


Jas Hammonds



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DESERVE
MONUMENTS**

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For Yasmin, who's read every word

NOW ENTERING BARDELL COUNTY, GEORGIA
POPULATION: 9,127
HOME TO THE RICHEST SOIL ON EARTH
A GREAT PLACE TO GROW!

1.

TEN.

That's how many bullet holes I counted puncturing the rusted brown Bardell County highway sign. There were probably more, but I lost count when it blurred past us as Mom accelerated into town. I turned to look through the rear window, wondering if I imagined them, but they were as real as the seat belt digging into my neck. Dreary sunlight streamed through the holes like an erratic cheese grater, and I couldn't think of a more fitting welcome to this wasteland.

"Richest soil on Earth!" Dad said from the passenger seat. "That's not foreboding whatsoever."

I bit back a grin as Mom sighed for the thousandth time since we crossed the South Carolina–Georgia border.

"Sam, please," she said. "Lay off. Bardell is a—"

“Diamond in the rough,” Dad and I echoed. It was the same phrase she’d muttered the past few weeks as we packed suitcases and prepared for the trip down south. *A diamond in the rough.* Now, I pressed my forehead to the window to take in the flat fields and umber dirt. It was the same landscape I’d been staring at for what felt like years, and I saw no diamonds. Only rough.

“Besides.” Mom shot me a terse glance in the rearview mirror. “You said you’ve been eager for a change of scenery all summer.”

I swallowed my protests. *This* wasn’t what anyone had in mind. Yes, I wanted a break from the DC nooks and crannies I’d known my entire life. I wanted an excuse to slip out of Kelsi and Hikari’s carefully arranged summer plans. But in my imagination, this getaway entailed an escape to a charming beach cottage or an unfamiliar metropolis filled with taxis and overpriced tourist traps. More skyscrapers and fewer silos.

“We know, Z. Unsavory Avery and I are messing with you,” Dad said, dusting off my childhood nickname. His hand was a slow smear of warmth across Mom’s back, and her shoulders melted under his lanky fingers. I rolled my eyes and returned my attention to the window as Bardell, Georgia, unenthusiastically introduced itself.

At a red light, Mom studied her manicured nails against the steering wheel. An elderly woman in a sagging lawn chair on the corner motioned to the bulging basket of peaches by her feet and yelled something, but I couldn’t understand her over the roar of the car’s air-conditioning. Dad smiled his awkward white-dad

smile and shook his head, and I sank against the leather back seat. All of our shoulders relaxed when the light flickered green and Mom cruised down Main Street.

“It’s so different,” Mom muttered. “Everything’s so different.”

Downtown Bardell unfolded all at once. The library, post office, pharmacy, and fire station were contained to one essential block. Across the street, a group of older white men in sun-faded denim leaned against the wall of a one-stop shop. The drooping banner above the entrance promised amazing deals on everything from cell phones to guns to wedding dresses in bright red letters, as if the convenience was something to be admired. The bar next door had a Confederate flag proudly draped in the window. My family said nothing. I could only stare at Mom’s tight coils and wonder how in the world this place created her.

“Holy mural,” Dad said. We slowed at a stop sign in front of an imposing brick building that towered over the street like a castle. A three-story-tall mural of a pale woman with a gleaming halo graced the side, staring serenely like the Mona Lisa.

“That’s the Draper Hotel,” Mom replied. The three of us watched as a trio of slim women in matching yellow yoga pants slipped through the revolving front door.

“Looks fancy,” I said, and Mom hummed.

As we continued down the street, Mom muttered like a confused tour guide about gas stations long gone and snorted at a chic bistro with a sign claiming to have the best fried chicken in town. At the next stop sign, she switched off the GPS, and I silently lost hope that maybe, perhaps, somehow we weren’t in the right place.

“It’s so different,” she repeated, followed by vague, clipped stories about how Mrs. Robinson used to live over there and that clothing store used to be a pharmacy called Easy Does It Drugs. She kept skirting over the real reason we were in Bardell, the one that had hovered over our family like a rain-heavy cloud for the past month.

It’d been five weeks since the wrinkled letter slid through the mail slot of our Shaw Victorian row house that quiet July morning. Saturday mornings had always been a bonding time for me and Mom. We’d wake up early, pick up bagels and fresh flowers, and hurry home to slip back into our sweatpants. For hours, she’d grade papers or work on grant applications, the clacking of her keyboard our only music. I’d run SAT prep questions or study successful college essays while the coffeepot slowly emptied between us.

But that Saturday morning was different. I could still see Mom clutching the letter, her slender brown fingers curling over the return address. The peeling American flag stamp on the envelope waved as she read it over and over.

