle. "The funny part was, Howie was very muscular but about five feet tall. Estelle was almost ten inches taller and weighed at least three hundred pounds. I don't know why Howie didn't collapse when she jumped on, but he just kept running around screaming, and swatting at her head. She looked like a giant cowboy riding a bucking, Shetland pony."

Pagne looked at Bree, and they both started howling with laughter. They laughed and laughed until they heard a knock on the bedroom door. "Girls, time to get some sleep," suggested Pam.

"Okay, Mom," yelled Bree.

"Goodnight," Pam called through the door.

"Goodnight" they both yelled back. Bree put her finger to her lips and went into the bedroom. She shut off the lights, laid on her bed and flopped around so the bed would creak and then slowly rolled off. Pagne was covering her mouth so Pam wouldn't hear her giggles. Bree crawled over to the closet and shut the door slowly from inside. "Okay, now we gotta whisper. No laughing!"

"The police stayed at the house until mine and Stevie's social workers could come pick us up. So that was home three. My social worker was so upset that I was getting moved around to all these different homes, so she made some calls

and told me that we were coming here. She knew Pam and Brent, and she convinced them to take me in that night. It was three o'clock in the morning by the time we got here, but Pam was so kind to me. I lived here for six months, and I felt like this was my family. They were so loving. They sat me down one evening after Richie was in bed and said they had a proposal for me; they had fallen in love with me and wanted to know if I would let them adopt me. Pagne, I was so excited that I screamed and then cried like a baby whose bottle was ripped away from her. It was disgusting! They started crying, and then Richie ran down and started crying because he thought something bad had happened. When he found out I was going to be his sister, he started screaming too. It was an emotional blood bath!" Pagne hugged Bree and told her how happy she was for her, yet she did feel a twist of jealousy. How she wished she could have a family like Bree's'.

"Okay, so that brings you up to speed on the major stuff. It would take days to tell you all my stories like school, friends, and Jimmy!"

"Jimmy? What's up with this Jimmy?" asked Pagne.

"Oh, nothing. He's just the most gorgeous boy you'd ever want to meet. I think he likes me ... I hope he likes me."

"Tell me more," begged Pagne.

"Not tonight. We will have lots of time to talk about my Jimmy!"

"Yours huh," teased Pagne.

"Okay, enough stalling. Inquiring minds want to know," prompted Bree.

Pagne took a deep breath, and then said, "I really have to pee."

Bree slapped her playfully and said "Okay, but be quiet and quick!"

Pagne slipped out of the closet and tripped over her unpacked bag, almost falling over in the dark. "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh" she heard from the closet and then giggling. Pagne made it to the bathroom and debated whether to flush and wash her hands. It would make noise, and they would know that she was up. However, she decided that if Pam came in before she woke up in the morning and found pee and tissue in the toilet, she might wonder if Pagne should stay, so she flushed and washed her hands quickly. She slipped back into the closet and saw Bree stuffing her face with chips and dill pickles.

"Yuck," groaned Pagne.

"You'll love it," insisted Bree. Bree handed Pagne a chip with a pickle sitting in the center of it. Bree's "I dare you look" convinced Pagne to tough it up and try it. She closed her eyes and shoved it in her mouth. After a few chews, she realized it was actually pretty good, so they made quite a few potato chip and pickle sandwiches that night.

"Okay, okay Spill it girl!" Bree whispered impatiently. Pagne began her story very slowly and quietly. Her voice was almost soundless, but Bree was very close and could hear every word. She told her about her time at the Hall after Bree had left. She tried to explain her broken heart when her mother left

her in the courtroom, her home with Grandma, Tad, Chad and Macey. She then told her about the fire, the burns, the treatments, and the pain. She rolled up her long sleeve and showed Bree the scars. She pulled down the collar of her shirt so Bree could see how far they came up her body. Pagne shared the wedding plans and the pity she felt for her mother that night in the dark. She then went on to the story about Lenny and the beating, which led to the arrest of his father. Pagne was surprised that even though Bree quietly cried on and off, she herself could tell the story without tears. She wondered if maybe she had cried every tear she was given in a lifetime, and maybe it would only be the suffocating ache in her heart that would confirm the pain she had endured. Pagne had saved the story of her angel for last. Bree looked at her in shock and amazement as she described her encounters and relationship with this winged creature. When Pagne had finished, she realized Bree had not asked her one question, but had just sat there focused on Pagne's every word. Bree held her hand through the toughest parts, shoved a pillow in her face while she laughed at the funny parts and provided an endless supply of tears. Bree leaned over and put her arms around Pagne, and could feel her warmth, her love, and her strength. It felt so good!

After about ten minutes, Bree whispered, "Now I gotta pee." Both girls felt a giggle building ... "Oh no," they both whispered and then shoved their faces into their pillows and an explosion of laughter cut loose. Not that it was hysterical that Bree had to pee, but it was more about releasing the tension and laughing to prove that they both had survived their lives.

Bree came back to the closet, and Pagne looked at her with mocked disgust, "You didn't flush or wash your hands!" Pagne accused!

"I didn't want to wake them up, it's two o'clock in the morning! I just hope I don't stick my fingers in my mouth while I'm sleeping!" Both girls could not contain their laughter. They grabbed their pillows, and once, again used them to smother their howls, but not before Pam heard them. She looked to see if Brent had woken up, but he was sleeping deeply and didn't stir. Pam thought about getting up and scolding the girls, but realized that, with their histories, laughing uncontrollably at two o'clock in the morning was a good thing. She smiled and went back to sleep.

The next morning, Pam let the girls sleep until ten o'clock and then knocked on their door. "Okay, girls, time to get up." No response. She opened the door, and peeked in only to find that they weren't in their beds. She heard deep breathing from the closet, and when she opened the closet door she had to chuckle. Both girls were curled up together in a pillow and blanket nest surrounded by all the junk food that was in the kitchen. "Okay, girls, party is over. Time to get up." Both girls stretched like sun-soaked cats and opened one eye at a time, blinking at the intrusive daylight that was flooding in the closet. "Now, don't go back to sleep. We have things to do today." Pam left the room,

shaking her head with a big grin. She knew she'd be back in their room at least one more time before they would be up. She decided she'd give them thirty more minutes.

After the girls cleaned up the closet mess, Bree got into the shower first. Pagne decided she should unpack. She put her few items in the closet's wire drawers and she had about five tops that she decided should be hung. She placed her two pair of shoes on her side of the closet shoe rack, which looked sad compared to Bree's twenty or so pairs. Pagne put Lenny's book under her mattress so she could pull it out at night to reread, and she put his shirt under her pillow. While Bree was finishing up in the bathroom, Pam knocked on their door and stepped into the room. "I heard you guys laughing last night," she said with a grin. "You and Bree get caught up?"

"Pretty much, I guess. She says she has lots more stories."

"I'll bet she does. Did you get unpacked?" Pam looked around for Pagne's belongings in the room, but she didn't see anything. She glanced in the closet and saw Pagne's meager wardrobe. "Is this everything, hon?"

"Yes," Pagne answered. Pam's heart ached for her because she saw herself in Pagne. Pam had grown up with very little to call her own.

"Well, dear, when Bree gets out of the bathroom, get cleaned up and we'll discuss the plans for today. You and Bree want breakfast?" She knew the answer before she asked.

"No thanks, Mrs. Masters, I mean Pam. We're feeling very yucky after all the junk last night."

"You think?" commented Pam, with a tone of sweet sarcasm. "See you both downstairs as soon as possible. We got a big day ahead of us."

As Pam reached the family room, Brent was playing video games with Richie while keeping one eye on the twins. "Hon, think you can cover the kids for awhile if me and the girls take off for a few hours?" asked Pam. His first impulse was to give her his list of projects he wanted to attack today, but when he saw her face and could see that she was trying not to cry, he said, "Sure. What's going on?" She swallowed hard.

"Pagne has nothing, just a few hand-me-downs." Brent knew that this touched Pam so profoundly because of her childhood years; the years of being neglected.

"Take all the time you need, hon. We'll be fine here. Might look like a tornado landed when you get back, but all the kids will be alive." She smiled at her sweet Brent and knew he wasn't kidding about the tornado.

When Bree and Pagne made it downstairs, Pam looked at them sternly. "Much too much laughing last night. You stayed up way past a decent hour. I'm just going to have to punish both of you with some hardcore ... shopping!"

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. The word "Chapter" is written in a cursive font, and the number "7" is in a large, bold, serif font. They are enclosed within a circular frame that has a floral or leaf-like pattern on its left side. The entire graphic is rendered in a light gray color.

Chapter 7

Both girls squealed and hugged Pam till she thought she'd pass out. "Come on, so many stores, so little time!" All three of them ran out to the car. Brent watched them, laughing as they piled in. *This was so good for her and the girls*, he thought.

Pagne had never been on a shopping spree before. Pam and Bree tried on enough items that Pagne didn't realize that this was about her. Pagne couldn't remember when she had owned a new outfit. Her mother only took her shopping to second-hand stores. Of course, Leah wouldn't be caught dead wearing anything from a second-hand store. Pagne felt a slight tug when thinking about her mom.

They went into a boutique that catered to teen girls. Pagne had a very cute figure and Bree kept showing Pagne darling tank tops and short, little tshirts, but Pagne kept finding excuses why they wouldn't fit. Pam had been warned about Pagne's scars, and she realized that Pagne was very embarrassed. She reminded Bree that she needed new bras and panties and sent her over to find her sizes. While Bree was occupied, Pam took Pagne to the side and told her that she understood that her arm would show in most of the warmer weather clothing. "Pagne, it is important that you understand that your arm is a badge of honor. You saved a young man's life. Probably everyone in that house." Pagne didn't realize that Pam knew about the fire. "You are a beautiful, brave, young lady. Please don't ever limit yourself out of shame." Pagne looked into Pam's face and believed her.

"Okay, Pam, bring them on. I love purple, blue and teal."

Pam smiled, "You got it. I'll keep them coming."

Pagne found so many clothes that were fun and suited her taste. She would

step out in each outfit and wait for their reaction. The first time Pagne stepped out, revealing her burnt arm, Pam had to catch herself and hold back her any tears. Pagne wasn't sure how many items she could get. Pam had her start three piles, "I love", "I like" and "No Way." Once Pagne thought she had tried on everything in the store, she had three piles with tops, dresses, pants and shorts. Pam picked up the "I love" pile and gave it to the sales girl. "Okay, now we vote on the "I Like" pile." As Pagne held up each item, the three of them voted "Yes" or "No." If an item got two or more yes votes, then it was to be purchased. Several more items were handed to the sales girl. The unwanted items were returned to the lady at the dressing room counter. "Sorry," Pam said as she laid down the big pile.

On their way out of the mall, they were drawn to some wonderful scents. They entered the bath and beauty store. Each of them found a set of bath products that suited their personalities. Pam got White Linen, Bree got Citrus and Pagne got Lavender. They took turns sniffing each other as they made their way to the car with arms full of bags.

When they got back home, the girls carried their bags up to their room. Bree announced that a fashion show would start in exactly ten minutes. Brent, Richie and the totally disinterested twins sat, facing the family room entrance. Pam grabbed a chair at the kitchen table. Bree came in, announcing the first group would be "casual wear." Pagne timidly entered the room and froze. She had on deep-purple cotton shorts, and a lavender, lace patterned tank top. Brent saw Pagne's arm for the first time. He felt such empathy for her. Richie blurted out, "Hey, what's wrong with Pagne's ... ", but Brent quickly said "Shush. You're interrupting the show."

"But, her arm, it's all messed up," continued Richie.

Brent and Pam shot a quick look at Pagne to see her reaction. Pagne looked down for a moment, brought her hand up to her arm, rubbed it lightly, and looked right at Richie.

"Well, Richie, this is a badge of honor. I got this saving my friend's life, and it shows the world that I am brave."

"Cool," said Richie. "Tell me what happened?"

"After the show, okay? I have a lot more clothes to model."

"Okay, but right after!"

"Sure," she smiled.

Pagne modeled every outfit. She started to relax and posed, curtsied and flexed like a body-builder to Richie's delight. Everyone was laughing and clapping. Even the twins were clapping with everyone each time Pagne donned a new outfit. Bree glowed as she watched Pagne get sillier, and each of her poses more dramatic than the last. Even Bree knew the importance of Pagne's declaration and ownership of her scars.

This would be one of Pagne's most cherished memories. After the show,

Pagne asked Richie to help her put her new things away while she told him about the fire. Richie raced her up the stairs. Bree watched as Pam and Brent held each other, and she thought about how much she loved them. She knew that they were her miracle, and she hoped they would be Pagne's also. Bree headed upstairs to hear the fire story again, because it was a great story.

Brent leaned down to teasingly kiss Pam's ear, then whispered, "Do I want to ask how much?" Pam smiled to herself, "No. No, you don't, but I will say this ... well worth it!"

"I'll trust you on that," he said, as he placed a long, hot kiss on her neck. They shared a moment of "Them," the chemistry they still shared, but then the twins decided they had been ignored long enough and insisted on their attention.

"A good day," Pam said as she picked up Matt. "A good day!" After a big bear hug, Pam handed Brent her twin and she moved to the fridge to prepare dinner while he bounced Matt on his right knee and Mattie on his left.

After the clothes were all put away and every one of Richie's questions about the fire were answered, all the kids headed down to help with dinner and the twins. Once they made it to the top of the stairs, Richie reached for Pagne's hand. She looked down at him and saw such adoration in his eyes. She knew that this was the beginning of a long relationship, and she would be right. Once downstairs, Bree picked up Mattie to save Brent's leg from spasming and Brent set Matt on the floor so that Richie could lead him to the toy area. Pagne assumed she was helping Pam with dinner. "Great show Pagne," said Brent. "You guys got it covered in here? I'm going to take a few minutes and clean out my car if you guys can survive without me!"

"Sure, Dad," Bree answered.

Pagne moved into the kitchen and shyly asked Pam what she'd like her to do. She didn't know how to act around someone who just gave you a lifetime of Christmas and birthday gifts in one afternoon. "Can you help me cut the vegetables for the salad?" she asked, as she handed Pagne a knife. They stood next to each other, not saying anything, listening to the rhythm as they chopped.

Pagne finally said, "Thank you so much!" Pam just bumped her with her hip and smiled. Pagne felt herself longing to lean into Pam, and to touch her, but her years of physical isolation prevented her.

Once dinner was ready, which was homemade pizza, salad and a shimmering gelatin dessert firming in the fridge, they all came to the table. Everyone was starving, and the time was spent cramming the food in their mouths. There wasn't a lot of conversation during dinner. Pagne liked the quiet at times, because she could focus on the taste and texture of her food.

As the meal was wrapping up, Pagne brought up Lenny. "Pam, do you think I can earn some money to take the bus to Langston Hall? I have a very good friend that I would like to visit."

Bree grinned with a devilish gleam in her eyes. "Yeah," she teased, "Lennnnnnnnny." Pagne kicked her under the table. "Ouch," Bree yelped.

"It would mean a lot," pleaded Pagne.

Pam glanced at Brent. "The Hall is very far from here, Pagne. I don't know if it would be safe for you to ride the bus alone all that distance." Pagne tried not to smile. She had traveled the network of buses alone since she was seven. Leah never had an issue and welcomed the fact that Pagne didn't have to bother her when she needed to get around. Pagne liked that Pam worried about her, because it let her know that Pam cared about her. "I think I might have a better idea," Pam said thoughtfully. "The twins will start having extended visits with their mom each week. Her facility is over that way, just a few blocks north. You could ride over with us, visit this young man Lenny while the twins are with their mom, and you'd have a ride home. The babies have had only one hour visits, but on Friday, they will increase to four. Would that work for you? I can pick you up after school." Pagne confirmed that Pam's plan was perfect.

"Oh, yeah," Pagne said, "I was also wondering what time we will leave tomorrow." Everyone looked confused.

"Leave? What's tomorrow?" asked Brent.

"Church" Pagne explained.

Pam's face went flat and she spoke with a brooding tone. "We don't attend church Pagne,"

"You don't? But you are all so loving and kind I just assumed you attended church. Most nice people I know do"

"Not everyone has to have God telling them to be good," said Pam, almost irritated. Pagne knew that she had stumbled into another touchy subject.

"Okay, I just really enjoyed it when I lived with Grandma. We all went to church and then came home to a big lunch. A picnic in the back yard when the weather was nice." Pagne looked down at her hands and decided to drop the subject. Pam looked at Brent and cleared her throat.

"Just because we don't go, Pagne, doesn't mean you can't. There is a lovely church just down the street. The music is wonderful, we can hear it out back sometimes. I believe the service starts at ten o'clock and is over at twelve o'clock."

Bree cautiously suggested "I could go with her, Mom, so she knows someone. I miss going to church, my family went all the time when we were together." Pam didn't respond. Brent stepped in and told Bree that would be very kind of her to keep Pagne company.

Richie burst out, "I want to go too!"

Pam's face tightened. "Not this time Richie," she said, somewhat angrily.

Pam excused herself and went to sit outside. Everyone knew that she was working through some feelings, and Brent said that she needed her space. Bree brought out the dessert and served the others. It was delicious, marshmallows,

nuts, pineapple, cherries, peaches and bananas surrounded by shimmering green slime. So cool and sweet. Pagne asked Brent if she could take a bowl out to Pam. "I think she might enjoy that." Pagne scooped out a healthy portion into a bowl and headed outside to the sitting area under the big tree.

Pam looked up when Pagne approached. "Would you like some dessert, Pam?" Pam's first instinct was to pout and say no, but she saw the concern on Pagne's face and smiled instead.

"Sure, hon. Thank you for bringing it out. Knowing those guys, there wouldn't be any left by the time I came back in." Pagne stood awkwardly for a moment, and Pam realized that something was on her mind. "Would you like to sit with me?" she asked.

"Yes, please." Pagne sat in the other chair facing Pam. Pam slipped a spoonful of the transparent treat between her lips. It was hard to pout with sweet slime swishing around in your mouth. Pagne started slowly, "I am sorry if I upset you again. I seem to keep doing that." Pagne was really concerned that if she kept upsetting Pam, she might want her to leave the house.

"Oh, Pagne, it's not you, hon. I just have a lot of skeletons in my closet, and they like to pop out at times." Pagne wasn't sure if she was treading on thin ice but decided to ask.

"Do you believe in God and are mad at him, or do you think God is pretend?" *Wow, that was a heavy question.* Pam thought hard before answering.

"I used to believe in God, I would talk to him often. But when I really needed him, He didn't help me. So I'm not sure if He just doesn't care about me, or if He isn't real. If he's real then I guess I am mad at him." This made sense to Pagne.

"I wonder where he is sometimes too, but I guess my angel keeps me from being mad at him. After all, he did send her to protect me." Pam looked at her, intrigued.

