

# 14

**TO DO:** Eat pizza! (and . . . do some other things, but . . . pizza!)

**I WENT TO** bed that night with a belly full of pizza. It was the first night in ages I didn't have to police Maddy's plate. The first night we ate without Momly's tired face looking back at us. Without the smell of turkey wings mixed with the smell of clean. No white plates to put in the sink, because Uncle Tony had us eat on paper ones. It was the first night that me and Uncle Tony actually had to help Maddy with her homework. She had to practice for a spelling test. She wanted to know if the word Dr. Lancaster said, "concussed," had anything to do with bad words. Me and Uncle Tony

laughed, told her it had to do with a concussion, then we had to tell her that neither of us knew exactly what a concussion was. It was the first night that I tried to make small talk at dinner. Momly was always good at starting conversations at the table, even if Uncle Tony was better at stealing them. He couldn't start them, though. And silent dinner was killing me, so I tried to.

"Y'know, the other day I got into it with this girl," I said, pulling another slice of pizza from the box. "At practice." Not sure where it came from. Probably just thinking about how good practice went with me and the girls today, and how sucky it went on Tuesday. I glanced at Maddy, and she was in full-blown cheese mode. It was like eating pizza clogged her ears. She would take a bite, then stare at the slice as if it was talking to her, telling her how delicious it was.

"What? Who?" Uncle Tony perked up, tightened his eyes. "Why?"

"Just this girl, Krystal. I didn't bother tellin' nobody about it because we squashed it," I explained. "But she called Momly my 'white mother' and I just, like . . . lost it."

Uncle Tony slurped the hot cheese, then set what was left of his slice down. Grabbed a napkin, cleaned the grease from his hands and mouth.

"That made you mad?" he asked. "I mean, I know Emily's not your mother, but did that girl saying you had a white mom really offend you?"

I chewed on crust. Chewed and chewed, thinking. Thinking about . . . everything. I swallowed, shook my head.

"Nah, not really. It wasn't that. I was more mad that she said it like she knew our family. Our situation." I glanced at Maddy again. She was nibbling like a rabbit, which meant she was now listening. Didn't matter. She needed to hear this part. "So I had to defend us. I had to defend Momly." Maddy looked at me. I looked at Uncle Tony. He nodded and picked his pizza back up.

"You know, Emily would've told you not to get into no mess with nobody over her. She would've said she doesn't need you to defend her, because she's the adult and it's her job to defend you."

"Yeah, I know. She probably would've got on the phone and snitched on me to Ma."

Uncle Tony snorted. "And what you think Bev woulda said?" He took another bite of his pizza.

I thought for a moment, ripping the crust in my hand open to pick the soft white bread out of the crunchy part. I glanced back up and shrugged, bread

between my fingers like a pinch of cotton. "Probably woulda yelled at me."

"Concussed you out," Uncle Tony joked. "Just like she's gonna do me since I forgot to call her and tell her about everything that happened today."

I tossed the bread in my mouth, chewed. "Yeah, but then she probably would've told me she was proud of me."

To that, Uncle Tony didn't have a follow-up joke, like normal. That was a first. Instead he just said, "I'm proud of you too. Me, Emily, Bev, Ronnie, and little Waffle here"—Maddy bounced her eyebrows at me and flashed a joker-y grin—"we all are."

This was also the first night in a long time someone tucked me in. I don't mean actually tucked me in, but just came and checked on me. I always did it for Maddy, counting her beads, and toward the end of the week when there were fewer to count—and after the accident there were much fewer to count—I would make up all kinds of silly stories until she fell asleep. Lately, they've all been some weird spin-off about Frida. Other times, I would just sit on Maddy's bed and listen to her make up tales herself until she dozed. Crazy ones about what our mother's legs might be doing. Maybe they were dancing in Mexico. Maybe

they were off kicking butt somewhere. "Who knows," Maddy would say. "Ma's legs ain't no junk."

Tonight, though, my uncle came and checked on me. This was after he'd finally spoken to my mother. After my mother talked to Maddy. After she talked to me. After she made my uncle put her on speakerphone so she could pray. After she asked my uncle to take her off speakerphone so she could tell him what she would've done if anything had happened to Maddy, and how dare he take all day to call her. After she asked for Momly's hospital room number. And after she told us she loved us. All of us.

Uncle Tony knocked on the door. I had just finished doing my Frida research for the night and was sitting at my desk, staring into the mirror, wrapping my hair—combing it around my head and pinning it in place before covering it in a scarf, a pretty silk one Ma gave me with stars all over it.

"Come in," I said, tying a knot in the fabric.

"Hey," Uncle Tony said. He was holding an empty plate and kissed me on top of my head, the image of the two of us in the mirror, obviously related. Uncle Tony set the plate on the desk.

"Hey," I said, getting up and climbing into bed. Uncle Tony took a seat on the chair.

"I just wanted to come say good night," he said. "And to let you know I called Skunk, and he's going to help us out with some stuff." He nodded, awkwardly, before finally just saying, "And . . . I wanted to check on you. How you doing with everything going on? School isn't your favorite place, Momly's going through what she's going through, track is stressful, I'm sure, and Maddy, I know can be a handful because she's got your mother in her." He smirked just for a second.

"I'm cool."

"Yeah?" He didn't seem surprised by my answer, but he leaned in anyway and asked, "You sure?" He looked at me like he could see that thing on my face that Becca saw. That I saw in hers. That look that says I got thoughts somewhere I can't get to. Under-thoughts.

But what was I supposed to say? I mean, I was fine because I had to be.

"Yeah, I'm sure, why?" I faked, but before he could call me on it, I changed the subject, which, when I think about it, might be one of my hidden talents. "What's the plate for?"


"Oh," Uncle Tony said as if he had forgotten about it. He reached behind his back and grabbed it, then sat right beside me. "Well . . . I was wondering if maybe you would have a cupcake with your uncle." He extended

the plate to me. "Go on. Your ma won't know, and you better not tell Momly or Maddy on me." A wink and a grin.