That morning, Mom retreated to her bedroom before finishing her bagel. She didn’t emerge until the late afternoon when the coffee was cold and stale and forgotten. At the time, she didn’t tell us who the letter was from. She didn’t elaborate on the cancer, didn’t explain why *now*. She simply leaned against our granite kitchen island, the sharp scent of gardenias hanging heavy around us, and said, *I need to go home*.

And somehow, *I* turned into *we*, and now the three of us crossed over the murky Bardell River, heading deeper into

the city's east side. We ended up in a neighborhood filled with scruffy houses and slumped trailers with tangles of weeds sprouting along their walkways. Old people lounged on front porches, fanning the August humidity away and staring curiously at our BMW. Bardell felt suffocatingly small, the complete opposite of DC. If I sank any lower, I'd be on the floor.

"Home sweet home," Mom said as she turned onto Sweetness Lane. The irony of the name wasn't lost on any of us as we crept down the pothole-riddled street and stopped in front of a weathered brown house. In the cracked driveway sat a faded indigo hatchback with missing hubcaps that looked like it hadn't transported anybody anywhere in a very long time. Mom cut the engine.

"Ready?"

"You and Avery go ahead," Dad said. "I'll grab some bags."

I unbuckled my seat belt and reluctantly followed Mom. Sweat dripped down my bare neck, and I wiped it away in disgust. I was tempted to strip off my jeans and run through the misty spray of the sprinkler next door but swallowed the urge with a grin. I could already hear Kelsi telling me a public indecency charge wouldn't look good on my Georgetown application.

"House looks the same," Mom said. "Do you remember it, Avery baby?"

We climbed the splintered steps to the front porch. A dingy white rocking chair and a hanging swing—both in desperate need of a paint job—were frozen in the muggy heat. I took it all in, trying to conjure decade-old memories of the last time I was here. There was nothing but haze and Christmas lights.

“Not really,” I said.

Mom rang the doorbell and started fiddling with her dangly earrings, her signature nervous tic. “I guess it has been a while,” she said quietly.

After a full minute went by with no answer, Mom knocked on the barred screen door, angling her palm so her nails didn’t clip the rusted metal. Dad dragged a couple of suitcases down the sidewalk, his shoulder-length brown hair already damp with sweat.

“Don’t tell me she’s already dead,” he said. “We just got here.”

Mom glared. “Can you please refrain from making jokes about my elderly mother right now?” She continued to rattle the screen door, and I hid my smile by wandering over to the large picture window with a missing shutter. Through the cracked blinds, I made out a plaid sofa, wood-paneled walls, and a stack of newspapers piled high on a tasseled ottoman. But no Mama Letty.

“I’m calling the cops. She really could be dead,” Mom said, pulling her phone from her leather handbag. Before she could dial, a booming voice echoed from the blue house next door.

“Zora? I’ll be damned!”

A Black woman with long braids made her way across the lawn. Dad and I glanced at each other, then at Mom, expecting some kind of introduction, but her mouth stayed clamped shut as the stranger joined us on the porch.

“Can’t say hi?” the woman asked. “Your family don’t speak?”

Dad glanced at Mom, but she was frozen. He stuck his hand out. “Nice to meet you. I’m Sam Anderson, Zora’s husband.”

Finally, something flickered in Mom's eyes. "Carole . . . hi. I almost didn't recognize you with the braids."

"Gave up them perms a long time ago." The woman's gaze trailed Mom's chiffon sundress. "Nice to see you got my letter. How many years since you been home? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

"Not that long," Mom said swiftly. She clapped her hand over my shoulder and thrust me forward like a carnival prize. "Carole, you remember my daughter, Avery?"

"Hi," I said.

"She was a little thing the last time y'all were here." Carole's gaze lingered on my lip piercing, and my cheeks burned. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision I gifted myself in June, after Kelsi and Hikari vetoed me shaving my head. *Think about how it'll look*, they urged, although I had and it was exactly why I wanted to do it. The tiny metal hoop was supposed to be a compromise, but Hikari and Kelsi had regarded it with as much disdain as Carole was serving now. *It looks trashy*, Kelsi had said with a disappointed frown. Now, I ran my tongue over the metal and stared at the dirt peeking between the porch slats.

Carole moved on from her examination, asking Mom again if she was *sure* it hadn't been fifteen years since her last visit, surely it had to have been. Mom grinned and grunted, smiling in relief when Carole turned her attention to wondering why her daughter hadn't come out to say hi.

"Teenagers. Always on that damn phone." Carole sighed. "*Simone Josephine Cole!*"

The screen door of the blue house flew open and a short, curvy girl with shoulder-length locs and a bright tie-dyed shirt

emerged. "I'm coming!" she yelled, yanking out a pair of ear-phones.

