



TO DO: Think about aliens in big fancy
houses (and posers)

NOT ONLY DOES rain mean no practice, but rain on Wednesday means Thursday's practice—the last practice before the meet on Saturday—was gonna suck. Too bad to even think about. And I had no time to think about it anyway, because no practice also meant I didn't have an excuse not to go straight to Becca's after school.

I met Maddy in the north wing, walked her to the car as usual. Well, it was more like a run to the car, because the rain was coming down hard. Maddy climbed in and I jumped in the passenger seat.

"Practice is canceled," I blurted at Momly, wiping water from my arms.

"I figured," she replied, smirking. I kicked something on the floor. A plastic bag. Fresh clothes and stuff that she'd packed for me anyway. Just in case.

"So, if it's okay with you, I think I'm just gonna go over the girl, Becca's, house to work on the group project now. That way I don't have to stay long." Momly didn't say nothing to that, just nodded. "Can you please, please, please come get me in two hours."

"Two hours, got it," she confirmed. "But do you know where she lives?" I just pointed from the window. The big house directly across the street. Momly looked, let her mouth hang open for a second before catching herself. "Wow. Um . . . well, I guess I'll just drive you on over there."

And just then Becca, Taylor, and TeeTee appeared in the doorway of the school, but because of the rain, they didn't come out. And if they were planning to wait the storm out, they would never get to Becca's house, which meant there was no reason for me to go. Plus, we'd never get any work done.

"There go the other girls in my group right there," I said, the words like glue on my tongue, only because I knew what Momly would say next. But, like I said, it

was raining. Hard. And we all had to get to the same place.

"Oh, well then, I'll just take all of you!"

Momly beeped the horn and waved Becca, Taylor, and TeeTee over. They didn't come. Not at first. Momly's sweet face can definitely come across as stranger-danger if you don't know her. But then she cracked the window enough to be heard and shouted, "I'm Patina's auntie!" and the girls came running to the car.

Maddy got up front with me, something that Momly would never, ever allow any other time, but it was only, and I do mean only, because we were going right across the street that Momly let it slide. Didn't matter to Maddy. She was in the front seat, and she was happy. Smashed in the back was basically my worst nightmare. I'm kidding. But seriously, it was wild to know that Becca, Taylor, and TeeTee were crammed into Momly's car, which is basically like my car!

"Seat belts, everyone," Momly sang. I yanked the seat belt around Maddy and me, strapping her tight to my chest. I couldn't even turn around to look at Becca and them. Not because the seat belt was too tight, but because it was all just too weird. I wasn't embarrassed or nothing. I take that back. I was a little embarrassed, only because Momly was playing her talk radio, and

Maddy decided to try out some small talk by asking if any of them gave their dogs massages or kissed them on their mouths.

"Maddy," I snapped as she turned halfway around to get a good look at the girls.

"What? I'm just askin'."

"I don't have a dog," Becca said, cheery.

"Neither do we," TeeTee said for her and Taylor.

"Well, y'all got mothers?" Maddy followed up.

"Oh, that's enough, Madison," Momly tsked, putting an arm across both me and Maddy as she came to a red light.

"I'm just asking," Maddy repeated.

"Of course we all have moms. Why?" Taylor asked, which stung me a little. Because we all don't have everything. Some people have mothers, some don't. Some have dads, some don't. Some got two moms. Shoot, some even have to be moms before they actually are moms. The light changed and Momly rolled across the street so slowly that cars were honking their horns and zooming around us.

"Oh, okay. I just thought maybe you didn't because you got all that makeup on, and my mother says that if—"

"Okay, I think we're almost there, right, Becca?" I

cut Maddy off before she got me cut off. Even more cut off.

Becca laughed. T-N-T, not so much.

"Yep, this is me right here on the left. The one with the open gate." Becca pointed to the most giant-est house I ever seen up close. Momly pulled in, pulled up around this big fountain, to the front door.

As everybody got out, I leaned back in and reminded Momly, "Two hours. Please. Just two hours."

"Two hours," she repeated slowly, putting two fingers up. And Maddy, who had now climbed back in the backseat, also put two fingers up, but held them up to the window at Becca and the girls—a peace sign.

INSIDE BECCA'S HOUSE:

- (1) A whole lot of space.
- (2) A big piano Becca called "that old piece of crap."
- (3) A chandelier that looked like the ceiling was raining diamonds.
- (4) Paintings. Pictures of paintings.
Paintings of pictures. And pictures. Of Becca. Looking goofy.
- (5) A movie theater that Becca said no one ever used.

- (6) Big furniture made from the same kind of leather as my uncle's favorite jacket.
- (7) No dog.
- (8) A scraggly cat named Carl, that didn't wear clothes or look like it had ever had a massage a day in its life.
- (9) Me and the two other girls, who were taking selfies like they ain't never been nowhere.
- (10) The familiar smell of sugar.

"This is Granny," Becca said as we popped into the kitchen for a moment. An old lady dressed like an old lady was baking cookies.

"Hi, girls," she said, scooping batter from a bowl. "Sweets will be ready in a short while." The old lady's voice was like Momly's if it had a whole bunch of cuts in it.

"We're going to be upstairs doing work, Granny."

"Okay, well then, I won't bother you. They'll be down here. Chocolate chip, oatmeal, snickerdoodle, and peanut butter. You girls help yourselves."

"She made all that?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's her hobby. We don't even eat them. She just likes to make them and then give them away to

our neighbors. I like cupcakes better. What's your dad's favorite recipe?"

I don't know if it was the sugar smell, or the buildup from earlier, or what, but I just . . . said it.

"He passed away."

Becca looked me in the eye. Straight in the eye. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It was a long time ago." And now, relieved I got it over with, I changed the subject without actually changing the subject. Another one of those small-talk tips I picked up from Momly. "Where your folks?" I really asked because the house was so quiet. No TV. No radio. No noise besides pans being slid into the oven, and the weird giggles of T-N-T holding their cell phones in the air, posing.

"Where they always are. At work," Becca shot back. "Come on." And with Taylor and TeeTee trying for the millionth time to get the whole chandelier in the shot, I followed behind Becca as we walked up one of those round-and-round stairs to her room.

Here's the thing about hair-flipper bedrooms, they basically only come one way. I mean, I had never actually been in one in real life, but I had seen them enough times on TV to know that they're all bedazzled in pink and purple. They look like candy shops. Like

doll houses. Like living inside of a strawberry cupcake.

But as we entered Becca's room . . . uh-h-h-h . . . blackness. Not like Black History Month blackness. And not blackness like I passed out from the overload of girlyness in Becca's room. I didn't. Though I did feel like I was gonna black out from shock, because if Becca's house was a castle, Becca's room in this house was the dungeon. The upstairs dungeon. Everything . . . eh-ver-ree-thing in her room was black. The walls, the closet doors, the lamps and lights, the desk, the ceiling, everything. It was like Becca was really a YMBC or something. Like she was really a button-bagger!

As I tried to hide my shock, Taylor and TeeTee finally came busting in the room all squeals and smiles, which quickly turned into gasps and frowns. Their faces were stuck, half-melted. Terrified. Meanwhile, Becca pulled a chair from behind her door, another from the desk against the wall, and plopped down on her bed like none of this was a big deal.

"Okay. Let's get to work on Miss Frida." She clapped her hands together, excited.

Silence. From me and T-N-T, whose struggle-faces looked like they were trying to swallow their own tongues. Me, well, all I kept telling myself was, two hours. Just two hours, Patty.