"You have an angel?"

"Yes, I named her Chantal. Figured she might like a name instead of being called hey you, angel. Kinda like being called kid all the time." Pam couldn't help but smile.

"Have you seen this angel and why did you name her Chantal?"

"I haven't actually seen her. I see the edges of her wings sometimes, and she has talked to me a couple of times. Mostly I smell her."

"Smell her, hmmmmm that's different."

"I know, I haven't found anyone yet that can smell their angel. Guess I'm special that way."

"Their angel? You think others have angels too?"

"Oh yes, everyone gets an angel. It's easier to know they are there if you believe. If you don't, then they are still there but they are invisible in every way. They still look out for you, but it's a lot harder job for them." Pam loved the

picture of angels floating all around, but it was a child's fantasy. "My angel has a beautiful smell. I can't even tell you what it smells like, nothing else here on earth smells like her. She protected me when I had a really bad fall, and she woke me up when Grandma's house caught on fire. She shows up when I'm really happy and when things are very sad or dangerous. I know she is with me all the time, but I don't always smell her. She's here right now." Pam found herself looking around, hoping to see a shimmer in the evening light.

"I'm very glad you have your angel Pagne. That must give you a lot of joy."

"She does," she said, and then Pagne was quiet.

"You didn't explain why the name Chantal," reminded Pam.

"The name Chantal sounds strong and beautiful. Someone with this name would be brave and fierce. I need a powerful angel, not a sweet, frail one," explained Pagne.

Pam saw the desire for protection in Pagne, so very similar to her own longing for all those painful years. "Pagne, I have a question for you. You have had a lot of hard things to deal with in your short life. I realize you believe God has given you an angel, but why aren't you mad at God about the fact that you need an angel? Don't you wish He would take away all the bad things."

Now Pagne had to think hard. "I suppose so. I think this life is important, but it's like the cartoon before a movie. It's a little part. If the cartoon isn't that great, it's okay because your best friend told you how good the movie is. So you just watch it, laugh when you can, and look forward to the movie." Pam was impressed how well Pagne could express herself.

"The movie is Heaven?" asked Pam. Pagne nodded her head. "And how do you know this movie is good enough to sit through the lousy cartoon?"

"Because my best friend, Jesus, told me, and I trust him."

"So you're not mad at God about the fall or the burns?"

"No, He didn't do it to me. He tried to warn me so I would be safe. We are going to get hurt and bad people will sometimes find us. God isn't happy when it happens, but He stays with us so we have his strength to get through. He gave us our angel too." They both sat quiet for several minutes.

"Well, I would love to talk more about this later, but it's getting chilly. Why don't we go join the rest of the family?"

"Okay, so you've had enough space?"

Pam smiled, "Yes, Pagne, I just want to share space with you guys now." With that, they both walked lazily into the house. Taking turns bumping into each other, trying to throw the other off balance. Pam slipped her arm around Pagne's shoulders and Pagne leaned into the curve of her side.

That evening, Bree and Pagne selected their outfits for the next morning. Pagne was looking forward to visiting God in his house. She loved the music. The words when the preacher talked were kinda hard to follow sometimes, but Pagne liked it when they told the Bible stories about Noah, Moses, Jesus and

Abraham. There was a lady named Esther that was very brave, and Pagne wanted to be like her.

The girls decided to try and match the best they could. Bree and Pagne both picked out denim skirts, and pink tops. Bree's had little flowers with short puffy sleeves. While Pagne's had elbow-length sleeves and a striped pattern of shades of pink. Pagne was feeling better about her arm, but she didn't want to shock everyone by showing most of the scars her first time there. The girls were exhausted from their late night and passed out at nine o'clock. Pam came in the room once she realized how quiet they were. She moved through the space and collected cups to take down to the kitchen. As she reached to turn off the light, Pam saw where the girls had laid out their outfits for the next morning, and she smiled at the effort to match. She then saw Pagne's little, white Bible next to her clothes. Pam picked it up and opened the front cover. In a lovely cursive handwriting she read ...

*My dearest Pagne ~
May Jesus always be your best friend, a friend who waits to
show you His Heaven. What a joyous day that will be.
Your Grandma for Eternity.*

This was followed with "xoxoxoxo." Pam felt a tear forming because she wanted to have this hope. *But no, it's a lie. She won't be deceived again.* She set the Bible down and left the girl's room.

The next morning, the girls were up early, fluttering about with hair and last-minute wardrobe changes. They had found the service times online. Nine o'clock for Sunday School and ten o'clock for church service. Richie was quite put out that he wasn't going. "Let us check it out, Richie, and maybe next Sunday Mom will let you go too," Bree said with little hope.

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "You promise?"

"Well, Mom has to say it's okay, but if she says yes, then you can come with us." They girls grabbed some toast and juice, and rushed off to brush their teeth and apply clear lip gloss. They looked at each other critically and agreed they were the "Divine Duo." Bree's long, blonde hair was pulled on the sides with tiny braids that met in the back with a bright pink scrunchie. Pagne had let her hair dry naturally and the copper, shoulder length hair fell in beautiful ringlets. Pagne actually loved her hair. She caught her reflection in the mirror and saw her face, sprinkled with golden freckles. She liked her face, but the arm, it leaped out at her, and it mocked her. She called on her Jesus to give her strength to accept the scars. She left the house with Bree to walk the few blocks to a new adventure.



Chapter 8

The church was small. As they came up to the front doors, a sweet elderly man welcomed them. "You two are new here aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, we are," declared Bree. "Our first time."

"Well, Sunday school is about to start. What grade you girls in?"

"I'm in 7th," said Pagne, "and she's in 8th."

"Well, you both are in the Jr. High and High school class. Go down the first hall on your right and it's all the way to the end. Can't miss 'em."

"Thanks," the girls said in unison.

They moved through the church taking in the people, the structure and the sounds. They entered the large room at the end of the hall. It was the coolest room they had ever seen. There was a huge, tag wall where some of the kids were adding their input, an area with couches and large bean-bags on the floor, and there was another section that was long tables with chairs all around. They had a counter at the end of the room that had donuts, fruit and juices. A tall, thin young man made his way over, extending his hand out. "Hello there. I am the Youth Pastor, Eddie Johnson. You can call me Eddie." They both shook his hand and introduced themselves. He seemed genuinely glad they had come. If he noticed Pagne's arm, he didn't act like it. "What brought you guys here today?"

Bree piped in first, "Well, Pagne just moved in, and she likes to go to church. She was coming, and I didn't want her to come by herself, so I said I'd come too. I used to go to church when I lived with my real family, but that was a long time ago. My new family doesn't go to church." *How did she say all that without even breathing,* Pagne thought.

"Well, Pagne, I am so glad you thought of our church and that you came

with her, Bree. Do you both know Jesus?" *What an odd question*, thought Pagne.

"Well, I did the prayer," Pagne admitted. "Don't know if I did it right, and I can't say I know Jesus." Eddie felt a grin slipping on and quickly caught it because he certainly didn't want Pagne to think he found her comments funny. Bree jumped right in.

"I know some Bible stories, but I don't remember much else. I'm sure I didn't do a prayer or anything."

"We love to tell young folks about Jesus and his love. I think if you give us a chance, we can make some things clear for you about who Jesus is and what he wants from you. Let me introduce you to some of our kids. We'll be starting class soon."

With that, Eddie, moved around the room introducing the girls to some of the kids. Everyone was really nice, but when one girl made a disgusted face while looking at Pagne's arm, Eddie poked her in the side. She suddenly looked up, embarrassed, and then planted on a fake smile. Pagne was sure that they thought she didn't notice, but overall, everyone was very kind and seemed to take the scars as any other feature on a kid. She knew they all wanted to know. Maybe some day, she'd share, but not now. She didn't even know yet if she would be back.

Eddie had everyone sit on the couches and pillows. Pagne and Bree both liked the casual atmosphere. It was so much better than rows of hard, metal chairs. Eddie began by welcoming the new kids, Pagne and Bree. Everyone said hi, and then Eddie opened in prayer. He thanked God for such a beautiful day and every blessing he could think of. He asked Jesus to meet them there and bless the lesson. One of the boys played his guitar and the group sang worship songs. Actually, the other kids sang and Pagne and Bree just listened because they didn't know the words. Eddie said this was the time to worship God, and that God liked it a lot and he would hang around even longer, or something like that. After the songs, they had announcements about things that would be happening; school would be out for the summer in just two weeks, so they were planning lots of fun stuff. Pagne and Bree also found out that the kids met on Wednesday evenings for youth. They were interested, but didn't know what Pam's reaction would be. After the announcements, Eddie began teaching from the Bible. They were studying the book of John. The book of John was all about the birth of Jesus and how he died on the cross. Today's lesson was the part where Jesus could've jumped off the cross if He wanted to, but He didn't because He loved us too much. Pagne noticed that Bree was listening very closely and hung on every word.

When Sunday School was done, everyone headed to the main sanctuary where the service started right away. The choir sang really well, and the musicians were awesome. Pagne felt herself almost floating, and she could smell her angel, very faintly, but she was there. Pagne closed her eyes and just let

herself feel the presence of God in his house. It was a pressure of joy that overcame her. Bree was beginning to understand why Pagne missed it so much; she loved the peacefulness she felt. They took the offering and shared family related announcements. Pagne and Bree both looked at each other thinking, *"too bad our family won't be there."* Then Pastor Tim began to speak. He was young, and funny and he didn't have any shoes on. They liked that. Pastor Tim talked about how God wanted us to take care of each other. We were his hands, his arms, his wallet, his eyes, and his mouth. This hit Bree profoundly in the deepest part of her soul, and she felt that Pastor Tim was talking directly to her. It planted a seed that would grow into a beautiful, loving, giving life.

After church, the girls said bye to Eddie. He asked them if they would like to come Wednesday night? It was open-mic night. They could sing, dance, share a poem, anything they would like to do. There would be pizza and ice cream too. Youth started at six-thirty and ended at nine o'clock. "We will have to ask our parents," they said, "we would like to come."

"Think we'll see you next week?" asked Eddie.

"Absolutely," they said. They both felt a connection to this church and to these people.

"Do you girls have a Bible? It helps in the classes if you have one to follow along in." Pagne said that she did, but forgot it this morning. Bree admitted that she didn't. "Wait right here," Eddie said. He came back with a teen Bible and handed it to Bree. "You can have this. Try to bring it every week. It is also a good idea to read a little each day, maybe when you pray." Bree looked at him oddly. She didn't know much about the praying thing or that you did it every day. She thought you just prayed when you needed help. She explained this to Eddie. "That's what a lot of people think," he said. "But if you had a friend that only called you when she had a problem, would that be a good, loving relationship?"

"No," Bree admitted.

"God wants us to treat him like a friend we love. Someone we share our good and bad with. Our dreams and our secrets. You do that by talking to him every day." Bree was starting to get it. They said bye again and headed back home. On their way, they decided that they would read together each night and pray, and they thought the closet would be a good place, so this started a tradition.

When they got home, they ran into the kitchen, where Pam was pulling a raspberry basted ham out of the oven. "Hope you girls are hungry."

"We're starving. Can we eat upstairs," Bree asked.

"Okay, but bring your dishes down." They each filled their plates and headed up to their room. They sprawled over their beds and shared thoughts about their morning at church. It was agreed that they both wanted to go back. They tried to figure out the best way to approach Pam about Wednesday nights and Richie going.

"I think we should not make a big deal out of it, kinda like we almost forgot

about it. If we make it sound too important, it might worry her." Pagne agreed that would be the best way. She didn't know Pam very well yet, but realized that church and God was a sore subject with her. Bree noticed that she didn't ask them anything about their morning, which was very odd for Pam. Usually Pam wanted to know every detail. "I think it may take some time before she lets Richie go."

"I think you're right," agreed Pagne.

Monday morning, the girls grabbed a quick breakfast, Pagne walked the first block with Bree until she reached her bus stop, and Bree would walk the remaining three blocks alone. Pagne saw a bird struggling on the ground because it couldn't fly. It didn't appear to be hurt, but was very weak and limp. "Don't touch it," warned Bree. "Birds can have a disease that you can get. It kills the bird. I don't know if it can kill people but it makes them really sick." Bree continued on her way to school. Pagne couldn't stand to watch this bird flopping and suffering on the ground. She pulled some binder paper out of her backpack and picked the bird up with it. She talked to it and held it until it died. Pagne was so sad, and she thought about putting it back on the ground, but that seemed mean. She saw a trash barrel close by, so she wrapped the bird with more binder paper. There were some pretty flowers growing on a bush close to the trash barrel and she pulled some off. She slipped them in the wrapped paper with the dead bird, but she made sure she didn't touch it. She would wash her hands really well at school, just in case. Her bus came, and as she climbed in, a gorgeous collie had run up to her, sniffing. "No boy, you can't get on the bus." She pushed the dog back and hoped it would find its way home. As she moved into her seat, she saw the dog sniffing around the ground and the trash barrel. Then the dog took off running back in the direction it came.

The first day back to her school was wonderful. All her friends and teachers were so glad to see her. She felt like a celebrity. She was able to continue her studies since the tutoring at the Hall kept her in the same curriculum as the school's. Pagne was so thankful that she could finish up her final weeks with her class. School during the day and the Masters in the evening; life was good and getting better.

Pagne woke up Friday morning with the anticipation that a child has on Christmas morning. She and Lenny had been able to talk on the phone, several times, but it's not the same as being with someone you love. He only had short blocks of time that he could use the phone, so it had been rushed, unlike their leisurely discussions she was used to. She labored over what she would wear. Pam was picking her up at school, so she couldn't come home and change. She finally decided on a cotton, peasant-style top that was deep teal, that complimented her hair. She also put on jean shorts with sandals. She remembered that they would probably climb into their tree, so she changed, yet again, to jeans and tennis shoes. Her skin was tender, and scraping the bark was

not a comfortable experience. She brushed her hair back into a ponytail, added a matching, teal scrunchie and applied some pink lip gloss. She was very pleased with her reflection. She had gotten some sun and her face was bronzed gold, and she looked glowing and excited.

Pagne could hardly focus in class. She watched the minutes drag on the clocks. At lunch, she ate quickly, thinking somehow that would speed up the lunch hour. It didn't, she just endured the rest of the break, not able to concentrate on her friends' conversations around her. The afternoon was even worse! She was a little burpy from eating so fast and the excitement, she figured. She was hoping that any gas in her system would work its way out before seeing Lenny. Her biggest fear was to burp or fart in front of him. He would never let her live it down. Boys thought it was hilarious, but girls were so embarrassed. It was just a man-thing for them, and the louder or smellier, the better. Which was not fair!

Finally, it was three o'clock! Pagne ran out front and watched for Pam's silver mini-van. *Why couldn't she have a more distinctive color?*, thought Pagne. So many silver mini-vans came and went, and Pagne was now sure Pam had forgotten. It was already 3:05. Where was she? By the time Pam pulled up at 3:08, Pagne was worked into a frenzy. "I'm so glad to see you, I thought you might have forgotten me!" exclaimed Pagne.

"Never," said Pam, trying to keep a straight face. Oh how she wished this excitement would remain in relationships. She could remember when Brent made her this flustered. The drive only took fifteen minutes, but to Pagne it was an eternity. She reapplied her lip gloss three times, patted her hair smooth, and repeatedly checked her blouse for hair or lint. Pam got to watch the human preening process in her peripheral vision.

"So," Pam started, "does Lenny know you're coming or are you surprising him?"

"Oh he knows. Visitors have to get the office's permission and the kids get to say yes or no. That's how it's supposed to be anyway," Pagne added, remembering her mother's surprise visit.

"Well, I know that this is a special time for both of you." Pam pulled up to the front of the Hall. "Have fun, and I'll be back here in four hours. Brent will keep dinner hot for you."

"I got permission to eat with Lenny if that's okay?"

"Sure, I'll let Brent know."

"You're going back home? I thought you would stay with the twins."

"Oh no, she needs her time with them. Might be confusing for the babies if I'm there too. I'm going to head back home and I'll be back to pick you up at 7:15. I get the twins at 7:30, sharp."

"Oh please pick them up first," begged Pagne.

Pam smiled at the thought of a girl in love. "Sure, hon. I'll be here at 7:45.

Be ready to go. The twins will be ready for bed."

"Okay, Mom." Pagne said as she leaned toward Pam to give a hug. The look on Pagne's startled face touched Pam's heart. Pam tried not to react.

"Okay, my love, have fun." Pagne jumped out of the car and ran to the front entrance. Pagne didn't know why Mom had slipped out, she thought it a lot, but hadn't intended to say it.

Lenny was waiting for her just inside the doors. They didn't yell, scream, or say a word. They just held on to each other. *This feels so good*, thought Pagne. These were the arms that she hoped would always hold her. She signed in and they made a mad-dash for their tree. Lenny teased her about taking so long to climb up. Her face burned with embarrassment. The jeans were a good idea, but not such tight jeans. She thought at one point that Lenny might have to push or pull her up. She finally made it to their spot, smack in the center of the tree.

"You look incredible," he finally said, after minutes of just grinning at each other.

"Thank you, you're awfully cute yourself. I like your hair." He had gelled the grown out buzz into short spikes. It made him look much older than she remembered. He even had a few hairs sprouting on his face. She thought about teasing him, but she didn't want to ruin the mood by making him self-conscious. He wanted Pagne to start, so she shared her stories about Bree, Richie, the twins, Pam and Brent. She realized she smiled the whole time. Lenny was just amazed at the joy he saw in Pagne's face, and he was so relieved that her life was good with this new family.

She talked about church and the shopping spree. Lenny said that he was looking forward to a fashion show too. "You would look good in anything, Pagne," Lenny said with such conviction. Pagne grinned.

Next was Lenny's turn. Lenny was cautious, but he said that he and his mom were working through things. He didn't know how it would play out, but they were starting counseling together. He wouldn't be moving back home any time soon, though. She admitted that she didn't handle things right at all and was willing to find out why. Pagne touched Lenny's face while he sat quietly for a few minutes. "I know she hurt you terribly," said Pagne, "but at least she admitted it and is willing to try and fix it. My mom never said she was sorry or that she did anything wrong. I hope you and your mom can find a way to work this out."

"You think it would be good?" asked Lenny.

"Oh, yes. She is your mom, you can never change that. She will always be in your heart and mind. Better that it have a happy ending than a miserable one."

Lenny took Pagne's fingers in his and said those sweet loving words again, "Always, Pagne, Always." Pagne believed him. Lenny filled her in on some of the funny stories here at the Hall. He was a big goof-off and made life better for

the other kids. After Lenny had covered everything that he wanted to share, they heard the call for dinner, and made their way down the tree. It was a little easier getting down, but Lenny went first to help her if she needed it. Once on the ground, Lenny turned in close and whispered, "How you look in those tight jeans was worth being patient while you struggled getting up and down the tree. I'm so glad I went down first and could appreciate the view from below!" He grinned a very sly grin, as Pagne playfully tried to slap his arm. He turned quickly, laughing and acting like his pants were too tight when he ran. She ran after him, pretending to be angry by yelling at him to knock it off. They had a romantic dinner in a cafeteria of one-hundred clamoring kids.

