

## SUNDAY MORNING

*Shelonda Montgomery*

*I'm going to ask her to be my girlfriend,* Abby thinks to herself as she looks through a dirty church window. Anna Benton, the pastor's daughter, sits alone on a church pew rehearsing her lines for the junior choir's youth revival performance. *Okay,* Abby thinks. She looks at her trembling hands and closes her eyes tight. Doubt paralyzes her. She thinks the two locked eyes a few times. Thinks she saw Anna smile at her. Anna Benton is the prettiest girl at Holy Saints Missionary Baptist Church. All of the boys like her and follow her around and the congregation dotes on her because she is proper, well-mannered, polite, and a straight-A student.

"What if it's just me?" Abby says to herself. She opens her eyes and, again, stares into the small window. Her dirty black high-top Chuck Taylor gym shoes are pressed into the dirt. Her beige flowery dress hangs below her knees and flows with the wind. As she moves, her dress brushes her white, red-trimmed tube socks that Cissy, her grandmother, instructed her not to wear. She hates dresses but wears them because Cissy makes her. However, she resolves, to herself only, to keep the socks. *This dress would look good on Anna Benton,* Abby thought to herself as she dressed this morning. Anna wears pinks and yellows and oranges and to Abby, Anna smells like honey or freshly cut sugarcane.

"Abigail, get over here!" Cissy now says.

Abby runs to Cissy who looks down at her pointedly. "What are you doing over there? You know these people don't want you in they flowers." Abby looks back at the crushed lilies in the dirt, her shoe print between them. She runs over and tries to fix them as much as she can, holding a lumpy lily in her hands as if she is a surgeon trying to restore life to it. "*Girl,* get over here!"

Cissy says. Abby lets the lily go and walks to her grandmother. The lily, weathered and tired, slowly returns to the dirt and nuzzles itself within the shoeprint. Anna Benton closes her hymnbook and sings her verse. The beatific sound echoes through the small church and seeps through the windows and door crevices like fog searching about the air.

"Why don't she ever sit with us?" Robert says to Abby. From the church's second-floor balcony they look down at Anna, who stands onstage with the director and members of the junior choir.

"Don't know." Several members of the choir prepare to sing.

"She is so pretty," Robert says and wipes his sweaty brow.

Abby places her hands on the cold railing, leans over, stretches her neck like an ostrich searching for food, and looks at Anna again. "She Okay."

"Okay. . . no. She more than Okay. She pretty."

"If you think so."

"I do. You think she'll be my girlfriend if I ask her?"

"Nope." Abby presses her face against the bars, her heart in her stomach at the thought of someone liking Anna. *And Robert. Not Robert. Robert. Robert is not good for Anna*, she thinks.

"You *don't* think she'll be my girlfriend?"

"Nooooooooooooooooo."

"Why you say that?"

"Because she the pastor's daughter and the pastor ain't gone let her be your girlfriend. And she ain't cute anyway. You should ask Hattie Cowan to be your girlfriend."

Robert frowns. "Hattie Cowan?"

"What's *wrong* with Hattie Cowan?" Abby says, her hand on her hip as if she is her grandmother telling off a clerk, or waitress, or someone somewhere who did not give her all of her change.

Robert scratches his head. "Hattie Cowan is okay, but she ain't no Anna." Hattie Cowan has huge glasses and is often referred to as homely by the neighborhood children, including Robert.

"Boy, Anna *ain't* cute and you crazy if you *think* she is."

"What she do to you?"

Abby picks up her backpack, runs down the balcony stairs, and leaves out of a side door. Robert grabs his backpack and follows her.

"Where you going?" he asks, running behind her.

"Home," she says, pointing to her house in the distance beyond a field of brush.

"Why you going home?"

"Cause my grandmamma told me to be home by dinner and it's almost dinner."

"Oh. can I go?"

"Nope."

"Come on, why? I love your grandmamma's cooking."

Abby sharpens her eyes like knives at Robert.

"Come on, Abby."

"Nope. Bye, Robert," she says, places one of the straps of her backpack on her shoulder, and stomps like a soldier around the field, creating dust clouds that twirl and spin at her feet.

"What took you so long to get home?" Cissy says, standing at the kitchen sink, drying a plate and looking at Abby.

Abby places her backpack on a kitchen chair. "Had to stop by the church." She takes a cup from the rack, opens the refrigerator, and pours herself a cup of fruit punch.

"Right . . . You *did* tell me a few days ago that you were going to the church and would be home late. Did you like it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to be in it, Grandma. I hate singing."

