

HOME FRONT HEROINES

Not My Ways

UNITED STATES NAVY

by Carrie Daws



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WORKS**

RAEFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

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A New Home for Allie

Not My Ways

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“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

—Isaiah 55:8-9

Author's Prologue

I'D NEVER MET HER THIS SIDE of heaven, yet her life rippled into mine, her smile implanting itself in my memory and her perspective challenging my own views of God's plan.

It all started with a move that I didn't want to make. Medically retired from the United States Air Force, we thought God would let us finally plant some roots. Quit moving. Oh, I knew one more move was coming, but that would only be to a smaller house once the kids grew up and found places of their own. Four hours north of where we wanted to stay was not in my plans.

But isn't it often that way with God? As Job said in the beginning of his story, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). If only I could find reasons to praise Him in the midst of this move.

It's in this place I met Mika (Mē' kuh).

Chapter One

OCTOBER 1990

TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR OLD KUMI (Koo' mē) Etheridge lay exhausted on the stiff bed, listening to the sounds of Methodist Healthcare North Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, come to life. Machines beeped, babies cried, and nurses bustled with great purpose as the end of the night shift neared. She carefully sat up and ran fingers through her ebony hair, still damp from the shower they'd allowed her soon after giving birth. She held out her hands before her, uncertain what to do with them, and finally wrapped herself in a hug, rubbing her hands up and down her chilled arms. She wanted her baby.

Nana, her mother-in-law, shifted in the chair near her bed, eyes closed. Although she could just be resting, Kumi suspected the woman was praying. When her husband had first told her that his mother would be flying in from Virginia for the birth, Kumi had been excited. She loved her in-laws. Now, as more time passed and no one came with news, she was even more appreciative of Nana's presence. Her gentle face showed signs of the long night and concern for what she had seen when Mika was born.

Nana opened her gingerbread-colored eyes and

looked into Kumi's dark brown ones. "I've been praying God would fix her eye."

Her right eye. Kumi hoped Nana was wrong, that another explanation would be offered for the deformity Nana was certain she'd seen. Maybe it was just the angle of Mika's head or compression from traveling the birth canal.

Doubts prickled, and Kumi forced back negative thoughts. She would not give in to fear. And she would offer Nana grace and appreciation.

"I know, Nana." Kumi sighed deeply. "Thank you for praying for Mika. What do you think could be taking Jeff so long?"

Her husband, Jeff, had followed the nurses who had whisked Mika out of the delivery room. She had no idea how long ago that was, but it seemed like an eternity.

A nurse fluttered in with a notepad in hand, her blonde ponytail bouncing from side to side. "Good morning, ladies. I just need to check your vitals so I can get your chart updated before the day nurse comes on duty." She wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Kumi's right arm, and it began filling with air. "Just lie back and relax for me."

"Can you tell me anything about my baby?" said Kumi.

"You haven't seen her yet?"

"No," said Kumi, shaking her head.

"We know there was something wrong with one of her eyes," said Nana. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Anything you can tell us would be helpful," said

Kumi, her eyes pleading. “We’ve not heard anything.”

The nurse paused, placing her hand over Kumi’s. “I don’t know much because my job is taking care of you. But I know that your baby is in the NICU, and the doctor should be in shortly to tell you what’s going on.”

Kumi’s eyes filled with tears. Words would not come as fear overwhelmed her. Chicken pox. Why did God allow her to contract it back in April at just four months’ gestation? Her doctor had monitored Mika throughout the rest of the pregnancy. Every ultrasound and lab test looked normal. Every single one.

The tears flowed as Kumi’s mind focused on and expanded her last thought. Everything had looked normal—until the moment of birth.



JEFF PAUSED OUTSIDE HIS WIFE’S hospital room door. The weight of his family lay heavy across his shoulders, and he had to pull himself together. In his training at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, he’d received instruction on the Bible, including verses that would help in times of stress, pain, and uncertainty. He knew that his life as pastor would include heartbreaking diagnoses and funerals, but those problems were supposed to come from the congregants—not his own family. His training felt woefully inadequate.

He’d given up the Navy for the woman God had brought to him while he was stationed in Hawaii. Sure, he’d hung on to sea life by enlisting in the Reserves, but that was more about a regular paycheck to support his

family while he went to school than because he was ever going to go back on active duty again.

Jeff shook his head slightly as he prayed, his short, coffee-colored hair motionless as he leaned back against the wall, his eyes focused on the floor. “God,” he prayed, “we’ve given up so much already to follow You to Tennessee. We left family and friends and sacrificed to pay for school. We’ve worked to stay active at Bellevue Baptist, and I’ve studied hard to learn from my professors and Pastor Rogers. We’re trying to do the right thing, to follow You.”

A man in green scrubs walked down the hall pushing a cart full of food trays. Breakfast was being served, and Jeff didn’t know how much Kumi had been told. He stood, straightening his spine to his full five-foot six-inches and squaring his shoulders before turning the corner into her room. If he’d ever needed the façade of control the Navy had trained into him, it was now.

Kumi leaned back in the bed, which was raised almost to a sitting position. She faced the door, so when Jeff entered, her eyes immediately met his. “Jeff!”

His mother turned from the window where she stood looking over the parking lot, her short, thin frame highlighted by the sun that dared to shine. He walked to Kumi’s side, trying to put together a coherent sentence.

“What’s going on?” said Kumi. “Where’s Mika?”

His mother stepped closer to the bed. “Have they told you anything about her eye?”

Jeff grabbed his wife’s hand, trying to choose his words carefully. “Mika’s very sick, and there’s a lot they still don’t know. They are running tests, and the doctor is

waiting for one in particular to come back before he comes to speak to us.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “We know her right eye is underdeveloped. It just didn’t grow like it should have.”

Kumi nodded. “Okay. That’s not good, but it’s not so bad.”

“What else is wrong, Jeff?” his mother asked. “You’re too upset. You must know more.”

