

# 7

**TO DO:** Calm down, count to ten  
(or ten thousand)

**THE FIRST THING** I do in the morning every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday is send Ma a text message of a smiley face, just to let her know I'm thinking about her on the days she has to get her blood cleaned. And when I say cleaned, I don't mean cleaned like scrubbed. You try to scrub blood, you just gonna wind up with nasty red hands. What I mean by cleaned is the doctors do this thing where they run the blood out of one of her veins through a tube that's connected to a machine, and that machine takes all the bad stuff out, and then pumps the blood out of the other end through a differ-

ent tube and back into a different vein. Takes like three or four hours, and leaves her super tired, but she gotta do it because the sugar also broke her kidneys, and when your kidneys don't work, your blood gets dirty. And when your blood gets dirty, it basically messes all kinds of other stuff up inside you. Think about it like this: When you get dirt in your shoe, do it feel good? Nope. It makes you walk with a limp, like there are little fires blazing between your toes. And when you get dirt in your eye, can you see? Of course not. And it burns like crazy, too, every little speck of dirt like a teeny-tiny lit match. So imagine having dirt in your blood. Mess your whole body up. Make your organs feel like they in a microwave.

So, yeah, I text her to let her know I'm thinking about her on those days. I text her on other days too, but especially on the blood-cleaning days. She always sends a smiley face back, which I appreciate because I know how much she hates texting. She loves getting them, but really hates sending them.

Momly is who goes to pick Ma up, who takes her to the hospital's dialysis—another word with “die” in it—unit, where she gets the treatment, who then brings her back home. And because Momly gets to Ma's house at the butt crack of dawn, Ma goes to bed dumb early

on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays so she can be up and ready to go. And whenever Ma's not at treatment, she's recovering from it, which means she's usually lying in bed drifting in and out of sleep watching TV, or as she always puts it, "letting the TV watch her." So the morning smiley faces we send each other are important.

Correction: the smiley faces we send to each other are important to *me*. Almost as important as Vicky Tines's boyfriend is to Vicky Tines, who she announces is in high school every single day in homeroom. Mrs. Stansfield takes roll by going down her list and looking to see who's there and who's not. At Barnaby, Ms. Simmons used to call our names out loud. Needed to hear our voices. But in homeroom at Chester, there were a lot of voices already being heard. Like Vicky Tines's. Ugh. All of Vicky's friends be having heart eyes when they listen to Vicky go on and on (and on and on and on). Macy Franks pays no attention to her and just folds paper. Like, what's the name of that thing . . . that way you fold paper into animals and all that? Mrs. Richardson used to help me and Cotton make paper fortune-tellers when she was babysitting us back in the day. Used to give mine to Momly when she picked me up. But my fortune-teller ain't never predict this, that's

for sure. Anyway, Macy just be doing that. Making birds and stuff. Laurie Brenner wants a belly-button ring. Jasmine Stanger already got one. I saw it when she was showing Laurie. Pretty sure something's wrong with it.

First period, English. Mr. Winston is teaching us poetry. Which means Mr. Winston is teaching us boredom. My uncle said, "Tell Mr. Winston to teach y'all some Queen Latifah." At Chester? Right. Remember the whole "think about cannons" thing? That's because we've been learning this one called "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Cannons are mentioned in it, and Mr. Winston reads it like he some kind of actor or something, all bass-y and slow, like the man who narrates the previews at the movies. Like his dramatic voice is gonna make the poem any less wack. But hot sauce on cardboard is still cardboard.

Then comes math. Geometry. Ms. Teller says "perpendicular" and "hypotenuse" like her life depends on it. My life depends on math being over as quickly as possible.

Then lunch.

Okay, I know what you're thinking, what you think I'm gonna say. You think I'm gonna go on some kind of rant about how the cafeteria is basically like some



kind of “meanie mealttime” and little ol’ Patty Watty doesn’t have a group so she can’t find a seat, right? Wah wah wah! Right? Well . . . right. Kinda. But not exactly. See, the real issue with the cafeteria is that it’s tiny. Like teeny-tiny. It’s almost as if when they started this academy, they didn’t expect there to be so many people who would actually come to get academied. They probably never thought regular kids from regular neighborhoods and regular schools would end up here. But here I am. Looking for a seat in a space as small as the church we go to, and with just as much noise, but none of the spirit.

Point is, there was never enough seats, which was okay, because I never sat down anyway. I would basically just do a few laps around the room, scarfing my pasta Bolognese, which I found out was not pasta and baloney, but was actually just regular spaghetti. But yeah, I’d just circle the room, because when you keep moving, people think you going somewhere, like you on a mission and shouldn’t be bothered. Like you busy. And that’s better than people realizing that you not busy at all. That you not okay with lunchrooms that don’t have trays, and that ain’t big enough spaces to disappear in, and that don’t stink of week-old dirty mop water, which I now know is

the familiar smell of love and friendship.

Usually, on the tenth lap, my food would be gone, and the bell would ring. I had it all timed perfectly. But today, on lap number two, barely into my salmon teriyaki, which, by the way, should be called teriyaki salmon the same way barbecue chicken is barbecue chicken and not chicken barbecue. I swear . . . Chester. Anyway, on lap two, Becca stood up from her seat like a bird who just popped its head out of a nest, and waved at me. Well, not at me, but she waved me over. And I felt . . . funny. Like, confused, and weirded out, and skeptical, and yes, I can't front, a little excited. I cut between the tables, holding my plate steady, and once I got to where she was, smack in the middle of a crowded table full of . . . well . . . you know . . . girls on either side of her eating and talking and laughing, she said, "What are you doing?"

