

CHAPTER 1

“Destini, it’s time for breakfast,” my momma called.

I groaned and yanked my pillow over my head after glancing at the clock. It was only 6:30, and I hadn’t gone to bed until late—almost ten—because I was practicing my lead role for the annual play at my church’s family life center.

I heard a knock on the door, and before I could sit up and pretend I was wide awake, Momma had already entered my bedroom.

I scooted up in bed and grinned, hoping Momma wouldn’t fuss at me for still being in it. I was happy when she grinned back at me and her cocoa-colored eyes lit up.

“Happy Birthday,” she said.

My smile grew wider. “Thanks,” I said. I had been looking forward to my tenth birthday for weeks, and I couldn’t believe it wasn’t my first thought that morning.

Momma leaned over and gave me a hug and a kiss. She smelled so good, like fresh-baked sugar cookies. I knew she had been in the kitchen baking a batch for me because she did it every year for my birthday since I loved them so much.

“We’ve been blessed to have you for ten years,” she said. “Your daddy and I love you.”

“We sure do,” my daddy said as he walked into the room, recording me on his phone. He gave me a kiss on the cheek, and his moustache tickled me.

Before I could cover my face so I wasn’t caught on video looking crazy, I heard a sharp bark, and I glanced down to see a little white puppy wearing a red bow at Daddy’s heels. The puppy leaped on my bed and licked my face, which made me giggle.

“Who’s this?” I asked, already knowing the answer. I had been wanting a puppy since forever, and my parents had said maybe I could get one if I showed I was responsible. I had been doing extra chores to prove I was ready, and I bounced on my bed and clapped, excited my hard work had paid off.

I grabbed the puppy and gave it a big hug before I leaped off the bed and into my parents’ arms. “Thank you,” I said. “You’re the best parents ever.”

Momma and Daddy squeezed me so hard I thought my ribs would crack.

“You ready to eat?” Momma asked. “I made your favorite.”

I nodded, knowing, in addition to the sugar cookies, Momma had also made pancakes for me, then I put down my puppy who had started to wiggle in my arms.

“I’ll be right down,” I said.

Momma and Daddy nodded, then left me alone. I looked around my room. I had all the latest gadgets, including a laptop, printer and video game system. I headed over to my walk-in closet to find something to wear. Since it was my birthday, I decided on one of my new outfits Momma had gotten when we had gone shopping a few days before. I got dressed as the smell of pancakes and sugar cookies filled my room. Once I was done, I headed over to my full-length mirror to make sure I looked okay. I nodded in approval at my jeans, top and boots, then glanced down at my puppy who was sitting on her hind legs looking at me.

“What do you think, girl?” I asked.

She barked her approval, and I laughed as I picked her up. “I guess we should give you a name, huh?”

I thought for a second, and my puppy looked at me, but I guess I was taking too long because she started wiggling to get down. I put her on the floor and petted her as she wagged her tail. “I’m going to call you Wiggles,” I said. “You can’t seem to keep still.”

Wiggles headed to the door, and I followed her. I was just heading downstairs when the doorbell rang. I frowned, trying to figure out who would be stopping by at seven in the morning. I thought maybe it was my great-aunt Betty Thomas coming to wish me a happy birthday.

“I’ll get it,” I yelled, but before I could answer, Momma stopped me.

“Young lady, it’s too early for you to be answering the door. I’ll get it.”

The Greatest Gift of All by Chandra Sparks Splond

I shrugged and picked up Wiggles who licked my face.

When Momma opened the door, it was my best friend, Tiffany Davis, and she was carrying a bunch of balloons. I ran over. "Are those for me?" I asked.

Tiff nodded. "Happy Birthday," she said. She started to give them to me but my arms were full, so she walked over to the sofa and released them so they could float to the ceiling. "Who's that?" she asked, pointing as she sat on the sofa.

I gave Wiggles a hug. "It's my birthday present," I said. I kneeled next to her and placed Wiggles on my lap. It seemed like I had just gotten comfortable when my momma called us into the kitchen for breakfast. That's when I felt something wet on my jeans.

Tiff and I looked down to see that Wiggles had had an accident on me. "Oh-oh," I said.

I woke up when I felt someone shaking me.

"Destini, wake up," my best friend, Tiffany Davis, said.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to remember where I was, and that's when I saw Tiff holding a cup of water over my head, threatening to spill more on me. I wiped some drops off my forehead.

I sat up quickly. "Hey, what are you doing?" I asked.

"I've been trying to wake you up for the last five minutes," she said, placing the cup on the floor next to my bed. "You'd better hurry up or we're going to be late for school." She sat beside me. "That must have been some dream you were having. You were smiling in your sleep."