"Yeah, let's get to . . . work," I finally said, and before I could grab one of the chairs, TeeTee and Taylor had already snatched them, positioned them right next to each other, and right next to the door. So I sat on the bed. Take it easy. No big deal. All-black room . . . no problem. No problem at all. Don't really mean nothing. Nope. Not at all. Not. At. All.

Funny thing is, the group work went exactly the same as it did in school. Me, basically trying to manage it all while T-N-T, who were usually distracted by paint on their nails, were now distracted by paint on the walls. So while me and Becca were digging around on the Internet for more details about our Mexican artist friend, Taylor and TeeTee were whispering to each other, until finally Becca said, "Are y'all gonna help?"

"Oh, yeah," Taylor said, shocked that she got called out.

"We just had a question about it all," TeeTee added. I don't know what Becca thought was coming next, but I thought it was going to be about Frida. Turns out, the "it all" they had a question about had nothing to do with the project. "What's the deal with . . . um . . . all this?" TeeTee waved her hands around like she was swatting flies.

"What do you mean?" Becca asked, in that honest way she was always asking something.

"I mean, this." TeeTee repeated the wave.

"Look, I'm not trying to be mean, but it's just . . . a little weird," Taylor jumped back in. "It's like at school, you act one way, and it's not all . . . um . . . goth-y like this, but really you . . ."

"She's what?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. I don't know where it came from, but something about the way they were talking rubbed me wrong. The same way I felt when people tried to mess with Ghost. Or Sunny. Or even Lu. But Becca didn't need me.

"Goth-y?" She was for-real confused. "Oh. You wanna know about the black." She smiled, totally unfazed. Becca reached behind her back and snatched the curtains closed. Then she got up and slapped the light switch on the wall. And then blackness went to darkness . . . and the whole universe appeared.

Stars and planets and whatever other things be up there in space popped out of the black, glowing green, all around us.

"What . . . is all this?" I asked, looking up at the ceiling.

"This is as much of the galaxy as you can fit in a bedroom. And that"—she leaned over to see what

was directly above my head—"well, that looks like the Gemini Twins." She tried to get me to see what she was talking about, but it all just looked like a bunch of stars to me. "Constellations. Like connect the dots, except with stars, you know?" I didn't know. But I still thought it was kinda cool.

"I ain't never seen all these stars up there. I mean, I seen a few, but not like this."

"They're all up there. Each one connected to another in some weird way. It's amazing."

"Wild," I corrected her.

"Not that wild," she corrected my correction. "At least not to me. My folks are rocket scientists. This is pretty much as normal as it gets in this house."

"Rocket scientists?" Taylor finally found her words again.

"Well, they're really called astronautical engineers, basically the same thing."

"That's a real job?" TeeTee came right behind her. I can't front, I was thinking the exact same thing.

"I hope so. If not, I don't know where my parents are all the time." Becca laughed, but only a little. There was something about her face in that moment that was weird, like something invisible was pinching her underarm. I knew that face. Saw it in Ghost. And some

people say they saw it in me. Shoot, it was probably the face I made at lunch. The might-be-sick face.

So I pointed at a cluster to my left. Becca hopped up. "Oh, that looks like Pegasus." And that did it. No more Frida. Becca was off, spazzing around her room, pointing out different star clusters and planets, explaining why we can't see all of them where we live, straight up nerding out, and I was into it. But I guess T-N-T . . . not so much. They were basically just sitting there texting, and I figured they were texting each other talking trash about it all, but when Taylor blurted, "My mother's here," I realized who they were really texting.

"Already?" Becca asked, still not tripping about the way the girls had treated her. It was like nothing really bothered her, which I admired. "But you didn't even have any cookies."

"No, um, no . . . that's okay," TeeTee said, as if the cookies were going to be black too. Honestly, I was so caught up in her room that I'd forgotten all about the cookies.

"Yeah, it's cool. We just . . . have to go. Sorry," Taylor said, not seeming sorry at all.

"Well, let me walk you down," Becca insisted.

I checked the time and knew that the two-hour mark was coming, and one thing about Momly was

she was never late. She was the most on-time person in the world. So it made sense for me to head downstairs too. And halfway down the fancy round-and-round steps with the crystal chandelier hanging over us like ice frozen in the air, my phone buzzed. It was Momly. She was here.

Becca opened the door, and Maddy was outside talking to someone.

"Mrs. S, what are you doing here?" Maddy squealed, as me, Becca, Taylor, and TeeTee came through the door. Maddy was standing at the passenger-side window of the other car in the driveway. The one that came for T-N-T. At least I thought it had come for T-N-T, but why would Maddy's teacher be here for them?

"I'm here to pick up my daughter, Taylor." What? Daughter? Taylor? "And this is my sister, Mrs. Dorsey. She teaches at the school too. Fourth grade."

"Hi, Madison. I've heard so much about you. Hopefully, you'll be in my class in a few years." Wait a minute. Taylor Stein. TeeTee Dorsey. Bestie-cousin-sisters. And daughters of . . . no way . . . teachers? Teachers. Tuh. Well, well, well. T-N-T. Regular girls.

I looked at the queen hair flippers, but guess what? They wouldn't look at me. Just shot off the step and trotted over to the car. And that's when I knew they

knew they were caught. Gotcha! I could tell they knew what I was thinking. They knew I knew they'd been fronting this whole time. Ain't no teachers rich, and I knew that because at Barnaby, they told us all the time. *They don't pay me enough to teach you and babysit you.* Now I got why T-N-T were acting all weird in Becca's house. Taking selfies at the piano and all that. Chandelier shots for days. I turned back to Becca. It was like she hadn't even noticed. She just waved at them, while at the same time Maddy waved me over.

"Patty, it's my teacher, Mrs. S!" she said as I walked toward the car.

"I see! Hi, Mrs. S." I tried to keep my cool. "Happy early birthday. Taylor says y'all got plans tomorrow. Hope you have a great time!"

And before I got in the car, I looked up at the sky. Still cloudy. But I looked for stars anyway. Of course, I didn't see none. But now, for some reason, it felt good just knowing there were more up there than I'd ever known.

10

TO DO: Be introduced to Momly
(like, for real)

I HAD NEVER talked so much at dinner, but I was going on about Becca's house, how beautiful it all was, and how Becca's room was nothing like I expected.

"Stars everywhere. It was like being at the science center or something," I explained. "And did y'all know rocket scientists were real?"

Momly laughed and Uncle Tony joked me, talking about, "It don't take a rocket scientist to know rocket scientists are real, Patty." I admit, he got me.

I tried to explain to Maddy what constellations were, telling her they were stars connected in the sky

to make pictures. She said her teacher told them about constellations before, which of course made me go in on her teacher's daughter. Bony McPhony and her cousin, Lie-Lie. All this time I'd been thinking about Taylor and TeeTee like they were some kind of royalty, when really they were just . . . regular girls pretending to be something they not. Cornballs.

"But you don't know, maybe they have fathers that are doing well?" Momly suggested, her voice tired.

"Come on, babe," Uncle Tony cut in. "If I hit it big, you think you'd decide to be around all them snotty noses—matter fact, snotty, snotty noses—every day?" Then he quickly added, "Not you, Maddy. And I'm not trying to be mean, but . . . come on, y'all know what I'm sayin'."

"Well, how exactly do you plan on hitting it big?" Momly threw one of her zings that sound too sweet to be a zing, which makes it zingier.

"Oop!" I yelped, just to get Uncle Tony back for the rocket scientist burn.