"What you mean?" I replied, pretending like I hadn't just been acting like a lunch monitor, trying not to drop my plate while forking my fish.

"I mean, how come you're not sitting?" she asked. The girl beside her, a girl I'd seen every day but never really met, whipped her face toward me. Two faces looking at mine. Four rosy cheeks. Four mascaraed eyes. Four bazillion strands of blond.

"Oh, I'm good."

"But you never sit," Becca pressed. "Like . . . ever."

And before I could either drop my plate, or say anything, Becca bumped the girl next to her, who then bumped the girl next to her, who bumped the girl next to her who happened to be Macy Franks, folding her teriyaki streaked plate into a Styrofoam half-moon. They all scooted over, squishing together, making a sliver of free space on the seat. Was this some kind of joke? A trick? A scheme for Becca to milk me for info about Frida or something? Either way, I was tired of eating standing up, so I set my plate down, slowly climbed over the bench, and slipped my legs under the table. Then, as if none of this was a big deal, Becca turned back to her conversation—a ditzy discussion about music in space—and I turned back to my salmon teriyaki. Yeah. Kinda awkward.

After lunch it was time for my favorite girl group. I mean, history. Ms. Lanford was standing at the board, chewing the last bit of her lunch, as we all filed in and took our seats in our assigned-group clusters.

"Don't forget to figure out when you're going to meet outside of class to work on this. Not everything can be done in school." Ms. Lanford wiped crumbs from the corners of her mouth. Looked like she may

have had crackers for lunch. Definitely not salmon teriyaki. "Hopefully, today everyone is prepared to share with their partners some more new findings about the person you all have chosen."

"Hey," I said first, scooting my chair up to the desk. T-N-T sort of spoke back. Sometimes their hi's sounded more like humphs. But only to me. Their hi's to Becca came with weird no-touch hugs. But whatever.

"Hey, Patina." Becca beamed, much warmer than the other two girls. As if I hadn't just been sitting next to her at lunch. She pulled out the materials we put together yesterday. Well, really, the stuff I put together. The photos of Frida I found on Google. Then the three of them looked at me like I had something magical to say.

I returned the stare. Blank face.

"So . . . anything new we should know about . . . um . . ." TeeTee started but couldn't remember Frida's name.

"Frida."

"Yeah, Frida. Anything new we should know about her?" She cocked her head to the side. I imagined her brain oozing out of her ear.

"You tell me." Me = running out of patience.

"I watched the movie about her online last night,"

Becca blurted out, all excited. "Um, well, I watched some of it. There's Spanish in it, and that threw me off. But I saw the part where she was in school and on the bus with her boyfriend, who by the way was hot, just saying, and the bus got in an accident and gold dust went everywhere and the next thing you know, Frida is just lying there all bloody. A mess. And then she's got a cast over her whole body. She painted butterflies on the cast after the cute boyfriend moved to Europe, which I was like, what? No! So . . . yeah."

T-N-T turned their attention back toward me to see if Becca was right. As if I was some kind of expert on gold dust, butterflies, and blood.

"That's wassup, Becca," I said, smiling, nodding. "But there's some details you left out." Here's the thing. At this point, I had already come to grips with the fact that this group project was going to be a Patty project. Ms. Lanford told us at the very beginning that there would be one grade given, so everybody had to do a fair share. But how in the world was I supposed to tell the T(a/e)ylors to get it together? How was I supposed to say, *Yo, I ain't doing all the work?* I guess I could've just said it like that, but I didn't want no static. I didn't want to be on nobody's bad side, especially since I wasn't even really on nobody's good side

yet. Matter of fact, I wasn't on nobody's side, period.

Man, I missed Cotton.

I know that's such a random thought, but in moments like these, I missed her bad. And what made it worse was that I couldn't even talk to her, because Barnaby Middle was on spring break like everybody else—Chester's was the next week—and her grandma took her on their annual cruise trip, which Cotton don't even like because she says she don't do nothing but sit around with no cell phone service, eating shrimp all day and looking out at all the water she can't swim in while her granny plays slot machines. But if Cotton was here, if she was in this group with me, she would've just made up all types of silly stories. Oh, Frida? She was the first woman in Mexico to go to the NFL. Oh, Frida? She invented the flute. Used to play with James Brown and them. Oh, Frida? She's the first woman to have a day named after her—Friday. By the way, Thursday was named after Thurgood Marshall. That's Cotton. She would've turned everything into a joke until T-N-T realized it wasn't. That none of this was. That this was about a . . . number . . . grade. A four. I needed a four. Even if that meant I had to do three other people's work to get it.

I pulled out my notebook and started running

down more facts about Frida, filling in some of Becca's holes. "She also went to one of the top schools in Mexico. It was probably like this one." Becca nodded. She was in. The other two were still holding out. I tried one more time to make a connection. "And that's where she met Diego Rivera, who at the time was painting a mural in the school auditorium."

"That's the fat man, right?" Becca interjected, excited to share more of what she must've seen in the movie. But it came off kinda mean, so she added, "I mean . . . I didn't mean it like that. But that's him, right?"

"Right. And what's really interesting is she ended up marrying him once she healed from the accident. Not right away, but a few years after."

"The fat man," TeeTee chimed in, just to confirm that we were still talking about the same Diego. "What did he look like?"

Becca sifted through the papers until finding one with his picture, and stabbed his face with her finger. "Him."

"Him? She could've done better than him. And he looks so old," Taylor scoffed.

