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an unforgettable exploration of responsibility and
redemption.”—CELESTE NG

TAKE MY HAND

A Novel

*Dolen
Perkins-Valdez*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF WENCH



***TAKE
MY
HAND***



Dolen Perkins-Valdez

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New York

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For Elena and Emilia

*Ben, make sure you play “Take My Hand, Precious Lord”
in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty.*

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.’S REPORTED LAST WORDS, APRIL 4,
1968



PART I



ONE

Memphis
2016

A year never passes without me thinking of them. India. Erica. Their names are stitched inside every white coat I have ever worn. I tell this story to stitch their names inside your clothes, too. A reminder to never forget. Medicine has taught me, really taught me, to accept the things I cannot change. A difficult-to-swallow serenity prayer. I'm not trying to change the past. I'm telling it in order to lay these ghosts to rest.

You paint feverishly, like Mama. Yet you got the steadfastness of Daddy. Your talents surely defy the notion of a gene pool. I watch you now, home from college, that time after graduation when y'all young people either find your way or slide down the slope of uncertainty. You're sitting on the porch nuzzling the dog, a gray mutt of a pit bull who was once sent to die after snapping at a man's face. In the six years we've had him, he has been more skittish than fierce, as if aware that one wrong look will spell his doom. What I now know is that kind of certainty, dire as it may be, is a gift.

The dog groans as you seek the right place to scratch. I wish someone would scratch me like that. Such exhaustion in my bones. I will be sixty-seven this year, but it is time. I'm ready to work in my yard, feel the damp earth between my fingers, sit with my memories like one of those long-tailed magpies whose wings don't flap like they used to. These days, I wake up and want to roll right over and go back to sleep for another hour. Yes, it is time.

Two weeks ago, I heard the news that India is very sick. I'm not sure what ails her, but I take this as a sign that it's time to head south. I know what it looks like. No, I am not going to save her. No, I don't harbor some

fanciful notion that she'll be the first and last patient of my career. I have prayed about that. Please, Lord, reveal my heart to me.

I call your name, and you look back through the screen into the kitchen. You're used to my hovering, though each year you need me less and less, and I mourn the slipping. Soon it will be just me and the dog, an old lady muttering in that rambling, crazy way owners talk to their pets when no one is around.

But before we both head into that next chapter, we need to talk. You and I always have been open with each other. As soon as you were old enough to wonder, I told you everything I knew about your birth parents. I told how you came into my life, about the gift of our family.

I told you the story of your parentage, but what I didn't reveal was the story of your lineage. How you came to be. How you came out of a long line of history that defies biology. What I am trying to say is that your story is tied up with those sisters. The story of my welcoming you into my life, of my decision not to marry or bear children, is complicated. I have tried not to burden you, but I'm beginning to believe that not telling you the whole truth, letting you walk this earth without truly understanding this history, has done you a disservice.

I reach into the pocket of my dress and pull out the paper. Without opening it, I know what it says because I have memorized the address, mapped out the directions on my cell phone, and I know the route I will take. The car is gassed up, the snacks tucked into a backpack. The last of my carefully packed wardrobe capsules are squared off in a suitcase that sits behind the door. The only thing I have not done is tell you where I am going or why. You know a little about the sisters, about the case that engulfed the country, but you don't know the whole story. And it is time for me to tell you.

"Anne?" I call your name again. This time, I wave you inside.

TWO

Montgomery
1973

There were eight of us. When I think back to the time I spent at the clinic, I cannot help but stumble over that number. What might have been. What could have passed. None of us will ever know. I suppose I will still be asking the same question when I'm standing over my own grave. But back then, all we knew was that we had a job to do. Ease the burdens of poverty. Stamp it with both feet. Push in the pain before it exploded. What we didn't know was that there would be skin left on the playground after it was all over and done with.

In March 1973, nine months after graduation, I landed my first job at the Montgomery Family Planning Clinic. On the day I started, two other newly hired nurses, Val and Alicia, began with me, the three of us like soldiers showing up for duty. Hair straightened. Uniforms starched. Shoes polished. Caps squared. Child, you couldn't tell us nothing.

