

## **Preface – The Nightmare**

Tatia couldn't breathe. She could feel his weight on her chest, his hot breath on her face--and pain--she felt hot, searing pain running up the center of her body. Then, he rolled off of her, and she could breathe again, but she wasn't sure she wanted to. If she could hold her breath long enough, maybe she could go where Mama and Daddy went, to their Father's house. Suddenly, he grabbed her by the shoulder and jerked her off the bed into a standing position.

“Go clean yourself up. My friend will be here in fifteen minutes. Stop your bawling and freshen your make-up. You look like hell.”

He turned to the bed to straighten the rumpled sheets. When he caught sight of the fresh bloodstains, he threw his hands in the air in exasperation.

“Was this really your first time?”

The only reply from the bathroom was the sound of running water and soft sniffing.

“I could have charged twice as much,” he yelled.

Tatia woke with start as her alarm clock freed her from the nightmare she had re-lived for more than a decade. She turned off the alarm and slipped to her knees beside the bed, asking God to take away the horror of the dream and to replace it with His light. Basking in the love she felt in response to her prayer, she rose and picked up her partially packed suitcase from the floor. She placed it on the bed, ready for last-minutes toiletries, and headed for the shower. She had a plane to catch and girls to rescue.

**FRIDAY**

## **Chapter 1 – Off to Camp**

Tatia heard a car horn emit two quick beeps, and she knew her ride to the airport had arrived. She stepped out onto the balcony of her second-floor apartment and waved to the gray-haired man who stood beside the open door of an almost brand-new Lexus.

“Hi, Henry,” she called, waving and smiling as he looked up. “I’ll be down in two minutes.”

“No hurry, Miss,” he said, returning her smile. “We have plenty of time, and the traffic is light this morning, or at least lighter than usual.”

Tatia continued to smile as she closed and secured the sliding glass door. She was glad Henry had been available this morning. Her records at the executive car service she always used indicated that he was her preferred driver. She knew she could trust him to chat lovingly about his wife of nearly fifty years and his multiple children and grandchildren instead of hitting on her like some of the younger drivers.

She looked in the mirror and moved her arm into several positions to be sure her sleeve didn’t pull up and expose her mark of shame. Satisfied, she took a quick pass through the bedroom and bathroom in case she had forgotten anything vital. She closed the quart-sized plastic bag that held all the cosmetics she would need for a week at camp and tucked it into a corner of her small rolling suitcase. Then, she grabbed the laptop and the loose-leaf notebook that lay waiting on the ottoman in front of her favorite chair, slipped them into her shoulder bag,

and headed for the door. She wouldn't have time for work the next week, but she never liked to be completely out of touch--and she'd have time to review the notebook in the airport and on the plane. Before she shut and locked the door, she glanced around the tiny apartment that had been home since the previous year when the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act had been passed and she had been asked to chair the Council on Human Trafficking. The flat wasn't much by Washington, D.C. standards, but as one of twelve trafficking victims whose job it was to advise policymakers, she wasn't exactly an insider anyway.

“Good morning, Henry,” she greeted him again with a big smile. “Are you ready to roll?”

“Always ready to drive you wherever you need to go, Miss,” he replied with a grin. “You make yourself comfortable, and I'll put your bag in the trunk.” He took her rolling suitcase, knowing she would want to keep her shoulder bag with her.

Once they were on the road, Henry began a now familiar conversation. “Miss Robins, I don't understand why a successful lawyer like you continues to live in a cramped walk-up in this neighborhood. I'll bet you could find something much nicer if you looked around a bit.”

“I'm sure I could, and it would be much more expensive. Then, I wouldn't be able to afford to have you drive me around, and that would be just too sad.”

Henry sighed and continued. “I worry about you. This area isn't safe for a young, beautiful woman alone. You need a husband who will protect you.”

“Henry, I know you care about me, and I appreciate it. But you know I'm waiting for God to choose a husband for me. Until He does, I have my guardian angels standing guard.”

“So, I guess I should mind my own business and let Him mind His and yours. In the meantime, I'll keep reminding Him that you need a good man in your life.”

Tatia laughed and changed the subject. “Henry, I’ll bet you can’t guess where I’m going today.”

“No, I can’t. But since you’re dressed in jeans and boots instead of a business suit, I’m guessing it’s not a business trip.”

