

# HOMeward

*A Novel*

Angela Jackson-Brown



HARPER MUSE

*Homeward*

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ISBN 978-1-4002-4110-1 (trade paper)

ISBN 978-1-4002-4111-8 (epub)

ISBN 978-1-4002-4112-5 (audio download)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

[CIP TO COME]

*Printed in the United States of America*

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

## CHAPTER 1



SITTING ON THE PORCH WITH MY BABY SISTER, ELLENA, WAS always the best way for me to clear my mind. When she and I were young girls, we would sit out here and talk about everything. Clothes. Boys. What we wanted to be when we grew up. You name it and we talked about it. Every little thing that ever happened to me in life got resolved on the front porch swing, sitting next to my sister. No matter how big the problem might be, within a few minutes of talking and swinging, the two of us would figure it out. We have an older sister, Katie Bell, and three older brothers—Lawrence, and the twins, Micah and Mitchell—but Ellena and I were always “thick as thieves,” as Mama would call it. Ellena’s spirit spoke to mine, and vice versa. I didn’t remember when she was born, but I remembered everybody always saying on the day she took her first breath outside of Mama’s belly, I pulled her close and said, “Mine.”

Ellena was two years younger than me, but she carried a wisdom about her much like Mama’s and our daddy’s mama, Grandma Perkins. Ellena wanted to be a judge someday, and

when we were children, she would hold imaginary court and solve everything from who got the biggest piece of sweet-potato pie to who got to be the pitcher when we would all get together with the cousins and play baseball. But now, I had a problem so big, I wasn't sure whether anybody short of God could fix it. I was twenty-one years old, and right now, it felt like my life was crashing down right in front of me, and there's nothing I could do to stop it. Mainly because I caused the crash.

"What are you going to do, Rose?" Ellena finally asked, interrupting my thoughts. It was a rare thing for Ellena to lead with a question instead of an answer, but after I told her my awful truth, she had no words of wisdom. That scared me. If Ellena didn't have a solution, I didn't know how I would figure this out.

"I don't know." I rubbed my swollen belly. I was pregnant with a baby that didn't belong to my husband, Jasper. Two months ago, Jasper had come home on medical leave after injuring his leg while serving in the Air Force and he found me like this—pregnant. I was four months when he got home; now I'm six. I had managed to spoil everything that had been right between us over one night. One stupid, dumb night. Jasper had asked if somebody had done this to me against my will. As bad as that was, I could tell he was halfway hoping that I had been taken advantage of instead of willfully committing adultery against my husband. I shook my head no as tears rolled down my face.

If Jasper had yelled or screamed at me, I would have been better able to respond. Mama always said I had a feisty mouth, so if he had come at me with harsh words, I would

## *Homeward*

have been ready to fight back. He didn't. He just looked at me with sad eyes and started to cry. Every day for two months, that was what he did. Cried and begged me to tell him why I did it. Cried and said he would love this baby no matter what. Finally, I couldn't take it no more. I got on the bus, and I came home to Parsons, Georgia, where I've been for three days. I didn't even tell him I was leaving. I crept out of the house while he was sleeping. I couldn't stay not another day longer. I was too ashamed of myself. Up until he came home, I had hidden away in his mama's shack, making sure to stay out of eyesight of everyone as much as possible. As a result, I was able to lie and pretend to myself that this was all just going to go away. Even though it was the middle of the summer, I would wear a jacket to try to hide my shame when I was around Jasper's mother, but she had the same sad eyes as Jasper, so I knew she knew the truth. She never said a mumbling word to me about it though. She just kept hugging me and telling me everything would be all right. But it wasn't going to be all right. Not ever.

When I saw Jasper's eyes after he returned home, I realized how terrible a person I was. All I wanted to do was get out of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and come to a place where I figured there would be no sad eyes. No hurt. No pain. Just my family. But like everything else, I didn't think it through. I hadn't told anybody that I was expecting, so when I got off that Greyhound bus with my waddle and my big belly, to say Mama and Daddy were stunned was putting it mildly. They weren't dumb. They could count the months. They tried to talk to me about it as soon as we got into the car, but I had cried so hard that they left it alone. Mama had looked at me

with hurt and anger in her eyes, and it felt worse than any butt whipping I had ever gotten when I was a girl.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against Ellena. Despite all the turmoil going on inside my mind, it was nice sitting outside with her again, enjoying the little bit of a breeze that was making its way to the porch where we sat swinging. It was the beginning of August and the smell of peaches from the orchard was thick in the air. Back when I was a girl, me, Mama, my brothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins would all go down to the orchard and pick peaches for jellies, jams, and pies Mama would bake for Sunday dessert.

I missed those things when I got married to Jasper. There were no peach orchards where we lived. Just endless fields of cotton. Jasper Bourdon and I said "I do" before the peaches got ripe three years ago. At the time, he worked on a train as a Pullman Porter. Whenever he had a layover in Parsons, he would come to my daddy's store where I would be helping out. Daddy never let us out of his eyesight, but he liked Jasper. Said he reminded him of himself, minus the fiery temper Daddy used to have when he was Jasper's age. If Jasper had a long layover in Parsons, he would come over to the house in the evenings and sit on the porch with all of us, laughing and talking until it was time for him to go to Sister Clementine Myrtle's Boarding House where he would stay when he was in town. She was a church member at Little Bethel where we attended church and the only place in town where Negroes could stay.

If Jasper happened to be around on Sundays, he would walk me to church, like Daddy used to do Mama. We lived

## *Homeward*

in the house that Mama lived in with her grandma Birdie. With the help of Mama's uncles, Daddy had added several rooms. Mama said it still felt like the home she grew up in, and seeing me and Jasper courting on the same porch that Daddy courted her on did her heart good.

I would feel so proud sitting beside Jasper in the pew of Little Bethel AME while he sang with passion for the Lord, even if slightly off-key. It was all so romantic. I fell hard for Jasper Bourdon, and he did the same. I told him all of my hopes and dreams, including my desire to become a nurse someday. But then we started talking about love, and I let my dream slip away. Jasper didn't ask me to give up on being a nurse, but neither one of us wanted to wait, so I convinced myself that being his wife was all I would ever need.

I never should have married him. I should have gone to nursing school like I had planned. Ellena would be returning to Atlanta soon where she was a student at Spelman. I should have been going there with her instead of being in this awful mess. Mama and Daddy tried to talk me and Jasper into waiting, but we had one good reason after the other why we should marry as soon as possible. If I could go back in time and undo this mess I've made, I would, starting with my saying "I do." I felt a tear roll down my face just as the front door opened and Mama walked outside. I quickly rubbed it away.

"Let me speak to your sister," Mama said. Before I could reach out and grab Ellena's hand, she jumped up with a quick "Yes, ma'am," and hurried inside. My one champion was gone. My sister, the lawyer in training, would not be there to plead my case. Now it was just me and Mama.