Our supervisor was a tall woman by the name of Linda Seager. I swear that woman had three eyes. Nothing escaped her notice. Despite her stone face, a part of me couldn't help but admire her. After all, she was a white woman working in a clinic serving poor Black women. Trying to do the right thing. And doing that kind of work required a certain level of commitment.

"Congratulations. You are now official employees of the Montgomery Family Planning Clinic."

And with that, the training was over. One week. A fifty-page orientation manual, half of which concerned cleaning the rooms and the toilet, and keeping the supply closet organized. We had spent three days just going over that part. Long enough to question if we'd been hired as

maids or nurses. On day four, we finally covered charting patients and protocol. When the more experienced nurses noticed our downcast expressions in the break room, they promised to help us in our first few weeks. We were in this together.

As we dispersed, Mrs. Seager pointed a finger at me. “Civil.”

“Yes, Mrs. Seager?”

She pointed to my fingernails with a frown, then retreated to her office. I held up a hand. They did need a clipping. I hid my hands in my pockets.

The three of us new hires squeezed into the break room and removed our purses from the shelf. One of the nurses nudged me gently with an elbow. She’d introduced herself earlier in the week as Alicia Downs. She was about my age, born and raised in a small town up near Huntsville. I’d known girls like her at Tuskegee, pie-faced country girls whose wide-eyed innocence contrasted my more citified self.

“I don’t think it’s real,” she said.

“What?”

She pointed to her own head. “That red helmet she call hair. It ain’t moved an inch in five days.”

“Look like a spaceship,” I whispered. Alicia covered her mouth with a hand, and I caught a glimpse of something. She’d been putting on an act all week in front of Mrs. Seager. Alicia might have been country, but she was far from timid.

“I bet if you poked a finger in it, you’d draw back a nub,” she said.

The other nurse glanced at us, and I rearranged my face. Val Brinson was older than me and Alicia by at least a decade.

“You crazy, Alicia Downs,” I told her as we walked outside. “She might have heard you.”

“You look at your file yet?”

I took a yellow envelope from my bag. I had been assigned one off-site case: two young girls. Nothing in the case jumped out at me other than wondering what on earth an eleven-year-old would need with birth control. According to the file, she and her sister had received their first shot three months ago and were due for the next one.

“You got anybody interesting?” she asked.

I wanted to tell her that was a dumb question. This wasn't a talent search. Alicia had been trained as a nurse at Good Samaritan in Selma. She was pretty in a plain way, and there was a ready smile beneath her features. At one point, Mrs. Seager had asked, *What do you find so funny, Miss Downs?* and Alicia had answered, *Nothing, ma'am. I just felt a sneeze coming on.* Then her face had gone dull and blank. Mrs. Seager glared at her for a moment before continuing with her instructions on how to properly clean a bathroom toilet in a medical facility.

"Not really." I didn't know how much I was allowed to reveal about my cases. Mrs. Seager hadn't said much of anything about privacy. "Two school-age girls on birth control shots."

"Well, I've got a woman with six kids."

"Six?"

"You heard right."

"Well, you better make it over there quick before it's seven."

"You got that right. Well, I'll be seeing you." Alicia waved to me and I waved back.

I'll be honest and tell you there was a time I was uppity. I'm not going to lie about that. My daddy raised me with a certain kind of pride. We lived on Centennial Hill, down the road from Alabama State, and all my life I'd been surrounded by educated people. Our arrogance was a shield against the kind of disdain that did not have the capacity to even conceive of Black intellect. We discussed Fanon and Baldwin at dinner, debated Du Bois and Washington, spoke admiringly of Angela Davis. When somebody Black like Sammy Davis Jr. came on TV, it was cause for a family gathering.

But from the very first day I met Alicia, she ignored my airs and opened up to me. As I watched her walk away, I knew we would be fast friends.

