

**BREAK  
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HOUSE**

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CANDICE ILOH

DUTTON BOOKS

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*For Mom*



Dear Reader,

A lot of us are taught that if a feeling is too ugly or too loud, we should make sure we hide it. That there are things we shouldn't admit to, because what would they say about us? What would it say about us if we are angry at someone we love? If we cursed something or someone we are supposed to fear or respect, what kind of person would that make us? We are told a lot of things about how we should feel or behave when something bad happens. When the unexpected suddenly changes our lives, there seem to be all these rules about how to deal with it. But here's the thing: No one even knows what they're talking about. Not really. At least not about you. We all deal with it all differently.

The truth is I wrote this book to say the things I'm not supposed to say. I wanted to tell a story where the person in pain doesn't pretend. And I wanted to explore what it looks like to feel all these things at the same time: joy, love, rage. All of it.

I say all this to say, this book is going to get super real. And a little reckless. As you read it, some hard things may come up. You might experience some intense feelings. Particularly about **death and existence**. You'll probably laugh at some strange things too. But because I don't know you personally, I can't tell you what you can or can't handle. Only you can do that. I'm just here to say, take good care of yourself, friend. And whenever you need it, take breaks.

Thanks for being here. You're in for a wild ride.

With love,  
Candice





**Promise that you will**

**sing**

**about me.**

**KENDRICK LAMAR**



# PROLOGUE

**A rumor about Obsidian, Michigan, goes like this:**

There once were two girls who broke things. But not in the way that anyone might think. The girls didn't break regular things like glass or nails or bones. The girls broke bigger things—things they said could never work for them in the first place. At least not after everything that happened. Not after so much changed. At first, they broke promises they'd made to each other. Next, it was their bond. Then, it was the belief that anything could last forever or come back. Because look at us, they thought. Look at this family. Look at this place. The girls grew so used to things being broken that trying to fix them became the greatest chaos of all.

At first.

**BREA**

AK



# ONE

**“Aye, Pop. you stink.”**

“Hello to you, too, Minah,” Pop says, cutting me off with an eye roll right before mushing a kiss into my forehead. I catch a whiff of stale cow blood before he continues past me into the kitchen. “Relax—I’m on my way to the shower already. Ain’t gotta say that shit to me every day. Can’t expect your pop to quit his job just ’cause you protesting dead animals now.”

Everything about me that Pop and I disagree on he calls a “protest.” Us “new-grade young people”—as he labels us—always gotta be hollerin’ about something that worked just fine back when he was a teenager, and the problem with us is that we got too many feelings about things that are simple, like food and the moon. According to Pop, we spend too much time fussing over everybody needing to be vegetarians when what we need to be doing is training our ears to be able to hear real music again.

“First of all, the shower’s that way. That’s the fridge, just in case you got a little confused. Second, ain’t nobody protesting. Just think they prolly should have showers in that death chamber you workin’ at, bro.” I don’t understand how a person can live with themselves after spending they whole day slaughtering everything that bleeds and then selling it to somebody on a foam plate and wrapped in plastic to take home to they families. I mean, it used to be nearly impossible for

me to walk past Shake Shack without gettin' got just last summer, but still. I've been delivered from my ignorance.

"All right, tell me something, *bro*," he says, pulling off his pit-stained white tee, now turned a dingy yellow. "How could a place that pays for *all of this*," he says, pausing to look around the house like it's the second coming of the Trump Towers, "be a *death chamber*?" He waits for the gulp of beer to slosh down his throat before flashing his "gotcha" smile. He wouldn't be himself if he didn't pause for dramatic effect when he's tryna prove that he's right.

"Now, you know 'all of this' don't mean nothin' in Crown Heights. We live in a box, Pop. And I'm pretty sure killing all god's animal children every day and calling yourself a butcher classifies it as peak chamber of deaths. Like, by definition." A vision of the Trump Towers flashes before my eyes in my imaginary Google search for American Chamber of Deaths before I shake it away to finish closing the deal. "But I'll say a special prayer for your soul if I can get ten bucks."

"You ain't no real vegan," he says, tossing me a sweaty, crumpled twenty from his jeans pocket. "I'll believe that holistic mess you into now when you stop taking all my damn money. Shouldn't your no-waste lifestyle be costing me less . . . or something like that? Get me two gallons of water and a bag of them plantain chips. The garlic kind." Pop always gives me more than I ask for with a side of fake complaints. He puts on this act every time I ask for a little change to go to the store, but he's always telling me that this is what he's here for. And he's always been here.

"Damn, Pop. Wasn't tryna do all that. I was just tryna get something to drink."

"Damn, Pop!" His over-the-top impressions of me be having me weak. It doesn't matter that my voice is almost as deep as his or that



raising me ain't like raising those other girls I go to school with. I always sound like a spoiled, whiny-ass chick who hangs out at the mall all day with Daddy's credit card when Pop spits back the things I say at me. Full-on squeak mode.

"Firstly, watch your mouth. Nothing's free, Minah. Plus, what you need a whole ten dollars for when you know all you 'bout to get is some orange juice and coconut water? Fancy-ass bodega-snacks tax?" he says, scrunching up his face in disgust at the latter. "You're welcome." He finally turns his back down the hall toward the bathroom.

"Breath gon' be funkier than the homeless man on the train," I mumble under my breath, pulling on a sneaker.

"What you say?!" he screams over the running bathwater as I pull on the other. I must got the youngest dad in the whole hood. He hears everything. The giant mirror leaned up against the wall just inside our front door gives me a chance to glance over my look. I reach for my biggest pair of sunglasses and pull a bucket hat low over my twists. A decent bodega-run disguise. I tug a little at each corner of my T-shirt and check out my ass in my favorite jeans. Loose enough.

"Nothing . . . nothing. I'ma be back."

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Our side of Crown Heights almost feels like don't nobody go to work around here. Cars speed up and down the street like it ain't kids around to worry about. Buses push off the stop even though they see somebody runnin' to catch it. Dollar cabs blast horns loud enough you probably could hear them all the way in Bed-Stuy. Gossipy Trini grandmothers take their sweet time, clogging up the sidewalk in front of the West Indian market, squeezing mangoes and avocados checking to see if they're ready to eat. And all of them scoot slow and unbothered

with no signs of whether all the noise gets on their nerves. Each wrinkled hand remains steady despite how soca blasts from cars driving by behind them, shaking the whole block's concrete.

"Yoooooo, mamaaaaa. You got some extra change? Can you get me a soda?" I thought walking fast behind my biggest, blackest sunglasses, thumbing my phone like I got business, would have sent some type of signal to Old Man that I wasn't tryna do all that today. He pauses, smiles with all his grayish ancient teeth, hands stuffed into his pockets. The no-need-to-be-scared-of-me stance I'm used to seeing on him, carefully chosen in hopes that I'll let my guard down.