"And also," Momly added, "Tony, you know me better than that. There's nothing I love more than a snotty nose. Snotty or not."



After dinner, I wanted to help Momly with the dishes, sensing how tired she was. Uncle Tony had cleared the table and was now helping Maddy get ready for bed. She was probably talking his ear off about going to the farm in the morning. I couldn't wait to hear what she thought of it, only because I remember when I went—every school in the city goes to the same one. Maybe it's because they got so many cows, and that's cool, but milking cows might've been the grossest thing I've ever done. I mean . . . yeah. It's up there.

I ran the water in the sink.

"Oh, don't worry about the dishes, Patty. I'll take care of them in a minute," Momly said, now bending down, sweeping nothing into a dustpan.

"I got it."

"No, it's okay," she insisted. But I was already squirting green liquid soap on everything.

"Seriously, it's fine. I can do it."

Momly didn't say nothing to that. Just emptied the dustpan in the trash, then put the broom back in the kitchen closet. She snatched a hand towel from the oven handle.

"Then I'll dry."

I scrubbed each plate, then handed it over to Momly, who wiped it, then put it back up in the cabinet. We

did this over and over again with dishes and silverware, until there was nothing left but cups.

"I just can't believe those girls," I went on, handing Momly a glass. Just couldn't get over it.

"I can." She set the glass down. "I knew a lot of girls like that. Shoot, I was almost one of them."

I ran water in the last glass, then turned the faucet off. "What you mean?" I asked, handing her the final cup.

"I mean, I remember when I first went to that school. To Chester." She dried the glass and set it on the counter. Then she folded the towel into a square, placed it on the counter as well.

"Wait. You went there?"

Momly smirked. "Yeah, a long time ago. I told you that." Had she? I didn't remember ever talking to her about going to Chester. Actually, if I'm being honest, I don't really remember talking to Momly about anything. At least not about her. Didn't realize that until that moment.

"I mean, maybe you did, but I don't remember."

"Uh-huh. Well, in case you missed it . . . I grew up in the country. Not too far from the farm I have to drive Maddy to tomorrow morning. And when I was ten, my parents split up, and my father pretty much

disappeared. My mother had to figure out how to support us, now that we were on our own, so she ended up applying to be the custodian of Chester Academy. And because she was an employee, I got to go there for free."

I had no idea. I mean, about any of it. I didn't know Mommy went to Chester. I also didn't know her mom was a janitor.

"Did you like it there?"

"Ha!" she yelled, then continued, "No. No, no, no. Shoot, the only reason we sent you and Maddy there is because I know the education is excellent. But, for me, I couldn't stand it. Not at first. I mean, listen, I'm a poor girl from the sticks who ended up in a fancy city school. And what made it worse was after classes, I couldn't just go home like everybody else. I had to hang around with my mother, help her clean floors and bleach toilets. Of course, eventually my classmates found out, and then the jokes started. They called me names like Emily Mop Bucket, stuff like that. A few of the girls would even purposely leave trash around, or spit their gum out on the floor, because they knew after school my mother and I would have to clean it up."

"Stupid hair flippers." I murmured, chewing on the words.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just . . . did it . . . like, did it ever get better?"

"Better?" Momly humphed. "Eventually. I mean, first I tried to fit in. Tried to find another poor kid to pick on to take the attention off me. But all the kids I went to tease ended up becoming my friends. And after that, school got better for a while. But there were other things that happened that made it tough again."

Uh-oh. "Other things like what?" I asked. Momly crossed her arms.

"Well, halfway through my seventh-grade year, my mother had a massive stroke. The whole left side of her body was basically paralyzed. So she couldn't do the job anymore. Luckily, my grades were good, and they pitied me, so the school let me stay through the eighth grade for free. But . . . that was hard. And I . . ." Momly drew in a breath, then continued. "And I, um, I didn't know how to deal with it, so I decided I would just keep doing her job, which I couldn't do because I was twelve years old, so obviously the school couldn't let me be the custodian, plus they had no idea I was helping my mother in the first place. So they ended up bringing on somebody else. A man named . . . Mr. Warren." She paused, giving me a second to catch on.

"You mean, *Mr. Warren*, Mr. Warren?" Mr. Warren, her favorite patient?

"Yep. Mr. Warren, Mr. Warren." I had never seen Mr. Warren, but in this moment, I wondered what he looked like back then. Probably real tall with big crusty hands, a rough beard, a beanie on his head or one of them old-men hats with the kangaroo on the back. Maybe even chewing on a straw or a toothpick, a fat wallet in his back pocket, full of receipts and no money. Something like that. Like Coach, if Coach had hair on his face and was a janitor. And was tall. So . . . maybe not like Coach. But . . . yeah.

"Mr. Warren's been the sweetest old man alive since back then," Momly continued. "He'd let me show up for work with him after school, and he'd say I could sweep here, or scrub there. Light work compared to what my mother had me doing, but it was all I needed to make me feel like I was honoring her, y'know, and like I wasn't completely taking a hand-out."

I nodded. All of this made perfect sense to me. "But where was your mom?"

"We had to put her in a home. I went to live with an older cousin who'd moved to the city for college. She was really too young to be taking care of me, but we

didn't have any other family, so . . ." Momly shrugged.

"Yeah."

"But I saw my mom on weekends." Momly picked at a cuticle, gave it a tear. "Then one day I showed up after school ready for my daily task, and Mr. Warren said that he didn't have anything for me. And when I asked him why not, he said because he didn't have a task nearly as important as the one I was avoiding. Wait . . . that's not exactly what he said. What he really said was"—Momly held her finger out and screwed her face to imitate an old man—"Folks who try to do everything are usually avoiding one thing."

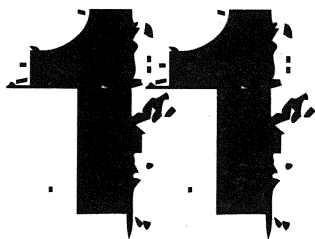
"And was he right?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

"Was he right?" Momly picked up the last two glasses from the counter, held them up to the light—no spots—then put them up in the cabinet. "He definitely was. But I didn't know it at the time. I mean, I was twelve, and couldn't figure out how to deal with the fact that my mother wasn't the same, y'know?"

"Yeah."

"And guess what? That old man is still teaching me stuff. Even the other day, when he was sort of out of it, going on about buffing the floor"—Momly's face brightened, laughter trapped behind her lips—"all I

could think was that he thinks he can do things that he just . . . he just can't anymore. In his mind, he's strong enough to push a buffer. But you know? If he really wants to clean that floor, we can do it together. And that's okay."



TO DO: Get there
(there's nothing else I can do)

THE NEXT MORNING Momly dropped me off, but only me. Maddy had spent the whole ride telling me how milking cows didn't scare her, and how if the milk don't come out like it's supposed to, she'll just pick the whole cow up and shake the milk out of it. Yep, farm day had finally arrived.

"Have fun," I said, climbing out of the car at the exact same moment Becca was walking between Momly's car and the car in front of us. We did a weird wave thing, and then I turned back to Maddy. "You getting up front?" I asked, not really serious, but Momly cut me off anyway.

"No, Patty, she is not," she said with an unusual snap. Momly ain't have no funk in her. No sit down. No finger point. No talk-through-teethness. None of that. But she didn't do the Maddy-in-the-front-seat thing. Maddy could kick the front seat all day, every day, could put a hole in it and everything, and Momly would be cool. But not this.

"Come on, Momly. Please? I did it yesterday," Maddy begged. Momly turned around in her seat, looked Maddy in the face.