I'd parked a block and a half away on Holcombe Street to hide my car. Daddy had given me a brand-new Dodge Colt as a graduation gift, and I was shy about anyone at the clinic seeing it. Most of the nurses took the bus. Mrs. Seager had assigned me two sisters way out in the sticks because she knew I had a reliable set of wheels.

"Civil?"

Oh Lord, what did she want now? I turned to face Mrs. Seager.

“Might I have a word?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She went back inside the building and let the screen door slam shut behind her. A gust of warm air swirled around me. I could swear that woman surged fire when she spoke. There had been scary professors at Tuskegee, so she wasn’t the first dragon I’d met. Professor Boyd had told us if we were so much as two minutes late, he would mark down our grades. Professor McKinney divided the class between women and men and dared us to even think about glancing over to the other side. That kind of meanness I could handle. The thing that bothered me about Mrs. Seager was that I always had the sense I could mess up without knowing how.

Inside the building, the reception desk was empty. I positioned my cap and smoothed the front of my dress before knocking on her door. She had taken the trouble to not only go back into her office but to close the door behind her.

“Come in,” she called.

The clinic had formerly been a three-bedroom house. She’d converted the smallest bedroom into her office. The other two were examination rooms. The old kitchen was now a break room for staff, the living and dining spaces served as a reception and waiting area. From the back of the building we could hear the roar of the new highway behind us.

Bookshelves lined one side of Mrs. Seager’s office, file cabinets the other. On the wall behind her desk hung at least a dozen community awards. Salvation Army “Others” Award. Junior League Lifetime Member. The surfaces were clutter-free. On top of the desk sat a cup of pencils, the sharpened points turned up. She cradled a file in her hands.

“Sit down.”

“Yes, Mrs. Seager.” I took a seat. The window was open and a sparrow was chirping insistently.

“I understand your father is a doctor in town.”

I could now see that she was holding my employment file. When I tried to speak, I coughed instead.

“Are you sick?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Because in our profession we have to maintain our own health in order to help other people. You must rest and eat properly at all times.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Very well. So your father is a doctor.” She said this as a matter of fact.

I knew what she was about to say. The same thing my professors at Tuskegee had lectured when they discovered my father and grandfather were doctors. *Your marks are impressive. Of course, as a woman, you have other issues to consider. Starting a family, for instance. You have wisely chosen the nursing profession, Miss Townsend.* I never knew what to say when they sounded off like that. The beginnings of a compliment always ended up stinging like an insult. Usually, I mumbled something incoherent and wondered if I was just being too sensitive.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We have been sanctioned by the federal government to execute our duties. We must take our mission very seriously. A wheel cannot work without its spokes. We are the spokes of that wheel.”

Alicia was right. The woman’s hair didn’t budge.

“What I’m saying to you, Civil, is that you are a smart girl. It’s why I hired you. I have high expectations of you because I think you’ll make a fine nurse someday. I don’t want you to go getting ideas.”

She had just paid me a compliment, but it sounded strange in my ears. “Ideas about what, ma’am?”

She frowned and, for a moment, I worried that my tone had slipped into insolence. “About your place in all this. You have to work together with your fellow nurses. Our mission is to help poor people who cannot help themselves.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I sat quietly, digesting her words. My daddy had made sure that I was educated not only in my books but also, as he had once described it, in the code that dictated our lives in Alabama. Knowing when to keep your mouth shut. Picking your battles. Letting them think what they wanted because you weren’t going to change their minds about certain things. It was a tough lesson, but I’d heeded it well enough to get some of the things I wanted out of life. Like this job, for instance. *The*

woman is just trying to pay you a compliment, Civil. Show her you can gracefully accept it.

“Yes, ma’am. I won’t disappoint you, Mrs. Seager.”

She nodded. “And Civil? Don’t forget to clip those fingernails.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I’d been called into the fold of the health profession as early as junior high school. Although my daddy wanted me to go to medical school, I’d always known nurses occupied an important space when it came to patients. Medicine was a land of hierarchy, and nurses were closer to the ground. I was going to help uplift the race, and this clinic job would be the perfect platform for it. Mrs. Seager could have been doing something else, but she had chosen to help young colored women. Her approval meant something to me. Our work would make a difference.