I gave her a sad smile. Tiff had been my best friend ever since she had been placed in foster care with me. I had been sent there five years ago after my mother had left me home alone for three days without food. When I had gone next door to ask my neighbor for something to eat, she had called DHR, the people who make sure kids stay safe, and they had made me move in with my great-aunt Betty Thomas who I didn't know all that well. Aunt Betty was getting older, and Ms. Baker, the caseworker who the court sent to check on us, said Tiff and I might not be there much longer.

I still didn't know what happened to my mother. When I was little, I used to think she was coming back, but I wasn't so sure anymore. Aunt Betty had told me to keep praying and one day God would bring Momma back home, but I was starting to think more and more I wanted to get adopted. I had been having the same dream for the last few months, that I would one day find a forever family, and that my new parents would love me like crazy and spoil me rotten. I never saw their faces or knew their names in my dream, but I knew they were somewhere out there waiting for me.

I hurried to get dressed so I wouldn't be late for school. I had taken a shower the night before, so I plopped down on my unmade bed and stared at the small pile of clothes in my closet, trying to decide what to wear.

"Hurry up, Destini," Aunt Betty said as she stood in the door of the room I shared with Tiff. I think she was in her sixties, but I wasn't sure. I had asked her once, and she had said that was grown folks' business. She was kinda fat and used a cane when she walked, but she was always nice to me and Tiff, and she always talked to us about God and how much He loved us. Some nights when she wasn't tired, she would read to us from the Bible, and she made sure we went to Sunday school a lot.

I finally chose my favorite pair of jeans and a pink short-sleeved T-shirt with Old Navy written in white across the front over a white long-sleeved one. I put on a pair of Skechers even though they hurt my feet and pulled at my jeans, trying to make them reach the top of my shoes, but no matter how much I tried, my mismatched socks still showed. I ran to the mirror where I brushed my big afro into a ponytail and used my hand to smooth down the strands that wouldn't stay in the rubber band, then I grabbed my backpack and hurried to meet Tiff who was waiting for me downstairs.

"You okay?" Tiff asked as we headed to school.

“I’m just a little nervous about this afternoon,” I confessed. “I really want to get that part in the play, but what if I get caught?”

Each year, one of the adoption agencies in our city, Birmingham, Alabama, sponsored an adoption fair so parents could come in and hopefully take a child home. I had never participated in an adoption fair since I’m only in foster care, but this year Tiff who was ten years old like me was able to be in it because she had been released for adoption. Her parents had been killed in a car accident two years ago, and she had lived at one other foster home before coming to stay with us while people looked for other relatives for her. When she had arrived, all she had was a purse that had a picture of her parents and a stuffed cow called MooMoo she used to take everywhere. Now it sat on our nightstand along with the picture of her parents.

Sometimes I wished I had something to remember my mother. Aunt Betty had pictures of her from when she was a little girl, but she said they had lost touch when Momma was a teenager, and she didn’t know what happened to her until authorities contacted her about me.

Tiff and I had been best friends since she had come to live with Aunt Betty, and since she could be a part of the fair, I wanted to be too. I had heard there was different kinds of entertainment, like a play and step show, and I wanted to be in the play. The kids were going to rehearse at the family life center of our church, Mount Canaan Baptist Church, where Tiff and I hung out after school, and I was going to pretend I was up for adoption so I could be in the play and find a forever family.

Tiff and I were friends with a lot of adopted and foster kids, and many of them hung out at the center. Sometimes the ones who had gotten adopted would send letters and include pictures of them with their families to the center director who would post them on the bulletin board, and they all looked so happy.

Tiff nodded. “Don’t worry. You won’t get caught, and you’ll get the role,” she said. “You’re really good. If it will make you feel better, I’ll try out with you.”

“Really?” I asked, liking the idea. “I thought you just wanted to do something backstage.”

Tiff shrugged. “I do, but that’s okay,” she said. “That’s what best friends are for.” She slung her arm around my shoulders, and we headed into Epic Elementary School.

We raced through the halls and slid into our seats just as the bell rang. I glanced over my shoulder and waved at my friend Cory Murphy, and she waved back.

Cory and I had known each other since first grade. Aunt Betty had even let me hang out at her house a few times where I had met her parents and her big sister, Courtland, who used to be a cheerleader at Grover High School.

“Good morning, class,” our fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Jones, said, greeting us with a smile.

“Good morning,” we repeated.

She started checking roll while Principal Smith came over the school intercom for our daily announcements. They seemed to go on forever. I was thinking about my dream the night before when I noticed everyone around me was shifting in their seats, which could only mean one thing.

“Everyone stand so we can say the Pledge of Allegiance,” Principal Smith said, like he could see us kids moving around.

I stood and placed my right hand over my heart and raised my left hand, reciting the words I had memorized: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.”

I slid into my seat, and knowing what would come next, I pulled out my math homework for Mrs. Jones to collect. I placed it on top of my desk, sure I would make a perfect score, like always. I glanced over at Tiff’s paper and saw it was only half done.

