

EIGHT

ME AND TY'REE WALKED THE FOUR BLOCKS TO the train station without saying anything. He bought me two tokens using a bunch of change in his pocket. He had a MetroCard for himself since he went to work every day. The MetroCard let him ride the train as much as he liked for just a one-time charge. As he stood there counting out the change, I remembered him and Mama at the dining-room table adding and re-adding and trying to make the money go further than it was likely to go. I stood at the token booth with

my hands in my pockets trying not to notice the people standing in line behind Ty'ree getting impatient.

When the train finally came, I took a seat by the window and stared out at the rainy darkness until the train went back into the tunnel and took us downtown.

I tried not to think about how poor we were, but when we got off at Fourteenth Street and walked up the stairs, all the lights from the stores hit me. There were toys and clothes in the windows and people dressed in nice warm coats and hats or getting out of fancy cars. As we walked along Fourteenth Street, I remembered the first time I realized we were poor. I was in third grade and my teacher gave everybody in the class a letter to take home. When Mama got home from work that night, I gave her the letter and sat beside her on the couch while she read it. I tried to read over her shoulder, but there were a lot of words typed real small. After Mama finished reading the letter, she folded it up—again and again until it was real tiny.

"If your teacher asks about it," she said, taking the letter to the kitchen and putting it in the trash, "you tell her we don't need anybody's Fresh Air Fund. You tell her we appreciate her thoughts though. You hear me, Lafayette?"

I had followed her as far as the kitchen doorway and stood there leaning against it nodding, not sure what she was talking about.

"What's Fresh Air Fund?" I asked.

Mama sighed and started washing the dishes left over from breakfast. She ran some hot water over them then rubbed Ivory soap on a washcloth before answering.

"It's a camp," she said.

"I *want* to go to camp."

"It's a camp for kids whose parents can't afford to send them somewhere else. For poor kids."

I watched Mama wash dishes and let the words sink in.

"Are we *poor*?" I asked.

"Poor enough," Mama said. She scratched her forehead with her soapy hand, then wiped the soap away with her arm. "But not that poor. And we won't always be this way, either."

When I was a baby, we all went to Bayamón, Puerto Rico, for my grandmother's funeral. Ty'ree said Puerto Rico was like what pictures of Paradise look like—all green and warm and pure. Mama always promised we'd go back again one summer when we had enough money.

"We ain't ever gonna have enough money," Charlie had said.

"Yes we will, Charlie," Mama told him. She pressed her hand against his cheek.

"When?" I asked, wanting to feel her hand on *my* cheek. Wanting her to look in *my* eyes and promise we'd have enough money.

"Soon," Mama said, still keeping her hand on Charlie's cheek. "Soon."

But it seemed most days we barely had enough money to pay the rent, let alone fly to Paradise.

"Soon ain't coming soon enough," Charlie said.

We were poorer now. Sometimes if Ty'ree didn't figure money out right or if something came up—like the time I lost three textbooks and had to pay for them before I could get new ones—we'd end up having stuff I didn't much care to eat, like cornbread that Ty'ree stretched with flour, and powdered vegetable soup with pieces of hot dogs in it. Or sometimes Ty'ree would send me to the store around the corner for seventy-five cents' worth of spiced ham and fifty cents' worth of cheese—enough for two sandwiches, three if you cut the meat in half and used a lot of mayonnaise. We got food stamps from the city and a little bit of money once a month, but there was always something

one of us needed that seemed to cost just a little bit more than we had.

"You wish we were rich, T?"

Ty'ree nodded. "Every day. Maybe not *every* day, but most days."

"How come?"

"Life would just be easier. I could go to school."

Me and Ty'ree walked by a group of boys passing a bottle around on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue. I eyed them, and one of them eyed me back, then said, "W's up." Me and Ty'ree said what's up back. They reminded me of Newcharlie and his friends hanging out on the corner of my block. I'd seen them in the same position—huddled in a circle passing a bottle of beer around. I wondered if that's what Newcharlie was doing right now. I missed him suddenly. He'd never come with us to see an art flick, though. He said they bored the living mess out of him.

"It ain't *my* fault you're not in college, you know."

"Nobody's blaming anybody, Laf," Ty'ree said, sounding tired and old. "You just asked a question and I answered it. That's all."

It had stopped raining and gotten a little bit colder out now. I pulled my coat sleeves down over my hands. A limousine drove past us slowly, and I wondered if

there was a famous rapper inside. Rappers and basketball players were always talking about buying their mamas houses and cars. If Newcharlie became a rapper, I wondered what he'd buy us. I looked down at my boots. They were black and scuffed. Ty'ree had promised he'd have some money to get me another pair in two weeks. The boots felt kind of tight too. They made me remember that guy David and the shoehorn.

After Mama died, we started getting some money from the state. I think we got some when Daddy died too, but I'm not sure. When the checks came, Ty'ree usually used them to pay rent and buy food. He used the money he made at work to buy us clothes and school supplies. After the textbook thing he started trying to put a little in the bank for hard times. Sometimes I sat at the dining-room table with him and helped him figure stuff out. By the time we got through figuring, there wasn't much left over. On pay-days, if the rent wasn't due, Ty'ree always made sure there was some left to see a movie or rent a video. And sometimes we'd stop at McDonald's or get a slice of pizza. I looked at Ty'ree. He was walking with his head down and frowning, like he was thinking serious about things. He needed a haircut, so his hair kind of fell

toward his forehead a little. I looked down at his sneakers. They were old and dirty-looking. He'd bought them before Mama died. They were Adidas but the kind nobody wore anymore. I moved a little bit closer to him, wondering if people could tell we were poor. He *couldn't* go back to school. Not right now anyway. Because of me. Because of Newcharlie. He couldn't quit his job, and he couldn't go at night 'cause the caseworker would be on us talking about how me and Newcharlie were home alone too much. The only way he'd be able to go to college was if me and Newcharlie went to live down south.

"I don't like being poor, T."

Ty'ree looked at me. "We won't always be this way. You know that. It's just a temp thing."

He put his arm around my shoulder and I nodded. But I didn't see a way out. Just years and years of us this way. Us moving in a circle. A circle called Time.

"Ty'ree," I said. "That guy David from Rahway? He ever killed anybody with that shoehorn?" I wanted to change the subject, to stop thinking about being poor.

Ty'ree thought for a moment. "That's the story Charlie tells about the guy making a knife out of it?"

I nodded.

"Correction officer found it under his bed. That kid's probably still doing time."

"Newchar—I mean *Charlie* tries to make it seem like he killed someone."

"You ever try to just talk to Charlie?" Ty'ree asked. We turned onto Thirteenth Street.

I shrugged. "And say *what*?"

"You know, just talk. Say w's up. Ask him how his life is going. What kind of things he likes to do. Stuff like that."

"I know where his life is going—down the toilet."

Ty'ree eyed me. "Maybe he knows you think that and that's why he acts the way he does."

I felt myself starting to shake. I *hated* when Ty'ree did this. "It's not *my* fault!" I said. "Everything ain't my fault, all right?"

Some people turned to look at me, but I didn't care. I started walking fast down Thirteenth Street, past the Quad. Ty'ree was somewhere behind me. I didn't care. I hoped he would turn into dust. Hoped he would disappear. Forever and ever amen. I sniffed. I could feel tears running down my nose.

"Lafayette!" Ty'ree's hand was on my shoulder, yanking me around.