“You’re right. No business for the next ten days. I’m going to visit some old friends, and then I’m going to summer camp for a week.”

“Summer camp, huh? My grandkids are each going to different camps this year.”

With that, Henry began talking about his favorite subject, his family. Tatia settled back into her seat and half listened while she thought about her first time at camp.

**It was the summer of her twelfth birthday** with nothing to look forward to but three months of Texas heat in a house crowded with too many foster kids and Josie, her pre-menopausal foster mom. Josie didn’t really seem to like any of them, and she usually took her frustrations with her absentee, truck-driving husband out on the kids.

At least Tatia would be free of the incessant taunting of her classmates as they droned on about their hectic vacation schedules and the hardship of finding time for cheer camp, youth camp, and several other camps between trips to the beach, the mountains, and The Continent. She didn’t bother to answer the snide questions about her summer plans, plans that consisted of remaining unnoticed and spending as much time as possible losing herself in a pile of books at the blissfully cool library.

Even those expectations were probably too high. Since she would be home from school, she would be noticed and subject to the Josie’s expectations. Josie didn’t like being called by her

first name, but she would never be “Mama” to Tatia. She was more like the wicked step-mother in Cinderella. While she was finding relief at the mall or the movie theater, Tatia would probably be stuck in a house with a couple of ancient window units and a few box fans that did little to fight the triple digit temperatures. Instead of spending time in the library, she would be surrounded by sweaty, smelly kids with runny noses, dirty diapers, or both. At least they could all go outside and spray each other with the water hose to cool down and wash away some of the unpleasant odors.

The only break Tatia could count on was the weekly meeting with her social worker. It wasn't really Ms. Dunham's fault that their time together was spent checking on Tatia's situation and filling out reports. Even though Tatia was smart, pretty, and sweet, she had issues, issues that had kept her moving from foster home to foster home instead of finding the forever home she longed for. Most prospective parents wanted newborns or at least a toddler to rock and cuddle. The few who would consider an older child wanted one who would respond to overtures of love and tenderness instead of an emotionally unavailable little girl who rarely made eye contact and who resisted all efforts to break through her ironclad defenses. It didn't help that her files included accounts of frequent night terrors caused by recurring nightmares. Still, sometimes Ms. Dunham dropped the formalities and took her out for ice cream or shaved ice, and that was better than nothing.

With such low expectations, Tatia was totally shocked when, at one of their meetings, Ms. Dunham said, “Tatia, how would you like to go to camp this summer?”

“Yeah, right. Like Josie would let go of that kind of money.”

Ms. Dunham smiled. “I know finances are tight right now, but this camp won't cost Josie anything.”

“I don’t know. I spend enough time during the school year with those snobs. I don’t want to waste my summer with them, too.” The regular kids made life miserable for the foster kids, so Tatia didn’t want to spend any more time with them than she absolutely had to.

“You won’t be with your classmates from school. This is a camp especially for kids in the foster system, so everybody will be more or less in the same situation.”

“Ah, I see. It’s one of those ‘let’s take care of the poor foster kids so we can feel better about ourselves’ kind of thing. And I suppose we spend most of our time in group counseling sessions spilling our guts to perfect strangers.”

Ms. Dunham was accustomed to the defensive cynicism of her young clients, so she wasn’t put off by Tatia’s resistance. “No, as a matter of fact, there are no counseling sessions. If the campers want to talk to a staff member about something, that’s okay, but the purpose of the camp is to have fun.”

“Fun, huh? Like what?” Tatia’s curiosity was piqued in spite of her best efforts to remain disinterested.

“Well, there’s a big swimming pool, and a pond with a slide and a zip line. There are lots of activity centers to choose from where you can make things like pillowcases, throw pillows, and spin art. And there are big events like a birthday party for everybody, a royal tea party in formal dresses for the girls, a dance, a slip and slide night, and a talent show. Does any of that sound like something you might want to do?”

Tatia couldn’t help feeling a little excited by the possibility, but after so many disappointments in her life, she was afraid, too. “Maybe, but Josie would never let me go. She needs me to help with the little kids.”

“I’ve already mentioned it to her. She said if all the kids can go so she can have a week off, she’s all for it.”

“Oh, I see. So, I get stuck with the same bunch, just in a different location.”

