

KINGDOM *of* NO TOMORROW

A NOVEL



FABIENNE JOSAPHAT

KINGDOM OF NO TOMORROW

a novel by

Fabienne Josaphat

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For my father

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The blood, sweat, tears, and suffering of Black people are the foundations of the wealth and power of the United States of America.

We were forced to build America, and if forced to, we will tear it down. The immediate result of this destruction will be suffering and bloodshed. But the end result will be the perpetual peace for all mankind.

—HUEY P. NEWTON, *To Die for the People*

BOOK ONE

Oakland, California—1968

It's crazy, all women, even the very phenomenal, want at least a promise of brighter days, bright tomorrows. I have no tomorrows at all.

—GEORGE JACKSON, LETTER TO ANGELA DAVIS, IN *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters*

1

NETTIE HAD GROWN accustomed to the kind of darkness the human eye couldn't recognize, the kind that stared back and engulfed a person. Sometimes she could see that darkness in a house, even in broad daylight. She could see it now as Clia's old Rambler came to a stop in front of that cul-de-sac address on Hollis Street. The house was a two-story home, commensurate with the rest of its quaint middle-class Oakland neighborhood. Yet, it was different from the other homes. It stared back at Nettie. Blank, cold, uninviting.

"Is this it?" she asked.

Clia killed the engine and gazed at the house before checking her list.

"This is it alright." She shook her head. "This ain't the projects, is it?"

Clia checked herself in the mirror quickly, patting down her natural. "Come on then!" She stepped out of the Rambler and started up the driveway, her heels clicking on the pavement. She was carrying a shoulder purse, her curves cinched in a black dress, her step, as always, determined. She never hesitated, never questioned herself, and sometimes Nettie envied that confidence. Her friend left behind a lingering spicy fragrance that she found pleasing, and Nettie breathed it in as she followed.

Something caught Nettie's eye on the front lawn. Was that trash, haphazardly scattered on the grass? Odd. None of the other homes around here were like this. In these suburbs, the homes boasted pristine lawns, large windows, and flower pots, and the California weather had been generous to the hydrangeas and the palm trees stretching along the main road. It was a change from the cramped apartments of low-income housing she and Clia

were used to visiting.

Clia knocked, and Nettie shook off a piece of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of her shoe and wiped the sole of her shoe against the cement. She scrunched up her face at the smell and sight of excrement. “What on earth...”

Clia knocked again, and the sound drew the ire of a neighbor’s dog that barked furiously, as if they’d trespassed onto his own property. Nettie hoped she hadn’t ruined her platforms, and that they were clean enough to enter the house. She quickly climbed the front steps, and there, something else caught her eye: the faint outline of words that had been scribbled there on the white siding, on either side of the front door, and then erased, or scrubbed off. She looked down and noticed a bucket of soapy water, a rag floating amid the suds.

Clia saw it, too, and the two women took a step back. On the right, in large black letters, someone had washed off the word **OUT**. On the left, Nettie struggled to read what had been written there, at first, but she felt a prickle in her spine as she made out the remains of the word **NIGGER**. She saw Clia’s body recoil.

“What the hell...?”

They heard footsteps, and a woman’s voice called out behind the door, firmly.

“Who is it?”

“Mrs. Haywood? It’s Clia Brown. We’re here for the sickle cell research.”

The dog was still barking. Everything was quiet otherwise, no one in sight. On the other side of the house, there was nothing but a thicket of woods leading, if her sense of orientation was accurate enough, to the rushing traffic on MacArthur. The April air was crisp, with a faint fragrance of juniper and pinions.

“We agreed today was alright to come and see your son,” Clia added. “Michael Haywood? Dr. Johnson sent us.”

She was explaining who they were—public health students helping the doctor with his research—when finally the door opened ajar. Nettie flashed a

friendly smile. She wondered what the woman would think of them standing there with their clipboards and bags, smiling back at her. Through the opening, Nettie saw darkness at first. But then two brown eyes emerged, cautiously measuring her and Clia before casting quick glances around.

“Good afternoon Mrs. Haywood,” Clia said. “Remember our conversation, over the phone?”

“Yes, I remember, but listen here...” Mrs. Haywood’s head inched out of the opening and Nettie saw more of her, a beautiful brown face with pressed, artificial curls. “I don’t know if today is the right day, Sisters. Could you come back?”

