



Nana's death forces college coed Chandra Howard to return to her Third Ward shotgun home and the four-year-old daughter, Lyric, left in Nana's care. Chandra is back where she started, the last place she wants to be.

Nana's Baby
By Cynthia D. Toliver

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A career in her future. A child in her past.
Chandra Howard is back where she started,
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Cynthia D. Toliver

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CHAPTER 1

Chandra Howard shot up, her heart pounding. Momentarily relieved, she realized the sharp retort was the sound of her Anatomy book hitting the floor. She had fallen asleep in the middle of cramming for her midterm. Below her, Michaela mumbled something unintelligible. Chandra swung her legs over the upper bunk and slid to the floor ignoring the ladder. She landed on steady feet, tossing her unruly hair with one hand and scooping up the book with the other. She glanced at the alarm clock she had never needed, and Michaela habitually set and ignored. It was 4 am. That left less than four hours to study before her 8:00 class. Chandra set the book on her desk and grabbed a change of clothes, fresh underwear and her toothbrush from the dresser she shared with Michaela.

Heading for the community bathroom, Chandra let the door close behind her. In the hallway, she offered a lazy wave to Justine Levi and Beth Parsons sitting cross-legged on the floor, popping M&Ms and studying. At the pre-dawn hour, the bathroom was empty. Chandra thanked God for the solitude. She turned on the faucet and let the fluorescent lighting and running water numb the worry that took small bites out of her peace of mind.

Her grades had slipped since her breakup with James Dexter, and she needed a high B on this exam to pass the course. The material wasn't hard, she was a borderline genius with a photographic memory, but the picture she'd had on her mind of late was James with Veronica Harper on his arm. Well-known, but not popular, petite and spunky, not long, lean and graceful, the secretary of the Honor Council, not the campus queen, Chandra was the antithesis of Veronica.

What made Chandra think she belonged with James, lean, muscular, handsome, chocolate brown star forward of the basketball team? Reared in Dallas, his parents both brokers, James had never attended public school. He transferred to Rice in the fall after two years at Saint Edward's. Chandra had no business in his circle.

She wondered if she had been imagining the connection with James. He said he wanted to remain friends. But she couldn't be his friend while he saw other people. And she couldn't help but think her decision to become celibate had everything to do with her man's change of heart. But he wasn't her man anymore, and when did other people become Veronica Harper? Debutante Veronica, perfectly coifed and dressed to the nines, her father a doctor, her mother a lawyer, raised on the right side of Brays Bayou not a mile from where the five Howard children grew up with their Nana and Papa in a four-room shotgun house in Houston's Third Ward.

Chandra took one last look in the mirror. Three generations had not diminished the French and Cherokee influence from her great grandfather - high cheek bones, angular though flared nose, olive skin and black hair. But dark bags hung beneath sad brown eyes; pimples dotted what had been a smooth complexion; and her hair entwined like a bird's nest. She crimped her mouth into a Joker's smile even Batman wouldn't buy. Aged beyond her twenty-one years, she knew the changes couldn't simply be attributed to a string of all-nighters. Old and tired of living a lie, she didn't like the deceptive young woman staring back at her. In the six months they'd dated, Chandra hadn't once invited James to her childhood home. He hadn't asked and she hadn't offered. All he knew was her parents were dead, and she'd been raised by her grandparents. Vital statistics - three brothers, one sister, two dead parents; what else did James need to know, especially since he'd turned tail and run the minute Chandra told him she wasn't entertaining any more booty calls.

She closed her eyes and willed the morose thoughts away. It had been three months since she'd last been out with James, since they'd had their last conversation, since she'd become a jealous shrew who didn't know her own self-worth. It was disgusting and pathetic and high time she took charge of her life. She was hours away from losing her scholarship. The work study program took up where scholarships and grants left off. She wouldn't be at Rice otherwise. And she couldn't afford not to be here, couldn't afford to follow in her parents' footsteps, not when Nana had worked so hard to put her here.

Chandra sighed recalling her sister Sheryl's harried phone call the night before. Nana had suffered a major heart attack. Chandra was more concerned with what would happen to her life if Nana died. The guilt had Chandra's insides churning. The face staring back at her from the mirror looked like hell and that's exactly how she felt. Three months lovesick, she had lost ten pounds she couldn't afford. Even if she wanted sex, she couldn't imagine attracting anyone with her waif thin body. She didn't need any more worries.