"It ain't my fault," I said, my voice choking up in the back of my throat. "He burned all of Mama's pictures!" I felt cold suddenly, cold and sweaty at the same time. I hated Newcharlie and I hated Ty'ree. I wanted to be dead. Dead like Mama. Maybe I'd die of hypothermia. Then it'd just be the two of them in that house, every day thinking about what they could have done to keep *me* alive.

"Just sat in the window and lit a match to them and let the little—" I gulped. I couldn't catch my breath. "He . . . he let the little fires float down."

A man with a little girl looked at us, then grabbed the little girl's hand and crossed the street.

"He didn't mean it, Lafayette." Ty'ree kept his hand on my shoulder. When I tried to jerk away, he held tighter. "It was just his way—"

"Those two pictures I got are the only ones left." I hated Newcharlie. *Hated* him. "Wish he'd never come home. Least then we'd have some other pictures."

"I know," he said. "I know."

I felt myself sagging into Ty'ree like he was a wall, felt him put his arms around me. "Then he got the nerve to put plants in all the windows, Ty'ree. Like plants was gonna change something."

"I know, Laf," Ty'ree kept saying. "I know."

"He's all bad, T," I cried. "And you're all good and I ain't nothing."

Ty'ree let out a little laugh. "Nah, Lafayette. Charlie ain't all bad. And you know you got it going on." He was quiet for a moment. "And I . . . I *definitely* am not all good."

I was getting colder and colder. Ty'ree kept his arms around me to keep me from shivering.

"Brother to brother, Lafayette?"

I nodded. "B to B," I whispered. It was something Ty'ree had started saying right after Mama died. It meant I love you, but we'd never really said that to each other. He'd said brother to brother meant that and then some. It meant we'd be there for each other, no matter what.

"Hey, let's bag the movie and go get something hot to drink, okay?" Ty'ree said.

"Yeah. Let's." Ty'ree kept his arm around my shoulder as we walked back toward Sixth Avenue. We went into a coffee shop on the corner of Sixth and Tenth. There weren't that many people in it, and me and Ty'ree took seats in the back. There was soft music playing and a couple of people sitting at tables writing in notebooks and on laptop computers. I ordered a hot

chocolate and an apple Danish, and Ty'ree ordered coffee. He handed me his napkin, and I wiped my eyes and blew my nose. I felt tired. Tired and empty, and even with Ty'ree right across the table from me, I felt a little bit alone.

Our stuff came and Ty'ree started talking. I picked at my Danish, hoping he'd tell me about Mama, about the day she died. I hoped he'd change the story around and make me the hero, the one who saved her. But he didn't. He started talking about our daddy. And when he started talking, we weren't in that coffee shop anymore. We were in Central Park. I stopped picking at my Danish and leaned in close. Not wanting to miss any of it.

NINE

"LOOK HERE, TY'REE," DADDY SAID. HE HELD the newspaper out so Ty'ree could get a look at the words there. "Says maybe the Knicks are gonna win this year. That'll be something new, huh?"

Ty'ree climbed over the park bench, then climbed back to the side Daddy was on. He was ten, in fourth grade, and probably the best climber in the whole school. He wanted Daddy to see him, to watch him hang off the side of the bench like a monkey. He climbed up to the back and walked along the edge of it like it was a high wire. When he stepped over

Daddy's head, Daddy glanced up and smiled. It was Sunday, cold enough to see your breath. They always came to Central Park on Sundays. Mama was at home taking care of Charlie and getting ready for the new baby that was coming. Ty'ree wanted a sister, 'cause he'd already gotten a brother and that wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Daddy'd said he wanted another boy 'cause you couldn't have too many boys. When he said this, Mama laughed and swatted him with whatever was close by. Mama said she got down on her knees and prayed for a girl some nights 'cause she didn't know what she'd do if another little man showed up in her house. When they were laughing and teasing about the baby, Ty'ree didn't care if it ever came, just so long as his mama and daddy could keep on laughing and having a good time. He figured his mama was probably about the prettiest woman in Manhattan. People said he looked just like her but he didn't see himself as pretty. He hoped his new baby sister would be pretty like Mama.

"Look, Daddy," Ty'ree said. He was a few feet away from his father now, high up in a leafless oak tree. Seemed he could look out and see the whole park from where he sat. Maybe if he went up higher, he could see the whole world.

"You sure can climb," Daddy said, then went back to reading the paper.

It was cold out, and the air seemed to lift up under the heavy coat Ty'ree was wearing. He loved being cold. It made him feel electrified. He loved feeling electrified. He sat down on a branch and let his feet dangle over the edge. His sneakers were white and new, and he promised himself he'd never get them dirty.

There were only a few other people in the park. Way down, there was a man playing with two little kids, running in circles and making them chase him. The kids were squealing and grabbing at his coat. He kept dodging them. There was a woman in a pink running outfit jogging around the lake. She had a big dog with her, and the dog was running right beside her. Ty'ree wished he could get a dog. Maybe a mastiff. He'd seen one once. That was probably the biggest dog in the world. He'd even settle for a Doberman.

Ty'ree heard somebody screaming. When he looked out toward the frozen lake, he saw the dog that had been running with the woman skidding out on the lake. He held his breath. Even from where he sat, he could hear the deep crackle of the ice. "Daddy!" he screamed. The dog kicked out its front legs, then its back. Then it was sinking. "Daddy!" Ty'ree called

again. The dog gave a yelp and disappeared underneath the water for a moment. Then the woman was running out onto the ice, screaming. Then she too was disappearing and reappearing, disappearing and reappearing.

Ty'ree jumped down from the tree and ran over to his father, who was standing now and staring out at the water.

"You gotta help them, Daddy," Ty'ree said, out of breath. "Daddy, that dog . . . that dog and lady . . ."

But his daddy was already running toward the water. Ty'ree watched his father break a branch off a tree and hold it out to the woman. But the branch snapped when the woman reached for it. Then his father was running along the icy bank and slipping slowly into the water. Ty'ree screamed. The man who had been playing with the two kids was standing a bit away from him, holding a kid in each arm and shouting something.

"Then Daddy was pulling the woman and the dog out of the water," Ty'ree said. "And far away I could hear sirens." He looked down at his hands. "Sirens and my own self screaming."

TEN

I STARED AT THE BOTTOM OF MY EMPTY CUP. Ty'ree had stopped talking, but I couldn't look at him. Not right away. Nobody had ever told me that he was right there watching our daddy slip into that frozen pond. Everybody had known it, but nobody had told me. It was like a secret—a lie that had been in my life since before I was born.

I could hear people talking all around us. Talking and laughing. I tried to imagine my daddy running out into that pond, but I couldn't. I could only see Ty'ree there, screaming from under that tree.

"How come y'all never told me?" I whispered. I wanted to scream it, but I didn't know what the words would do. Maybe they'd just sink into the walls and disappear. Maybe they'd reappear years and years later—in front of some boy who had spent his whole life thinking otherwise.

"Why?" Ty'ree asked.

I looked up at him to see if he was serious. What'd he mean, *why*? 'Cause I was his brother. 'Cause it was my daddy. 'Cause it mattered.

"'Cause," I said. "Just 'cause."

"You think it would have made a difference if you had grown up knowing that I was there?"

I nodded.

"Why?"

"How come you asking why, Ty'ree? You must've known it would've made some difference, 'cause y'all decided not to tell me. I'm not *stupid*."

"You know how you always want to know what were the last words I said to Mama?" Ty'ree asked.

I nodded.

"Well, it always makes me think of the last words I said to Daddy."

"You know what they were?"

"Yeah. The lady was in shock when the ambulance

got there. But Daddy was okay, so they let him and me go home."