"I don't know who you talking to in that tone," Carole chided as Simone joined us on the porch. "Have you lost your mind?"

Simone sighed. "No, ma'am."

"You probably don't remember Ms. Zora since she ain't been home in about fifteen years. She Letty's girl. Y'all, this my youngest, Simone."

Simone shook Mom's hand. "Nice to meet you slash see you again." Her warm voice sounded like honey dripping off the comb. She shook Dad's hand before sliding her palm in mine. Like her mother, her gaze lingered on my lip piercing, and I heard Kelsi's voice again, calling it trashy.

"Lord, you know I wouldn't have written," Carole said, "if Letty's cancer wasn't eating her away. It's worse as I ever seen it."

Mom swallowed. "Well, that's why we're here. But she's not answering the door."

Carole waved her hand. "Poor thing probably taking a nap. She usually lay down around three." She pulled keys from the pocket of her frayed shorts and opened the screen door. Mom fiddled with her earring again.

The stench of old socks and stale grease greeted us in the living room. Simone left to wake Mama Letty, and I took in the piles of notebooks and faded newspapers crowding the ottoman and side tables. Flashes of my first and only visit to Bardell came to me slowly as I made a quiet lap around the room, surveying a stack of wrinkled catalogues on the floor and foggy glasses of water on the coffee table. There was an oversized floral armchair in the corner,

and I had vague memories of my small fingers tracing one of the roses and wondering why the furniture was covered in plastic. I remembered a stack of gold-foil-wrapped presents in a pile near the rabbit-eared television. When I looked up and saw Mom's tear-rimmed eyes, I heard echoes of screams. But it was fleeting and faint, vanishing like a dream dissipating with sunrise.

"I should've come sooner," Mom said. "This is . . ." She bit her lip. Dad and I stepped forward to rub her back, and she shot us grateful smiles.

"Bless your heart, Zora." Carole clucked her tongue. "You ain't know how bad it was? After everything?"

Mom stayed quiet. A fierce protectiveness burned red-hot in my stomach.

"Shame that job of yours keeps you too busy to come home," Carole went on. "What is it you do again?"

"I teach," Mom said, swatting away her three degrees, her Georgetown tenure, her bestselling nonfiction book, and her superstar status as a nationally renowned astrophysicist as if they were yesterday's weather report. Dr. Zora Anderson enraptured auditoriums full of pensive students and eager journalists full of questions. She was able to make science sound interesting to even the most reluctant learner. She could describe the process of how a stellar black hole was formed and you'd swear you were floating among the stars, watching it happen for yourself. She was not the type of woman to wilt under anyone's words. Which is why Dad and I gaped when she turned away from Carole's taunting gaze and started flipping through a creased book of crossword puzzles.

“Well, good for you,” Carole said. “Nice of you to make time to come home.”

Those felt like fighting words, so I stepped forward. I’d had enough. But before I could say anything, Simone reappeared.

“Look who I woke up,” she sang. The warped hardwood floor creaked behind her, followed by a series of low grumbles.

Mama Letty had arrived.

She wore a rumpled pink nightgown and a pair of ratty house slippers that might’ve been white ten years ago. She and Mom shared the same rich mahogany skin and high cheekbones, but Mama Letty’s were more pronounced because of how thin she was. She blinked away crust as her eyes traveled over everyone in the living room. *Pissed* was the only word to describe her expression.

“Hey, Mama.” Mom set the crossword book down. She met Mama Letty and wrapped her in the most awkward hug of all time. Mama Letty’s arms hung limply at her sides before she patted Mom on the back twice. Mom peeled away, her face a mixture of hurt and confusion.

“Sorry we woke you,” Mom said, tenderly giving Mama Letty’s short gray curls a fluff.

Mama Letty waved her hand away. “No matter. I’m up now.” We locked eyes, and her chilly gaze sent another memory ricocheting back.

I was six. Or five? Was it Christmas when Mom and I visited? Or New Year’s? I only remembered the presents. I had a vision of Mama Letty throwing one of those shiny gold-wrapped boxes against the wall, fast as a shooting star. I heard the echoes

of screams again. I saw a vast field of clouds outside of an airplane window.

“I know this ain’t Avery,” Mama Letty said now. She followed Carole and Simone’s lead and zeroed in on my lip ring. “Out here looking like a fish caught on a hook. She a lesbian now, too?”

It was a thousand degrees in the living room, but a cold sweat gathered on the nape of my neck. I found the floor again, defenses hardening in my stomach. Any minuscule hope I had of this move being a good thing vanished. Mama Letty was nothing but a rude, grumpy woman. She was nothing like Dad’s late mom, Grandma Jean, who would’ve baked me a cake if I’d come out when she’d been alive.