"You're not old enough yet, sweetheart." That little bit of snap was gone and she was back to sweet Momly, even though she was still saying no.

"Patty!"

"What you want me to do?" I shrugged. "Look, you'll be up front soon enough, and then all you gon' do is wish you were in the back. So chill, and enjoy your limo ride to the farm, Waffle." I tried not to laugh while closing the door and throwing up the peace sign.

This is gonna sound silly, but when I walked into school, the hallway seemed different. Just knowing that Momly used to clean the floors of Chester, used to make it shiny every day just so it could get all scuffed up and dirty again, the same way she did our house, her car, and everything else, had my mind doing flips,

thinking thoughts it never thought before. I was looking down at the floor, the light shining off it. Looking down like usual, but for a different reason today.

At my locker, Becca was waiting for me, wearing a weirdo smile, holding a piece of paper.

"Hey," I said, surprised she was there.

"Hey. So, last night I was looking for more cool stuff about Frida, and I decided to just do something silly and Google Frida Kahlo and space, just to see, y'know? I wasn't really expecting nothing, but listen to this." Becca held the paper up and read, "'A constellation that exists only on paper is useless.'" She slapped the note down to her side. I gave her a blank stare. A *so what* face, which is when Becca yipped, "Frida said that!"

"But what does it mean?"

"I have no idea. But she said it!" Me and Becca laughed. "And I'm going to think about it, because maybe we can use it for the project."

I nodded, smiled. "Then I'll think about it too."

"Sweet. By the way, your little sister is the cutest." Then Becca held up two fingers like Maddy and said all corny and awkward, "Peace."

Peace. That's the opposite of what came knocking on the door at the very end of homeroom. Mrs. Stansfield had taken roll, and the morning announce-

ments happened, which was usually about permission slips and the day's lunch menu. Sesame chicken—yes! One of my favorite things to eat. My stomach started growling as I heard those two words come crackling through the intercom. So excited. And then Jasmine Stanger made her own morning announcement, that she had to take her belly button ring out. She lifted her shirt. Her belly button had turned into an alien. And my stomach stopped growling.

After the announcements and before the bell rang, the intercom speaker came buzzing back on.

"Mrs. Stansfield?" Ms. Durden's voice came growling through. Ms. Durden worked at the front desk in the office. Had a face like a baby doll and a voice like a car engine.

"Yes?"

"Can you please send Patina Jones to the office? Her uncle's here to pick her up."

My uncle? To pick me up? Why? What? I jumped up, grabbed my bag, and headed for the door. As I walked down the hallway, I could see Uncle Tony pacing back and forth.

"Uncle Tony?"

When he turned toward me, his face looked like there was ice under his skin. "Patty!"

"What you doing here?"

My heart was pounding even before he said what he said. The thing you never want to hear. Something I'd heard before, and never wanted to hear again.

"Something's happened."

Something's happened.

Something's happened?

The bell rang.

"What? What . . . happened?" I asked, already heading for the doors as my classmates poured into the hallway, homeroom over. My legs felt heavy and my body was doing what it does when I run, but I wasn't running. I was walking, but it didn't really feel like I was doing that, either. I was just . . . moving.

"I'll tell you in the car." Uncle Tony grabbed my hand, squeezed it as he led the way.

"Is it Ma? Is something wrong with Ma?" There was something about him holding my hand, something about that moment that made everything around me fade into streaks of yellows, browns, and pinks. The hallway muted in my head. I could only hear my uncle.

"We've gotta get to the hospital," he answered, steering me toward his SUV. He broke into a jog.

We have to go. We had to go. To the hospital. To the HOSPITAL.

Unmute. One second of teenage noise explosion before barreling through the double doors.

"The hospital?!" I cried out. "Uncle Tony, what's going on? What's wrong with Ma?" But he didn't respond until we were in his SUV. He jammed the key into the ignition and pulled away from the curb. And before I could ask again, he looked me square in the face.

"Your mother is fine," he confirmed finally. And I could breathe. But only one breath. Because then Uncle Tony said, "But Momly and Maddy were in an accident."

"What . . . wha . . . do . . . whattayoumean, Momly, and . . . and Maddy? What are you talking about?" It was hard to find words, because it was hard to find breath. My whole body felt like it had been emptied out. Like I ain't have bones or blood or nothing inside.

Uncle Tony repeated. "I don't know how else to say it, Patty. They . . . they were in a car accident."

Like I said—the opposite of peace. Well, not really because the opposite of peace is war, and I wasn't at war. But there were definitely cannons going off in my brain, just like Mr. Winston had been talking about. To the left and to the right. And all over. Cannons shooting exploding cannonballs of worry. Explosions of, *Is Maddy okay? Please let Maddy be okay. And Momly? Is she hurt?*

Is she . . . Boom. Boom. Boom. All Uncle Tony knew was he'd gotten a call from the hospital, not ten minutes ago. He was just leaving for work. That all they said was there was an accident. That he didn't know much more than that. He kept one hand on the wheel, and with the other he reached over and took mine again. Squeezed tighter this time, like trying to squeeze some *it's gonna be okay* in me. Trying to squeeze his own scared away the same way I do for Maddy sometimes. Oh, Maddy. No one was kicking the back of my seat. *Maddy. Maddy, please, just . . . Momly, please, please, just . . . be . . . just be . . . breathing.*

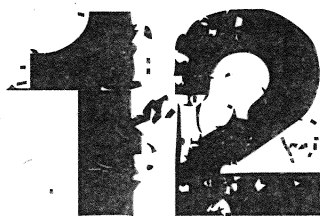
"Have you called my mom?" I asked as we pulled into the hospital.

"Not yet."

I immediately pulled out my phone, but Uncle Tony patted my hand down as he wheeled the SUV into a parking space.

"Let's, um . . . let's just wait until we see what's what, okay? Y'know, get a diagnosis." He turned the key, killed the engine.

My heart lurched at diagnosis. There's "die" in that word.



TO DO: Be there
(and stop Maddy from *going there*)

MOMLY WAS ALIVE. The nurse at the front desk told us she was banged up pretty bad, and had a mild concussion and a broken arm.

"And what about Maddy?" I asked before she'd even finished saying "broken arm." My heart had turned into a frog trying to jump out my throat. My brain thinking bad things only. *I'm sorry, but she didn't make it . . .* No. No, no, no. Don't think that. Don't think that. But I couldn't help it. What if Maddy was . . . I tried not to think what I couldn't stop myself from thinking. That Maddy, my mini-me, my Waffle,

was . . . hurt. Was . . . gone. I tried to speak clear, my voice balling up like a piece of paper. "I mean, Madison. Madison Jones."

"The little girl who was with her," Uncle Tony made plain, his voice sharp. Almost too clear.

"Ah." The nurse's face brightened up. "Baby ain't have a scratch on her."

All the breath in my body left, and then came rushing back in. Filled me up with a bunch of thank goodness. The cannons stopped firing. And the *boom-boom-boom* became the *beep-beep-beep* coming though the crack in the door of the room Maddy and Momly were in. It was as if me and Uncle Tony had teleported there.

"Hello?" Uncle Tony cried out as he tapped on the door and crept in like we didn't belong there, like we were afraid the doctor who was also in the room would think we had come to steal our family back.

"Patty!" Maddy jumped up from a chair and crashed against me. She squeezed, not like she was trying to lift me up, but like she was trying to melt into me. And I squeezed back like I was scared to let go.