"You want a coffee?" I offer instead, continuing to walk. I don't ever buy him soda. Or any of those other fake chemical excuses for food they got in there. Water, coffee, and sandwiches prepared on the grill only when I got it like that.

"I'll take a coffee," he accepts. The door jingles as I push quickly into the corner bodega. Old Man trails, head lowered, behind me. He makes a beeline for the coffee station while I split off down the aisle with all the chips. Fur grazes my ankle, and my instinct is to jump, but I fall back at ease looking down to see Bodega Cat greet me the way she always does. I try my best not to think about where she's been or what she's been doing with her life. Cats can't take off their shoes after coming in from New York City streets like Pop makes me do, a never-ending reminder of how dirty this city is. And I don't care that cats clean themselves all day with their own saliva. You can't convince me licking yourself makes you clean. I grab Pop's funky garlic chips—the purple bag with the palm tree next to the bright green lettering—right before heading to the back coolers for my juice and coconut water. Pop thinks he knows me or something. And how he gon' send me in here

for two whole jugs of water? Don't none of these bodegas ever got grocery baskets. And don't nobody ever come in here tryna buy enough to fill one. Most of this stuff's usually stale anyway. I learned that the hard way last time I craved some Fruit Loops. Tragic.

"Is this crystalized . . . or granulated sugar? Or . . . or is it pure CANE sugar?" I hear Old Man asking Bobby at the register from the next aisle. My guy is homeless with rich millennial taste. Must have made his rounds in Williamsburg. One time he fussed at Bobby for putting American cheese instead of cheddar on a bacon, egg, and cheese that I'd bought him. "'Cause the CANE sugar is the good shit. That's what I want in my coffee." Bobby eyeballs Old Man as I come down the aisle, ignoring his question. "And wheeeeere is the hazelnut half-and-half? I likes my coffee CREAMY."

I drop the juice, coconut water, and Pop's chips and gallons on the counter. "I got this and his coffee." Bobby mumbles something in Arabic as his eyes dart back and forth between the surveillance screen that hangs just above my head and Old Man, who's thumbing the coffee counter for a lid, still talking to whomever he thinks is listening about hazelnut half-and-half. Bobby is never not looking like he's worried and ready for somebody to steal something. Sometimes he barely even looks at me when I'm trying to hand him my money if somebody else is in there at the same time as me. But at least he don't got somebody sitting right outside the bodega in a wooden box facing the door watching every customer that comes out like the dollar store across the street does. At least this one don't got bulletproof glass we gotta speak into.

"All right, all right. Zas enough. Zas enough," he calls out to Old Man now that he knows I'm paying. He adds the cost of everything up out loud. A small kid who looks just like him barely peeks over

the counter and catches my eye from a stool he has perched just beyond the register. Behind his head is every kind of medicine, cigarette, or household appliance anyone could ever need. Options are stacked against the wall all the way to the ceiling. Pepto Bismol. Tylenol. Screwdrivers. Durags. Newports. Milk of Magnesia. Nasty. “Twelve dollars, baby. How you doing? No bacon and cheese? No cigarette?”

“I told you I don’t eat dead animals no more, Bobby. And I don’t even know what you talkin’ ’bout tryna sell me a loosie. I’m good,” I reply. I’m annoyed by his taunting smirk. Bobby asks me that almost every time I come in here like it ain’t been a whole year since I stopped eating meat. It’s annoying but at least he knows not to ask me about loosies in front of Pop. Don’t want him getting ideas. Grease snaps and sizzles loudly on the griddle filling the cramped storefront with hot pig smoke. I hand him the twenty and wait for him to count me back the change.

“Thank you, mama.” Old Man raises his coffee cup to me as if to toast to the only yes he’s heard all day and makes his way out with Bobby’s eyes glued on him until he’s fully out the door. I grab the bag of snacks and slide the gallons off the counter. I swear parents only have us so they can use us helpless kids for cheap labor.

The Memorial Day weekend heat and sunlight pushes into my face as I step out onto the sidewalk. At least five car speakers blast soca from different directions throughout the neighborhood as I watch a few motorcycles race down the orange fence-lined street. The block is pressed for the careless vibes of summer life, with old ladies selling all kinds of mini flags representing every Caribbean country on the map. New fruit carts have popped up on the corner, jam-packed with sugar cane stalks at least six feet high for families to suck on once the wet heat turns the whole street into a West Indian block party. Dollar-cab horns alert people waiting on the bus that they got room to give us all

a ride when the city fails us. Only two dollars for a ride up the street. Random police sirens enter the mix. Old Man is nowhere to be found.

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Stepping back into our fourth-floor apartment is like stepping out of a sweaty Jamaican bashment party scene into one of those old-folks smoke-filled jazz clubs Pop and Sandra probably met in forever ago. I hear the flit of random saxophone notes float from Pop's room and throw the chips on the counter. A thin stream of gray rises from a spliff-filled ashtray on the kitchen counter and I know there ain't no goin' back there now. He'll be fumbling around for at least the next three hours. Or until he starts getting on his own nerves. Bright side: The house smells only a little sour now and more like a steamed bar of soap. His musty work clothes are chucked somewhere I can't smell them. Also means I can chill on the couch with my phone in peace.

My phone vibrates and a notification flashes across the top of the screen. Tiff's name shows up as the screen opens to Facebook Messenger. It's about that time. Months have gone by and we're due, I guess.

**Tiffany Harrison**

WASSUP, CUZ? YOU MISS ME OR NAH?

**Yaminah Okar**

YOU MAD SILLY, GIRL, OF COURSE I MISSED YOU. EVERYTHING'S GOOD.

WASSUP WITH YOU??

**Tiffany Harrison**

LISTEN TO YOU. *MAD* SILLY. YOU THINK YOU REALLY FROM BROOKLYN NOW, DON'T YOU? YOU CAN SAY *MAD* AND TALK LIKE CARDI B ALL YOU

WANT TO BUT YO ASS STILL GON' BE FROM OBSIDIAN. LMAO. BUT NAH,  
THINGS IS COOL. I MEAN, EVEN WITH EVERYTHING GOING ON. YOU KNOW  
HOW IT IS. YOU KNOW HOW EVERYBODY HANDLE STUFF AROUND HERE.

Never missing a chance to remind me of where I came from, this is always how Tiff says hello. One part diss to New York. One part homage to the OB. One part family drama. One part envy that I got up out of there unlike everybody else, including her.

