

NO ONE EVER ASKED

*“Katie Gansbert is a skilled writer
who wrestles earnestly with the
clashing forces of faith and fear.”*

—LISA WINGATE

A NOVEL

SNEAK
PEEK



SAMPLE
ONLY

KATIE GANSBERT

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Praise for
No One Ever Asked

“Humble. Powerful. Awakening. *No One Ever Asked* unapologetically invites its reader into a journey of historical significance and soul discovery. A trek which, once taken, you won’t come back from.”

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“Emotionally resonant and brimming with hope, *No One Ever Asked* is an intimate portrayal of a community in chaos. As Katie Ganshert employs alternating perspectives and vastly different viewpoints, she dives deep into fraught themes of race, adoption, social justice, infidelity, friendship, and more. This gripping story is written with sensitivity and grace, and it will stay with readers long after the final page is turned. A heart-changing, transformative work!”

—NICOLE BAART, author of *Little Broken Things*

“*No One Ever Asked* is that rare breed of story that lingers in your heart and mind long after the final page is turned. Gut wrenching and achingly authentic, this story lays bare the profound intricacies of racial tension. Katie Ganshert is a gifted wordsmith with an uncanny ability to elicit the emotions her characters are experiencing in the reader. This evocative and incisive human drama will not leave you unmoved—a cautionary tale infused with hope. With a handful of stellar novels already to her credit, Ganshert has raised the bar once again. *No One Ever Asked* has my highest recommendation.”

—REL MOLLET, relzreviewz.com

Praise for
Life After

“Katie Ganshert is a skilled writer who wrestles earnestly with the clashing forces of faith and fear. *Life After* will hook you on the first page.”

—LISA WINGATE, *New York Times* best-selling author
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“Ganshert uses masterful pacing, engaging characters, and believable dialogue to bring readers along . . . tackling big issues powerfully.”

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“Another emotionally gripping page-turner from Katie Ganshert, a novelist who consistently writes with honesty and insight. *Life After* plumbs the depths of all that gives our existence meaning. Well done.”

—SUSAN MEISSNER, award-winning author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life*

“Katie Ganshert has made her mark by writing compelling stories about resiliency and faith. In her latest, she draws us through the aftermath of trauma, examining the soul’s miraculous ability to not just survive but to thrive—even in the wake of tremendous suffering. The result is an emotional journey that prompts us to question the greater purpose behind every moment we are given.”

—JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today*
best-selling author of *The Feathered Bone*

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Although the plot of this book is inspired by recent events, the characters and their experiences are fictional and any resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

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*For my daughter.
You have made my world so much bigger.*

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The world is wrong. You can't put the past
behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned
your flesh into its own cupboard.

CLAUDIA RANKINE

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Brown v. Board of Education

On May 17, 1954, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, which legalized state-sponsored segregation, was overturned. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court stated that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, education for black students was more segregated than in 1968.

Prologue



An earthquake started it. The one in Haiti back in 2010. All those images in the media afterward had done their job. Entire buildings not just toppled but flattened like sandcastles at high tide. Lifeless bodies left in the rubble. Small, brown children, streaked with blood, covered in ash. A cross left standing in front of a ravaged church building, and upon it a white Jesus, arms splayed wide in an offer of salvation.

Camille Gray had stared at that particular image the longest. She was not a woman of passivity. When she was moved, she was moved to action. And so—though she had never been to Haiti herself—she rolled up her sleeves, gathered a team of volunteers, and five months later gave the town of Crystal Ridge its very own, citywide 5K. The media around the event produced pictures in sharp contrast to the ones that inspired the run.

Bright-eyed children sporting Hope for Haiti T-shirts and wide, happy smiles. Adults of varying shapes and sizes, some who had trained and others who more obviously hadn't, pinning race bibs to their fronts. A giant banner at the finish line on Morton Avenue, right in front of the Pickle Pie Deli. Water tents and food carts and a live band and an ambulance on standby, just in case.

That year's 5K raised twenty thousand dollars and left Camille with the euphoric feeling that came after a job well done.

It was obvious to everyone. The race must continue.

The following year, with the Haiti earthquake long since gone from the news, the people of Crystal Ridge ran for Crystal Ridge. Camille—a long-standing PTA mom—gathered together other PTA moms and decided the money would be split among the seven schools that made up Missouri's highest-ranking district. Thus creating the Crystal Ridge Memorial Day 5K, an event the town looked forward to with increasing anticipation every year.

Everyone, that is, but Juanita Fine.

Friends and family called her Nita and often joked at the irony of her surname, as Nita was never actually fine with anything. Least of all, hordes of

people standing on her front lawn, unfolding lawn chairs on the curb and cheering on people who were running to raise money for a school district that seemed to have plenty.