I gave him a blank stare. Folded my arms across my chest.

"Go on," he nudged. "For me." I sighed, bit down on my lip, and pretended to pick up a cupcake. Held the invisible cupcake to my lips, took a bite.

"Good, right?" Uncle Tony said, doing the same, his eyes starting to water. "Strawberry." I kept my hand to my mouth, now covering it. *Keep it together. Come on, Patty. Keep it together.* But I couldn't. I couldn't help but think about my life without my little sister, without Momly. My life without my mother, or uncle. And even though I was grateful for all of them, I wondered how my life would be different if my dad had just . . . woke up. Why couldn't he have just woke up? If he was here, I could just be . . . regular. But I couldn't speak. Couldn't say nothing. So I just nodded at my uncle, who was now wiping tears from his own cheeks, and swallowed my pretend cupcake. And then, it all burst out of me. All those stupid tears I'd been cramming back finally broke loose. I cried me a flood.



The next morning I didn't send Ma a smiley-face text like I normally did. But that's because Uncle Tony took off work—something that never happened—so that he could fill in for Momly and take Ma to the hospital dialysis unit to get her blood cleaned. And because Momly was in the same hospital, I convinced Uncle Tony to take me and Maddy with him.

It was super early, like around six thirty in the morning, when we left the house and piled into Uncle Tony's SUV. There were papers all over the backseat, half-full cups of coffee in the cup holders, and a few french fries—hard yellow twigs—that must've been there forever on the passenger seat, wedged between the cushions. His SUV didn't smell like clean. It didn't have that nose-itchy scent that we were used to in Momly's car. It still smelled poisonous, but not the good kind.

When we pulled up in front of Ma's house, our other house, Maddy ran to the door like usual.

"Once, Maddy," I reminded her.

"I know!" she shot over her shoulder, pushing the doorbell. "Coming," Ma said through the wood. The sound of locks unlocking. Ma opened the door and pushed on the screen door, which I held open so Maddy could get her hug, which was extra-extra-long



this morning. Then I gave Ma a kiss on the cheek and wheeled her out to the car. I mean . . . SUV. Uh-oh. I hadn't thought about the fact that Uncle Tony didn't drive a regular car. A car like Momly's. One that Ma could hoist herself into. So as I pulled up to the passenger side, Uncle Tony hopped out of the SUV and came around to help.

"Hey, Bev," he said, opening the passenger door.

"Hey, Toon," Ma said, looking up at him. She reached up, took a chunk of his arm between her fingers, and pinched.

"Ouch!" Uncle Tony yelped.

"That was for taking so long to call me yesterday!" Ma growled. "And by the way, you look terrible in the morning."

"You don't look so great yourself." He gave it right back, smirking.

"Yeah, but I got dirty blood. What's your excuse?" Ma grinned like—won! She has the best smile.

"My wife is in the hospital," Uncle Tony deadpanned. His face changed, and Ma knew that even though she was trying to lighten the situation, the joke was over.

"Sorry, Tony. I don't . . . I don't mean to be insensitive. I'm so sorry this had to happen to Emily, of all people."

"Nothing to be sorry for. It's just a concussion and a broken arm. But it could've been worse." Uncle Tony glanced at Maddy. Ma did too.

We had to go. No time for jokes, and no time for tears, because Ma had to get to dialysis, and we had to make sure we got to the hospital before Momly went into surgery.

First we had to get Ma in the SUV, and when I say we, I really mean Uncle Tony.

"Come on, let's get you up here," he said, lifting her from the chair like a baby. He set her in the seat the same way my dad used to do me. I gotta admit it was weird seeing Ma be lifted up. Be held like that. And he lifted her out of the SUV just as carefully when we got to the hospital. I'd already pulled her chair from the back and unfolded it, ready to roll.

"First stop, Emily's room," Ma commanded. But we made a pit stop in the dialysis unit first. It was a room with a bunch of people sitting around hooked up to machines. Some were missing a foot, or a leg, just like Ma. Others looked pretty regular. It was like a blood-cleaning club, complete with magazines and newspapers, but most people were looking up at a TV screen showing one of those early morning shows like *Good Morning America*. They had some lady on there

demonstrating how to cut a pineapple into the shape of an owl.

"Shoot, by the time I do all that, I could've just ate the doggone fruit!" a woman wearing a blue hat was saying as we came farther into the room. Her silver hair was stuffed under it, wisps sticking out the sides like she was hiding an old cat up there. She noticed my mother. "Hey, Bev."

"Hey, Theresa." Then Ma spoke to everyone else in the room. "Hey, y'all. These my babies, Patty and Maddy."

Everyone did that weird whiny thing grown-ups do when they meet kids they've been hearing about. I'm surprised one of them didn't ask me how track was going. I knew they knew I ran. Both my mothers talk too much.

"And this my brother-in-law, Tony. Emily's husband." I learned then that the whiny thing isn't just for kids, but also for adults that adults had been hearing about. "Y'all know Emily's in here? She's upstairs. Got in a car accident yesterday."

"No," Theresa moaned, in shock.

"She's okay, she's okay," Uncle Tony said, doing the *calm down* hands. He gave my mother the *really?* face. That's the face you give people when you wanna say,

*You really just gon' air my business out in the streets like that? Um . . . this is Beverly Jones. The queen of the air-out.*

"She's okay, but she needs y'all's prayers anyway," Momly said. They all nodded, except for one old man who had nodded off. "Anyway, I'm gonna go up and see her right quick, and then I'll be back. Save my seat." The lady, Theresa, nodded and patted the seat next to hers.

When we got upstairs to Momly's room, Uncle Tony went in first.

"Good morning," he said softly.

"Hey, sweetie." Momly was sitting up, spooning clumps of oatmeal from a bowl. Uncle Tony gave her a smooch. "Who you got with you?" Maddy crept in. And me. "Oh, hey, sweeties." Then her voice quickly zipped from sweet to sour. "Tony, why aren't they in school?"