After dinner, Pagne got to see some of the other kids she knew. They shared and hugged, until Lenny walked Pagne to the front entrance. 7:45 came too soon. He couldn't go outside, so they stayed in the foyer with the door open, so Pagne would see Pam's car. "I miss you, Pagne," Lenny said softly.

"I miss you too, but I'll be able to come next week."

"Not sure if I'll still be here," he admitted. "Might be going into a group-home."

"Here in town, right?"

"Yep, I insisted on that. My mom is trying to kiss my butt. She offered to get me a phone. I wouldn't take anything from her, but if it let's me talk to you more, I'll take it. Maybe you can get one too?"

"I'll ask and if not, I'm sure I can use the house phone."

"I'll call you when I get it," promised Lenny. Pagne's heart dropped when she saw Pam pull up.

"Gotta go Lenny." She turned back to face him and suddenly felt his lips on hers. It was a small gentle kiss, but she felt it course through her body into her toes. He immediately turned every shade of red possible. "I love you" he said softly, as she stumbled out the door. When she climbed into the car, she looked up at the door and saw him slowly closing it. She knew she was grinning from ear to ear, but she couldn't help it. She was glad that Pam was watching the road ahead.

"How was your visit?" Pam asked.

"It was wonderful," Pagne said, dreamily. Pam smiled and remembered her first kiss. Pagne just let the emotions swallow her up for a few minutes. "Pam, if I do some extra chores, do you think I could get a cell phone? I'd be really careful with it, and you can tell me when and how much I could use it." Pam said that she would need to discuss it with Brent, but she thought that it might be a good idea.

A few days later, Bree was on her bed, and Pagne was in the closet. They were trying out their new phones. "This is so cool," Pagne said to Bree, as she opened the closet door to talk.

"Say it on the phone, you dork," said Bree, laughing.

“Oh yeah, this is so cool,” said Pagne, to the phone at her ear. The girls were so excited to have their own phones. Pam and Brent thought it would be a good way to stay in contact with the girls. They had unlimited text messages, which Pagne thought was dumb. *Why not just talk?* Bree said that everyone was texting, no one talked anymore. Pagne hoped that Lenny wanted to talk on his phone, because she loved the sound of his voice. He did. Once he got his phone, they spent many long hours talking and laughing.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. The word "Chapter" is written in a cursive font, and the number "9" is in a large, bold serif font. They are enclosed within a circular frame that has a floral or leaf-like pattern on its left side. The entire graphic is rendered in a light gray color.

Chapter 9

The girls had become very connected to their church and it's youth group. They never missed a Sunday. Pam was not thrilled, but she didn't discourage them. This particular Sunday, Bree and Pagne raced each other home. They burst into the front door, laughing, faces flushed. Richie was waiting for them. "When are you going to tell Mom to let me go?" he said with authority.

Bree knew he couldn't stand not being included. She could torment him or be nice ... it was a hard decision, but because she was coming from church, she thought she should be nice. "Richie, we can't make Mom let you go, but I'll talk to her today and we'll see what happens. But don't bug me, I gotta find a good time."

"Okay," Richie said reluctantly.

The girls asked in unison as they moved into the kitchen, "What's for lunch? We're starving."

Pam looked up and shushed the girls. The babies were asleep, passed out on the floor. "I was afraid they would wake up if I moved them." The girls looked over and saw that both babies were curled around the toys and sound asleep.

"Where's Dad?" Bree whispered.

"He had to run into the office for a few hours to take care of an emergency." Brent was a defense lawyer and was handling a big case that took a lot of his time lately. "Why don't you girls go get out of your good clothes? Thought we'd take Richie and the twins to the park for a picnic."

"Sure thing, Mom," Bree responded. The girls quietly moved up to their room.

Once changed, they headed back to the kitchen, and Pam was finishing up

with the lunch. "Try to wake the twins gently, Pagne. They are stirring, but not quite awake. Bree, can you help me take the food, Richie's bike and these blankets and chairs out to the car?" As Pam and Bree left through the French doors, Pagne moved over to the babies. She began cooing quietly, calling their names while she rubbed Matt's belly and Mattie's leg. They started grinning in their sleep, and then their eyes started to blink open. Both of them focused on Pagne's face and reached for her with wide smiles. Pagne pulled them both up to sit on her lap. They were so cuddly and let her just hold them. Pagne could tell that they needed a diaper change. One or both had the unmistakable odor of poop.

Pam and Bree came back in and Bree picked up Matt. "Will you help me change them? Mom is going to get Richie ready," she said to Pagne.

The girls took the twins upstairs and got them changed and into play clothes suitable for an afternoon at the park. Pagne was getting better at changing diapers, but she was relieved she didn't get the poopy one. They were now all ready to go. On the drive over, Pam said, "Daddy is going to meet us there. Richie, you wanna go fishing?"

"Yeah!" Richie yelled.

"I packed up your and Dad's pole."

"The park has a lake?" Pagne asked.

"Oh yes. You will love it. This isn't a city park, this is a state park with a forest and trails," explained Bree. Pagne was excited to get there, and after a short drive, they pulled into a parking lot. They unloaded the food and blankets, and put the twins in a double stroller with big, rubbery wheels designed to roll on rougher terrain. They made the short hike to a grassy, tree sprinkled area. There were picnic tables, but all of them were taken by families eating their lunch. Pam and the kids continued for some distance, and as they came around some large trees, they were at their usual place by the water. The lake glistened in the sun, and no one was around. "We always grab this spot," Bree told Pagne.

Richie was immediately by the waters edge, throwing rocks in with loud splashes. Pam reminded him, "Richie, you'll scare away all the fish."

"Oh yeah," he said as he dropped the really big rock he was ready to hurl. Pam and Bree had a system of setting up their picnic area, so they asked Pagne to entertain the twins while they threw the blankets out on the soft grass, got the lunch items set up.

Next thing they heard was someone crashing through the trees, Pagne whirled around, just as Richie was screaming, "Daddy!" Brent had taken the shortcut through the trees and had his arms full of baby equipment, including a collapsible playpen and a big bag of toys. He had put them in his car before he left. Pagne helped him set the playpen up and then dumped the toys into it. The twins were fed first and set into the playpen where they couldn't crawl away. The rest of the family filled their paper plates with sandwiches, chips,

and fresh fruit salad. There was a small ice-chest filled with juices and water. Lunch was delicious, and Pagne ate until she thought she would pop.

"Save some room," Pam advised. "I brought German Chocolate cupcakes."

Pagne groaned, "Why did you let me eat so much? I can't fit another bite!"

"Once you do some hiking, it'll all squish down, and you can squeeze one in," Bree teased.

Brent took Richie down by the water to fish. Pam was settled in with her book near the twins. "Bree, show Pagne around, but be careful. There are some wild animals in the park. Keep your distance from any strangers too."

"Okay Mom," yelled Bree as they moved along a path that winded through an opening in the forest trees. Bree was familiar with this park, so she moved through it with confidence and clearly had a destination in mind. They had only been on the trail for fifteen minutes, but it felt like they had hiked for an hour. Pagne was surprised how out-of-shape she was compared to Bree. They rounded a corner and Pagne saw a piece of Heaven. There was a gurgling stream running down to join the lake, ferns everywhere, wild flowers were blooming in the sunny areas and trees made a ceiling for shade.

"This is beautiful!"

"I thought you'd love it, said Bree. This is my favorite spot. Sometimes I see deer coming through here, and last spring there was a doe with two little fawns. I wish I had my camera." They found a mossy area under the trees and plopped down.

Pagne and Bree began to daydream out loud and share plans for the future. Bree told more stories and Pagne shared her feelings about Lenny. The afternoon was drifting lazily. The sounds of the stream were so soothing. As Pagne was dozing, while trying to listen to one of Bree's very extensive recounts of the mean girl who tormented her at school, she caught the scent of something sweet and familiar. It was her angel, and Pagne smiled. "I've missed you," she whispered.

"You say something?" asked Bree.

"No," Pagne lied still savoring the visit from her angel.

The scent continued and became incredibly strong. Not like a whisper, but a scream. Pagne realized they were in danger and jumped up. She then heard something coming toward them through the shrubbery close by. Bree heard it also and turned to look behind them, afraid that it might be a wild animal. There were mountain lions, skunks and wild pigs in this forest, but this was worse, much worse.

Almost immediately, they heard cursing and laughing, and it sounded like several people heading over to them, drunk and loud. Bree jumped up, ready to run. The voices cleared the last cover of forest. Pagne almost collapsed when she saw a young woman, about twenty five, trying to keep her balance and a man. It was Adam, and he was cursing about where she was taking him. He

saw the girls and flashed his too-white, capped smile and made a crude comment about what he could do with three young women. Pagne could see that he was drunk. She moved closer to Bree and started to herd her toward the path they came up on. As the couple got closer and Adam was able to focus, he started laughing, a disgusting laugh.

"I know you," he said. "You're that deformed kid of what's-her-name, Leah. Yeah, Leah." The young woman with him looked totally clueless and dropped to her knees on the ground, struggling to stay conscious. "Wow, what a small world, a very small world. How you doing, Gimp? What was your name again?" Pagne didn't answer. "You got a real cute friend there. Maybe you girls wanna party with me and Lucy here." He giggled, "*Looooosie*, good name for her." He patted her on the head and winked, that disgusting wink.

Bree and Pagne were much closer to the path now. Bree ran back to her parents. Pagne was moving slower, scared but unexplainably curious. "Hey, don't go, kid, we got some catching up to do. You still need a daddy?" Adam had moved onto the path, his arms outstretched, indicating he was offering himself up, while blocking her. Pagne froze. He was grinning at her, and continued to speak. "Saw your mom few weeks back. She's still working the streets, screwing anyone that's got five bucks. Maybe you two should offer a special: Worn-out hag, and a freak tag-team. Won't get rich, but it'll keep your mom stocked in champagne." Pagne felt the hot tears of humiliation rolling down her cheeks. She forced herself to run toward him, pushing Adam off of his feet, as she slipped past him. Last thing she heard Adam say was "Champagne, I remember now. Pagne, you're that pathetic, deformed kid, Pagne," and then a horrible, howling laugh. The tears were blinding Pagne, and she couldn't see the path clearly. She tripped over an upraised root and, as she began to fall, she felt large arms grab her. She looked up, frantic that Adam had somehow gotten around to the front of her, but instead, she saw Brent, and she let herself crumble in his arms, sobbing.

After a few moments of just holding her, Brent whispered, "Did he touch you?"

"No," she lied. It wasn't the kind of touch Brent was worried about, but he had touched her heart, deep inside and then he viciously twisted it and ripped it out.

Brent scooped Pagne up into his arms and carried her back to Pam and the kids. Pam saw them coming and sensed the devastation in Pagne's limp body, so she instructed Bree to quickly start packing things up.

Richie ran up, concerned. "You okay, Pagne. Did you fall down? Sometimes I fall down. Are you bleeding?"

Pagne lied again when she said, "No, I'm fine." The ride back was quiet; no one said much. Richie kept asking what was wrong, and what had happened, but Bree kept telling him to be quiet, and that everyone was just tired. When they got back to the house, Pam suggested that Pagne go up and take a long

hot shower. While Pagne was in the shower, the family unpacked the car, put the twins down for a nap and Brent took Bree and Richie to the store. Brent was instructed to take his time, maybe go by the video store and let the kids pick out a movie or two. Brent knew that Pam wanted some time alone with Pagne. He knew it would be emotional, for both of them.

When Pagne got out of the shower and had put on some loose, comfortable clothes, she grabbed her pillow and blanket and curled up in the closet. She heard Pam come in and quietly knock on the closet door. "Pagne, can I come in?"

"Sure," said Pagne, not really wanting to see anyone. Pam stepped into the closet with some of the cupcakes and milk.

"Thought maybe you'd like a snack."

Pagne shook her head no. "Thank you though."

"Maybe later," Pam suggested as she set the tray on one of the closet shelves. "Pagne I'd like to talk with you. Would that be okay?"

"Don't have much to say, but you can if you want." Pam sat on the closet floor, with her legs crossed, and looked sadly at Pagne, not sure where to start.

"That had to be very scary to see this Adam guy in the park." Pagne didn't respond. "He is the man you're mother dated that tried to touch you?"

Pagne looked shocked. "How did you know? Did Bree tell you?"

"No, Pagne, anything you have told Bree is private. Bree doesn't discuss what you two talk about. She is very trustworthy. When you came here, they gave us a file that has some of your history in it. That way, we know better how to protect you and how to understand what might be upsetting for you. I don't know everything that happened, just that there was an investigation about possible abuse. When Bree ran back to us, she just yelled that a bad man you knew was there, and he was saying bad things. Brent ran up immediately to keep him from hurting you." Pagne appreciated Brent's attempt to protect her.

Pam reached over and made physical contact by touching Pagne's leg. Pagne jumped slightly and Pam pulled back. Pam gave it a few minutes before starting to speak, "Pagne, I know how you feel, hon." Pagne shot a look that clearly said *"How dare you think you know how I feel."* Pam realized that she opened the attempt at communication badly and began again. "I have been wanting to explain some things to you, and maybe this is a good time. Okay with you?" Pagne nodded her head okay. "I'll be right back." Pam jumped up, went over to the window seat, and grabbed a bunch of the pillows. She came back into the closet and padded the floor and the wall. She realized she was getting older, and sitting the floor was not so easy. She knew they may be in the closet for some time, and her knees and back would not survive. She sat down and leaned against the pillows. "Much better," she murmured. Pagne had mixed feelings, part of her just wanted to be alone and feel like the Gimp she was, and part of her was so thankful that Pam was there.

"Think I'll just start at the beginning. My mother, her name is Grace, or was, not sure if she is still alive, got pregnant with my older brother, Peter, when she was fourteen. I call her Grace since I have a difficult time referring to her as mom. Well, any way, her parents sent her to live with my great-grandmother, who was much too old to be raising a teen, especially one that was as wild as my mom. After she had my brother, things got worse. She would sneak out and meet up with older guys who provided her with alcohol and drugs. My mother worked her way up to heroin. My great-grandmother didn't realize what was going on, and when my mom told her she was pregnant again, my grandmother kicked her out.

She was seventeen by then, and she and my brother moved in with my father. He was a working drug-addict. He was thirty-two when I was born. I had some real health issues due to my mother's drug use while she was pregnant, but I survived. Not sure how, but I did. Grace and Luis, my dad, partied harder and harder until my dad overdosed and died. He died in our apartment and my mom didn't report it for four days. Because of her high and fear, she left him laying where he fell. It affected my brother more than me. I was still very young. She did finally call the police, but we had moved out of the apartment with one of her druggie friends. I never knew any of my relatives on my mom's side, because they had disowned her, and I never met anyone on my dad's side. I was three when my dad died." While listening to Pam, Pagne was reminded that she knew nothing about her father or his family. This added to her current feelings of abandonment, but also connected her to Pam.

"We lived with my mom's friend Sarah for almost two years. She partied like my mom, but not as bad. She made sure my brother and I ate and bathed now and then. Sometimes she'd bring us second-hand toys. We never even knew when our birthdays were, let alone celebrated them." Pam paused, the memories could still make her heart ache. Pagne reached for Pam's hand to comfort her. Pagne knew how badly the disregard felt. "I'm not sure how they paid the rent, but I think Sarah bartended and I figured out later that my mom was prostituting herself. When we lived with Sarah, no men were ever around, so it was a good time for me and my brother. That lasted until my mom stole money from Sarah, and Sarah was done with her. She kicked us all out.

My mom was able to get us a room in a disgusting hotel, and without Sarah there to have some say, things got really bad. Some nights my mom would be gone all night, and quite a few times, she'd come home all beat up. During the day, she would either sleep or scream at my brother and I. We weren't in school and seemed to be invisible. Eventually, she started to bring men back to the room. We didn't know what was going on, but we knew it was bad. We were told to stay in the bathroom while she entertained her guests. Mom was going downhill fast because of her drug addiction. She had a harder and harder time getting men to pay her for sex. She had lost most of her teeth, and she

rarely bathed.

One evening, she came home with a stranger." Pam became quiet and struggled to continue. "We were heading to the bathroom, our usual routine, but she kneeled down and pulled us both up to her. She told us that the nice man was giving her a lot of money to spend time with us, so she wanted us to do what he said. We were promised a toy and ice cream, and then she left. We had no idea what was to come." Pagne looked up at Pam's face and saw tears rolling down her cheeks.

Pagne squeezed her hand, "You don't have to do this," Pagne said.

"I know, hon, but I need to." Pam had thought to bring some tissue with her and blew her nose. She took a deep breath.

"The next day, my brother and I were so ashamed, we couldn't even look at each other. My mother slept all day. She had brought home a few groceries and a coloring book with a box of crayons; this was our reward for the horror we endured. The next night we heard the key, but mom didn't even bother to come with the man. This was my life for eighteen months. Our tender bodies were used to support us and to support my mom's drug addiction. During this time, I would be sexually brutalized, develop infections, and suffer injuries. Some of the men just wanted to hurt us. I can't tell you what was worse. These assaults on my young body resulted in the internal damage that doesn't allow me to have children." She stopped, and Pagne knew she was trying to get her composure back, as she blew her nose. "When my brother was nine, she left us alone for several days, and there was nothing to eat. He went to the small grocery store a few blocks away to steal some food, and he got caught. The police were called in, and he finally told them about me and where we lived. The police came and took us both into protective custody. We were treated for several diseases that the men had given us, and I had to have my arm rebroken and set. I didn't know that my arm had been broken, and healed badly. I just knew it hurt all the time. My mother was located and arrested for abuse, and all sorts of other charges. She ended up serving seven years in prison. My brother and I were eventually put into foster-care homes. They tried to keep us together ...," Pam paused and sat biting her lip. Then she continued, "But we had become so physically dependent on each other and found comfort with each other in ways that were not good. This created a lot of issues in the homes. We had to be separated." A long deep sigh escaped from Pam.