“Mama Letty,” Dad started, “maybe a discussion about Avery’s sexuality isn’t appro—”

“No one asked your white hippie ass,” Mama Letty snapped, not even looking at him.

Always the good sport, Dad ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. We had to be thinking the same thing: No wonder Mom left Bardell as soon as she could.

Mom’s smile wavered. “Mama, what has gotten into you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Zora, would you prefer a little dance number to welcome you back?” Mama Letty shuffled over to the couch, dust pluming when she sat.

Carole chuckled in the corner, and I glared at her. *No one* ganged up on my mom. Not so-called family, and especially not people she hadn’t seen in years.

“Mom, Dad, did you want to go grab the rest of the bags?”

I asked. Maybe outside of the scrutinizing gaze of Mama Letty and Carole, I could convince them that maybe this was all a mistake. Clearly, we weren't wanted.

"Make Simone go with you," Mama Letty said. "She need to work off all that cornbread."

Simone scoffed and pulled my arm before I could respond. Humidity slapped us in the face when we stepped outside.

"Come on, DC," Simone called as she sauntered down the sidewalk. My anger faded slightly when my gaze landed on her thick thighs; they filled every inch of her jean shorts. Of course I followed her.

"Um, sorry about that," I said to her back.

"Sorry about what?"

"My grandma. She's . . ." I searched for the right word, but I couldn't think of anything that could explain Mama Letty's rude comments. How do you apologize for someone you don't even know? In the Anderson family, shit was talked behind backs and closed doors. Mama Letty's snipes were as wide and outside as the sun. Then again, she wasn't an Anderson.

"She's what?" Simone prodded. "Stunningly beautiful? A grumpy old kook? A wolf in a pink nightgown? Take your pick."

I smiled, shook my head. "You don't need to work off any cornbread."

She laughed and it was all dimples. "Aw, she was basically telling me she loved me. Don't mind Mama Letty." My grandmother's name rolled off her tongue in one languid swoop.

I popped the trunk and hauled a duffel bag out. Simone

leaned to grab a suitcase, and our arms accidentally brushed. She jerked away; I tried not to take it personally.

“Do you know what school you’ll be at?” she asked.

“Whichever one requires a uniform.” Mom ordered the atrocious red plaid skirt and sad white polo before we left DC.

“Nice. You’ll be at Beckwith. The more, the merrier!”

“More of . . . what?”

She tapped the brown skin of her fist. “Black people. African Americans. People of color. Y’all got a better term up in DC?”

Shame pinched my chest at the easy way she included me in the tally for Black people. It brought back the horrible, ugly fight that ultimately led to my breakup with Kelsi. I could still see her puckered pink mouth forming the words, *You’re barely Black*. How I’d carried them for almost two months now, like a set of keys in my back pocket. Trying to brush the memory away, I joked, “What is this, 1955?”

“It’s Beckwith.” She said it as if it needed no further explanation and rolled the suitcase down the cracked walkway. I followed, actively ignoring her thighs this time. Instead, I focused on her locs. They were shoulder-length, black with electric-blue tips, and adorned with gold charms and shells. I was staring so hard, I nearly ran into her when she stopped and turned around.

“What’s your sun?”

“My what?”

“Your astrological sun sign,” she said impatiently.

“Uhhh . . . Capricorn?”

She hummed. “Good to know. Did that hurt?”

“Did what hurt?”

She ran her index finger over her plump bottom lip. “The piercing. Did it hurt?”

My tongue slid over it self-consciously. “Oh. Yeah. I guess.” I braced myself for another reaction like Hikari’s and Kelsi’s, but then Simone smiled and told me she liked it. I momentarily forgot I’d been forced to this crappy town to reside with my cranky grandmother who hated everything that moved.

As we set the bags on the porch, Carole stepped outside and told Simone to go finish the dishes.

Simone cast me a sideways glance. “See you later?”

“Apparently.”

She started for her house, leaving soft footprints in the wet summer grass.

“So,” Carole said as we watched Simone head inside, “Avery. What you think of Bardell so far? You like it?”

“It’s okay,” I said stiffly. Saying as little as possible around her seemed like the safest option.

“It’s been a long time since your mama been home.”

My annoyance flared again. “Well, we’re just here to help.”

“Here to help.” She rested her hands on her hips. Her fingers were empty of jewelry and full of scars, nails cut to the quick. She walked off with a laugh, mumbling to herself, “Here to help. Well, it’s about time.”

THE GHOST

THERE WERE APPROXIMATELY fifty people who resided in the sixteen homes that dotted Sweetness Lane, and all of them had heard the joke at one point or another. Out-of-town relatives, visiting friends, and mail carriers would examine the gaping potholes and pale patchwork lawns and homes that seemed to sag into the earth and ask, *Sweetness? Where?* Residents would laugh or roll their eyes or, if you dared to utter these comments in the presence of Letty June Harding, tell you to shut the fuck up. It didn't matter what Sweetness Lane looked like. Sweetness Lane was home. And home was always sweet.