"Don't worry, they'll make it there. Even if I gotta roll 'em there myself," Ma said, rolling into the room, purposely making an entrance. *Beverly Jones. The queen of entrances.* She planned the whole thing in the elevator on the way up.

Momly laughed. "Hey, Bev." Ma wheeled up next to her bed. Grabbed her hand. The one connected to the unbroken arm.

"How you feeling, Em?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine."

"You ain't that fine if my knucklehead brother-in-law had to pick me up." Then she leaned in and said just loud enough for all of us to hear. "His SUV is filthy."

Momly closed-mouth laughed. "I know."

"Hey!" Uncle Tony squawked. "I mean . . . it got you here, didn't it?"

"Yep, it sure did get me here. It also got me a two-year-old stale french fry stuck to my butt." At this, Momly couldn't contain herself and let out a belly laugh. It was so loud that it caught me off guard. I don't know if I'd ever seen her laugh like that. She also seemed super rested. Just, like, chillin' in the hospital.

"Sounds like the morning is starting off on the right foot." Another man's voice came from the door. It was Dr. Lancaster. He came into the room, shook Uncle Tony's hand.

"Dr. Lancaster, this is Beverly Jones." Ma turned her chair, shook the doctor's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Jones." Then he stood by the head of the bed.

"And how are you today, young lady?" he said to Momly.

"Hangin' in there. My head feels a little better, that's for sure."

The doctor nodded. "And you all?" he addressed me and Maddy.

"Good."

"Good."

"Great." He put his hands together. "So, Emily, I'm going to give you the rundown of what's going to happen. In a few minutes a young man named Terrence will arrive to transport you to the operating room. I will be there waiting along with two others, Dr. Morris and Dr. Fisk. Nice folks, talented surgeons. There will also be an anesthesiologist there, named Patricia." The doctor paused and pointed at me. "Patty, right?" I nodded. "Short for Patricia?"

"Patina." I was used to people doing that.

"Ah. Patina. That's a pretty name. Different."

"Thanks."

"Dr. Lancaster, can we make sure Patricia knocks me completely out?" Momly asked. "I don't want to feel anything."

Dr. Lancaster laughed. "That's the plan. And once you're out cold, which will take all of seven seconds, we'll get in there and fix you right up."

"And then she can come home?" Maddy asked, eager.

Dr. Lancaster squatted. "Not quite. We need to

watch her overnight to make sure there's no funny business. But I don't see why she can't go home tomorrow. How's that sound?"

Maddy nodded.

"Well, I'll be here to get you as soon as we get word," Uncle Tony said to Momly.

"Me too," I said.

Momly shot me down fast. "Oh no you won't. Because you have to run."

"I don't have—"

"You do," Momly insisted. "You're going to your track meet, where you should be. There's no use in you coming back up here worrying about me."

I looked at Ma for a bailout. But all she said was, "Don't look at me. You heard her."

"Track, huh?" Dr. Lancaster asked.

"Yeah, she's a fast one. Got them legs from me." Ma shined.

"Absolutely," Momly double-teamed.

"That's terrific," the doctor said. "My grandson is a runner. I've never seen him race, and honestly, he doesn't strike me as fast, but he tells me he runs, so . . ." Dr. Lancaster shrugged. Checked his watch. "Terrence should be here," he muttered, just as we heard a knock at the door. "And there he is." Dr.

Lancaster grinned. "The kid is like clockwork."

Terrence, who I just need to say was fifty times better than any boy on the Defenders team or at Barnaby Middle, or . . . ever, let Momly know it was time for me, Maddy, Uncle Tony, and Ma to say good-bye.

"Send us all a text when you make it out of surgery," I said, ironing the wrinkles out of my khaki skirt with my palms.

"A smiley face, just a little something," Ma suggested, followed by hugs, kisses, and of course, a prayer. (Ma told Terrence he'd better bow his head.) And then we were on our way back to the elevator, but to different floors: Momly to the operating room, and us to the dialysis unit—Uncle Tony would come back for Ma in three hours—and me and Maddy were back in Uncle Tony's dirt-mobile, headed to school.

At Chester, Uncle Tony walked us to the office to get our lateness excused, and then I wandered down the empty hall toward locker 172. I had already missed most of first period but grabbed my English book anyway. By the time I got to Mr. Winston's class, he was wrapping up his usual theatrics and a weeklong lesson, explaining the final stanza of the poem.



*"When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
All the world wonder'd.  
Honour the charge they made,  
Honour the Light Brigade,*

"Noble six hundred," he recited, his voice breathy like he was having the most poetic asthma attack of all time. "Is that not beautiful?" Everyone just kinda stared at Mr. Winston, which to most folks would mean, *Leave us alone*. But not to teachers. To teachers, when no one looks interested, that means ask more questions. "Can anyone tell me what they think this means?" asked Mr. Winston now.

The whole class became mannequins, which is the standard move for *please don't call on me*. But for some reason, even though I was late to class, I was feeling bold. Funny thing is, even though I thought Mr. Winston was a weirdo, I actually kinda got this poem, mainly because of church. See, it was that one Bible verse—which is actually like reading one long poem—that Pastor Carter said all the time . . . alllll the time, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." It was his go-to, and whenever he said it, the whole church bugged out. And this

Light Brigade poem started the same way—charging into the valley of death. So . . . yeah, I got it. Got it so much I even raised my hand.

“Patina,” Mr. Winston called on me, surprised. I put my pen top in my mouth, chewed on it for a second, then answered.

“It’s basically saying that their bravery should be honored. That they did what they had to do, and they did it together, even though it seemed almost impossible to win.”

The bell rang.

“Exactly,” Mr. Winston said over the clatter of chairs scraping the floor and backpacks zipping. “Now, onward to enjoy your weekends, my noble six hundred!”