**Yaminah Okar**

AND YOU WON'T EVER LET ME FORGET IT. AIN'T NOBODY  
TRYNA FORGET. BESIDES I BEEN GONE FOR YEARS.  
PRACTICALLY GREW UP HERE NOW.

**Tiffany Harrison**

OH, PLEASE. YOU STILL ONE OF US. BUT I GUESS I FEEL YOU, GIRL.  
AIN'T NOTHIN HERE NO WAY. SEEM LIKE EVERYBODY JUST SAD ALL  
THE TIME. I GET IT. I'M GLAD YOU GOOD. 'CAUSE I GOT SOME TEA. WELL,  
MORE LIKE SOMETHING HAPPENING THAT I THINK YOU SHOULD KNOW.

I was waiting for this. Cousin Tiffany always has the tea.

**Yaminah Okar**

DO I REALLY WANNA KNOW? I'M TRYNA BE ON MY NAMASTE RIGHT  
NOW. I DON'T KNOW IF I'M IN THE MOOD TO HEAR ABOUT SOMEBODY  
ELSE IN THE FAMILY FIGHTING.

**Tiffany Harrison**

(...)

I see the dots on the screen that, for Tiff, means she's telling me whatever I probably don't want to hear anyway. My question completely rhetorical in her book. I wait for her to flesh out a full-on story about how Aunt Jo was rude to Cousin Jay's girlfriend again or how one of the neighborhood women tried to sabotage Nana's Sunday-dinner business. It's all happened before. Very little would surprise me at this point. Pop's saxophone squeaks from behind his closed door followed by him releasing a sudden cuss into the air. He's gonna need a break after that one. His door flings open and Tiff's message finally sends a link to an event.

**YOU'RE INVITED TO THE WILLIAMS-JOHNSON 2019 FAMILY REUNION**

**IN MEMORY OF OUR SISTER**

**SANDRA ANNE WILLIAMS (SEPTEMBER 3, 1973—JANUARY 8, 2019)**

**OAK COMMUNITY PARK**

**Thursday, July 4—Sunday, July 7, 2019.**

**Are you going?**

**Yes      No      Maybe**

Tiff's message bubbles pick up again. I read the Facebook invite title over again. Then again. Then a third time. You can receive an invite for anything on Facebook. Prom-posals. Graduations. Celebrations of death. Family get-togethers for families that have been broken since the beginning of time. *Are you going?* People have even been known to go live into the delivery room reeking of vagina blood while their best friend was pushing out a slimy-ass baby.

**Tiffany Harrison**

**I FIGURED UNCLE JAMES FORGOT TO SEND YOU**

**THE INVITE AGAIN THIS YEAR**

**Tiffany Harrison****YOU STILL THERE?**

I close Messenger, stuff my phone into my pocket, and walk over to the kitchen, where Pop leans over the counter, shoving handfuls of garlic plantain chips into his mouth. Crumbs fall into the gray hairs of his struggling goatee without him noticing. He washes it down with water straight from the jug, small streams escape down the sides of his face as he gulps with his head tilted all the way back, eyes closed. Pop might be the king of escape. For those few minutes it almost looked like that water was all that ever existed and he wasn't being dragged by the stress of this city.

"It's all these damn buildings that got my head all screwed up. I know it," Pop says, staring off into nowhere. "All these musicians moved to New York City to follow they dreams but ain't no nature in this dump! I used to be good, man. But these exhaust fumes is going straight to my brain. You know what Coltrane used to say? He said, 'All a musician can do is get closer to sources of nature.' But I'm convinced even them birds we be hearin' outside is bots, Minah. Can't even convince me them trees on the next block is real. I used to have something. I used to be able to play my songs, man."

If I just stand still, it'll be some other random day where Pop is just fussing as usual. Nothing special. Nothing going on. If I just stand still here for a while, Pop will be back in his room playing off-key and I'll be chillin' on the couch reading my horoscope, able to breathe.

"Minah. Did you hear what I said? Your pop is losing out here, baby girl."

In Memory of Sandra Williams. Date of death: January 8, 2019.



Sandra has been dead for four months. Does he know about Sandra? Plantain chip bits are sitting on Pop's gray hairs just under the drops of water he still hasn't wiped away. I feel the coolness of the countertop tiles under my damp hands now stuck here like glue. My one-hundred-pound hands. The crumbs start to blur like one big orange blob on the side of Pop's face, dancing up and down. They move around the same spot that words are coming out of but that I suddenly can't hear. Dark Brown. Black. Orange. Gray. A breeze flies over my eyes and I blink the water away. It slides down my face and wets my neck. Pop's face comes back into focus.

"Minah, baby. Are you there?"

Am I here? I run to my room and shut the door before Pop can say anything else.

Less than a minute later Pop's voice pleads on the other side of my bedroom door. Other days I would have feared for my life walking away while he was talking to me and even worse for slamming my door. Sandra has been in the ground since it was covered in snow and people were still wishing each other Happy New Year. What the fuck. My phone buzzes again against my thigh. I slide it back out from my pocket to see five more messages from Tiff. It doesn't matter that I'm not there. She'd continue talking to a wall if no one was there to listen to her run her mouth. I unlock it and open back up to click the link and read the rest of the Facebook invite:

Come join us as we celebrate family, our late sister Sandra, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the life He's given us and for keeping us together as a family. Cancer can try to break us down but the love of God keeps us up! Contact James Williams with your shirt size and Venmo \$20 for your T-shirt by June 15th. Stay tuned for itinerary. Praise God!

Our Lord and Savior. Cancer. Sister Sandra. Jesus Christ. T-shirt. Praise God.

“Minah, baby. Come on and talk to your pop. Can’t just go running off into your room like this. You scaring me. Come on now. What’s this about?” Pop still pleads gently on the other side of the door. The windows shudder as a semitruck rolls by, two drivers downstairs lay on their car horns much longer than necessary. An ice cream truck’s theme song plays off down the street and my phone buzzes again. I squeeze my eyes shut, blinking out the water, lift my body from against the door and jump back to my feet.

“Did you know about the family reunion this year, Pop? Did anyone tell you?” Pop and I stand face-to-face at my now-open doorway, sweat gathering over every inch of my skin. We have a lot of talks right here. Pop don’t ever walk all the way in my room. Always talkin’ about how a girl should have her space and I agree. “I got a Facebook invite from Tiff today. It says it’s happening in July, Pop. You know anything about it?” Pop stares back at me, looking confused by the question while looking like he doesn’t want to be caught in a lie. Sweat pools above his eyebrows, too. His bald head glistens just before he wipes a thick sheet of it away, taking a deep breath before he answers.

“That’s what this is about? You know they have them things every two years and you haven’t wanted to go to either of the two that went by since we left.”

“So you knew!”