"He was old. Twenty years older," I explained. Taylor leaned forward, the drama of that kind of relationship seeming to send some kind of electrical charge through

her. Suddenly, Frida was a little more interesting.

TeeTee pinched the corner of a picture of Frida, the one where her neck is too long and a small monkey's looking over her shoulder, and turned the picture around.

"I mean, she wasn't like . . . she definitely coulda done better than that guy," she said, studying Frida's face.

"Yeah, I agree. But he was a genius with a paintbrush, and I guess that's why she chose him. People used to call their relationship 'the Elephant and the Dove.'"

Becca's eyes lit up. "Like Beauty and the Beast!"

Taylor grimaced. "I guess," she said, and just then it occurred to me that we were all leaning in, analyzing Frida's and Diego's faces, looking through the pictures, discussing something . . . interesting. Sure, it was about their crazy love story, but still. It was a start. And if it weren't for the piercing sound of the fire alarm suddenly going off, we might've been able to get to some of the other cool things about Frida Kahlo, but at least we decided whose house we would go over to do the "go over somebody's house" portion of the project. Becca's. Taylor and TeeTee basically begged Becca to host it at her place, which I guess made sense because



it was right across the street from the school. Becca said the best day to do it at her house would be the next day, Wednesday, because her grandmother was making cookies, which T-N-T said was perfect because Thursday was Taylor's mother's birthday, and Friday . . . was Friday. I told them I could do it, but I'd have to come by after track practice, and if it wasn't for the alarm suddenly screaming over us, maybe, just maybe, they would've asked about my running. But I guess fire drills are important too.

At least they are to six-year-olds.

Specifically six-year-olds named Madison Jones.

"But just in case there is a real fire, it's good we practice, right?" Maddy went on and on in the car after school. From the moment I met her in the hallway she'd been blabbing, so excited about the hustle and bustle she'd experienced earlier in the day. Fire drill, fire drill, fire drill. It's like that was the only thing that happened in the north wing of Chester.

"I think we should also maybe practice stop, drop, and roll with Mrs. S," Maddy barreled on, rolling her hands in the air. "Just in case somebody don't make it out in time, especially since she make us all walk so slow. I don't know about everybody else, but if there's a for-real fire, I'm outta there."

Momly snorted.

"But what about me?" I asked.

Maddy thought about it for a second. "Patty, I can lift you up, but I don't think I can lift you and run."

"Not yet," I replied, sliding one arm out of my shirtsleeve.

"Right. Not yet." Maddy flexed one of her arms, squeezed her bicep.

The ride to MLK Park was the one thing that got Maddy to stop yakking about fire drills . . . for some reason she still geeked out at the fancy houses we passed on the way, especially the big white ones, their wooden castle doors with knobs like golden fists. The fountains and wraparound driveways. The windows—no curtains, like they want everybody to know what they got. But can't nobody really see nothing anyway, because of the gates, the tops of the metal posts curling up into the air like witch fingers. And in front of the gates, shrubs. And then the mailbox, with the address, which is always just one or two numbers. Like 6 Chester Ave. Or 13 Chester Place. And as we moved through town, the numbers continued to climb as the neighborhoods changed. From mansions to weird cereal-box communities, where every house looks like a different version of the one next to it. Then on to

older neighborhoods like mine, where the houses are still nice, but have been around for a while, so still made of brick. My address has three numbers. 685 Wallery Street. But Ma's address, over in Barnaby Terrace, has four—5014. And I think Ghost's is something like five or six. It's like the less numbers in your bank account, the more numbers in your address.

Practice was a little less silly today. Well, it got less silly after warm-up laps, stretching, and the usual clowning around. Well, Lu was clowning Curron.

"Yo, Curron, how come yesterday Coach ain't make y'all do that dancing thing Patty and Krystal did?" he asked, winding up and tossing a live grenade into the mix. He had one of his legs pulled back behind him, doing a final stretch.

"You mean what he made you and Ghost do?" Curron jabbed. "Because we don't need all that on the boys' relay," Curron bragged, cutting his eyes at Brit-Brat.

"Oh, y'all don't?" That was Krystal's cue to jump in. Brit-Brat didn't pay it no mind, and neither did I, because Curron was always trying us. Deja bucked a little, but Krystal beat her to it. "You do know that you can't keep taking off early in a relay race, right?"

If you jump the gun more than once, y'all shot . . . is shot." Krystal laser-eyed Currón. "And everybody know you a gun-jumpin' fool." We all laughed. Everyone but Sunny, who was chillin', trapping his laughter in his face, as usual, so nobody knew what he was really thinking. Krystal moved closer, put her hand on Currón's shoulder like a concerned parent. "Seriously, is there gonna be one race where you don't false start?"

Everybody laughed again, but Currón didn't find it funny at all.

"Seriously, Krystal No-Speed, is there gonna be one day that your breath don't smell like boiling track shoes?" Currón slapped a hand over his nose. He zinged her with that one, and even though it was super petty, all of us were yikes-ing from the blowback. Then he turned to Ghost. "And I know you ain't laughin', Ghost. Maybe you need more practice with your dance partner, because you ran the whole race before you realized nobody was running with you. The. Whole. Race."

Ouch. I can't front, just thinking of Lu and Ghost holding each other like that made me want to burst into laughter. But I held it in. But not everyone did, the loudest coming from Aaron, Freddie, and Mikey, who all began fake-waltzing.

"Whatever! It was his first race! His . . . first . . . race!"

Lu came to Ghost's defense. And I was right there for the follow-up.

"Ever," I dropped in to drive home the point.