She bent over the sink and splashed water over her face. Steps heavy with worry, she trudged to the shower. She turned on the water, testing it and adjusting the temperature until it had the right amount of warmth and bite. The water pelted her skin, pricking her to life. She threw her head back, letting the stream massage her scalp. Afterwards she combed her wet hair, pulled it back and twisted it to let it air dry. Let loose, her hair would be a tangled mess, but so was her life. She felt like Jiffy Pop, tossed over the fire and seconds from bursting, like all hell was about to break loose and she couldn't do a thing to stop it.

She dressed and returned to her room long enough to grab her books. It would be easier to study at the library where solitude and quiet wouldn't be interrupted by blaring alarms, grumpy roommates and slamming doors. On the way, she stole a glance at Jones Hall and wondered if James were alone. She shook the useless thought from her

head. Worrying about James and Veronica is exactly what put her in this tenuous position - an exam away from failure, from disappointing Nana, from going back to the hood with the realization she was no better than the life she had gladly left behind.

Inside the library, she took the steps to the basement and found a study carrel in a dark, dank corner. The musty smell put her in the right mood for studying. She opened the Anatomy book and began to read where she had left off, her photographic memory in overdrive. She chuckled remembering how Freshman year her Abnormal Psych professor had been so impressed with her aptitude; he'd tried to persuade her to change her major. She didn't have the heart to tell him, she was taking the class to meet her distribution requirement and twenty-four hours after the exam she'd forgotten, no discarded ninety percent of the knowledge she'd so aptly regurgitated. Although she had been fascinated with Pavlov and his dog, Freud and his id, she couldn't fathom listening to other people's problems, when she had so many of her own.

By the time the clock in the bell tower announced the hour, Chandra was certain she knew the material, all seven chapters. She hummed as she left the quadrangle and walked to Anderson. In the lecture hall, she slid into a front row seat thumbing the blue book the TA had laid on the desk. She was anxious to get started, her brain on information overload. She needed a place to dump the information while she still remembered how sodium and potassium kick started the nerves to make a muscle spasm. And to think she had briefly entertained pre-med.

Fifty minutes later, she had checked and double checked her exam. It had been mostly multiple choice, the blue books designated for two short answer questions, she had turned into mini essays. All that information was screaming to go somewhere, besides her head. She could have written more, but she didn't want to be an ass. She dropped

her exam, blue book and scantron in the appropriate piles and eased outside. The tree-lined gravel walkways were slick and treacherous with a pungent mix of morning dew and bird droppings. She picked her way across the campus to her dorm. What a difference a day makes, acing a test put her on top of the world. She could see blue sky again and the pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow. So, it didn't include James or any other man. Where she came from, rainbows seldom did.

She wasn't hungry, but she could use a bit of camaraderie, so she entered the dining hall replete with chatter, clinking dishes and breakfast aromas. In the line she bypassed the pancakes and sausage. It was her favorite breakfast, but she could only stomach it on a 4:00 am run to House of Pies. Otherwise, the sweet maple syrup made her stomach do back flips. Determined to eat something, she ordered a bowl of oatmeal and toast, avoiding eye contact with Mabel who was baiting the next guy in line to make up his mind while she slapped Chandra's oatmeal into a bowl. Michaela could always coax a smile out of Mabel, but Michaela was the only one.

Exiting the line, Chandra scanned the tables until she spotted Michaela. Michaela's head bobbed and her long slender arms waved as she talked. Chandra wormed her way through the packed hall, occasionally nodding at a familiar face.

She reached the table as Michaela finished her story. The group burst out in laughter and in unison, picked up their trays. John Cable, James' best friend and teammate and one of Michaela's many admirers, pulled out a chair for Chandra before he waved goodbye. Michaela winked at Chandra with mischievous amber eyes, the color of the week.

Michaela - pretty and preppy in a crisp pink sleeveless shirt, white collar turned up to her angular face, V-neck opened to a hint of cleavage, and khaki shorts revealing long freckled legs. Chandra had

roomed with Michaela for three years and still didn't know how the girl managed to look so put together.

"How did it go?" Michaela finger-combed her short hair and shoved her books to the middle of the table, making room for Chandra.

"No biggie." Chandra set her tray on the table and slid into the seat. "I forgot to get juice."

"Here, have one of mine." Michaela offered a carton of orange juice. "You always forget your juice. How can you remember half a book and forget a carton of juice?"

Chandra shrugged, accepting the orange juice. "Did you miss your eight o'clock?"

"Yeah, but we had a take home exam anyway. If I turn it in by this afternoon, I'm good."