Jeff looked out the window away from his wife and mom’s questioning stares. “She has to stay in the NICU for now. She’s been spending time under an oxygen hood to help her breathing. She . . . she, umm . . .” Jeff swallowed to try to regain control of the quivering in his voice. “Some of her fingers don’t look quite right, and she has some scars down her side.”

“Scars?” said Nana.

Jeff looked at Kumi, tears threatening to spill over in both their eyes. She leaned back against her pillows.

Nana took a couple steps to sit in the chair still positioned by the bed. “Is there more?”

Jeff looked at his mom, shaking his head. “I don’t know. I think so, but they aren’t telling me anything yet. They keep saying they are running tests.”

“Is it the chicken pox?”

Jeff barely heard Kumi as she whispered her biggest fear into the room. He didn’t have an answer for her. He struggled to hang on to hope but knew his wife had fought to take this thought captive for five months. “We’ll know more soon.”

“And we will pray in the meantime,” said Nana, looking at both him and Kumi steadfastly for a moment

before bowing her head.



THE NICU DOCTOR STOOD AT the end of her bed. His tall height, thin face, and serious demeanor reminded Kumi of the grim reaper. Thankfully he communicated somewhat well in layman's terms, but she couldn't take in everything he was throwing at them. Tests were beginning to come back, but the initial diagnosis was clear: congenital varicella.

"The chicken pox you had, Mrs. Etheridge, attacked the baby's body in utero. It's very rare, but when it happens, there's a lot that goes wrong. Quite honestly, if I had known about this, I would have recommended you abort the fetus."

Kumi gasped. "No! Mika is God's blessing no matter what she looks like."

"That's right," said Jeff. "We would never have considered abortion, no matter what you think her medical problems will be."

The doctor cleared his throat, and Kumi saw a look of disdain cross his features.

"Be that as it may, you need to be prepared. She may not survive today. I have concerns about her breathing and feedings, the virus clearly stunted the growth of the fingers on her right hand, and a plethora of other problems will likely begin presenting themselves over the next few days if she lives."

Kumi leaned against Jeff's strength as he stood beside her bed. *Lord*, she prayed silently, *let her live. Give us a*

chance to know this child you entrusted to us.

“Her weight is just 5 pounds, so we’ll closely monitor both that and her food intake. An IV may become necessary to give her body the nutrition it needs to function.” The doctor cleared his throat again. “If she lives . . .”

“Can you please stop saying that?” said Jeff.

The doctor looked confused. “Saying what?”

“If,” said Jeff. “*If* she lives. We understand the reality of the situation. You’ve made it clear. We don’t need you to reemphasize it. But until God takes her home, we will live in the moment, and her current situation is that she is alive, and she needs our help.”

Kumi’s heart flooded with thankfulness for her husband. It was hard enough hearing all the possibilities they faced without being constantly reminded that Mika may die before leaving the hospital.

The doctor grimaced as he returned to his enumeration of worse case scenarios. Growth limitations and mental retardation. Malformations and skin scarring. Brain and nervous system malfunctions. Blindness. Deafness.

Kumi felt the world closing in on her. This doctor was full of bad news, and she needed hope. She needed to be reminded with her own eyes that Mika was alive. God had blessed her with a precious baby girl. “Can I see her?”

The doctor just looked at her, and Kumi felt like she’d asked something odd, out of place, crazy. Maybe she was closer to losing her mind than she’d previously thought.

Jeff grabbed her hand, and she held on tight, drawing from his strength. “Please,” she said. “They took her away straight after her birth. I’ve not even seen her yet.”

“You won’t be able to hold her,” said the doctor.

“That’s fine,” said Kumi. “But I’d still like to see her.”

The doctor nodded briefly.



THE NEXT MORNING, JEFF ENTERED the hospital prepared to take his wife home. Taking her to see Mika the day before had been both difficult and rewarding. Numerous wires flowed from her tiny body, but the nurses encouraged them to talk to her and to touch her.

At one point she’d opened her left eye and looked at them. At that moment, everything within him rushed to the battlefield for her wellbeing. She might not have a great chance at a normal life, but she was God’s child entrusted to him for this time. She needed him, and he would not let her down.

Jeff entered his wife’s room to see Mika’s doctor standing there, the grim reaper as Kumi had dubbed him the day before. Kumi sat in the chair with a look of horror on her face.

“What’s going on?” said Jeff.

“Mr. Etheridge. Your daughter’s lungs collapsed last night. I was able to insert a chest tube, so she’s on a ventilator today, but doing well with it.”

“So she’s okay?” Kumi asked.

The question burned in Jeff’s chest as he worked to

understand the doctor's answer.

"The ventilator is helping her to fully open up the lung sacs. We'll watch her over the next day or two to see how she progresses."

"So she's hanging in there?" Jeff understood doctors tried not to insert false hope, but this guy took that caution to the negative extreme.

"Yes," said the doctor.

"Well, we'll take that and be thankful for it," said Jeff.

The doctor grimaced, his usual expression whenever Jeff or Kumi mentioned anything close to faith. Clearly this man believed more in science and medicine than God.

"Thank you, doctor," Jeff said, extending his hand. He was determined to be gracious no matter what the doctor thought of their faith.

As the doctor left the room, Jeff looked at Kumi. She was dressed, and her small bag sat open on the bed. Taking Kumi home without Mika was heartbreakingly hard. "Do you have everything packed and ready to go?"

His wife just nodded.

"Come on," he said, grabbing the bag with one hand and holding out his other toward his wife. "We will stop over and see her before we leave."



THE TEMPERATURES OUTDOORS had been cooler than normal all week, but Kumi barely noticed as she and Nana headed to Methodist North to visit Mika. In some

ways, she couldn't believe she was the mother of a three-day-old baby, because life seemed to be just a series of visits to the hospital. How she longed for the day she could take Mika home.

"She's doing better today," said Nana, breaking the silence.