“We won’t even be in the way,” Clia said, shaking her head. “You’re last on our list today, we’ll be in and out.”

“Is Michael alright?” Nettie asked.

She knew the boy had sickle cell anemia, but now Nettie wondered if he had gotten sicker. Mrs. Haywood looked nervous. She opened the door and waved them in impatiently.

The drapes were all shut. Nettie’s eyes adjusted to the darkness and she noticed the photographs on the walls, a small piano in the corner of the room, a living area with nicely kept furniture. The sofa was upholstered in a shiny teal fabric, and on it, Nettie saw a doll, slightly smaller than a human infant. The eyes were fixed on nothing in particular, but Nettie waited for them to move behind those heavy, unrealistic lashes. She couldn’t tell if it was made of porcelain or plastic, but its brown face glimmered in the faint light of a table lamp.

“It’s not a good idea to just linger on the front porch like that,” Mrs. Haywood said.

“Why?” Clia narrowed her eyes. “Is everything alright, Mrs. Haywood?”

Mrs. Haywood was in her forties and had a Diahann Carroll beauty. As she spoke, she wiped her hands nervously on an apron that covered her checkered dress.

“I just... There’s a lot I need to deal with today.”

“This is for Michael,” Clia said, resting a hand on her arm. “It’s

important, if you just let us see him. This is Antoinette, she goes to Merritt with me.”

Nettie smiled, and shook Mrs. Haywood’s hand. “It’s just to talk to Michael,” Nettie said. “Collect some data. I promise to be quick. Is he feeling up for it?”

All the other test subjects Nettie had seen were weakened by the devastating bite of sickle. Nettie still couldn’t shake the image of one of the patients from a few days ago, the eyes sunken, the skin yellow and slack. Dr. Johnson’s clinic saw dozens of afflicted patients on a weekly basis. It had been Nettie’s idea to help him with research, to understand the growth of the disease in the community. It could be helpful as Dr. Johnson petitioned again for funding; all his efforts so far had been challenged.

“There are hundreds of other diseases and conditions out there,” Dr. Johnson had mumbled, his shoulders drooping with defeat. “That’s what I keep hearing, that this isn’t a priority. We must prioritize ourselves.”

His voice dropped and he paused, thinking about something too difficult to broach. “It’s difficult to see it in the children, especially. One was too many. But two, here at my doorstep since I started practicing. Three... That’s alarming.”

Back home in Haiti, she had seen it, children with distended bellies and weakened immune systems who could not even keep their eyes open. She could write a book about it. She’d seen it when her father, a city doctor who’d retreated to the countryside, made house calls and took her along. This was how Nettie had learned about the human body, by spying on her father through door cracks when he examined patients. She’d learned about what made the body sick and what made it thrive, how to heal it not just with medicine and leaves, but also with nutrition and sunlight. Little by little, she’d move closer to the opening of the door until her father called for her. “Viens, closer. You like to watch, you might as well learn. Passe-moi le stéthoscope.” She learned to hold hands with a patient, to comfort them with hope, to show compassion like her father, and now she wanted to follow in his footsteps, make him proud, and this study would be in her curriculum

vitae and her applications to medical school.

Dr. Johnson had gladly accepted Nettie's proposal. This research was important work for him, but it meant a lot to her as well. This was practice for the future, and so Nettie asked Mrs. Haywood again about her son.

"Is he feeling ill? Has he been taking his medication?"

Nettie heard a set of footsteps, and a small silhouette emerged from the kitchen, a little girl. She watched her slip into the light and grab the doll from the sofa. She was probably seven at the most, with a lovely face and a large bow in the braid on top of her head. The other braids were pulled back into a bun, and there was another bow in the back, atop the nape of her neck. Something about her hairstyle was endearing. Something warm radiated in Nettie's chest. A memory, perhaps? A flash of recall of herself as a small child, once wearing bows in her hair... Nettie smiled at her, but the girl stared at her with empty eyes before rejoining her mother.

"Hello!" She leaned in and honeyed her voice a little. She smiled. "I'm Antoinette. My friends call me Nettie. What's your name?"

"This is Violet," Mrs. Haywood said. "Go on chile, say hello."

