



# HOLDING ON

A PARABLE OF FAITH AND STRENGTH

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JO EVANS LYNN

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## DEDICATION

To Gloria D. Evans, my sister and my best friend,  
I never would have made it without God and you in my life.





## PROLOGUE

*The First Monday in October 1936*

“What’s your name?” The teacher looked down her almost flat nose and twisted her sausage thick lips in disgust at the tiny girl. This child was surely not old enough to be starting first grade.

“Sister,” the little girl said. She did not know why the teacher had such a disapproving look on her face. Lifting her chin, she threw her shoulders back and pulled herself up to her full two and a half feet in height. Grandma Hester said, “Looking short was a state of mind.” Sister had to admit that at just over four feet tall Grandma Hester never “looked” short next to anybody.

“I mean your real name, Girl.”

“Sister Fullmore,” the little girl peered up at the teacher puzzling over how someone too dense to understand such a simple statement could be a teacher. Sister was all she’d ever been called. If it wasn’t her name, she didn’t know what was.

“Does anyone know this child?” the teacher asked the class. She didn’t try to keep her disgust from showing.

It was her fault that the brightest teacher in her graduating class from Tuskegee Institute had gotten stuck in a back-water school in Salley, South Carolina, but she would spend the rest of her career taking it out on the children in this hick town.

She followed her college beau to Salley-certain he would marry her once he had a job, but he took one look at Julia Mae James,

another teacher at the school, and forgot all those words of undying love he'd been spreading out like a blanket of lust for them to crawl under during the last two years.

"She has some brothers in the upper school," a boy volunteered.

"Go get one of them." The teacher stared down at the child, "Fullmore? Are you Alton Fullmore's child?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Sister said proudly.

"I should have guessed. He's the only one I know round here dumb enough to raise a child that doesn't even know her own name."

"My Daddy ain't dumb. Mama says he just thinks things through 'fore he says anything. She says it took him six days worth of courting to ask her to marry him."

Sister knew why people thought her Daddy was dumb. There were times when being referred to as the "Poor Fullmores" made her wonder at the intelligence of a man who would get drunk enough to sell his birthright. Her father's birthright had been one that included half of the only Colored funeral home in Salley, South Carolina and a farm that was so large at one time that his father had been able to give the land for Okey Spring Baptist Church and for the Colored School and still have the largest farm between there and Columbia. Sister having doubts about her father and allowing anyone to talk about him to her face was a different matter entirely. Sister was getting more than a little ticked off.

"Child, are you carrying on a conversation with me like you're grown? If I say he's dumb, he's dumb." She grabbed the girl's arm, pulled her right hand open flat and slapped it twice with a ruler. "He is dumb," she drew each word out as long as a single sentence.

"Ma'am just because you're a teacher..."

"Sister, shut up," her brother Oscar arrived just in time, "Ma'am, her name is Sister. Sister Fullmore, Ma'am."

"You are just as dumb as you are ugly Oscar Fullmore. Nobody names a child Sister. You two are trying to pull something over on

me. You got me wasting time trying to find out one child's name when there are children here who want to learn. Put your hands flat on that desk and lean over," she was so angry that her voice was trembling as she reached for the paddle that always stood sentinel next to her desk.

Oscar didn't cry, and Sister didn't either when it was her turn.

"Now, what's her name?"

"Sister," they said in unison.

"Well, I... I..." the teacher sputtered as she raised the paddle again.

"It's Mary. Her name is Mary Fullmore," Sister's oldest brother Aaron rushed into the classroom. Someone had gone to get him while the teacher was whipping Oscar and Sister.

"No, it ain't," Sister wasn't about to let him get away with giving her Baby Jesus' mother's name.

"Mary," the teacher repeated as she added the name to her roll, totally ignoring Sister. "What's her middle name?" She turned with a smile for the handsome young man. The first time she set eyes on him; she wanted to hate him because he was Julia Mae's child and because it was clear to anyone who knew Clark Mobley that Aaron was her old beau's son, but Aaron had so much personality, was so talented, and so eager to learn that he became her favorite student.

"It's, it's... Helen. Mary Helen," Aaron added although he wasn't sure he'd ever known her middle name, but since he knew that everyone had at least one middle name. He gave Sister one.