Mama sat on the swing beside me. She started rocking it slowly, then she turned and looked me square in the eye. “You ready to talk now about this baby in your belly, Rose?”

All I wanted right now was to be still and sit here beside Mama. Telling my story to Ellena was one thing, but telling Mama . . . well, I would have rather stood before the Savior himself and confessed my sins than to tell them to Mama. My mama, Opal Pruitt Perkins, was the best person I knew. Her life had not been easy, but she never complained, and she always put everyone else ahead of herself. I wanted to be like Mama, but I had failed in every regard. The last thing I wanted to see in her eyes was disappointment.

“I said, are you ready to talk, Rose?” Mama asked again. This time her tone sounded like it used to when I would do something that made her mad, but she was trying to keep her voice calm so I wouldn’t haul off and start crying. Even though I was twenty-one years old and a married, pregnant woman, Mama still could reduce me to tears.

I couldn’t never stand for her nor Daddy to be mad at me when I was a girl. Mama used to say I was the worst *water-head* of all her six children. My siblings were all different in their own ways, but the one thing they all had in common was the fact that they coddled me about as much as Mama and Daddy did. And for most of our childhood, my youngest sister, Ellena, would bear the brunt of any punishment that rightfully should have come to me. “*It’s easier taking a lickin’ than to hear you whine and cry,*” she used to say. Suddenly, I was feeling bad for all the lickins she took on my behalf. I was feeling bad for everything. Grandma Perkins



*Homeward*

would say I was having a pity party; I suppose she would be right.

“Rose . . .” Mama said in a warning voice. I could tell her patience was near ’bout gone.

“No, ma’am. Can’t say that I am ready to talk,” I finally said. And I wasn’t—ready, I mean, to talk about this baby or how I came to be pregnant with it.

I wanted to stay here close to Mama and not think about anything. I wanted to listen to the cicadas chirping in the trees and inhale the scent of Mama’s shasta daisies that were in full bloom. I’d helped her plant them a few weeks before I married Jasper. Hard to believe that was three years ago. Feels like a lifetime had passed.

“Well, like it or not, Rose, we are gonna talk.”

I was sure wishing for Daddy to make an appearance. Maybe he could distract Mama and I could have one more blessed day of not having to talk to them about my shame. Nothing was going like I had planned in my head. I had sat in the back of that pee-smelling Greyhound bus for fifteen hours riding back to Parsons, Georgia, hoping I could bury my head in the sand and pretend like everything was as it should be. I couldn’t believe how ignorant I was to everything.

“Rose—”

I shook my head. “Can’t we just sit here? I’m tired, and—”

Mama looked at me with waiting eyes.

“I know you don’t want to talk, Rose, but it’s time. Past time. You are way big in the belly. Bigger than you oughta be with your man just now making his way back home from

Vietnam. He's been calling and you ain't been answering. It's time for you to tell us what is going on."

I had begged and pleaded for Jasper not to join the Air Force, but he had gone ahead and done it anyway. A local crop duster had taught him how to fly a plane. He said maybe the Air Force would give him a chance too. I couldn't believe he would volunteer to go and put himself in harm's way and leave me all alone in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, with his mama. Everything that I had heard on the radio about Vietnam told me Jasper didn't have no business hopping up and volunteering. But he had made up his mind, and for the first time since we met, no amount of pleading from me made him change it.

"*Rosie, I can't make no living for us on this white man's land,*" he had said one evening after coming in from a long day's work, his hair full of cotton, making him look like an old, tired, worn-out man. He and I lived in a little shack right beside his mama, Miss Ida Mae. Their living conditions had been a shock to me, considering he had boasted that he was a big-time farmer in Hattiesburg and, if I married him, my way of living wouldn't change one little bit. Daddy and Mama believed Jasper's promises to continue to treat me like a hothouse plant. I believed him too. Our wedding was as whirlwind as our courtship. Before I knew it, I was on the train with Jasper, heading to Hattiesburg. I hadn't even met his mama. We were so anxious to say "I do" that we didn't give anyone time to say no or give his mama time to come to the wedding.

When we rode up to his house, he had begged me to forgive him and he had promised me that within a few months'

## Homeward

time, he would turn things around. Well, after nearly two years, we were still poor as Job's turkey. I never told my family the truth. I was too ashamed. Whenever they would call, I would make up stories about how good things were and if they said they wanted to come visit, I'd make up even more lies.

*"Jasper just spoils me so much,"* I would crow to whoever happened to call. *"I'm gonna need another closet for all these pretty frocks he keeps buying me . . . No, it's not a good time to visit right yet. Plus, we'll be home for the holidays. We'll see you then."*

I knew where Jasper's desperation was stemming from the night he told me he was joining the Air Force. I looked at him that night and I saw the eyes of a man with no other options. A man who would rather stare down the barrel of a gun than to see the disappointment in my eyes anymore or hear me lie to my family one more time about how well we were doing. *"Rosie, what I'll make as a soldier will be more than enough to pay off what we owe Mr. Adler, and then we can move off his land and buy a farm of our own. I can be the man I promised you I would be."*

I had cried and cried and begged and whined to no avail. *"You brought me all the way down here to Mississippi just to run off and leave me all alone? I ain't got nobody down here to look after me if you leave."*

Jasper had tried to hug me, but I had pulled away. *"It won't be for long, Rosie. I promise. Just 'til I can see our way out of debt. I know I told you things were better than they were. I just didn't want to lose you. I tried getting back on with the Pullman Porters, but they letting folks go left*

*and right. Just about all the ones left got decades of seniority. This the only way, baby. Plus, you'll have Mama. Y'all can keep each other company 'til I come back. This war won't last long, and with me volunteering and all, I'll get a better position."*

Before I knew what had happened, Jasper had left. Almost as soon as he finished basic training, they sent him over to Vietnam. In his first letter to me, he said he was spraying herbicides in the forests. That didn't sound too bad to me. At least he wasn't taking bullet fire. When Mama and Daddy had called to check on me, I told them Jasper felt convicted by God to join the Air Force. If my parents understood nothing else, I knew that bit about him being "convicted" would be sufficient for them to accept his decision without too much pushback on their part. Both of them had told me to come back home, but I had said I needed to stay and help Jasper's mama with the farm, which was true. Granted, I wasn't a whole lot of help, but I saved her a few steps here and there. I so wish I had listened to Mama and Daddy and come home.

"Mama, I don't—" I stopped, dropped my head, not wanting to meet Mama's eyes. I didn't belong here with my mama, who was a good, wholesome Christian. Mama deserved daughters that brought her sunlight, not awful storm clouds like I was doing.

My tears fell in earnest. Mama watched me as I wiped them away with my handkerchief that had my married name initials "R. B." on them. My sister, Katie Bell, had hurriedly made them for me as a wedding present so I would have

## *Homeward*

something when I went off with my husband on our wedding day.