This was the way I figured it. There were all different kinds of ministers. Ministers of congregations. Ministers of music. To minister was to serve. This work was a ministry serving young Black women.

The wind tugged at my nurse’s cap. I walked quickly, and as soon as I was in the car, I unpinned the cap and took it off. I’m telling you, in those early days I was pretty sure I’d work at that clinic for as long as they’d have me. I had a new friend. A new job. A Tuskegee degree. I was sure enough ready.

As soon as I got home I asked my mama if we could trade cars. I didn’t want to call any more attention to myself than I already had, and her Pinto was much older than my Colt. I was determined that Mrs. Seager would not be disappointed in me. I was going to have that dragon eating candy out of my hand before it was over and done with.

THREE

I got to admit something to you before I go any further. Something I ain't shared before, and I pray you'll understand.

I had an abortion in the spring of 1972.

I was twenty-three years old, a nursing student two months before graduation, ready to start my life. At the time, I planned to work in a hospital, perhaps on the surgical floor. The moment I noticed the telltale signs, I told myself it couldn't be true. I was supposed to be more than a wife and mother. Even though the baby's father was Tyrell Ralsey, my best friend since childhood, I was not ready and neither was he. After the procedure, he drove to Tuskegee to see about me. We said little over bowls of cabbage soup. Then he drove home and we did not speak about it for months.

I wanted things to be different for my patients. Through the miracles of birth control, they would plan their pregnancies. I intended to decrease the uncertainty, the unwelcome surprises. If Ty and I had taken the necessary precautions, we wouldn't have found ourselves in that situation. Most of our patients at the clinic had already learned that lesson the hard way. They'd already had babies or miscarriages. And yes, in some cases, abortions. They usually showed up at the door without an appointment, looking resigned to the fact that they were going to have to share their private business in order to get the help they needed.

Then there was the outreach side. We visited some patients at home because it had been determined that if we did not go out into the community, there would be women we'd never reach. The new nurses were each assigned one off-site case in the beginning. Our load would increase once we'd worked there six months. My home case was out in the country and scared me. I had no idea how I was supposed to talk about sex

and birth control in somebody's front room. On top of that, my two patients were minors. Would the mama and daddy watch while I stuck them with the needle? Just the thought of making a home visit scared the living daylights out of me.

You see, I'd believed in the mission of family planning clinics long before I applied to work in one. I knew that the rate of pregnancy in young unwed mothers in Montgomery was terrible. Earlier that year, the US Supreme Court had ruled that abortion was legal in certain circumstances, but Alabama had not yet caught up with the law. And even if safe hospital abortions had been made available, the procedure was expensive and out of reach for most poor folks. The best solution had always been a prophylactic one. Although I refused to believe there was such a thing as an unwanted child, there was such a thing as an unwanted pregnancy—and I could speak to that firsthand.

On Monday morning I set out for the clinic in my mama's car though I could have walked. It was only two miles from my house, but Daddy insisted that I drive. He said he didn't want anybody harassing me in my uniform. That may have been true, but I also think he wanted me to drive because he prided himself on it. Having a car was further evidence of our status. I rolled down the window and let the wind blow across my face.

I arrived at the clinic early that morning, but I wasn't the only one. Eager Seager was already walking around checking lightbulbs. The bulb in the waiting room lamp popped as she turned it on. She seemed satisfied at this discovery and marched off in search of a fresh one in the supply closet.

The receptionist left the appointment book open on the desk so we could see the schedule as we walked by. Usually, there weren't many names in the book. As I said, most women just walked in. After the patient signed in, the receptionist would put their file in the plastic slot holder outside the examining room door. We worked in rotations. Whoever was next would take the file and step into the room. During training, I'd raised my hand and asked a question. *Wouldn't the patients feel more comfortable if they saw the same nurse each time they came in?* Mrs. Seager had just scrunched her face at me.