“Yeah, Minah. Your uncle told me about it. He still does even though you won’t talk to nobody” is all Pop says, staring down at his hands. His hands still look strange without a wedding ring even though he took his off years ago. Sometimes he still slides his right thumb and middle finger over the space where it would be had everything not

changed. “I didn’t think you’d want to go or nothin’ like that, Minah. You told me you were done with that side of the family. Told me you didn’t wanna hear nothin’ else about ‘em,” he continues softly. “You mad ‘cause you think they didn’t invite you?” he asks, finally looking me directly in the eyes.

“Did you see this invite, though, Pop?” I ask, getting hotter by the second. “It’s not just another reunion. It’s for . . . They said that . . .” The rest of what I try to say snags in the bottom of my throat like a deep crack in the street. The words are so big they feel like they’d choke me if I tried to make them come out.

“You know your pop don’t have Facebook, Minah. James called me on the phone,” he replies with a look on his face that I don’t understand. Does he even know?

Does he know my mama is dead?

**D**idn't nobody know what was about to hit Obsidian when it showed up. They say all of a sudden it started takin' over all the parties and then out of nowhere everybody was goin' crazy for it. We ain't never seen nothin' like it so it was strange how it became something everybody was cool with—no questions asked about where it came from. Somehow, we all just decided it was what everybody wanted to be around and no one disagreed. None of us knew what could happen when it came around except that it made the hood feel good. Made everybody forget they whole world and the pain in it. Made everybody forget what they own name was. Made everybody act out even on they own family. Do things they said they'd never do. It wasn't that expensive, but before we knew, it seemed like there was never enough money for all the times we wanted to go back for more. "I would never" turned into "might have to." And shoot, why not. And don't look at me like that, just let me hold something till tomorrow. I'll pay you back. You know I'm good for it. Nobody asked questions so it took time to notice how it made us go missing. Into the depths of dark alleys. Under the overpass before kids were even up getting ready for school. Down the street from the cookouts, "right quick" turning into days. It was mystical like that. So quick and powerful nobody saw it coming. Made you feel like fingers was wrapped around your neck but kept you begging for a tighter squeeze. Would creep up in your blood, stiffen, leave you in the same place for so long you forget who you are. Forget any reason you ever had for being alive.

# TWO

**Yesterday, Co-Star said it would be a day for a visit from** the past. That I should be open to a surprise that'll make me think about how the old days are making it possible to understand the new. That when the past comes walking back into my life, I should look at it as a chance to exercise how much I've grown and acknowledge where I came from. That the past is a gift to the present. No wonder why Pop be looking at me crazy when I start talking about retrograde and alignment and rising signs and shit. Astrology is mad weird. But for some reason it makes me feel calm. Ever since Pop and I left and started moving around, I been needing things to make sense. He laughs at everything I do but he never explains anything. On a good day he'll call it hocus-pocus mess and tell me to cast a spell on his boss so he can get a raise. On all the other days, he acts like everything's cool but I know something's wrong with him, too. Horoscopes might not be real but at least it seems like whoever it is that's been studying the stars understands me. Or people like me, I guess. At least, unlike my family, somebody out there has some answers that feel a little like the truth.

But the thing is, don't nobody ever really tell the truth. And by nobody, I mean all the grown folks. Always keeping secrets 'cause they think we can't handle it. Think we too young to be honest with, so they tell us lies and stories tryna make everything seem all good when it ain't. They think our brains is too small to compute real life. Then

they play dumb when you find out. Or they act like it's none of your business. They act like you couldn't possibly understand what's going on because life isn't a fairy tale like the books say. Like all the books you read in school filled with white girl princesses and happy slaves, pleased to serve their masters. But even worse—most of the time they just treat it like it's all a joke. Like it's no big deal. Like we all somehow just get over it and that none of us is in pain. Like we haven't been looking around. Like we all just keep it moving until we're gone.

I wait until it's all the way dark out again and Pop thinks I'm asleep. My light's been out since before the sun went down so it's believable. With only the glow from my phone lighting the space around me, I sit up from the dampness of my bed and toss it aside. It's been five hours and there's nothing left in it for me to research how we got here. I scrolled all the way back in my texts only to remember I deleted them years ago, my eyes swollen, tired of tears and staring into the black hole of blue light. Pins and needles attack my toes and then shoot up my legs as I stand to cross the room. I give my legs a minute to wake up. A gentle turn of the doorknob confirms that the door is locked and nobody can come in. Nobody's ever really tried but it always makes me feel better to know they can't even if they did. I open my closet door, tug on the chain hanging from the ceiling, and pull down the empty Reebok box.

The faint glow of the shady bulb gives enough light for me to sit on the floor and open the box I been keeping since we moved here. To a random person it'd seem like it's filled with a lot of goofy shit that don't mean nothing to anybody, but I know different. And nobody knows it's here anyway so it don't matter what they think. Lifting the lid, my hands move through old birthday cards, movie tickets, family pictures from before Instagram existed, and I smile a little bit at all

the memories of times when I was happy. When we were really happy. Under those, all my love notes from Mike. Postcards mailed from the Bronx. Poems scribbled on the napkins from the Dominican restaurant off 181st Street. Drawings of the side of my face scribbled on receipt paper saved from the first time he took me to Coney Island. A photo-booth picture of us making funny faces at each other and the camera. Mike is corny like that. Corny enough to always be sending me things and telling me I can talk to him about anything. *“Anything,”* he says.

I move through old pictures of Pop and Sandra when I didn't exist yet, and Sandra had that look in her eye like she clearly was the baddest bitch and her man knew it. One picture of me on the day she taught me how to ride a bike on Jarvis Street, whole body covered in cushioning—knee pads, elbow pads, helmet—so I wouldn't die if I lost control and flew out into oncoming traffic. A whole hot mess. A bent corner of a photo watermarked KODAK with the words *Us, 2003* on the back juts out from under a big stack of unopened cards from Nana. I push the stack aside to turn the old photo right side up. There stands Pop in front of a big old house—our house—with both arms reaching around the sides of Sandra's belly, three times too big for the dress she's wearing but they're both smiling facing the same direction like they was taking a prom picture. Sandra's small hands rest just on top of Pop's, nails painted her signature purple, with long box braids flowing over her shoulders, over his tattooed arms, and down her back. The house looks different from the way I remember it. Maybe because I wasn't alive yet and that's back when things was better.

Pop's feet shuffle out of his room and close his bedroom door just before his footsteps get louder and louder like they're coming to my door. On Sundays, Pop plays at Fat Cat. I don't move until I hear the

front door open and close again with the sound of his keys clashing against two of the three locks, making sure I'm safe. I flick more photos around and touch the corner of a teal American Spirit pack that appears under all the memories. I pull it from under, letting all the pieces of our family that I keep fall aside, and unlock my phone.