"We could speak fairly well but could barely read. Thank goodness for Sesame Street. We had to have special education to catch up to where we were supposed to be, and it took many years. My brother and I could have supervised visits, talk on the phone, and write. We kept in touch a lot at first, but it became less and less, because I started to pull away. I had the chance to be someone else, I could be anyone that I wanted to be. I wanted to reinvent myself, so I eventually refused his calls and visits. When I was sixteen, I was told that my

brother had killed himself. We hadn't spoken for six months, so I don't know if something happened or just the weight of his life was too much." Pam stopped here, and Pagne thought she may not be able to go on. "Excuse me, hon." Pam jumped up with her hand over her mouth. Pagne heard her throw up in the bathroom next door. She heard a flush and then water running. Pagne heard her leave the bathroom and then more water running. Pam came back in, smelling of mint. She sat back down and sighed again, very deeply. "I don't know if I could have helped him. I wish I had stayed in closer contact, but I just didn't want to be that girl anymore, and he was a reminder of who I had been. Make sense?" Pagne nodded her head. She had also wanted to be someone else, she also wanted another life.

"I was in a lot of foster-homes. Some very good, some very bad, but most were just okay. Most families just didn't know how to deal with my issues. I had to be reminded constantly to bathe and to brush my teeth. I would wake up screaming in the night with terrible nightmares. I was afraid of men and couldn't be alone with them. I was a challenge. My last family had me for three years, and I was living there when I found out about my brother. Luckily, they were loving and supportive, and they helped me deal with Peter's death, and made sure I got counseling. After I graduated from high school, I received several scholarships. The Burton's covered what the scholarships didn't. I was able to go to college, and that is where I met Brent. I never saw or spoke to my mother again after the day that the police found my brother and I."

Pagne looked into Pam's eyes and felt hers tearing up. "Thank you, Pam, I have never known an adult that could understand what I feel." Pam slid over and held Pagne. "This is why Brent and I do foster-care. We want to provide a home that is a place to heal and to be valued. My foster-parents gave me the chance to have a good life, and they loved me. If I can give that back, then my life was worth living. If you ever want to talk, Pagne, I'm here for you."

"Would it be okay if not today? I have a lot of thoughts moving around and don't think I can say the words."

"I totally understand," Pam said. "When, and if, you're ready."

"Think I could have one of those cupcakes?" Pagne asked.

"Sure, I'll have one too." They sat there, eating cupcakes and listing all the foods they loved. When Pagne had only eaten half, she set it down, and laid with her head on Pam's lap. Pam rubbed Pagne's head, wrapping her curls around her fingers. She heard Pagne's breathing become deeper and, as Pam paced her breaths with Pagne's, she also drifted off to sleep.

This is how Brent found them. Brent gently touched Pam's shoulder, and she jerked out of her dream. It was a sweet dream really, she and Peter as children, with Pagne, running through open fields full of wildflowers and butterflies. "Hey, doll, the kids are watching a movie and the twins have been fed."

"What time is it?" she asked.

"About five-thirty."

Pam tried to shift without waking Pagne and realized her body was seizing up. She carefully slid Pagne onto the pillows and Brent helped her get up.

"Should we wake her?", asked Brent.

"Let me get dinner ready, then I'll send Bree up. She can use the rest."

"Okay, but let me cook, you can keep me company," he insisted.

"Okay," she said softly. She felt exhausted.

Pagne laid in the closet, so cozy. She dreamed about running through fields of flowers, the sun shining, and other children with her, laughing. She then grew wings and flew up toward the clouds, looking down and waving at the kids on the ground. Angels zipped past her, then swirled and dipped. She looked for her angel. She was sure she would recognize her. Then there was that wonderful, familiar smell, that she knew so well! Lasagna. Pagne was starving. She opened her eyes and only knew it was still the same day because they would never cook lasagna for breakfast. She went into the bathroom and used the toilet and washed her hands and face. She looked at herself in the mirror, a long studying look. She was not a freak. Adam could say whatever he wanted, but it didn't make it so. She did know that he was telling the truth about her mom. Something broke in Leah that last night, and all of her self-worth poured out; she was empty.

Pagne came downstairs to find a loving family in the process of living and cherishing each other. Would she ever have this? Everyone looked over when they heard Pagne come in. Mattie crawled over to be picked up, Bree smiled at her, as she pushed Matt in the swing. Richie just said, "Finally!" and turned back to his game.

Pam smiled and said, "Hey sleepy head, you get to set the table," which she did with great appreciation. She claimed this family, in this moment, she could pretend.

Brent was adding fresh grated cheese to the top of the hot bubbling pasta. "Dinner is ready," he announced with a wave of his oven mitts. The twins were put in their chairs and given bread to gnaw, while the rest of the family took their seats. A family, discarded people that found each other and mended together to make a new family, a strong family. The scars made them tough and courageous, they were badges of honor. Pagne wore some of hers on the outside, but she shared the scars of the heart with the rest. She cherished this family, even if it was not hers.

Once alone in their room, Pagne told Bree what Adam had said about her and her mother. "Oh, Pagne, I'm so sorry. He is such a sleazy, old creep. Do you think he really saw her? You know, like he said?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," said Pagne. "I think she had a brain meltdown that night, and if she is on the street, she'll do whatever she has to so she can drink."

"Well, maybe she found someone nice and is doing okay" Bree pretended.

"Yeah, maybe," pretended Pagne, right back. Once they had their clothes laid out, they went into their closet. All the pillows were in there from earlier. They both plopped down and got comfortable. They read the Bible together for about fifteen minutes, and then they then faced each other holding hands and prayed for their family and friends. This was a nightly ritual for these two friends, these sisters. They would meet in their closet before bed, sometimes for a few minutes, and sometimes for hours. It depended on what was going on and how much they needed God. These nightly meetings would continue on for weeks, then months, and even years.

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Lenny was eventually placed into a group-home for boys. The Masters' assured Pagne that they would include Lenny in as many summer activities as possible. The next few months would be filled with camping, swimming, movies, and picnics in the park. Lenny and Brent kept an eye on Pagne and were aware of who was around at all times when at the park. Pagne was flattered with Lenny's protectiveness of her, but she had also been concerned at his anger when he heard about Adam in the park. She was very glad that he had not been there.

Some of the best times were at the old drive-in theatre, where they played older movies. They would load up chairs, blankets, and coolers and go with several other neighboring families. They would park their cars in a semi-circle and set up an outside viewing area in the center of the cars, turning on all the drive-in speakers full blast. It was loads of fun, sitting under the stars watching movies, and it seemed like every time they went, their group got bigger and bigger.

They were three weeks into their summer break when the girls woke to sirens, flashing lights and yelling. They looked out their bedroom window and saw that a house one street over was on fire. They heard Pam and Brent talking in the hall. Bree called out, "Come in here! You can see the fire from our window." Pam and Brent pressed in with them at the window. A lovely home was in flames, and water sprayed over the house like a thunderstorm. The firemen were also spraying the roofs of the surrounding homes. The Masters and Pagne watched, as the fire was slowly put out. Pam put an arm around Pagne's shoulder, not knowing how the fire was affecting her. Pagne did have strong memories about her fire, but she also had a sense of peace. She knew that this fire could not touch her. She prayed that the family in this burning house was safe as well. She continued to watch, until all the vehicles pulled away, and the sun was coming up. The fire had almost taken the whole house. Only part of the first floor was standing, partial walls that darkened to black charcoal was

all that was left of the second floor and roof. Pagne felt exhausted, physically and emotionally. The others had gone to bed earlier when it was clear that the fire was under control and the surrounding houses were safe. Once Pagne was curled up, under her blankets, an overwhelming sense of joy came over her. To further confuse her, there was a powerful whiff of Chantal that lingered for a few moments, then faded away. She drifted off to sleep with a smile firmly planted on her face.

That evening, when Brent came in from work, he had the day's paper. "Come check this out!" he yelled, as he set down his briefcase. It was an article about the fire. Everyone had gotten out safely, because the family's dog had warned the family members, who were all asleep on the second floor. They said that the dog was a hero and absolutely saved the family from serious injury or death. The parents said that they didn't smell anything, and that they knew the batteries needed replacing in the smoke alarms, but kept putting it off. The Humane Society was going to honor their dog, Chance, with an award. Pagne smiled, as she wondered if the dog would even care. She did remember feeling very special when she was honored. She decided that Chance would too.

At dinner that night, Brent said that the fire really started him thinking. He decided to make sure that the fire alarms had fresh batteries. All were working, but he was concerned about how old the batteries might be. He would also check the fire extinguishers. They already had an emergency exit plan that Pam shared with Pagne on her first day in the house, but they reviewed it again, all together. Brent said that he had ordered rope ladders that would be in each bedroom, so they could escape through the windows if the stairs were blocked with fire and smoke. Pagne liked the idea that they would be better prepared, because she did not want to ever experience the panic she had at Mrs. Buttonhook's again.

The twins were returned to their birth mother shortly after school ended for the summer, and Pam had an open invitation to visit them as much as she wanted. She actually developed a close friendship with their mother, Annie. Pam enjoyed playing the big sister. Annie was doing very well and was in her own little apartment. Brent and Pam loved garage sales and found everything she needed to set up her new place. Annie was thrilled with her new start. Pam decided to take a break from taking in more babies for awhile. Pagne figured she also wanted to make sure Annie was successful, just in case the twins needed to come back. Pam had become very attached to Matt and Mattie, but it seemed that Annie, with the help of friends and family, was doing very well.



Chapter 10

Lenny and his mother went to counseling every week. At first he was indifferent, and had agreed to go mainly due to Pagne's urging. Lenny was very surprised how much his mother, Suzanne, was trying. She was direct and honest in their sessions, and she applied the skills the counselor was teaching her. It was too soon, but Lenny was beginning to soften to her efforts. He refused to see his father. Suzanne would go once a month, but didn't discuss it with Lenny, which is how he wanted it, because he still struggled with the fact that she would even visit him at all.

What Lenny didn't realize was that his father, Len, had met some men in prison that were truly good men. One was a pastor that came to visit every week and held meetings. In these meetings, the men could talk, get anger management skills, share their lives and talk about why they had the anger and substance abuse issues. There was a lot of education about the problems of generational abuse and how to end it. Len was beginning to see the destruction he had brought to himself and his family. He knew that Lenny may never forgive him or believe that he was changing. He knew that it would take time, if it was to happen at all. Len began keeping a journal and wrote about his childhood. The abuse, beatings, and neglect that shaped his life. He described the physical fights to defend his youngest sister from his brutal father, including the fight that left his father in a coma for months and then eventually killed him. Len could remember the feel of the heavy hammer in his hand, and the dull thuds in his ears with each blow that made contact with his father's flesh. His father was so strong, so angry. Len couldn't remember how many blows it took before his father stopped beating his sister and turned his wrath on him. The hammer was his only hope of survival. He painfully recalled his mother forcing

him to quit school even though only in his freshman year to support her and his three younger siblings, all the while loathing him for killing her husband. His attempts to numb the memories of all the pain, blood, dreams lost, and hatred with drugs and alcohol. He had mixed emotions of rage and guilt. Len wrote it all down, and the result was a purging that led to healing. The pastor, Pastor Mike, was loving and patient. He created a safe environment where these men could reveal their pain, open their hearts and minds to God, and find redemption through God's grace. This group of men became brothers, fathers, friends to Len. Something he had never known in his life in the real world.

The girls continued their prayers and reading the Bible, and soon they began to see changes in their priorities, their choices. They had finally approached Pam and Brent about the Wednesday night youth program, and Pam reluctantly gave in. She still had a hardness about her position, but knew that these girls needed all the hope and support they could find in life. Also, Richie was able to start attending Sunday church with them, and he loved it. His difficulties were graciously accepted and he was blossoming in the church environment. He actually joined the children's choir, and he decided that he wanted to be more and more involved with activities and events. Brent or the girls took him to these activities, but Richie was getting irritated with the fact that Pam never came to watch him practice or sing. Pam could feel the noose tightening. One Sunday, at the end of August, the church was having an end-of-summer program and picnic for the congregation. The kids choir would be performing, and Richie had a solo. He brought the permission slip home for Pam and Brent to sign, because the parents had to commit to having their child at rehearsals. After Brent signed it, Richie walked over to Pam and said very clearly, "Mom, you will be there to hear me sing my solo, right?" Pam looked at the girls, and they could definitely see her irritation with this dilemma. She took a deep breath and said "Of course, dear, wouldn't miss it." Richie ran past the girls and threw back, "I said it just like you told me, and she's coming." Bree and Pagne ducked out of the room as quick as they could, but they didn't miss Pam's glare.

Lenny had also started attending church and youth with the girls. The group-home he was in was very supportive of their kids having a normal life. They encouraged them to attend church and to be involved in activities with friends. Lenny was uncomfortable at first, but once he got to know some of the kids and the youth pastor, he really felt a connection to the youth group. Bree had prayed the prayer of salvation and took her new life as a Christian very seriously, but Lenny, on the other hand, was still testing the waters and had lots of questions that seemed unanswerable. He still took part in the youth's outreach efforts with Pagne and Bree. Bree had a big heart for the elderly, homeless and needy. Pagne saw that she thrived at these events, and Bree began to look at community supported programs also. She was filling her spare time

more and more. Pagne felt little pangs sometimes, she just wasn't motivated the way Bree was, and Bree started doing things without Pagne. This was the beginning of their personal paths.

It was August tenth, a day Pagne would always remember. She entered her room to put clean laundry away and she heard quiet crying in the closet. She tapped on the door lightly. "Bree? You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, be out in a minute." Pagne hesitated and leaned up to the door to listen. Silence.

"Can I come in? I have laundry to put away." Silence. Pagne opened the door and saw Bree sitting cross-legged on the floor of the closet, in the dark. Her face was flushed, her eyes swollen and a pile of tissues laid next to her. "Bree, what's wrong?" Pagne whispered, as she dropped to her knees. Bree looked into Pagne's face, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. She started hesitantly, "You know I love all of you, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"And I'm very happy here, right?"

"Yes." Pagne couldn't imagine where this was going.

"Today is my mom's birthday."

Pagne looked at Bree in total confusion, no one had told her that it was Pam's birthday. Bree understood immediately. "No, not Pam, my real mom, Linda."

"Ohhhh," now Pagne got it.

"I miss her so much, Pagne, I miss all of them. I don't want Pam and Brent to see me upset. They are such good parents, and I don't want to hurt them."

Pagne moved down and sat next to Bree. "Oh Bree, they don't expect you to forget about your family and your life before. You loved them." Bree leaned into Pagne and wiped her eyes and nose.

"I'm starting to forget, Pagne. I can hardly picture them or remember what my life was like. It feels like I'm losing them again." Pagne hugged her and tried to think of what would help.

"Do you have pictures of them?"

"Yes, a big box here in the closet. I haven't put pictures out because it would upset me every time I looked at them."

Pagne had an idea, and she smelled a hint of Chantal, which confirmed that it was a good idea. "Give me five minutes and come downstairs with your box."

"What? I don't think that's a good idea at all."

"Please trust me, Bree."

Bree looked long into Pagne's face. "Okay, but this could be all bad." Pagne squeezed Bree's hand and headed downstairs. She found Pam and Brent in the family room, and Richie was outside in his tree fort. Pagne asked Richie to come inside and she stood before all three of them. She tried to chose her words carefully, because she wasn't sure that Pam and Brent wouldn't be hurt if they

knew Bree still missed her family so much. "Mom, Brent."

They saw the seriousness on her face. "Everything okay?" Pam asked.

"Bree is upstairs, pretty upset. Today would be her mom's birthday, and she really misses her and her family." Pam moved to go up to her. "Please wait." Pam reluctantly stopped. "I figured we could let her share her family and her memories. She has a box of pictures, and I thought we all could go through them with her, to hear her stories." Pam and Brent were so touched by Pagne's ability to see into the heart of things.

"That sounds like a great idea," Brent confirmed. They all turned to the doorway when they heard Bree come into the family room, clutching the big box. "Need some help with that, hon?"

"No, Dad, I've got it." Pagne's heart ached at the pain she saw in Bree's eyes. Bree stood there, scared to reveal her loss, but knew she needed to speak. "Today would be my mother, Linda's birthday," started Bree. "I miss her." She couldn't say anything else. Brent took the box from her and set it down in the center of the room. Pam and the others sat around the box.

"Bree, we would love it if you would share your family with us," Pam said softly. Bree sat down in front of the box and opened it. On top was a family portrait. Bree began to cry again, as all the loss, fear, pain, regret gushed out of her. Pam and Pagne moved to each side of her, their bodies close for support. Pam took the picture out of the box and looked lovingly at this family. "Your mother was beautiful, Bree. Such a sweet face." She passed the photo to Pagne. "You look like her," Pagne added. Brent reached to take the framed photo and searched the faces of these people, this life that Bree had before them. He couldn't imagine the loss Bree must feel. The pictures started circling within the group. Bree said little at first, just identifying the event, their ages, but as they got deeper into the box, the stories began.

"This one was our first camping trip. Dad built the fire too close, and our tent caught on fire." Bree began to giggle. "He stomped on the tent to put it out and broke all the tent supports. We had to go get a motel room." It was like a second sense, the others knew when they could begin to laugh and ask questions. They watched Bree begin the healing right before their eyes. Richie's questions were so direct and silly, that they all began crying from laughter. They were on the floor for hours. Pagne noticed that Bree pulled out a folded piece of paper and stuck it in her pocket, and she was curious. The mood was much lighter, now everyone had a better picture of Bree's life with these wonderful people. When they had finished, Bree started to put the pictures back into the box, and Pam looked into her lovely face and asked if she would select some of the pictures to be displayed in the family room. Bree looked at Pam with confusion.

"Bree, these photos are part of your life. This home is about all of us, not just about now, but about our histories, and our memories. I think we should

honor that part of your life by remembering out loud, everyday. Let's honor your family." Pagne loved this woman. Bree and Pam set the framed family portrait aside and found six others that were special to Bree. Pam had some extra frames, and they placed her precious pictures on the shelves that surrounded the fireplace. Room was made by tightening up the existing pictures. Bree stepped back and saw her old family mixed in with her new family. She packed up the rest of the pictures and closed the box. Brent offered to take the box upstairs for her. As they walked up the stairs, Brent could be heard telling Bree that he would pick up some photo albums so that she could protect these treasures. He also told her that he was so sorry that she had lost her family. He wished he could thank them for having such an incredible daughter for him to love. The others didn't see what happened next, but could guess that it involved some serious hugging.

Pam stretched and rubbed her neck and knees. "Oh, Pagne, don't get old ... parts just don't work the same." Pagne grinned.

"You think the alternative is better?" asked Pagne.

Pam grinned, "Well, I guess not. Pagne, I think you are wise beyond your years. Your idea is just what Bree needed! I asked her when she first moved in if she had things she wanted to display, but she said no. I knew about the box, but didn't want to push, I figured that it would need to be her timing. You were the perfect person to help her open up. It has been an intense afternoon, and I think we all could use a night out. Richie, want some pizza?"

"YEAH! Can we go where they have the playground and games?"

"Of course. What's pizza without games? Can you go tell Bree and Brent our plans?" asked Pam, as Pagne headed upstairs.