"Come here Sister," he pulled her to the side. "Keep quiet. Do as you're told. These people ain't like Mama and Daddy. They won't stand for you sassing back, talking like you're grown."

"I wasn't sassing. I was just..."

"It's sassing here. That's the first lesson you got to learn in school. Keep your thoughts to yourself. You can't tell stuff to grown folks like you do children."



He understood her frustration. He felt it too when he started school six years ago at the age of eight. Since he was always big for his age, his father put him to work on the farm until a Truant Officer showed up one day and took him right out of the field. No one ever heard of a Truant Officer coming to get a Colored child even though the South Carolina State Education Law said that all children had to be enrolled in school by age seven. Even their mother didn't know why the Truant Officer came. She was just glad that someone took the matter out of her hands, and Aaron was happy to get to go to school.

Julia Mae James Fullmore had been called a "modern" school teacher before she married their father. She spanked them only for the very worst infractions and talked them around to doing the right thing the rest of the time.

This worked with him, and Albert Lee, the two older brothers, but with Oscar, Sister and Clareth, it led them to believe that all adults were capable of discussing matters other than serious infractions with children. Clearly a fallacy he would have to straighten out before she ended up getting as many whippings as Oscar had his first year of school. Aaron didn't want her spirit broken like Oscar's had been. He could not imagine Sister with her eyes down, saying, "Yes, Ma'am" to everything a teacher said or anyone else for that matter. How could he make her understand?

"Sister, you want to make a good impression the first day of school and saying too much to the teachers isn't a good idea."

"Why?" Sister's voice pulled him back into the present. "Why?" she repeated. It seemed a reasonable question to Sister.

"Why?" Aaron lowered his voice even more, "Cause they grown that's why."

"Mama and Daddy are both grown, and they let me tell them whatever I want. Anyway, Grandma Hester says that I can say whatever I want as long as it's the truth as I see it."

“Not here, at school they got their own set of rules.”

“That don’t make no sense, but I’ll do it to keep peace,” Sister finished after seeing the serious big brother look on Aaron’s face.

Sister would soon find that it would take more than keeping her thoughts to herself to keep the peace.



## Chapter One

Oscar was about sick of Sister. She'd been a thorn in his side since the first day of school three years ago. In spite of the fact that she had too much mouth, there was something about Sister that the teacher liked. It could have been the fact that she was a whiz in math and could help with some of the younger kids. No matter what it was like all the other adults, the teacher let Sister act grown as he was.

Part of behaving like one of the older kids was coming out to play with them. Not only did he have to contend with having two older brothers who were so good looking that girls about fainted over them, now he also had folks picking on him because Sister could best him in any game. She could run faster, hit a baseball farther and pin him when they wrestled.

Now, she was taking being a pest too far. She'd started to follow Aaron and him everywhere they went. He wasn't going to put up with it.

"Sister you can't go with us," Oscar grouched. He tried to look down his nose at her, but it was hard to do because she was only a couple of inches shorter than he was. God had finally answered one of his prayers- not to have sister grow taller than him. Their younger sister Clareth who was three years his junior had out grown him by half a foot last year, which only left Sister and the one year old Luke, shorter than him.

“Why not?”

“Cause we’re going to be doing man things.”

“Y’all ain’t no men.”

“I don’t know about Oscar, but Aaron sure is a man,” Rose Hampshire put in as she slid her arm through Aaron’s.

She was beaming with pride. All the girls wanted to be with Aaron Fullmore- at least one time and this was her first and perhaps only time. He didn’t have a reputation for sticking with any woman, but every woman he’d been with would be willing to take him back on any terms. It wasn’t just looks either. He was hard working, smart, and he knew how to make a woman feel special.

There was even talk that Aaron wasn’t Alton Fullmore’s son, which was a mark in his favor. He had his mother’s high yellow complexion, and wherever he’d gotten that jet black curly hair from- the way it waved made it real easy to say “yes” to anything he asked.

“Shut up Rose. There ain’t going to be no man things going on tonight unless going to the movies is a man thing,” Sister spoke to Rose, but she turned to look directly at her brother. “Aaron, you promised I could go to the movies this week,” Sister gave Aaron her sweetest little girl look.

Oscar’s heart dropped. He knew when Sister turned those enormous brown eyes up at Aaron he’d give in and let her go. Thus, ruining any chance he had of getting over with Rose’s cousin tonight.