Ty'ree swallowed and looked away from me. He stared around the restaurant a minute before going on. "They gave him this blanket to wear even though he kept insisting he was fine in all those wet clothes. But he put the blanket on anyway and the cops drove us home. Mama nearly went crazy when she saw him. She was scared something had happened to me."

"Where was Charlie?"

"By the time we got home, Mama'd put him down for a nap."

He got quiet again. I waited, and when he started talking, his voice was real low.

"After Daddy got out of those wet clothes and climbed into bed, I came into the room. I asked him if he thought the dog was going to be okay." Ty'ree smiled. It was the saddest smile I'd ever seen in my life.

"Then what happened?"

"Daddy said, 'It's all right, T. I'm warm now. I'm warm now.' "

Ty'ree shook his head.

"I wouldn't talk about it for a long time. Charlie used to always ask me about what happened, but I

wouldn't say. And I made Mama promise not to talk about it. I wanted to make believe I wasn't there. Figured if nobody talked about it, I wouldn't go around blaming myself 'cause I had told Daddy to help them. And you know why I told him to help them?"

I shook my head. Something was coming to me—slow and clear as pancake syrup. Charlie, I kept thinking. Charlie.

" 'Cause I wanted a stupid dog!" Ty'ree said. "I wanted a dog more than anything in the world, and because of it I lost my dad. You know what that does to you?"

"Yeah," I whispered. But Ty'ree didn't hear me. "He would've gone in there anyway," I said a little bit louder. "Right?"

Ty'ree shrugged and kept looking around the restaurant. He was sort of bobbing his head, like he was hearing music inside it. The waitress came over and asked us if we wanted anything else. When Ty'ree didn't say anything, I ordered two refills.

Sometimes I stared in the mirror and was surprised to see how little and lost I looked. That was how Ty'ree looked now—like he was waiting for somebody to come and take his hand and show him the way home.

"How come Charlie didn't go to the park with you?"

Ty'ree kept bobbing his head. "Too small," he said, still looking out at the restaurant. "Daddy wanted to read his paper. Didn't want to have to keep an eye out for him. Sundays were me and Daddy's time.

"The thing is," Ty'ree said, "Charlie wasn't there for any of it—for Daddy, for Mama. And it's made him mad. Mad and helpless."

I shook my head again, trying to shake Charlie thoughts out of it, but I couldn't. All those years Charlie must have grown up watching Mama and Ty'ree at the table trying to figure out how to keep us eating and wearing clothes, and him not being able to help. All those years of him being too small or too much trouble. Him not being the one Daddy wanted to take to the park.

I looked around the coffee shop. There were a lot of people in it now. A woman was sitting in one corner by herself reading a magazine. I wondered if she'd ever been jogging in Central Park. Wondered if she'd ever had or wanted a dog or had a brother who was mad all the way down to his bones.

"We got all this stuff to carry around with us,"

Ty'ree said "You know how they say drug addicts got a monkey on their back?"

"Nah."

"Well, that's what people say. And it's like we got monkeys on our backs, except it ain't drugs."

"You wanted that dog," I said. "And I wanted some breakfast. Just regular stuff people want. We didn't know what was gonna happen or anything. Charlie didn't want anything from them . . . I don't think. I mean, maybe he just wanted them—maybe he wanted Daddy to take him to the park and you and Mama to let him help with stuff. But that ain't no monkey."

The waitress brought us refills, and Ty'ree waited till she left again before he started talking.

"Yeah, it is," he said. "Charlie got the biggest monkey on his back. I can remember the last thing I said to Daddy and you can remember the last thing you said to Mama. Least we got to be there. But not Charlie. And I think he carries that around. It's more like a gorilla on his back than a monkey."

"Nobody told him to go hold up that store," I said.

"But he did," Ty'ree said. "And while he was gone, me and you had each other after Mama died. And he just had Rahway, you know."

"It turned him mad," I said.

Ty'ree nodded. "And I don't know where he's gonna take that mad," he said. "I really don't."

"Should send him to Dr. Vernon," I said. "That shrink y'all sent me to."

Ty'ree shook his head. "We don't have Dr. Vernon money anymore. And Charlie said he didn't want to go to a psychologist—said he had to see one when he was in Rahway. And since he hasn't really gotten into trouble again, I can't make him."

"But he's evil incarnate," I said. I kept thinking about the way Newcharlie's face twisted up every time he called me Milagros killer. It reminded me of somebody possessed.

"*Evil incarnate?*" Ty'ree smiled and shook his head. "You'll probably grow up to write those thriller movies where everyone's always screaming."

"If I have to keep living with Newcharlie, I will. I'll have firsthand experience."

ELEVEN

TY'REE WAS ALL RIGHT AFTER MAMA DIED. BUT I was all wrong. The year before, I'd seen this show about snakes. They showed this one snake slipping out of its old skin and then leaving that old skin on the ground behind him. That's how I felt—like Mama'd been my skin. But I hadn't grown a new skin underneath, like that snake had. I was just blood and bones spreading all over the place. Every night Ty'ree stayed with me in my room till I cried myself to sleep. And the next morning he'd find me sleeping curled up on the floor beside his bed.

After a few weeks of me ending up on the floor, he called Aunt Cecile, and she came back to New York and asked around trying to find a doctor I could go to—a psychologist. Some afternoons I'd come home from school to find Aunt Cecile sitting at the dining-room table writing down and crossing out numbers as she talked on the phone. And some evenings I'd catch her and Ty'ree whispering about different doctors, their fees, and social service benefits.

Then one afternoon Aunt Cecile announced that she'd found a person I could talk to named Dr. Vernon. That Wednesday and for a whole lot of Wednesdays after that, Aunt Cecile would take me to Dr. Vernon—an old man with a nice office in Harlem. His office was all wood and windows and smelled like heat and dust and warm blankets. Smells I'd always liked. So while Aunt Cecile sat in the waiting room, I went into Dr. Vernon's office. I wasn't afraid, 'cause the warm-blanket smell felt like it was covering me up, protecting me.

The first time I went to Dr. Vernon, he put some paper and some markers on his desk and asked me to draw a picture for him. There was a little table in the corner, and he told me I could sit there and draw for as long as I liked. But I didn't want to draw. I sat at

that table for a long time just feeling the warm blanket around me and staring at that blank white paper and those markers until Dr. Vernon told me it was okay to go.

The second time I went, Dr. Vernon gave me the paper and the markers again. I wrote my name in blue. *Lafayette Miguel Bailey*. Then I wrote Ty'ree's whole name, which is Ty'ree Alfonso Bailey. And Charlie's name, Charles Javier Bailey. I stared at the paper until Dr. Vernon came over to see. He was tall and thin the way Ty'ree said my daddy had been. But Dr. Vernon's hair was white like Aunt Cecile's. And he had a white beard—a skinny black Santa Claus. I stared at the paper, and I could feel him standing above me staring down at it, too.

"That's your family," he said.

I shrugged.

"Any other members?"

I shook my head.

"How does that make you feel?" Dr. Vernon asked.

I shrugged again. "Like nothing."

"You feel like you're nothing, Lafayette?"

"No. I know I'm something. I'm just saying that not having a mama and a daddy don't feel like nothing. It's just the way things are."

"And how does that make you feel?" he asked again.

I stared down at the paper, at me and my brothers' names. It was a lot of white space where there wasn't any writing. I had tried to write our names real big, but they still looked small, almost like nothing against all that white.

"I want my mama back," I whispered.

Dr. Vernon patted me on the shoulder and said, "I know you do, Lafayette."