**Me**

where u at?

♥Mike♥

just left work . . . wyd?

**Me**

nothin' . . . sittin' on the floor.

♥Mike♥

sound like some emo shit. Lol what you wearin'?

**Me**

Lolol. shut up. can i see u? can u come get me?

A fresh set of tears begins to fall as I send the last text to Mike, turning the screen into a blurred glow of wordless light. I catch some just before they can drench the screen and just after he responds with a *yea*. I'm glad he can't see me yet or didn't have to hear my voice while I make this request. You can type *LOL* and send heart-shaped emojis in a text without anybody knowing that you're sad. Or that anything's wrong with you. You can type anything without the person on the



other end knowing what's really up. Mike tells me he can meet me at the bus stop right by the Utica Avenue train station in an hour before telling me that he missed me. I wipe more tears away while I type *ok* and a *me too*, followed by a heart emoji and a wink.

# THREE

**Mike's neck is a damp combination of goose bumps, salt,** and the frankincense oil he buys from the Muslim store down the street. I love it.

He holds still when I run my tongue across it with his back pressed against his bedroom door under my weight. I barely notice when he drops his hand behind him and locks it. I know he's too smart to ever let his mama catch us slipping. I hear the latch enter the hole and watch the edges of his lips curl up, pleased with himself as always. I wouldn't ever dare tell Pop that Mike's mustache easily beats his. He'd just wonder how I was even standing close enough to a dude like him to notice. I sound too much like a giddy little girl when the thick hairs tickle my face, pressed to his. This is my second time here. Behind a closed door with him. A locked door. I back away from it and sit on his bed.

"Come here," I command.

"Oh, you just gon' tell me what to do in my room, huh?" he questions, eyelids lowered, sizing up the situation. Mike always looks smacked. Pop would never believe me if I told him he don't even smoke.

"You actin' like you don't want to."

"I ain't say all that." Mike grazes his mouth with his pointer finger and thumb like he's wondering something before inching forward. I

pull him onto me the minute he's within arm's reach. His bed is softer than I imagined. Ugly though. I don't know what it is about dudes and these comforters that look like they're about to go camping. Most of the ones I know ain't been hunting a day in their lives but all their beds look like somebody's granny ripped the shirts off hunting-ass white boys and made blankets with it. I know because most of them is too dumb not to take selfies with their bedrooms as a backdrop just before posting it on Instagram. I'd always sat on a chair or the floor until today.

I open my mouth and legs as he falls on top of me, pushing my tongue into his. My best friend Nikki coached me on this. She said to use lots of tongue and that he'd like it if I sort of tried to eat his lips.

He goes with it.

What I love about Mike is how he don't be askin' me no stupid questions. If I tell him I need to get out, he makes it his job to see me. And I needed to get out today. He knows Pop ain't cool with us runnin' around together, so we always meet somewhere neutral and discreet before our dates. Neutral and discreet equals Nikki. Pop don't really like her neither, but something about her is nonthreatening. Probably 'cause she's a girl. And maybe 'cause she's always been the one to look out for me in this city. You'd think by now that Pop would have caught on that girls can be plottin', too. Mike and I been seeing each other only a little over three months. Nikki knew him from her job and introduced us.

"What you doin', Yaminah?" I like that Mike uses my full name when he talks to me but this time I can hear suspicion in his tone.

"What does it look like? Taking off my shirt. Are you gon' help or what?" This is my attempt at seduction. Mike hovers over my face looking confused. I don't understand why he needs to question this

or why he'd even want to be talking right now. This isn't how this was supposed to go. I pull my T-shirt off myself and pull his face back to mine. Lots of tongue. Lots of tongue. Sort of eat the lips.

"Yo, you trippin' right now." Mike unlatches me from his body and pushes himself up. My eyes catch his fallen fitted cap next to me on the bed and then scan the back of his head, his back still turned to me. Mike says his mama braids his hair, but I don't think she's touched that head since before we really started talking. "Yo, why you all over me all of a sudden?" The way Mike uses the word *yo* always feels like he's saying somethin' that's been on his chest for a long time.

"What you mean, 'all of a sudden'?"

"You ain't even really talk to me like that when we was walkin' over here. Barely even looked at me on the train. And last time you said you wasn't ready. Now you lickin' me and bitin' me and shit?" Mike slaps the back of his right hand into the palm of his left hand whenever he's trying to be serious with somebody. I don't want serious right now, though. I don't want to talk about nothin' unless it's what he wants to do to my body. I need him to touch my body right now.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Can you just come back over here? Don't you want me?" I plead.

"Of course I do. But . . ." He hesitates.

"But what? You don't want to be close to me?" For a minute Mike just stands there looking sad and doesn't speak. I drop my head down and focus on my hands to avoid the water trying to pool behind my eyelids. I read somewhere that people can read palms and tell things about the future and about past lives. I wonder now if somewhere in my palms it can tell me how my mama still has the power to make me feel like something's missing even when she's dead. Mike's body is close to mine again, where I need it, but this time sitting beside me, my

right hand pulled tightly into his left. Silent. “I don’t wanna cry about her no more, Mike.” I don’t have to tell him who “her” is. I only had to tell him about her once and he never made me have to explain again.

“But you ain’t gotta fake for me, Minah. If you need to cry, go’on head and let it out,” he says softly, keeping his gaze forward. I can tell when he’s looking at me and when he’s trying hard not to. I know when he doesn’t know what to do but hold my hand. “I won’t even trip if you get snot on my T-shirt.” Tears and laughter gush from my face at the same time and I let myself fall over into the space between the ball of his shoulder and neck that he’s made for me. I like how Mike ain’t afraid of tears but don’t let me stay sad for too long without sayin’ nothin’.

“You remember when I told you about Tiff?” I start.

“Yeah. Your play cousin on your mama’s side, right?” I’ve never told Mike that Tiff is my play cousin, but I guess he figured it out when I told him about how she just used to be around all the time when we was kids. She don’t really belong to none of my aunties or uncles, but Nana been treating her like one of us ever since she came back to her house with me one day after we spent hours scraping our knees and playing tag on the playground. She’s lived down the street from Nana’s house my whole life and you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference except she was lucky enough to get to go home at night.

“She sent me a Facebook message earlier today. Another family reunion’s coming up this summer and she sent me the invite on there since she knew Uncle James didn’t send it to me. You want to see it?” Before Mike can respond or wonder why I’m crying over a Facebook invite, I pull my phone out and push it into his hands, opening the screen to Messenger, scrolling up before all the messages Tiff sent afterward that I still won’t read.