Juanita lived in the only house that remained in the city's business district. It had been her father's house before her and his father's house before him, and she saw no reason to surrender it to developers. Sometimes she suspected the town's annual race was nothing more than subterfuge—a plot to chase her away—because her two-story brick home sat on Morton and Main, with a grocery store on the left and a law office on the right. And every year, that law office was one of the race's biggest sponsors. Which meant every year there was loud music playing outside her home and a slew of volunteers handing out water and cheering the runners along as they stampeded across her grass. And every year she made a phone call to the local police department to file a complaint.

Last time, she spent twenty-seven minutes telling a female police operator that Chewbacca had ruined her rosebushes.

Chewbacca.

That was another thing. The runners dressed in costumes.

This year the Crystal Ridge Police Department had finally provided Nita with a stack of bright orange cones, to which she fastened signs that read in bold lettering: Stay Off the Lawn!

She had planned to sit on her front porch swing and wave her cane at anyone who dared defy those signs, except this year there was a twist. Not only were there adults in costume, but great plumes of pink powder polluted the air, forcing her and her asthmatic lungs inside to watch from the window, rapping the pane whenever any of the onlookers toed her property line.

Most of them ignored her.

So she watched, increasingly irate, as volunteers along two oblong tables snagged plastic bottle after plastic bottle, squeezing their contents into the air, creating bright cotton-candy puffs that rained down like fairy dust. Just beyond them were the water pistols. Young folk wearing headbands brandished them like proud soldiers as they shot streams of pink water at the runners. And just beyond them, the Crystal Ridge marching band—banging their drums as they marched in formation. Thankfully, away from her.

At 4:22 p.m., a cluster of racers approached, each one wearing a rainbow-

colored tutu. Even the boys. In fact, two of them—full grown, large-bodied boys—wore leotards. They were out of their minds. All of them.

Nita scowled as a spray of pink hit her driveway.

Enough was enough.

She pushed open her front door, let in the cacophony of sound, placed her hands on her hips, and glared with the full force of her disapproval, as if doing so could make all of them stop. But nobody did. Nobody noticed her at all. The tutu-wearing runners kept running. The volunteers continued tossing clouds of pink into the sky. The marching band kept marching farther away.

But then the minute hand changed from 4:22 to 4:23, and something happened nobody could possibly ignore. Something happened that had never happened in the town of Crystal Ridge before, at least not that Juanita Fine could remember. Something that had been brewing ever since that horrible town meeting last July.

A startling crack burst through the noise like a car backfiring. For a split second, in the infinitesimal span between the sound and the processing of it, Nita thought one had.

Until it happened again.

The crowd scattered. Onlookers trampled her cones. Tables upended. Bottles of pink cornstarch flattened underfoot like sandcastles at high tide. And through all the chaos, a blood-curdling, terrifying scream rose above the others.

One that went on and on and on.

Even after everyone was gone and all that remained was yellow police tape and a bright crimson stain on her green grass, Juanita Fine could still hear it.

PART I



Newton's First Law: Objects in motion stay in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force.

One



Before

Wipers squeaked against the windshield, smearing raindrops across the glass. The rhythmic sound filled the car as Anaya Jones idled in the driveway. Her hands trembled like her great-grandfather's. Even though he died when she was in first grade, she would always remember the exaggerated way they shook at the dinner table whenever he used silverware.

She turned the key, and the wipers stopped at a thirty-degree angle. All that could be heard was the pitter-patter of rain as she sat behind the steering wheel. A satchel lay open on the passenger seat—the new one her mother gave her before her first day of student teaching. The flap was open, revealing a corner of the science curriculum manual stuffed inside and a sparkly picture a student had given her from art class. Silver glitter would probably speckle the bottom of her satchel in the weeks to come. It wouldn't go away. And neither would this.

The shaking in her hands moved into her arms.

Anaya picked up the satchel, removed the half-empty cup of cold gas-station coffee from the cup holder, and stepped out into the cool rain. The screen door squealed on its hinges as she pulled it open. It took a good three tries before she could manage the lock.

Inside, the house was quiet.

It still smelled like last night's dinner.

Auntie Trill slept on the sagging couch, four-year-old Abeo wedged between her and the backrest, tracking Anaya's movements with wide-awake eyes. Her uncoordinated attempts with the house key must have woken him.

She placed her finger to her lips and tiptoed past him into her room, where she set the coffee and the satchel on her desk and pulled a men's sweatshirt over her head. She sat on the edge of the bed—her body like wet cement as she

pressed the sleeve to her nose and inhaled an achingly familiar scent—one that would forever be associated with regret.