“No, Tatia. It’s not like that. The campers are divided by age group, and each counselor has two campers for the week. You’ll be paired with a girl your own age, and the two of you will get lots of one-on-one attention from a counselor who is already praying for you and looking forward to meeting you.”

“I knew there was a catch. This is a church camp with lots of preaching and telling me what a failure I am. Right?”

“It is a faith-based camp, and there will be a couple of Bible stories each day, but the focus is on how special you are to God. And I guarantee you won’t be bored with the praise and worship times. All I can say is you’d better take your dancing shoes.”

“Really? The way you describe it, it sounds too good to be true.”

“It’s better. I’m probably not doing it justice. It’s only five days. What have you got to lose--and you might have some fun.”

“Well, if you want to go to the trouble of getting it set up, I guess I could try it just this once.” She tried to retain her cool demeanor, but Ms. Dunham was thrilled to see a spark of something in Tatia’s eyes she hadn’t seen before--hope.

**“Miss Robins?” said Henry.** “We’re almost to your stop. Are you checking your bag or carrying on?”



Tatia knew his question was his diplomatic way of calling her out of her reverie. She had lost a bag once, and not wanting to repeat the experience, she had learned to pack lightly enough to meet the strictest carry-on limitations.

“Just drop me at the curb, Henry--and thanks for calling me back from La-La-Land.”

He smiled at her in the rear-view mirror. “Anything for my favorite passenger. I hated to disturb you. You looked like you were enjoying your thoughts. Looking forward to your week at camp?”

“I am, Henry. It’s an intense few days, but it is the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done. And I get to do it with some very special people.”

“How special?” he asked mischievously.

“Henry, you’re impossible.”

She laughed as he stopped the car and moved quickly to the trunk to retrieve her bag. She was reaching for the door handle when her phone notified her that she had a text. She glanced at the screen and saw a selfie of Jesse in a do rag and Harley t-shirt. The brief comment said, *Wanna race?*

She grinned and responded. *You nerd! I’ll be in DFW before you make your first gas stop.*

*So smart & beautiful! 1<sup>st</sup> gas stop already.*

*You cheated! Left early!*

His reply began with a thumbs up symbol, then he continued. *Making 500+ today. Stopping in Springfield, MO tonight. 400+ tomorrow. Breakfast Sunday?*

*Deal!*

She slipped the phone back into the side pocket on her shoulder bag and slid toward the car door which was now open. As she stood up, she looked up into Henry's grinning face.

"Very special, I think," he said knowingly.

Tatia felt the heat rise in her cheeks, but she couldn't help smiling back at him.

"Yes, I thought so," he said as he pulled out the handle of her suitcase and handed it over to her. "I've already scheduled myself for your return. I'll be waiting in the cell phone lot when you touch down. Have fun."

"I will, Henry, and thanks."

## **Chapter 2 – Camp Memories and Family Good-Byes**

She made it through security in record time and, as always, Tatia breathed a prayer of thanks for Senator Porter's administrative assistant. After Tatia almost missed her first opportunity to testify before the Senate subcommittee that was reviewing the Trafficking Act, the efficient young woman from the Texas Senator's office walked her through the red tape of the TSA Pre-Checked Security System. Still, Tatia always arrived well before flight time, just in case.

Her frequent flyer status entitled her to lounge privileges, but since she didn't drink, smoke, or flirt, she preferred to spend her pre-flight time with the regular folks. She did, however, drink coffee, so she picked up a decaf mocha before heading toward her gate. She paid no attention to the glances and outright stares she attracted as she walked down the concourse with a long-legged stride, her shoulder-length blonde hair swinging in rhythm with the tap of her heels. Her thoughts were focused instead on the two campers she would meet for the first time in a couple of days and then spend almost twenty-four hours a day with for the next five. She felt the same mix of emotions she always felt before camp--excitement at the possibilities and dread of the heartbreak that would come when the week came to an end.

For now, however, she had a plane to catch, and she suddenly realized she was beyond where she would find hers. Relieved that she had no traveling companion to notice her lack of concentration, she quickly turned around and made her way back to the correct gate. The waiting area was almost empty, so she had her pick of seats. She chose one with a view of both the

tarmac beyond the window and the desk where the gate agent would deal with irate passengers who were certain their situation was the most important on the planet. She smiled, looking forward to a week free of irate politicians who were even more certain than the passengers that their situations were the most important on the planet.