“You didn’t finish your homework?” I whispered. Normally we did our homework together, but Aunt Betty hadn’t been feeling well the night before, so I had hurried to finish mine so I could cook dinner, and I had left Tiff alone at the table.

Tiff shook her head. “I couldn’t figure it out,” she said. “This division is driving me crazy.”

“Why didn’t you ask me for help?” I asked.

The Greatest Gift of All by Chandra Sparks Splond

Before Tiff could respond, Mrs. Jones walked past to collect our papers. "Is there a problem, ladies?" she asked.

I leaned back in my seat and sat up straight, knowing Mrs. Jones didn't tolerate talking in class. "No, ma'am," I said, handing her my homework.

After Mrs. Jones had walked by, I whispered to Tiff, "If you need help, ask me, okay?"

Tiff nodded and looked at her desk.

I like school a lot, but most of the time, I'm bored. I'm always the first one finished with my classwork, and I used to just sit and stare out the window once I was done, until I realized when I did that, teachers started giving me more work. Now once I'm done, I sit staring at my paper, pretending I'm trying to figure out a problem. I don't think Mrs. Jones is really fooled though, but she doesn't bother me.

After Mrs. Jones had gathered all the papers, she walked to the front of the classroom where she began writing a few division problems on the board. As she began to explain them, I tuned her out since I already knew how to do the work.

I scribbled on a piece of paper for a few minutes before drawing pictures of Wiggles, the dog I had dreamed about, as I pretended to figure out the problems. After I was done, I stared out the window, thinking about the play tryouts that afternoon and dreaming about what my forever family would look like.

"Miss Daniels, would you care to join me at the board?" Mrs. Jones asked.

I looked around and noticed everyone's eyes were on me, and a few of the kids were giggling. I smoothed my hair in case it had worked its way loose for my ponytail, and as I stood, I tugged on my jeans, hoping they at least met the top of my shoes.

"Oooh, she's in the flood," someone yelled, and all the kids burst into laughter.

I tugged at my jeans again and slowly made my way to the front of the room as Mrs. Jones clapped her hands. "Children," she said sharply, "I won't tolerate this behavior." She gave me a big smile and held out a piece of chalk to me.

As I took it, I realized my hands were sweating. I hated coming to the front of the class. Kids always tease me because sometimes my clothes don't match, and if Aunt Betty has arthritis, which sometimes makes her hands hurt, she can't iron them. I know how to iron, but I don't like to, so I end up wearing wrinkled clothes, especially if I'm running late for school. There have also been a few times like today when my clothes are starting to get too little.

"Her socks don't match," someone said.

I looked down at the floor, suddenly feeling really sad. No matter how hard I tried, I could never seem to find matching pairs of socks.

"Leave her alone," I heard someone say, and I looked up to find Cory glaring at a group of kids who were pointing at me and laughing. She must have felt me watching her because she looked at me and smiled. I glanced at Tiff, and she was smiling at me too, which made me feel better, even though a few kids were still laughing.

Mrs. Jones bent next to my ear. "Just ignore them," she whispered before turning to the other students. "If I hear one more word, I'm canceling PE today."

The room fell silent as I quickly worked through the problem correctly.

"Nice work," Mrs. Jones said, touching me on the shoulder. She was always nice to me, and I really liked her a lot, even though some of the kids in class thought she was mean.

"Thank you," I said softly and headed back to my seat.

As I was walking past, Michael Billingsley looked at me and stuck out his tongue. I rolled my eyes at him. He was always teasing me, and it drove me crazy.

I was just about to take a seat in my chair near the back of the room when Jordan Henley handed me a note. I tried to hide my excitement, but suddenly my stomach felt all jumpy like butterflies were floating in it. Jordan was the most popular girl in class. She wore the latest styles, and her braids always looked good. I really wanted to be her friend, even though she loved talking

about kids and making fun of them. She and her friends were always laughing at someone, but still I wanted to be a part of their crowd. Tiff and Cory thought I was crazy. They said Jordan and her friends were just mean, so I had stopped talking to them about it.

I slid into my seat and opened the note.

I have some clothes I'm giving away. Do you want them?

Jordan had included two boxes along with the words *yes* and *no*. I checked the *yes* box and passed the note back to her. She read it and nodded.

I spent the rest of class thinking about all the cool outfits Jordan would give me. Living with Aunt Betty, I rarely got the latest styles. Sometimes at school I would find a new outfit in my backpack. I had caught Mrs. Jones sneaking one in one time, so I knew she bought them for me. Although Jordan had worn the clothes she was going to give me, they were cooler than mine since most of my stuff came from Walmart, Family Dollar or the thrift store. I tried not to let my excitement show, but I couldn't wait until lunch so I could talk to Jordan about the clothes.