"Does that mean it's done?"

"No that means it will be. Have you ever known me to miss a deadline?"

Chandra laughed. "No, though the closer you get to one, the more you procrastinate."

"Pot to the kettle," Michaela jibed, mimicking one of Chandra's archaic pet phrases.

"What can I say?" Chandra agreed. "I thrive on pressure."

Faking disgust, Michaela shook her head. "Rice cadets. Why else do we come? Why else do we stay?"

The question was rhetorical. Chandra shoved a spoonful of oatmeal between smiling lips.

"By the way," Michaela continued, "your sister called this morning."

"Again? What did she say?"

"She said you need to call her. It sounded important. I hope your grandmother's alright."

Chandra nodded, unable to speak over the lump forming at the base of her throat. And it wasn't the oatmeal, it wasn't even Nana, it was what losing Nana would mean for the rest of Chandra's life.

As Michaela rose to leave, she placed a caring hand on Chandra's shoulder. "I'm sure it will be alright, but if you need to talk."

Chandra cut Michaela off with a wave of her hand. Michaela had an inkling about how much Nana meant to Chandra. Chandra wondered if Michaela would be so sympathetic if she knew the whole truth, how selfish and ungrateful Chandra had become.

She picked over her oatmeal, her resolution to live, eat and be merry temporarily on hold. She was worried again. Worse, she was more concerned for herself than she was for Nana. The realization filled her with self-hatred.

She returned to her room and put her books away. Since she didn't have to worry about disturbing Michaela, she straightened her bed. When done, she sat on the windowsill and stared across the campus, willing Nana to get well again. She would have prayed, but she knew God would recognize the selfish motives behind her prayer. She didn't want to do Nana more harm than good. If there was one thing Chandra did know, God didn't play.

Before she could work up the courage to return Sheryl's call, the phone rang. Chandra knew instinctively Sheryl was on the other end. Chandra hesitated, bracing herself for more unwelcome news. She picked up the phone and put it on speaker.

"Chandra, are you there?"

Chandra drew in a deep breath. "Hi, Sheryl."

"Didn't Michaela tell you to call me?"

Chandra heard the accusation in Sheryl's voice. "She told me. I just got in. How's Nana?" Chandra tried but failed to circumvent the chewing out she knew was coming.

“She’s in intensive care.” Sheryl growled. “I need you. Eddie has to go back to work, and someone needs to watch the kids while I sit with Nana.”

“Is it that bad? Is Nana? Is she dying?” Chandra braved the question though she feared the answer.

“She had a massive heart attack. She sounds like she’s drowning in her own fluid and the doctor says there’s nothing he can do. He said we need to pray. How do you think she’s doing?” Sheryl spat, her tone sharp and piercing. “Eddie will pick you up after lunch. Be ready.” Sheryl hung up the phone without waiting for an answer.

Still holding her phone, Chandra collapsed on the floor. Tears welled in her eyes. Silent tears coursed down her cheeks and pooled in salty lakes. She closed her eyes, but the tears continued to flow. Like a wet dog trying to dry her coat, she stood and gave her body a deliberate shake. She wished she could shake off grief and worry that easily. She needed to pack. She had an hour to shed one life and put on another. Sheryl needed her. Nana needed her. Lyric needed her.

By the time Chandra had packed her clothes and written Michaela a brief note, the phone was ringing again. This time it was Eddie, and he was downstairs. He sounded impatient, but Eddie always sounded impatient. He was a good man, meaning he had a job, he’d married the mother of his kids, and he spent his spare time with a beer and ESPN.

Chandra organized her books on her desk one last time. The books would be there when she returned. She grabbed her bag and avoiding eye contact, made her way to the elevator. Anyone who saw her might have thought for once she was going home for Spring Break. Eddie hadn’t bothered to come in. She found him out front in the car, still dressed in his city gray uniform, drumming the steering wheel. He leaned over and opened the door for her.

Eddie drove an air-conditioned truck, but at the end of the day, he still managed to smell like sweat and garbage. By the multiple stains

under his arms, he'd worn the same uniform for several days. Chandra held her breath and tried to ignore the smell. Throwing her bag in the back, she sat down in the front seat. "I thought you had the kids."

Eddie bobbed his head to old school R&B. "They're at the house. I told them not to dot that door till you got there. They'll be fine."

"Have you seen Nana?"

"No. Sheryl rode with her to the hospital, and she's been there ever since. Somebody had to stay with the kids."

