

The Free Verse Society



Can the power
of the written
word tear down
the walls they've
built around their
hearts?

DELALI ADJOA

*The Free Verse
Society*

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PEACHTREE
Teen



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For me at sixteen.

No matter what happens next,
you did it!

—D. A.

CHAPTER ONE

Jae

After months of muggy heat, a cool breeze passes through to say goodbye. It curls around me like a snake, smooth and slow. I clasp the handle of the suitcase by my waist, recounting everything I packed inside like a memory game: clothes and toiletries; a vintage postcard of Georgia, brown around the edges; a photo album; Mom's faded Bernie Mac tee; and as many books as I could fit inside.

I never paid much attention to the sidewalk, to the way it curves perfectly around the bend. This corner was always a *passing-through* place, a nowhere on the way to somewhere. To catch the bus for school, for the clinic, or to meet up with Austin Green. Now this is where I'll pass from one world to the next.

The phone in my pocket vibrates. I pull it out to read the message from Uncle Rowan: Just a few minutes.

Soon, a sleek black Cadillac pauses at the four-way stop before making a turn and pulling up beside me. The windows are tinted so dark they nearly blend in with the body of the car. The engine cuts off, the door opens, and Uncle Rowan's shiny brown head emerges

from the driver's side. He's wearing dark sunglasses, and he walks toward me in a gray suit that shimmers like a new quarter in the sun.

He comes close to give me a quick pat on the back and says my name, *Janelle*, like it's a greeting. I see the tiredness stained red in the corners of his eyes, from a full day of visiting clients and old friends on the way to pick me up. *I have people to see along the way*, he'd said. As if they were the ones that made the stagnant hours on the road worthwhile.

I don't realize my fingers are wrapped tightly around my suitcase until he tries to wrestle it from my fingers.

"Did you cram the whole house in here?" he asks as he opens the trunk and heaves the suitcase inside. He grunts, dusts off his hands as if they've gotten dirty, and slams the trunk shut. We both look toward the empty apartment complex, and stupidly, I wave at the time-battered bricks.

Call me if you need me, Mom said this morning before leaving for her nursing shift. But we both know I won't call. These days our words are so sharp they could cut our own tongues. This is my chance to leave everything behind, including her voice.

Uncle Rowan says, "Let's get a move on," and nudges my shoulder.

I open the passenger-side door and pause, one foot hovering over the mat inside. The Georgia dirt clings to my black shoes like a final goodbye. I pull my foot out again and kick the curb, watching the dirt pepper the street.

When I step into the black-and-silver interior of the car, with all its gleaming gadgets, I feel like I'm stepping into the future. And I finally understand what a new car smells like. I've never ridden anywhere without the smell of cigarette smoke clinging to the seats, the smell of gasoline thick in the air, the smell of unwashed bodies sitting too close.

“We’ll be home in about eight hours,” Uncle Rowan says.

The word *home* rattles me. I remember that the place we’re driving away from isn’t home anymore, that it stopped being home a long time ago. Today my family name, my father’s name, feels like a mockery. *Afenyo. Home is good.* A reminder of what’s been broken, what I no longer have.

I wrap my arms around my stomach and listen to Uncle Rowan talk about his legal practice and his new office in the heart of Delray Beach. An easy commute, he says.

I *uh-huh* and *hmm* to show interest while I watch the houses with yellowed siding and chain-link fences pass by the window with increasing speed. Then we’re on the highway, where Uncle Rowan sinks back comfortably in his seat and turns on music that makes me think of Afros, bumping hips, and bell bottoms. I’m relieved not to have to fill the silence with small talk.

Quietly, I pull out my copy of *The Best American Poetry* and try to forget what I’m leaving behind.



Raise your right hand for me.

My eyes flutter open when I hear the familiar voice. I expect to find myself sitting in a red plastic chair in a small office, but all I see are the dashed white lines of the encroaching road. Uncle Rowan yawns beside me. The bumpin’ oldies music is now gentle classical, which had lulled me to sleep.