We stayed like that a long time—me staring down at the paper, Dr. Vernon softly patting my shoulder. We didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. After a long while had passed, Dr. Vernon said, "You can go now, Lafayette."

But I didn't want to go. I liked the way it felt to have Dr. Vernon patting my shoulder. I liked how deep and soft his voice was. So I came back. Every Wednesday for a whole year. And while Dr. Vernon stood above me or sat beside me, I drew pictures and told him what I remembered and what I wished for. I told him about the hairy hands that came at my throat in the middle of the night, the hands that wanted to choke me for not saving Mama. And how the only way I could keep them away from me was to go into

Mama's room, where she was waiting for me, where she told me to lie down and go to sleep, that everything would be all right soon.

"What does 'all right' mean, Lafayette?" Dr. Vernon asked me one Wednesday. By then Aunt Cecile had long gone back down south, and I took the train by myself. I'd gotten used to the train ride, to Dr. Vernon's wood-and-window office, to his soft voice telling me all the things I'd done right in my life and how it wasn't my fault Mama had died.

I looked down at the picture I'd been drawing. It was a picture of me and Ty'ree walking together down our block. Ty'ree had his hand around my shoulder and was smiling. I had my hands in my pockets and was looking up at him.

I held the picture up so Dr. Vernon could get a closer look at it. "This," I said, feeling a smile coming on.

"If you're scared at night—" Dr. Vernon began, but I didn't let him finish.

"Then Ty'ree's there for me. Ty'ree and Mama."

"Where's your mama, Lafayette?" Dr. Vernon asked softly. His white eyebrows crinkled, and he looked at me like he was searching my face for something.

"She died," I whispered. "I know that. But I still feel her."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

I looked at Dr. Vernon. It was almost time to go. He'd told me a while back that this would be my last visit with him, that I'd done all the work I needed to do here. He said I was gonna be okay.

Dr. Vernon smiled and patted my shoulder. "You can go now, Lafayette. Maybe I'll see you around sometime."

"Yeah," I said. When I got to the door, I turned to him and waved good-bye, then ran back over and hugged him hard. "Maybe," I said.

TWELVE

IT WAS ONLY A LITTLE BIT AFTER TEN WHEN ME and Ty'ree got back Friday night. The apartment was dark, which meant Newcharlie hadn't come home. He didn't have to be home until eleven thirty on Friday and Saturday, and most times he squeezed in right as the second hand was moving toward eleven forty-five. Ty'ree didn't fuss with him about that. A long time ago Ty'ree had said he was going to choose his arguments with Newcharlie or else they'd be fighting every minute of the day. Even though people call him St. Ty'ree, he's not really. He's flesh and blood and

makes mistakes just like other people. Once I saw him push this man out of his way when he was running for the train. It was like he didn't even see the man as a human being. And the year before, when his girlfriend dumped him, he was just pure evil to live with for a while. And not telling me till now that he'd been there when my daddy went in that lake. Nah, he wasn't *all* good.

We'd gotten a video, and I put it in the VCR and went to get the rest of my dinner from the refrigerator. Ty'ree checked the messages. There was one from a girl he kind of liked, so he went into his room and called her back. He dated girls off and on, and some of them were okay and some of them were dumb. I hadn't met this new one yet. It took Ty'ree a while before he brought a girl he was dating home. He was private that way. Mostly they went out to movies or met on his lunch break. Sometimes he went to their house. Girls acted like he was *God* or something when they learned he was raising me and Newcharlie. St. Ty'ree.

"Yo, T!" I yelled. "You gonna watch the movie?"

I heard Ty'ree telling the girl to hold on. "You go ahead," he called to me. I heard him close the door to his room.

I sat there wishing Smitty and PJ were around even if Smitty *was* nosy. I *hadn't* changed like Ty'ree said. I just didn't want to answer a whole lot of questions. "Mama," I whispered, "I'm still me. I'm still Lafayette."

Me and Mama used to sit watching movies till late. We'd usually get funny ones and sit there cracking up over the stupidest thing. I rubbed my hand over the couch cushion. Mama'd sit right there. And she'd laugh and laugh.

This movie was about a guy who wakes up one morning and can't tell any lies. He'd been lying to everyone, including his little son, for a long time. But this one day, every time he opened his mouth, the truth came out and he found himself saying stuff he hadn't meant to say. It was supposed to be a comedy, but it wasn't that funny. I ate my chicken and watched the movie, wondering what it would mean if the whole world woke up having to tell the truth. Maybe then I would have known a long time ago about Ty'ree being at that lake with my daddy.

It was one of those movies you can figure out the end of by the time you get to the middle. I watched it a little more than halfway through, then washed my plate, changed into a T-shirt and shorts, brushed my

teeth, and went to bed. Ty'ree was still on the phone. It was a little bit after eleven thirty. I fell asleep listening for Newcharlie's footsteps on the stairs.

IT WAS THE STUPID DOG THAT KEPT WAKING ME up. First the barking that wasn't really there. Three times I heard it. And each time I sat straight up in bed. Then nothing. Not even a whimper. But each time I turned over and started falling asleep again, the barking started up. Then, when I was almost asleep, I heard a car screech and slam into something. Something soft and solid.

"No!" I sat straight up again and blinked. The room was dark. "Uh-uh," I whispered. It had been a reddish dog, with long hair and dark, sad eyes. It kept trying to bark, but no sound came out. I swallowed. The dog had its head on Newcharlie's—no, on *Charlie's* lap.

I pulled the covers up over me and lay down again. My eyes felt heavy and dry. But when I closed them, it wasn't sleep that came to me but Charlie. Charlie with his face raised up toward the sky howling, screaming to nobody, *Please, God, don't let it die.*

THIRTEEN

"LAFAYETTE."

The dog was gone and Charlie was gone and I was at that stream near Aunt Cecile's house again. It was pretty out, the sun cutting its way around the leaves and dancing up off the water. I had a big trout on the end of my line, and it was fighting hard. Every time it came up, I saw the colors dancing off its scales. It had an angry mouth and devil eyes. But that whole head would be gone soon, and I'd be picking my teeth with its bones.

"Lafayette, wake up."

Then the trout was talking, calling my name and shaking me. Then it was disappearing downstream. Then the stream was gone. But the fish was still calling my name.

"Lafayette."

I opened my eyes to see Ty'ree standing above me. The room was almost dark. There was just the tiniest bit of light in it, like maybe it was five in the morning or earlier. I rubbed my eyes and tried to turn away from Ty'ree, but he shook me again.

"They got Charlie," he whispered.

"The dog got him?"

"Lafayette," Ty'ree said, his voice just a little bit louder than before. "C'mon and wake up. The police got him. We have to go down to the station."

"You go."

Ty'ree switched on the light and I jumped up. My head felt like it was gonna fly off from all the brightness.

"Nah, man," Ty'ree said. "Brother to brother."

I wanted to say, *Brother to brother my butt*, but I was too tired. Ty'ree handed me my pants and shirt at the same time. He was still wearing the clothes he'd had on the night before.

"Police got him for what?" I asked, pulling the pants on over my shorts. "The dog?" Things in my head were all fuzzy. Charlie was holding a dog. I was fishing. Had he stolen the dog? Is that why the police had him?

"What dog?"

I shook my head. "Nothing," I said, remembering. "It was a dream, I think. What'd they get him for?"

"I don't know. He just called, said I need to go down there." Ty'ree cursed and went back into his bedroom. I could hear him opening and closing drawers. The hallway light was on, and I saw him walk back past my room on his way to the living room.

"Hurry up, Laf," he said.