Chandra leaned back in the seat as Eddie bullied his way through the midday Houston traffic. "Does Lyric know Nana's in the hospital?"

"Lyric called the ambulance, then called Sheryl. That girl is too damn grown."

Imagining Lyric giving instructions to the 911 operator, Chandra couldn't help but smile. Lyric had plenty of practice in the past year and a half. Nana had been going downhill ever since Papa had died. Collecting garbage for the city, Papa had been hit by a car two months before he officially retired. Eddie had personally delivered the grim news and Nana, suffering a mild heart attack, had collapsed in his arms. Despite the setback, Nana insisted on caring for the kids. Sheryl took it upon herself to teach E.J. and the girls to dial 911, both on her cell phone and on Nana's old land line. In the kitchen, the kids had to scoot a chair next to the wall and climb up to reach Nana's phone. The lessons hadn't been lost on Lyric. This was Nana's fourth trip to the ER.

They passed the museum and theater district, the bustling commercial district and the trendy revitalized neighborhoods that bordered downtown before crossing Alameda and entering the squalor of low rent government funded housing. The Ward was deteriorating as fast as the city was growing, spreading its tentacles into conservative strongholds like Katy, Sugarland and Spring while draining resources from the inner city and pooling them in suburban pockets. What wasn't eaten up by decay was taken over by gentrification with high rise

condos and expensive homes three blocks away from Nana's neighborhood.

Eddie pulled up in front of the house Papa had bought Nana forty years ago. They were one of the few owners still living in the Ward, evidenced by the siding, neatly trimmed, fenced yard and brick flower beds. Eddie never put the car in park. He shot off as soon as Chandra shut the door and her body and bag cleared the curb.

Chandra opened the locked gate with her key and secured it behind her. She could see four tiny heads peering through the sheer curtains. She trudged up the porch, gave the customary three knocks to announce her arrival as she unlocked two deadbolts and the doorknob. She pushed the door open tentatively, but the chain hadn't been set. The kids, ranging in age from one to seven, were too short to reach it.

"Channie." Even Lyric echoed the familiar moniker her older cousins had dubbed Chandra. Seven-year-old E.J., five-year-old twins, Sherita and Danita, "Rita" and "Nita" for short, and four-year-old Lyric grabbed Chandra's hands and dragged her inside.

"We're bored, Channie," E.J. complained. "Can we play outside?"

"Give me a minute to lock this door." Chandra shrugged the kids off. "Take my bag to Nana's room, E.J."

Proud he'd been singled out for such an important task, E.J. grabbed the bag with both hands. Bent backward with the strain, he toddled off with the bag.

With the door locked, Chandra checked on the baby. Lying on the sofa and secured by two pillows stuffed beside him, one-year-old Dante sucked on a bottle and played with his toes. Three precocious girls on her heels, Chandra scooped up the baby and headed for the kitchen.

Wadded napkins, sandwich rinds, crumbs and greasy fingerprints dotted the kitchen table. Eddie hadn't even bothered to close the bag of bread or the jar of mayonnaise. The soiled knife he'd used had been

carelessly tossed in the sink. At least he'd put the lunch meat back in the refrigerator.

Although nothing lasted long enough in Nana's house to gather mold, out of habit, Chandra closed the bread and put it in the refrigerator. With Dante propped on her hip and one hand free, she rinsed the knife with scalding hot water and wet a washcloth. The girls were eager to help. Chandra directed as they wiped the table and swept the floor.

Once the kitchen was returned to order, Chandra took the kids to the backyard. She rocked Dante in the chair swing while E.J. and the girls watered Nana's oasis of roses, azaleas and crepe myrtles. When the plants were over-watered and the yard flooded, Chandra ordered E.J. to turn the faucet off. E.J. found a deflated rubber ball among the hedges and captained a noisy game of kickball. There was comfort in the noise and Chandra found herself drifting with Dante.

She didn't know how long she slept when she felt a gentle tug. Her eyes felt heavy. Her arms felt light. "Where's Dante?"

She searched the yard relieved to find the baby sprawled on the ground laughing as E.J. played keep-away with that dirty ball.

"We're hungry. Can you fix us some 'ghetti?" Lyric asked.

Chandra stretched her body and rubbed her arms against a slight chill. She felt oddly tired, like the waning sun had stolen her energy while she slept.