I told Tiff and Cory about the note on the way to the lunchroom, and Tiff frowned.

"Why is she being so nice to you?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Who cares? She's going to give me some of her clothes. Just think, by the end of the week, I'll be wearing the popular designers. You know you can borrow whatever you want, right? I can't get new stuff and not hook you up."

Tiff didn't respond, and I remembered how she didn't trust Jordan, so I decided not to talk about it anymore. When we were in fourth grade, Jordan had pretended to be friends with me and Tiff. We had told everyone we were cousins and that we lived with our grandma, but I had told Jordan the truth about Aunt Betty being our foster mother, and she had told our whole class. Tiff hadn't liked her since.

Tiff, Cory and I had just made our way to the end of the lunch line where we punched in our account numbers when Jordan and two of her friends walked up to us.

"Hey, Jordan," I said excitedly.

"Hey," Jordan said, not even looking at me.

"So when do you want to get together?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't let the others know she was giving me clothes.

Jordan laughed. "Why would I want to get together with you?" she asked, looking me up and down.

"Remember what you said in your note?" I asked, wondering if maybe I had read it wrong.

Jordan laughed. "Oh, you thought I was serious about that? You can't even iron your clothes, and your socks never match. What would make you think I would really give you my clothes, even if I don't want them anymore? I'll just tell my mother to send them to the Salvation Army like she always does."

I felt my brown face getting hot with embarrassment. "Why did you give me that note?" I asked. I felt Tiff nudging me, which meant I should leave, but I really wanted to know.

"I thought you'd get the hint that you need to tell your parents to buy you some new clothes, but I forgot, you don't have any parents," Jordan said, looking at her friends and laughing. "No one cared enough to want you, so I know they wouldn't care enough to make sure you have decent clothes. Besides, you're too fat to wear my clothes." She looked me up and down. "Didn't those jeans come from Walmart?"

Even though I tried to stop them, I felt tears fill my eyes.

Cory grabbed my hand and squeezed it, letting me know everything was going to be okay.

"Why are you being so mean to her?" Tiff yelled. "What's she ever done to you?"

Jordan and her friends just laughed as they walked away.

Tiff looked at me. "Come on," she said, grabbing her tray and placing it on a table. She took my hand and Cory put her arm around my shoulder as they led me to the bathroom where I sank to the floor and cried.

"Why did she say those things to me?" I asked.

Tiff patted my back while Cory went to get me some tissue. “Don’t let her get to you,” Cory said. “You know how mean she can be.”

“But I’ve never done anything to her,” I said. “I can’t help that I don’t have new clothes or that I don’t have parents.”

“I know,” Tiff said. “God is going to send us parents soon.”

“Yeah, Destini, it’s going to happen,” Cory said, peering at me through her glasses.

I really wanted to believe them, but I didn’t. I had been praying to God for a long time, and he hadn’t answered my prayers.

We stayed in the bathroom for the rest of lunch, and when it was time for PE, Cory and Tiff finally talked me into going instead of staying in class with Mrs. Jones.

“Do you want to practice for the play?” Tiff asked as she hung upside down from the monkey bars. Coach had let us come outside, and most of the kids were running around, but I didn’t feel like it. Tiff was trying to take my mind off Jordan by talking about the play, which helped a little. The kids did the same play every year, so I had found an old copy and had started memorizing the lines.

I sat beneath the jungle gym playing in the sand with Cory, watching as it fell through my fingers. “Nah,” I said.

“Why not?” Tiff asked.

“I don’t know if I’m going to try out. I’m not supposed to anyway. Maybe Jordan’s right. Why would anyone want me? My own mother didn’t even want me.” I felt the tears coming again, and I brushed them on my shirtsleeve since my fingers had sand on them.

Cory patted me on the back, and Tiff flipped right side up then hopped down from the jungle gym and squatted next to me. “Don’t say that,” she said.

“Why not? It’s true. I don’t have any parents,” I said. It was turning out to be a horrible day.

Tiff put her hands on my shoulders and wouldn’t move until I looked her in the eye. “It’s not true. You have a father,” Tiff said confidently.

“I do?” I said, looking surprised. Before my mother had left, it had just been the two of us. She had never told me who my father was.

“Of course you do,” Tiff said. “Even if we never get new parents, God is the only father we’ll ever need.”

I thought about what she said. I had heard the same thing at church, but something about the way Tiff said it made me feel warm and special inside.

“Don’t let Jordan get to you,” Tiff said. “We’re going to believe this is the year we’re both going to get forever families. Deal?” Tiff held up her pinkie finger and waited for me to do the same before we wrapped our fingers around each other then hugged.

“Deal,” I said.

Excerpt from *The Greatest Gift of All* (West End Publishing LLC, 2011) by Chandra Sparks Splond—www.chandrasparkssplond.com.