Uncle Tony darted to the bed where Momly lay. Maddy and me weren't far behind him. The first thing I noticed was Momly's face. It was puffed up, so

much purple on her pale skin. Bruises and lumps and knots, worse than a Barnaby beat-down. And then I noticed her arm. The broken one. It was swollen up to the shoulder, making the skin look like it was being stretched too tight. Compared to the other arm, it looked more like a leg, at least the top part did. The bottom part they had in some kind of sling-contraption thingy, to keep it from moving. But I could still see the imprint in the fabric where the bone jutted out, like a second elbow. Looked like it hurt like crazy.

"Come on in, y'all." Momly's voice was all grog. She waved us toward her with her good arm—her right arm—like she was hosting a party. "Dr. Lancaster, this is the rest of my family. Patty, and my husband, Tony."

"Nice to meet you," Uncle Tony said, immediately shaking the doctor's hand.

"The pleasure's mine," Dr. Lancaster said, smooth. "Me and Maddy are just here making sure Mrs. Emily doesn't fall asleep while she's concussed."

"What happened?" I asked, because how does someone who drove as safe as Momly, someone who didn't even listen to music in her car, get in a crash?

"Yeah, Em, what in the world happened?" Uncle Tony followed up, gently stroking Momly's hair.

Momly's eyes were half-open, blinking super slow

like windshield wipers on the low setting. Like when it's just drizzling. "Someone ran a red light. Smacked right into us and kept going."

"A hit-and-run?" Uncle Tony asked, his voice hardening in a way I'd never heard.

Momly nodded. "Yeah." She tried to shift in the bed but was in too much pain to do so. Every little inch up or to the side made her show teeth. A pain smile. "But I'll be fine," she was telling us now, stroking Uncle Tony's arm. "Right, doc? Concussions and broken bones heal. I'm just glad the strongest girl in the world's not hurt."

Maddy's arm tightened around my waist. Down, tears. Down! Hold it together. You are Patina Jones. Daughter of Beverly Jones. No junk. No punk.

"I know," I said, forcing a small smile and resting my cheek on the top of Maddy's head. I figured I'd better put my face down somewhere before it split down the middle. Then Maddy reached over and took Momly's hand, her chest heaving as she worked to fight back her own feelings, even though she had been there the whole time. It was like now that me and Uncle Tony showed up, she could let herself be scared.

"It's okay, Maddy. I'm fine. I swear. It's just a broken arm. Remember when Cotton broke her arm? She was

better in no time! Nothing crazy." Cotton broke her arm trying to prove she could do a handstand on the bathroom sink at Barnaby Elementary, but she slipped. She was lucky. Could've broke her neck. Or broke her life. But that would've been her own fault. This was different. "Hey . . . hey, Patty, I won't be running any relays anytime soon, huh? No handoffs for me." Momly was trying to lighten the mood, but it fell flat. I forced a fake laugh, because I got what she was trying to do. But jokes were Uncle Tony's thing.

"But . . . but . . . I just don't want them to anfiltrate it!" Maddy wasn't distracted at all by the corny comedy. Momly refocused.

"They're not gonna amputate it, baby. They're gonna fix it," she assured her. That voice, the one that usually only a mom has, even though . . . well, she's our mom too, kicked in and seemed to calm the whole room down. But I knew Maddy. I could look in her face and see that she wasn't so sure that things were going to be fine.

"Maddy, they're not gonna take it," I echoed. Then a better idea to chill Maddy out sprouted up in my mind, and I walked to the other side of the room to grab one of the two chairs that were there.

"We're definitely not," the doctor confirmed. And

while he explained how bone healing works, and Maddy started getting into how our mother had had her legs cut off, I bent down and pretended to try to move the chair. I started grunting like I was constipated or something, just to draw attention. "Ughn . . . ughn." I turned around and Maddy was still going on about how for our mom, first it was a toe, then it was a foot, then her legs—none of which she actually remembers—and how for Momly, what if it starts with one part of the arm, and the next thing you know half her body is cut off.

"What if she can't drive with half a body?" she asked the doctor, who at this point looked somewhere between amused and confused.

"Maddy, can you come help me, please?"

"Help you what?" she asked, her voice still quavering.

"Help me move this chair. It's too heavy." The chair really was more like real furniture. Not some flimsy fold-up. Of course I could've moved it if I really wanted to. But I bent down again with a huge, "Ughn!"

"It's just a chair, Patty," Maddy said, skeptical but coming to my side anyway.

"Yeah, but I think hospital chairs be heavier for some reason."

Maddy frowned, but then she grabbed the chair by the armrests and yanked it forward. I widened my eyes as Maddy backed the chair across the room, inch by inch, until it was at the foot of Momly's bed.

"That one's for Uncle Tony," I said as she slapped her hands together like, light work. "But I need to sit down too." I pointed at the other chair. "And then you can sit on my lap." Maddy trotted back to the other side of the room to get the other one, Uncle Tony plopping down in the first.

"Thank you, Maddy," he said, winking at Momly.

"No problem. They not even that heavy for me," Maddy boasted.

"Of course not," I agreed, watching her lug the next chair. When she'd parked it beside the other, I sat down. "Girl, I'm so glad we got somebody strong in this family." I patted my thighs, beckoning her to come take a seat so we could continue on with the visit and put the tears and scary stuff behind us. But, in true Maddy fashion, she wasn't ready to sit yet. Oh no. I got her going. Got her all revved up. Next thing I know she was now explaining to the doctor that she was one of the strongest first graders he'd ever seen.

"It's true," Momly gurgled.

And when Dr. Lancaster asked, "Is that right?"

Maddy ran up on him like a maniac, threw her arms around his legs, and tried to lift him!

"Wha . . . Whoa, whoa!" the doctor hooted.

"Maddy!" both Uncle Tony and Momly barked, clearly embarrassed. And me, well, I actually thought it was kind of awesome. I mean, think about it. Here we all are, sad about what happened to Momly—and what could've happened to Maddy—and somehow (thanks to me, ahem) we got from there to watching Maddy try to lift the doctor up off the floor.

"I . . . got it. I . . . can . . . do it!" she growled, yanking at the doctor's legs, his pants lifting enough to see his yellow dress socks. The doctor looked at me. I looked at him. He smiled, and then raised slowly up on his tiptoes just enough.

"What? How did you . . . ?" Dr. Lancaster gasped. Maddy let him go, stood back up, breathing heavy and nodding like some kind of warrior.

"I told you," she said to the doctor, then turned to the rest of us. "Told y'all."

"Lord have mercy," Momly muttered under her breath, shaking her head slightly. If only Ma had heard her, we would've had to go into a whole Sunday service right here in the hospital. "Okay, Maddy, that's enough. You've . . . proven your point."

But . . . she hadn't. It was like she had roid rage. That's what it's called when you take steroids and get all jacked and then start flipping out, right? Roid rage. It was like she had that. Because you wouldn't believe what she did next. She came back over to where me and Uncle Tony were sitting, and I thought she finally was going to hop up on my lap, but instead she turned toward Momly and grabbed the bed frame. "I can lift up this whole bed, with Momly in it!"

"NOOO!" everyone—everyone—shouted, and I sprang from my seat and grabbed Maddy before she could even try. Not that she would've really been able to lift it, but still, anything's possible, and then one broken arm is two broken arms and a broken back.

But thankfully, nothing, at least nothing like that, happened.

What did happen was Dr. Lancaster finally explained to Uncle Tony that Momly would have to have surgery to set and pin the bone.

"And when is this surgery?" Uncle Tony asked.