When I came into the living room, Ty'ree was pulling his keys off the nail by the door and pulling on his raincoat at the same time. I hadn't noticed before, but now I saw that the rain was coming down hard and steady. I went back to my room and got my rain slicker. The sleeves were too short, but otherwise it was fine.

We walked out into the early-morning darkness without saying anything. I wanted to tell Ty'ree that Newcharlie always found a way to mess up, but he

had his head down and his hands in his pockets. His face was all bunched up like he was thinking the exact same thing, so I walked beside him and kept my mouth shut.

FOURTEEN

I'D NEVER BEEN INSIDE A POLICE STATION BEFORE, and when we got there, I felt like I was gonna be sick. There were fluorescent lights everywhere, but the place still seemed dark, like the inside of a cave. I tried to breathe through my mouth—there was a smell to the place, like something or someone had died inside its walls. Everywhere I looked, there were desks that were so huge and dark, you could barely see the people sitting behind them, and people moving in and out of offices—mostly cops. It felt like a place where it

was always gray and rainy. Like it was always Judgment Day.

A skinny man sitting high up like a judge looked down at me and Ty'ree and asked if he could help us. Ty'ree told him why we were there, and the man pointed us down a hall.

Ty'ree reached to take my hand and I snatched it back. He blinked, like he was realizing I was twelve, not six, and walked ahead of me. Phones were ringing and people were calling out information to each other. A woman at the end of the hall said Newcharlie's name. Me and Ty'ree walked faster.

Once I saw a woman faint on the subway, and when I saw Newcharlie, that's just what I felt like doing. I felt my head get light and my arms go numb. Ty'ree saw him at the same time and broke into a run down the hall. Newcharlie was sitting on a bench curled up into the corner like he wanted to disappear. His lip was busted and one of his eyes was swollen completely shut. His hands were trembling like he was cold. The right one was cut and swollen big as a bear paw.

That's my brother, I wanted to shout. What'd y'all do to my brother?

Instead, I bit my bottom lip and stood back while

Ty'ree went to him. When Ty'ree sat down on the bench next to him, Newcharlie tried to move away, but there wasn't anyplace to go.

"Yo," Ty'ree whispered.

I heard something jangle and looked at Newcharlie's hands again. He was wearing handcuffs.

He looked at me out of his one good eye. I looked at him back, and for a long time every sound in the world disappeared. *Don't die on us, Charlie*, I wanted to say. I wanted to run to him and throw my arms around his shoulders. But I just stood there, biting my lip and looking into his one good eye. *When someone hurts you*, Charlie said to me once, *you just hold on. Hold on until the pain goes away*. We were little then, and a kid from school had punched me in the eye for accidentally stepping on his toe. I hadn't learned how to fight and didn't want to anyway, so I waited in the school yard until Charlie came out. He'd been playing basketball with some other guys in the gym, so when he finally came out of the school building, the school yard was empty and my eye had swollen shut. *The pain always goes away, Laf. You just hold on, you hear me?* He put his arm around me and we walked on home. And slowly the pain went away.

Ty'ree touched the swollen eye and Newcharlie

jerked back and frowned. Then Ty'ree touched his lip, real gentle, and Newcharlie let him.

"It's okay," Ty'ree whispered.

You just hold on, Charlie. The pain always goes away.

Ty'ree kept telling Newcharlie it was gonna be okay. It felt like the moment had frozen, like we were all stuck that way—me standing a little bit away from them, Ty'ree looking like he wanted to hug Newcharlie but was scared to and Newcharlie doing everything he could not to cry.

"I ain't do nothing, T," Newcharlie whispered, his words coming out slow and muffled because of his lip. "I swear I didn't. I didn't know nothing about it. I swear I didn't steal that car."

"What car?" Ty'ree asked. "What happened, Charlie?"

I took a step closer to hear him better, and just as I did, a policeman came over to us.

"He yours?" he asked Ty'ree. He was a tall black guy with glasses. The pin above his badge said "Joseph." I looked from his pin to his face.

"My brother," Ty'ree said, standing up. "I'm the legal guardian. Ty'ree Bailey." He took some papers from his pocket and handed them to the cop. The pa-

pers were from the state, saying that Ty'ree had custody of me and Newcharlie. I'd seen them a couple of times before.

The cop read them slowly, nodding as he did. "He was in a stolen car," he said, not looking up from the papers. "Him and another guy. Mr. Bailey here wasn't driving." He looked at Ty'ree and frowned. "They got the guy who was driving in a holding pen back there. Broke his parole. So did your brother."

I swallowed and looked down at my sneakers, trying not to think about Newcharlie going to jail and me going to Aunt Cecile's.

"He said he ain't know about the car," I whispered.

Ty'ree and Officer Joseph looked at me.

"My brother say he ain't—he *didn't* steal the car," I said.

"No, he didn't." Officer Joseph handed the papers back to Ty'ree. "He got banged up pretty bad though. I'll let him tell you about that."

Newcharlie was crying softly in the corner.

"Is that what happened to his face?" Ty'ree asked. The muscles in his jaw were moving back and forth the way they did when he was trying to hold his temper.

Officer Joseph sighed and shook his head. He took

a key ring from his pocket and walked over to Newcharlie, undid the handcuffs, and clipped them to his holster.

"He'll tell you what happened," he said, looking at Newcharlie. "Mr. Bailey knows the rules. He knows he breaks his parole, he goes to jail. He knows you go to an initiation, you're going to have to fight." He shook his head and turned back to Ty'ree. "Last thing I want to do is send another young brother to jail. I'm going to let you take him home this time, but I don't want to see him in my precinct again. Not unless he's working here."

Ty'ree nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, sir," I whispered.

Newcharlie put his head down and walked out the door without saying anything.

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?" TY'REE ASKED when we were a block from the precinct, his questions coming fast. "What's that officer talking about? Why you gotta mess up, Charlie?" He pushed Charlie. "You always the one gotta mess up. Me and Lafayette—"

"Stop it, Ty'ree," I said. "Stop it!"

Ty'ree clenched his hands.

"I'm always the one," Newcharlie said. "The bad one. The loser. That's me. The one who always messes up. Ain't it always been that way?"

"Yes," Ty'ree said. The muscles in his jaw were working fast. "It's always been that way."

"I ain't never gonna be anything," Newcharlie said. "So why even try?"

I swallowed, and Ty'ree looked down at his hands. We walked a long way in silence, Newcharlie walking a little bit ahead of us with his head still down.

"You don't always mess up, Cha," I said.

"Yes I do. And you're the angel. The innocent one. The one everybody gotta look out for. I ain't nothing. Nobody."

It was daylight out now. The sky was pretty—gray blue from the rain. Newcharlie wasn't wearing a raincoat. Ty'ree had tried to give him his, but Newcharlie wouldn't take it. His clothes were dripping wet. Maybe he wanted to die of hypothermia.

"Why you have to do this, huh, Charlie?" Ty'ree said. "Why you gotta do this to us?"

"I ain't do anything, T."

Ty'ree's jaw was working fast. He clenched and unclenched his fists. *Don't hit him*, I kept thinking. *Don't.*

I'd seen Ty'ree lose it and hit Newcharlie once. That night the cops came to our place. Just as they were taking Charlie away, Ty'ree jumped off the couch and punched him in the back. Then both of them started bawling.

"I ain't steal that car, Ty'ree," Newcharlie said.

Maybe Ty'ree couldn't see it but I could. There was something real sad about Newcharlie right then. It was that same look he'd had that day the vet told him that dog had died. The same look he had the day we buried Mama. He looked . . . broken.

"You ain't a nobody, Cha," I said, but I don't think either of them heard me.