“Fuck.” Mike reads fast. “Why ain’t nobody tell you this before?” A

rhetorical question I obviously don't know the answer to. Mike shakes his head and stares at the phone as if staring a little longer will help him find the thing inside of it that I'm missing. He scrolls further down to read the full description in silence and pauses to look up at me. "You okay?" Who would be? He pauses to lick his lips and looks away. "I mean, I know she used to treat you kinda wild but, like . . . that's your mama." I laugh before realizing how silly it makes me look.

"Of course they wouldn't tell me. They probably thought I ain't wanna know. I mean, I don't know if I wanted to know. Cancer?" The laughter erupts from my belly so forcefully that I'm scared I won't be able to stop. "Like, how HILARIOUS is that?!" Mike doesn't speak. He places one hand on my back, and my body shoots up from the bed at his touch. "Kind of makes sense, you know? She was so mean to me. Out of nowhere. How long can you treat your own fuckin' kid like you hate them and get away with it?" I now say through streaming tears. "Maybe since she ain't have me to take things out on no more, it all stayed inside her and finally ate up her body for good."

"Minah."

"I mean it, Mike," I explain, laughing again. "That's what the fuck she gets!" Before I know it, I'm throwing things that aren't mine, tipping over crates of books and video games, grabbing pillows, and swinging them into walls as hard I can. I start to swing so hard I lose balance and my legs are no longer beneath me. Somehow Mike softens the fall. "She just thinks she can ruin my life and then go die? She can just leave like that without telling me? Sounds very on-brand!" Mike pulls me from the floor all the way into his arms. I cash in on my permission to soak his shirt with everything pouring from my face.

"I'm sorry, Minah." He says the only thing he knows to say.

Sorry for my loss.

# FOUR

**If I were to rank offenses punishable by death in Pop's** mind, spending the night at my boyfriend's house would probably be at the top of the list. But between all the energy crying took from me and having to face the 4 train in the Bronx after midnight, dealing with what Pop might have coming for me was a chance I had to take.

So I stared at the cement walls of Mike's cramped bedroom as he held me through the night before walking me to Mount Eden, the closest stop to where he stays but almost the last stop on the green line. Already groups of Dominicans hovered over the curb with their car doors open to the sidewalk blasting reggaeton and puffing from their community hookah, small chairs posted up for all their friends to come kick it. It's eight in the morning and Memorial Day. Far before noon the sidewalk is a developing party. The whole neighborhood creating its own theme song bouncing off its high, Pepto Bismol-colored building walls. Mike walks coolly beside me on the street side, pressing his knuckles gently into the small of my back whenever it's time to turn.

"I know where we're going," I snap softly. Usually Mike's gestures make me feel special and safe, but today I can't help but feel like a charity case that he's treating like a box marked FRAGILE. He nods, saying good morning to the neighborhood grandmas sitting on their small stoops, and stops to hold the door open for one pushing a full

cart out of CTown. The fact that he always gotta be so kind to everybody gets on my nerves sometimes.

“I know you do” is all he says after a few moments pass. The sidewalk curves and swoops down past a busy laundromat marked WASH AND GO in white lettering surrounded by a loud shade of blue. Across from it, the Dominican spot Mike’s taken me to before is still open from last night and full with people behind a steamy display window leaning into foggy glass placing their orders for plantain, rice and beans, and stewed pork. Fencing shakes to the left of me as a basketball flies into it from across the court. I wince even though I know it’s already been stopped by the metal. Mike slides his hand farther across my back and reaches his arm around my waist, pulling me in closer.

“I’m okay, Mike. I’m good,” I lie. Because what is he even gon’ do about it? He keeps his eyes forward, saying nothing until we reach the corner just across from the subway stairs.

“Look, I know you gonna keep acting like all this don’t mean nothing to you, like it’s no big deal, but you don’t gotta act like that. I don’t know what I would do if I just found out what you just found out, Minah.” He pauses and looks around as a mother walks behind us, holding tight to her son. With his free hand he clutches the strap of his Black-Is-King backpack sagging off his shoulders that’s almost the same size as his body with a snot stream trailing from his nose down to his upper lip, his small legs trying to keep up. “Just text me when you get to your house, okay?” I nod yes before he pulls me in for a hug and smushes a kiss into my cheek. I hear the rumble of the 4 train coming down the tracks above me and run.

The mornings after Pop plays Fat Cat he sleeps in until noon. It’ll take me at least an hour to get back down to Crown Heights with no train delays, and ain’t no guarantees that won’t happen, especially



since it's a holiday and that's only one of the one million things that could make the train be on some silly shit. I make it up the stairs onto the platform just in time to catch the doors open and drop into a seat as the doors close behind me and the subway theme song plays, "Stand clear of the closing doors, please." The fact that the announcement says please even though it'd close on that ass if you tried to hop on a few seconds too late is hilarious but don't nobody ever find it funny.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN . . . Excuse the interruption. Pardon me. I don't mean to bother you. This is embarrassing for me. But I ain't ate in five days . . . I'm homeless . . . and I got three kids to feed. I lost my job three months ago and me and my family been struggling to get back on our feet. We lost everything. I applied for food stamps yesterday and I just need a little change to get something to eat and buy milk and Pampers for my baby girls." The man shuffles his feet down the middle of the train car with a limp and a toe sticking out of one of his busted sneakers. His jeans look like he's been rolling around in dirt and he's got on way too many layers for us to be just a few weeks away from summer. "I ain't tryna bother nobody. We just goin' through a real hard time. If you could spare a dollar, a quarter, a nickel, or even a penny to help me and my family out . . ."

A white man in a cheap business suit who don't look like he's supposed to be on this train drops a few coins into his cup, pauses and smiles awkwardly, looking around him while most of the people on the train try not to make eye contact. "God bless you. If anyone else could spare a dollar, a quarter, a nickel, or a penny to help my family eat today . . ." He pauses in front of each person he passes repeating the same line meant to make us all feel bad for his hunger. This is when it becomes peak time for everybody to scroll through their phones looking at nothing in particular, reading books that weren't

gonna be opened, or pretending to sleep extra hard. I search my backpack for headphones for the third time and realize again that I forgot them at home last night in my hurry to meet Mike. I didn't need them on the way to his house and now I hate myself for forgetting. I never leave the house without my headphones for moments like this. And now the homeless man is paused in front of me expecting change. I freeze and stare at the floor, breathing through my mouth to avoid the smell of piss that I know he wears like the cheap cologne the dudes at my school be wearing. If I ignore him long enough, he'll keep it moving to the next person.