"Pastor said it would be good for you. Said it'll help you adjust to being out here."

*I don't want to adjust*, Abby thinks, staring into her cup as if in a trance.

"I want to go back home with my momma, Grandma," she says, her voice low.

"I know, but she sent you to live down here until she gets things situated." "Just try it, Abigail," Cissy says, her eyes low and voice soft, as if pained by Abby's resistance to joining the junior choir. "It's a nice choir and the children are so sweet. And that little Anna. She is the nicest little thing. Sweet as a peach." Abby looks at the linoleum-tiled floor and allows her eyes to trace the boxes. "It's just hard now," Cissy continues, "because it's new to you. Can you just try it for a little longer?"

Abby nods.

"And maybe if all goes well, the pastor will give you a solo someday. That would be so nice, wouldn't it?" Cissy says, smiling.

"What's that I smell?" Abby's grandfather Earl, recovering from a stroke, slowly walks into the kitchen. He grabs the top of a chair and tries to sit down but nearly falls. Cissy quickly grabs him and helps him into the chair.

"Oxtail stew, cabbage, and dressing," Cissy says. "I told you I would bring your meal."

Earl takes a piece of tissue out of his pocket and wipes his hands and forehead, ignoring her. Cissy looks at him and frowns. "You couldn't wait, huh?"

Earl tries to adjust himself in the chair.

"Do you want to eat in here or do you want me to take it in the room? I can set it on your TV tray and you can watch TV and eat," Cissy says.

Earl moves from side to side in the chair and stops. "Well. I'm here now, so I'll just eat it here." He sucks his teeth a little and tries to secure a loose denture with his tongue. Abby stands and absentmindedly flicks a piece of plastic hanging from her cup.

"Okay." Cissy takes a bowl from the rack. "Earl, Abby joining the choir," she says, as if she just remembered to tell him and is afraid she might forget.

"Why you got her joining that shit?" Earl frowns as if he just smelled a foul odor.

Sissy spins around so fast that she stumbles. "Earl! Stop all that! I got her joining the choir because it's good for her."

Earl fans his hand, his forearm resting on the back of the chair.

"Earl, stop. It is a good church. The pastor is nice . . . he's a good man. The congregation is, too . . . Abby, go upstairs and clean up for dinner," Cissy says.

"Yes, ma'am," Abby says, grabs her backpack, and runs upstairs.

Holy Saints Missionary Baptist Church is small and wooden, yet beautiful. Its steeple is high and its windows are lined with stained glass. It is packed every Sunday morning for service and every Wednesday night for Bible study. Now Sunday service has just ended, and the congregation stands in fellowship greeting each other, eating cake and pie, and drinking tea and coffee. The church's elders made peach cobblers and display them proudly on tables.

"Keep us, Lord," Anna sings softly, sitting and swinging her legs on a bench behind the church and holding a sheet of song lyrics. She stops singing, unfolds the paper, and reads the lyrics. She stands and walks down a dirt path, holding the paper behind her back, slipping and moving it between her fingers. "Through the storm. Through the night," she sings. Suddenly, just as she takes a step, a black snake slithers across her path and nearly brushes her shoe. Anna screams and runs behind a tree. Abby sprints forward and grabs the snake. It wriggles in her small hand and struggles to break free. Holding the snake, Abby proudly walks over to Anna.

"Just a snake," Abby says, holding the snake out to Anna. Anna frowns and turns her head away. Abby throws it into the grass and wipes her hands on her dress, which is two sizes too large. "It wasn't poisonous," she says, rubbing her hands together as if trying to remove the remaining dirt.

"How do you know?" Anna asks, looking at Abby pointedly and studying the crooked ponytail sitting atop her frizzy, sandy-brown hair and the smudge of dirt on her cheek that looks as if it has been there for some time.

"Cause it was not. I know snakes. Use to see them all the time when I use to go fishing."

"What are you doing out here anyway?" Anna asks.

Abby looks down.

Sister Gene, an usher, peeks her head out of the back door, looks at Abby, and frowns. Behind her the choir sings. Abby tries to smooth her hair and brushes dirt off her dress. Wearing a pink floral dress, Anna stands and balances her white purse on her bent wrist. Her hair is shiny and not a strand is out of place, the neatly combed baby hair greased and curled. Her lips have a coat of fresh pink gloss and her nails a matching coat of fresh pink polish. Her face is oiled, which makes her dark umber skin look as if it is glowing, complementing her big, bright, delicate almond eyes and long eyelashes. She smells like strawberries because she habitually dabs strawberry perfume behind her ears and on her wrists.