“It’s not Jasper’s baby,” I finally said. I should have felt relief letting go of this burden. Instead of feeling relief, I felt horrible, even more horrible than before.

Mama’s expression didn’t change. There was no surprise on her face. “I knew that baby couldn’t be Jasper’s. It didn’t take a genius to figure that out. What happened? Did somebody . . . hurt you?” There was that question again. It would have been so easy to say yes when Jasper asked and yes when she asked. But I couldn’t add on to my sin with another lie.

“Mama, I . . .” Before I could finish, I saw Daddy walking down the street toward home after putting in a long day at the store. If I weren’t in the family way, I would have been there helping him. Daddy lost his arm when some horrible white folks from Parsons started shooting at the annual Founder’s Day celebration before he and Mama got married. Mama’s granny, Grandma Birdie, died that day too. She had raised Mama like she was her own when Mama’s mama ran off. Daddy said Mama was never the same after Grandma Birdie died. Daddy and Mama saved enough money for him to take over the grocery store that used to belong to Great-Uncle Myron, Grandma Birdie’s oldest son and my favorite of all my great-uncles.

I watched as Daddy tiredly made his way up the stairs to the porch. He had a car, but he usually preferred walking to work on sunny days. He said he was cooped up inside so much, he wanted every chance he could get to be outside. Some afternoons, Mama would walk up to the store

so she could walk home with Daddy. He looked over at me and Mama once he was on the porch, and immediately the weariness left his face. Unlike Mama, Daddy was beginning to look his age. Her face was smooth as a baby's bottom; Daddy's face was creased with fine lines. Mama's waist-length hair was black as night; Daddy's hair was now more salt than pepper. But Mama said his spirit was as young as it had been that summer when they fell in love underneath the peach trees down the street.

"There's my girls," he said, smiling. "How y'all doing?"

Mama got up and went over to Daddy and hugged him tight. One thing about my parents, they were still in love even though they were close to their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Daddy looked over at me with concern on his face.

"You okay, Pudd'n?" He looked over Mama's shoulder at me. I tried to speak, but the crying only got worse. I put my hand over my mouth to stifle my sobs.

"She's okay," Mama said, turning around so she could look at me sternly. "Pregnant women get that way sometimes. You go on inside and eat. I'll see about Rose. There's some leftover baked chicken, rice, and collard greens on the stove. The corn bread is in the oven. And there might be some of my lemon squares on the counter if you're good."

Daddy kissed Mama on the cheek. "You spoil me, pretty girl," he said, using his pet name for her.

"Long as I'm still your pretty girl, I reckon I'll keep right on spoiling you, Cedric Perkins."

Daddy went toward the door, but then he stopped and turned back around. "It's gonna be all right, Rose. I think your mama cried nine months straight with all of you

## *Homeward*

youngins,” he said, looking over at Mama with a grin on his face. “She got right back to being ornery again after she pushed y’all out though. You’ll do the same.”

“You,” Mama said playfully. We both watched as he went inside. For a time, nothing could be heard but me hiccuping through my tears. Finally, Mama spoke again. “I ain’t gonna be moved by all these tears, Rose. So you did this? Knowingly?” She came closer, stopping right in front of me.

I hung my head. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t hang your head now. You weren’t hanging your head when you were sleeping with a man who wasn’t your husband,” Mama whispered. Her voice was calm, but it cut like Daddy’s pocketknife. “Get up and go tell your daddy you and me are going for a walk out to the peach orchard. I need to hear this story first. So you dry up them tears. If you old enough to make grown-up decisions, you old enough to deal with the aftermath. I can’t believe a daughter of mine would behave in such a way.”

I took my handkerchief and wiped my face. Then I got up and went inside to the kitchen where Daddy was fixing his plate.

Daddy looked at me and smiled and I nearly lost it again, but I was determined to do exactly as Mama had said. It was my fault that Mama was feeling disappointment and anger. I didn’t have nobody to blame but myself.

Daddy doted on all of us children. He had always used a firm hand with us, but he was always fair. No matter what, Daddy loved us, and he was never ashamed to show it. When we were younger, Mama used to say two things to us

when we were on our way to church or school or one of our cousin's homes: "*Don't shame the Lord, and don't shame your daddy.*" I looked over at Daddy smiling at me with so much love, I thought my heart would break. *No tears*, I repeated in my head over and over. *No tears.*

"You ready to eat, little girl? I can fix you a plate."

I shook my head and tried my best to smile. "No thank you, Daddy. Mama said to tell you we were going to go for a walk."

"Okay, baby. Y'all be careful. It's hotter out there than it seems. You still a little thing, but you got a big belly. Daddy don't know if he could lift you with his one good arm if you got light-headed out there."

"We ain't going far," I said. "Just out to the peach orchard."

Daddy went to the table and put his plate down, and then he came over to me and hugged me. "I'm glad you home, little girl. Daddy missed you. All of your brothers and sisters are special to me, but you was always my baseball buddy. My shadow. I know your husband wants you with him, but I 'preciate him letting you visit with us for a spell. And I know you say you don't need no money, but if you do, you let me know. I don't care if my girls are married or not. If you ever need your daddy, all you got to do is call."

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to say anything outright. Daddy hugged me again, then went to the table and sat. I stood still as he blessed his food and then opened up the newspaper.

"The Giants are playing the Milwaukee Braves tonight,"



## *Homeward*

Daddy said without looking up. “You think Willie Mays is gonna have a good night?”

“Yes, sir, Daddy,” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. Growing up, I was always the one to listen to the baseball game at Daddy’s feet, talking stats and players we both loved like Jackie Robinson, Ernie Banks, and Roy Campanella. Up until the Negro League ended when I was about four or five, Daddy coached the McDonough Brown Thrashers. Daddy said since most of the good Negro players went to play in the white folks’ league, there wasn’t many folks willing to come see the second and third string players play, although Daddy swore they were every bit as good as any of the players in the white league. Daddy tried to get on with one of the white teams, but no one was interested in hiring a Negro man with a missing arm. But that rejection didn’t stop Daddy’s passion for the game of baseball. If there was a game on the radio, Daddy was always front and center.

“Hurry on back before the game starts.”

“Yes, sir.” I turned and walked back outside where Mama stood waiting.

“Walk.” She took my arm and led me down the stairs into the street that leads toward the peach orchard.

“Mama, I . . .”

Mama stopped and turned toward me. “Not now, Rose. Wait until we are somewhere alone where I can yell at you at the top of my lungs without worrying about being heard.”

I dropped my head but quickly lifted it back up. “Yes, ma’am.”