She settled back in her seat and pulled the purple notebook out of her shoulder bag. She sipped her coffee and flipped to the first page: “Royal Children’s Camp, Counselor and Staff Manual, Preparing Yourself for Camp.” The familiar pages were highlighted and the edges were tattered from years of use. She knew most of the material by heart, but going through it again helped refocus her mind from the outside world to the children. She skipped over a couple of pages and read the camp’s mission statement. The last sentence was underlined, highlighted, and marked with a star in the margin: “We will create life-changing moments and extend loving hands to these children of abuse.” She closed her eyes and whispered, “Help me create life-changing moments and loving memories for Carmella and Amanda.”

Her thoughts were interrupted by the patter of little feet and the excited squeals of a dark-haired five-year-old with sparkling brown eyes. “Daddy,” shouted the little girl, running to the window and pointing toward the runway at a plane that was just touching down. “Is that our airplane?”

A tall, handsome man with a suitcase in each hand followed her to the window and knelt beside her. “I don’t know, Angel,” he said with a loving smile as he pointed toward the area directly in front of where they were kneeling. “It might be. Our airplane will pull up right there, and when it’s time to go, we’ll walk down a tunnel and get on the plane.”

A young woman joined the pair, putting her overnight case on the floor and kneeling on the other side of Angel. “Mommy, our airplane will park right there, and we’ll walk down a tunnel. Daddy said!”

Tatia felt like an intruder, watching the little group share a family moment, but she couldn’t look away. It wasn’t a life-changing moment, but it was one of many moments that would accumulate into a lifetime of loving memories for Angel. Tatia’s life might have been very different if there had been time for a few more family moments.

**“My Daddy died,”** said five-year-old Tatia.

“I know, Sweetie,” said the nice church lady. “Would you like another cookie?”

Tatia didn’t want another cookie. She’d had three already and a plateful of chicken strips, macaroni and cheese, and mashed potatoes. She didn’t want any more food. She wanted to talk about Daddy.

“He died over the seas somewhere. His car ran over a bomb, and he blew up. The preacher said he’s in his father’s house, but I saw him. He’s in a box and his face looked all painted.”

The church lady looked funny and her eyes got a little red.

“I’m so sorry, Sweetie.”

She hugged Tatia and went to see if anybody else wanted another cookie. Tatia looked for her mama. She couldn’t find her, but she found her grandmother. She tried to climb up in her lap, but her grandmother pushed her away.

“Get down, Tatia. You’re too big to be sitting in my lap. Besides, you’re shoes are dirty, and you’ll ruin my dress.”

Tatia looked down at her black, patent-leather shoes. They had always been her favorites, the ones she was only allowed to wear to church or parties. They had straps, and she liked the special socks that went with them, the white ones with the pink lace around the edges. Now the shoes were splattered with sand from the grave yard. Bits of grass and several stray burrs clung to the lace on her socks.

“Now, go outside and clean yourself up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tatia said as she shuffled toward the door.

“Pick up your feet when you walk, and don’t slam the door on the way out.”

Tatia concentrated on being sure her shoes cleared the floor each time she took a step, and she slipped outside as quietly as she could.

It was nice outside. The fellowship hall of the little country church was too warm, and there were so many people that it was hard to breathe. Everyone in town knew her daddy, and they all came to pay their respects to a local war hero. They also turned out for the lunch afterward--the ladies at the First Baptist Church were famous for their cooking.

Tatia walked on the curb that ran along the edge of the driveway that looped from the parking lot to the front door and back toward the street. She balanced carefully until she came to the intersection of the cement and the grass, and then she sat down. She began gingerly pulling the burrs from her socks and brushing away the sand and grass. When they were as clean as she could get them, she stood and shook the way she’d seen her dog Lucky do after his bath. Maybe that would get rid of anything she missed.

“Tatia!”

She jumped when Aunt Sheila called her name. She had been so intent on her task she hadn't heard the door open. Sheila wasn't really her aunt, but she was Grandma's best friend and acted like a surrogate aunt sometimes.

"Yes, ma'am?" she said quickly.

"You'd better get in here. Your grandma has been looking everywhere for you."