Carole Cole had lived on Sweetness Lane since she was Carole Thompson. The blue brick ranch with the dogwood tree in the side yard was the only home she'd ever known. Darryl Cole had grumbled when he moved in after their wedding, complaining that grown men had no business moving into their mother-in-law's house. He promised one day they'd leave. But since the house was there and Darryl's funds were not,

they stayed. They stayed after their first two babies were born, even though the eight hundred square feet became bloated with toddler screams. They stayed after Martha Thompson passed and left them the home in her will. They stayed even when the third baby took them by surprise. It wasn't until their three children became two that Darryl finally made good on his promise and left.

Through it all, Carole remained tethered to Sweetness Lane like a life raft. Seasons changed. People came and went. Her youngest daughter braided flower crowns under the dogwood tree. Usually, Carole would gaze upon the lane and think, *This is fine. This is good enough.* Occasionally, she thought about the girl who used to live next door and wondered what she was up to. Sometimes she thought about writing her. It wasn't until Letty's third round of cancer that she finally did.

By the time Carole devised a letter she was proud of, she'd burned through four days and half a notebook. After several weeks with no reply, she'd almost given up hope. On a particularly steamy August afternoon, Carole was sweeping her kitchen and minding her business when a fancy silver car arrived on Sweetness Lane. Fancy cars on this block were not a common occurrence, so Carole stopped mid-sweep. She paid attention. And when a ghost from her childhood emerged from the driver's side, she nearly dropped her broom.

2.

BY THE TIME I hauled the last bag inside, Mama Letty had retreated to her bedroom. I followed my parents' voices into the small, sun-drenched kitchen, mind still swimming from Simone's and Carole's comments.

Mom was leaning against the chipped tile counter, eyes trained on the peeling yellow diamond wallpaper. Dad sat at a circular Formica table shoved up against the window, drumming his fingers along a glass of water. Above his head was a creepy black cat-shaped clock, hands stuck at midnight.

"I didn't know," Mom said. She scrubbed a hand over her face and took deep, labored breaths. It was the same technique she always used before a big speech, the one she taught me when I was losing sleep over a public speaking assignment in eighth grade: inhale on the one, exhale on the two, continue to ten, lather, rinse, repeat. I cleared my throat, and my parents looked up with fake, stretched smiles.

"Hey, Avery baby," Mom said, too chipper. "Thanks for grabbing the rest of the bags."

“Don’t mention it.” I took a step closer. “You okay?”

She nodded. “I haven’t seen your Mama Letty in a while, and it’s hard. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said, but it was no use. She was already composing herself, wiping the emotions from her face like Windex on glass. Soon, she was Dr. Zora Anderson again—calm, collected, close to perfect.

“You’re in luck,” she said, pulling at one of my spiral curls. “You’re getting my old bedroom. Best room in the house.” She brushed past me before I could say anything and busied herself with the suitcases in the living room.

I looked at Dad. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on,” Dad said, “is that we lovingly agreed to take the luxurious pull-out couch in the back den to give you some privacy.”

I narrowed my eyes. He knew that wasn’t what I meant. “Dad, seriously. What is *up* with Mom and Mama Letty?”

His smile dimmed. “They’ll be fine. It’s going to be a trying time, but remember what we talked about?”

“We’re here for support,” I parroted. “And this situation is temporary.”

“Exactly. All of this is temporary. We’ll stay out of Mama Letty’s way, and everything will be fine.”

I wanted to press further, but based on Mom’s disappearance and the return of Dad’s wisecracking smile, I was out of luck for now. So I nodded, the ever-dutiful daughter.

Dad clapped my shoulder. “Anderson family motto?”

“Focus forward.”

“Focus forward!” He pointed down the hall, past Mama Letty’s closed door. “Your room’s that way.”

• • •

Entering Mom’s old bedroom felt like stepping thirty years back in time. Dozens of textbooks and sci-fi novels crowded the built-ins along the wall. The dingy yellow carpet smelled faintly of mildew. Posters of Janet Jackson and Whitney Houston covered the wood-paneled closet doors. Above the bed was a glossy diagram of the solar system, poor little Pluto hovering at the edge, unaware of her fate.

I tossed my duffel bag on the floor and wandered over to the rolltop desk wedged in the corner. I gave the plastered window two strong pulls, sneezing as dirt and dust drifted into my nostrils. With a final push, the room flooded with sunlight. I had the perfect view of the side of the Coles’ house. The image of Simone’s finger trailing her lip flashed through my mind. I quickly shut it down and plopped into the desk chair.