"Nah, it's cool," Ghost said, calling off his newbie goons. "How 'bout this, Curron. How 'bout you pick the distance, and we line up and—"

"Okay, okay, knuckleheads," Coach cut him off, sauntering over, swinging his stopwatch. "Let's get done with the funnin' so we can get down with the runnin'. I swear if you all could move your legs as fast as you move your lips, we wouldn't even have to practice." Time for Coach's daily pep talk.

"We got three practices left before the next meet. Today, tomorrow, and Thursday. Then it's go time. If you came here to play around"—he looked at Lu, the instigator—"when Saturday comes, don't cry when I don't run you. If you came to be lazy, I'll make sure you have a comfortable seat this weekend at the meet. Are we clear?" We all nodded. "It's Technique Tuesday. I watched some of your forms break down last week, out there looking like wet noodles. I don't wanna see that this week. Let's keep it tight." He tucked his elbows in, stuck his chest out. "Keep your stride wide, and remember to breathe. Come off the block like you got a point to prove." Coach then told the relay teams what Coach

Whit had already told us at the last practice—that we would also be working on baton passing. Thankfully, he didn't mention dancing.

Me, Brit-Brat, Krystal, and Deja went off to one end of the track with Coach Whit. She was holding small orange cones. Not the kind that you see at construction sites, or in school cafeterias whenever there was a spill. These were small. Where the heck do you even get such tiny cones? If Maddy saw them, she'd want them for pretend megaphones.

"Okay, ladies, I need you all to pay attention, because what I'm gonna show you could make or break you," she said.

Then Whit placed one of the cones just before the curve on the track, and another, I don't know, maybe twenty feet into the curve. "This is the handoff zone," she said, coming back from the second cone. "Or as Coach calls it, the hot zone. This is the amount of space you have to hand off the baton. Now, I know the three of y'all"—Whit pointed to Krystal, Deja, and Brit-Brat—"are used to standing at the starting line with your arm out waiting for the stick, but this year Coach and I have decided to shake things up. You're going to run the eight-hundred relay as if it were a one hundred relay."

We looked at Whit like she had grown a second head. Once she realized that none of us understood what she was talking about, she explained, "What I mean is, we're gonna do blind handoffs."

"Wait, what you mean, blind?" Deja asked.

"Now she 'bout to blindfold us, y'all," Krystal joked.

"No, I'm about to show y'all how to win. That is, if you can shut up and listen. Especially you, Krystal, seeing as though you run the slowest leg." Krystal sucked her teeth, burned. Probably would've sucked her teeth hard enough to turn her whole face inside out if she could.

"Now, watch and learn," Whit said, and started demonstrating the blind handoff, a technique that usually only sprinters do during relays because of the momentum of the incoming runner. The runner who's receiving the baton has to time it exactly right, start sprinting before the runner with the baton reaches the line. So there's no slowdown.

"This is why I had you dance, ladies," Coach Whit was saying, moving Krystal and me to imaginary positions on the track. "Now, Krystal, you're coming in fast."

"Wait, we're running the eight hundred, not the four hundred," Brit-Brat said.

"So?"

"So . . . I mean, how fast do you really expect us to be coming in? By the time I get to the final stretch, I'm rigged. This is the hardest race to run," Brit-Brat argued, her arms spread wide, as if, what the? I nodded, thinking the exact same thing. The eight hundred ain't no dash.

"As fast as you possibly can. Our job is to run to win. If that means you have to run until your legs detach from your body, then that's what you do." Whit's face went dead serious. "Because the rest of your relay team is depending on you. Got it?" Brit nodded sheepishly. So did I. Coach Whit wasn't playing no games today.

"So, Krystal, pretend you're coming in, final stretch," Coach Whit gave Krystal the baton, stood beside her. "You want to line your right arm up with Patty's left shoulder. Now, whoever's receiving has the hard job, because they have to time the transition. In this case, it's Patty. When you see Krystal about to enter the red zone, where this cone is, you gotta take off, full speed. If you wait too long, you two will collide and get jumbled. If you go too early, the person passing the baton won't be able to catch up to hand it off. Make sense?" We all nodded.

"Now," she went on, "what this means for the



incoming runner is that you have to dig deep and run with everything you got on that final stretch, because once you yell out, 'Stick!' you still have to run fast enough to catch the next runner, who will have her arm out, but will also have fresh legs. So we all have to feel each other out. Know when to go. Know when to hand off. It's waltzing without touching. Just moving in rhythm. Now let's run it slow-mo a few times."

Coach Whit moved Krystal back twenty more feet and told her to jog toward me. Once Krystal got to the first cone, I started jogging. "Good," Coach Whit said. "Now call it!"

"Stick," Krystal said, no oomph behind it.

"No." Whit thrust her arm out across the Krystal's body like Momly does to me after slamming on the brakes. "I said, call it. Not say it." Whit took the baton and stepped back a few feet. "Stick! Stick!" she shouted, running toward us. "People are going to be screaming. You need to make sure your teammate hears you. Now, run it again."

When "stick" is called out, my job is to stretch my left arm behind me, without looking, while running full speed until Krystal slaps the baton in my hand. It's tricky, because our running has to match up. She has to have enough juice and enough time to get to me.

We ran it again and again, faster and faster, working on the timing of it all. Deja had to practice the handoff to Brit-Brat, and Brit-Brat had to practice the handoff to Krystal.

"Now remember, these cones won't be on the track. So you're gonna have to learn to eyeball when the transition should happen," Whit said, picking them up. "This time, full speed. Run it."