Ty'ree cursed again. He was madder than I'd seen him in a long time. "What the hell were you doing in it? And what were you doing fighting in the street?" He took a quick step and grabbed Newcharlie by the shoulder and swung him around. Newcharlie tried to frown, but his lips were trembling. "You don't give a damn about anybody but yourself, do you? You mess up, Lafayette goes to Cecile and you go to jail. Is that what you want, man?"

Newcharlie shook his head. He was crying full out now. "I didn't know anything. Aaron and me—we

went to this party. Only it wasn't a party, it was—it was an initiation."

Ty'ree pushed him, hard. "What are—"

"Stop, T." I tried to shout, but my voice was soft and high, like a scared little kid's. I looked around, nervous. But there was nobody else on the street.

Ty'ree stopped pushing him and glared at me.

"What're you talking about, Charlie? You better talk to me, 'cause I don't have a lot of patience for your junk tonight. I'm about ready to send both of you packing."

"For the Fordhams," Newcharlie said.

"The what?"

"It's a gang, T," I said.

Ty'ree looked like he didn't know if he wanted to smack me or Newcharlie first.

"What—?"

"I just thought it was a party," Newcharlie said. "I didn't know Aaron was in no gang. I thought he was lying. Then he showed me his colors. You had to fight somebody. I didn't want to do it, but—" He started choking. After a long time he had enough breath to talk again. "It makes you *somebody*. Aaron got all these other homeboys around him now. He don't re-

ally need me—" Newcharlie started gulping again. He put his head in both his hands like he was trying to hide inside them. "It makes you somebody. It gives you people."

"How'd you get in the car?" Ty'ree asked.

"I—I was—scared, T. This guy, this older guy, said he'd take me home. Aaron got in this other car, and he said I'd be all right. I thought it was cool. I just—I just wanted to go home. . . . Aaron said they'd just drive around a little bit. Said I didn't have to fight. But the guy—the guy in the car, he said I needed a couple of punches, toughen me up." Charlie swallowed, and opened and closed his mouth a couple of times like he was trying to drink the air. "I just wanted to go home," he whispered.

Ty'ree shook his head and looked off down the block. "Damn," he whispered.

"You in a gang now, Newcharlie?"

Ty'ree glared at me but I didn't care. If Newcharlie was in a gang now, he'd be the next one in our family to die. Gang members were always dying. I felt my bottom lip starting to tremble. I didn't know what I'd do if I lost somebody else.

But Newcharlie shook his head. "I ain't never going back."

"What happened to Aaron?" I asked.

Newcharlie shook his head again. "I don't know. I thought the cops got him, too, but they didn't." He pressed the cut on his swollen hand against his mouth and sucked it hard. There was a tiny cut on his cheek that I hadn't noticed before. I wondered what other bruises he had.

"I don't want to see Aaron nowhere near our place," Ty'ree said. "You hear me?"

Newcharlie nodded and wiped rain off of his face. "I didn't want to fight nobody," he kept whispering.

Ty'ree put his arm around Newcharlie's shoulder. His other hand was still clenching in and out of a fist. "C'mon," he said. "Let's get on out of this rain."

FIFTEEN

MAMA READ ALL THE TIME. WHEN SHE WASN'T reading to me, she was reading to herself. She'd always have one or two books in her bag 'cause she liked to read on the train going to work. We used to play a game where every day I'd ask her to name a book and then tell me the name of the person who wrote it. If it was one she'd said already, she'd have to give me a dollar. I earned one dollar in all of me and Mama's years of playing that game.

She liked to read this writer named Toni Morri-

son. Once she read me something Toni Morrison had written.

Listen to this, Lafayette, Mama said.

I was sitting across from her at the dining-room table, flipping through the pages of a comic book. I was probably eight or nine, and it was dark outside. Too dark for me to be out but not for Ty'ree and Charlie. So I was sitting there being a little bit mad, sitting right near her but not really caring about what she had to say.

"The function of freedom," Mama read, "is to free someone else."

I shrugged and went back to my comic book.

You ever thought about that, Laf? Mama asked me. That being free means you help somebody else get free?

I shook my head.

She put her book down.

Why not?

'Cause I ain't free.

Mama looked at me and frowned.

Well, I'm not, I said. If I was free, then I'd be able to go outside like Ty'ree and Charlie.

Then Mama laughed. But I didn't see what was so funny about the truth.

SIXTEEN

THE PHONE RANG IN THE LATE AFTERNOON. Ty'ree and Newcharlie were still asleep, but I'd been lying in bed talking to Mama, telling her about the precinct and how she didn't have to worry 'cause it was a place I never wanted to see the inside of again. She was sitting at the foot of my bed, rubbing my feet the way she would some nights when I couldn't fall asleep. *The way the lights were, Mama? It made you feel real sad inside. Like your life was over. Mama? Is Newcharlie's life over?*

"Somebody answer that!" Ty'ree yelled from his

room, his voice sounding sleepy and muffled like it was coming from underneath his pillow. Newcharlie groaned and turned over. His face was still swollen, even though Ty'ree had made him ice it when we got home.

Mama's hands faded from my feet; then her face was gone too. I stared at Newcharlie for a moment, my question hanging in the air over his bed. The phone rang two more times, and I got out of bed to get it.

"Yo, Lafayette? It's Smitty. What took you so long to answer, man?"

"Nothing. We still sleeping." I sat down at the dining-room table and squinted against the sun coming in through the windows. "What's up?"

"Why so late?"

"What's up?" I asked again, ignoring his question. I didn't want to give him anything to ask questions about.

"You feel like playing ball or something?" Smitty asked.

"I thought you was at your cousin's house for the weekend."

"Nah, man. My aunt said she was taking us all to church this afternoon, and me and PJ said we had to

get home and catch up on schoolwork." Smitty laughed. "She's taking my cousin to church every weekend now, and he's like 'C'mon Smitty, it'll be fun.' I was out of there . . ."

I yawned and sat there in my underwear listening to Smitty go on for a while.

"You feel like going to the park?"

I pushed some leaves from one of Newcharlie's plants out of the way and looked out the window.

"Yeah. I'll meet you downstairs in a few."

"Don't be taking a long time, Laf."

"I just gotta get dressed, man. Give me like twenty minutes."

"You said a few—"

"Okay, then forget about it—"

"Okay, okay. Twenty minutes. Jeez, man. Go back to bed and wake up on a better side."

He hung up, and I wrote a note for Ty'ree telling him where I was going, ate four pieces of bread with peanut butter, then went back into my room and pulled my pants on over my shorts. I sniffed under my arms, then thought better of it and went and took a quick shower. By the time I came back into the room, Newcharlie was sitting up in bed, touching his lip and frowning.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Hang with Smitty and PJ—probably play ball."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I pulled my pants back on slowly, wishing I knew what to say. Wishing I knew how to free him.

Newcharlie looked at me for a moment like he was gonna say he was coming with us, but then he lay back down and turned toward the wall. I stood staring at his back, wishing he'd turn around and say he'd come.

He didn't, and I didn't know how to ask him.

SEVENTEEN

SMITTY AND PJ WERE SITTING ON MY STOOP rolling a basketball back and forth between them. PJ is two years younger than me and Smitty, small and quiet. Everyone called Smitty the pretty one on account of his dimples and straight teeth. Which I guess made PJ the ugly one, since he wore braces and didn't have dimples. I didn't think Smitty was all that easy to look at—not like the way grown people made a fuss over him.