She and I walked, waving and speaking to various ones who were out and about, but we didn’t stop. Mama kept

*Angela Jackson-Brown*

us marching right along like two warriors off to do battle. Normally, I would be happy to take this walk with Mama so I could pick one of those delicious, juicy peaches, but today I felt only dread. Other than Jasper, I was finally going to tell the one whose opinion mattered to me the most. My mama's.



## CHAPTER 2



MAMA AND ME MADE OUR WAY TO THE BENCH MY TWIN BROTHERS had made for us to sit on when we went out to the orchard. The orchard belonged to all the Negro folks who lived in Little Parsons. It used to be called Colored Town, but through the years, folks stopped using that word so much. Little Parsons became the name we all used to identify where the Negro folks lived.

“Tell me what happened, Rose.”

“Mama, I don’t—” I stopped. I saw the look on her face. She was not going to allow me to get away with anything but the truth. So I told her everything. I told her about Jasper lying to me about his finances and the fine and stately home he supposedly had waiting for us. I told her about how hard he struggled to make ends meet and how he finally gave up on farming and entered the Air Force.

“Why didn’t you tell your daddy or me what was going on, Rose?” Mama demanded. “Why would you lead us to believe everything was just fine and dandy down there? We would have helped you children. There was no reason for

you to struggle as long as your daddy and me have breath in our bodies.”

“I couldn’t say anything, Mama,” I said, ducking my head. “I was ashamed. You tried to tell me to wait, but I didn’t listen.”

“Well, that explains part of the story.” Mama remained steely. “Tell me the rest.”

I continued to look down at the ground for a moment, then I raised my head and looked at Mama, finishing the story I had begun. “After Jasper left, I moved in with his mama. She and I talked, and we decided it didn’t make sense for the house Jasper and I shared to stay empty, especially since we needed the money. Neither one of us was up for doing much farmwork, so we rented it out to the Negro schoolteacher, Mr. Bernard LeBlanc.”

“A single man?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Go on with your story.” Mama folded her arms across her chest.

“Bernard . . . I mean, Mr. LeBlanc—”

Mama interrupted. “How old was this Mr. LeBlanc?”

“About thirty-five or so.” I was just guessing. He never told me his age and I never asked, but somehow, that made everything seem even worse—that I didn’t know much of anything about the man I willingly gave so much to in a moment of passion . . . or maybe desperation.

Mama clicked her teeth. “Rose, I . . . Lord have mercy. Girl, just go on and finish what you were saying.”

I started again. “Mr. LeBlanc was very kind to me and Miss Ida Mae. He would check on us regularly, and he

## *Homeward*

would bring us things like a mess of fish he caught down by the creek or books from his personal library that he thought I might like to read since we didn't have a television and our radio only worked half of the time. Most nights he took his meals with us, making sure he gave us extra on his rent to cover the food. Miss Ida Mae would turn in early, leaving me and Mr. LeBlanc to ourselves." I tried not to let my mind wander back to those moments I shared with Bernard LeBlanc. I just told Mama the truth. All of it. From the kissing to finally, the lovemaking.

"So you started having relations with this man?" Mama snapped.

"Just once," I said hurriedly. "Just once. He and I . . . well . . . we . . . we did that one time and we both were so horrified. We didn't mean for it to happen."

"You said y'all kissed several nights. What did you think that was going to lead to, Rose?" Mama demanded. "Kissing is just the beginning of relations between a man and a woman. You had been married long enough to know that."

I nodded. I couldn't disagree with her. She was right. Everything she said was right.

"Where is this man now? Was he there when your husband returned?" Mama asked in a cold voice. I couldn't stand Mama sounding like that. It was like all feelings for me had left her spirit. I couldn't look at her.

"No, ma'am, he wasn't. The next morning, after we did what we did, Mr. LeBlanc left without leaving a forwarding address or explaining to anyone why he left so suddenly. That Sunday I cried before the altar for my sins, Mama. No one knew why I pled the blood of Jesus so hard that

day. I didn't mean to do what I did, Mama. I promise you I didn't. I thought it was all over and done with, but then my monthly didn't show up. One month went by, then two, then three, and . . ." I could barely speak by this point, but Mama just kept looking at me like she was looking at a stranger.

"Jasper came home with an injured leg, and you were carrying another man's baby. What did he say to you? Was it his idea for you to come back home? Did he strike you?"

"No, ma'am." I cried. I couldn't have her thinking badly about Jasper. "He didn't want me to leave. He took the blame for all of this. He said his lies led to my waywardness. He said he didn't blame me. He said I was young, and he forgave me. He said he wanted to raise this child as his own."

"I don't condone the lying he did to get you down there, Rose, but your 'I do' should have sustained you. It should have kept you unsullied while your husband was away," she said. "What do you want to do, Rose?"

"Stay here with you and Daddy." There were a lot of things I didn't know, but this one thing I did. I didn't want to go back down to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I didn't want to see Jasper's kind, sweet, forgiving face. I didn't want to live one more day in that broken-down shack of a house. I just wanted to stay in Little Parsons with my family and forget all of that ever happened.

"And what about your baby?"

I could see the sweat beading up above Mama's top lip and streaming down the sides of her face. Her headscarf was nearly soaking wet. I didn't know if it was the heat of the day or the heat of her rage that had her sweating so hard. I handed her my handkerchief. She wiped her face and

continued to look at me expectantly. She wanted an answer to her question. Finally, I spoke.

“I would like to give it up,” I said in a soft voice.

“Give it up,” Mama repeated. “Give up your marriage?”

I shook my head. “No, ma’am. The baby. I would like to give up the baby.”

Mama stood up from the bench, throwing the handkerchief in the spot she just got up from. “If you don’t want to be married to Jasper anymore, that is one thing. But give up this baby? No, ma’am. You will *not* be allowed to shove your child off to some stranger. You will *not* be allowed to pretend like none of this happened. You will *not* give away a member of this family. As sure as the good Lord put this baby in your belly, it will not be tossed away like yesterday’s newspaper. Do I make myself clear?”

I started crying again. “Mama, don’t make me keep this baby. How can I love this baby knowing what I did to get it?”

“Ain’t the baby’s fault. The baby didn’t do nothing to be punished for,” Mama said. “You the sinner. You owe this baby your life if it comes down to it. I know what it’s like to have a mama walk away without a second glance, and you will not do that. You will not.”

I nearly groaned. I couldn’t believe how insensitive I had been with my comment. How, in my selfishness, could I have forgotten Mama’s story? Her own mother had left her when she was a baby and she never heard word from her again. Great-Uncle Myron had done some digging when I was in high school, and he learned that Mama’s mama had died in Detroit, Michigan, soon after she left Parsons. The

records he found said she died in a knife fight. Mama always said it was good to finally know the truth. I know that pain wore at her like an open sore that would not heal, and here I was adding more pain to her hurt.