"Well, we wanted to do it today, but like I said, we have to monitor the concussion. So we'll need to do it tomorrow morning."



We stayed at the hospital for a few more hours until finally Momly basically forced us to leave, saying we didn't have to go back to school but that I could not miss track practice. I was surprised. Maybe she knew that I wouldn't have been able to focus in class, probably resulting in me getting in trouble for finally letting one of them fake hair flippers have it. Or maybe she knew I needed practice. I needed to run.

And I did, even though, because yesterday's practice had been rained out, this would be the last practice before the meet on Saturday. I was fully prepared for the hardest practice ever.



TO DO: Run forever
(and then run some more)

WELL, NOT FULLY prepared.

Thursday. Long-run day. No surprise there. But because we were also training for relay races, Coach had to figure out how to combine both endurance and relay into the same workout. Which basically means, Coach had to figure out how to crush us.

"Patty, you okay?" Ghost whispered to me as we stretched—left-side toe touches. Aaron was counting down from ten.

"Yeah," I said. "Why?"

"Six, five, four . . .," Aaron chanted.

"I'ono," Ghost said, now mid-yawn. Said he stayed up all night watching some movie about Jesse Owens, which was fine for him since he didn't have to go school. Spring break life. Ghost's tongue was a weird shade of purple, dyed from something. Candy, I guessed. "You just seem . . . different."

"Switch!" Aaron said. We all stretched to the right. With my eyes I followed my right arm, top part, elbow, bottom part, wrist, hand. All there. All working. I couldn't help but have a flash of Momly. And even though I knew she'd be okay—at least I hoped she'd be okay—it was hard to not wonder how everything was going to get done now. Would Uncle Tony have to drive us everywhere? Drop us off at school, pick us up? Then pick me up from track? What about dinner? What about Ma? Who was going to take care of Ma? And how was she going to go get her blood cleaned? I couldn't take her. I would if I could, but I can't drive! It was impossible to not think about all these things. These things that I hadn't really thought about because Momly always just . . . did them. Which I also never . . . really . . . thought about.

It was also impossible to just come to the track and pretend like I hadn't just come from the hospital. The hospital has a way of sticking to your skin.

"Yeah, Patty, you do seem strange," Lu added.

"Eight, seven, six, five . . ."

I turned to Sunny, trying to keep up my front. "Am I acting funny, Sunny?"

Sunny smiled at *funny*, *Sunny*.

"Switch! Down the middle!" Aaron now ordered.

"Funny?" Sunny asked, his noodle-y body bent over, hanging limp, his fingertips pressing the track. "Not funny. But yeah, kinda weird."

"Told you," Ghost said, low. I didn't know what it was about these guys. Except for Lu, I had only known them for a few weeks, and they could already tell when something was going on with me. I mean, I could always tell when something was wrong with them, because something was always wrong with them. But the fact that they could pick me apart so easily was crazy.

"Above your head!" Aaron called out.

"It's just that my—" I started to tell them, but Coach cut me off.

"Focus, newbies! We're not talking, we're stretching! It's been an eventful week, and you four always seemed to be part of the events. So today, keep your heads in the lane." Lu and Ghost had their arms up but tucked their chins, almost as if they were sniffing their

pits, when really they were just sneak-looking at me. I gave them a *yes, something's going on and I'll tell you later* sort of nod.

After a few more stretches, and Aaron's way-too-serious countdowns, it was time to run.

"Okay, so we lost a day yesterday. And y'all know we gotta make up for it today," Coach said, spinning his car keys on his index finger. The whole team seemed to brace itself—we all knew what was coming. "So here's what's going to happen. Coach Whit is gonna lead y'all on the long run as usual. But it's going to be a little different. All of you who aren't running relays will run the regular way. But all my relay runners are going to stagger." Coach Whit stood off to the side, kicking her legs behind her, one at a time, catching them by the ankle and holding them for an extra quad stretch. That should've been a sign. If the coaches are doing extra stretches, we're in for a doozy. "What this means is, according to what leg you're running on Saturday, that's the order in which you run this long run. So, for the girls, Deja, you're gonna start off with everybody else. Same goes for you, Freddy. Stay with the pack. Now when they get about ninety seconds out, I'll blow the whistle and our second legs, Brit-Brat and Mikey, y'all will start. Your job is to keep a steady pace but

not to catch up with the rest of them. Understand?" Brit-Brat nodded.

"Yeah," Mikey grumbled.

"Ninety seconds after them, Krystal and Eric," Coach said. I was happy he didn't call my name, because everybody knows the third leg is the weakest. "And then come our anchors." Coach held two fingers out and pointed them at me and Curron. "That's you two." Curron was known for false starts during his individual eight hundreds, but apparently he was the man as the anchor leg for the relay. And I gotta admit that while today had been the pits so far, I couldn't help but be a little gassed about the fact that I was chosen for the anchor.

Coach pulled a baton from one of his back pockets. Then from his front pocket he pulled out a small jar of Vaseline. He popped the top off, slathered the baton in the petroleum jelly, and handed it to Curron. Gross! I could tell Curron thought so too. Then Coach pulled another baton out and gave it the same oily rubdown, handing that one to me. Uuughhhh. "Patty, after the other day, plus your temper tantrum last meet, I wasn't sure. But I feel like you've got the heart for this. Like you can handle this responsibility. I don't know why, but I feel like you're the comeback kid. Prove me right,"

Coach said like a cornball before releasing the baton.

"Got you," I said, cool, switching hands, wiping the grease on my shorts.

Coach cleaned his hands on the towel that seemed to live around his neck, then raised his voice. "Listen up. Here's how this is gonna go, relay squad. Every time you all hear me hit the horn, the person with the baton has to run and catch the leg in front of them. Call out, 'Stick!' Whoever is receiving the baton cannot turn around—you have to find the rhythm of the run, reach back and take the baton, just like you went through on Tuesday. Then you continue running on pace until you hear my horn. Then the person with the baton has to catch the next leg and hand off the stick. At the end of the run, all first legs should have the baton, and you should all be together. You start apart, but you end together. Everyone needs to make sure of that. This is like a reverse relay, but it's good to push ourselves, especially since as relay runners, a lot of times it'll be your job to eat up track and make up time. If anyone messes up the handoff and drops the baton—I don't care that it's slippery—the relay team has to start the process over, meaning, if Mikey drops it, we start again with Curron. Got it?"

We all just sort of nodded, numbly. This was going to be hell.

"I don't understand nods and I can't read minds," Coach growled.

"We got it, Coach," Mikey said, putting on his game face.

"Yeah, Coach," Krystal said, game-faced too. "Pass and don't drop."

"Again, everyone is responsible for everyone. In relay, you win and lose as a team. You are not two legs, you are eight," Coach droned. "Now, the rest of you non-relayers, you know what this is. Ghost, I don't wanna see you in last. Lu, if Ghost is in last, you owe me a mile."

Lu's mouth dropped. "What?"

Coach ignored him and kept on preaching. "And, Sunny, if you don't finish first, you're gonna be running sprints."

"Got it, Coach," Sunny said, totally unflustered.

"The best never rest. Now let's get it."