Tatia sighed and hurried inside. No matter how hard she tried, it seemed like Grandma was always mad at her. Sometimes Tatia saw her whispering with Aunt Sheila and other ladies, and they all looked at her funny. One day she was outside playing, and she could hear what they were saying. She hadn't meant to listen, but the window was open, and Grandma had a pretty loud voice.

"Steve would never have married her if she hadn't been expecting Tatia. Sometimes I wonder if Steve is even her father, but he was determined to do the honorable thing. She and that baby ruined his life, and I'll never forgive either of them for that."

Tatia didn't know what all that meant, but she knew it wasn't good and that somehow it was her fault. Tatia wondered if Daddy liked it in his father's house. She wondered if he had to stay in that box or if he could get out and walk around. She didn't want to have to get her face all painted up and lie in a box, but if there was another way to get to where Daddy was, she'd sure like to go. She was still in Springdale, though, where he'd left her, and now Grandma was mad at her again. Mama was really sad, and tonight she would probably drink too much of that brown stuff that made her act funny. She wished her Daddy hadn't run over that bomb.

**Tatia had put on her pajamas** and had been playing on the floor for a long time, but Mama hadn't come in to help her say her prayers, tuck her in, and kiss her goodnight. She stood up, put all her dolls to bed, and kissed them. Then, clutching her favorite bear under her arm, she quietly opened her bedroom door. She peeked out into the hallway, and seeing no one, she tiptoed toward the living room and peered around the door jamb. Mama was lying down with one arm covering her eyes and the other hanging off the edge of the couch. She had a half-empty bottle of brown liquid clutched in her hand.

"Mama, I'm ready for bed."

"Honey, this one time can you be a big girl and put yourself to bed? Mama doesn't feel well."

Tatia could always tell when Mama had been drinking a lot. Her words got all fuzzy and mashed up together.

"But, Mama, aren't you going to help me with my prayers?"

"Why bother? He doesn't hear them anyway, or if He does, he ignores them. We prayed for your Daddy every night, and look how that turned out."

Tatia was a little bit scared. She had never heard Mama's voice sound like it sounded now--like somebody else was using Mama's voice--like Mama wasn't really there.

"But, Mama..."

"Tatia, I can't! I have to think. I have to figure out what to do, how I'll feed you, where we'll live. I can't do this by myself!"

As Mama began to sob, tears escaped from Tatia's clear, blue eyes, rolling down her pink cheeks, dripping onto the blonde curls that fell across her shoulders as she stared at the floor. She



thought about what she had heard outside the church before they left. Grandma was yelling at Mama.

“You think you’re all set now, don’t you? Well, I have an appointment with my lawyer tomorrow morning, and I will personally see to it that you and your daughter don’t get a cent of my son’s money, no survivor benefits, nothing. And that’s my house you’re living in. You have thirty days to be out.”

“But where will we go?” Mama had asked. “How will we live?”

“You’ll think of something. You managed to trap my son into marrying you. I’m sure there is a market somewhere for your skill set.”

Tatia didn’t understand what Grandma meant, but she knew it made Mama cry.

“Mama, please don’t cry. You’re not by yourself--I’m here. The preacher said Daddy is in his father’s house. Maybe we can go live with him.”

Mama’s sobs gradually slowed down, and she finally spoke again, so quietly that Tatia almost couldn’t hear her.

“Maybe.” She was quiet for a minute or two. “Yes, maybe I can. You go on to bed now, Honey. I’ll be in to kiss you goodnight in a few minutes.”

Clutching her bear to her chest, Tatia slowly went back to her room and climbed into bed. She lay very still, listening for Mama. She was half asleep when she finally heard footsteps headed toward the bathroom. She heard Mama open the medicine cabinet door and turn on the water. Tatia imagined her taking an aspirin--she did that sometimes when she drank a lot of that stuff. Then, she heard Mama coming toward her room. The door opened and Mama came over and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Are you still awake, Tatia.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Give me a hug, Sweetheart.”

Tatia hugged her, and Mama squeezed her so tight she could hardly breathe. Then, she kissed her on top of the head and Tatia could feel Mama’s tears dripping onto her hair. She almost giggled, but then Mama began to whisper, almost like she was talking to herself.

“Tatia, you are the best thing that ever happened to me. The only good thing I ever did was bring you into this world, and now I can’t even take care of you. But you’re so beautiful, so special--they’ll grow to love you as much as I do. I miss you already.”