Pagne met Brent in the hall, "Pam says we're going out for pizza."

"Sounds good to me," Brent said. "I'll be down in a few," and he headed into their bedroom. Pagne heard him dial the phone, then say, "Hey Mom, just wanted to call and say hi." Pagne went into her room and saw Bree sitting in the window seat, looking out at the sky filled with a beautiful sunset.

"We are going out for pizza."

"Mmmmmmm," said Bree, "I'm starving." Bree turned and looked at her best friend. "Thanks Pagne."

"Your welcome."

Bree got up from the seat and pulled the paper from her pocket. She laid in on the bed and then picked it back up. "Pagne, I want you to read something." She handed Pagne the paper.

Pagne looked at her, "What's this?"

"My mom lived a few days after the accident. She told a nurse to write down her words for me. She couldn't write it herself." Pagne touched the paper with her fingertips and got it. The brief note that her own mother had left her was important to Pagne, even though she wasn't sure why. She didn't know if

she would ever see her again. This letter had to be a treasure to Bree. She opened it cautiously with respect.

My Dearest Bree:

I am so sorry that you have lost your brother and your daddy so suddenly. I know that I will be joining them in Heaven very soon. You will feel very alone, but know this, my love, we are with you. Always. We will be watching over you and will rejoice when we are all united in Heaven, our family together again.

I wanted to tell you how thrilled your daddy and I were when you were born. We looked into the face of an angel. You were the best present God could ever have given us. It is important that you remember this. You belong to God, you are his precious child. He gave you to us so we could learn how to love deeply, completely. You were such a good sister to your brother. So loving and patient with him. You made us very proud to be your parents.

I pray that you find yourself in a loving family again, a family that you can love. That is my wish for you. I don't want you to think that you will betray us if you love others. God built us with an expanding heart. We can never fill it up. We can fit there with your new family.

I am so sorry that I will not be there with you for the big things and the little things. I am so sorry that I was not strong enough to survive the accident. I tried Bree. I tried so hard, but my time here is done. Yours is not. You have mysteries to solve, emotions to feel, accomplishments to complete and people to love.

I will be watching, sweetheart, excited to see the person you become.

All my love, your Mom

Pagne didn't have words. She ached for this kind of love. She wanted to have a mother that was proud and thankful to have you. Pagne laid the letter on Bree's bed. "That was beautiful, Bree," is all she could say. Bree picked up the letter and slipped it under her pillow. Bree hesitated for a moment, breathed a deep sigh. Then they heard Richie yelling....

"Come on you guys! You're taking too long!"

Pagne headed toward the door, "You heard him. Let's get going." The family headed out to the car and looked forward to an evening of fun. They were determined not to think about loss, pain, tears or regret this evening. They were going to enjoy each other and laugh!

The summer was ending too soon, but Pagne was excited that school was starting. Pagne would be at Bree's school this year. They had become very close, and it was scary how they could finish each others sentences. It felt like they

were wired together, like identical twins can sometimes be. Lenny had agreed to move back with his mom before school started, as they were doing very well and a lot of healing had occurred. Lenny still did not want to have anything to do with his dad, but did secretly read the letters he received every week. These letters told Lenny about his life in prison, and how God was changing him. Being forced to be clean and sober revealed the reality of what a monster he had become. He shared how sorry he was for hurting Lenny and his mother for all those years. Lenny longed to believe the letters, but he couldn't risk his heart, and make himself vulnerable. He knew what his father was, and was convinced it was manipulation again. At the same time, Lenny couldn't explain why the letters were tucked under his mattress, worn from his repeated rereading.

Lenny would be able to continue at his previous school, and life became joyful to some extent. He spent most of his free time with the Masters family and Pagne. Brent Masters was like his big brother, only because he dare not think of him as his father. Lenny cherished the relationship they were building. Their time spent together created a natural bond that allowed Lenny to trust an adult for the first time.

Richie could hardly sleep. It was the night before his big solo. He had fussed over his costume and practiced his song over and over in his fort. He had insisted that no one could come out back and listen. He wanted to surprise them. They all went, including Pam, as a family to support him. When he came out on stage and saw Pam, Brent and the rest of them in the front row, he grinned and glowed. The girls could see Pam's uneasiness, but when the room darkened and the show started, she got swept up in the passion that Richie oozed out of every pore. She was a proud mom, watching her son blossom before her eyes. She had to admit that the church experience and support he received had made a big impact on him. After the show, they all went out to his favorite restaurant for lunch. They decided not to press for the church picnic, because Pam had already made a real effort to be there for Richie. Richie basked in the glory of being a celebrity.



Chapter 11

Several days later, Pam had an appointment with her gynecologist. She always had painful, irregular menstrual cycles. The scarring of the uterine walls made the natural contractions much more difficult. The doctor had advised Pam on several occasions that she should consider a hysterectomy. Pam just could not lose another part of herself, but her menstrual complications were getting worse each year. She suffered even more this last month, and none of her medications were helping. She had decided that the surgery may not be avoidable any longer. This appointment was to discuss, and probably arrange her surgery. Pam dreaded the stirrups, and didn't understand why an exam was necessary if they were just going to remove everything, but the doctor insisted. She was laying on the examining table, and she heard her doctor say, "Hmmmmmm." *Odd response*, she thought.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Well, I'm not sure. I want to run some tests. I'm feeling an enlarging of the uterus, and I want to do a sonogram. If there is a tumor, we will need to consult an oncologist before we do the surgery." Pam felt her throat tighten. She wished now that Brent had come with her.

The doctor ran her tests and asked Pam to wait in the waiting room. It would take a little while to get and review the test results. Pam considered calling Brent, but thought it would be better if she had all the facts first. *She found herself cursing God, asking him why this was happening to her? Hadn't she endured enough?* The nurse came out and asked Pam to follow her into the doctor's office. Dr. Wilson came in, shaking her head. She sat at her desk and peered into Pam's file again and then closed it. "I don't want you to get excited, but Pam, you are pregnant." Pam thought she would pass out. *What, did she hear*

her right?

"I'm pregnant? How can that be? I was told that I would never be able to have children."

"The scarring was significant in your fallopian tubes and the chances of egg fertilization was very low, apparently not totally impossible, however." The doctor became quiet and seemed to struggle to begin again. "Your uterus does not have enough viable surface to support a baby." Pam's head was still reeling. "The chance of this pregnancy coming to term is very likely impossible. Your uterus is extremely compromised, and we believe the lining cannot retain enough blood supply to support a baby to term. A bigger concern is, if the uterus can expand enough without hemorrhaging. That would cause the termination of the pregnancy and a very real risk of death for you." Pam didn't know how to respond. She could hear her doctor, but there was a lag and she was still absorbing the previous statement. "We need to schedule your hysterectomy right away." This pulled Pam back to clarity.

"But, the baby."

"Pam, it is much too risky for you to continue the pregnancy."

Pam felt her whole world falling out from under her. She kept thinking ... *God, how can you be so cruel? To give me a child I can't carry.* "I need to think," Pam said. "I don't want to kill my baby."

"Pam, you have to understand, you run a very high risk of not surviving a pregnancy. If your uterus hemorrhages, you will bleed out in just a few minutes."

"I want to call Brent," she said. She really needed him with her. Dr. Wilson asked the nurse to put in the call to Brent. "Doctor, if I want to continue the pregnancy, what would I have to do?" Pam asked. Dr. Wilson sighed.

"Pam, I really can't support that decision. It is too risky. I have never seen a pregnancy come to term with the amount of tissue damage you have. I can't allow you to risk your life."

Pam quietly sat in the doctor's office with both hands on her abdomen. Brent must have flown to the doctor's office. It seemed like only moments after they called, that he ran into the waiting room. "Pam," he called. "Where's my wife?" Brent was taken back to the doctor's office. He saw the pale, blood drained face of his Pam. She looked as though her mind was a million miles away. "Pam, are you okay? What's going on?" Pam stood and crumbled in his arms. Brent was scared to death. The doctor asked them to have a seat. "Doctor, please tell me what's going on." The doctor explained Pam's condition and the extreme complications she faced if they did not do the surgery.

"Brent, we need to schedule the surgery. It needs to be done this week." Brent's heart was aching so badly. He looked at Pam and saw the detachment in her face. Brent took her hand, she was cold and clammy.

"I want to take Pam home so that we can talk and wrap our heads around

this," he said. "Will she be at risk if we take twenty-four hours to make a decision?" He already knew what they had to do, but he knew Pam. He knew she had to work through this.

"I don't want to delay any longer, we must talk by this time tomorrow. She needs bed rest and absolutely no lifting," the doctor instructed.

Brent helped Pam up and led her out like a shell-shocked soldier coming out of the war zone. They drove home in silence. Brent just felt that this was beyond his capabilities; he didn't know what to say. When they got home, Brent half-carried and half-walked Pam up to their room. He got her undressed and into her pjs. He felt as though he was dressing a child. She moved when he needed her to, but she had checked out. She laid down, and he crawled in bed next to her. Wrapping himself around her, trying to protect her and their baby. "We'll figure this out, Pam. Just give me some time to think." He felt her body begin to shake, the tears began to fall, and her quiet sobs tore out what heart he had left. Pam finally drifted off to a fitful doze. Brent heard the kids coming in from school. He slipped out of their bed, closing the door as he left their room. He quickly made it down the stairs before the girls could make their usual run to their room. "Shhhhhhhhhhhh" he said. "Your mom isn't feeling well and just fell asleep." The girls saw his drawn face and knew something was up. "Can you guys fix yourselves some dinner and help Richie with his homework? I want your mom to get some rest. I'll be in the room with her."

"Sure," they both said, giving each other a panicked look. "Come on, Richie, lets get you a snack before we hit the homework," said Pagne.

"But, what's wrong with Mom?"

"She has a really bad headache," said Brent. "You gotta keep quiet, okay?"

"Okay. Give her a kiss for me."

"Okay, buddy, be good and mind the girls." Richie ran off to the kitchen for cookies and milk. Brent looked at Bree, and saw her concern. "Bree, it's going to be okay. We'll explain tomorrow, but we gotta figure some things out first."

"Okay, Dad, you sure she'll be okay?"

"Yes, hon, I won't let anything happen to Mom."

The girls busied themselves with preparing food and helping Richie with his math and spelling words. They took turns pronouncing his words while he spelled them out loud. They struggled to stay focused, because there was such a darkness over them this night. After dinner was done and the kitchen was cleaned, Bree got Richie ready for bed and met Pagne in their closet. "Oh, Pagne, I just know something awful is happening."

"I feel it too," said Pagne. "Let's pray and ask God to come and keep Mom safe." The girls knelt, held hands, and poured their hearts out to their God. Brent had come out of the room to check on the girls, and when he stepped inside their room, he heard them praying. He sat on the floor outside of the closet, put his head on his knees, letting the tears roll and joining them in prayer. He didn't

know if it would help, but he knew the girls believed. He needed a miracle, and he needed it now. He slipped out of their room when he heard them finish.

He went downstairs and grabbed some fresh fruit, crackers and cheese. He hoped that when Pam woke, he could convince her to eat a little. When he went back into the room, Pam was sitting up. She looked so tiny, so frail. "Hey, sweetheart," he said. "I brought us something to snack on. Can you eat?" She shook her head. He set the tray down on the dresser and moved onto the bed next to her. She laid her head in his lap, and he stroked her head, feeling her body relax. "Pam, I know this is difficult, but we have to talk. You know that I can't lose you. We need to schedule the surgery." Pam didn't comment. "Pam, I need you to help me with this."

"I had a dream," she said. "A wonderful dream. I was walking through the woods and I heard Richie yelling Mommy! Mommy! I turned, and he was running up to me. I felt so blessed to have this child in my life. I couldn't love anyone more than I love him." Brent was relieved. It sounded like Pam was accepting that her motherhood for Richie could be enough. "Then you came up through the trees, with a tiny little girl on your shoulders, our little girl. She was beautiful. My dark hair, but your eyes. The grin on your face said it all, you adored this little creature. You came up to me, and we held each other, all four of us. Bree and Pagne came running up with Lenny, and we all moved on through the forest. Brent I can't give up on her yet."

Brent was speechless, he wanted this dream too. He always desired to have a child with Pam, their child together. He took her hand and held it softly, inspecting each fingernail, and each line in her palm. "I think we need to look at this objectively. We both want this baby, but me and the kids need you. None of them need any more loss in their lives, Pam. I think we need to look at this in a different way. If you had something you wanted to keep and it's broken, what would you do?" After a pause, Pam answered thoughtfully.

"I would call a professional to inspect and evaluate. Once I knew if it could be fixed and what the cost would be to fix it, I could make an educated decision."

"Exactly!" agreed Brent. "Tomorrow morning we will find the best specialist in this area and get an evaluation." Pam held onto Brent, as though her life depended on it, because it did. They drifted off in each other's arms, dreaming about their family, their four children.

Early the next morning, Brent was online, searching for doctors that specialized in risky pregnancies. He found several, impressive doctors and the closest was in Los Angeles, only a few hours from where they lived. Brent called the office at seven o'clock a.m. and left a message that it was urgent. He described the circumstances briefly, and asked them to please get back to them this morning. The girls were up getting dressed for school, when Brent went in and explained that he may be taking Pam into LA to get some more tests done.

They would explain everything as soon as they had more information. He warned them that they wouldn't be back in time to pick up Richie. He gave Bree twenty dollars and told her to order them a pizza, and he hugged them both and headed to the kitchen. He made Pam and himself a cup of coffee, grabbed some muffins and went upstairs to let her know what he had found out. By nine o'clock a.m., he was on the phone with Dr. Olsen's nurse. They said that they could see Pam that afternoon. Brent would need to request that Pam's medical records and a referral from her primary doctor be sent to their office as soon as possible. Brent called Dr. Wilson's office and explained to the nurse what he needed. She put him on hold, and Dr. Wilson picked up the line. Brent didn't care if she was insulted or not, this was his family. Surprisingly, Dr. Wilson was very supportive and said she would cooperate in any way she could. She admitted that she couldn't sleep last night, because she knew how much this baby meant to Pam and Brent. She did remind Brent that this was a long-shot, and that he should prepare himself and Pam for the worst.

The doctor's facility in LA was impressive, large, and beautifully decorated. Brent found a seat for Pam and let the front desk know they were there. They told Brent that there would be a short wait and to have a seat. When he joined Pam, she was looking at all the baby portraits on the walls. Wooden letters above one large grouping said "Our Miracle Babies." They were adorable. Within ten minutes, they were taken back to an examination room. They took Pam's temperature, blood pressure and weight. Brent helped her disrobe and put on the gown they provided. She still was not herself. He could see how her fear was pulling her into a child-like state, and this problem was too big for her to cope with right now. He helped her up onto the exam table. They were prepared to wait some more, but Dr. Olsen came right in. "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Masters. May I call you Brent and Pam?"

"Yes, please," Brent said.

"Okay then, I've reviewed your file, and I have to admit that your case is very difficult, at best. I can make a better evaluation after examining you." Pam assumed the position on the examination table. Brent saw Pam's face tighten with a low groan, as the doctor invaded her cervix and womb. He pressed and pushed. "I want to get another sonogram. We have superior capability with our equipment, and I can get a very clear picture of the damaged tissue and the thickness of the uterine walls. Pam, you can take your feet out of the stirrups, but don't sit up. You will be taken in for the sonogram right away."

He left the office and was quickly replaced with several nurses. They rolled Pam out and told Brent that they would bring her back shortly, and he could wait in the exam room. Brent took a seat and breathed. He liked this doctor, no nonsense, but passionate. He believed this doctor would provide their chance, if there was one. The twenty minutes felt like hours, and Brent realized he hated waiting. Pam was rolled back in and told to stay flat. She was quiet, but not

detached like before. "You doing okay, babe?" he asked.

"Yes, trying not to think too much."

"Yeah, me too." He slid the chair over by her head and leaned in to kiss her.

"We got each other, no matter what," Brent whispered. She smiled that goofy "I love you" smile that warmed his heart.

The doctor came back in with a very serious expression. He sat down looking at both of them, not speaking. "Okay, here it is," he started. "All logic would say that this pregnancy cannot succeed, that you should get the hysterectomy and play it as safe as possible." They looked at each other, hearts breaking in unison. "But, I would guess that you two are fighters and are capable of not playing it safe." They both nodded their heads. "I must tell you that attempting what I am proposing has real risks. We can be very careful, but we cannot promise that everything will be fine. Pam, you must know that this pregnancy will put your life at risk. With that said, I am going to explain the procedure and then you and Brent will need to make a decision. You will need to be on medications that will build up the healthy uterine tissue. There are side effects. You will have swelling and headaches, and you will be on complete bed rest, only getting up to use restroom. Move your bed as close as possible to the bathroom. You will need a shower chair, no standing for any period of time. No baths, because climbing in and out of tub is too risky. You will have a lot of abdominal pain as the baby grows, as the strain on the scar tissue will be intense. I read in your chart that you are already experiencing pain; it will get much worse. We can help with some pain medication, but it will not be as strong as you'd like. We can't put the baby at risk." Pam nodded in agreement.

"I can bear anything to save this baby," she whispered.

"A specially-trained RN will give you weekly exams at home to monitor the stress on your uterus. If your uterus does not fail, you can remain home until the beginning of your seventh month. You will then need to come to the facility and finish out your pregnancy under our constant supervision. You will be here for the seventh and eighth month. If we see that the uterus is compromised, we will do an emergency cesarean delivery. Your survival is primary, and we will not be able to delay to protect your baby." He paused at this point to allow this revelation to sink in. "If you carry through your eighth month, we will deliver through cesarean, because your uterus will not be able to endure the strain from the ninth month, labor or deliver vaginally. The baby will be premature, but this can be a very viable age with assistance from our excellent staff. We cannot risk allowing you to go to term; your uterus will not expand that much without tearing. Now you must realize, this is best case scenario. If there is any bleeding, we must do a cesarean, even if the baby is not viable. You both must sign a release that the mother's life is primary. We also will need permission to perform a hysterectomy at the time of the cesarean, as the uterus will be extremely compromised after the pregnancy. If you have an

issue with any of these conditions, we cannot provide our services." Dr. Olsen took a moment to breathe. "Now, this is a lot to take in, and you do have some time, but not a lot. We need to start the medications right away, or else the baby will not have enough blood supply to survive. Again, I must warn you that this is not a logical choice. It requires a lot of self sacrifice, strong desire to beat the odds, sheer will and it can't hurt to have faith in something bigger than you. I'll give you both some time to discuss." Dr. Olsen left them alone in the exam room.

Brent didn't know what to do. He didn't want to risk losing Pam, but he also knew that her loss of this baby would be heartbreaking for her. He looked at her, knowing that this had to be her decision. Pam laid there, with her eyes closed, barely breathing. "You know, Brent, when I was a little girl, and I had to live through all those months of humiliation and pain, I made it. I survived. If I can survive that hell, I can do this for our precious child."