“Had you done what you promised the Lord you would do, you wouldn’t be in this fix right now,” Mama snapped. “You reap what you sow in this life, Rose. You know this. You were raised in the church. This baby is God’s way of saying you are forgiven. The dirtiness of what you did will be cleansed by the birth of this child. But you can’t run from it. Even if this baby were to end up on the other side of the earth, you would still have to reap what you sowed.”

“Are we going to tell Daddy?” I dreaded the idea of seeing the look of hurt on my daddy’s face. I would do anything to avoid that moment. I prayed Mama would just tell him herself. I should have known better.

“Oh no, ma’am. *We* are not going to tell Daddy anything,” Mama said. “This is your bed, Rose. You are going to have to lay in it all by yourself. Telling your daddy is your responsibility and I expect for it to happen the second we darken the door of our house. I needed to hear you say the words to me first. Now, you say those words to your daddy.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come on then.”

The walk back home was dreadful. No laughter or teasing. No chatting about the day. Just silence. When we got back to the porch, Daddy and my brother Lawrence were sitting outside talking. Lawrence was married to a sweet girl named Naomi, and they were the parents of six-year-old triplet boys named David, Daniel, and Demetrius. Lawrence



## *Homeward*

was a doting father and an equally doting big brother. I didn't want him to know my shame, although I was sure he and everyone else had figured it out. When he said something the other day, Mama had mumbled that some women carried bigger than others. After that, he started calling me Biggun.

"Hey, Biggun," Lawrence teased as Mama and I walked onto the porch. "Hey, Mama. How you doing?"

Mama looked at me and then at Lawrence. "Fair to mid-dlin', I suppose. Son, let's go inside and try out some of them lemon squares. That is, if your daddy left us any."

Daddy laughed. "Pretty girl, you know better than to leave me alone with your lemon squares, but I think there might be a piece of one left that y'all can share."

Lawrence got up but stopped beside me. "You okay, little sister?"

I nodded. I was trying my best not to cry again. He gave me a quick hug, then went inside with Mama. Daddy was gazing at me intently. Finally, he spoke.

"Come on over here and tell me what's wrong," he said in such a sweet, kind voice that I started crying as hard as I did that Sunday when I went to the altar to lay my sins in front of God. I sat beside Daddy and told him everything, just like I did with Mama. He said nothing throughout the entire story. I was afraid to look at his face when I was done. I didn't want to see the same disappointment and anger I saw on Mama's face. I couldn't believe I had allowed myself to be so selfish and unthoughtful. That lustful time I had spent with Bernard LeBlanc had done so much damage to so many innocent people. Finally, I looked up at Daddy and

he was smiling at me. I wondered for a moment if he heard what I said.

“Daddy, did you hear me?” I asked softly.

Daddy took his clean, white handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to me to wipe my face before he spoke. I did and waited for him to say something. I prayed it wouldn’t be “depart from me, I never knew you,” like it says in the Bible.

“Before I started dating your mama, I was a hothead. A real rascal,” Daddy said, continuing to smile. “Your grandma Perkins used to love saying she had prayed for the sins she knew I had committed already and the sins I was subject to do in the future. She said God had a book filled with just her prayers for me. So whenever I came to her or my daddy, God rest his soul, she would listen to what I said, and then she would say, ‘I talked to God about that a long time ago.’ You are forgiven and like the Bible says, ‘Go, and sin no more.’ Go and sin no more, daughter.”

I laid my head on my daddy’s shoulder and cried in earnest. Daddy wrapped his good arm around me and rocked me gently.

“Daddy, I am so sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Course not,” he said. “I’m disappointed in the choices you made, Rose. You have always been my little heartbeat, but this was wrong. You did that boy wrong, and you did yourself and your family wrong. You will have to live with that for the rest of your life. For now, we need to figure out what you are going to do moving forward. The sin is never as much about the act itself but how we act after we sin.”

## *Homeward*

“Daddy, I don’t want to go back down there.” I sat up and looked at him, trying my best not to start crying again. “That place is terrible. I’ve never seen anybody live like folks live down there. I just want to stay here at home where my family is.” I didn’t tell him the real reason I didn’t want to go back. I didn’t want to face the pain I had caused Jasper and his mama. Both of them had loved me the best they could, and I had slapped them in the face with this baby. I just didn’t want to see them look at me with their sad eyes anymore. I just didn’t think I could bear it.

Daddy looked at me with a serious expression on his face. “Then you are going to need to talk to your husband.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say. My mind was a jumbled-up mess, and I didn’t have a clue what to do. And of course, right then the baby started moving. Almost like it wanted to have something to say too.

“Did you hear me, Rose?” Daddy asked.

Before I could respond, Mama and Lawrence walked back outside. Mama sat on one of the porch chairs that faced the swing. Lawrence sat in the opposite chair.

“Daddy, you might as well have eaten them all,” Lawrence said, chuckling loudly. “Now Mama is going to need to make a special batch just for me. Ain’t that right, Mama?”

Mama and Daddy laughed. Normally I would too, but there was nothing in me that could make me laugh right now. I couldn’t ever imagine laughing again.

“You will survive, son,” Daddy teased.

“Y’all talked?” Mama asked, looking from me to Daddy.

“We talked,” Daddy said.

“I told your brother,” Mama said. I groaned.

“I’m not going to judge you,” Lawrence said in a serious voice. Of all my siblings, he was the most pious. Everybody just knew Lawrence was going to be a preacher someday. Grandma Perkins had proclaimed as much to everyone: “*Someday he would be a preacher like his grandpa Perkins.*” So far, he hadn’t made any movements in that direction, but he still gave some amazing spiritual counsel, whether we wanted it or not. “You should go talk to Grandma Perkins. She has always said she’s prayed for every sin we could think to do and when we go to pray about it ourselves, the Lord has already done the labor to forgive us.”

“It is already done,” I said softly, repeating one of her favorite expressions.

Daddy and I looked at each other and smiled. We have always been such a tight-knit family that it was not surprising when we all ended up saying pretty much the same thing.

“I just might do that,” I said. Grandma Perkins was getting on up in age. She still lived in the old home she once shared with our grandpa Perkins, who died a couple years after Ellena was born. Everyone said he stayed long enough to see his final grandchild. Grandma Perkins was a stern grandma but also very loving. She also prayed a special prayer for each of her family members when we would come visit. Her prayer for me would always begin with, “*God, thank you for this beautiful flower you blessed us with that we have named Rose. She has blossomed into a wonderful woman, and we ask that you nourish her with spiritual water and light so that she can continue to grow.*”

## *Homeward*

I tried to imagine what Grandma Perkins would say to me now. I imagined pretty much what Mama and Daddy and Lawrence have all said.

I knew I needed to talk to Jasper. He had called every day that I'd been here.

"I'm going to go inside and call Jasper," I said.

Daddy and Mama looked at me. Mama nodded. She still did not look at me like normal.

"We will be praying for you," Mama finally said.