I would not—*could not*—go down that road. Not after my breakup with Kelsi, not on this MAGA turf. Besides. Simone was probably straight. Probably dating some buff guy on the football team—if Beckwith Academy even *had* a football team. I took a deep breath and grounded myself like Mom taught me, replaying my conversation with Dad.

Focus forward. The Anderson family motto had gotten me through every roadblock in my life. When Grandma Jean died in eighth grade, I kept the sadness at bay by crafting the perfect life plan to make her proud. I set my sights on straight As and a Georgetown acceptance—focus forward. During the pandemic,

I gritted my teeth as I watched my high school experience slip away one canceled plan at a time—focus forward. I clung to the motto as I watched the nightly news in horror, telling myself things would eventually get better, that they had to. I had to keep my focus forward. Same as I had to see this stint in Bardell through.

Get in. Get out. No drama. Focus forward.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I rolled my eyes. Kelsi and Hikari hadn't stopped texting, even though I hadn't replied since a rest stop in Virginia. They were making good on their promise that our friendship wouldn't change after Kelsi and I broke up, even though things were clearly not the same. They were trying to re-create the magic that had glued the three of us together since freshman year, either unaware or choosing to ignore my icy aloofness. I scrolled through the new messages and felt nothing.

Hikari: Yooo I got Lentz for AP Comp fml.

Kelsi: She gives great rec letters tho.

Hikari: Avery where you at? Have you made it to the land down under?

Kelsi: I still can't believe you won't be here this year.

Hikari: Kels who did you get for AP Chem?

Kelsi: Jones for Chem. Toth for AP Physics.

Hikari: Can't believe you're taking both.

“Neck gone get stuck staring at that phone all day.”

I looked up to see Mama Letty leaning against the door-frame. Her eyes combed over my new bedroom, somehow ending on my lip ring again. I awkwardly stood.

“Hi, Mama Letty. How are you feeling? Anything you need?”

“I need a lot of things,” she said, crossing the room in light strides. “None of which yo ass can get.” She stopped at one of the bookshelves and grabbed a small wooden box with a gold clasp from the top shelf. She didn’t look at me as she ran a hand over the lid. Staring at the side of her face caused another plotchy memory to appear, as soft as a bubble blowing from a wand.

Christmas lights. Mama Letty’s hair more black than gray. Her wrinkled brown fingers clutching a box like this one. Screams.

“What’s in the box?” I asked.

She shot me an icy gaze. “Your mama raise you to be this nosy?”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Didn’t realize it was a secret.”

She snorted and left the room as quietly as she arrived. Her bedroom door slammed seconds later, and I slumped in the chair again. I had a nagging feeling that Dad’s definition of a “trying time” wouldn’t hold a candle to Mama Letty.

“Temporary,” I whispered. “All of this . . . is temporary.”

• • •

I spent the next two days unpacking and settling into the small, strange quiet of Bardell. In DC, my life was loud and expansive, full of Mom’s domed planetarium lectures and Dad’s jazz piano melodies padding every corner of our row house. The gridded streets of the city hummed with busy people, honking traffic, and pulsing energy, whereas the noises that comprised Mama Letty’s home could be contained in a thimble. Crickets chirped all night. Mama Letty’s coughs blended in with her groaning

rocking chair. Mom sighed loudly from the den every fifteen minutes.

I was lonely. As an only child, I was used to finding ways to entertain myself. In DC, that usually meant going around the corner to Hikari's house to lounge by her backyard firepit. But in Bardell, there was nothing but me and my thoughts and a growing resentment toward Hikari and Kelsi I still couldn't name. My silence toward them finally broke when I texted them my class schedule the afternoon before the first day of school. They ridiculed my course load, like I knew they would.

Kelsi: 10th grade called, Hicktown High. They want their classes back.

Hikari: Only 3 APs???

Kelsi: you think Georgetown will still take you?

Hikari: Totally. It's not Avery's fault she had to change schools.

I thought about texting something snarky back. Something like, *hey bitches, my grandmother is DYING*. There were more important things to worry about than stupid AP classes. But I stayed silent because although they were annoying me, I understood why they cared so much.

COVID had taken a giant shit all over our grand high school plans. As starry-eyed freshmen, we imagined becoming officers in important clubs. We thought about the volunteer work that would push our college applications over the edge and made bets on who would get the highest PSAT score. Instead, what we got were clusterfucked virtual classes and half-hearted attempts at online extracurriculars. The experience ignited a fire

that burned in the three of us equally to make the most out of senior year and beyond.