The little girl blinked, muttered the word. Nettie couldn't explain why, but she felt overwhelmed by a sudden sadness, the sight of this child tugging at something buried inside her years ago. Violet ran up the stairs and disappeared.

"I'm really sorry," Mrs. Haywood said.

She reached inside the pockets of her apron and pulled out a cigarette and lit it. She let herself fall against the wall and she rested there, visibly tired. She took a long drag as if seeking some elixir in it to calm her nerves. She exhaled and the smoke curled into clouds between them and it was as if a mask had fallen off her face.

"It's just... hell." She shook her head. "Ever since I moved here it's been one thing after another. Broken windows. Trash on my lawn. At first, I thought it was just kids, you know..."

She glanced at Nettie and Clia, and laughed nervously. Nettie felt a chill.

"That's what the police said, too. Just kids. But this..." She took another

drag from her cigarette. Nettie noticed her eyes were wet, but no tears came. “Did you see what they wrote on my house?”

Nettie nodded, but she couldn’t speak. What was there to say? There was a silence in the house, one that sounded louder than words.

“You know who did this?” Clia asked.

“Does it matter?” Mrs. Haywood clenched her jaw. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care who did, I just want it to stop! They want to drive me out. They want me out of my home and I own this house fair and square. They can’t make me leave... I got a sick boy on my hands!”

Nettie clutched her clipboard. This was unexpected. She’d come for one thing and suddenly found herself in an unexpected scenario. Now that they were here, it was more than just Mrs. Haywood or the house that was in danger. She was, too, and so was Clia. Whoever vandalized her home didn’t want them here.

“Two weeks ago, they sat out there and pelted my house with rocks! Broke my window. I keep the curtains shut all the time. My kids can’t play outside. If my husband were alive today, he would die all over again of indignation. He worked so hard for this house. And now I have to deal with this.”

Nettie had heard of things like this happening in places like the South, where Dr. King was still fighting the ugliest forms of hate. This wasn’t Mississippi, though. It was California. How was this possible? Clia looked around, a grave expression on her face.

“No, Mrs. Haywood, you shouldn’t have to deal with this. Where is your telephone?”

Mrs. Haywood pointed to the kitchen. Clia turned to Nettie. There was a different layer of determination to her now, visible on her face as she squared her jaw.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and see Michael with Mrs. Haywood? I’ll make a call.”

Clia and Mrs. Haywood looked at each other, and for a moment, Nettie felt left out of an exchange between them, missing the transmission of

unspoken words.

“It’s alright, go on,” Clia said. “I’m calling for help.”

MICHAEL HAYWOOD WAS in his room, sitting up in bed. He looked frail. Beyond the yellow tint in his eyes and skin, Nettie saw the glow of brown eyes, and a face that would light up any midnight sky when it wasn’t contorting in pain.

“Sometimes, I feel alright,” he muttered. “I do my chores, I go to school. But sometimes, I feel like I can’t breathe.”

“Do you feel pain sometimes?” Nettie asked. “In your extremities? Fingers? Toes?”

“Yes ma’am,” the boy said. “It’s how we knew I was sick.”

Nettie sat on the edge of his bed. Mrs. Haywood stood by the door, watching. The room was dark, too, and Nettie was thankful for the table lamp that glowed enough to let her see what she was writing, checking off boxes. Michael had gotten screened with Dr. Johnson, who had immediately referred him to a hematologist. He was on medication, but lately, it wasn’t helping. Mrs. Haywood lowered her voice as if she didn’t want Michael to hear.

“Since Charles died—my husband—things just become more difficult, financially. Hematologists are expensive...” Nettie could feel her eyes on her, perhaps trying to read her notes. “Do you know what a blood transfusion goes for at the hospital? You seem so young.”

The orange glow from the table lamp illuminated Nettie’s face, and she felt her cheeks heat up. Mrs. Haywood was scrutinizing her features, judging her. Would her actual age diminish her authority here? Did this mean she couldn’t work or help in any way? She was prepared to argue for herself, she supposed. She’d had to argue this with her aunt many times. Tante Mado always pleaded that a pretty girl like her should always work her charms to get what she wanted.

“You have the bone structure of a goddess,” Tante Mado would say, holding her face up in the light to see her angles. “You look like your mother.