"Anna, come inside," Sister Gene says. Anna walks inside. Abby follows her.

Anna stands onstage in the center of the choir and sings during rehearsal. The junior choir joins in and follows her lead. Abby stands in the far back corner as if hidden. She peeks out from behind the drums and taps her dirty sneakers. Overwhelmed by the rhythm, she starts singing. The choir director squints his eyes and puffs his cheeks. He then pushes his eyeglasses down a little and looks over the rim at Abby, who puts her hands over her mouth and slowly rocks from side to side. The choir director takes Abby by the hand, guides her to a pew, and sits her down.

The sun is setting, and members of the congregation walk toward their cars. Abby walks alone on a dirt road toward home, her head down. She walks slow and drags her backpack by her side as if it is full of stones.

“Hey, thanks for saving me today!”

Abby turns around and sees Anna standing in the middle of the road.

“I ain’t save you. I told you that snake wasn’t going to kill you.”

“But still . . . Thanks.” Anna looks down at the ground, up, and around. “Can you help me sell some gift baskets this Saturday? We have to raise money for the junior choir. My father said if I sell them, people will line up to buy them. Can you help me?”

Abby nods.

Anna smiles. “Thank you. I’ll tell sister Gene. Meet me here at 11 a.m. on Saturday.”

Abby fidgets with her dress. “Okay.”

Anna runs back into the church. Abby rushes home, smiling the entire way and clutching her backpack to her chest as if it were a sack of weightless feathers.

“Mr. Hudson, how are you on this beautiful Saturday morning?” Anna says, standing at Mr. Hudson’s doorstep. She is in a white lace dress with matching gloves and holds a gift basket. Abby stands in the distance, peeking around a tree.

Mr. Hudson’s eyes light up. “Anna Benton, what brings you by this Saturday morning? How’s your grandmother doing?”

“She’s quite well, thank you,” Anna says, smiling and partially curtsying.

“And the pastor?”

“My father is well also, sir.”

“Mildred!” Mr. Hudson leans back and yells into the house. “Anna Benton, Elder Benton’s granddaughter, is at the door!”

“Really!” a voice yells from within the house. “Well now!” In moments, Mr. Hudson’s wife stands at the door, smiling. “Anna!” she says, then runs off the porch and hugs Anna.

Anna looks back and smiles at Abby. "You look so nice." Mildred continues, "I was *just* talking to the pastor about you. I told him that he should be so proud of the little lady that you've become."

Anna blushes and looks down. "Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. That means so much."

"And I love your bow," Mildred says, patting a lace bow that delicately sits on Anna's head. "How is your grandmother?"

"She is fine, Mrs. Hudson. How are you?"

"Fine, fine, Anna. I'm fine . . . you are so polite. Isn't she, Henry?"

"She is," Henry says, smiling.

"What brings you by, Anna?" Mildred asks.

"We are selling gift baskets to raise money for the junior choir," Anna says as she walks over to a red wagon and uncovers a bag of elaborately made gift baskets.

Mrs. Hudson eyes light up. "Look at that! Beautiful!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Hudson, as you know, we have a youth revival coming up and we—"

"No need to say anything else, Anna!" Mrs. Hudson says, extending her arm and shaking her head. "We will take four . . . no . . . give me about five. I'll give some to the ladies at the hospital. They will love them! They love little cute stuff like this."

"They bought five?" Abby asks, pulling the wagon.

"Yep." Anna counts the money and rolls it tight as they walk down a trail. "Okay, now it's your turn," she says and looks at a huge house sitting regally on a hill.

Abby swallows hard. "That's a big house."

"It is. Which means they have money . . . and we need money. Come on." Anna beckons for Abby to follow her and starts walking up the hill. They arrive at the front door. "Stand right here," Anna says and hides behind a tree. Abby looks around, rubs her hair to try to fix strands sticking up, and rings the doorbell. Dr. Miller opens the door slowly. He pokes his nose out.

"Hhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee," Abby says, stuttering so much that she spits, and it splatters like rain.

Dr. Miller frowns. "What?" he asks, his voice husky.

"Hhhheeeeeeeeee, dddddddddd doo dddddddddd you want to buy some gift baskketss Mr.," Abby says, fidgeting with the rim of her dress so much that her rolled up, red-trimmed tube socks and muddy high-top gym shoes show.

"What!"

"Who is that!" a woman yells from inside the house.