What happened, Anaya?

Her heart thudded in response to the question.

It beat into the darkness like a jungle drum.

The front door opened.

“Our kids deserve to go to a school that’s not failing.” Mama’s voice carried into her bedroom. “And if they think they can turn us away without a fight, then they don’t know what a mother gonna do for her child.”

Anaya peeked through the crack of her bedroom door.

Mama had come home talking on the phone, her voice loud in the early morning silence. “We ain’t responsible for no tuition.”

With a moan, Auntie Trill raised up a listless arm and batted the air.

Mama pulled a face. One that clearly said, *This ain’t your home*. It wasn’t either. Auntie Trill’s apartment was being fumigated, so she and her youngest were staying for a couple of days. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. They gotta follow the law.”

Abeo had popped his head up now. Anaya could see it from her spot in the doorway.

Mama rubbed the top of his head, gave some mm-hmms and some uh-hus to whoever she was talking to, then said goodbye.

Auntie Trill sat up next to her son, her face lined with sleep, her head wrapped in a silk scarf. “You’re fighting awful hard to send your boy to a school filled with a bunch of rich white kids.”

“I don’t care if they’re pink with purple polka dots and richer than Oprah Winfrey. I’m not gonna stand by and watch my son fall through the cracks.” Mama handed a white paper bag to Abeo. By the look on his face, you’d think it was Granny’s homemade cinnamon rolls instead of stale pastries from a hospital cafeteria. “Darius needs to be challenged, and he needs to get away from them boys.”

“And away from his daddy’s school?”

“It’s not his school anymore, Trill.”

Grief came like a wave—sudden, engulfing.

“Anaya!”

She stepped back from the door, into the darkness of her room, just as

Mama came inside. Her attention moved to the bed, which wasn't ruffled with sleep, but neatly made. "Are you sick?"

"Headache."

Mama's expression softened with knowing. Only she didn't really know. "I didn't see you yesterday."

Yesterday.

What an innocuous word. And yet, it hovered between them, bloated with all the emotion that came with it.

Yesterday.

An anniversary not meant to be celebrated.

Mama stepped forward and wrapped Anaya in a hug. She smelled like hospital food and exhaustion. "You okay?"

No, she wanted to cry.

She wasn't okay.

Something was seriously wrong.

What happened, Anaya?

The doorbell rang.

Mama put her hand on Anaya's cheek, her brow furrowing. "Baby?"

"Aye, Anaya!" Auntie Trill called down the hallway. "Marcus is at the door."

Her stomach turned to stone.

"Are you two fighting again, because he looks like . . ." Auntie Trill poked her head into Anaya's bedroom. "Well, he looks a whole lot like you do."

"Thanks."

"I have to get to the salon. Can you watch Abeo for me?"

"Sure."

"I'm gonna change for work," Mama said, giving Anaya's arm a squeeze.

Anaya nodded, hating that Mama needed to go to another job. Hating the dull pain in her ankle that served as a reminder of all that had been lost. It hurt worse when it rained, and right then, as she shuffled robotically to the front door, the rain was falling harder, gathering in puddles around Anaya's car.

Marcus stood on the front porch rolling a hat between his hands. When he looked up, his eyes looked as tortured as her soul. "I am so sorry."



The phone buzzed in Jen Covington's sweat-slicked palm, turning her pulse manic.

We're getting off the plane.

Having read the text message over Jen's shoulder, Jen's best friend clutched her arm, and the two shared a breathless look—one that encompassed every prayer, every hope, every hard, impossible emotion felt in these last three years.

"We," Leah whispered.

And just like that, a flood of tears welled in Jen's eyes.

It was happening.

After all the loss and all the waiting and all the political red tape, after the horrible unknown and the fight of her life, Jen was finally going to be a mother.

Not just in theory. Not just on paper.

But in real, actual life.

A ball of emotion swelled in her throat—hot and thick. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, clamping down on her jaw, setting a tremble in her muscles. Ever since Nick told her the news over FaceTime two days ago, she had kept a piece of her heart locked away. Over the past two days—while Leah made phone calls and organized a meal train and brought over spring clothes that would fit a seven-year-old girl because all the clothes they bought in the beginning had been for a child much smaller—Jen braced herself for the other shoe to drop, because the other shoe always did. But now they were here. Nick's text was the proof.

We're getting off the plane.

In a cluster of celebration stood Leah's husband and their two young children, friends from church, Jen's in-laws, and her mother—her brimming-with-excitement, teary-eyed mother. Nobody said anything about the two who were missing. Jen refused to think of them and focused instead on the people who were here, holding balloons, brandishing handmade signs.