We had a plan. Three Georgetown acceptances, a triple room. Kelsi and Hikari were going pre-law, inspired after too many binges of *How to Get Away with Murder*. I was supposed to follow in my mother's footsteps and study the stars. But somewhere between the needle sinking into my lower lip and Kelsi's "We Should Just Be Friends" speech, my spark for academics—and Kelsi and Hikari—had extinguished.

There was a swift knock on my door, and Mom poked her head in. Her tight coils were covered in a gorgeous royal-blue headwrap. "Hey, Avery baby."

"Hey, Mom."

She swept into the room, ivory linen dress swirling around her ankles. "Love what you've done with the place," she said, and we laughed because there wasn't much that would improve the unremarkable room short of tearing it down and starting all over.

"No point in getting too comfortable, right?" I asked.

She looked around the room, eyes softening when they landed on the bookcases. She pulled a tall, skinny book from the shelf and joined me on the bed. She smelled like she always did—jojoba oil, vanilla, summertime. It was nice to have this small, familiar thing when everything else felt off-center.

"I'm surprised you haven't uncovered this yet," she said, leafing through the pages.

"What is it?"

She showed me the forest-green cover. *Bardell High School Yearbook, 1984–1985* was etched in silver block letters.

“Baby Mom!” I examined the senior class pages, hunting for Mom’s perfect white smile and almond-brown eyes. After mistakenly searching for Zora Anderson, I found her under the Hs—*Zora Rayla Harding*. Over thirty years later, and she still looked the same. I traced her maiden name with my index finger. “It’s so weird to see you with a different last name.”

“What was weird was changing it when I married your dad. I was a Harding longer than I’ve been an Anderson, you know.”

I turned the page, giggling at the hairstyles of decades past. “Is Ms. Carole in here?”

Mom didn’t say anything as she flipped to the Ts. Carole Judith Thompson beamed proudly in the center of the page.

“I don’t remember her from when we visited last time,” I said.

“You were only five.”

I thought about hazy string lights and shiny gold presents. “Did we come around Christmas?”

“New Year’s.” Mom frowned at Carole’s picture and closed the book.

“What happened?” I asked. “During that visit? I don’t remember much of it.”

Mom exhaled and returned the book to the shelf. “Nothing really. We came for a quick visit so Mama could meet you.”

“Must not have made a good impression considering she still wants nothing to do with me,” I joked. Which I didn’t necessarily mind. She responded to my passing greetings in the hallway with mild grunts, and I left her alone to do her cross-word puzzles. Win-win.

Mom pursed her lips. “It’s been two days. Give it time. In

fact, why don't you go keep her company while your father and I get dinner ready?"

"*You're* cooking?" That visual felt as incredulous as me and Mama Letty skipping hand-in-hand down Sweetness Lane. My parents didn't *do* cooking. At home, we had an entire drawer dedicated to Indian and pizza takeout menus and colorful magnets from every sushi restaurant in a five-mile radius decorating our fridge.

Mom flicked my lip ring, lightning-quick. "Don't be a smart-ass. It's not becoming of you."

"Ow! I was just saying!"

"Go keep your Mama Letty company while your father and I go *pick up* dinner."

"But—"

"Porch. Now."

I huffily followed Mom to the living room, and she pointed to the porch. Outside, Mama Letty eased back and forth in the rocking chair.

"Go talk to her," Mom said.

"Thoughts and prayers," Dad chimed from the kitchen. Mom shot him a look and told him to shut up and grab the keys.

I braced myself for Mama Letty's attitude and pushed open the screen door. Mom and Dad blew kisses and made a beeline for the car.

"Hey, Mama Letty." I sat on the hanging swing opposite her. "How's it going?"

Her eyes flicked up from her crossword puzzle. "Fine."

I watched reluctantly as the BMW made a slow U-turn and disappeared down the lane. I tried to calculate how much longer I had to stay before I could politely excuse myself. Even with the golden afternoon melting into evening, it was unbearably hot. The muggy air felt like a drenched washcloth waiting to be twisted.

“It’s hot,” I said.

Mama Letty grunted. I fiddled with my lip ring, patience waning. I tried again.

“I was telling Mom how I don’t remember much from my first visit here.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You were three. ’Course you don’t remember shit.”

“Mom said I was five.”

“Same thing.” She slipped a pack of cigarettes and a silver lighter from the pocket of her gray cotton capris. My eyes bulged.

“Do you think it’s a good idea to smoke when you’re . . .” I watched as her wrinkled fingers struggled to ignite a flame. When it caught, she inhaled deeply.

“Say it.” She grinned through white smoke. “Dying? This ain’t gonna change nothing.”

I kneaded my fists into my thighs. The conversation suddenly felt way out of bounds of my light pre-dinner chat obligation.

“You gonna tell Zora on me, Fish?” she asked with a smirk.

“Fish?”