"First legs and non-relays, follow me!" Whit said, taking off. Me, Krystal, Curron, Mikey, Brit-Brat, and Eric all hung back. Coach eyed his stopwatch and as soon as it hit ninety seconds, I guessed, he blew the whistle and Brit-Brat and Mikey took off. After another ninety seconds, the whistle blew again. Krystal and Eric headed out. Curron and I were last, holding our greasy

batons, waiting for our whistle. Coach made his way to his taxi—the Motivation Mobile—had his arm out the window, the other holding the stopwatch. Then, *whieeeet!* And me and Currón broke out, off the track, through the grass and onto the street, seeing sets of two in front of us, and in the far distance the jostling mob of colorful cutoff T-shirts and jerseys, bush-balls and cornrows, and farthest ahead, Sunny, tall and light, towering above everyone.

“Just keep pace,” Currón suggested, as we trotted down the street. “If you can.”

“If I can?” I shot back. I was not in the mood for his mess.

Currón tried to back it up. “I mean, not because you’re not fast, but because my legs are longer,” he said, opening his stride. But he clearly had no idea who I was. Patina Jones. No junk. Frida in a suit. Mary J. Blige in track shoes.

“Uh-huh,” I said, the baton glinting in the sun every time I lifted my right arm. I opened my stride too. And then, the horn.

“Let me see you push!” Coach shouted from his window as me and Currón started running faster. I needed to beat him, or to at least be with him. Didn’t matter if his legs were longer. Did. Not. Matter. I got the

legs of two people, me and my mother. We pounded down the street, gaining on Krystal and Eric, who had just reached a construction site. Workers in hard hats were hoisting big metal containers on ropes and hooks up to the roof of a building. Krystal and Eric cut into the street to get around the orange cones and yellow tape, and we would have to do the same. Thankfully, there wasn't much traffic.

Curron started to pull ahead, so I turned on the jets and really started burning my legs out, even though I knew it was a bad idea. But I was no way going to take another loss. Not today. I stepped off the sidewalk well before the construction and ran in the street, close to the curb to avoid an oncoming delivery van.

"Back on the sidewalk, Patty!" Coach yelled through his megaphone. I ignored him. "Patty. Back on the sidewalk!" A bus was coming up the block, the roaring of its engine like a bear waking from its sleep. *Coach is gonna kill me*, I thought, *but so what. Come on, Patty. You got this.* Almost at the construction. Curron was just a few steps behind me, still on the sidewalk, the *pit-pat* of his footsteps in my ear. Coach in my ear. The horn of the bus in my ear.

Come on. Come on, Patty. Krystal was close. I could see her ponytail flicking in the wind like a brown

flame. Curron was gaining on me. But he had his work cut out for him, because Eric was farther ahead than Krystal. Now the bus was only a few yards away from me. *Honk! Honk!* "Patty!" Coach bellowed. The bus was right . . . there. I was at the construction site. Hard hats. Metal clanging. Men talking. Laughing. The bus was right in front of me. *Honnnnnnk!*

And I hopped back onto the curb at the last second, avoiding the bus and the construction site. Curron however, was stuck.

Keep pushin', Patty. Krystal was five feet away. Four. "Stick! Stick!" I yelled, just like we'd learned in practice. I took the inside of the sidewalk, running closer to the shop doors, while Krystal smoothly slid to the outside, skimming the curb. "Stick!" I pushed the word out, now gasping for air. Krystal stretched her arm behind her, speeding up as I was coming in fast. And just like dancing, like being able to move with each other without actually touching, in one smooth motion I handed the baton to Krystal.

And suddenly, I was winded. I fell back a bit, while Krystal kept her pace. Then came the second horn. And Krystal now had to catch Brit-Brat, who was, at this point, a speck in the distance. Ahead of her, scatterings of everyone else. Krystal pushed forward while

I stayed about fifteen steps behind her, passing Lu and Ghost, who'd pulled over on the sidewalk. Ghost was hunched over puking up purple. So it wasn't candy. Probably soda. Lu, standing over him, was yelling, "Come on, man! Hurry up and get it out so we can go!"

"Get it together, Ghost!" Coach barked on the infamous megaphone. Aaron was just ahead of us, looking over his shoulder, his bottom lip hanging.

In another minute it was Krystal's turn in the red zone, close enough to get the baton to Brit-Brat. I wasn't far behind, my heart beating so hard it felt like it was rocking side to side. Hard, like it was trying to pump the blood out of my body. "Stick!" Krystal yelled. And like with the last pass-off, Brit-Brat, with those big ol' feet of hers, sped up, just enough to fall right into rhythm with Krystal's stride. Krystal swiveled to the inside, Brit to the outside. Arm back. Arm out. Hand-off. Perfection. Just dancing the waltz. I fought back a grin. Whit's crazy waltz. Yeah.

Just about the time we expected to hear the third horn, we instead heard the clang of metal on concrete, like someone had rang a bell. A baton had been dropped, but not by any of the girls. We were holding tight, waiting on Coach to hit the horn again so Brit-Brat could catch Deja, and we could bring it home.

"Start again, fellas!" Coach was yelling at the guys' relay. "Back to Curron. No dropping the stick! NO DROPPING THE STICK!" By the time Brit-Brat sailed over to Deja, she was done. All of us were. The final handoff was fine. Not perfect, but not terrible. And, hey, we killed the guys! But our legs were shot. And on top of all that, none of us knew where to go because Whit was gone, probably chasing after Sunny who runs long distance like it's a leisurely walk to his locker. The sweetest show-off ever.

"Where did they go?" Deja asked, slowing, waiting for the rest of us to catch up. We jogged in place on the corner trying to figure out where to head next. We knew better than to stop running. Coach was heading our way in the taxi; if he caught us standing, he would give us the blues. And the jazz. And the freakin' rock and roll. So we kept our legs moving. Like he said, the best never rest.

"What are you waiting for?" he called out, his taxi creeping up the street, emergency blinkers on.

"We don't know which way to go!" Krystal called out.

"We don't know where Whit went!" I added. Coach smirked.

"So?" he said, like this wasn't an issue.

"So what should we do?" I asked.

"You tell me," he replied. Now the guys relay team caught up to us, their mouths hanging open. I looked to the right. Hardware store. Man on the sidewalk selling used books. I looked to the left. An old woman sweeping the steps of a church. A little girl with a much smaller broom, helping. Her hair in dookie braids, maybe five or six of them sprouting every which way like antennae.

"This way," I decided, heading left toward the little girl. I didn't know if it was the right way, but in that moment, with Coach looking at me all crazy, I knew I had to do something. The comeback kid. Let's see if I could be the "get-back kid" and get us back to the park. Everyone followed as I led, until Coach finally pulled up beside us again.

"Follow me," he said, grinning out the window. He headed straight, which meant I was leading us in the right direction. Phew. And from there, Coach led the rest of the way back to the track.

When we arrived at the park, everyone crashed, rolling onto the track like cars whose tires had just blown out. And for once, Coach let us stay down there. He even brought our water bottles over to us! Sunny and Whit, on the other hand, were leaning against the fence

having a casual conversation. They didn't even have the decency to be panting or nothing, while the rest of us were trying not to cry like babies. Ghost and Lu came sputtering in a little after us, Ghost dehydrated from all the puking, and Lu purposely jogging a few steps behind him, one hand on Ghost's back, almost pushing him along so that he wouldn't be last. Aaron immediately handed his water bottle to Ghost, who pretty much crushed whatever was left in it. I gave mine to Lu, who took a swig then gave it back.

"Good job, good job!" Coach said. "Give it up," he added, now clapping his hands. He went on. "Relay is about everyone pulling their weight. But sometimes, there has to be one person to just take over. Take the inside lane, and go for blood. Make a decision, because sometimes, there won't be a leader there to tell you. There won't be a coach or a frontrunner or a roadmap. Sometimes, you just gotta make a decision, take a turn and see what happens. If you trust yourself, nine times outta ten, you'll get to where you're supposed to be."