“But I’m right here, Mama.”

“Of course you are, my darling. I just hate to be away from you even when you’re asleep. I love you more than anything. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mama, I know--to the moon and back. And I love you, too.”

Mama kissed her one more time and then tucked her in. She walked to the door and paused. Without turning around she spoke again, so quietly Tatia wasn’t sure she heard right.

“I’m so sorry, Tatia. Good-bye.”

**When Tatia woke up the next morning**, the sun was peeking through the cracks between the blinds. She stretched and listened for the familiar morning sounds of Mama taking a shower or fixing breakfast, but she heard nothing. She strained to hear the talk show Mama watched every morning, but there was nothing but silence. She sniffed for the smell of coffee, but that was missing, too. Maybe Mama was still in bed with a headache from the stuff she drank. Tatia would have to be very quiet this morning.

She slipped out of bed, dragging her bear and her blanket with her. She opened the door of her room as quietly as she could and tip-toed down the hall.

“Mama?” she whispered.

There was no answer--Mama must still be in bed. She went into the living room and saw Mama lying on the couch like she was last night--one arm was covering her eyes and the other one was hanging off, touching the floor. She wasn't holding the bottle, though. It was on the floor on its side with a little dribble of brown liquid forming a small puddle under its mouth. Tatia went over and carefully picked up the bottle, but she accidentally brushed Mama's hand. She froze, afraid Mama would wake up and be mad, but she didn't move. In fact, her hand was cold--really cold--and it felt kind of funny, not really like skin. Tatia put down the bottle and her bear and gently covered Mama with her blanket. Now she would get warm and feel better when she woke up. Tatia picked up her bear and laid him on Mama's tummy. That was sure to make Mama smile when she woke up. Then, Tatia picked up the bottle and took it into the kitchen to throw it away.

She was getting hungry, so she pulled a juice box out of the refrigerator and a Pop Tart out of the cabinet. She sat down at the kitchen table to eat so she wouldn't make a mess. When she was finished, she threw away her trash and went into her room to get dressed. She stayed there and played for a while, but she checked on Mama every once in a while to see if she was awake yet. She wasn't. After a long while, Tatia was growing bored playing by herself, so she ventured all the way into the living room.

“Mama,” she whispered. When she got no response, she spoke a little louder. “Mama, it's time to wake up.”

She put her hand on Mama's cheek. Her face was really cold, and Tatia was getting a little scared. She patted Mama's cheek, but nothing happened. Then, she laid her head on Mama's chest. Sometimes she went to sleep that way at night while Mama watched TV. She liked the sound of Mama's heart beating and of her breath going in and out. Now she heard nothing. Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes, and she grabbed Mama's shoulders and shook her gently.

"Mama, please wake up. I'm scared. Please wake up."

She didn't know what to do. Then she remembered what Mama taught her about the telephone.

"Tatia, if anything bad ever happens and you need help, just pick up the handset and hit this button that has a "1" on it. I have it programmed to automatically dial some nice people who will come and help you."

Tatia, picked up the handset and pushed the button. In a minute she heard a nice lady talking.

"911. What's your emergency, please?"

Tatia began to cry. "My Mama won't wake up, and she's really cold."

"What's your name, Sweetheart? And how old are you?"

"My name is Tatia and I'm five years old."

"Is anyone else in the house with you?"

"No, just Mama."

"Okay, Tatia. You did the right thing. Don't hang up the phone. I'm sending someone to help you."

The calm voice on the phone had a soothing effect on Tatia, and her tears began to dry.

“Tatia, is your door locked?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can you unlock it?”

“If I stand on a stool.”

“Okay. Go get your stool and unlock the door so the helpers can get in.”

Tatia did as she was told. While she was putting the stool back, she heard sirens. Then, she went back and picked up the phone.

“Okay. I did it.”

“That’s great, Tatia. The helpers should be there any minute.”

Tatia took the phone and went back to the couch where she sat on the floor. Her bear had fallen off Mama’s chest, so she picked him up with her free hand and hugged him to her own chest.

“Mama,” she said quietly. “The helpers will be here in a minute. They’ll help you and make you warm.” Her tears were flowing again. “Dear God, please don’t let Mama be dead. Please don’t make her be in a box like Daddy.”