Smitty stood up and brushed something off his overalls. They were new and stiff-looking. His aunt

was rich and always buying them new stuff. PJ had on a new pair of sneakers. It wasn't that I was jealous that they had rich relatives, I just didn't think Smitty needed to be flashing his new stuff every minute. I was wearing a pair of pants that used to be Newcharlie's and the green shirt Ty'ree had given me a long time ago.

"Yo," Smitty said. "I hear they got Charlie last night. He going back to Rahway?"

I took the ball from them and bounced it a couple of times, dribbling it back and forth between my legs.

"Might want to go on upstairs and ask him about that," I said, knowing full well that Smitty was scared of Newcharlie. Once Newcharlie'd caught him asking me questions about my daddy dying. He'd let Smitty know right off it wasn't any of his business. Not in a nice way, either.

Smitty glanced up at our window. "Nah," he said. "That's okay."

"Who'd you hear that from?" I tried to sound like I didn't care. I hated how fast news traveled around this neighborhood.

"Aaron told my cousin and my cousin told me. They really got Charlie?"

"Aaron should keep his mouth closed if he don't

know what he's talking about. Charlie ain't going back to Rahway. He's right upstairs sleeping. You here to play ball or give me the third degree?"

"I feel like playing some ball," PJ said, jumping off the stoop and trying to grab the ball from me. He was wearing the kind of sneakers Ty'ree'd said he was going to buy me soon's he could. When he saw me staring at them, PJ looked kind of embarrassed. That's what I liked about PJ—he wasn't a show-off.

THE PARK'S ONLY A FEW BLOCKS DOWN AND wasn't too crowded. Most of the hoops had bigger guys around them, but we found one at the edge of the park where a group of guys were leaving. I didn't realize until I got close that one of them was Aaron. He was patting a tall skinny guy on his back and laughing. I swallowed. There wasn't a single scratch on his face. He looked like he'd spent the night having a good time, not getting his butt kicked, then waiting up in some dark precinct until his brothers came to his rescue. When Aaron saw me, he stopped laughing. He was wearing a red-and-blue scarf tied around his head. Gang colors. I thought of yesterday. It seemed like forever ago that him and Newcharlie were sitting up in

our room talking about who was the baddest. And all the times I got home from school to find him and Newcharlie hanging out. Like they were the two best friends in the world. Like they were brothers.

"What's up, Lala?" Aaron said to me. Some of the guys he was with kept walking. A couple turned around, I guess to see who this Lala person was.

"Nothing's up, A. What's up with you?" I felt myself starting to shake, inside where nobody but God could see it. I saw Newcharlie's surprised broken-up face and I hated Aaron. Deep.

"No thing. No thing at all. What's up with Charlie?" Some of the guys who had been walking away stopped then and turned, all of them looking at me and waiting for an answer.

PJ came up beside me. I took the ball from him and dribbled it a couple times, hoping it would hide my shaking.

"Charlie's all right," The sound of the ball was familiar. Comforting. "Say he don't need no colors to be bad. Say he got his badness inside of him."

PJ looked at me, his eyes wide. I almost smiled. I wasn't scared. Not now. Not anymore.

"What are you saying?" Aaron asked, frowning.

"Just what I'm saying."

Aaron took a step toward me, and one of the guys pulled him back. "He's just a kid," the guy said. "He don't know."

Aaron glared at me. I looked back at him. Not frowning but not smiling either. Just looking. It seemed a long time ago I wanted him to like me, to be my friend. But it didn't matter anymore. I didn't need him. Charlie didn't need him either.

The other guys started heading out of the park.

"You better watch yourself, Lala," Aaron said. "You don't know me, little boy."

He turned and caught up with the other guys. He was right. I didn't.

Me and Smitty and PJ headed over to the empty hoop. We played some one-on-one, then just shot the ball around until it was almost dark. We didn't say much to each other.

I shot the ball through the hoop again and again, trying hard not to think about Newcharlie, about his broke-looking face and that dog he'd found that time. The one that didn't make it.

EIGHTEEN

I SAID GOOD-BYE TO SMITTY AND PJ AT THE corner and headed on home. I was hungry again and thinking about the leftover chicken in the refrigerator, how I'd make myself a sandwich and maybe wash it all down with some of Ty'ree's nasty ginger ale.

Newcharlie was sitting on the stoop, holding a plastic bag filled with ice over his eye. His lip looked a little better but not much.

"Yo," I said, walking past him.

"Yo back," Newcharlie said.

I pushed the outside door open and headed up the

stairs. But halfway up I stopped. Mama was standing there, staring at me, waiting to see if I'd go back down.

I took the pictures out of my back pocket and held them out to her, but she didn't move, didn't reach for them. The hallway was dim and cool. I sat on the stair and stared at the picture of me handing her something.

"What was it, Mama?" I whispered. I felt her sit down beside me, stare at the picture over my shoulder.

"A green leaf," Mama said. "A promise."

I swallowed. "*A promise?*" And all at once I remembered: When I was little, I used to pull the leaves off trees, and every time I pulled one down, I made a promise—to get my homework in on time, to not be scared when the big guys picked on me, to get the highest score when I was playing video games, to kiss Mama before I left for school . . . I was handing her that leaf because it was some promise I was making to her. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the wall. That day me and Charlie had been fighting over who got to watch what show on TV. We'd fought all morning and then started fighting again in the afternoon. When Mama went out to visit some friend of hers, she took me with her, to make sure Charlie and me didn't fight while she was gone. On our way home she pulled a leaf off a tree and handed it to me.

Promise you won't fight with Charlie anymore, she said. *Do that for me, Lafayette.*

But I shook my head and put the leaf in my pocket. That night when me and Charlie got to fighting, Mama sent us to our room, then sat down at the dining-room table and cried. The next morning I came outside to find her sitting on the stoop. Ty'ree was taking pictures of her for some school project. Mama looked like she'd spent the whole night crying, and I hated that I'd been the reason for it. That's when I handed her the leaf and made her the promise.

I stared at the picture a long time. I could feel Mama getting up and leaving, could feel her moving away from me. When I looked up, she was walking up the stairs slowly, her body growing darker and darker until I couldn't see it anymore.

"Mama?" I whispered. But she was already gone.

I put the pictures back in my pocket and sat in the hallway, trying not to feel anything. Somewhere outside a dog was barking. *Please God, don't let that dog die. Please God, don't let Mama die. Please God, don't let my daddy die.* I put my head in my hands and listened to the words over and over. They came at me fast, then slow, hard, then gentle, loud, then soft as a whisper. *Please God . . .*

I sat listening for a long time, taking the pictures out of my pocket, then putting them back in again. "Mama," I whispered. "Mama."

I got up slowly, called Mama's name one more time, and headed back down the stairs.

The street was crowded and loud, kids running up and down the block and people sitting on stoops talking. Newcharlie was the only one sitting on our stoop.

I stood pressing myself into the doorway until Newcharlie looked over at me. He was barefoot, wearing a T-shirt that said *Everything Is Everything* and a pair of jeans.

"Your eye still hurt?"

Newcharlie shook his head and continued staring out at the block.

The day Newcharlie had burned the pictures and dropped them out the window, I had run downstairs trying to catch them. But there were only black smudges of paper left—and ashes everywhere.

"I was thinking about Aunt Cecile's house when we was at that precinct," I said.

Newcharlie looked at me.

"I like it in the summer. Like when I went this past summer, it was real nice. But I'm not gonna live there all the time."

"No one said you had to," Newcharlie said, sounding evil.

"You mess up and I have to go there," I said. "Least till Ty'ree's twenty-five. It's like we're on probation for three more years."