Brent squeezed her hand and kissed her forehead softly. "Difference is, I'm here with you," assured Brent. She squeezed his hand back.

"Yes you are." They made the arrangements to begin the treatment.

When they got home, Brent warned the girls that they would have a family meeting shortly, but first he had to get Pam up to their room and in bed. He would call the kids in when they were ready. They heard furniture being moved across the floor and looked at each other, confused. After about thirty-minutes, Brent called them all upstairs into their room. He motioned for them all to sit at the foot of the bed. Pam was actually grinning. "Well, it appears that I'm having a baby" Pam announced. The girls were dumbfounded.

"What? How Mom? You said you couldn't have a baby," asked Bree.

"I know, I didn't think I could either, but there is a little baby growing inside of me." Brent put his hand on her shoulder to unite them for the tough part.

"Okay, this is the thing. This is going to be a very difficult pregnancy for your mom. She has to stay in bed, except to use the toilet and shower. She has to get lots of rest, and she can't go to school functions, the grocery store, nowhere. She can't drive. When she's closer to having the baby, she will have to stay in the hospital in Los Angeles."

"But we can talk on the phone," Pam assured them, while looking at Richie's panicked face.

"What that means for all of us is that we will be doing all the cooking, shopping, housework, laundry, everything. We also need to keep the house quieter than normal, so Mom can rest. Mom might be grouchy some days because she is hurting, but we have to be nice to her. She is working hard to keep our baby safe and needs our help so she doesn't worry about us or the house. Can we all handle this?" Pagne and Bree quickly agreed, but Richie was quiet. Brent scooped up Richie and suggested that they go downstairs and have some ice cream. Brent wanted some time alone with Richie to see how he was

handling things. The girls stayed with Pam.

"Oh, Mom, how exciting. Our own little baby. It's a miracle."

Pam looked at the girls very closely, "Yes, I do believe it is a miracle," she said quietly, but Pagne sensed that there was more.

"Mom," Pagne hesitated, "Mom, is this dangerous for you?"

Pam chose her words carefully, so not to panic Pagne and Bree. "Yes, there is some risk, but the doctors are watching me very closely. I know that my doctor is very good, and he knows what he is doing. It's not going to be easy, and I'll probably have times that I'm in pain and crying, but we are choosing to give our baby a chance to have a life with us. I am willing to do what it takes. So be patient with me, and remember that I love you both very much."

"We can handle the house, Mom," said Bree.

"I want you both to know that there will be times that I will need to rest, but that doesn't mean we can't hang out in here together. I figure we can watch a lot of movies, maybe you guys will read to me? I can help Richie with homework, at least for awhile. Brent is putting a big-screen TV in here, so we can make this a family room." They discussed lots of ideas to make this new arrangement work. They could see that Pam was fighting sleep, so they kissed her, told her again how excited they were about the baby, and left her to rest.

Brent and Richie had gone into the family room. Brent laid on his back on the floor and Richie sat on his stomach. "Okay, buddy, what are you thinking?" Richie looked away.

"You'll think I'm a baby if I say."

"No I won't, Richie, I want to know."

"I don't know if I want this baby. What if you and Mom like it better than me?"

"That's not possible, Richie. Parents have this special magic that lets them love each child the same amount. They don't run out of love. We've had babies here before and you weren't worried."

"Yeah but they weren't here forever. I knew that I was your real kid." Brent saw how fragile he was.

"We are nutso about you. Nothing is going to change that. You will have a special job when the baby is here, so I hope we can count on you."

"Special job? Me?"

"Yep, only you can do it."

Richie grinned, "What's this special job?"

"You have to be the big brother. Bree and Pagne can't do it" Richie started to puff up.

"Oh yeah, I'm the only boy kid."

"That's right. You know what big brothers get to do?"

"No, what?"

"They get to teach the little ones things, important things. They get to be

like policemen; they protect them. Little kids love their big brothers and want to be just like them." Richie liked the idea of that. Brent and Richie spent the next hour just wrestling, tickling and laughing.

The girls came down to join them. They worked as a team, making soup and salad for dinner. Brent managed to get Pam to eat. After watching a movie, Brent told Richie that he needed to get his PJs on and get in bed. He could read for a half an hour, but then lights out. "Remember Richie, Mom needs to sleep so I need you on mute, okay?"

"Sure, Dad." Richie tiptoed out of the room. Brent's attention then turned to the girls.

"A lot of the burden is going to be put on you two. Think you can handle it or should I bring in some help?"

"Let us try, Dad," insisted Bree. "If we all pick up after ourselves, it shouldn't be bad."

"Okay, I know Mom would be more comfortable with just the family, if we can do it. But be honest with me, if it becomes too much and starts affecting school or your sanity, tell me."

"Okay," they both agreed.

"Now, I was thinking that we could come up with a schedule. One week, one of us cooks and cleans the kitchen, and another cleans the house and the other does laundry. Then we rotate. We can have Richie help with making sure Pam has what she needs. I will take care of the shopping, so just give me a list of what you need for your week, but let's keep meals simple. Did Mom tell you we're setting up our room so we can all spend time with her in there?"

"Yes, she said you were putting a big-screen TV in there."

"Yep, but this needs to be the rule; if she gets tired, we clear out and finish the movie or our visiting later. There will be no complaining, and don't bring problems to her. Run them through me first, and I'll decide if she needs to be involved. Her health comes first. I am also getting baby intercoms, so she can call us when we are downstairs. I'm moving in a larger table by the bed, so we can keep some things within her reach. I want water there at all times, tissue, a phone, and whichever books she wants. Her nature is not to stay still, so we need to make sure we're all there for her."

"Got it," they both agreed.

"This is not going to be easy," Brent said with dread. "Not so much the house and taking care of her, but she is going to be miserable and in pain. A lot of grace will be needed." They knew that they could take whatever she dished out. "I'm taking a few days off to get us organized. I'm relying on both of you to work out the schedule. We all will need to make time for Richie. This is going to be more difficult for him." Brent spoke with a quiet seriousness, "Girls, you need to know that there is a real risk for Pam. If you see bleeding, I don't care how little, call 911. Got it? Her uterus can tear and she could bleed to death very

quickly, so no hesitation. Call 911 first and then me.”

“Okay, Dad.” Bree saw the depth of the situation in his eyes.

The girls somberly went up to their room. They waited for the other to suggest prayer in the closet but both were emotionally exhausted. Instead they said goodnight, murmured a prayer for Pam, and the baby, and fell into a deep, but troubled sleep. They both had dreams about everything from flashing red lights, to smiling babies, to blood. They tossed and turned all night.

The family soon became a well, oiled machine. After a week or so, they had all the kinks worked out. Brent was right, Pam staying in bed and remaining sane was the biggest hurdle. Each of the kids each had their “Pam-Time.” They would talk or read to her, because Pam loved to be read to. Each one picked out a book and would read a portion during their time. Brent got a hospital tray table on casters that they could use to play board games. They could roll it over Pam’s lap when it was her turn, then back out for theirs. Pam found just the right configuration of pillows to lift her up enough to be comfortable, but still at a recline. It frustrated her that she tired easily and needed to lay flat on and off throughout the day. “Wish we had gotten the adjustable bed instead of this number bed, it would make it so much easier,” she complained. Brent came home that night with a device that went under the mattress. She had a remote that filled an air bag wedge that raised her up at an incline. When she wanted to lie down, a release button let the air out slowly. It was perfect. Brent was able to find several other items that made Pam’s life in her bed more comfortable. Lenny spent a lot of time with the family. He helped with the yard-work and some of the cooking. He was getting pretty good, and Pagne loved sharing the kitchen with him. He didn’t participate in the family time in Pam’s room, because it seemed too personal, her bedroom and the presence of her pain hovering.

They all cherished the family time. They moved the pillows from the window seat into the room, so the kids could lay comfortably on the floor, because not all of them could fit on the bed. They started a ritual of movie selection. They did rock, paper, scissors, until one man was standing. Everyone groaned when it was Richie. He only chose from two movies: Superman and Batman. They became sick of these movies in a short time, so they decided to make a game out of it. They each selected a character and said their lines with them. The one who did the best that night got the honorary possession of a canned ham, and Pam was the judge. It was so funny that they truly coveted the ownership of the ham. Everyone but Richie understood the significance of the ham. Richie just accepted it as the trophy for beating out the others.

They built so many wonderful memories in these months of Pam’s pregnancy, but there were also sad ones. Pam had pain from the beginning, but each month it increased dramatically. She would whimper at times and cry. The girls took turns sitting with her, refreshing the cool, wet cloth she used on her

face. They would pray silently, asking for God to give her the strength to endure, and to bless her and this baby. Sometimes, Pam would cry out for Brent, and he would have the girls take Richie to the park, anything to get the kids out of the house. Pam would need privacy to just let go and scream, curse, and let Brent hold her. Pam was a person that complained very little, so when she did, you knew it was bad.

The weekly exams showed that Pam was doing well, and the baby was strong. They increased her pain meds gradually, but couldn't give her anything strong enough to eliminate all pain. The pain and pregnancy were extremely draining on Pam's body, and the nurse decided that she needed more nutrients. They inserted an intravenous drip, and she also had to drink fortified liquids that replenished her system.

They began to see the wear on Brent's face. He was struggling to work, sleep, and keep the family functioning. The girls kept a beeper on them at all times, especially during the day at school in case Pam needed them. The school had given them permission to leave campus if she paged.

One afternoon, a car they didn't recognize was in the driveway. They ran in, thinking the worst. Sitting in the living room was Brent and an attractive, older woman. Bree ran up and hugged her while calling out "Grandma!" She squeezed and held Bree.

"My, Child, you have gotten so tall and pretty. Let me look at you." She stepped back from Bree while holding her hands. "Lovely, just lovely."

"When did you get back?" Bree asked.

"Just last week. I took care of some things at the house and headed down." Maxine worked with Physicians Without Boundaries. She was a retired nurse and spent most of her time traveling the world, assisting doctors that volunteered their services for the needy. This grand woman then turned her attention toward Pagne. She grinned, "I know who you are, you're Pagne. I'm Brent's mother, and you can call me Grandma." Pagne reached out to shake her hand. "Oh no, you don't get past my hug, young lady." Grandma Maxine, grabbed Pagne and hugged her firmly. Pagne loved the scent of her.

"Have a seat girls," Brent instructed, "Richie is in with Mom." The girls weren't sure what was going on, but sat down and focused on Brent. "I am concerned about Pam being here alone while you kids are in school, and I want to be with Pam when she is in the hospital. I called my mom last week, and she said she could stay with us until the baby is born," Brent explained.

Grandma Maxine cleared her throat. "You are all doing an incredible job, and I won't interfere. I will primarily be here to help care for Pam during the day, so please assign me chores that will lighten your burdens when you're home. I can take a week of cooking if you'd like, I'm a good cook." The girls relaxed. While the girls welcomed the help, they had become the women of the house and didn't want to be reduced to kids again, not until Pam was back in

her rightful reign. They both had become very protective of their home and family.

For the next several months, Grandma Maxine supported the family and took the burden off the girls. They were able to attend after-school functions, attend their church's youth events and focus on school and homework. She did this with such grace and allowed the girls to feel that they were critical in the functioning of the household. Pam adored Grandma Maxine, and they spent a lot of time chatting and laughing. When the pain would get severe and Brent wasn't there, Grandma Maxine would hold her and soothe her like a small child in her mother's arms. Pam needed this surrogate mother. Pam appeared to be weaker and weaker as the pregnancy progressed. The family spent fewer evenings in the room, due to Pam's exhaustion and need for sleep. Even the frustration of being bed-bound left her, and she cherished any sleep she could manage.

Grandma Maxine was a church-goer. She and the girls would get up early Sunday mornings, make a wonderful breakfast for everyone, and would leave Pam in Brent's care while they attended services. Grandma Maxine was bold about her love for Jesus, and the girls pumped her for understanding of the Bible and God's plan for mankind. They would sit in the backyard for hours, and while Grandma Maxine didn't have answers for every question, she was incredibly knowledgeable. Pagne loved these conversations that sometimes turned into debates. What they did not consider was that Pam's window overlooked the deck and she could hear the sharing, the explanations, and the joy of their conversations. She heard their prayers for her and the baby. Pam strangely found some peace.

One evening, Pagne looked in to check on Pam and found her awake and actually feeling decent. She was rubbing her belly and talking to the baby. "Pagne, come here quick!" Pagne moved over next to her. "Put your hand here. Feel that?" Pagne almost jumped.

"I do, is that the baby?"

Pam grinned, "Yep, trying to make more room I think. Imagine that it has to be very crowded in there." Pagne left her hand on Pam's stomach and thrilled with each wave of movement that she felt. Pagne sat on the edge of the bed, sharing this miracle with Pam. "How you holding up, hon? Guess you didn't bargain on this drama when you moved in." Pagne looked at Pam with such affection.

"I'm fine. I just pray that you and the baby will be okay." Pam put her hand on Pagne's and they shared the excitement of the baby's life together. After a few minutes of silence, Pagne began to speak. "Remember that day in the closet, when you told me about your life?"

"Yes," acknowledged Pam.

"I really wanted to talk to you about mine, but I just didn't think I could

without totally losing it. I felt like I was just barely hanging on."

"I know, Pagne, I have felt those feeling so often." Pam squeezed her hand.

"I don't want you to think I didn't trust you."

"Hon, pain is tough, and we all work through it in our own time. I just hope you know that you can talk to me whenever you're ready."

"Would now be a good time?" asked Pagne. Pam patted the bed next to her, and Pagne slipped off her shoes and laid down on her side facing Pam. Pagne poured out her heart and shared every terrible detail. Pam quietly listened, nodding when appropriate, and tenderly touching Pagne when she saw the pain in her eyes. It felt like hours, but it was only forty minutes. *How could so much pain be described in such a short time?*, thought Pagne.

"Pagne, you are a survivor, like me. You have a strong spirit and heart. It is important that you hear me. Your value is not determined by others, especially your mom. She is broken, and what she thinks is affected by her brokenness. You are a lovely young woman, inside and outside. I know that you will accomplish many wonderful things in your life. Who you are and will be is not controlled by who your family was. Understand?" Pagne believed her, and trusted her.

Pam had bad days and tolerable days. The family loved on her, fretted over her, and prayed. Brent would secretly talk to God, promised him everything and anything to save his wife and child. He remained strong for Pam and the girls, but at times couldn't contain his tears when he heard his wife's pain. He would hold her for hours, rubbing her head, and her belly, soothing her with his touch and words. He would urge her to hold on, as she was only a week away from going to the hospital. They were close. "Soon, we will have our precious baby, soon," he would whisper softly in her ear.

Saturday morning, Pagne tapped on Pam's bedroom door. She had breakfast for her. Pam wasn't eating much, so they tried tempting her with the foods she loved. This morning, Grandma Maxine had made Belgian waffles with fresh berries and whipped cream. Pam's favorite. Pagne didn't hear a response to her knock, so quietly opened the door and slipped in. The drapes were pulled closed, and the room was very dark and oppressive. Pagne noticed the scent immediately, she hadn't smelled her angel in months. "Mom, I have your breakfast," Pam did not acknowledge her presence in the room, and Pagne became alarmed. Pagne set down the tray and moved closer to Pam, and heard her breathing. Pagne would have felt a sense of relief, but the scent of her angel was stronger with each moment. Pagne knew that the angel was preparing her. She nervously turned on the light and looked at Pam. She was so drawn, so pale. The pregnancy and pain were definitely taking their toll on Pam's body. "Mom? You awake?" Pagne touched her shoulder, and Pam still didn't respond. Pagne began to panic, she pulled the blanket off of Pam's full, round belly, and only remembers hitting the floor while Brent and the others raced into the room in

response to her screams. There was blood, lots of blood.

The rest of the morning was a blur. She remembered Grandma Maxine pulling her out of the room, speaking in soothing tones, trying to get her to calm down. Bree grabbing Richie, half-dragging and half-carrying him into the girls' room. Brent on the phone, frantically talking to the emergency operator. Then flashing lights were out front, and people pushing their way into Pam's room. She was swept away and howling down the street before clarity could even surface. Brent was in the ambulance with Pam. They wanted him to meet them at the hospital, but he wouldn't leave Pam alone. The EMT's could see the determination in his set jaw and eyes.

Grandma Maxine kept her arm around Pagne, once they were in the bedroom with Richie and Bree. They both looked like scared deer, facing the end of a hunter's gun. Grandma Maxine motioned for them to follow her into the closet. The girls had shared the intimacy of their closet with Grandma Maxine. The four of them sat in the closet, snuggled together. Only Pagne was aware of her angel. The lovely, ominous smell remained. Then the crying started, as they held on to each other. Grandma Maxine started praying first. Her voice was low and struggling. Pagne joined her first, then Bree, and then Richie. They poured out their hearts and their fears to God in that closet.

They took Pam to the closest emergency room. Dr. Olsen was being airlifted to meet them. The EMT's had called ahead, and the surgery room was being prepared. This would need to be a very quick, organized effort if Pam and the baby were to survive. Pam was not conscious of her world, she was elsewhere. Brent could feel her body, hear her breathing, hear the baby's heartbeat on the monitor, but he was alone. He was unable to bring them to him, and unable to protect them. Once they reached the emergency area, Pam was taken directly to surgery for prep. Brent was led to a private room and was assigned his own nurse. Molly Ambrose. She would be his connection to Pam and keep him updated on her progress. Brent felt very small and very ineffective. He should have said no. He should have made Pam understand that he could not risk her, not even for their child, but that was a long time ago, and he now had the reality of their decision to survive.

Pam was in surgery for two hours. They did a cesarean and immediately did a complete hysterectomy. She had lost a lot of blood, and they were doing everything they could to stabilize her. Pam survived the surgery, but was struggling to remain alive. The baby, Amanda, was premature and was taken immediately to the ICU for infants, and she was placed in an incubator. The doctors could not give Brent a prognosis, because Amanda was much too early, and they could not predict her outcome. They were making every effort to keep this little baby alive. Brent was finally taken to view Amanda once she was stabilized. He was struck with the realization of how small his beautiful daughter was and how serious of a struggle she had ahead of her. Brent loved

her instantly, but found himself wanting to guard his heart. Loving her and losing her could be more than him or Pam could endure.

Molly came and got him and took him to ICU to be with Pam. He saw the sparkle in her eyes when he came into the room. She was extremely weak and her words came with difficulty. "Did you see her yet? Is she beautiful?"

"Yes, my love, she is so precious."

"I wish we could hold her."