She told Deja to start back at the two-hundred-meter mark, outside lane, and do the handoff to Brit-Brat. It wasn't bad. Then she had Brit-Brat do the same to practice the handoff to Krystal.

"Stickstickstickstick!" was Brit-Brat's way of calling out, which made us all laugh, even Whit. But, hey, whatever works. Next it was my turn to receive the handoff from Krystal, but when she reached the red zone, and I broke out running, she couldn't catch me.

"Try it again," Whit said. So we did, and I got out too far ahead of her again. I wasn't trying to, but she's just . . . slower.

"Yo, what you tryna do?" Krystal asked, panting.

"What you talkin' 'bout? I'm waiting on you to call it out," I explained.

"No, you tryna play me," she said. "You over-running."

"Over-running? That ain't even a thing. Maybe you under-running—"

Coach Whit cut us off. "You two, cut it out and get back on your mark. Save that drama for the other teams on Saturday."

But Krystal wasn't ready to be cut off. Maybe it was because Curron snapped on her and Whit threw her a little shade earlier, but now Krystal was fuming. "Nah. See, I try to be nice to the new girl"—she looked around at Brit and Deja, all fired up—"but she always correcting me. And being all goody-goody, like she think she better than us." She raised her chin at me. "What make you better? Your white mother?"

My white . . . mother? Ohhhh . . .

"What?" My left eye twitched, a sign that things were going to go bad if Krystal didn't shut up. Nobody had ever tried to call me out about Momly before. Nobody had the nerve to even pretend to know something they really ain't know nothing about. Until now.

"You heard me." Krystal didn't shut up.

"Enough." Coach Whit slid between us, but that wasn't enough to stop what was coming. Because now I wasn't shutting up.

"I don't think I'm better than y'all. I think I'm better than you." I jabbed a finger over Coach Whit's shoulder

right at Krystal. "And not because of no so-called white mother. But because I'm actually . . . better . . . than . . . you. I just am. You run like your feet made of oatmeal. Like your whole life is in slow-mo. I'm faster, because I work harder while you sit around and pout like some spoiled brat. Like somebody owe you ribbons. Like it's our job to carry your lazy—"

"Patty! THAT'S ENOUGH!" Whit yelled, whirling around to face me.

"Better watch who you playin' with," I snarled at Krystal, last dig in.

"PATTY, I SAID THAT'S ENOUGH!" Coach Whit grabbed me by the arm and dragged me off the track to the gate. My heart was pounding so hard that my chest felt like it had stopped pumping blood and was pushing those red beads I put in Maddy's hair through my veins instead. "Are you serious?" Whit asked when we were out of earshot. "What was that?"

I glared over at Krystal. Made sure she knew I wasn't scared. But I didn't answer Whit. Didn't want to, because if I did I would've said that that was me offering Krystal a seat and that she better take it before I showed her what it meant to lay down. I was so mad. So mad. White mother? I'm the daughter of Bev Jones. And she don't make no junk. Momly ain't even my

real mother, but even if she was . . . what? I lasered in on Krystal's face. Her eyes, tearing up, her tough, tearing down. *You don't even know what you talkin' about, over there about to cry. What you about to cry for? You started it. Why you even have to go there? Why?*

"You hear me talking to you, Patty?"

I glanced at Coach Whit. "Yeah." I closed my eyes for a second, told myself to get a grip. Deep breaths, Patty, my mad slowly mellowing. This temper ain't a new temper. Breaking invisible teacups. Smashing them everywhere. No, this ain't new. I just be keeping it pushed down, all the way down in my legs. See, there was this weird period between my dad's passing and my mother losing her legs that my mom always calls "the funky zone" because I was acting, well . . . funky. Temper on a billion. As soon as somebody started with me—even if they looked like they wanted to start—I would finish it. Talk people down. Talk them out of whatever they thought they wanted with me. And I was just trying to let Krystal know, that's all. But it had been a long time since I had to get funky. And now that I had—and now that I noticed Krystal was really hurt—the "funk" was fading.

"So then I need you to answer me," Whit pressed, steely. "What was that?"

"Look, I'm sorry," I said, feeling somewhere between embarrassed and satisfied. But then I looked over at Krystal pretending I ain't cut her deep, doing her best to hold in her tears. Deja and Brit-Brat pretending like they minding their business but really they being nosy, watching us.

And . . . I felt bad. A little bit bad. I didn't want to, but . . . I did.

"What's going on here?" Coach had now made his way over to us.

"I'll let Patty tell you," Whit said, her voice still furious, stalking off to go talk to Krystal.

"It's nothing," I said quickly.

"Nothing?" Coach looked down at my hands. "Since when does 'nothing' make you look like you're about to punch somebody?"

I guess the funk hadn't completely faded yet.

I looked Coach in the eye but didn't say nothing. He mumbled something like, *I'm getting too old for this* under his breath. Then he startled me by shouting, to everyone, "Y'know, I'm not your daddy. I'm not your teacher, or your principal, or even your friend. I'm your coach. Your coach! My job is to coach you, to hopefully make you all better runners, but more importantly, better people!" He closed his eyes. "Krystal,

Deja, Brit-Brat, right here." He pointed to the ground in front of him. When they all came over, he took the baton from Krystal.

"Take one end," he ordered. I grabbed it, thinking this was going to be a revisit of the whole "energy of the team" speech. "Krystal, you take the other." She took the other end of the baton, looking like it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. "If either of you let go, you're both off the team." Then he looked at Deja and Brit-Brat. "If you two see either one of them let go, you tell me. And if I find out they did and you didn't let me know, you're gone as well. Now, fix it."

"Coach—" I begged.