"Do you think so?" said Kumi.

"Yes. The hospital hasn't called about any emergencies, and I can just feel it. She's going to come home to us."

Kumi valued her mother-in-law's faith and knew that at times she leaned on her for support as much as she did Jeff. The woman had a calming influence, likely from her vigilant prayer life.

"Well, we're almost there, so we'll know for sure in a few minutes."

Nana parked as close as she could, and they made their way to the NICU, donning the required hospital gowns over their clothes before approaching the crib. A nurse was standing over Mika, watching the machines and making notes. She turned toward Kumi, the bottom of her braid swinging around to her left shoulder. Their eyes met, and she smiled.

"Hey there," the nurse said. "I just returned from lunch and was checking on my patient. She's doing much better today." She moved to the end of the small, open crib so Kumi could get closer.

Kumi bent down to look into Mika's face. "Hi, Mika. Nana and I came to see you." She stroked the child's cheek, and Mika turned her face toward her. "She's still off the ventilator," said Kumi looking at the nurse.

“That’s good.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the nurse in her Tennessee drawl. “That’s very good. She is breathing on her own and doing a beautiful job of it.” She clicked her pen shut and put it into her hip pocket. “Would you like to hold her?”

Kumi straightened, looking at the nurse in great surprise. “I can hold her?” She caught Nana’s eye. She smiled back at her, nodding like this was exactly what she’d been expecting all along.

“Well, sure, honey. You just get yourself settled there in that rocking chair, and I’ll hand her to you. That usually works better so we don’t get the IV and wires tangled up.”

Kumi obediently sat in the chair, doing her best to control her anxiousness as she waited for the nurse to put Mika in her arms. The moment the nurse released her, an emotional bomb exploded in Kumi’s heart. Her precious girl, the child she’d spent the last three days terrified she’d never hold. Thankfulness overwhelmed her, and her eyes filled. Tears were so common these days.

The nurse lovingly patted Kumi’s shoulder. “My name’s Stacy, and you just call me if’n you need anything.”

Kumi reached over to stroke one of Mika’s hands as she whispered to her, trying to etch every moment into her memory so she could share it with Jeff after he got out of class. “We love you, sweet girl. Daddy will be here tomorrow to see you. He has a lot of school to do today and work tonight, but he misses you.”

Nana moved closer to look at Mika.

Kumi didn’t want to let go, but she knew Nana must

want to embrace the baby as badly as Kumi. “Do you want to hold her, Nana?”

Nana smiled. “You enjoy this moment. I’ll get to hold her soon enough. She and I will be great friends. You’ll see.”

Enthralled, the room around Kumi faded and time stopped. Her mind ignored everything as her heart flooded with love for her precious Mika. It seemed like only seconds before Stacy was standing in front of her again.

“I hate to tell you this,” Stacy interrupted, “but we need to get her back into her bed for now.”

“Okay,” said Kumi, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice. Looking at the clock, she realized that she’d held her baby for fifteen minutes. Rather than focus on the shortness of it, she would celebrate the preciousness of it.

“Don’t worry, Momma,” said Stacy. “As long as she keeps up this good progress she’s been makin’, you’ll be able to hold her a little more each day.”



THINGS WERE LOOKING UP. When Jeff had escorted his wife to the hospital Thursday, they’d each received a few moments to hold their daughter. Today, as Kumi finished tying her protective gown around her clothes and he helped his dad do the same, Jeff couldn’t wait for another opportunity to hold his baby. He thought the difficulty would be sharing Mika, as his dad only had a couple days before he had to fly home again, but as they walked into

the room, they saw Mika under an oxyhood. Jeff's heart sank.

As they approached Mika's crib, a nurse came over.

"Is she having trouble again?" Kumi asked.

"She had another pneumothorax," said the nurse.

"What's that?" said Papa.

Jeff hadn't realized at first how tall the nurse was until she stood beside his dad. The top of his head barely reached her chin, and they all had to look up at her.

"In simple terms, her lung collapsed. It's probably just leaks from her air sacs into her chest wall."

While this nurse was professional, Jeff liked the Southern-speaking nurse from yesterday better. This one talked more like the doctors.

The nurse straightened a cord connecting Mika to the monitor. "The oxyhood will remain in place for several days to give the lungs a chance to heal."

"So that cake-plate-looking thing is helping her breathe?" said Papa. Leave it to Dad to get straight to the bottom line. It was a trait he admired in both his parents, although sometimes their blunt analysis was tough to hear.

"It is enriching the oxygen she's breathing and allowing her to stay here in the open crib rather than forcing us to move her to an isolette."

"That's one of those covered cribs?" Jeff asked.

The nurse nodded. "Yes." She turned and pointed to a baby across the aisle, his bed completely encased in a hard, plastic cover. "That is an isolette."

Jeff struggled with the nurse's choice of words. When he looked in the direction she pointed, he saw a baby that

happened to be in an isolette, not merely the isolette itself. But perhaps he was sensitive.

“What about her feedings?” said Kumi. “She was doing well with bottles.”

“We’ve stopped that for now as well,” said the nurse. “We’ve switched her to IV nutrition, although the goal is to get her on a nasogastric tube within three or four days, as long as she doesn’t re-accumulate air in her chest.”

“I see,” said Kumi. “Why the tube and not back to bottles?”

“The doctors have determined this is what is best for her.”

“I think she’s asking you why the tube is better than the bottle feedings,” said Papa.

The nurse bustled slightly like she was offended by the question, and Jeff wished again for the easygoing nurse from yesterday. Maybe it was just the woman’s personality, but he sensed that she didn’t like this part of her job very much.

“The nasogastric tube will allow us to not only feed her but also give her medicine. It also allows stomach contents to be removed and analyzed if the doctors so choose.”

An alarm sounded a few cribs away, and the tall nurse turned her head. Jeff saw another nurse appear, who turned off the noise and leaned over the baby. Tall nurse turned back to them.