Welcome Home, Jubilee!

With Leah's round, hard belly between them, she continued clutching Jen's arm. She held on tight while Jen shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her breath shallow in her chest, her underarms clammy with sweat, her mind spinning with unformed thoughts. Nick and Jubilee had already gone

through customs in Dulles. All they had to do now was walk through the jet bridge and the terminal.

Her eyes searched the crowd.

Leah stood on tiptoe, looking around at the travelers walking toward them. An elderly woman pulling a floral carry-on. An Asian couple and a little girl skipping between them with a Hello Kitty backpack jouncing around on her shoulders. A man in a wheelchair wearing a cannula and a Wake Forest baseball cap, being pushed by a gentleman with a build like a linebacker.

Suddenly, Leah's grip tightened.

Because suddenly, there he was.

Her husband.

And there she was.

Her daughter.

Hand in hand.

Nick caught Jen's eye through the distance.

The cluster of family and friends around her shifted. They held up their signs and began to cheer.

The little girl lifted her head.

Nick pointed in their direction.

Leah let go of Jen's arm and covered her mouth. And Jen, unable to hold her own weight, dropped to her knees.

Nick whispered something to the girl Jen had loved so desperately from afar these past three years. Jubilee hesitated for the smallest of seconds, and then she raced down the airport terminal. With one hand clutching the waist of her jeans, she ran straight into Jen's waiting arms. Their bodies collided, knocking Jen back. But she didn't fall. She absorbed the impact as Jubilee wrapped her skinny arms around Jen's neck and her skinny legs around Jen's waist. With a sob tearing loose from the deepest part of her soul, Jen stood and pressed the small girl against her.

The nightmare was over.

Her prayers had been answered.

Her daughter was home.

And Jen would never, ever let her go.

These were the words she whispered—over and over again. Jen poured them, with all the love in her heart, straight into her little girl's ear.



Camille Gray placed her hands at her temples and lifted, watching in the mirror as the furrow between her eyebrows stretched and smoothed away. Now if only she could make her face stay like that.

“What are you doing?” Paige asked. She sat on the bathroom rug wearing her favorite cat pajamas, her freshly washed hair cascading in blond ringlets down her back. She’d paused from combing through her doll’s matching mane, an arrangement of American Girl outfits and accessories on the floor all around her.

“I’m traveling back in time, to a land before wrinkles.” Camille leaned closer to the mirror. She didn’t think she’d spent her life furrowing her brow, and yet, at forty-three, the line had etched itself into her skin. She released her face. The furrow sprang back into place. “Your mother’s getting old.”

“Not old, Mommy. Wise,” Paige chirped.

Camille chuckled. Like her, Paige had a long memory. At kindergarten roundup—over two years ago now—when Paige kept pointing out the fact that Camille was the oldest mommy there, Camille had jokingly insisted that she wasn’t the oldest; she was the wisest.

Her daughter uncrossed her legs and came to the vanity, then placed her hands on the countertop and lifted herself up so that her bare feet dangled above the tiled floor. “Your dress is pretty.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

“Your earrings are simply beautiful.”

Camille smiled down at her, uncapping her lipstick. Paige was clearly angling for something.

“Would you like to wear my tiara?”

“That might be overdoing it a little, don’t you think?” Camille leaned close to the mirror again so she wouldn’t smudge.

A knock sounded on the door behind them.

She spotted her husband in the mirror’s reflection and did a double take. She’d been doing that a lot lately. Two-and-a-half months ago, they celebrated Neil’s forty-seventh birthday. When he’d caught sight of the picture Camille snapped of him blowing out the candles in his cookie cake, he asked with legitimate horror, “Am I really that bald?”

He wasn't.

It was a bad angle.

But the next day he joined a CrossFit gym and turned into one of those people they used to make fun of. He even bought a shirt with one of those CrossFit jokes only people in CrossFit could understand. Neil dove in as if exercise and the Paleo Diet might bring his thick hair back. It didn't. It did, however, bring his college body back—the one he had when he and Camille first met and he was on a rowing scholarship at Brown. The transformation happened fast, as if the extra pounds he'd been carrying around his middle for the past ten years had been nothing more than a new style he'd decided to try on for a while—an unfortunate accessory he thought looked good but never suited him to begin with.

"You ready yet?" he asked, his expression set in mild irritation.

"I just have to slip on my shoes." She rubbed her lips together, then dropped the lipstick into her bag and zipped it shut, the skin around her mouth tightening. It was hard not to feel irritated with his irritation. Yes, she'd promised not to get caught up at this afternoon's meeting, but it wasn't her fault it went longer than planned. Kathleen was still distressed over the locker-room incident, and Rebecca Yates had chosen the very end of the meeting to make her surprise announcement. It would have been rude for Camille to leave without joining in the celebration.