"Don't try me," he cut me off, his voice ice. "There are Patinas and Krystals all over the place, begging to be in your spot. Praying to form the bond that y'all are so determined to break. Fix it."

Coach went back to the boys, who were practicing their blind handoff, leaving me and Krystal standing there, holding the metal stick, trying our best to not let our hands touch, which was pretty much impossible. Deja and Brit-Brat stood in front of us, awkward.

"Come on y'all, just squash it so we can get back to work," Brit-Brat said. "We a team."

"I ain't start it. She came for me for no reason," I pleaded my case.

"That's because you were purposely trying to make me look bad," Krystal said.

"Make you look bad? I was running. Running. This is a track team."

"Yo, you think I don't know that? I was on this team before you!"

"That's the thing. You don't think I know that!" Krystal didn't say nothing back. She just looked at me with a screwface, then yanked the baton. I almost let go.

"Whoa, whoa! Chill," Deja said, eyes wide, hands up.

"Yeah, y'all trippin'. Let's just talk it out," Brit-Brat said. "I've watched enough Iyanla Vanzant to know how to do this."

"When do you have time to watch Iyanla Vanzant?" Deja asked. "I didn't even know she still had a show."

"I don't think she do, but my mother recorded every single episode and uses it whenever she feels like she don't understand me. I keep trying to tell her, I'm tall and skinny with big feet, and therefore a monster. And then she says, no baby, you're beautiful, and I'm here for you, and what do you need from me to support you—which she steals from Iyanla—and then I say, a bag of Twizzlers, a trip to the mall, and a lock on my



door, and then she says, how about a bag of Twizzlers, and then I say I hate everyone and everything."

"Wait, so you don't get the Twizzlers?" Deja asked, now laughing.

"What? Oh, of course I get the Twizzlers."

"I love Twizzlers," Krystal said, low. It was as if suddenly we were all just thinking about candy.

"Me too. My mother used to sell them," I said after an uncertain pause. I wasn't sure if I wanted to join in on this weird Twiz-fest that had suddenly broken out. Especially since I was just about to give Krystal a good old-fashioned Beverly Jones Funky Zone beat-down. But it seemed like it was happening, so . . .

"Your mother?" This from Krystal.

"Yeah, she used to be the candy lady in Barnaby Terrace."

"Wait, that white lady sold candy in Barnaby Terrace?" she asked.

"That's not my mother. That's my auntie."

Krystal was quiet. For once. Probably trying to swallow down all that "loud-and-wrong" she'd just spat.

Brit-Brat stepped in. "Okay, so what Iyanla would say, now that we've broken the ice, is, 'Patty, what did Krystal say to offend you?'" Then she changed her mind. "You know what, scratch that question. I

think we know what you both said. Yeesh. How about this. Patty, what's one thing you want Krystal to know about you?"

Brit-Brat had her hands clasped and was leaning in like she really knew what she was doing. Like she was for real. I couldn't believe I was actually about to do this, but seeing how serious Brit was, I felt like I had to.

"I wasn't trying to embarrass her."

"Say it to her, not to me," Brit-Brat nudged, her voice over-the-top calm. *Seriously?*

"I wasn't trying to embarrass you," I said, feeling totally ridiculous. But also feeling like Krystal needed to know that, because it was true. "And I'm sorry for not adjusting like we learned when we were doing the waltz. But I'm still figuring everything out."

"Yes. Yes, we all are. We're trying to figure out this relay race . . . of life," Brit-Brat said, her eyes now shut. Now we all shot looks at her, like really? And when she opened hers and realized we were staring her down, she said, "What? That's what Iyanla would say." She turned to Krystal. "Your turn."

Krystal sighed. "Look, even though I talk a lot of trash, I'm serious about this team too," she assured me. "But . . . it's real that I'm . . . I'm not as fast as you."

"Shoot, neither am I," Brit-Brat seconded. "But that don't mean we can't win if we stay connected."

"Exactly," Deja chimed.

I looked at Krystal. She looked at me. But for the first time today, neither of us were sizing each other up. You know how you can tell if a person is looking at you, or *looking* at you? Yeah, there was none of that extra sting in her eyes. She was just . . . looking at me. Like she was trying to see me.

"We good?" I asked, still holding on to the stupid baton. Krystal bit down on her bottom lip, nodded.

"Yeah, we good."

"Good, because I'm done with Iyanla Van-CANT over here." Deja smirked.

Brit-Brat palmed both of Deja's shoulders and looked in her eyes all serious. "Oh, please. You know you want me to fix your life." Deja rolled her eyes, like tuh. "Okay. But just know, denial is the first step to defeat, Deja."

A few minutes later we called Whit over. We would've called Coach, but he was so mad at us that it just didn't seem like a good idea.

"Can we drop the baton?" I asked.

"Can you what?" Whit sparked up like I had asked

her for twenty bucks. "You can never, ever drop the baton."

"That's not what I meant."

"But it is. Subconsciously." Everybody was Iyanla all of a sudden. "But if y'all are done fighting, you can release it. Krystal, you keep it, and we can get back to practice."

"We're straight," I said.

"You sure?"

I looked at Krystal. Saw her. Saw all of us, and knew we now had each other's backs. "Yeah, Whit. We good."



**TO DO:** Think about aliens and rap music  
(and Dad)

**“HOW WAS PRACTICE?”** Momly asked as usual, turning the radio down as I closed the car door.

“Fine,” I said, right on script, as Momly drove away from MLK Park. Even though I felt like I looked normal, apparently I didn’t.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Maddy, who had been kicking the back of my seat, suddenly stopped. Listened closely for my answer.