“If that answers all your questions, I have other duties to attend to.”

“Thank you,” said Kumi to the nurse’s back as she walked away from them.

“I liked the nurse yesterday better,” Jeff said quietly to Kumi.

“Yes,” said Kumi. “Stacy was much friendlier and easier to understand.”

“That one needs to find a new job,” said Papa. “Maybe in billing.”

Jeff chuckled, thankful his dad had made the trip from Virginia to see them. “I’ve missed you, Dad.”



ESCORTING HIS BROTHER INTO the NICU, Jeff hoped for better news than they’d received yesterday. Jack had flown in from Ohio for the weekend so he could see both Mika and their parents, and Jeff hoped to send him off Monday morning with more than memories of Mika covered in tubes and wires. But she looked the same.

At least the Southern nurse was on duty this morning. Now if he could only remember what Kumi told him her name was. Susan? No. Stacy? Maybe.

“Hey there!” she said.

“Hi,” said Jeff, thinking he’d just keep his ignorance to himself. “I brought my brother to see Mika. He hasn’t met her yet.”

“Oh, sure,” said the nurse. “Take your time.”

“How is she doing today?” Jeff asked, looking at his daughter sleeping on her belly with her knees pulled up underneath her.

“She’s holdin’ her own, which is good stuff. She didn’t lose any ground overnight, and we’re pleased with that.”

“So the added oxygen is working?” Jack asked. He stood four inches taller than Jeff, but people frequently forgot that as his friendly demeanor engaged their attention.

“Well, we won’t know for sure for a couple more days yet, but it seems to be. She’s at least not havin’ troubles, which is a blessing. That’s exactly what she needs to give her little lungs a chance to heal good.”

A sensor went off a couple of beds over, and Stacy looked toward the monitor near that bed. “Excuse me,” she said before she walked over to the little one lying there and thumped the bottom of his foot. “Come on, now,” Jeff heard her say. “We can’t be stoppin’ breathing today.”

He returned his attention back to Mika. She looked so tiny under the oxyhood. So fragile.

Jack stood quietly by his side for a moment, then said, “Is the name Mika from Kumi’s heritage?”

Jeff nodded. “In Japanese it means *beautiful blossom*.”

Jack quietly watched Mika for a moment. “She certainly is beautiful.”



KUMI LOOKED AT THE BABY calendar in front of her as she considered what to write for the last entry of the month. She never knew what tomorrow would hold for Mika, so she wanted to record everything she could, to remember every precious milestone her daughter reached.

Things were looking better, though, and Kumi embraced the hope that Nana was right. Mika would

come home. On Monday, the doctors had switched Mika to feedings through an NG tube, and yesterday she and Jeff had been able to hold her again.

Memories of the adorable white bear Jeff's mother had brought for Mika filled her thoughts. About twice Mika's size, he wore a black, Halloween-themed shirt with the words "Boo Bear" on it.

"He's so soft and cuddly," Kumi wrote on the calendar. "Perfect for our baby girl."

Chapter Two

NOVEMBER 1990

NOVEMBER KICKED OFF WITH above average temperatures in Memphis. Kumi walked briskly into the hospital and followed the now familiar hallways to her precious child, encouraged by all the good news that had been coming over the last week.

Mika had been breathing on her own with only occasional support from a nasal cannula for several days, and yesterday marked the eighth day in a row they'd been able to spend time holding her. The doctors had even started gravity feedings through a tube down her nose, and Mika was doing well adapting to it. Surely Nana was right, and Mika would be home by Christmas. Maybe even Thanksgiving!

As she walked into the NICU, her favorite Southern nurse greeted her. Kumi smiled. "Hi, Stacy. How's our girl doing today?"

Stacy looked at Kumi, then at Mika, reaching into the crib to gently stroke the child's leg. "Well, Doc was in this mornin' and looked at all the latest test results. He continues to have some concerns."

Kumi put her purse down in an empty rocking chair near Mika's bed and reached over to pat the sleeping

baby's back. "Okay. Is there something more going on? Does he want to try something different?"

Stacy paused for a moment. Kumi looked at her, struggling to contain the fear threatening to overtake her. Surely they weren't facing yet another diagnosis.

"Doc thinks it would be best if we transferred Mika to Le Bonheur."

"Le Bonheur?" Kumi forced her brain to focus. "Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center?"

Stacy nodded. "Yeah, they have a top notch group over there in Pediatrics, trained and ready for all kinds of issues. She'll be with a great team of docs and nurses that will help you figure out what's best."

Kumi's mind raced. Le Bonheur wasn't any farther away from them. It would actually be easier in some ways, but she'd been hoping for home, praying for an end to the hospital visits. She'd been asking for healing. Moving to Le Bonheur made all the health problems seem bigger.

Kumi looked into the face of her sleeping daughter, tears running down her cheeks.

Stacy moved over to stand beside her, gently covering the hand Kumi had gripped on the side of the crib. "It's gonna be okay, Mrs. Etheridge." She shook her head. "I know it don't look like it, but it's gonna all work out. You'll see."

Kumi tried to swallow the huge lump in her throat. She couldn't respond.

"Come on," Stacy said gently. "Let's get you settled in the rocking chair. I noticed you've been able to hold her a little longer each time. That's good progress."

“Yes,” Kumi forced out. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, forcing herself to think of the blessings around her. Mika was alive. She had good nurses and a doctor who wanted the best care for her.

As Stacy placed the child in Kumi’s arms, Kumi focused on the baby’s sleeping face. Tears flowed again as she released her daughter’s life to God. “Help me, Father,” she whispered. “If this moment is all you give me, let it be enough.”



JEFF STOOD BESIDE HIS WIFE as the crowd gathered around Mika. Friends from church surrounded them to pray. As a small drop of oil was placed on the baby’s forehead, Bill, the minister in charge of pastoral services at Bellevue Baptist, opened by reading out of the Bible.