Ignoring E.J.'s protest, Chandra gathered the kids and headed indoors. She switched the TV to *Family Feud* as the kids settled on the sofa to watch. In the kitchen, she found a pound of ground meat in the freezer and enough spaghetti to stretch between four small children, but there was no tomato sauce. She found four dollars taped beneath the cookie jar. She sent E.J. to the corner store four doors down. She watched him walk there and back, navigating the latest crop of young

hoodlums and a decrepit old wino along the way. Nobody bothered Eddie Mack's son, Sonny Howard's nephew. They didn't dare.

E.J. returned triumphantly with a dusty overpriced can of generic tomato sauce and a pack of gum he shared with his siblings and young cousin. He followed Chandra back to the kitchen. "Can I play outside while you cook?" E.J. entreated, whispering so the girls couldn't hear.

Chandra considered all the things that could go wrong. While Mrs. Johnson and her father had rented the house on one side of Nana for the past four years, the house on the right was a revolving door. She considered what Nana would say before answering. "No, stay inside. I need you to watch Dante."

E.J. kicked the throw rug beneath his feet. Chandra threw him one of Nana's no nonsense looks. Sulking, he plopped down on the sofa, but he didn't answer back. Chandra knew how E.J. felt. There was not much you could do in that little shotgun house with no cable.

Chandra shrugged apologetically to E.J. She put a pot of water on the stove to boil and defrosted the meat in the microwave Sheryl had given Nana last Mother's Day. Chandra set aside the tomato sauce along with sugar, salt, pepper, and garlic salt, the only spices Nana ever saw fit to buy.

In a little over half an hour, she had the kids at the dinner table, spaghetti sauce staining their mouths and hands. She fed the baby mashed up noodles minus the sauce, while she nibbled on a bologna sandwich.

It was too late for a nap and too early for bed. After Chandra did the dishes, she marched the kids into the bathroom. She tossed all three girls and the baby into the tub, using dishwashing liquid for bubble bath. They splashed and played till their toes and fingers wrinkled like raisins. Chandra dried them off with the same towel and put them in Nana's bed.

Lyric sprung up her eyes wide and teary. “Keep the light on Channie. Nana keeps the light on till I fall asleep.”

Chandra nodded and turned to leave.

“Don’t close the door,” Lyric squealed.

Chandra acquiesced, amazed the same little girl who was so afraid now had the fortitude to dial 911 three times in the last year and a half. She returned to the living room, where the TV was blaring.

“Your turn, E.J. You can sleep in Lyric’s room.”

“Ah, Channie. Do I have to?” E.J. kept his back to Chandra, his eyes glued to the television.

Too tired to argue, Chandra grabbed one of the pillows that had cushioned baby Dante earlier and curled up on the opposite end of the sofa to watch *Jurassic Park*. Satisfied he wasn’t going to be hustled off to bed, E.J. snuggled up beside her, as the raptors made a meal out of a cow.

“Awesome,” E.J. cheered the raptors.

Chandra thought the cow was unlucky and started to say so. She realized the difference between that cow and the USDA grade beef they’d consumed for dinner, was the movie cow wasn’t hit over the head, ground, frozen, thawed and simmered before he was eaten. Come to think of it, Chandra chuckled, Spielberg’s cow had probably retired to a pasture in Malibu before he got his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Chandra and E.J. fell asleep on the sofa, long before the movie was over. Chandra dreamed tiny lizards with flaring pink jaws were nipping at her and Lyric while Nana stood safely on the other side of a flowing stream, powerless to help them.

CHAPTER 2

After a breakfast of dry Cheerios and Kool Aid, Chandra cleaned out the refrigerator. Curdled milk, molded cheese and assorted leftovers were double-bagged and set in the alley for the next trash pickup. Obviously, Nana had been sick longer than anyone knew. When was the last time Chandra had called – Valentines Day, Nana’s birthday? Chandra wasn’t sure. She exorcised her guilt by cleaning every surface of the house. When the dust cloth and broom wouldn’t do, she wielded the sponge and Lysol. While she cleaned, the kids ran in and out of the house, alternately watching television or playing in the backyard. Nana wouldn’t have liked that, but she wasn’t there to tell them to stop going in and out of her door.

At noon, Chandra fed the kids bologna sandwiches and more Kool-Aid. They watched Nana’s favorite shows, while Chandra combed the girls’ hair. Bad news travels fast, and she wasn’t surprised when none of Nana’s church friends called to chat up the soaps. She smiled ruefully and imagined Nana fussing about her favorite characters.

“Ohh, Erica sho’ is nasty. Ain’t no one man go’n hold that woman. Jackson needs to fire her and hire me.