"Thank you," I said and went into the house. There was a phone in the kitchen, so I went there to place my call. Jasper picked up after two short rings.

"Hello," he said.

"Hi, Jasper. It's me." All I wanted to do was hang up the phone and run away again, but the words Jasper said next nearly broke me in two.

He was quiet for a moment. For a second, I wondered if he had hung up, but then he spoke. "I want to come there where you are. I love you and I want my wife back."

I couldn't believe the words he was saying. Somehow, through it all, he still loved me. I could hear it in his voice even if he hadn't said the words, and it was almost too much to bear.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," I said. "It'll be better for you if I just stay here so you can find yourself a good wife down there. Somebody worthy of your love."

"What about the baby, Rosie?" he asked. "It ain't just about you and me now."

I could imagine his furrowed brow; his thick, calloused hands rubbing through his curly, black hair; his lips, plump

and turned down. I could also imagine Miss Ida Mae, his mama, sitting in the corner hunched over in her chair while she chewed tobacco, spitting her juices into a Pepsi bottle. I could see all of it, and worse, I could see my future with him, and it scared me—almost as much as giving birth to this baby. For the first time since turning twenty-one, I didn't feel like an adult. I felt like a little girl trying to make grown-up decisions.

“Jasper, I don't know what to do. Please, just give me some time to figure things out.”

“But . . .”

“Goodbye, Jasper,” I said and lightly hung up the phone.

After I hung up, I stood there and cried. I had broken the heart of a good man, and I wasn't sure if there was ever going to be a way for me to make things right. I loved Jasper, but I just didn't see how we could fix what I had broken. Him coming here seemed like the absolute worst thing he could do. I knew I was being selfish and thoughtless, but I wanted to stay here at home where things made sense, and I wanted him in Hattiesburg. I guess what I really wanted was my old life back. Unfortunately, there was no way that old life would be mine to have again.

## CHAPTER 3



I LOOKED ACROSS THE ROOM WHERE ELLENA NORMALLY SLEPT, but she had gone to spend the night with our sister, Katie Bell, in McDonough, Georgia. Katie Bell had given birth to a baby boy, Luther Jr., three months ago, and he was struggling with sleep, which meant Katie Bell and Luther Sr., her husband, weren't sleeping either. Ellena had offered to go spend the night with them so they could get a good night's rest. I was all alone in our room with my thoughts and emotions. I hadn't eaten a thing tonight. There was a lump in my throat that wouldn't let a morsel pass by. I tried to sit and listen to the ballgame with Daddy, but my mind was all over the place and my stomach was in knots, so I just came on in the room and got in the bed.

It was stifling hot though, and it didn't take long for my gown to get soaking wet—partly because of the heat and partly because of my tossing and turning. The baby was moving around a lot too. Seemed like neither one of us could get any peace on this night. I just kept thinking about Jasper wanting me back. The idea that he would try to love

me after what I had done to him was unthinkable to me. My daddy was a godly man and so were my brothers and uncles, but I had never witnessed anything like this. Jasper was showing me what forgiveness looked like, and it made me even more ashamed because I don't believe I would be that forgiving if he had done the same to me.

When it got to be close to midnight, I finally got up and slid down off the bed onto my knees. Grandma Perkins liked to say, *"If you can't rest, storm heaven with your prayers and God will send you some relief."* I prayed she was right as I pressed my damp forehead against the twisted sheets on my bed.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being such a terrible person. I know I asked you to forgive me before, but I wasn't really asking you to forgive me for what I had done. Oh, I said the words, but really, I just wanted to pretend like nothing happened. I did wrong. I did wrong toward you and Jasper and this baby and everybody who loves me, and I am so very sorry." I felt a cry forming in my throat, but I put my hand over my mouth to stifle it and rocked myself until I felt calm again. I continued to pray, trying my best to "cast my burdens upon the Lord." I stayed on my knees until nearly one in the morning. I was so tired.

Finally, I lifted myself off the floor and walked over to open the window, praying a breeze might find its way to me. Then I climbed back into the bed. I had no more tears at that point. I was emotionally drained. I just wanted to go to sleep and escape all the thoughts that were causing my brain to hurt. I pulled back the sheet and light spread. I touched my belly. Something I seldom did. The little cantaloupe-size



## *Homeward*

belly felt strange since I had always had a flat stomach. “I will try to do right by you,” I said to the baby inside. I had never had a kind word for it. I wondered if it could hear me.

The bed felt huge. Jasper and I shared a full-size bed at home, and this was a queen. For the first time in a long time, I wished for my husband. I closed my eyes, tears seeping out of my eyelids. “I’m sorry,” I whispered just before I dozed off. My dreams had me restless all night. I kept dreaming that Jasper was trying to get to me, but something kept pushing him farther away. Every time he would call out to me, his voice would be fainter and fainter.

“Rosie,” I heard a voice calling me from way off. “Rosie.”

“Jasper,” I said. “Jasper, I’m here. I’m here.” The dream was so real. Hearing his voice was both comforting and distressing because I couldn’t get to him. There was thick fog and everywhere I tried to turn felt like I was moving farther away from Jasper.

“Rosie, baby, it’s me. Wake up,” the voice said again, and this time he didn’t sound far off. He sounded like he was right there. I opened my eyes and saw my husband sitting on the bed beside me.

“Jasper.” I sat straight up in the bed. He was wearing his Air Force uniform and he had never looked so handsome. I wrapped my arms around him. “Oh, Jasper. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not mad at me for coming here?” His voice was muffled as he sank his face into my hair that was all over my head. I hadn’t even bothered to tie it up before bed.

“No. I’m not mad at you. I never was mad at you. I was

mad at myself, but I took it out on you.” I cried. “Please forgive me. Please.”

Jasper caressed my cheek. “Rosie, I forgive you. I already forgave you. Do you forgive me? For lying to you? That’s how all of this got started. If I had just been honest with you. If I had trusted that you loved me.”

I nodded. “I forgive you. I forgive you.” I did. None of that mattered. I was just thankful to have Jasper holding me again. Wishing I could rewind the last few months and be his—only his.

He kissed me softly on my lips, and for the first time in a while, I kissed him back. It felt good. Just like I remember it feeling when we first kissed on the day we got married. Jasper had insisted that he didn’t want to kiss me until I was his wife. It seemed a bit silly to me at the time, but on our wedding day, it made that moment so special. And to think, I let another man have what was only supposed to be between Jasper and me. I tried not to allow myself to be overwhelmed with shame, but I knew I would feel it until the day I took my last breath.

“What time is it?” I whispered. Jasper didn’t answer me. I looked towards the window. Judging from the faint light of the moon, it wasn’t quite daybreak. He gently pushed me back down onto the pillow. I watched as he took off his shoes. Then, he stood and removed his uniform and neatly laid it on the chair by the bed. “Where’s your mama? Did you bring her with you?” I was confused and maybe still half asleep.