In math I spent the entire time thinking about how Momly’s arm was probably at an obtuse angle when it broke. Maybe 230 degrees. That’s if it snapped backward, which made the most sense to me. I also thought about the 180-degree turn I was going to make as soon as I saw T-N-T. Let them know that I ain’t gonna be buffing the floor by myself anymore. That I ain’t no junk. The floor being the Frida assignment, of course. Maybe math actually was good for something. Somehow convincing yourself to stand up to hair flippers (and fake

flippers), understanding bone-breaking angles, and estimating how long it would take to eat three (hundred) tacos.

Lunchtime. Friday's menu: tacos. Pick your meat. Chicken, beef, or shrimp. Pick your shell. Hard or soft. Cheese, shredded or liquid. Lettuce, tomato, sour cream, salsa. Three tacos, \$4.25. Everybody's favorite.

I didn't do no lunchroom laps today. Instead I just got my food and headed to the table where Becca and Macy and Sasha and the others were sitting. The table I'd been sitting at two days in a row, well, except for yesterday. I slipped in next to Sasha, lifted one of my tacos, and bit it in half.

"So what did I miss yesterday, Becca?" I asked. I was prepping to deliver the blow, that I, Patina Jones, was done being the Frida Leader. I was sick of it, and I didn't put up with this on my track team, so I was definitely not putting up with it at this school. TO DO: put T-N-T on notice that the Frida Freebies were a wrap. Dunzo. Becca, who was holding her taco like it was a grenade about to explode hot sauce and lettuce, widened her eyes.

"Oh, I was about to tell you. Ms. Lanford changed the rules," she said. Sauce was dribbling out of the end of the taco and onto her hand. Newbie!

"Changed the rules?"

"Yeah. She's not grading us all together anymore. We all are responsible for different parts of the project. That way it's fair, y'know?" Becca explained. She put down her taco and dabbed a napkin to her hand. "I think it's better this way." Then she flashed a sneaky grin. *Um . . . me too, Becca. Me too*, I thought. But there was something about that look on her face that made me want to thank her. Made me think she had something to do with it. Anyway, this was great news. And it made Friday even better, and I don't know if it was the combination of it all, or what, but I was suddenly feeling . . . I don't know. Like I had some kind of magical thing happening in me. This must be how Maddy felt all the time. Strong in a special way.

Once I got to history class, guess who spoke to me first. Guess. You get two chances, and one clue. They got almost the same name.

"Hi, Patty," Taylor said as I came into the room. Caught me off guard.

"Hey, Taylor." I didn't put no funk in it. Not even when TeeTee spoke. No need to be mean to them. Plus, I understood what it felt like to want to fit in. Or at least to feel like you "fit out." I don't know if I would've been fronting like them, but I get it.

"Welcome back, Miss Jones," Ms. Lanford said as I sat down. "I'm sure your group members will be happy to see you, especially since I've adjusted the rules."

"Becca told me." I tried to keep from grinning.

"Good. You will still have to give a group presentation, but now each of you will have to cover a specific part of the life of your subject. I got word that not everyone has been pulling their weight, so I wanted to make sure I'm giving fair grades."

I was psyched, I'm talking totally gassed about this. But once we got into our groups, I discovered the other girls had already chosen which parts they wanted. TeeTee chose Frida's love affair with Diego, no surprise there, though judging by Taylor's face, there had been some drama over that choice. Taylor, I guess because her first choice was taken, decided to go with Frida's death. Becca was going to talk about the art, which I would've loved to talk about since I was the one who had been doing so much research on it. But it was okay. Becca was . . . she was cool. So that left me to talk about Frida's childhood, which to be honest, I was fine with because I already knew so much about it, including the newest thing I'd learned the night before, that after Frida was diagnosed with polio, which messed up her right leg, giving her a limp, her father encouraged her

to play sports—soccer, even wrestling—even though girls didn't really do that back then. He thought it would be good for her leg, but turned out what it was really good for was her confidence. And I kept thinking about that, not just in class, but for the rest of the day—that that's kinda what running was to me. A way to shut people up. A way to . . . I guess, sometimes even shut myself up. Just turn it all off. Leave everything, all the hurting stuff, the unregular stuff that seemed so regular to me, in the dust.

# 15

**TO DO:** The family thing (beads, bedtime stories, and . . . back to turkey wings, of course)

**MOMLY TEXTED ME** a smiley face at almost the exact same time me and Maddy climbed into Uncle Tony's SUV after school. I knew she had planned it that way—Momly plans everything—to make sure I wouldn't be checking my phone in class when I heard the *ding*. I showed it to Maddy, and she smiled big-time.

"Hold that pose," I told her, and snapped a photo of her—head cocked, big gappy-mouthed cheese—and texted the photo back to Momly.

"Are we going to go see her tonight?" I asked Uncle Tony. "Especially since I don't have practice."

"Actually, I think it'd be better if you girls waited until tomorrow," Uncle Tony said, turning his blinker on so he could pull out into the street. He looked to the right and to the left, to the right and to the left again, being extra careful, waiting for the coast to be clear. "She's pretty spacey right now since she's on heavy-duty pain meds since it's the first day. When I spoke to her earlier, she was talking about putting beads on her fingernails."

"On her *fingernails*?" Maddy cried out.

"See what I mean? Painkillers can be a zonk; sometimes it's just best to give people a rest day."

"So tomorrow then?" Maddy pushed.

"Hmmm. I'm pretty sure she's going to come home tomorrow," he explained, finally turning.

"Can we go pick her up with you?" Maddy followed up, the *thump, thump* of her feet in my back.

"Well." Uncle Tony gave me a look. "Skunk's gonna do me a favor and take y'all to the track. Patty has to run." He looked at me to make sure that was okay, and I nodded to let him know that it was.

"But I don't." Maddy made her point clear.

"Don't you wanna see Patty race?" Uncle Tony asked.

"Yeah, but maybe we can pick Momly up first,"



Maddy pushed more. I reached back and gave her knee a squeeze.