She motioned to my lip ring, and my cheeks burned,

remembering her earlier comment. *Out here looking like a fish caught on a hook.*

Words failed when I met her taunting gaze. My back stiffened against the swing.

“That’s what I thought.” She inhaled again. We settled into another uncomfortable silence. It was the complete opposite of the familiarity I used to have with Grandma Jean. Being in Mama Letty’s presence felt like quaking under the scrutiny of a Newport-smoking Sunday school teacher.

I was debating between one more shot at conversation or running inside when a pearl-white Jeep rumbled down Sweetness Lane and stopped in front of the Coles’ house. Seconds later, Simone bolted outside, locs flying behind her in an electric-blue whirl. The Jeep’s roof and doors were missing, so Simone used the frame to haul herself into the passenger seat. There was a burst of laughter from the driver, a white girl with a mane of messy blonde curls. Mama Letty and I watched as the Jeep lurched forward, pop music and chatter amplifying, and stopped at the end of our driveway. Simone stood and gripped the frame of the roof.

“Avery! Come here a sec!”

I looked at Mama Letty. She looked at me.

“My name ain’t Avery,” she muttered before returning to her crossword.

“Come on!” Simone yelled. “We ain’t gonna bite!”

The pop music dimmed to a dull roar as I made my way down the walkway. The driver studied me, ice-blue eyes shining behind thick, clear glasses. Simone sat and leaned over her.

“Jade, meet Avery, aka DC. DC, this is my best friend, Jade. Come hang out with us tonight.”

Jade gave me a smile that teetered between polite and aloof. She looked like the type of white girl who lived for pumpkin spice lattes and had a pretty brown horse named Trinity or Diesel. A gleaming heart-shaped locket rested in the hollow of her neck.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, voice as light as wind chimes. I imagined her around a bonfire, strumming a guitar, telling her youth church group to come on, y’all, sing along with her.

“Hi,” I said.

“Come on, get in. Ya girl has a curfew,” Simone whined.

I glanced over my shoulder. On the porch, Mama Letty penned in a crossword answer, cigarette still balanced between her lips. “I’m kind of busy.”

Simone snorted. “Doing *what*? Capricorns aren’t usually liars. What’s your rising?” She leaned closer, and Jade sighed the sigh of someone who’d been through this a thousand times.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“She said she’s busy,” Jade said. “We should let her get settled in.”

“But it’s a new moon tonight,” Simone said. “We’re setting our intentions for the school year.” She pointed to the junky back seat, which still had plenty of room for me. I had the slightest tingle in my chest when I imagined joining them.

“I—” I hesitated, remembering the mantra I told myself not even forty-eight hours earlier.

Get in. Get out. No drama. Focus forward.

“I’m good,” I said firmly. “Thanks though.”

Simone shrugged. “Suit yourself. You should definitely take the time tonight to set some intentions privately. New moon energy is powerful, boo.”

I laughed, taking myself by surprise. Jade shook her head, a smile tugging on her lips. They waved goodbye and hit a U-turn at the dead end before peeling off, music returning to ear-shattering volume. I stood in their dust, heart skittering in my chest.

When I turned back to the house, I realized Carole had joined Mama Letty, much to my disappointment. I took my time walking back, in no rush to dodge more of her back-handed comments.

“Those girls,” Carole was saying as I drew closer. She was pulling at the neck of her stiff white collared shirt. *Syrup* was embroidered in gold lettering above her name tag.

Mama Letty stubbed her cigarette out. “Can’t believe you still let them hang out.”

“What am I supposed to do, Letty? They been friends since they were girls.” She frowned and looked at her watch. “I gotta go. Lucas will have my ass if I’m late again. Call me if Simone’s not home by nine.”

Mama Letty grunted. Carole’s gaze flickered to me like she just realized I was standing there. She gave me a curt nod before heading to her car.

I sat on the porch steps and watched the sky slip into a purple-rose ombré. I could still feel the hum of the Jeep’s engine

in my chest. They seemed like such an interesting pair, Simone and Jade. Jade looked like she attended extravagant cotillions in fluffy white dresses, while Simone felt like the human equivalent of a rainbow. Jade seemed cool, calculated, skin as pale as her blonde curls. Simone was full of color, inviting, and probably capable of making people stop in their tracks. I ran my fingers over the worn rubber soles of my Chucks.

“Why doesn’t Ms. Carole like Simone and Jade hanging out?” I asked.

When Mama Letty didn’t answer, I tore my eyes from the sky and looked at her. She was studying me, twirling her pen between her lanky fingers.

“What?” I asked. “Is that another one of your ‘secrets’?”

An unreadable grin bloomed on her face. “Be careful with all them questions you’re asking,” she said. “Might fuck around and actually learn something.” And instead of explaining what she meant, she lit another cigarette.