And yes, maybe she was still a tad annoyed with Neil's after-CrossFit comment early this morning—something he said in passing on his way to the shower, as if he were commenting on something as innocent as the weather.

I'm really sick of the rain.

Only Neil didn't say he was sick of the rain. Supposedly, he was sick of his job—a career they'd built their entire lifestyle around. Could he really blame her for the hint of snark that had come with her reply?

"I'm really sick of Taylor's attitude. Should we quit them both?"

Camille slipped her feet into a pair of nude high heels and hurried past the piano room, out to the kitchen, where Austin arranged dominoes on the island countertop, standing them at attention in an intricate design.

"Ooh! Can I knock it over?" Paige asked, climbing onto one of the stools, bumping the island as she did so.

"Paige!" Austin barked.

“Move back a little, honey,” Camille said.

“But I’m not touching anything.”

“You just ran into the counter, and the dominoes are on the counter. It’s called a chain reaction, Paige, and it doesn’t have to start with one of these.” Austin picked up another domino and set it in place with laser focus.

“Camille.” Neil pointed to his watch. “Our reservation was at seven.”

She grabbed her purse and looked into the living room, where their eldest sat wedged in the corner of the couch, one long, lean leg crossed and wrapped around the other as she texted into her phone.

“Taylor,” Camille said.

Taylor looked up—impossibly young, perpetually annoyed.

“Make sure your sister is in bed no later than eight. I don’t want her getting sick again.”

Paige scrambled off the stool, bumping the island all over again.

Austin yelped and held up his hands as if doing so would stop the dominoes from wobbling.

“But Mom, I really, really want to watch *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Honey, it’s too late for you to start a movie. And the flying monkeys scare you.”

“No, they don’t. Not anymore! I watched it over at Faith’s house, and I didn’t even get a little bit scared.” She clasped her hands beneath her chin. “Pleeeeeease.”

Camille shook her head, her attention back on Taylor, who was supposed to be in charge. “She already took her bubblegum medicine. Don’t let her talk you into taking any more. Austin needs to floss his teeth before he goes to sleep. All that food gets stuck in his braces, and if he doesn’t floss, he’s going to get cavities.”

Taylor stared at her with heavily lidded eyes.

“Don’t forget to set the alarm as soon as we leave, and absolutely no YouTube.”

“Mom,” Taylor said. “I’m *sixteen*.” She stressed the final syllable, as though the age implied all manner of adulthood and maturity, when in fact, it implied everything opposite.

Neil wrapped his arm around Camille’s waist and nudged her toward the

door, bringing the familiar scent of expensive cologne with him. “They will be fine.”

“Can I watch *some* of the movie?” Paige asked, trailing them.

“Tomorrow, sweetheart. I’ll watch the whole movie with you.”

“Promise?”

“Pinkie swear.” Camille held out her little finger.

Paige entwined hers with her mother’s, temporarily mollified.

Camille kissed her daughter’s forehead, inhaling the sweetness of her strawberry shampoo, and whispered, “Be good for your sister. And make sure she sets the alarm.”

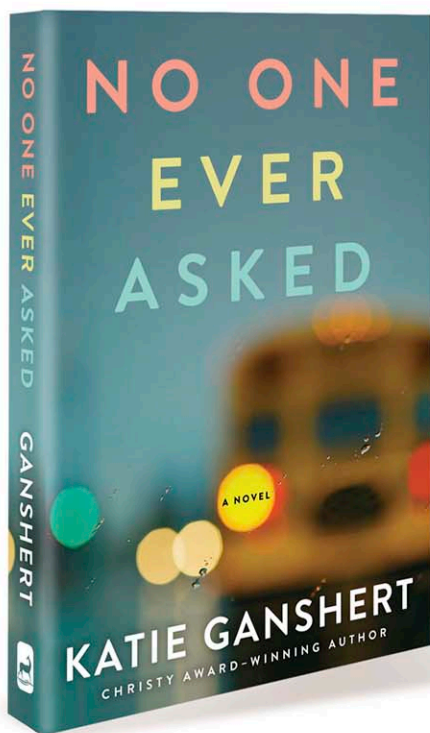
“Camille,” Neil said.

“I’m coming.”

As she stepped into the garage, the clattering sound of falling dominoes followed her. For some reason, it stayed. On the silent drive to the restaurant. As the waiter led them to their table. As they looked at the familiar menu and lifted their glasses of Beringer, toasting twenty-one years of marital bliss.

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