“Aaron, don’t let her come,” Oscar pleaded.

“A promise is a promise, and she did save the breast of the chicken for me last Sunday when Rev. Covington came over for dinner,” Aaron pulled one of Sister’s thick plaits.

Oscar couldn’t argue with that. Getting any part of the chicken other than the gizzard or the feet was a considerable accomplishment when Rev. Covington came to dinner.

The itinerant preacher who served both the Okey Spring Baptist Church and Samaritan A.M.E. Zion church counted the Sunday dinners that the local Colored families took turns preparing for him as the best part of what little he got paid, and he always ate and carried enough food away to last him well into the next week.

Oscar could tell that Rose was even madder than he was. They walked all the way in to Salley without Rose saying another word.

Not getting any men's things done tonight didn't mean a thing to Aaron. He wasn't all that hot for Rose, not like Oscar was for her cousin.

He almost changed his mind about letting Sister go with them when he remembered this, but a promise was a promise no matter who was inconvenienced. He didn't much care whether or not Rose ever spoke to him again- there were too many women out there to let any one woman get on his last good nerve. He'd find a way to make it up to Oscar.



The Fulmer's owned the only theater for Colored people in the county. It was built of raw lumber in 1922, and by 1940, it looked as though it was 100 years old. A high center section looked like an "A" squatting on the corner of Stack Road, the main street of the Colored section of town. Lower wings on each side of the building contained the concession stands on one side and exceedingly modest indoor facilities on the other side. It was more of a barn than a real movie theater like the White folks had but to the young Colored people of Salley, South Carolina it was a place to go courting on Saturday night with little or no interference from grown folks.

Oh, the grown folks knew the kinds of shenanigans that went on in the theater and in the woods between there and home on Saturday nights during the summer and early fall, but if it would keep the young men on the farms long enough for the next batch of children to get old enough to work, then what was the harm?

If a girl just happened to get pregnant, then that was even better because the boy either would marry the girl and end up spending the rest of his life scratching out a living on the farm or the boy would run off and the girl would end up working in somebody's house and sending money home to her family for the baby.

"Why's your hair plaited?" Aaron asked Sister.

"Mama said she didn't know how long she'd be in the hospital this time, and she didn't want me running around looking like a hoyden."

Sister knew her hair was one of her best features. It hung down her back in an odd blend of black and reddest brown, wavy like the Oceesi River on a summer night. It was a thick mixture of hair that gave testimony to the truth of the stories her Grandma Hester told about White masters mixing their blood with the royal West African blood of their slaves' ancestors.

Sometimes Aaron would tease Sister about her hair.

He'd say, "Sister, when I find a woman with hair like yours, I'll settle down with her awhile."

This evening though, Aaron wasn't in a teasing mood. All his thoughts were serious thoughts about his mother.

"Oh," was all he said.

Although Aaron tried to keep his worry hidden, Sister knew why his answer was so short. They were all worried about their mother. When she had their baby brother Luke last year, they kept her in the hospital for three whole days during harvest time. No Colored woman laid-up in the hospital for three whole days unless she was sick unto death. Sure, there was something called a laying-in period when a woman could not cook because the flow of blood after the birth of a child made her unclean, but no woman actually laid around. There was too much work other than cooking to do.

Grandma Hester was madder than all get out when their mother came up pregnant this last time. She was the local root woman. When she'd learned that the doctor told Julia Mae that she should

not have any more children, she gave her daughter a bitter powder and told her to put it in her husband's food.

Julia Mae was too soft-hearted to do it. She told her mother, "I can't take his manhood away from him. That's about all he's got left."

Julia Mae wouldn't even insist that Alton allow her mother to serve as a midwife for her this time around. Hester James let everyone know that Alton was a fool to spend good money on a hospital when she had delivered babies for over fifty years and hadn't lost a single mother.

Alton Fullmore wanted only the best for Julia Mae. He still couldn't believe that a soot-black man like him could win the hand of the only high yellow belle among the James girls. Everyone said Daisy was the real beauty among the five James girls, but Daisy was too bossy and too full of herself for Alton Fullmore. He couldn't give Julia Mae much, but he could give her a hospital and real birth certificates for each of their children.