When me and Pop moved to Crown Heights five years ago, Pop taught me the rules of riding the subway quick. Sometimes he came here for gigs back in the day so he knew some things that I ain't know about getting around a big city. Specifically New York. Like how you can't respond to every homeless person who asks for something on the street. And that not all of them are "just" homeless. Pampers and baby formula most definitely meant something else according to Pop. How you can't just be walkin' around with your phone out and money in your hand. How you can't be caught slipping on the train because anything could pop off at any given moment. He'd tell me I'd better have something constructive to do 'cause I'm probably gon' be sitting there for a long time, stuck stuffed between all those people. And "some of them ain't gon' be wearing deodorant," he'd warn me.

Back then I thought he was being dramatic, 'cause we had homeless people back in Obsidian. And the rest of the rules just sounded like common sense if you live in *any* city. But ain't no city like New York City. And there definitely ain't no place like Brooklyn. So I learned soon enough that Pop was right about how I needed to handle myself when I left the house and when I got on the train. I minded my

business and kept to myself in general. Pop still told me that I needed to stay alert but I added wearing headphones on the list, too, once I realized I couldn't walk down the street in my neighborhood without dudes tryna holler at me. Or walk down the street without having to ignore homeless people and addicts when I ain't have nothing to give. But I was smart enough to know not to do that at night.

Six stops down I can tell we're not in the Bronx no more. Right before my eyes the car shape-shifts into a confetti of skin colors and weird lives. Everybody got somewhere to be, even when it's a holiday, and we become smooshed into one another's bodies tryna get there. The air is a hot, thick steam of random breath-and-skin smells that make me want to throw up right here in front of everybody. Pop used to tell me that I'd get used to it. That if I just mind my business like everybody else, I'd forget how nasty this place is and one day see the magic and the beauty, as he called it with his eyes glazed over, always looking far off at something that wasn't there. But ain't enough business in the world that's gon' make me unsee all the hands that's touched that pole in the middle of this train car. Fingers that's been digging all up in people's nasty-ass noses.

A baby next to me lets out a scream that cracks the air around us all and its mama starts searching like crazy for something to make it stop before anybody has the chance to look down on her. She finds its pacifier and its eyes get all big and just stare back up at her as it sucks on plastic nothingness. She smiles back at it like ain't nobody else in the world. Even with all these people crowded around our seats, arms holding on to the rail just above our heads. She notices me staring and presses the child deep into her chest as if I'm the biggest threat on this train. I wonder if she posts pics of her baby on Instagram.

It's hard to remember Sandra from back when she used to look at

me and hold on to me like that. Before Pop and I moved out of Obsidian for good and left everybody behind, including her. There used to be pictures all over our old house of us together. Sandra watching me crawl around with my cousins on the kitchen floor. Sandra adjusting that expensive, itchy-ass dress her and Pop made me wear for Christmas when I was two. Sandra wiping some unknown food-thing off my face with her spit and the back of her thumb. My eyes begging Pop to come from behind the camera to save me from the weird things she'd do because I was too little to do it myself. It's hard to believe that same person is in the ground now and ain't nobody tell me when it happened. Did they think I was still that little girl I was before we left Obsidian who everybody whispered around? Did they think I wouldn't understand her being sick? Did they think I wouldn't care?

The 4 train pulls into the Crown Heights-Utica Avenue stop, and the loud voice over the intercom screams at us about clearing the train because it's the last stop. Standing in front of the doors, waiting for them to open, I cringe at my reflection. Swollen eyelids beneath a cascade of old Marley twists that I ain't bother to force into a ponytail high above and away from my face like most days. I should fix that before Pop think too much about what was going on wherever I went last night. The homeless dude cuddled into the corner on the opposite end of the car snorts, scratches his ass, and switches to his left side facing the back of the seat but don't wake up, unmoved by the chance that MTA police is gonna kick him out of his temporary home as soon as these doors open.

It feels like I've been asleep this whole ride, wishing I could wake up from the nightmare inside my head. Just days ago I wasn't even thinking about her and now I can't stop seeing her face every time I close my eyes or sit still for more than a few seconds. And how am

I supposed to walk into my house now? Pop is usually still asleep around this time but he's a different person when he's worried. He should have thought about that before he chose to keep this from me. Before he decided to treat me like a child who always needs to play pretend like everybody else.

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“Good morning, Munch.” Pop calling me by the nickname he gave me when I was three feels like somebody's hand reaching into my chest and squeezing as hard as they can, then letting go and running away. He wasn't supposed to be awake yet and here he is sipping coffee out of a bodega cup on the couch with the TV off like he's been there all night. By the steam I can see that the coffee's hot so I know it hasn't been that long since he went across the street to snoop around. He only goes over there when he wants to know where I've been. Otherwise he sends me to deal with Bobby myself.

“Hey.” Maybe if I disguise my fear of what comes next after being caught sneaking in in the morning with some righteous anger, whatever's next won't come. Maybe if I say as little as possible, Pop won't treat me like his daughter who slept somewhere he doesn't know about without permission and, instead, he'll treat me like the daughter he's been lying to. Maybe he'll beg for my forgiveness. Maybe he'll do something like that.

“All you got to say is ‘hey’? Where you been at all night, huh?”

“I—I went for a walk, Pop.” He had to have gone to sleep. He couldn't have been up all night and this morning. He's not thinking about this backpack I got on, I think.

Pop looks over at my bedroom door as if his eyes were a finger pointing at my mistake. I'd left it cracked by accident in my rush

to leave. Stupid. “Try again.” The words are said quietly but forced through his clenched teeth. A sign that he’s trying to be patient but don’t have too much left.

“Okay. I—I was with Nikki. I know I should have—” I begin to lie again through my twists that I’d forgotten to pull back before walking through the door, eyes digging into my shuffling sneakers still just inside the front door.

“Maybe you should have told her where you was gon’ be before you used that lie.” Our eyes meet: mine probably too big to continue the story I was trying to produce out of thin air. His, searching me through deeply judgy, furrowed brows. “She was across the street picking some things up for her mama while I was getting this coffee. She ain’t say nothing about you. But you wasn’t with her, Munch. Now, I’ma give you one last chance,” he says, leaning forward, arms resting on his knees as he turns his full body in my direction to look into me. “You wanna tell me where you was really at all night, or are we gon’ keep playin’ these games?” He looks away again at nothing in particular in front of him and takes a slow, tired breath. The regular blare of sirens coming down the street vibrates through the walls in our silence and the honks of back-to-back dollar vans follow. I stand there not knowing what lie to tell for what seems like forever. It doesn’t matter where I was. I didn’t do anything and I’m not the one walking around with anything to hide, anyway.

“Mike’s.” The hand from before comes back to reach into my chest and squeezes even harder this time. Pop chuckles and nods his head looking down into his coffee cup, then caresses it like it’s the face of a baby he was suddenly stuck with. He leans forward.