“James chapter 5 says, ‘Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.’”

Jeff heard a few murmur, “Amen,” as Bill continued.

“We don’t want to linger long and be in the way of those caring for these babies, but this passage makes it clear that we should pray for healing. So that’s what we’re going to do, expecting God to show up and do something miraculous in and through Mika.”

Bill raised his hands as if he were going to embrace those around him. “Will you pray with me?”

Everyone bowed heads as Bill began.

“Father God, we thank You for this child that You’ve entrusted to the care of Jeff and Kumi. We know that children are a blessing, a heritage, and a reward from You, and so we can’t help but rejoice in the presence of Mika. She is beautiful as her name suggests. But, Father, You know even better than we do how very sick she is. You know exactly what her body needs to function the way You intended, and we are here tonight to ask that You heal her. We ask that You . . .”

As Bill continued to pray, Jeff’s mind wandered into his own prayers. The thoughts jumbled as he prayed more in phrases and heart’s desires rather than eloquent sentences. “Lord, heal her. Make her well. Let us take her home. I want to teach her so much, to do so much with her. You gave her to us, please let us enjoy her longer. Father, I want time with Mika and lots of it.”

After the group chorused, “Amen,” the women all stopped to give Kumi a hug before leaving. Bill put his hand on Jeff’s shoulder, squeezing slightly.

“How are you holding up?”

Jeff had trouble taking his eyes from Mika. “It’s hard. She seems to be making progress, but the doctors are still concerned, and she can’t seem to get enough oxygen on her own.” Jeff paused, striving for a semblance of control over his emotions. “We just want to take her home.”

Bill nodded. “We will keep praying for that. God has a good plan for Mika—you know that as well as I do.”

Jeff looked at Bill and nodded. He tried to swallow

the lump in his throat. “I know. But I want that plan to include her coming home. Is that too much to ask?”



MIKA'S TRANSFER TO LE BONHEUR Children's Medical Center went smoothly on Monday, November 12. Kumi saw her comfortably settled in her room with the Special Care Unit, and on Wednesday the doctors started running tests.

Friends surrounded Kumi on Sunday at church, asking how things were going, but Kumi was lost for words. *Father*, she prayed during the service, *these people are looking for news, for hope. But I'm also looking for hope! What are You doing with Mika? How much longer will You delay in answering our prayers for healing?*

By Tuesday morning, Kumi fought the doubt struggling to overwhelm her. A week with a new specialized team had not seemed to make any difference. “You are not doing well, little one,” she wrote on Mika's baby calendar. “You had continuous apnea this afternoon, so you are being transferred to ICU.”

She sighed as she closed the calendar and stared absently in front of her. “How are we supposed to live with this, Jeff?”

Jeff looked up from the pile of open schoolbooks in front of him on the table.

Kumi swiped her hand across the front of the calendar, remembering how Mika had looked when she'd left her this afternoon. “The Bible says that all things work together for good, but how can any of this be good?”

Or turn out good? It doesn't feel good."

Jeff took a deep breath and shook his head. "I don't know, honey. I have to believe that God has a plan and that somehow good will come from this. But you're right. This is hard." He grabbed Kumi's hand and squeezed. "This is very hard."



THE NEXT MORNING KUMI walked over to the crib indicated by the nurse at the front desk in ICU. Her baby was calmly sleeping, curled up on a warming mat.

"Good afternoon," said a nurse with short-cropped brown hair as she walked over.

"Hi," said Kumi, readjusting her purse strap on her shoulder. "How is she doing today?"

"She's made good progress. She settled into that warming bed and has been sleeping considerably better than I heard she was doing in Special Care."

"That's good." Kumi reached in to gently rub Mika's back. "Is the apnea going away?"

"The rate of her apnea has decreased considerably," the nurse said, moving over to look at the monitors.

"So is it something that she'll live with for the rest of her life? Or can it disappear completely?"

"It can disappear. Sometimes these little ones just need time to train their brains that they aren't in the womb anymore and need to keep breathing. It's pretty common with the kids we see here."

"I see. And that was the main reason she was transferred to ICU, right? So as her breathing improves, the doctors will transfer her back to the Special Care Unit?"

“Well, you know she has different issues going on, but yes, her breathing was a huge concern. I can’t speak for the doctors, of course, but I think if she continues to do this well for another day or so, they’ll upgrade her back to SCU.”

“Oh, okay,” said Kumi. “That will be wonderful.” A glimmer of hope. It was small, but for today, it was enough.



“GOOD NEWS, MR. AND MRS. Etheridge! It’s a good Friday!”

Jeff paused just inside the Special Care Unit’s doors to see who was addressing them. Kumi walked past two cribs before stopping to stand beside Teresa, a curly blonde who was quickly becoming their favorite nurse.

“More good news?” said Kumi. “I thought Mika getting upgraded back to SCU yesterday made it a great Thanksgiving Day!”

“Yes, we were very thankful of that,” said Jeff as he joined the ladies.

Teresa smiled. “You see this tube going into her left leg here?” Teresa gently turned Mika’s leg so Jeff and Kumi could see better.

“Yes,” said Kumi. “Is that for medicine?”

Teresa’s eyes sparkled. “The best kind of medicine God gave us: food.”

“What?” This was the hope Jeff looked for. The doctors adding food back into Mika’s health plan had to be a good sign that God was finally answering their prayers.

“Yes. We’re pumping her full of what we call TPN, Total Parenteral Nutrition. She’s getting two solutions. Hyperal which is basically your proteins and carbohydrates, and we’re adding lipids which includes your fats and fat soluble vitamins like D and E.”

“That’s wonderful!” said Kumi.

“Yes, that’s certainly great news,” said Jeff.

Teresa nodded her head. “Mm, hmmm. She should start to put on some weight with all this nutrition flowing through her. Every ounce she gains will be a blessing.”

“Now what about the apnea? Is that still doing okay?” said Jeff.