He didn't care that three months after he married Julia Mae she confessed that the baby she was carrying wasn't his. Another man might have killed a woman who tricked him into marriage like that, but Alton knew that she might not have given him a second look if she had not been knocked up. The way he figured it, it was that pretty-boy school teacher's loss and his gain.

So, every time Julia Mae started labor, Alton got her to the nearest Colored hospital. It was easy with Aaron, Albert Lee, Oscar, Sister, and Claretha because he was a wandering farmer and all his other children were born in Florida or Georgia near good sized towns, but Julia Mae wanted to come home to Salley, South Carolina. He fought coming back for as long as he could fight against coming back. He knew that anywhere within 100 miles of Salley was Hester James' territory and in her territory everyone did what she told them to do.

Alton Fullmore rebelled. He grew up under a despot father who

still ruled the Fulmer's with an iron fist. No one had bossed him since he refused to go up to Columbia and learn to be a mortician and his father disowned him. Everyone thought he felt awful about having to earn his own way, but being free of the old man was better than getting five dollars a week pay. It was worth changing his name to Fullmore and bearing the jokes to be free of the old man.

Working hard and being poor didn't bother him the way it bothered Julia Mae and the children. Julia Mae was accustomed to a better life.

She was the belle of a family of strong women. Julia Mae was college educated, and her mother was the matriarch of a family that was the closest to African-American royalty former slaves would ever achieve. The old house where Julia Mae lived as a child had the stately columns that heralded roots that sunk as deep as those of the three hundred year old trees that surrounded the house.



Aaron stood there for awhile thinking about his parents. No one spoke because everyone knew that this was his way.

Aaron would stop in the middle of a conversation or a job-stand still for a time and then say something so profound that everyone would wonder why no one had ever seen things exactly that way before. Then sometimes he wouldn't say anything at all. At other times, he would just start back talking as though he had not been silently standing there for a few long moments.

When Aaron came back to himself, he said, "Don't look sad like that Sister. Mama is going to be all right," Aaron smiled his reassurance.

"Promise?" Sister knew Aaron never promised anything that he couldn't deliver on and if he promised their mother would be all right she would be all right.

Aaron didn't look at her when he said, "Tell you what, I'll go



over to Springfield tomorrow and find out when she's coming home."

It wasn't until later that night as she lay awake still worrying that Sister realized that Aaron hadn't promised her that their mother would be all right.



"Okay, let's go," Aaron turned and started to walk in the direction of the movie. He stopped and looked back when he realized that only Sister had fallen into step beside him. Oscar and Rose stood there looking as though they'd put more than they intended to in the offering plate at church.

"If y'all are going to look like that, y'all can go back home, and me and Sister will go to the movie."

"Oh, Aaron, I'm not mad, just disappointed. This should not count as my stepping out with you. Promise me next Saturday night," Rose pleaded.

"I can't do that, all my Saturday's straight through Easter of next year are taken. You want to come or not?"

"I'll go," There was still the woods after the movie. Maybe she could get Aaron to take Sister back home first.

Rose was even more disappointed when Aaron took her home first and rushed off saying he had to get to bed early.



Aaron was up before the sun was up. He thought he rolled out of bed quietly enough not to wake the other three occupants of the bed- his three younger brothers. He almost jumped out of his skin when he found a fully dressed Oscar standing at the foot of their bed.

"What are you doing up this early?"

"Going with you."

"No, you're not. You know Daddy can't spare both of us."

"He can't spare either of us. You know Albert Lee ain't much good for work, but if we leave now we can maybe catch a ride back

with someone and be back by noon. I got to see if Mama's all right."

Since Oscar pressed his case by threatening to wake their father and thus prevent either of them from going, Aaron had to take him along.

Aaron knew that Oscar would want to use up the time during the seven mile walk into Springfield talking about the movie last night. Oscar could just about retell any movie that he saw word for word. Usually, Aaron found this talent and Oscar's ability to mimic the voices of both men and women entertaining, but today Aaron's mind was set on one thing- getting to Springfield and that hospital as fast as he could get there. Heck, Aaron couldn't even remember what the movie last night was about. A wall of worry had clogged his ears and pressed down on his chest since that moment when he couldn't get the words out to promise Sister that their mother would be all right.

Aaron didn't want to talk. He didn't want to walk. He wanted to run all the way there.

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