“That’s a sin and a shame. Vicky is crazy girl. Apple don’t fall far from the tree. Bunch of crazy bad apples. Her daddy was mean crazy, her brother is double dog crazy, and her daughter is sho’ nuff crazy. Rich folks are crazy as hell. Scuse me Lord, but you know I’m right.

“Sonny knows Carly is lying but bless me if she ain’t the woman for his cheating behind.”

Nana said the soaps were her only vice. She said she got to release her demons that way. She didn't count bingo or the lottery. She said bingo was for charity and the lottery was the poor folks' tax.

At three, Chandra switched over to Fox Kids. At four, the phone rang rescuing her from another half hour of kids after school programming. She snapped up the phone, "Howard residence."

Nana had always insisted they answer the phone like they had some sense. Folks always said the way Mother Howard put on airs; anyone could have sworn she lived in the burbs instead of the heart of Third Ward.

"Chandra?"

"Hey, Sheryl."

"Is that my Momma?" Rita and Nita sang in unison.

"I want to talk to Nana," Lyric demanded reaching for the phone.

"You can't talk to Nana, stupid," E.J. chimed in. "She's dying."

"E.J." Chandra hissed and swatted at her nephew.

"Well, she is," E.J. shrugged.

"I want to talk to Nana," Lyric insisted, crying now.

"Chandra, tell E.J. to hush up before I come over there and shut him up." Sheryl's threat blared through the phone and E.J. shrunk three inches.

Chandra gave E.J. the eye and pulled Lyric into her lap. "Hush up now. This is Sheryl not Nana, and I need y'all to hush so I can hear. How's Nana?"

"Holding her own and asking for you."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He said it could go either way. Said it's up to her."

"Well Nana's always been a fighter." Chandra held out hope Nana would recover and be home soon.

Sheryl sighed. "I don't know, Chandra. She's been talking to Papa a lot."

Chandra's hopes sunk. "You, mean about Papa?"

"No, I mean to Papa. Half the time I don't even think she knows I'm here. Scared me half to death when she asked to see you."

"What. What do you think she wants?" Chandra quavered.

"I think she wants to say goodbye. Chandra, you still there?"

"I'm still here. What am I going to do?"

In her typical matter-of-fact fashion, Sheryl told the awful truth Chandra didn't want to face. "You're going to come see Nana. Spend the night with her while I see my husband and kids. Say goodbye if that's what she wants. I'll be there in about half an hour. I'll drop you by the hospital on my way home."

"What about Lyric?"

"Lyric can come home with me. You pack up her things. Y'all better be ready when I get there. I'm beat and I don't need no mess, you hear me."

"I hear you." Chandra hung up the phone and scrambled to gather the kids' things.

She had just changed Dante's diaper, when Sheryl pulled up in front of the house and honked the horn. Ready for a change of pace, the kids raced out the door. At least at home they had cable, a Sony Play station and a couple of E-rated games. They would be able to play until Eddie came home and took over the couch and the set.

Chandra bagged the dirty diaper. She didn't know how long they'd be gone, and she wasn't about to leave an open invite to Nana's house for every roach and rodent in the Ward. She set the baby on the sofa. "Be there in a minute."

She tossed the diaper in the garbage out back and surveyed the house one last time. She put Dante on her hip and slung her purse, an overnight bag for Lyric and Dante's diaper bag on her shoulder.

"E.J. go back and help your auntie," Sheryl chastised as Chandra struggled to lock the door behind her.

E.J. ran onto the porch. Chandra handed him the bags but kept her purse. The last thing she needed was for those kids to go through her things.

Sheryl leaned across the front seat, opened the door and yelled. “Y’all come on now. I’m tired.”

The kids piled in the back seat of the used four-door Honda Civic. Plain, beige and boxy, it was nothing like its sexy offspring the Honda CRX. Chandra put Dante in his car seat and took the passenger seat up front. She fastened her seat belt and turned to the older kids jostling for position in the crowded back seat. “Lyric, sit in E.J.’s lap. Y’all buckle up now.” Although they were two to a seat belt, they were small enough to fit and accustomed to sharing.

“Are we going to see Nana?” Lyric asked wistfully.

Sheryl eyed Lyric through the rear-view mirror. “Lyric, you know babies aren’t allowed in the hospital.”

“But I’m a big girl!”

Sheryl softened her voice. “I know you’re a big girl. But you’re not big enough. Not as big as Channie and me, O.K.”