“We still see moments of it,” said Teresa, “but it’s better than earlier this week, so her time in the ICU was exactly what she needed.”

Kumi pointed to the cannula tube coming from Mika’s nose. “Is that why she’s still on oxygen?”

“Yes,” said Teresa, “but we’ve been weaning her off of it, and she continues to do well. The doctor wants to continue to reduce her down to one-eighth liter for the weekend and see how things go.”

“Thank you for taking the time to tell us all this,” said Kumi.

“Yes, thank you,” said Jeff. “It means so much. Sometimes the doctors seemed rushed, or . . .” Jeff struggled to find the right word.

“I just have trouble understanding what they are telling me,” said Kumi. “And I feel like I’m a nuisance when I ask them questions.”

Teresa patted Kumi’s hand. “You just keep asking questions—of them and of us. This is sad to say, but the

truth is that we don't get a lot of involved parents in this unit. At least one of you is here every day, and that's refreshing to see because it's just not what's normal."

"That's sad," said Kumi.

"Yes," said Teresa, "it is. But it's our reality. So don't worry about those doctors. They're just adjusting to you like you are adjusting to all of this. You keep asking questions." Teresa lowered her voice, leaning in so Jeff and Kumi could still hear her. "And when they talk above your head, just come find one of us, and we'll explain it in layman's terms."

Kumi giggled as Teresa winked at them. Jeff smiled, shaking his head. Talks like this were exactly why he and Kumi valued Teresa so much.

"Let me go check on my other patients." Teresa waved as she walked away. "You two stay as long as you like."

Chapter Three

DECEMBER 1990

NOVEMBER ENDED ON A GREAT note with Mika coming off oxygen and gaining weight—a full pound in a week! The doctors doubled her feedings, and Kumi felt her spirit relaxing. Mika was getting better. She was going to come home.

Jeff’s mother came for another visit, and on Tuesday, December 4th, Kumi watched as Nana sat in the hospital rocking chair feeding Mika her bottle.

“She’s really going to town on this bottle, Kumi.”

“I know, Nana. She’s doing so much better. Doesn’t she look good since you saw her in October?”

“Oh, definitely. She’s starting to get those cute baby rolls around her legs that I like to see on little ones.”

Kumi laughed. Her baby was finally making continuous progress, and it felt so good.

But the good news was short-lived. On Wednesday, Kumi arrived at the hospital to discover that the doctor ordered the bottle feedings discontinued.

“I thought she was doing well,” said Kumi to Teresa. “What happened?”

“Her apnea incidents started increasing again, and she

developed bradycardia.”

“Bradycardia?”

“It’s basically just a slow heartbeat, under sixty beats per minute, which for little ones like Mika is really slow.” Teresa turned to point at the number on the monitor that indicated Mika’s heart rate. “She should be somewhere in the area of eighty to one-forty.”

“Oh, I see.” Kumi could feel the stress sneaking back into her shoulders. She focused her attention on the errant curls escaping from Teresa’s ponytail, trying to keep her thoughts from giving in to fear. “Is the apnea causing her heart to slow down?”

“Well, it can. Sure. But I think the docs are watching to see if something else is happening. Maybe something we don’t know about yet.”

“But it’s possible that nothing else is wrong.” Kumi looked at Teresa. Right now she needed hope more than she needed truth.

Teresa smiled at her. “It’s possible. You just hang in there, Mrs. Etheridge. We’ll get this figured out.”

Kumi fought tears. She looked down at the baby, asleep on her back with one arm stretched out toward the edge of the crib. She placed her hand on the child’s upper belly. “How do you always have so much hope for Mika?”

“I can’t really explain it,” said Teresa. “I know you and your husband are people of faith. Well, I am too. And I just know God put something special in this child.” Teresa covered Kumi’s hand with her own. “I don’t know what it is, and I don’t know when you’ll see it. But she’s different in a good way. This child—you mark my words,

Mrs. Etheridge. She will change lives.”



ON THURSDAY EVENING, doctors placed Mika back on hyperal and lipids, and by Monday she was finally showing a little weight gain. Kumi faithfully recorded each ounce her child gained, the only progress Mika seemed to make. By the following Wednesday, she was just under six pounds again, and Jeff wanted to find some way to celebrate.

“What are you thinking about doing?” Kumi asked.

“I don’t know,” said Jeff as he looked aimlessly around their small kitchen. “Something. Something that she can enjoy.”

“Do you want it to be something we can leave there with her?”

“That would be nice, don’t you think? Something new for her to look at. I mean, I know she’s a baby, but still, maybe there’s something she enjoys that we don’t know about because we haven’t tried it yet. We don’t have to leave it, but maybe we could take it with us from now on when we go to see her.”

“Well . . .” Kumi began thinking out loud, listing the items in Mika’s room waiting for her to come home. Rattles would only be useful when someone was there to shake them for her. The stuffed animals wouldn’t be allowed to stay, and they certainly couldn’t take in anything to hang on the walls.

Jeff dismissed them all without too much thought. Then an idea struck him. “What about her mobile?”

“From her crib?”

“Yes. We could wind it up so it plays the music while we are there. Maybe she likes music.”

“That might be perfect. I think it will hang on the crib they moved her to earlier this week. Let’s take it and see.”

At the hospital later that afternoon, Mika moved her head toward the music as soon as Jeff wound it up. She seemed to listen intently as long as the music played.

“I think she likes it,” said Teresa, walking over from another bed.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” said Kumi. “How has she been doing today?”

“She’s holding her own,” said Teresa. “The doctors are thinking she might have reflux, which is why she struggles so much when she eats with a bottle. They are going to schedule a couple of tests—an MRI and an esophageal pH probe—but those probably won’t get done until early next week.”

“What can they do for her if they determine she has reflux?” Jeff asked.