“She’s staying with a cousin of hers in Mobile,” he said. “She’s going to be there until we decide what to do. I didn’t

want you having to worry about taking care of Mama, you, and . . . and . . . the baby.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Don’t.” He slid into the bed beside me, pulled me close, and began stroking my belly. “Don’t be sorry. Not no more. This is going to be our baby, Rosie. You hear me? This baby is going to be all ours. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I didn’t understand. I didn’t understand at all, but I didn’t say anything. I just watched as he bent down and kissed my belly. Then he looked back up at me.

“Will you let me love on you? I mean, let me make love to you so we can make this baby officially ours?” he asked, the words catching in his throat. I touched his face, and it was wet with tears.

“But, Jasper, I . . .”

“If I make love to you right now, in this moment, God will make this baby ours.”

“Jasper, I . . .”

“Do you believe in miracles, Rosie?” he asked, his voice so solemn.

“Yes. Of course, but . . .”

Jasper interrupted me, his voice quiet but sure. “If Jesus could change water into wine, feed the five thousand, walk on water, and raise Lazarus from the dead, surely he can make this baby mine and yours. Do you believe that, Rose?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my face now wet with tears too. “Yes, Jasper. I believe it.”

Our lovemaking was sweeter than anything I had ever experienced. On the night of our wedding, we had been like two carried-away teenagers—groping and petting on each

other, calling each other's names so loudly we were afraid somebody would hear us. This night, we took our time. Our lovemaking was calm and gentle and tender. Jasper kissed every part of my body, including my belly. He whispered sweet words of love to the baby that he said would now be ours. Jasper was making this baby his own and I couldn't thank God enough for giving me another chance at love with my husband.



"Y'all kids better come on out. Breakfast is near 'bout ready," my daddy called from the door. My cheeks got hot. I looked at the clock. It was seven in the morning. I knew Daddy knew we were married, and I knew he knew married people did married people things, but somehow, the idea of him knowing what we might be doing behind closed doors had me feeling embarrassed. Then Jasper went ahead and made it worse.

"We'll be out there just as soon as I finish kissing on my wife, Mr. Perkins," Jasper called back. I heard laughter outside the door. It sounded like Mama and Grandma Perkins. I wanted to fall beneath the floor. Before I could chastise Jasper for being so forward, he reached over and pulled me close, kissing me like he had been doing off and on since he arrived. Suffice it to say, we did not get much, if any, sleep.

"Jasper, we got to stop." I moaned softly. "They gone know."

"They gone know I love myself some Rose Bourdon," he said with a laugh and commenced to kissing on me again. It

## *Homeward*

didn't take long for me to forget everything. Mama. Daddy. Grandma. Everything except my husband. The man I loved and who loved me in spite of my shortcomings. I knew God could answer prayers, but I had no idea he could answer them like this.

Finally, Jasper tore his lips away from mine, nearly gasping for air. "We better get out there before I have my way with you again, wife."

Once again, my cheeks got warm.

"Rose, I need to say something before we go out there."

I looked up at him, afraid of the seriousness of his tone. I worried that he regretted everything, but the look of love in his eyes calmed my fears. Or at least most of them.

"Okay," I said, so soft I wondered if he heard me. He bent down and kissed me, brushing my hair so it fanned across the pillow.

"Last night when we made love, you and me made a baby. You understand what I'm saying? Last night, I put this baby into your belly. Me. Is that clear to you?"

I nodded tearfully.

"Good," he said with a smile, tilting my chin so I was looking him in the eyes. "Then we don't need to mention that other ever again. Not in this world nor the world to come."

"Yes, Jasper."

"Them tears is happy tears, ain't they?"

"Yes," I whispered.

Jasper began rubbing my belly and almost on cue, the baby kicked. He looked at me and grinned. "Was that . . . ?"

"Yes." I laughed for the first time in months, maybe

years. I didn't even remember feeling this pure joy before, except on our wedding day. "That was the baby kicking."

"The baby knows I'm her daddy. Say it, Rosie. Say the words. Say, 'Last night, you and me made this baby.'"

"Last night, you and me made this baby," I said, wiping his tears with the back of my hand. This moment was so beautiful that I didn't want it to end. I knew things would still be hard, but we were going to be all right. That's what I told myself. I was going to try my hardest to not allow the dark thoughts to enter my mind again because Jasper and this baby deserved better than that.

Jasper smiled at me, his eyes still shining with tears. "I'm gonna be a daddy. You, this baby, and me is a family. And I only got one more thing to ask you to do for me." He looked at me with so much love in his eyes that my heart didn't think it could hold it all.

"What's that?" I whispered, laying my head on his shoulder.

"I want you to give me a pretty little girl who looks just like you," he said with a huge grin. "I don't want no nappy-headed boy. I want our first baby to be a girl. You think you can do that?"

I started laughing. "I don't know. I'll try."

"Well, you try hard." He lifted my head from his shoulder and kissed me softly on my lips. "And every single day, I want you to dress her up in blue dresses. Pretty blue dresses with white lace."

"Blue?" I questioned, still laughing. "Boys wear the blue, Jasper. Girls wear the pink."

Jasper shook his head as he laughed. "Not my baby girl."

## *Homeward*

She gonna wear blue for her daddy because that's my favorite color. Every day, she gone have on a pretty blue dress."

"Oh, Jasper. Yes," I said, smiling through the tears. "I promise you. The prettiest blue dresses you have ever seen. I'll get Mama to help me sew them. I promise."

"Good," he said. "Let's go before they all bust in here on us."

Reluctantly, I got up from the bed and quickly put on a house dress. Jasper put his Air Force uniform back on.

"Why you wearing that, Jasper?" I asked. "Put on some regular clothes."

"I gotta go back, Rosie," he said quietly.

I stopped. I felt like somebody had punched me hard in the stomach. "What you mean you got to go back? Go back where?"

"I got a letter saying I needed a doctor to tell them if my leg had healed or not. Well, I saw the doctor and he said my leg was healed enough for me to return to active duty. Air Force said I gotta report back in three weeks. I'll be going to Wolters Air Force Base in Texas."

"Did you find out all of that before I left?"

He nodded. "I didn't want to worry you. I knew you had a lot on your mind."

"Oh, Jasper." I rushed into his arms.

I felt like crying all over again and begging and pleading him to just ignore the letter, but I knew he needed me to be his wife and not a spoiled little girl. I made myself smile, even though all I wanted to do was cry out to God to fix this so me and Jasper could be together. I didn't though. I had asked enough of God for one night.

“Then we gone make these next three weeks the best ever,” I said, reaching up and putting my hands on his cheeks. “I love you, Jasper Bourdon. With all of my heart. Me and your daughter gone be waiting right here when you come back home. Both of us wearing blue. I promise.”