"Soon, Pam, soon," Brent whispered with a hollow promise. He sat next to her and held her hand in his, and then he broke, as the aching sobs rolled out of his heart. "I thought you were gone; I thought I had lost you." He laid his head down on the bed, and he sobbed, while she hushed him softly and stroked his head with her free hand. The nurses stepped into the doorway and pulled back when they realized he was calming down. They had seen this anguish so many times. They knew that in most cases, it gushed and slowed just as quickly as it had begun. They left them with their privacy for as long as they could.

Pam drifted off to sleep. The doctor came in and motioned Brent to the hallway. "Well, we were very lucky that Pam and the baby survived. She hadn't been bleeding long, thank goodness. There was a major tear in the uterine wall, and if she hadn't been discovered when she was, she would not have survived. However, we are very concerned about her general health. The strain from the pregnancy has compromised her heart and liver, so we will be watching her very closely. I don't want to discourage you, but I think it would be wise to have everything in order. In case" Brent looked at the doctor in disbelief. "But it's over, Pam lived. The baby is alive."

"Yes, but Pam is very weak and your baby is in critical condition. We are doing everything possible to keep them both alive, Brent."

Brent went out to the hospital gardens and walked in silence, trying to get the depth of their circumstance to sink in. He knew he needed to call the family, but didn't know what to say. Brent dialed his mom and explained briefly what he knew. She assured him that they were all alright. Brent hung up, and went back to the nursery and watched Amanda. He then headed back to Pam's room to stand watch through the next chapter of his life with her. She didn't stir when he came in. He settled in the chair and was amazed that he was so tired. He drifted off.

"Brent, you awake, baby?" Brent opened his eyes to see Pam looking at him.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm awake. How you feeling?"

"Kinda odd I guess, almost like I'm water logged. My arms and legs feel so heavy."

"Are you in any pain?"

"No, these drugs must be strong, I'm not feeling anything. Have you heard any more about Amanda?"

"Amanda is stable, but she's got a struggle ahead of her."

"Did you call the kids?"

"Yes, hon, I talked to my mom when you got out of surgery. The kids were scared but are doing much better. They are excited to come see you and Amanda."

"Those girls are going to spoil her rotten! You're going to have to get a second job to pay for all the shopping!" Brent smiled. He sure hoped that would be the way it all played out. "Am I going to be okay?" Pam asked quietly.

Brent touched Pam's nose with his finger. "You'll be fine, you're not leaving me with all these kids! You gotta get well quick. Lots of mothering to do!"

Pam smiled a very content smile. "Sounds good to me," she agreed.

The doctor came in and explained the tests they would be performing. "Brent, she is going to be tied up for several hours. Why don't you go home, get a shower, and some hot food, and spend some time with your kids. You can stay all evening and all night when you come back." Brent reluctantly agreed. Brent gave Pam a loving kiss on her lips, then her nose, then her forehead.

"Check on Amanda before you leave," whispered Pam. He nodded yes and stepped out of the room so the aids could get in. He watched them roll Pam out, down the hall and through the double doors. He went by the nursery and watched Amanda moving and kicking. She appeared to be very strong for being so tiny. He headed home.

When Brent walked in the door, he smelled something wonderful coming from the kitchen. He had called his mom from the parking lot and she had gotten everyone helping in the kitchen. Brent realized that he was hungry when he smelled the food, but he didn't know how much he could actually eat. His stomach was in a huge knot, coiled in his gut. He had taken some pictures of the baby with his cell phone. They girls ohhhed and ahhhhed when he showed them. Richie was very quiet and just wanted to sit on Brent's lap. He tried to assure them that Pam and the baby were doing fine, but Pagne knew differently. The smell had not left. It wasn't as strong, but she knew this was not over. She knew that her angel wanted her to have her strength, to be ready, but for what?

Brent was able to eat more than he expected. There was grilled steak, mashed potatoes and fresh pea pods. His mom was a great cook, and he did enjoy the flavors and the warmth the food brought to his belly. He took a long, hot shower, letting the water roll over his head and back. He turned the shower head to a hard massage setting, and he let it pound on his neck and shoulders, trying to work out some of the tension. He allowed himself to cry, knowing that no one could hear him. After shaving, brushing his teeth, and putting on some fresh clothes, he headed into the bedroom. Everyone was piled on the bed, watching Batman. Richie had drifted off, but the rest kept watching the movie anyway. As Brent got ready to leave, he assured them that he would call as soon as he knew anything. They surrounded him with hugs and kisses for Pam.

Before he reached his car, he heard his name called. "Brent," it was Pagne.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Can you give this to Mom for me?" It was a folded piece of paper. He looked into her blue eyes, so full of concern.

"Yes, of course." He placed the note in his pocket and patted it. "Just as soon as I see her."

"Thanks, Dad," Pagne said, as she turned back to the house. Brent smiled a sad smile. How long he had hoped to hear her call him dad, but now he didn't know if it was wise.

When Brent got back to the hospital, the sky was darkening. A storm must have been coming their way. Brent shivered and tried not to take it as an omen. He entered the hospital and sat with Amanda for a short time, memorizing every detail. He had brought his camera this time and took several pictures to share with Pam. He made his way back to Pam's room, feeling anxious and full of dread. She was awake, but very groggy. *She must really be getting some good drugs*, he thought. Brent was just thankful that her pain was gone. She grinned at him and told him how good he cleaned up. "Mmmmmmmmmmm you smell good too."

"Nothing but the best for my babies." He sat down and showed her the pictures of Amanda while they waited for the doctor to meet with them. "Oh yeah, Pagne wanted me to give you this." He handed Pam the paper. As she started to open it, Dr. Olsen walked into the room, and Pam set the note on her table so she could focus on what the doctor was going to reveal.

Brent and Pam were profoundly hit by the severity of her complications. The doctor tried to be encouraging, but the pregnancy and blood loss had ravished her. There was permanent heart damage, and the blood transfusions were not as effective as they hoped. Brent and Pam shared that quiet moment when there are no words. The doctor had been brutally honest, and Brent knew that if he spoke, he wouldn't be able to contain himself. He didn't want Pam to think he had lost hope. The doctor said they would know more in the next forty-eight hours. Pam drifted into a fitful sleep, while Brent watched her, wanting her home with him, in their bed, making love with no pain or fear. He tried watching some TV but nothing held his attention. He made several walks to look at Amanda and to the vending machines for something to stuff down the screams with. At about one o'clock a.m., he finally fell asleep, with Pam's hand nestled in his.

The nurse came in about two o'clock, and woke Pam up while checking her vitals and drip levels. The nurse asked if she needed anything. "Maybe some water, if that's okay."

"How about some ice chips. They want to limit fluids until tomorrow, because they could upset your stomach."

"That would be fine," said Pam, feeling lightheaded and relaxed. She saw

Brent sleeping soundly in the chair. She knew his back would be killing him tomorrow, but she needed him there. Pam remembered the note, so she opened it quietly so not to wake Brent.

Dear Mom,

I was so scared when I found you today. I thought that I had lost you. I know that you are very sick and I am praying for you, very hard. I hope that doesn't make you mad. I know you think God doesn't care and maybe isn't real, but I just wanted to share something with you. I so needed to be loved. I knew God loved me, but I needed a real person. A mom who could hug me. God gave me you and Brent, Dad. Oh yeah, I decided to call him Dad today. I hope he doesn't poop his pants or anything like that. I've been wanting to say it for a long time, but just didn't know how to start.

I don't know how to say this so I apologize if it sounds bad. I realized today that any of us could die. A car wreck, sickness, and what scared me more about you maybe being dead today was that I didn't know if I would get to be with you again in Heaven. Remember how I told you about the cartoon and the movie. I love you so much and want you in the movie too. I want to run around Heaven and do all the wonderful things there with you. I can live with losing you for a little while but not forever.

Your daughter, Pagne

PS: If you want to be in the movie, just ask Jesus in your heart and ask him to forgive all your sins. I don't know of any sins because you're wonderful, but just in case.

Pam realized that tears were rolling down her cheeks. She read and reread Pagne's note, feeling surprisingly peaceful. She found the pen by her bed and managed to write a few lines, hopefully legible. She closed her eyes, trying to picture Heaven with her family. She was drifting off, muttering, feeling light and smelling the most incredible smell. *Was it Pagne's angel?* was her last conscious thought before she fell into a deep sleep. Dreams of a beautiful place, with her family.

Brent woke up with a start when the obnoxious beeping finally punctured into his dreams. He was being told to move back. Nurses and doctors surrounded Pam. He had known, Pam would not survive.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. The word "Chapter" is written in a cursive script, and the number "12" is in a large, bold, serif font. They are enclosed within a circular frame that has a floral or leaf-like pattern on its left side. The entire graphic is rendered in a light gray color.

Chapter 12

It would be several months before Amanda could come home. She was doing better each day, but she was born incredibly early. Her lungs and several other organs were just not ready to be independent of Pam. Brent tried to look at the positives of having a child of his own, but it felt hollow without Pam. They were attending her memorial service today. The hours and days following Pam's death were a blur; he knew he did all the required things, signed all the necessary papers, and informed all the necessary people. He wanted to be strong for all of them, especially Richie, but he was on autopilot. He knew he was breathing, talking, eating some and dozing, but nothing felt real. The kids were just now able to hold back the tears. Brent was sure that there just weren't any left; they were all cried out and now the numbness took control. Nature kept them functioning.

Bree and Pagne helped Richie with the finishing touches. He normally would have been so excited to have a man suit, but even he knew that this was the outward wrapping of horrific pain and sorrow. Brent noticed that the kids were kind to each other, but each was isolated in their own pain, unable to comfort the others. They had all decided to accept Pam's wishes to be cremated. None of them wanted her remembered the way she was when she died; so drawn, and so much of a shadow of herself. Instead they filled the raised platform in the large banquet room with picture after picture of Pam. Some were of her alone, and many more with the family. Sadly, there was nothing prior to her college years, except one picture of her with her brother. It must have been one of their supervised meetings. They were both in their very early teens. Pam and Peter stood stiffly next to each other, an emptiness in their eyes.

Lenny positioned himself between Pagne and Bree during the memorial.

He needed to be there for each of them. Brent focused his support on Richie. Brent's extended family flew in to give Brent their support.

Pastor Tim and Eddie were there. Pagne knew that they didn't have the answer to the big question: Why? It made no sense. But having them there did mean a lot to her. At least they didn't forsake her, as God had. Pagne hoped that her angel didn't reveal herself. She didn't think she could feel anything but anger toward Chantal.

Several of Pam's friends and associates from the foster agency spoke about Pam's capacity for love and selflessness. Matt and Mattie's mother shyly shared the support Pam had given them. She would always be grateful for the love Pam had shown her and her children, the continued support once she had her children back. Once everyone had spoken, there was not a dry eye in the room. Brent and the girls wanted to share their Pam at the memorial, but the intensity of their loss would not allow them to speak. Amanda was still in the hospital, and sadly, the family was relieved that she was not there. It was as if the pain and anger needed to be flushed before she was brought into the family. They all loved her, but right now, she was a reminder of their loss. However, they didn't hold her responsible, because they all knew that Pam made the choice to give Amanda a chance. Amanda was an innocent bystander, just like the rest of them. But they needed Pam's memorial to be the family core, the unit that knew and loved Pam so deeply. Amanda would never know her, and that thought added to the ache in Pagne's heart. After the last person left the memorial, the family stood there, not really knowing what to do next. They hadn't planned food, because they knew they could not deal with the requirements of an ongoing event: being polite, not falling apart, and the sadness in everyone's face. Brent finally took the lead and guided his grieving family to their car. They drove home in silence.

Brent's mother was going to stay permanently and help with the baby. Brent hadn't thought out all the details yet, but knew he couldn't work all day and expect the girls to be Amanda and Richie's mother. They had their schooling and lives of their own, but Brent didn't want a stranger raising Amanda. His mother was the perfect solution and she was very willing to love and care for her grandchild. She would go back to Washington in the morning, and close up the house and get things situated up there. She would be back before Amanda was released from the hospital. Brent wasn't sure how they would all fit in their home, but knew that it was the only way to survive this nightmare.

The kids had been excused from school since Pam's death. Brent knew they needed to get back to their routines and lives, but he needed Pagne and Bree to have another day off with Richie back at school. They needed to work out the details of the house. The home was spacious but not suited for so many people of different ages. Richie had his room, the nursery was ready for the baby, and the girls had their room. Grandma Maxine would be moving out of her

temporary room in the nursery, into the master bedroom, because Brent couldn't sleep in there anymore, not without Pam. Brent and the girls needed to move Brent's clothes to their huge closet so Grandma Maxine could move her things in. They would also have to pack up Pam's items. Brent knew that they would only get through that together.

Brent wandered the house at night and would finally pass out on the couch when exhaustion finally hit him or on Richie's floor, next to his bed when Richie would cry at night. Having Brent in his room would calm him down, and allow Richie to go to sleep. The floor was uncomfortable, but Brent found some peace in listening to the rhythm of Richie's breathing. Brent felt displaced in his own home, lost and abandoned. Why did he let her take the risk? He didn't think he could ever forgive himself.

Several days after the memorial, Brent's mother and the rest of his family left for the airport. Grandma Maxine would be returning in a few days with the rest of her belongings. Brent drove Richie to school and spoke briefly with his teacher. "Please call me if there are any issues," he instructed. "I don't know how he will adapt to being back at school."

"Don't worry, Mr. Masters, we will be very sensitive to his situation." Brent went back to the car and saw Richie at the cyclone fence, fingers wrapped around the wire with such a sad expression. Brent realized that Richie would be changed forever.

When he reached the house, a car pulled up in the driveway; it was Pagne's social worker. Brent walked over and opened the door for her. The social worker stepped out of the car, and Miss Renee climbed out of the other side. Both ladies looked heartbroken, and proclaimed their sorrow at Brent's loss. Brent had forgotten that the routine meeting was scheduled for this morning. "Please come in," he invited. "Pagne and Bree are staying home today to help me pack up Pam's things, and prepare for my mom to move in. She will be living with us to help care for the baby."

Mrs. Locke and Miss Renee followed Brent into the living room. Pagne and Bree walked into the room and realized Brent was not alone. Miss Renee hugged both of the girls and squeezed them tightly. "So sorry" is all she could say. Mrs. Locke looked uncomfortably at Brent and asked him if they could speak privately with him.

"Of course. Girls, can you start organizing your closet while we talk?" Pagne sensed that something serious was up. She followed Bree up the stairs, while looking at Miss Renee. Miss Renee did not make eye contact. Pagne felt a knot starting in her stomach.

Brent invited the ladies to have a seat and asked if they would like something to drink. "No thank you," Mrs. Locke said. She was a down-to-business woman, and these difficult situations were best handled quickly and impersonally. Miss Renee declined also and sat down. "Mr. Masters, we have a

situation that does not have a simple solution. The death of your wife has affected the licensing you have as a foster-parent." Brent's face dropped.

"Excuse me?"

"The county restrictions do not allow Pagne to be placed in an unlicensed home." Miss Renee just kept looking down at her feet, wishing the floor could swallow her up. She didn't approve of Mrs. Locke's approach but she didn't know of a better way to break the news.

"But I don't understand. We love her."

"I understand that, but your licensing is based on your wife being the primary caregiver since you work full-time. As a single father"

"You mean widowed father," he cut in angrily.

"Yes, I'm sorry, widowed father. The county does not license widowed men as foster-parents for female teenagers." Brent thought he might take all the pain and anger out on this woman. *What was she suggesting? He loved Pagne like his daughter.* The worker continued. "I am not suggesting any inappropriate behavior on your part, but it is the procedure we use to protect these young ladies."

"What about Bree and Richie?"

"Mr. Masters, they are your legal children, you have adopted them and the county has no jurisdiction." Brent's heart sank. He looked at Miss Renee. Pam and Brent had requested the paperwork and started the process to adopt Pagne through Miss Renee, but the pregnancy complications had put the plans on hold.

"Couldn't I adopt Pagne? On my own?" Neither ladies could bring themselves to answer him.

"Brent," Miss Renee finally spoke. "I know that you love Pagne very much. Please know that I am working with the county to make sure she stays within city limits so that she can continue a relationship with all of you, but you have a lot to deal with once the baby comes home. Richie is going to need a lot of your energy to recover from such a terrible loss."

"But what about losing a sister? Don't you think that will hurt him even more?" Miss Renee remained quiet while she searched his eyes.

Mrs. Locke interjected, "Mr. Masters, this is not our decision. This is the county's policy and it is not to punish your family. Your circumstances are tragic and we are all very sorry that our obligations will add to your loss." Brent knew from her tone that there probably was no point arguing with her, but he had to try.

"What about my mother? She will be living here," Brent pressed.

"That was considered in their decision. Your mother's age and obligations of caring for a premature baby and Richie will disqualify her from becoming licensed in this county."

"Brent," Miss Renee spoke softly. "I know this is very confusing. Our county has not adopted a tolerant perspective that some other counties have accepted.

We are restricted to the limitations of a very established process and a conservative judge."

After a very uncomfortable pause, Mrs. Locke suggested that Pagne be asked to join them.

"No please, not this way. Give me today. Let me talk to her. You can do what you have to tomorrow." He turned to Miss Renee. "Please, you have to give us this. We can't take much more." Miss Renee looked questioningly at Mrs. Locke. Mrs. Locke bit her lip.

"I can't give you till tomorrow, we are directed to have her at Langston Hall by this evening. I can give you until six o'clock tonight. I will be back then to collect Pagne and her belongings. Mr. Masters, I know you are a good man, but don't think you can resolve this matter rashly, the police will be brought in to intervene. It can create a very difficult situation for you and your children." Mrs. Locke rose and headed to the door. "Again, Mr. Masters, I am very sorry for your loss." She let herself out. Miss Renee also stood up.

"Brent, I will do everything in my power to keep her close. She needs all of you." Miss Renee touched his arm, and when he felt the warmth, he was reminded of Pam. He pulled his arm away and glared.

"You better. She can't take much more."

"I know," Miss Renee whispered. "Are you sure you want to do this alone?"

"Yes, right now, for today, I am her dad."

Miss Renee moved out to the porch, and he quickly shut the door behind her. She moved down the steps and opened the car door. Mrs. Locke just sat there, not saying a word. Miss Renee looked up and saw Bree and Pagne looking down at her from their bedroom window, a sad resign on their faces. Miss Renee climbed in, closed the door. She had no clue how to process the emotions. Mrs. Locke started the car, pulled away from the curb, and made it around the corner when she suddenly pulled over to the side of the road, turned off the engine, and sat there. Miss Renee was a bit alarmed. She looked at Mrs. Locke face and saw such disgust and frustration. Miss Renee reached over and touched her hand. The physical contact sparked an electrical current that threw the switch, and Mrs. Locke began to rock while sobbing. "How do we do this to them? How do I look at my husband and my children tonight, knowing I tore a family apart today?" Miss Renee squeezed her hand.