"Maybe," Uncle Tony said. "The thing is, Patty's meet starts in the morning, and Momly's told me a million times that usually hospital discharge stuff takes a while, so people aren't usually released until early afternoon. That's the way it normally goes. Doctors drag their feet and take their sweet time." Maddy pouted in the back, while Uncle Tony took *his* sweet time driving us home.

That night I called my mother and asked her to help me make turkey wings. Yes . . . turkey wings. Uncle Tony had been married to Momly for forever and never knew how to cook much of nothing, which was ridiculous to me. He would've ordered takeout, but I just felt like we needed to have a real meal. Have something regular. A reminder that we were fine. Plus, I wanted to make sure I was ready to really help Momly when she came home, even though Uncle Tony kept saying he had it covered. I mean, don't get me wrong, the driving thing was all him, and lifting Ma up, and all that, but I was just doing my part. Teamwork. Ha! I almost said, *Team wing*, which I guess works too.

So I called Ma for a practice run, and she walked me through how to make turkey wings in a way that

definitely wasn't Momly's way—Momly put hers in the oven, but Ma told me to put mine in a pan on the stove. I was scared they were going to taste like bacon, because that's how Ma had me cooking them—but they still tasted like turkey. Either way, Maddy and Uncle Tony devoured them, Uncle Tony, of course, being silly, eating his with a fork and knife like it was something fancy.

"Goor-met Tur-Kay Wangs," he kept saying, struggling trying to cut around the bones.

After dinner, Maddy and I did our nighttime routine. And because it was Friday—five days after I did her hair—it didn't take long.

"Okay, let me see." I fingered through her hair, counting each red plastic . . . cylinder? I guess they were kinda like cylinders. Math! "Looks like you have thirty beads left. You started with ninety."

"That's not bad!" Maddy whooped. And it actually wasn't, especially since it was such a crazy week. There'd actually been weeks when by Friday, Maddy would be beardless. I always figured during those weeks she was purposely taking the foil off the ends of her braids and shaking them out for fun. I had never confirmed it, but it seemed like something she'd do.

"Nope, pretty good!" I agreed, squished up beside

her in her tiny bed. Her room, so Maddy, full of weird-looking brown dolls with yarn hair and scary-movie eyes. She named them all Addison. Also a stuffed giraffe that was bigger than her, that Uncle Tony won for her at a carnival. She named him Giraddison. Of course. And taped to the walls were a whole bunch of pictures of our family. Some were photographs—Momly always went nuts with pictures, and Uncle Tony always went nuts with camera filters, and together they had the nerve to get cell phone pictures printed—and some were drawings. Crayon on construction paper of smiling pink mother, smiling brown mother with no legs, smiling little girl with big muscles and red circles all over her head, smiling man, and giant girl with shorts and jersey. That was me. But I wasn't smiling. I looked cool, but, weird, everyone else was smiling. Huh. Then there were pictures of legs. Just legs playing kickball, or legs holding hands, which I thought was kinda funny. But my favorite one was of me, Cotton, Maddy, and Momly, with Ma floating above us, just a head and torso, and above her, for some reason Maddy had scribbled, *Merry J Blyj*.

"I'm gonna tell you a story," Maddy said, fluffing her pillow. "It's a good-luck story, about a lady who

almost lost her arm, but a girl saved it because she had thirty magic beads."

"Magic beads, huh?" I propped myself up on my elbow.

"Yep, they . . . they . . ." She was thinking of the next part. "When the girl runs around, the beads go *clickety-clickety-clickety* and that's like a magic spell that heals things. It's like a special hairstyle."

"And did the beads have to be a certain color for this spell to work?"

"Well . . ." Maddy smiled. And before she could even finish the story, I kissed her cheek and told her I loved her more than all the cupcakes in the world.

The next morning I startled awake, still in Maddy's bed, my body cramped, her face two inches from mine, her eyes wide open, willing my eyes open.

"Uncle Tony said Momly can come home at noon!" she blurted, way too early, and way too close to my face. Not even a good morning. Maddy might be a YMBC too.

"Okay," I said, groggy.

"So Skunk gonna take us to your meet, while Uncle Tony gets Momly."

"Okay." This was basically what Uncle Tony had

already prepped us for. No new information.

"You think he might bring Momly to the track after he picks her up?"

"Hmmm, not if she's in pain, Maddy. I doubt it." I hadn't really thought much about the pain Momly might be in. I mean, I know the medicine is probably pretty strong, but still.

"She's still gonna be in pain?" Maddy said, the tone of her voice diving into concern.

"I don't know. I hope not. I'm sure she'll be okay." Then I repeated the same things, this time to myself, in my own head, to convince myself Momly was all right.

*I don't know. I hope not. I'm sure she'll be okay.*

"But she might be in pain, right?" Maddy doubled down, like she always does.

I moaned, long and loud, like a train horn. "Maddy, I don't know. I'm still sleep." I rolled over and snatched the sheet over my head.

"But you not sleep because you talkin' to me," Maddy said.

And she was right, I wasn't sleep no more. But I also had to get my mind right for the meet. I took a shower, then sat down at my vanity desk to do my Flo Jos and hair. For my nails, I was going to paint

different-color squiggles all over them. It's just part of my good-luck thing. And I could use a little of that. Plus, they made me feel fly. Like Flo Jo.

Now for my hair. Here's the thing: usually for the meets I either snatch it back into a ponytail, or I comb it straight and leave it out, also like Flo Jo. But today, after I was sure my nails were dry, I reached up and grabbed a chunk of hair, split it into thirds, and started braiding. Starting with the front, I worked the left side, then the right, and then after about thirty-five minutes all I had left was the back, which was always the hardest part to do myself.

"Maddy!" I yelled. She didn't come, so I yelled again. She was probably in the kitchen, eating breakfast and watching cartoons. Everybody left me alone on meet days because they knew I had my rituals—hair, nails, begging for Flo Jo to give me some of her magic from heaven. Oh man, I really am a YMBC. The sound of Maddy's feet came skittering toward my door. "You called me?" she asked, knowing full well that I called her.