"Wish where we were supposed to be was down my street. Woulda went home," Lu mumbled. Ghost was on his knees trying to catch his breath. I would've laughed at what Lu said, but I didn't have the energy. None of us did. Plus, he said it a little too loud.

"No, see, that's where you want to be, son." Coach picked up the two batons from the track, and wiped them down. "But this is where you need to be." He slipped the metal sticks in his pockets. "And you know why, Lu?" Lu lifted his head, eyes on Coach. "Because you and Ghost owe me a mile."

"Coach, I was last! Not Ghost. You said, 'Ghost can't be last.'" Lu looked apoplectic.

"Yeah, but I don't ever want you to be okay with being last, son. So you both owe me one. Everybody else, I'll see y'all Saturday, bright and early. We're gonna try these relays, and if they look good, we'll start working on other ones, and maybe even some hurdles." The rest of us got up, limped our way to the benches. Car doors started slamming as parents showed up to pick up their half-dead kids. You could see others poking their heads out of the windows, trying to understand why the track looked like an apocalypse movie.

I looked for Momly, then caught myself, realizing that she wouldn't be there. Couldn't be. But there was Uncle Tony. He was holding Maddy by the shoulders—Maddy, unbroken, breathing—they both looked tired, as if they'd been running too. A rush of feelings came washing over me. The sizzle in my lungs now becoming a full fireball dropping into my gut. I turned back

toward the track for a quick moment of *Get yourself together, Patty. Be strong, Patty.* I was looking out toward the track but not at the track. Not at anything.

I shook my head—refocus, girl!

"It ain't gotta be fast, but it's gotta be done," Coach was saying to Lu and Ghost, and as the blur cleared, I saw them both now standing with their hands resting on their heads, their breathing almost back to normal. But they looked pathetic. Exhausted. And they had to put in another mile. Poor guys.

Deja walked by me, heading toward her mom. "Good job, Patty," she said, tapping me on the back.

"Yeah, Patty," from Krystal. "You ain't no joke. Let's crush 'em on Saturday."

"That's definitely the plan," I said, now walking toward Maddy and Uncle Tony. I glanced back. Sunny was still on the track. Still leaning against the fence. His father hadn't come yet, which was weird. The stiff-suit dude was always on time.

When I reached Uncle Tony and Maddy, Maddy gave me her usual big hug, and whispered, "There's pizza in the SUV." I let go of her, nodded, then gave Uncle Tony a hug too. Just reached out and grabbed him. I told him I needed a few more minutes. Then to Maddy, I promised, "Ten, tops."

"Of course," Uncle Tony said. And I turned back toward the track to join my boys.

"So, I'm ready to tell y'all what's wrong," I said to them halfway around lap one. See, I told Coach that if Lu and Ghost had to run, then so did I. That as a newbie, we also have to win and lose together, hold each other up.

"Somebody's learned a lot this week, huh?" Coach teased. He had no idea what I was feeling. What I'd been going through. How could he?

"I'm in too, Coach," Sunny said, sauntering over.

"Look, we takin' it easy, Sunny," Ghost said testily. "It's all love, but don't be showin' off."

And no one did any showboating. And once we knocked down that first two hundred meters, I was ready to talk.

"Well, we ain't interested no more, Patty. We over it," Lu jabbed.

"My aunt's in the hospital. The one that takes care of me," I said flat-out, to shut his stupid mouth for once.

"Shoot," Lu said quick. "Patty . . . I was just jokin'."

"I know."

"She good?" Ghost asked.

"Yeah. Car accident. Broke her arm and she's

bruised up pretty bad. And she got a concussion. Crazy thing is my little sister was in the car with her, but, thankfully she came out okay." No one said anything. Just kinda let that whirl around us for a second. "But on top of that, well, I don't think I realized how much she actually be doing. Like, how much she takes care of. I mean . . . she takes care of my mother, for real. So now I gotta figure out how I'm gonna get my mom to the doctors and all that so she can get her blood cleaned. Plus, Momly's how I get to the track. It's just so much. Too much." I could feel myself getting choked up.

"Wow. That sucks." Lu said, as we rounded the second curve. He jogged closer.

"Yeah. A lot going on," I replied, with nothing on it. "Uncle Tony will probably ask Skunk to help out with some stuff since he ain't working."

"Who's Skunk?" Ghost asked.

"Cotton's big brother," I answered. Which makes him basically my big brother and practically Uncle Tony's little brother. Y'know, my uncle just be looking out for Skunk's knucklehead self. Keep him out of trouble.

"And who's Cotton?" Ghost followed.

"Patty's bestie," Lu panted.

I shook my head at him, like really? "Ghost, Cotton is really Lu's boo." Not really, but they liked each other. Which was disgusting.

"Oh, word?"

"Nope."

"Yep."

"We just cool."

"Don't deny my girl, Lu, or I'll leave you laid out across this track."

"Whatever."

"Whatever, whatever," Ghost cut in. "Patty, just put me on with them rich girls at your school."

"Tuh. Boy, please."

"What? You think they too good for me?" Ghost's voice toughened.

Lap three.

I thought of T-N-T. Taylor, TeeTee, this is Ghost. "Nah, not even. You're too good for them, Ghost. They ain't ready for you," I said, glancing over, catching a slick smile creeping across his face. Then I added, "Plus, they don't eat sunflower seeds."

"They don't eat sunflower seeds?!"

"They don't eat sunflower seeds?" Lu repeated.

"They don't eat sunflower seeds," I confirmed.

Sunny, oddly didn't weigh in on the sunflower seed

situation. So we all just jogged, the sound of eight feet moving in rhythm, slapping down on the track.

Last lap.

"Yo, so how long Mrs. Emily gonna be in the hospital?" Lu asked.

"The doctor said they doing surgery tomorrow morning. Hopefully she'll be home by Saturday."

"You still gon' make it to the meet?" Ghost asked.

"That's the thing. I'm gonna try my best, but I don't know yet. I wanna be there for her, y'know? Don't tell Coach, though. I don't want him to be disappointed. He gave me anchor."

"Wait, so you not gon' tell him?" Lu asked. "Patty!"

"I know! But I'm still trying to figure everything out. This all just happened this morning," I explained. "I'll text him tomorrow, latest. It's not like he can train another relayer in a day, anyway."

"You better," Lu warned.

Sunny sniffled. The first sound from him since we'd been running. I glanced over. He sniffled again as we came up on the last hundred meters.

"You good, Sunny?" I asked. He didn't respond. Just ran face forward, and kept running, sniffing the whole way. Once we crossed the finish line, he quick-quick dashed tears from his face so no one could see

them. But I knew they were there. We all did. "What's wrong, man?" I shot a look to where Maddy and Uncle Tony were parked. Coach was talking to them and I groaned. I had a feeling my uncle had already told him about Momly.

Ghost put a hand on Sunny's shoulder. "Yeah, man, what's goin' on?"

"It's just . . ." Sunny started but got caught up. "Sorry." He took a deep breath, got himself together. "Sorry," he said again. "Just, thinking about your mother. It just got me, y'know?" he said, his voice shaky. His father was there now, parked in his fancy car, a newspaper parked in front of his face. I knew Sunny meant to say my aunt, but it wasn't no point in correcting him. I got it.

"Awwww, Sunny," I said, opening my arms. "She'll be fine." We hugged, and then Lu and Ghost, my boys, my YMBCs, came in for theirs, too.