“Well, with minor cases, doctors try a thickened formula, and we try to keep the babies more upright during feeding, but I’m not sure that will be enough for your girl. We do have some medication options, but those carry side effects that we don’t necessarily want to introduce to Mika. And her pulmonary issues and struggle to keep her weight up complicate everything. So, the medicines may not be worth trying, particularly if it’s as bad as the docs suspect.”

“Pulmonary issues?” said Jeff as he wound the mobile

back up for Mika. “Would that be the aspirating you’ve mention?”

Teresa nodded. “Yes. Her swallowing issues are difficult enough, but she commonly swallows the formula into her lungs and never coughs to clear it out. We call that silent aspiration, and if that doesn’t improve, she may have a lifetime of serious respiratory issues like pneumonia.”

“Reflux is when the food from the stomach comes back up the throat, right?” said Kumi.

Teresa nodded.

“So it’s almost like the reflux is giving Mika a second chance to swallow the formula into her lungs, making eating even more dangerous for her,” said Kumi.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Teresa.

“So, what do we do?” said Jeff.

“We wait for the test results and see how bad things are. She’s young enough that this could just be a skill she needs to learn. But, if the results show this is more serious, then the doctors have a couple of surgical options that may help.”

“Okay,” said Kumi. “Will you let us know when they are scheduling the test?”

“If the order comes through tomorrow, then I should be able to let you know,” said Teresa. “But I’m off Saturday through Monday, so if I don’t know tomorrow, then just ask the nurse on duty Monday. They should know more by then.”



KUMI'S MOTHER, MASAKO, (Mah sah' ko) arrived Friday, December 14th. Since her marriage to an American soldier in the 1950s, they'd settled in Hawaii. As much as Kumi loved the islands, she didn't get to see her parents a lot.

"Mika's hair looks like it might come in dark like ours, Mother," Kumi told her as they walked into the hospital Friday evening.

"That's good," said Masako. "Will I get to hold her?"

"Yes, you should be able to do that. Because of the wires and tubes attached to her, it is easiest if you sit in the rocking chair and let one of the nurses hand her to you."

Kumi led her mom through the doors of the Special Care Unit, walking over to Mika's crib. She looked so much better than she had last week, and Kumi thanked God that He had allowed Mika to have a good weekend for her mother's visit.

Kumi noticed Teresa working on another child across the room. When Teresa looked up, she waved.

"Hey, Mrs. Etheridge! I'll be over in just a minute."

"Well, Mother," said Kumi. "What do you think?"

"Her name is just right," said Masako quietly, her eyes never leaving Mika. "She truly is a beautiful blossom."

"Hi, folks," said Teresa.

Kumi gave her a hug. "Thank you for coming to help us. This is my mother. She's up for just a couple days to visit and would like to hold Mika, if she can."

"Oh, absolutely! Just get her settled in the rocking chair while I make sure all these lines are straight and

won't give us any trouble when we pick her up.”

Kumi took her mother's purse, and Masako sat. The moment Teresa released Mika into her mother's arms, she watched her mom draw back, like she entered another world where no one existed but her and Mika. Masako snuggled Mika closer, murmuring *Mika-chan* before slipping into quiet Japanese.

Kumi relaxed. In Japan, Chan was a suffix given to those the speaker found endearing. Of course, most people added it to the names of most babies, but Mika's medical issues caused a hesitation within Kumi's heart. She couldn't help but wonder what people thought when they saw her lying in a hospital bed surrounded by machines rather than rattles and stuffed toys.

I have plans for you, my child, Kumi heard the Holy Spirit whisper.

I know, Kumi thought. *Jeremiah tells me You have plans to prosper us and not harm us, plans to give us hope and a future. I've been trying to focus on that, but what kind of future does Mika have? Is it here, with us?*

Once again, silence from heaven confronted her ideas of security and goodness. It seemed God provided just enough hope for the moment and no more.

Kumi sighed, looking at her precious girl. *I want to trust Your plan, Father. I want to call it good and believe it with my whole heart. But how is this good?*

More silence.

I guess all I can ask, then, is that You help me in my unbelief. Kumi closed her eyes to focus more fully on her conversation with God. *Help me in my unbelief.*



JEFF AND KUMI WALKED INTO the hospital on Monday, late in the afternoon. Jeff was thankful for the break in school over Christmas. He desperately needed the time to rest and spend with his family.

When they arrived in the Special Care Unit, they found a doctor standing near Mika, making notes on her chart. Placing his hand on the side rails of Mika's crib, Jeff got straight to the point. "Are you her doctor?"

The man looked up. He laid his pen across the chart, securing it with the thumb of his left hand, and extended his right hand in greeting. "I'm Doctor Rickover, and yes, I'm one of the doctors overseeing her care. You are?"

Jeff didn't think he'd have any trouble remembering the name of this towering doctor with graying hair. His name definitely suited him. "We're her parents. I'm Jeff Etheridge, and this is my wife Kumi."

The doctor politely nodded at Kumi while Jeff forged ahead. Catching the doctor at Mika's bedside was a rare opportunity for him, and he was going to get all the information he could. "What's the latest? How is she doing?"

"I ordered a gastroesophageal scintigraphy this morning and was just reviewing the results. It appears she has severe reflux. I'm recommending surgery, although I'm ordering an MRI first."

"A gastro—?" said Kumi. "What's that?"

"It's commonly known as a milk scan. Basically we feed her a bottle with a small amount of radiopharmaceutical in it. Then she simply lies on top of a camera,

and we take pictures for about an hour to see what happens.”

“And what does that tell you?” said Jeff.

“The camera essentially captures three things: if any of the milk is returning to the esophagus, how quickly the milk is processing through the stomach, and if any of the milk is aspirating into the lungs.”

”And you found milk coming back up?” said Kumi.

The doctor pulled out the test results. The black photo paper was covered in neatly numbered rows and what looked to be oddly shaped yellow dots. None of it made any sense to Jeff.