“Nothing. Why?” The only thing I could guess was that even though all the drama at practice was over, some of it must’ve been lingering in me. On me. You

know how you clear your throat? How you force an almost-cough to get the crackly stuff out? Well, I tried to clear my face. Tried to open my eyes wider and loosen my jaw a little to wipe it back to regular.

"You just seem off, that's all."

"Nah, I'm cool," I insisted, then changed the subject. "Maddy, you need me to help you with your homework?"

"No. We already did it. Momly helped me," she said, then started kicking the seat again.

Momly turned the radio up. No music. Just talk. People talking about people talking about animals like they people. Which Momly thought was hilarious, Maddy thought it was fascinating because of her upcoming field trip to the farm, and I thought was bang-your-head boring.

"My mother used to take her dog to the spa. Like, the spa . . . for humans. Used to get the ugly mutt massages and facials as if her Chihuahua was living some kind of stressful life. It was unbelievable. That money could've gone to her grandchildren for college, for goodness' sake. But since the dog couldn't get a degree, it was like she didn't care. I mean, can you imagine?" a lady on the radio went on and on. *Yes, I can imagine*, I thought, T-N-T and

Becca instantly replacing the Krystal track drama in my head (and apparently on my face), reminding me to tell Momly about my group project "after-school meet-up" thingy I had to do the next day. I bet Becca had one of those little dogs. Probably dressed it up like her twin. Oh boy.

"Hey, so tomorrow after practice, can you take me back over by the school to this girl in my class's house?" I asked. "It's for the Frida project."


"After practice?" Momly turned the radio down again. "Will her parents be there?"

"Her grandmother," I explained.

Momly nodded. "And who is this young lady?"

"Her name is Becca Broward. She's okay. I mean, I just want to get it over with so I can get a good number on this project, y'know, to keep Ma off my back." And not to mention, my feet on the track. Momly could definitely understand that.

"Okay." There was some hesitation in her voice. "Well, you want me to bring you a change of clothes?" I hadn't even thought about that. The last thing I needed was to show up at Becca's house smelling like sweat gravy. Before I could even answer, Momly added, "I'll just pack a little bag for you."



At home, after homework, turkey wings, and push-ups with Maddy, Maddy and me laid around in her room, looking at old-school music videos on my laptop while I counted the beads left on her braids. I know the nineties videos seem a little weird, but me and Cotton always watched them, let them play one after another. And because we'd been doing it for so long, Maddy liked them too. Knew all the songs and everything. We loved Mary J. Blige, and that came from my mom. She really got on a Mary kick after my father passed and played her nonstop when we were little. It was truly all about Jesus and Mary. And I get it. I mean, just the way Mary be dancing is worth watching, like she a sixty-year-old man who just hit the lottery. Like she got all dressed up in a fur vest and knee boots, full face of makeup and hair fresh-laid, just to go beat somebody up. To go fight life. Like she had all the answers to all the questions.

And I needed some of them answers. Not just for the track, but also for school—and after school—the next day. Answers for Mr. Winston as he went on and on shouting, “Cannon to right of them! Cannon to left of them!” Are ye part of the six hundred? Are ye part of the Light Brigade?” Answers for Ms. Teller in math class as she asked us to describe a cylinder. And



even worse, when she asked us to describe a trapezoid, which I wanted to raise my hand and say, "A trapezoid is another name for a scary kidnapper." But instead I decided to save that joke for me and Cotton.

I also needed an answer to the cafeteria, which to me, always asked the same question, "Where you sitting?" I didn't just assume I was gonna have another spot over at Becca's table. So instead of me going in there thinking that, and playing myself, I just did my usual. Got my food, which today was short rib, which was delicious and a little weird because I couldn't help but think about what animal has a rib this short. I know they say it's beef, but don't no cow have a little baby rib like this. And then I started thinking about the radio, about the people talking about people who talk about animals like they people, and I just . . . I just . . . lost my appetite.

For like five minutes.

For one lap around the cafeteria.

Then Becca called me over again. And I (almost did my Mary J. Blige walk over there and) sat down and separated the meat from the bone, while Becca, for the second day in a row, went on about music . . . in space.

"Seriously, my father said there's like all kinds of

stuff on this gold record they sent up there back in the seventies. And not just music. But he said there's digital photos of people eating and dancing and stuff."

"So you're saying, somewhere up in the stars, there's just random information about us floating around?" the girl sitting next to her, the girl I still didn't know but that I heard Becca call Sasha, asked. She said it in that I-don't-believe-you voice, and I couldn't blame her. Becca was buggin'.

"Yep. But it's on a gold record. They did it thinking that maybe one day aliens would find it and learn about us."

Today Macy Franks was sitting directly across from me. She dragged hunks of meat across her plate, sopping up sauce before lifting her fork to her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, then pointed her fork at Becca and asked, "But if aliens do find it, won't they need a record player to play it on?"

"We don't even really use those things down here anymore!" Sasha said.

"Plus, what makes you think aliens don't already know about us? Shoot, I know a few aliens in this school," Macy added.

The other girls laughed.

"Oh yeah? Like who?" Becca asked.

I looked down at my plate. Chewed my lip for a second like it was a piece of beef.

"Like me," Macy replied, shaking her head. "And obviously, you!"

Phew. Shoulders back, Patina.

The conversation went on, Becca leading the way, now asking everybody if they could record anything on whatever gold record she was talking about, what would it be.

"I mean, choose carefully, because it's gonna last forever and might be seen or heard by aliens," she reminded us.