E.J. poked Lyric in her side. “Baby.”

Lyric stifled a sob, stuck her thumb in her mouth and twirled on a pig tail.

Sheryl cut E.J. a look that would have taken the joy out of Santa Claus. “What I tell you about teasing her?” Sheryl braked suddenly, launching her passengers forward. She reached back and smacked E.J. hard. E.J. sniffled and rubbed his leg.

“Thank God for seat belts,” Chandra mumbled.

“Don’t you start.” Sheryl punched the gas, switched driving hands, and flipped off the furious driver behind them.

“Way to multitask,” Chandra quipped.

Sheryl glared. “An education is a terrible thing to waste. You need to use all that book sense for something besides sass.”

With the mood Sheryl was in, Chandra didn't dare answer back. She glanced over at Sheryl, but Sheryl was too busy fighting traffic and swearing at all the people who didn't know how to drive. The kids quieted in back. Sensing the tension, Dante whimpered and put his thumb in his mouth.

Minutes later, Sheryl pulled up in front of Hermann Hospital. "Lyric, get out of E.J.'s lap. E.J. come up front."

Chandra hopped out and held the door open for E.J. Lyric stood up and hung her head over the driver's seat as E.J. squeezed out past the twins, the car seat and Dante. "I want to come too," Lyric whined, pleading with eyes clear and dark as obsidian.

Sheryl eyed Lyric through the rear-view mirror. "Lyric, sit down and put that seat belt on."

Lyric pouted, but she did as Sheryl commanded, sucking her thumb while giant tear drops welled in her eyes. "I want my Nana." Swallowing a sob, she poked out a miniature version of Tommy Joe Martin's stubborn chin.

Sheryl's head did a 180. "Lyric, you better straighten up."

Rita and Nita bucked their eyes. Their heads swiveled back and forth like they were watching a tennis match. Lyric closed her eyes and prepared to cry herself to sleep in that quiet, breathy, jerky way kids do when they're either too exhausted for an all-out wail or as in Lyric's case, they know better.

Still holding the door open, Chandra waited for the kids to settle and Sheryl to calm down. "Where's Nana?" she asked.

"She's in 401. There's a cot in the room you can sleep on. There's a cafeteria downstairs if you get hungry. You need any money?"

Chandra shook her head. She had about twelve dollars. She'd make do.

Sheryl grabbed her purse from the floor and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "Here. I know you ain't got enough sense to ask." She

reached across E.J. and handed the twenty to Chandra. "Eddie's off tomorrow. I'll stop by in the afternoon, while he watches the kids."

Chandra raised a brow. "You're pushing it aren't you? Eddie's gonna watch these kids, again?"

"He ain't got a choice. He knows he's working my last nerve. Tell Nana, I'll see her tomorrow."

Behind them someone honked. Sheryl leaned out the window and shot the bird. Chandra winced, shut the door, backed away from the car and waved as Sheryl peeled out of the drive.

Chandra took a deep breath and headed for the cafeteria. She wasn't hungry, but she needed strength and a little more time before she faced Nana. Regardless she wasn't ready, and Nana wasn't going anywhere.

The hospital food smelled worse than any other cafeteria food. She opted for a chef salad that along with a bottled water cost her twelve dollars. She picked out several wilted pieces of lettuce and an overripe tomato. She opened the packet of Thousand Island dressing and squirted the watery mixture over her salad. The fruit and white bread sandwich she had sneered her nose at began to look a whole lot better.

She choked the salad down while she watched the tired doctors, nurses and visitors shuffle in and out of the busy cafeteria. She couldn't help but wish she was one of the professionals working for a paycheck instead of one of the visitors worrying about a sick relative and perhaps how to pay the bills. That was one good thing. Papa had blessed Nana with a widow's pension and insurance. And Nana's white folks still supported her. Nana hadn't worked for them in twenty years. Their kids were grown and having kids and grandkids of their own, but they were always sending Nana something. The oldest son was on staff at Hermann, and it was thanks to him Nana had a private room and the best of care.

Chandra cleared the table and tossed her trash on the way out of the cafeteria. She wasn't looking forward to a night of waiting. The only

thing worse than no cable was hospital T.V. She needed something to occupy her mind. She stopped by the gift shop and splurged on a Harlequin romance and a Penny crossword before she got on the elevator. She pressed four and wedged herself in a corner of the packed elevator.

A chubby woman in a sack dress squeezed in beside Chandra. “Could you press two, please? Whew, I am tired of this hospital.”