“Well, check you out. Out here spending the night with your lil boyfriend like a grown-ass woman, huh? You paying bills, too?” Here

we go. Pop's sarcasm gets on my nerves. It's not like I've ever done anything like this before. He doesn't even bother asking questions before he assumes he knows what I was doing over there. Pop stands up and comes closer to me, where I've yet to move from before all this questioning started. I take one step back, closer to the door. "I know what teenage boys are like, Munch. I was one be—"

"Why didn't you tell me, Pop?"

"If that boy hurt you, I'll—"

"About Sandra!" When Pop is standing this close to me, I have to look up to make eye contact. He ain't no giant, but he's got a whole foot on me. His tall frame shrinks to my five foot, three inches when her name spews out of my mouth like vomit. His jaw flexes beneath his stubbled cheek. Suddenly, his eyes look like they supposed to be in a doll's face, made of glass, and locked on something too far away. Somebody might think I'm pulling a move by changing the subject, but who gives a fuck where I was at, honestly. This is what I need to know.

"Munch—"

"Please don't lie, Pop. Please don't lie about this." My keys press deeper into my palm as my hands form a tight fist around them.

"I'm sorry, baby."

"I'm not a baby. Why ain't nobody tell me, Pop?"

"Well, it's complicated, ba—Munch. I—I wanted to tell you so many times but you get so mad every time I bring her up. I didn't want her causing you no more pain. It's a lot to explain. It's too much." Pop looks even sillier to me now than he did when I first walked into the house. His oversized button-up paired with the old baseball cap that he barely ever takes off his head, his forever gig uniform no matter the venue. Every time he pushes his hand into his face to rub his struggle beard, I hear sandpaper.

“Too much? For who? I’m sixteen years old. Not six. How long did you know she was sick?”

“Well, Munch, that’s—”

“People don’t just up and die from cancer without somebody knowing about it, Pop! HOW LONG DID YOU KNOW?!” Pop freezes and I’d be scared for screamin’ on him any other day but he doesn’t even look like somebody to be afraid of standing in front of me with a look I ain’t ever seen before. “I read in the family reunion invite that Sandra had cancer. How’d she even get that, Pop?”

“Hmm . . . cancer. That’s, uh, I don’t know how anybody gets that, Minah.” His eyes go big as he says this, right before he focuses them on the ground. He rubs his chin even harder this time like there’s an equation scribbled into the floor that he wishes he could solve but already knows he can’t. He looks like he was expecting me to say different words altogether.

“Not anybody. Her.” Pop turns his back to me and walks over to the couch. It groans as he plops down into it where he’d been perched when I walked through the door. He leans over the coffee table, picks up his half-smoked spliff, lights it, and stares off at nothing after taking a long pull. He rests his hands, crossed, in his lap and shakes his head, letting the smoke seep slowly out of his nose. Just a few minutes ago I was the one being interrogated about where I was and what I’d been doin’ all night, but now Pop looks like the one who’s in trouble. Now he looks like the one tryna figure out what to say.

“Don’t nobody know how it happens, Minah. All we know is that it don’t seem like it cares too much about what it does to families.” Adults know everything until they don’t know shit. Convenient. He takes another drag, blowing the smoke back out, finally looking over at me. “Your mama was sick for a long time and you was already mad at



her 'cause everything that happened . . . I . . . I ain't never had to break no news like that to you before without her being there to help me do it. I just . . ." His voice trails off and the empty look on his face makes me feel sorry for him. It's pitiful.

I stand there shifting, still in my sneakers, watching the smoke rise and fill our small Brooklyn apartment's stale air, spreading but having nowhere to escape to. I don't know what else to say to Pop, or even ask. I'm low-key disgusted by him not knowing what to say to me at a time that I got all these questions. I was the one kept in the dark all this time. I was the one who ain't nobody think could handle the truth, and here he is staring off with nothing to say. I used think Pop and Sandra knew everything. Always talkin' all low, laughing at some inside joke of theirs from behind the walls of our old kitchen in Obsidian like there was nothing too serious for them to handle in our house. But Pop just looks like any other person now—lost.

I look down at my sneakers and the space where I normally slide them off before placing them against the wall. I usually tuck them next to Pop's vintage Reebok 85s that he'd gotten at a random thrift store in the West Village when we first moved here. That day he'd told me we couldn't be caught out here in these mean New York streets without legit sneakers. I remember looking around at the feet of all the people who looked like they'd rushed off a runway to get to the next thing and felt like both of us definitely were underdressed. I knew buying new sneakers wouldn't change nothin' about how out of place we looked, though. We looked like what we were: a tall, scrawny-lookin' black dude just tryna hold it together and his standoffish kid stuck in the nineties from a simple-ass city learning how to live a whole new life. A whole new life in a place that could eat us alive if we ain't find a way to shake the sadness off us. That day we came home with new sneakers

and two bags of groceries me and Pop lugged all the way from Manhattan 'cause we wanted to eat good our first week here. We learned fast that finding the fresh stuff in our new neighborhood was hit-or-miss. But Pop couldn't get the stove to work and we didn't even have a table to eat on yet anyway. So, that night we went to Sally's Diner.

Pop still tries to keep up our old Obsidian traditions by promising that we'll grill every holiday. And me not eating meat aside, being a butcher now meant he always came home with something fresh to cook up. Today we were supposed to brave the mystery of the back staircase that leads up to the dingy rooftop through a small door at the end of the seventh-floor hallway. "We can throw on some tofu dogs for you, or whatever you be eatin' at barbecues now," he'd said. But I could tell nothin' was getting grilled around here today as I hear my stomach's growls interrupt this standoff between me and Pop's lies.

"Pop?"

"Yeah, Munch."

"You hungry?"

"I could eat. And I can hear that stomach of yours screamin' from all the way over here." I drop my bag while Pop ashes what's left of his joint and slips on his sneakers before leading me out the door.

**A**t first, won't nobody suspect nothing. They just gon' be jealous. Think you too caught up in your new lil friend to come around anymore. Think you too busy to remember your family to come out the streets and get home. Think all you ever want from them is money. Instead of being worried about you, they just get mad, you know? Won't ask too many questions besides where you've been and who you were with. They don't ask you how you doin' or if you need some help. Instead they'll see somebody different when they look at you. Somebody that they don't know. Say you gettin' a little too skinny. Assume you're doin' it all on purpose. Assume you're being hardheaded, livin' that fast life and all your new lil friends are just fast, too. They won't know that you'd eat if you could. That you wish it could be like it used to be but you can't help yourself no more, and the looks on their faces makes it hard to tell them the truth. They won't know that you're sick. At first, they'll call you everything else . . . but that.