"Yeah, come in," I said, combing my fingers through the patch of hair left on the back of my neck. Maddy opened the door, and her eyes went wide. My hair was braided up just like hers. "You like it?" I asked.

Maddy grinned. "Yeah." She came over to me, pinched the ends of a few of my plaits, then patted my edges as if she was touching up my baby hair. "You did a good job."

"Well, I'm glad you approve." I shook my head.

"But you missed a spot." Maddy noticed the unbraided bit in the back. "Unless that's the way you want it." She shrugged.

My face went flat.

"What? It might be a new style."

"It's not." I grabbed the comb off the desk and used the corner of it to pick through my kitchen—the back of my neck—again. "And I need you to braid it up for me."

"I can't braid."

"Yes, you can," I said, calling her bluff. I knew Maddy could braid because I taught her, and plus, she braided her dolls' hair all the time. Now, she wasn't very good, but she could get the job done.

"But not as good as you," she argued.

"Yeah, well, maybe I want a Maddy braid. Maybe that's my new style."

Maddy didn't look convinced. "You sure?" she asked, now running her own fingers through it.

"Waffle, if you don't braid my hair—"

"Okay, okay!" she said, focusing in. I watched her through the mirror, the tip of her tongue sticking out of her mouth, concentrating, weaving the hair slowly, trying her best not to mess up. Ten minutes later, "Finished."

I ran my hand back there. Three of the fattest, loosest braids I'd ever had.

"They're perfect," I said. Maddy crossed her arms across her chest, all cocky. All that. I laughed. "Now it's time for beads." I opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out the can.

"You putting beads on 'em?"

"Yep."

"What color?"

"Hmm." I pretended to be thinking. "I think I'm gonna go with red."

"Good choice."

"But I'm only gonna put thirty on there. That's it," I said, popping the top off the can.

"Only thirty?"

"Yeah, only thirty. Thirty red, good luck, magic beads. Just like you got."





**TO DO:** Nothing (but win)

**I HADN'T REALLY** thought about the fact that I wasn't going to have a parent at the track meet until the doorbell rang, and it was time to go. Before that, I was just focused on getting myself together. But now that Skunk had arrived, it hit me that when I looked out into the stands, Momly wouldn't be there. Uncle Tony wouldn't be there either.

But Maddy would. And when I opened the door, I found out Cotton surprised me by coming too! Cotton! I thought she was coming home from her cruise the next day, but she showed up a day early.

"I got so much tea to spill!" I said, throwing my arms around her. And instead of us immediately going in about everything, she whispered, "We'll talk later. There's somebody else here to see you."

I looked past Cotton, and there was a head full of tight curls poking out the passenger side window, a sly grin on her face. "You ready, Pancake?"

"Ma? What are you . . ." I was so surprised I could barely speak. I mean, she never came to my meets. Not because she didn't want to but because she was always so drained from the blood cleaning and Saturday was her only real recuperating day, and she needed to save up her energy for church on Sunday.

"Yeah, you ready, Pancake?" Cotton repeated.

"Shut up," I said, giving Cotton another hug. Then I ran over to give Ma a kiss on the cheek.

Uncle Tony came to the door with Maddy. Peered over at me standing at the passenger side of Skunk's car, my mother's face still out the window. "Bev? What a surprise!" he exclaimed. I shot my eyes at him: that goofy look on his face was a dead giveaway that he set this whole thing up. "What?" he said to me, his shoulders lifted to his ears. Then he waved me over so he could give me one. With his arms around me, he whispered in my ear, "I hope you've been practicing

the Running Man, like I showed you." Then he released me and did a quick two-second dance that looked like he was being electrocuted.

I told him I hadn't been practicing that—how to look ridiculous—and as he walked me and Maddy (and Cotton) to the car, he assured me that we could work on it some more later that evening when Momly got back. Then Ma told Uncle Tony that even though she had to tell Skunk to turn his music down because "ain't nobody trying to go deaf with all that boom, boom, boom," at least his car was clean.

"And cleanliness is next to godliness," she plucked at Uncle Tony as he closed the back door after Maddy and me climbed in. Maddy had to sit on the hump, between me and Cotton, my duffel bag on my lap. These people. They were my constellation, or however Becca was saying it. The dots all connected.

"I know, Bev. I know." Uncle Tony bent down and looked through the passenger-side window, past Ma over to Skunk in the driver's seat. "You remember what I told you yesterday on the phone?"

"Yeah, I got it, Mr. Tony," Skunk said with that same annoyed voice that all of us get around naggy oldheads. "The speed limit."

"Not. One. Mile. Over it."

On the way to the park, Ma (who was sipping from a big cup of coffee) and Skunk talked about how Skunk was having a hard time finding a job, while Cotton and Maddy were doing their Maddy fo-faddy game. They were also yapping about how nice my hair looked, especially those three braids in the back.

"She looks so chic, like a throwback Serena Williams," Cotton said, trying to be funny, but Maddy didn't get the joke, and loves Serena Williams (who doesn't?), so she just whipped toward me and blurted out, "Yeah! You do look like a throwback Serena, Patty." Skunk and Ma paused their conversation and had a good laugh at that. But I ain't have time for all this jokey-jokey. I needed to get focused. Especially since Ma—Ma!—was going to see me run.

The park was teeming with parents and friends, runners and coaches. But I was going to do my best to block out all the noise on the outside, and all the noise on the inside. I was here for one reason. To win.

And so was Cotton.

"You think if I wink at Lu on the track, he'll wink back?" Cotton asked.

"What? Are you serious? I can't do this right now, Cotton." I said that, but of course I still did it. "You

think Lu is gonna be able to see you wink?" I pulled Ma's wheelchair out of Skunk's trunk. Unfolded it. Maddy held my duffel bag and looked out at the track.