Dr. Miller looks around the door. "I think it's Cissy's granddaughter. You know, the one she took in because the mother fell on hard times." The woman comes to the door and looks at Abby. She then looks at the uncovered gift baskets. The covering hangs and lies partially on the concrete. Abby quickly rushes over and tries to fix the covering.

She looks up at the couple. "Dddd doo yyyyou wwwwwantt to buy—"

"No, baby. We don't want none of them baskets," Mrs. Miller says, frowning. Abby drops her head, takes the wagon and walks away. The wagon crashes against rocks and debris, making a loud clucking sound.

"That was good," Anna says, waiting beside the tree.

Abby sits on a log and picks up a stick.

Anna looks at her, her face somber. "It was good."

"They like you," Abby whispers, her eyes red and watery.

"They *don't* like me. They like my grandmother and father. Everybody likes them, so they think they like me."

Abby, sitting with her head down, peels a piece of bark from the stick, and throws it to the ground.

"Is that true what he said about your mother?" Anna asks, her voice soft. Abby rubs the stick between her fingers. Anna stands directly in front of her. "Stand up." Abby stands. They are so close that their noses almost touch. Anna takes a tissue

from her purse and wipes smudge marks from Abby's chin and forehead. "Here, take off your jacket." Abby removes her leather jacket, her dress wrinkled and dusty. "Pat your dress off." Abby starts whacking her dress. "No, like this," Anna says and starts wiping and patting Abby's dress. Anna takes her brush out of her purse and brushes the front of Abby's hair. "Turn around, please," Anna says. Abby turns around and Anna takes strands of Abby's hair, which are sticking up, rubs them down, puts the hair into a ponytail, and takes the lace bow from her head and places it on Abby's. In order to inspect her work, she again faces Abby. Anna smells like strawberries and her lips are slick with freshly applied gloss. Abby's heart beats and she begins to sweat.

"Now, let's try this again," Anna says and looks at a house in the distance. "Here, put this on." She takes out her lip gloss, applies it to Abby's lips, and rubs it in with her pinky finger. "Okay, come on. We'll do it together this time." She takes Abby's hand in hers and feels that it is covered in sweat. "Are you nervous?" Abby looks at her, wipes her brow and nods. Anna looks into Abby's eyes. "I am too." She squeezes Abby's hand and holds it tight. They walk down the hill and ring the doorbell. The door creaks as it opens.

Anna sits in church inside the choir box. She sees Abby and Cissy walk in, so she rubs her hair back and sits up straight.

Abby and Cissy sit in a pew. Pastor Benton is preaching. Abby opens her Bible and looks at Anna.

"What are you doing?" Cissy says when she sees that Abby did not turn to Matthew 3:17 as Pastor Benton instructed.

Abby looks up at her grandmother. "Nothing."

Cissy stares at Abby's open Bible. "He said Matthew 3:17."

Abby starts flipping through the pages, trying to find the scripture. Anna stares at her. Their eyes meet and Abby looks away, smiles, and turns to Matthew 3:17.

"How are you liking that choir?" Cissy asks, sweeping the front porch.

Abby rests her body on the fence, leaning over it. "It's okay."

"Just okay? Either you like it, or you don't . . . *Girl*, move and let me get over here," she says, sweeping beside Abby's feet and trying to sweep the spot where Abby is standing. "It is a good church. There are some good kids in that choir. That reminds me . . . y'all youth revival is coming up this Sunday. The junior choir is going to sing, right?"

Abby nods.

"Are you ready?" Cissy asks.

Abby, again, nods.

"Okay. If not, just practice. Go over the lines that you don't know. Do you like the dress I got you?"

Abby puffs her jaw and releases the air slowly, balancing herself on the edges of her gym shoes, and slouches on the fence, her arms dangling like tired, wreathed willow tree branches. "It's okay," she says, as if she just remembered to respond.

"The pastor told me to get you there early, so we gone get dressed and be on our way, okay?"

"Okay, Abby says and moves her feet. Cissy sweeps in the desired spot.

A stage is set up outside behind the church and long tables with white linens line the lawn. The parishioners wait to hear the junior choir sing.

"I hate ham and they always serve ham at these things. Ham . . . and luncheon meat that is often passed off as ham," Anna says to Abby. They are dressed in white and stand in a food line beside a table covered in dishes in plastic containers or huge aluminum trays that have Chafing Dish Fuel and a PowerPad underneath. The dishes are macaroni and cheese, ham, gumbo, collard greens, macaroni salad, potato salad, coleslaw, fried chicken, two cakes, and two peach cobbler pies. Anna skips the

ham and dips a huge spoon in a coleslaw container and places some onto her plate, which has potato salad and macaroni salad on it.