Jasper nodded and kissed me once more, then took my hand in his. We walked out to the living room where Mama, Daddy, and Grandma were sitting. They all looked up at us with smiles on their faces.

“There they come,” Mama said, reaching over to grab Grandma’s hand. They both looked at each other and smiled. I could just imagine the conversations the two of them have had this morning.

Daddy looked from me to Jasper and finally he spoke. “Everything good with y’all?”

I looked up at Jasper, and he kissed the top of my head. “Yes, sir. Everything is good. I got a beautiful wife, and I’m ’bout to be a daddy. It can’t get no better than that.”

Daddy came over and shook hands with Jasper. “That’s good, son. That’s real good. Congratulations.”

When Daddy said that, I knew he understood that me and Jasper had figured things out between us, and he was going to accept things just like Jasper was saying it. Mama got up and came over and hugged Jasper and me. I heard her say down-low, “You are a good man, Jasper. I couldn’t want for a better son-in-law.”

“Y’all children have made this old woman proud this morning,” Grandma Perkins said as she wiped tears from her eyes.



## *Homeward*

Daddy cleared his throat. "I got to get to the store soon, so let's go eat breakfast."

We went to the table and Daddy said the blessing, making sure to say how grateful he was for his daughter to be reunited with her husband.

I didn't eat much more today than I did yesterday. I was trying to soak everything in. Things being right between me and Jasper. Jasper having to go back to Vietnam or wherever the Air Force decided to send him. Me trying to wrap my brain around being a mama soon. It was a lot. In less than twenty-four hours, I was madly in love with my husband again, and he was willing to forgive me and love this baby. That was a whole lot, and it took up every space inside me that food would go, or at least that was how it felt.

Once we were done eating, Daddy stood up and looked over at me and Jasper.

"Why don't you young folks drive me to work today and y'all keep the car?" Daddy said. "Maybe go over to Katie Bell's and pick up Ellena. Y'all can go see a movie or eat out. Just be young folks."

I knew Daddy was in a good mood if he was offering us his car to drive. Didn't nobody drive that car but Daddy. It was a 1962 Chevrolet Impala. Daddy had bought it for cash off the showroom floor just a few months ago, and he babied it like it was his seventh child.

"Thank you, Mr. Perkins," Jasper said with a wide grin. "Y'all ready?" he asked, excitement in his voice.

"I got to get dressed, Jasper," I said, laughing. "I can't go out in this old house dress."

"You look fine to me." He looked at me like I was

wearing an evening dress and crown on my head like those girls in the Miss America contest.

Everybody laughed. I gave Mama and Grandma Perkins kisses.

“Y’all children come by tonight when you get back. I’ll have supper for you,” Grandma Perkins said.

“Yes, ma’am.” I got up from the kitchen table. “I’ll hurry, Daddy.”

I went back to the bedroom and looked through my closet for something to wear. My belly didn’t make it easy on me. Suddenly, I didn’t feel so good about going out. I couldn’t embarrass Jasper by looking like somebody thrown away.

“Wear this,” I heard a voice from the door say. I turned. It was Mama, and she was holding a beautiful, sleeveless, pleated dress. And it was blue! Jasper’s favorite color. “I made it for you. I figured you would need something nice to wear for church.”

“Oh, Mama.” My eyes filled with tears. Even though Mama had been so angry and disappointed with me, she still was thinking about me enough to make me a dress. “When did you have time to make me a whole dress, Mama?” I held the dress up to me as I looked in the mirror.

“When I can’t sleep, I sew. No matter what, you’re my baby girl, and I love you.” Mama pulled me into an embrace. I could feel the wetness on her cheeks.

“I will make you proud again, Mama,” I whispered. “I promise.”

Mama cleared her throat. “You and Jasper making up is all I could ask for. Now, let’s get you all prettified for your husband.”

## *Homeward*

Mama did my hair for me in a chignon, and then I hurried into the bathroom and washed off. When I put that dress on, I felt like a million dollars. Mama loaned me her Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat that matched the dress. Then she gave me a matching blue purse to carry.

“I feel like a movie star,” I said, twirling around in my dress.

“Come on,” Daddy called out from outside the door. “Y’all gonna have me late.”

I looked at Mama and she nodded with approval. We walked out arm in arm. Jasper was sitting at the table with Daddy and Grandma Perkins, but when he saw us, he stood, a huge grin on his face.

“My oh my,” he said, coming over to me, slowly turning me around. “Don’t you look mighty fine in this blue dress.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Mama made it for me.”

“You look beautiful, baby,” Daddy said, getting up. “Let’s go. Time waits for no man. Mama, you want us to ride you by the house?”

“No,” she said, settling back in her chair. “I’ll drink another cup of coffee with Opal and get Naomi to take me home. You children go ahead. Be careful though. I was reading in the papers that some mess happened over in Albany. Thirty-nine Negroes got put in jail for doing nothing more than praying. Lord have mercy. What is this world coming to?”

“They were doing more than praying, Mama,” Daddy said in a gruff voice. “They was protesting on private government property. It’s that Dr. King and all them young rabble-rousers. They just need to settle down and work with

the white folks who want to help us change things. Patience is what they need, not protests.”

“I reckon Dr. King and them figure Negroes been patient enough, Mr. Perkins,” Jasper said quietly. “Me and the other Negro soldiers serve right along with them white boys, taking the same gunfire they do, and yet, they still have the nerve to hurl ugly names at us. Then when we come home, we still have to sit in the back of the bus. I read about those Freedom Riders and the work they trying to do to integrate the buses and the lunch counters. I don’t think that can happen too soon.”

Daddy huffed, but he said nothing else about it. “Let’s go, y’all.” He kissed Mama and Grandma Perkins on the cheek. Jasper and I said our goodbyes and went outside where Daddy was waiting by the car. He handed Jasper the keys. “Go easy on her.”

“Thank you, Mr. Perkins,” Jasper said with a wide smile. Daddy got in the back seat, and Jasper opened the passenger door for me. Once everyone was settled, Jasper eased the car into the road, and we were on our way to downtown Parsons. “My oh my, this car shore does drive nice, Mr. Perkins. I ’speck I would be driving it around all the time if it was mine.”

Daddy laughed. “You wouldn’t feel that way if you were buying gas for her at thirty-one cents per gallon. This is a greedy girl, Jasper. A real greedy girl.”

Jasper looked over at me and smiled. “When I get back, I’m going to get us a nice car like this so I can take you and our daughter out in style.”

“That would make me mighty proud,” I said. “But you

*Homeward*

don't have to get a fancy car. You just need to come home. That will be a plenty."

"I'm going to do both," he said confidently. I prayed he was right. I didn't want to think about him getting hurt again or worse. But I decided to put all those thoughts behind me and just enjoy spending time with my husband. God had given us more time, and I planned on enjoying every second of it.