Chandra grunted and pressed the floor the woman requested.

“You and me. How you doing, Mrs. Moore? How’s your husband?” A friendly janitor took up the conversation. The chatty woman never noticed Chandra’s reticence. Chandra sighed with relief when the pair exited on two.

She spotted Nana’s room as soon as she exited on the fourth floor. She crossed the hall and passed the nurse’s station. Hesitating at the door, she knocked before entering.

She crossed the dark, quiet room and flipped on the T.V. for company. She opened the drapes to let in some natural light and turned to face the bed. Nana was sleeping, her haggard face tight and drawn. Chandra crossed the room, planted a kiss on Nana’s cheek and finger-combed Nana’s hair. Nana had soft hair but now it had the color and texture of straw.

There was a large cart beside the bed. It held a pump, hooked to the IV in Nana’s arm. Chandra wondered what that was about. She pulled a chair up to the bed and grasped Nana’s cold hand. Chandra had cried till her eyes swelled when Papa died. Why didn’t she have a tear for Nana?

Thoughts of school edged out her concern for Nana. Chandra could have been a doctor, but she’d decided medical school and law school, while potentially lucrative, took too long. She’d opted for a business major instead. Under the work study program, she had interned the last two summers at Merrill Lynch. She was supposed to intern again this

summer. Her supervisor had promised her a job if she kept her grades up. While her mentor Susan Curtis had warned Chandra, she'd need an MBA to advance, Susan had also assured Chandra once she came on board, Merrill Lynch would reimburse her if she chose to pursue her Master's.

Chandra needed to get paid. That was never as clear as it was now, but Nana's illness and Chandra's academic troubles were threatening her future. She tried to shove the thoughts from her mind. Tried to think of Nana instead of the future, but the two were intricately tied. Nana was dying and Chandra's fate hung in the wrinkled hands now clasped in her own.

"Chandra?"

Chandra winced at the sound of Nana's voice, so weak and resigned.

"Nana, how are you feeling?"

"Poorly. But it will all be over soon."

"Don't say that, Nana."

"I know I'm dying, child," Nana asserted, her voice reverberating with a bit of her old tenacity. "How's our girl?"

"Lyric's fine. She wanted to come see you."

Nana smiled with half of her face and Chandra realized Nana had suffered another stroke. "You tell Lyric not to worry 'bout me. You go'n have to be her momma now. You know that don't you, honey?"

"Nana, how am I supposed to take care of Lyric? What am I going to do about school?"

"You go'n finish that's what. Just like we planned."

Chandra turned away, unable to hide her bitterness and uncertainty. "How am I going to finish school and take care of Lyric?"

"Chandra, you ain't the first or the last woman to make a baby. You'll make do."

“How, Nana? Somebody’s got to tell me how ‘cause I sure don’t know.” Chandra felt a slight pressure as Nana tried to squeeze her hand. “I’m sorry, Nana. I should be comforting you, not the other way around.”

“Hush child, I don’t need no comfort. Everybody dies and this is my time. I been faithful, and I know God’s go’n be good to me.”

Chandra glanced down and shook her head. “Nana, I wish I had your faith.”

Nana chuckled. “Keep living, girl. You’ll get it.” Nana took a deep breath, summoning the last of her strength. “Now listen. I’m leaving the house to you and Lyric. Sheryl has her own house, and Sonny, well he tore his drawers with me. There’ll be a bit of insurance left after you bury me. You and Lyric can live on that. You got your scholarships and your work study, and you got God. You got to pray. You take that baby to church, read your Bible and pray. God will get you through.”

Chandra looked up. Nana’s eyes mirrored a sureness Chandra didn’t feel. “Nana, you make it sound so simple.”

“It is simple, but it ain’t easy. I’m tired now. I’m go’n sleep and dream about Papa and the pearly gates. I’m go’n dream myself right into heaven.”

“Nana.” Chandra could have been talking to a brick wall. When Nana said she was done, she was done. Nana closed her eyes and didn’t say another word. “Nana.” Chandra shook her grandmother’s shoulder, but she didn’t respond. “Oh Nana.” Chandra laid her head down and the tears she didn’t think she could cry flowed bittersweet and salty in Nana’s cold hand.



Nana's death forces college coed Chandra Howard to return to her Third Ward shotgun home and the four-year-old daughter, Lyric, left in Nana's care. Chandra is back where she started, the last place she wants to be.

Nana's Baby
By Cynthia D. Toliver

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