Abby looks at the ham. "I like it." She puts a piece on her plate. "This all my Grandma ever cooks."

"Is your mom coming to see you perform?" Anna asks.

Abby shakes her head and struggles to place a roll on her plate, her eyes low. Anna looks at her. "I'm sure she will get a chance to stop by and see you soon."

"I told you to come by my house and get me!" Robert says, running up to Abby. He is dressed in white, his face is shiny, and his hair is neat and extra oily, as if someone forgot to rub the oil in properly.

Abby spins around to Robert. "I told you that if me and my grandmother was running late we were going to go on to church."

Robert shakes his head.

"Hi Anna," he says, staring at Anna as if he just realized she is standing there.

"Hi Robert," Anna says and smiles.

"Abby, are you ready to sing in the choir today?" Robert asks, his voice trembling as if he could not think of anything else to say to Anna.

"I am," Abby says.

"How are you, Robert?" Anna says.

Robert blushes and smiles. "Fine," he says and nervously twirls a strand of his oily hair between his fingers. "How are you, Anna?" He rubs the back of his head, looks down, and kicks a rock, grinning.

"I am very well, thank you, Robert." With her tray in her hand, Anna looks around. "Where do you want to sit, Abby?"

Abby looks at an empty corner table. "Over there."

Abby and Anna walk to the empty table. Just as Anna positions herself to sit down beside Abby, Robert runs up and sits between them, a leg on both sides of the bench.

"So . . ." he says, opening a bag of potato chips, "Abby, do you know the whole song?"

"I think so," Abby says. "I was working on it all night. My grandma said she would help me but fell asleep . . . but I think I know it."

"But do you know the *whole* song?" Robert says, stuffs a chip into his mouth, and starts crunching loudly.

Anna stands up, throws out her food, and walks away, her shoulders straight and chin up high.

"Why she do that?" Robert says.

Abby looks at Anna, then back to Robert, and shrugs.

"Why you throw your food away?" Abby says.

Anna stands inside the kitchen in front of the refrigerator, holding a wrapped food dish.

"I have to get this back out there. Sister Gene told me to get it and come right out because people are waiting," Anna says.

"Are you mad at Robert?" Abby asks, as if Anna had not said a word. Anna shakes her head. "Why you throw your food away then?"

"Why did you have to talk to him?"

"He my friend."

"I thought you were going to talk to me."

"Anna!" Sister Gene yells into the kitchen.

"Coming!" Anna closes the refrigerator door.

"Give me that," Sister Gene says, rushing into the kitchen. She takes the dish out of Anna's hands. "I told you to come right out," she says, walking wide with the food dish and making sure that its contents do not spill on her. "Come on in here."

Anna follows Sister Gene. She looks back at Abby who stands with her eyes wide and mouth open, her hand on the refrigerator.

"Holy, holy, Lord," Anna, wearing a white choir robe, sings. She is alone on stage. "He is my comfort through the storm. Holy, holy, Lord."

"Holy!" the other members of the choir sing, including Abby, who sings with her eyes closed.

Anna rocks slowly. "Keep me, lead me home . . . through the night." Anna walks in front of the other choir members and stands.

The choir, in unison, clap their hands and stomp their feet. The organist, pianist, and drummers play, enhancing the choir. The congregation joins in and all jubilantly sing, dance, and perform in unison. The celebration is heard miles away in neighboring towns. Abby opens her eyes and smiles at Anna, who smiles back.

Abby picks up a rock and throws it into the river. She wipes her hands on her robe.

"Sister Gene is going to get you if you get your robe dirty," Anna says, holding a glass of water.

"It's already dirty," Abby says, patting at a dirt stain. Anna sits beside Abby on the rock and sips from her glass. Abby stares at her.

"What," Anna says, taking the cup from her mouth. Abby leans over and kisses her. Anna jumps up and drops the glass, which shatters at her feet. She then wipes her lips with the back of her hand, spits on the ground, and walks back to the church, spitting as she walks. From the rock, Abby watches Anna walk into the church. Within moments, several members of the congregation pile out and stare at Abby, who sits frozen. In time, a crowd forms, stands, and stares at Abby. Anna stands in the middle of the crowd drinking water, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and spitting, her white robe rippling and flowing in the wind. Abby runs into the field, her white, dirt-stained robe disappearing into the brush.