"I wish I could send what my older brother's shoes smell like," Sasha said. "I feel like aliens won't want anything to do with us, not attack us or anything, if they knew what kinds of smells come out of teenage boys." I chuckled at that one, only because I spend so much time around boys, I can definitely cosign. It's like their toes be made of week-old cheesy bread or something.

"This is true," Macy said, now folding her meatless plate. "I'd probably send some origami. Maybe a fortune-teller with instructions on how to use it. And under every flap it would say, Come to earth, destroy Chester Academy, located at . . . What's the address

here? Whatever . . . destroy the school, find your sisters Macy and Becca, and take them home."

"Speak for yourself!" Becca's voice rang an octave higher than normal, putting her at almost glass-shatter level. "Anyway, what about you, Patina? And don't say anything about Frida Kahlo, either. That's cheating."

I could've used some short rib to stuff into my face to keep me from having to say anything. The seat was enough, and to be honest, I wasn't really expecting any actual words to come my way. So I wasn't ready. Caught off guard. But everyone was looking at me, waiting for an answer. I ran through—and this is gonna sound silly—everything I would want an alien to know about me. About Barnaby Terrace, and my folks. Where I'm from. But I couldn't really figure out what I would want to go up into space. Pictures? Movies? Red beads? All my first-place ribbons? Better yet, get rid of my stupid second-place one?

"Um . . . it could be anything?" I stalled.

"Yep. I mean, when they first did it, they sent a bunch of music recordings and stuff."

"They send rap music?" I asked.

"Good question," Macy propped.

Becca looked stumped. She tapped her temple. "Hmmm. I don't . . . I don't think so."

"Probably not," I agreed, "because it wasn't really a thing at the time. So . . ." And then it hit me. Something I never really thought about. Something I never even really heard. But it was important to my family in a weird way. Important to me in a way that kinda lived in the part of my brain that I can't even think with. It's like an under-thought or something like that. Hard to explain. "Back in the day, my father used to make beats. I think I'd try to send one of those up there. Either that, or maybe his favorite cupcake recipe." I sorta shrugged. "I know, super random."

"I want some cupcakes right now," a girl whose hair was spun into a tight bun the size of a biscuit on the tip-top of her head said. I hadn't caught her name yet. I don't think anybody said it.

"Cupcakes would be cool," Sasha agreed. But Becca's mind was somewhere else.

"Yeah, they would be, but what would really be cool is beats, right? I mean, especially if some alien DJ got ahold of them." Becca did a fake DJ thing with her hand on her plate, like she was scratching records. And then she added, "Does your dad still make beats?" But her voice seemed to slow down, stretched out and distorted all crazy in my ears.

*Does Your Dad Still Make Beats?*

My throat. Did I eat the plate without knowing? Did the pointy fingers of the fork break off? Did I swallow them, so now plastic nails were poking the inside of my neck? I never, ever, ever talked about my father in public. Not because I didn't want to, but because it just never came up. I was more used to talking about my mother. My mothers. The mom situation always became a conversation about why I have two, but never about why I don't have a dad. If anything, most people just assume Uncle Tony's my pops, which is cool, but it just never hit me that I don't really talk about my actual dad. Not even to Cotton. Not to nobody. And so this simple question about whether or not my dad still makes beats tightened the skin around my bones.

"Patina?" Becca's voice wah-wah'd in my head. "You okay? You look sick." I had no idea how long I was sitting there, stuck.

"No . . . um, sorry," I tried to answer. "My father . . . yeah, he, um . . . he's . . ."

Gone.

But before I could actually say it, the bell rang and it was off to history class, where I had to sit with it all. Had to let the thought of my dad splash around my stomach with whatever a short rib was, while my regular-size ribs felt like they were being bent. A tiny

hammer, the one that always knocks on the back of my throat whenever I need to cry, knocking away! And usually, whenever I feel this stuff, it's soothed by the thought of track practice. By running. But since it was now thundering out—causing Becca to almost jump out of her skin every five minutes in Ms. Lanford's class, which, along with me struggling to get myself together, kept "Group Frida" from getting any work done—Coach sent out a text saying practice was canceled. The world was proving it hated me. It was like the ultimate hair flip. Like the Earth's ha-ha-ha.



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What? I'm just askin'."

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

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

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

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

"I'm just asking," Maddy repeated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### INSIDE BECCA'S HOUSE:

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She made all that?" I asked.

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

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

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

"He passed away."

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

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

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

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

doll houses. Like living inside of a strawberry cupcake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wild," I corrected her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

I ran the water in the sink.

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

"I got it."

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

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

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

"Then I'll dry."

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



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

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

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

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

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

"Wait. You went there?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you like it there?"

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah."

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

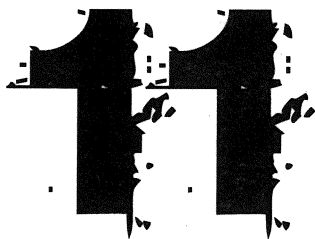
"And was he right?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

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

"Yeah."

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Patty!"

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

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



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

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

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

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

"But what does it mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes?"

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

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

"Uncle Tony?"

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

"What you doing here?"

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

"Something's happened."

*Something's happened.*

*Something's happened?*

The bell rang.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

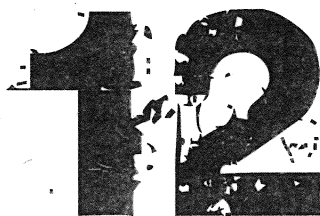
"Have you called my mom?" I asked as we pulled into the hospital.

"Not yet."

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's true," Momly gurgled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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