"Uh, Patty, have you seen these lashes? Yeah, I think he'll be able to see me wink."

"He won't. Trust me. When you're on the track, the only thing you're looking at are the runners around you, and the finish line. I mean, sometimes I can see family, but still. He might not even look up in your direction." I wheeled the chair to the side, while Ma balanced herself and slowly slid onto the seat.

"Well, even if he don't see it, he'll feel it and it'll still be good luck," Cotton said low so my mother wouldn't hear.

"Then wink at me, too."

"Patty, please. Maddy already told me you got all the good luck you need," she teased, flicking one of my beaded braids. "And don't forget, if you win, you gotta strut off the track like Mary." Cotton did a few power steps, MJB style.

"I got it, Pancake," Ma interjected as I tried to push her. "You get over there to your team."

"Ma, it's grass and other stuff over there. I'll push you."

"Patty, go. We here to support you. Not for you to

worry about us. I got Skunky here if I need help. Ain't that right?"

"Yeah, I got her, Patty." Skunk hit the alarm on his car. *Bloop-bloop!*

"So give me a hug." Ma spread her arms out. I leaned into her, pressed my lips to her cheek again. She whispered, "Remember, you ain't no junk." She grabbed my hands and it was like she whispered electricity into me, my insides fluttering in a weird way. I couldn't help but cheese. I couldn't help but stand up straighter, roll my shoulders back like Momly always be saying, and if she was here, she would've said it again. To walk like there's nothing on my back. No weight. And today, that's what I felt like. Then, and I didn't see this coming, Ma glanced down at my fingers. And then the glance became a stare. My nails! Uh-oh. And I snatched my hands from her with the quickness and tried to get going.

"Let's go, y'all," I said, scurrying and rallying Cotton and Maddy, taking my bag back from her. And as the three of us headed toward the park, Ma called out to me.

"Patina!" No. No. Please, not right now. Not today. Not here. Not before the race. I turned around, because if I didn't, it was only going to be worse. "I like your

nails." She smiled wide, still rolled her eyes just a little, and wiggled her fingers in the air.

I threw my duffel back over my shoulder and we headed toward all the action, my face feeling like a bright star.

"Okay, Defenders, here we are, back on the battleground—" Coach was starting strong on his windup speech, when he glanced at me. I was sitting on my butt doing butterfly stretches with the rest of the team. "Nice hair, Patty. Different," he said, which of course caused a few giggles, the loudest coming from corny Curron. Whatever. "The lineup will be the same as it was last week, which means relays are up first." First? We were up first? My mind flashed to last week's meet. Not just the whole second-place thing, but also the fact that during the girls' 4x800 relay, one team dropped the baton. Yikes.

After stretching, we went over to the benches, got our last-minute jitters out by adjusting our jerseys and tightening the drawstrings on our shorts. I checked my nails. No chips yet even after fooling with that wheelchair. Flo Jo perfect.

Mrs. Margo, Coach's wife, started handing out Gatorades. Lu's mom, who'd been talking to my mom,

was now bopping over with a Tupperware full of orange slices. "Hey, everybody!" she sang out. She been doing this—the oranges—since me and Lu ran for the Sparks. Then she was holding the container out toward me. "Hey, Patty-Patty." Her voice only got scary-sounding when she was cheering for Lu. "Lu told me your auntie was in the hospital. Just talked to your mom about it. You know you can always come see me if you need to. I know you don't live as close anymore, but I'm still Mrs. Richardson. You and Cotton still my girls."

I nodded thanks and waved off the oranges. I can't eat oranges before a race. Too nervous.

But at least I wasn't *first* first. Boys' 4x800 was. Curron, Mikey, Eric, and Freddy took the track and the rest of us erupted in cheers. They huddled together for a quick talk, and then Freddy headed to the starting line. The other guys stood by the side of the track until their leg was up. I watched closely, my heart kicking as if I was already out there. Freddy stretched his arms over his head, did a few jumps, readying himself. The other runners around him were doing the same. Then . . .

On your mark, get set . . . *Bang!*

They were off, Freddy keeping pace with the pack. No one broke out on the first lap, but on the second,



Freddy and a kid from another team started to lead out. Mikey took his position on the starting line as Freddy rounded the final bend of the second lap and was about to take the straightaway. He was still neck and neck with the other kid. I glanced over at Coach, who had one finger in his mouth, gnawing on a nail. The red zone was coming up. The handoff.

Now people began shouting at the top of their lungs as Freddy came charging into the handoff zone and Mikey broke out. We couldn't hear him call "Stick!" but he must have because Mikey threw his arm back and two seconds later had the baton. The other teams did it the regular way, sort of, sidestepping and waiting for the runner to hand them the stick before taking off. Our coaches were right. This blind handoff would be the game changer.

By the time the other second legs got their batons, Mikey had taken the lead. And his handoff to Eric was just as smooth, as was Eric's to Curron, too. The other teams didn't stand a chance; our boys smoked everyone. After we all finished screaming and cheering, I looked down the line at Coach. His finger was out of his mouth, and he was nodding. He caught my eye. *You ready?* he mouthed. Then he waved me and the other three girls over.

"Next up, the girls' 4x800 meter relay," the announcer said over the loudspeaker.

"Y'all ready?" Coach this time asking all four of us. Whit, beside him, her hands behind her back, had a serious mug on her face. "This is rhythm, connection, and timing. Just like we practiced," she reminded us. "This is nothing but the waltz."

"Be there for each other," Coach added the last word, eye-lasering us.

We hit the track. The bleachers started stomping and cheering, each section for a different team or a different person. Me, Krystal, Brit-Brat, and Deja huddled up. "Let's show 'em how we dance, y'all," Krystal said, fierce. She looked at me and grinned. "Leave our legs on the track." Oh yeah.

"Wipe the floor with 'em. Together," I snarled.