"It is beyond us. We have to do the best we can for these kids with the limitations we have. The perfect solution would be two parents who love and adore their children, but when we have parents with no regard for these young lives, they will be forced to deal with institutions and rules that have no emotion. Pagne is strong. We will be there for her and do everything we can to get her through, okay? We're a team right?" Mrs. Locke looked at her with such softness in her eyes, something Renee hadn't seen before.

"Yes, we are a team." She pulled tissue from her purse, wiped her eyes and

blew her nose. She then started the car and headed back to the job that made her the emotionless enforcer that she needed to be.

The girls slowly came down to the living room. Brent was sitting on one of the chairs, face in his hands. He looked up when he heard the girls come in. His eyes were red and swollen, tears still flowing, and he couldn't speak. Bree rushed to his side ... "Dad, what's wrong?" Pagne stood where she was, not wanting to get any closer. She knew what was coming. Pagne saw Miss Renee's face when she looked at the house before climbing into the car. The look that clearly said ... "You're screwed Pagne, and there's nothing anyone can do about it." She knew that she would be leaving. Pagne stayed back from them, her family. She had to break the connection. It was too painful to do it slowly, instead it had to be quick, hard pull ... like a band-aid. Brent finally made eye contact with her,

"I'm so sorry Pagne. They have pulled my licensing for foster-care." Pagne heard Bree gasp. Pagne knew what he was going to say before he said it. Not the exact phrasing, but that she would have to leave.

"How long before I go?" asked Pagne.

"They will back at six o'clock this evening. Pagne, I" Pagne couldn't hear his apologies. Pagne needed to get out of that room ... to breath. She ran out back and climbed up into Richie's club house. She curled up in the small area and held herself. Not crying, but just holding herself. She realized that her mother's words were true. Pagne would always be her daughter, and she didn't get another life, no matter how much she wanted it.

Only minutes later, Bree was at the base of the club house. "Pagne, please come down."

"Just go away," Pagne hurled at her. "You have your family. You aren't a part of this."

Bree felt the sting. She knew Pagne was in so much pain and her lashing out was trying to let some of the anguish escape. "Pagne, I am your sister, and I will always be your sister. Now get down here so we can figure this out. Otherwise, I'm coming up, and you know I can drag you down if I need to." Pagne laid for a moment longer but really did need Bree. She slowly maneuvered her way down the ladder and stood in front of her. Bree grabbed her with both arms and wrapped them around her. Pagne melted into her and let the anger rush out of her with floods of tears and cursing, which surprised Pagne even more than it did Bree. Brent was inside watching this display of raw emotion, so guilt-ridden that they had not made this young lady's future a priority when they had the chance.

Once Pagne was worn out and felt the drain of her emotional release, they sat down with Brent to brainstorm. Rather than focusing on what he didn't do, Brent became very committed to what he could do now. Brent assured her that Miss Renee was going to do everything possible to keep Pagne local. They

would have visitation, and she would still be part of their family. Once they had developed a plan, they hugged, and the girls went upstairs to pack Pagne's belongings. Brent made two calls when the girls were gone. First he called Lenny's school principal and explained the circumstances. Mr. Adams agreed to excuse Lenny so that he could be there for Pagne. They sent word to him in gym, and he ran out of class dressed just as he was. Brent was shocked how quickly he was coming through the front door, a young man prepared to protect his partner. Brent hugged him and looked at the confusion in his face. "Go on up, the girls will explain."

Lenny darted up the stairs, and Brent heard him yelling "Pagne, what's going on?"

"Oh Lenny, you're here," and then the sweet mutterings of two people in love. Brent had also called Miss Renee. He asked that she come back over to the house, alone. He knew that the social worker was only doing her job, but they needed a friend right now, someone invested in Pagne on a personal level. She would be there at five o'clock.

Brent went upstairs and asked Bree to meet him in their bedroom. He thought that Pagne and Lenny could use some time alone. While Pagne and Lenny started packing, they realized that Pagne had come to the house with nothing and her small duffle bag wouldn't even hold a fraction of what she now owned. Lenny knocked softly on the open door to Brent's room and explained their dilemma. Brent opened their closet and pulled out Pam's luggage. "Here, Lenny, tell Pagne that I want her to have these." The set was very pretty, black with a soft pattern of vines and lavender flowers. There was an overnight bag, very large suitcase, a smaller suitcase, and a wardrobe bag for hanging clothes. "Lenny tell her that she doesn't have to pack her summer clothes. We will keep whatever she doesn't need now for her here, in her room."

"I'll tell her, Mr. Masters," Lenny responded as he rolled the luggage down the hall.

Bree had started going through Pam's drawers, filling the storage boxes that Brent's family had gotten while they were there. They thought they could make it a little easier for Brent and the girls, because packing up Pam's belongings would be painful enough. This small gesture was so appreciated. The girls had already gone through Pam's clothing and jewelry and taken what they wanted, and Brent had saved some jewelry pieces for Amanda for when she was older. Richie had selected Pam's favorite sweater, which he slept with, and a watch. It had a leather band and could pass for a boy's. Brent had stored Pam's wedding rings in the same box they had come in. He wasn't sure what would become of them, but he had them safe until it was obvious. Brent had started on the closet items.

Bree opened a dresser drawer that the girls had not sorted through yet. It was filled with Pam's bras, and both girls knew the bras would not fit them.

Bree found a group of DVDs wrapped with a ribbon. There was an envelope on top with Pam's beautiful writing "For My Family." Bree just stared in shock. Brent came out of the closet and saw the look of confusion on Bree's face. She lifted the DVDs out of the drawer and handed them to Brent. He looked at Bree with the same confusion. He suddenly yelled, "Pagne, Lenny, get in here." As they ran into the room, Brent was untying the ribbon and opened the envelope. There was a note from Pam. Brent began reading softly

My Dearest Family ...

If you are reading this, then my suspicions were correct and I am no longer with you. I hope that Amanda survives so that you still have a part of me to hug and hold. I asked Maxine to record these dvd's to each of you. She promised to keep it my secret.

I am so sorry that these are my last words to you. I was so blessed to have a family that was so loving. You all made my life worthwhile.

All my love, Me

Brent looked at the DVDs in his hand and saw that there were six. They were labeled My Family, My Sweet Husband, Richie, Bree, Pagne and Amanda. He looked up at the others, not sure what to do next. He handed the girls their DVD and sat on the bed holding the others. Lenny saw the confusion and thought they needed a jumpstart to continue. "Mr. Masters, I have a suggestion." Brent looked up, thankful for the prompt.

"Yes Lenny?"

"Why don't we finish the packing. Pagne and I are almost done. We can help you finish up in here. Between the computers and TVs, you can each watch your DVD alone before Richie comes home. Then you can all watch the family one together before Miss Renee gets here." Brent nodded in agreement.

"I think this evening would be a good time for Richie and I to watch his together," said Brent quietly. They all became very focused, and the packing was finished up very quickly. They lingered over a few items, but were so anxious to see their beloved Pam again, even if on a DVD, that they didn't spend a lot of time reminiscing. Once everything of Pam's was packed, it was moved to the garage. Pam had always made it clear that in the event of her death, after the girls had selected what they wanted, she wanted the rest of her belongings given to the children's shelter for the teen girls who were living

there. Pam had wonderful taste in clothing and the girls would love these beautiful clothes. Brent had some friends with a truck that would be taking the boxes over that weekend. Brent was thankful that his part was done.

Once everyone was back inside, Bree ran up to their room to put the DVD into her computer. Brent went into his bedroom to watch his. It was odd how he avoided the room, but now it felt like the most natural place to be with Pam's DVD. Pagne slipped hers into the DVD player in the family room. Lenny awkwardly stood there, not sure if he should leave. Pagne then sat on the couch and patted, indicating for him to sit next to her. He moved next to her but didn't touch her. He wanted this to be about her and Pam.

The beginning would have been comical except for the seriousness of the circumstance. Grandma Maxine and Pam were fussing about how close the camera should be, and how much lighting was needed. The room was lit, but so softly that it was hard to see Pam clearly. Suddenly there was a bright flash of light, and Pam put her arms in front of her face. "Nooooooooooooo, too much!" The light quickly went off. Apparently Grandma Maxine had tried to use Brent's spotlight from the garage. Then Grandma Maxine opened the drapes, and Pam was bathed in lovely golden sunlight. Pagne's heart tightened. She could see just how worn out Pam was. It was so odd to see her alive, talking, and giggling with Grandma Maxine. Then Pam seemed to remember the purpose of the camera. She focused her look at the camera. "Ahhhhhhhhhhh, my dear Pagne. I haven't written any notes on what I'm going to say, so I might ramble. I wanted this to be from my heart and in the moment. I am making your DVD first, that's why there was all the confusion. I won't erase it since this is about life, and confusion will always be a part of life." A long pause. "First thing I want to tell you is that you are my hero. I am amazed at your grace and ability to love. You fit into our family as though you had always been here. I don't know about this whole God thing, but if you are a result of his love for me, then He's looking better and better everyday," Pam said. Pam continued with shared memories, sometimes laughing and other times struggling not to cry. Pagne had never felt so valued by another living person as she did by Pam. Pam saw everything; she knew Pagne's secrets about her self-worth. Pam kept assuring Pagne that she was beautiful, and that she was so lucky to have Pagne in her life.

At several points, Pagne reached for Lenny's hand, holding it tight. Then she would let go again and it was just her and Pam. Lenny had come prepared and handed Pagne tissues when he heard her sniffing. Pam was sounding very tired, and Pagne knew that the DVD would be ending soon. She didn't want it to end. She loved how close this brought Pam to her again.

"Well, sweetie, I'm getting a little sleepy. I am going to finish this up and get some rest. I want to close by telling you that I hope you are right about Heaven. I want to see all of you again, in a world filled with love and beauty. Until we are all together, please help take care of Bree, Richie and Brent. You

will all need each other. And if Amanda is there with you, please love her the way you love me. You are precious, Pagne."

The DVD ended abruptly. Pagne sat motionless, speechless. She leaned into Lenny, as he brought his arms around her. It had been wonderful to see Pam and to remember their life together, but something disturbed her. Pam talked about seeing her in Heaven. How could that be if she didn't accept Jesus Christ? She didn't want to think about it. She just savored the loving words of Pam and the idea of seeing her again. She felt the heat from Lenny surrounding her, his strong body holding her. She loved Lenny and knew that he loved her. That mattered so much to her, especially now.

Lenny and Pagne heard Bree entering the room. Her eyes were red and swollen, but there was a glow in her face. She sat down next to Pagne, and the sisters just were. No words were needed. Brent came down a short time later. He was obviously emotional, but he was trying to sound normal and suggested they all deserved lunch. Friends and neighbors had brought over casseroles, desserts, and salads over the last week. The fridge was still stuffed full. Brent started pulling everything out onto the counter, and they all piled their plates full of the delicious food. They focused on taste, living, having each other in that next hour. They laughed, and teased but didn't talk about the DVDs or share what was on them, at least for now. It was their time with Pam.

Once they were gorged, the girls started to clean up. Lenny and Brent went up to Richie's room to put together a second twin bed. This would be where Brent could sleep if he wanted a real bed. Pagne asked Bree if she thought Brent and Richie would move into the girl's room and Bree would move into Richie's room. "No way, Dad already said that our room is our room. You will be here more than you aren't." Pagne hoped that she was right. After the bed was put up, and the master bedroom was ready for Brent's mom, Brent left to get Richie. The plan was that they would all sit and watch the family DVD together. Pagne wasn't sure how Richie would handle the news that she would be leaving today.

A short time later, Richie and Brent came in, and Richie ran up to Pagne. He threw his arms around her. "You can't go Pagne! I won't let them take you!" he cried. Pagne's heart was breaking. She just held him, while he dumped his frustration and pain out with his tears. When he calmed down a little, Pagne smoothed his hair back from his face and looked into his eyes.

"You are my little brother; no one can change that. We are going to make sure that I am here so much you won't even notice a difference. We will be going to church together, the park together, and watching your dumb movies together."

Richie hugged her and sadly said, "I don't want to watch my movies without Mom." Pagne was reminded again how much they all had lost.

"I agree," she said, "we will find some new stupid movies you can torture us with." Richie actually giggled. "Did Dad tell you we are going to watch a

movie that Mom made for us?" Richie nodded. "Well let's go sit on the couch together, okay?" Richie took Pagne's hand and led her to the couch. Once she sat down, he curled up next to her, almost in her lap. The others found a spot to see the TV screen. Brent moved in close to Richie and brought his arm around the back of the couch so he could stroke Pagne's head. He loved this young lady so much.

Lenny did the honors of taking out Pagne's DVD, and carefully putting it back into the case. Pagne reached for it when he seemed confused about where to put it. The family DVD was inserted and began, as Lenny sat on the other side of Pagne. When the movie started, Pagne smiled to herself. The lighting and camera positioning was perfect. She was flattered that her DVD had been the first one made. Pam had even thought to apply a little makeup, and Grandma Maxine had set the stage a little nicer. Lots of pillows were behind Pam, she was wearing her lovely blue robe. Her hair had been twisted up and out of her face. Pagne took a moment and looked at the faces of her family, which appeared to be a mixture of adoration and longing. Love is a powerful emotion. Pam smiled and welcomed them to the premiere of her sixth film. They all grinned at her playfulness.

There is no way to describe the depth of regret, compassion, affection and total adoration contained in the movie Pam made. But everyone in that room had no doubt about how important they were as a family to Pam. How this group of misfits had changed the existence of this fragile spirit. Pam then went on to share her faith in them as a strong unit who would continue to be this family she had relied on. She pleaded that if Amanda was alive, that they never blame her for their loss. She needed them to be her arms, ears, eyes, love, so that Amanda could know who her mother was.

Time stopped while they watched Pam. They had left the present and had stepped into another dimension, one that allowed them all to be together. Once the DVD was done, they sat there, in silence. No one wanted to acknowledge that this journey with Pam was done, that everything from this time on was memories. It hurt so bad, and they couldn't go there. These DVDs gave them one more chance to share the unknown with Pam. As if timed in a stage play, the doorbell rang. Brent looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was five o'clock. Not enough time to savor; he wanted more, he needed more. Brent slowly got up, and moved to the front living room to greet their guest. Lenny shut off the TV and left the DVD in the player. He was sure that it would be viewed many times before it would be put away in a safe place. Lenny then reached for Richie and asked if he could play in the clubhouse with him. Richie reluctantly left with Lenny to the back yard. These plans had been discussed earlier in the day to distract Richie.

Bree had insisted that she be included in this meeting with Miss Renee. The girls moved into the front living room, and each took a seat on the ends of the

couch. Brent would sit between them to present a united front for Miss Renee, which was one of Bree's contributions to their master plan. Miss Renee was escorted in, and Brent motioned to the high back chair facing the couch. He then moved into position with the girls. Brent took each girl's hand in his. Miss Renee was so touched by their protectiveness of each other. "We want to discuss your plans for Pagne," he said directly. "We need your help to keep our family together." Renee knew they viewed her right now as the enemy, part of the organization that was heartless when it came to children. This really was so far from the truth, but she understood their fear. They felt helpless to control their future as a family.

Miss Renee began, "Brent, the rules are very rigid regarding licensing. I wish there was a way to work around then. You know that I love Pagne and I too want her to be safe and happy. I know that her time here has been such a blessing for her. I do not want her to lose you. There are several ways that we can approach the county on this. Pagne would reside at Langston Hall until she is 18. You would have visitation but extended visits would be limited. Overnight visits would be difficult to arrange. The second option, would be a local group-home, but there would still be restrictions. The third option, which I think would work best for all of you is if we place Pagne in another local home as soon as one is available. The foster-home environment is not limited by group-home restrictions. You could work with the foster-parents regarding weekends, vacations, and time spent with your family. I would play a big role in selecting a family that would be cooperative with Pagne's desire to remain connected to this community, your family, her school and church."

They looked at each other. "What do you think Pagne?" asked Brent. "Think you could adjust to another household?" Pagne certainly did not want to leave or try to fit in with another family; she had a family already. She knew how tight the rules were at Langston Hall, so she really didn't have much choice.

"I will do whatever I have to," she whispered. They held each other's hand tightly, this broken family.

"Can you girls go spend some time with Richie. I know he could use all the "Pagne-time" he can get right now." The girls looked at Brent oddly. "I have some things to discuss with Miss Renee privately." They moved out of the room looking at each other in total confusion. Once Brent heard them go out the back door, he turned to Miss Renee and began the discussion of his long term plans. He knew that her position and her heart for Pagne was the perfect combination to help him succeed. He pulled out his lap top and shared a portion of Pam's DVD to him with Miss Renee. Pam spoke from her heart regarding Pagne and her future, Miss Renee truly understood the wonderful life and love Pagne had found here with these people. Miss Renee left after assuring Brent that she would begin the groundwork immediately. He thanked her and joined his children in the backyard. Six o'clock would come much too soon, and he wanted

to cherish every moment they had left. His heart lifted when he heard their laughter as he closed the French doors behind him.

Mrs. Locke was there promptly at six o'clock. Brent didn't see any, but figured she had a police car waiting around the corner in case they put up a fight. Lenny and Bree loaded Pagne's bags into the car, while Brent and the social worker finalized some paperwork. Pagne sat holding Richie on her lap, whispering that things would be fine and sharing her ideas of the next family outing. Then it was time. Brent suddenly remembered, he wanted to give Pagne some spending money in case she needed something while at Langston Hall. He opened his wallet and saw the note that Pagne had given Pam. He hesitated, not knowing if it would help or make things harder for her. He felt a strong sense that he needed to give it to her. Along with the cash he handed her the note. Pagne looked down, confused at first. He smiled at her. "She did get it, Pagne, and she did read it." She saw a scribbled note written on the outside. "Doesn't make sense to me," he added. Pagne opened the first fold which revealed the whole note.

"I would love to go to the movie with you, I prayed for a ticket!" was all it said. Pagne felt a tug in her heart and such joy. She then smelled her angel strong and powerful, surrounding her. She just held Brent and sobbed. He thought she was crying from sadness, but it was from sheer joy and relief. She then ran to share the news with Bree. Brent walked out to the porch to see the girls screaming, jumping and laughing, joyfully. Pagne saw the shock on Brent's face and whispered to Bree.

"Will you explain it to him?" she asked.

"It will be my honor," Bree said. Pagne hugged and kissed Lenny and Richie and then slid into the car next to Mrs. Locke. She looked over at Brent and blew him a kiss then shouted, "LOVE YA, DAD! I'LL SEE YOU SOON!" When they lost sight of Mrs. Locke's car, Bree shared the reason for their celebration. Once Brent understood the meaning of Pam's scrawled note, he dropped to his knees and prayed for his ticket too. He would be with Pam again for eternity.