“A substantial amount is returning into her esophagus, and it is going high enough that she easily aspirates.”

“I see,” said Kumi.

“And what will the MRI tell you?” Jeff asked.

“It’s just a precaution before surgery. I want to make sure that she doesn’t have something else going on.”

“Like what?” said Kumi. “What are the possibilities?”

“MRIs show soft tissues, so they are ideal for spotting abnormalities like tumors or infections. It can also indicate internal bleeding and a few blood vessel diseases. Some of that could be a contributing cause of the reflux or a complicating factor. Either way, knowing will help us determine the best course of action.”

“When will that be done?” said Jeff.

“I’m putting the order in as soon as we’re done here, so I would expect it to happen within twenty-four hours.”

“All right,” said Kumi. “Thank you, Doctor Rickover. We appreciate you taking the time to answer our questions.”

“Yes,” said Jeff, extending his hand. “Thank you. We just want to understand what’s going on with our daughter.”

Dr. Rickover shook Jeff’s hand briefly. “Of course. Just let the nurses know if you have further questions.”

As he walked away, Jeff put his arm around Kumi. They stood together at Mika’s bedside, watching her sleep. He heard his wife softly say, “Please, Lord. Do not let there be more wrong. Let it just be reflux, and let the doctors be able to fix it.”

“Amen,” said Jeff. “Please, Father. Do not add more to the burden on our little girl’s shoulders.”



JEFF AND KUMI ARRIVED AT Mika’s bedside Tuesday afternoon to find a tube in their daughter’s nose.

“Hi, folks!”

“Teresa!” said Kumi. “Hi there. What’s going on with Mika?”

“Are you feeding her through that tube?” said Jeff.

“No, that’s an esophageal pH probe,” said Teresa. “The MRI came back fine, so everything it could see is normal. Dr. Rickover ordered the probe because he wanted to confirm how bad her reflux is.”

“So does that tube go all the way to her stomach?” Kumi asked.

“No,” said Teresa. “It just goes to the top of the esophagus. It has a little sensor on the tip of it that measures acidity. If it finds any, then we know she’s having reflux, and the more acid it finds, the worse the problem.”

Jeff nodded. “How long will you test for that?”

“Usually about twenty-four hours,” said Teresa.

“So the doctor will have the results tomorrow?”

“You got it,” said Teresa. “And then I expect they’ll make a final decision about surgery.”

Jeff cleared his throat. The question he needed to ask troubled his mind and disturbed his sleep. He needed a solid answer before he would sign off on any procedure involving the operating room. “Teresa, is she strong enough for the surgery?”

Teresa took in a deep breath before answering. “Truthfully, I’d like to see her gain a little more weight beforehand. But, the reflux could be causing damage that could lead to other issues. So fixing it could far outweighs the risks.”

Jeff looked at his wife before looking back at Teresa. “That’s a lot of *coulds*.”

She nodded. “It is.” She tilted her head to the side, motioning upward with her chin and looking at the ceiling before refocusing on Jeff’s gaze.

He paused. “You’re saying we should pray.”

Teresa winked at him. “Isn’t that always the answer?”



THE PH PROBE CONFIRMED severe reflux, and surgery was scheduled for Friday morning. Yet when Kumi arrived at the hospital, instead of finding Mika being prepped for surgery, a nurse directed Kumi to an isolation room. When she approached the door, she saw Teresa through the glass, making notes on Mika’s chart.

Kumi pushed open the door. “Good morning, Teresa.”

“Hey, Mrs. Etheridge!”

Kumi approached the bed and saw Mika lying on her back, awake. Her good eye was open and looking at the light coming from the window, so Kumi bent over into her line of vision. “Good morning, sweet girl. Happy two-month birthday!”

“Has anyone talked to you yet?” said Teresa.

Kumi shook her head. “No. I was expecting surgery this morning for the reflux.”

Teresa put the chart into a slot on the end of the bed. “Surgery has been postponed.” She picked up Mika’s left foot. “See these spots here?”

Mika kicked a little, but Kumi could see the red rash on her daughter’s foot. Parts of the skin were inflamed with little blisters adding polka dots across the top. “What is that?”

“Herpes Zoster, commonly known as shingles.” Teresa gently put Mika’s foot back on the bed. Mika stretched her leg out and then kicked.

“Shingles? I thought only older people got that.”

“Well, it’s most common in seniors, but people of any age who have been exposed to varicella-zoster can get it.”

“The chickenpox?”

Teresa nodded.

Kumi felt a fresh wave of guilt. The chickenpox from her pregnancy was coming back to haunt them again. As if her child didn’t already have enough to deal with. “How long will this last?”

“Well, it’s a virus, so it must run its course. We should begin to see improvement in a week, though, and

it should be completely gone within a month.”

“Is she in any pain from it? I’ve heard from others that it is quite painful.”

“Shingles is one of those diseases that we don’t really understand. We know the chickenpox virus lives on forever in the nervous system of those who contract it, and we know shingles is a reactivation of that latent virus. We suspect that a weakened immune system has a lot to do with the reactivation, but that’s more of a logical conclusion right now rather than scientific fact.”

Teresa reached out, letting Mika grab her finger. “Most of the time, infants and children only get mild cases of Herpes Zoster. That means it may not spread much from where it currently is, and she probably won’t experience any pain. But rest assured, we are keeping an eye on her and watching for signs of it elsewhere. If she begins to indicate she’s uncomfortable, we’ll help her.”

Kumi rubbed her hand gently over Mika’s head. “So there’s nothing we can do but watch and wait.”

Teresa nodded. “Yes. And pray. God’s got His hand on this one, Mrs. Etheridge. I don’t know what He’s doing, adding in all these medical challenges, but I sense His hand all over this somehow.”

Kumi couldn’t help the tears coming to her eyes. It was so easy to forget in the midst of Mika’s health concerns that God was still in control. She looked at Teresa and gave her the best smile she could force. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I needed that reminder.”

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