Deja was up first. She didn't do any extra stretches. Just went out there, looked every other runner up and down, then took her place in lane three. She ran her tongue over her teeth like a wolf ready to feast. Slapped the baton against her leg a few times, then got set. And . . .

*Bang!*

Deja jumped out in front of everyone. Zipped from the third lane to the first in a matter of seconds.

Too fast. Too fast. Pace yourself, Deja. But Deja didn't slow up. By the time she hit the second lap, she had a pretty big lead on everyone . . . until the home stretch, when her legs turned to mush. You could literally see her downshifting from the fastest to the slowest.

"Come on, Deja! Come on!" we were calling out, Brit-Brat already in position for the handoff. As Deja fought her way into the red zone, Brit-Brat took off. Deja's face was a grimace—I could almost see her fighting through the cramps, taking one for the team, leaving her legs out there. She pushed through, screaming in pain as she handed the baton to Brit-Brat.

Deja collapsed, and Coach ran out onto the track to help her up. Brit-Brat, however, was able to hold on to what was left of the lead. She ran a steady race, her long ballerina legs graceful, which was ironic since she couldn't stop stepping on my toes during practice. Grace. Such grace. Until the red zone.

"Stick!" Brit-Brat shouted. Krystal had already taken off, and she thrust her arm back to receive the baton. Brit-Brat reached out to give it to her.

Except it slipped out of Brit's hand before it had Krystal's fingers around it.

*Oh . . . God . . .*

The sound of the metal cylinder clanging on the

track could be heard over the howls and groans of people who knew exactly what that sound meant. It seemed like everyone froze, everyone watching it bounce and roll. Really, nobody froze. Brit-Brat scrambled frantically to pick it up, like chasing down a rolling quarter. And once she finally did, Krystal, whose face looked like it was going to literally jump off . . . her face, and who had already run twenty meters, had to backtrack and meet Brit halfway to take the handoff. It was a fumble, and I slammed my hands together. No. *Noooo*.

This was it. We blew it. I shook my head and huffed, so mad that I could've untied my shoes and flung them into the stands. Forget it. But then Deja started going off. And I do mean OFF.

"GO! GOOOO!!!!" Deja screamed, snapping me back into the race. She had gotten up—she left her legs on the track, but now she was jumping and screaming. What was I doing? Coach told me, no matter what, I couldn't check out. I couldn't leave my team hanging. They needed me. Not just my legs. But my support. My energy. We needed each other. I looked behind me. Ghost and Lu were screaming their heads off. Curron, Aaron, and even Mikey were at the edge of the track, punching at the air with their fists, urging Krystal onward. Whit was biting her fist, while Coach

stood next to her, arms across his chest, too cool, just watching.

"GOOOOO!!!" I belted out. I caught Brit-Brat out of the corner of my eye, covering her face as she came over to where we were. I grabbed her—snatched her right up—turned her around, and threw an arm over her shoulder. "It's okay. It's okay. We're still in it. We're still here!"

We kept screaming, but we'd already lost the lead. There were four people in front of us, but Krystal wasn't giving up. And neither would I.

As soon as she hit the back stretch on the second lap, I stepped onto the track. Rolled my neck, right to left, left to right. Stretched my arms behind me, clenched my hands to work out any shoulder and back kinks.

Lane three. I sized up the other girls who were taking their places beside me. Then I looked over and saw Ghost nodding at me and clapping. Sunny next to him doing the same thing. Lu had one of his arms flexed up, making a muscle. He slapped his bicep, then pointed at me. And Coach, still cool, was now looking at me, nodding. Like he knew something I ain't know. Or maybe, something that I actually did know.

*You are strong enough. Your mother's legs. Patina Jones ain't no junk.*

I glanced up at the crowd. At first everyone was a smear of color and sound. Except for a few people. Then a few came into focus. Cotton. I couldn't tell if she was winking or not, but she might've been. I could see Maddy, but even more, I could hear her, hear her screaming my name as if it was just her and me in a tunnel. And next to her, for the first time in forever, was Ma. Her arms raised high in the air, her fingers tickling the sky. I couldn't hear her, but I could see her lips forming a *P. Pancake*. She might've been saying Patty. But she had to be saying Pancake.

TO DO: Just run.

And win.

Here we go.

The other three girls had just made their handoffs when Krystal pounded into the red zone. I broke out and could tell that I was in lockstep with Krystal—in sync.

"Stick! Stick!" she yelled, and I reached my left arm back and grabbed the baton smooth as smooth. From her hand to mine—the energy protected, the power transferred. I opened my stride early to make up for lost time, and it wasn't long before I caught up to the pack, my beads clicking in time with my heartbeat. *Thump-thump-click! Thump-thump-click!* Long Ponytail

was in lane two. Baldy in lane one. Twists in lane four.

Cannon to the right of me! Cannon to the left of me!

We all stayed together coming down the home stretch of the first lap. Now, for the second. Time to make my move. I opened my stride even more. Figured I'd make Long Ponytail, who was shorter than me, work for it. She couldn't hang, and two hundred meters into the lap, she rigged and fell back, as if her legs locked up on her and she had to pull up or something. Like she gave up.

The other two were still with me. Well, actually Baldy was leading Twists and me by a few steps. And as we came down the back stretch and hit that final two hundred, I felt my legs start to stiffen. No! It was like my muscles were turning into wood or something. No!!

*Come on, Patty. Push. Push. Push. Breathe. Thump-thump-click!*

"Come on, Patty," I said out loud.

"Come on, Patty!" I could hear Maddy screeching from the bleachers.

*Thump-thump-click!*

*Final one hundred. The pain. The pain. The pain. Is nothing. You are strong enough. You got your mother's legs.*

The three of us were neck and neck, shoulder to

shoulder, fighting until the end. The batons in our hands like broken sword handles. Warriors. The finish line. Right there. Leave your legs on the track. Heart pounding. Beads clicking in time with my steps, like a clock ticking in my ears.

Or a time bomb.

*Come on, Patty. Come on!*