Newcharlie sighed and looked out over the block. "Whatever."

I felt real old when he said that, like I'd spent all my life standing in that doorway trying to get him to listen to me. My head felt heavy, and the sun was too bright in my eyes. When I closed them, Mama was there again, holding the leaf out to me.

"Last night," I said slowly, "I dreamed about that dog you tried to save, Charlie. You did everything you could. Wasn't your fault it died, you know. It was like that dog was coming to me in the night trying to tell me that."

"I don't care about some stupid dog." He pressed the ice harder against his forehead and glared out over the block.

"Yes you do. Just like we cared about Mama. Maybe not so deep, but I bet that dog took—I bet that dog . . . took ahold of your heart. And I bet it held on, didn't it?"

Newcharlie shrugged. "It was a long time ago. How

am I supposed to remember stupid stuff that happened a long time ago?"

"You remember."

Newcharlie sniffed but didn't say anything.

I swallowed and stared out past his head. "The thing I ain't ever tell you and Ty'ree is that Mama *did* wake up that morning. When the paramedic guys put this thing against her chest that sent electricity to her heart. They did it twice while Miss Roberts and me stood back. Miss Roberts had her arms tight around my shoulders. The first time nothing happened. But the second time Mama's eyes opened, just for a minute—maybe not even that long. They opened and her lips moved. Like she wanted to say something. But then her eyes closed—only halfway but enough for me to know she wasn't gonna open them again. She let out a breath, a high used-up sound like right before a song ends."

"Why you tell—telling me . . . now?" When I looked at Newcharlie, he was crying, gulping but not making any other sound. Tears were moving down into his mouth and dripping from his chin. He sniffed and bit his bottom lip.

" 'Cause I never said it to nobody. I been carrying

it around. Like . . . like a monkey on my back. You weren't here for me to tell it to. None of it."

I took the pictures out of my back pocket and sat down beside him. "I didn't kill her."

Newcharlie moved the plastic bag away from his eye so he could get a better look. He hadn't seen these pictures probably in years and years. I'd kept them hidden from him, afraid he'd get them and burn them up too. But now I held them out so he could see, not afraid anymore. It was like the pictures were chiseled into my brain.

"You tried to kill the memory of her," I said. "But she's too deep inside of us."

Newcharlie winced, and I wondered if it was because of his hurt eye or what I was saying. He sniffed again.

"You want to burn these, too?"

Newcharlie took the pictures from me. He stared at them. I could see his eyes filling up again, but he wiped at them with the ice bag. After a long time he handed the pictures back to me.

"I ain't gonna burn them."

"Charlie," I said, "that vet guy said you did the right thing. That dog was hit too hard."

Charlie bit his lip again and held it. He blinked hard and nodded. "It ain't the dog," he whispered. "It's just . . . it's just when that cop put those cuffs on me, it reminded me about the last time. About how that was the last time I got to see Mama living. I wish the last time had been something else. I wish it had been me sitting on the couch next to her making her laugh. I used to make her laugh all the time. I wish that was the way she got to remember *me*. Not with no handcuffs on.

"I should've been here," Charlie whispered, his voice breaking up. He stared down at his feet, his whole body shaking.

"She used to all the time tell me about Bayamón," I said. "About what it was like there when she was a little girl—how the birds and frogs were always making noise outside her window and everything was green and warm."

Charlie smiled. It was real tiny but I could see it.

"*El Coquí*," he whispered. "That was the frog she used to talk about. Remember that song? *El Coquí, el Coquí, el Coquí*."

He sang a little bit of the Spanish part. Charlie knew more Spanish than me and Ty'ree 'cause he used

to beg Mama to speak to him in Spanish. He said it was so he could rap to Puerto Rican and Dominican girls, but I knew it was 'cause he loved listening to Mama speak it.

He stopped singing and stared down at his feet again. "She used to all the time say we was gonna get back there someday," he whispered. "All four of us . . . on a plane to Bayamón."

"We never had the money though."

"I was gonna get us tickets," Charlie said. "Take us there."

"To Bayamón?"

Charlie nodded. "Paradise."

I swallowed and stared out over the block. *Paradise*, I kept thinking. *Charlie wanted to take us to Paradise.*

"That why you robbed that store?"

"Yeah."

We didn't say anything for a while. Charlie took a piece of ice from the bag and started chewing on it. He held the bag out to me.

"Nah. I could make you copies of these last two pictures, Cha."

"That'd be cool."

I moved a little bit closer to him. We sat there like

that for a while, staring out over the block without saying anything. I could hear some girls singing about the man they were gonna marry. And real far away, I heard an ambulance siren. Across the street a woman was watering her window boxes, and me and Charlie watched her, watched the water drip down.

After a while I could see Ty'ree coming down the block. He was walking fast, like he had someplace important to be, but he stopped at a couple of stoops to say hi to people. Charlie wiped his eyes.

"What are y'all up to?" Ty'ree asked when he got to our stoop.

Me and Charlie shrugged. Ty'ree looked from one of us to the other and sat down on the step below ours.

"I saw your boy Aaron," Ty'ree said.

Charlie frowned. "He ain't my boy."

I wanted to ask Charlie what it was like to be in that room with all those gang guys, if he was scared when he had to fight. I stared at him, wanting to know what he was thinking when that first punch landed.

"He *was* your boy though," Ty'ree said.

"Yeah," Charlie said. "But that was a long time ago."

Yesterday, I thought. *Yesterday was a long time ago.*

"You feel like trying to catch that movie again, Laf?" Ty'ree asked.

I shrugged. "Yeah, that would be cool."

Me and him looked at Charlie.

"Some lame art film?" Charlie said, but he smiled, then winced and held the ice bag to his lip.

"Either that or sit on the stoop for the rest of the night."

Charlie leaned back against the railing and thought for a moment. The ice was melting through some holes in the plastic bag and down his arm. He wiped it on his T-shirt.

"This *is* art, though, ain't it?" he said, waving his hand over us. "Sometimes I feel like our life is one big work of art—it's everything." He stared down at his bare feet. "And nothing."

I looked at Ty'ree and raised my eyebrows. I had no idea what Charlie was talking about. Maybe something in his head got knocked loose in that gang fight.

But Ty'ree nodded. And the two of them stared out over the block like it was the most interesting thing in the world. I tried to see what they were seeing but couldn't.

"This isn't art," I said. "It's our *block*! It's our *life*."

Charlie put his arm around my shoulder. It felt

strange. Familiar strange. Good strange. I didn't want him to ever take it off. Ever. Ty'ree smiled and winked at me. I winked back. *B to B to B.*

"I saw a picture once in this gallery," Ty'ree said. "It was of this man sitting on a stoop just like we're doing now. And it was selling for like four thousand dollars."

"Shoot," Charlie said. "Somebody could take a picture of me and sell it for that much. They could take a hundred pictures of me!"

I touched my back pocket where the pictures of Mama were and didn't say anything. I would never sell them. Not for a million dollars.

Charlie and Ty'ree went back and forth talking about life and art and things that cost lots of money. I listened to them, feeling good and safe and free. The sun was almost gone now and the block was quieter. Charlie had set the plastic bag next to him, and I watched the water pool underneath it. He kept his arm around my shoulder. Maybe the moment wasn't ever gonna end.

"Mama used to say she'd buy three more of us if she was rich enough," Ty'ree said.

Charlie pulled me a little bit closer to him. After a long time had passed, he said, "What else did she use to say?"

When Ty'ree started talking, his voice was low and even, like he was reaching way back to remember. Me and Charlie leaned forward, leaned into our brother, to listen.