We’re driving through the city Uncle Rowan calls home. I stare out the window at Delray, and Delray stares back with bright, unblinking streetlights. Palm trees hover over colorful buildings,

and dark shadows walk past. There's a quiet energy that makes me want to take it all in.

Soon, the houses get greedier, taking up more and more space, some peeking coyly through wrought iron gates. Uncle Rowan's house stands behind a white stone wall. We roll slowly around a circular driveway, at the center of which stands an illuminated statue: A woman with hair round like a halo carries a jar on her shoulder. She looks steady, but the jar is tilted, and I'm sure at any moment it'll fall to the ground and shatter. The yard is full of towering trees, lush palms, and flowers brilliant even in the dim light. It reminds me of the gardens Mom and I would visit every Sunday when I was little. She would talk about the wisteria she wanted to plant someday when we got a yard, a garden. The wisteria would line a stone walkway, hanging over like a canopy of purple raindrops. I wonder if she envies Uncle Rowan for having the garden she never had.

Without a word, he turns off the car and steps outside. I realize I'm staring wide-eyed at the house—which looks like it belongs in Europe somewhere, with all its arches and glinting glass—when he knocks loudly on the passenger window and walks away, towing my suitcase behind him.

The front door opens to reveal a thin, dark woman standing in the light of a chandelier. She's wearing a blue maid's uniform and a white smile. Uncle Rowan disappears inside, and when I finally get to the door, the woman sticks out her hand and shakes mine.

"You can call me Ms. Rosette," she says in an accent that feels familiar. "You are Janelle?"

"Jae," I correct her. Uncle Rowan doesn't know I shed my old name like I shed so much else.

“A pleasure to meet you, Jae,” she says. But in her mouth, *pleasure* sounds like *pleh-jah*. Her words come out slow and purposeful, like she’s polishing them to a shine before placing them down.

I hesitate as I step inside, staring at my shoes and the spotless floor.

“You can leave them on,” she says, flicking her hands like she disapproves. “That’s what people do here.” I’m staring at her, overcome by how similar she sounds to Dad, until she points me to the bathroom to wash my hands for dinner.

I can’t shake Mom’s voice as I walk across the shimmering cream tiles in my boots: *Does it look like we have a maid in here? I am not gonna pay another carpet-cleaning fee.* I almost laugh out loud. Well, there is a maid now.

Ms. Rosette ushers me down the hall with her hand against my back. “He is waiting in the dining room,” she says.

I find Uncle Rowan sitting at the head of the table. I sit beside him, and it’s just us and the silence. In front of me is a wineglass filled with water, a red napkin folded up like a pope’s hat, and more forks than I need. There’s an empty silver plate on my mat, but no food at the table to serve myself.

Just then Ms. Rosette walks in carrying two bowls of salad and sets them in front of us, right on top of the large silver plates. No one can read my thoughts, but I’m embarrassed that I feel so out of place. Back home, we eat dinners in front of the TV so we can stream *The Bernie Mac Show*. You don’t need all the extra silverware for TV dinners. Seeing the table set like this, I agree with Mom. Uncle Rowan’s too rich to be an Oakland.

“Eat,” he says. His glasses are halfway down his nose and he peers at me over them.

I look down at my salad, suddenly remembering that I'm hungry, that I only ate a handful of cereal in the morning as I did some final packing, and then only picked at my drive-thru fries at lunch. I remind myself that rich people don't eat much, that this salad is probably all I'll get for dinner and I should try to enjoy it. I reach for a fork, but my hand hovers, unsure.

"Start with the fork on the outside. Then work your way in," he says.

We eat in silence until Ms. Rosette picks up our empty salad bowls. I'm surprised when she brings in plates of rice and chunky red sauce.

I poke the slab of meat drenched in bloodred.

"Lamb," he says.

I haven't eaten meat in years. Not since the day I opened the deep freezer in the African market and saw a goat. A whole goat. It was the meat Dad used in his Ghanaian light soup, and there it lay with its eyes wide open and frozen, staring back at me. Now I look up at Uncle Rowan's expectant face and cut into the lamb swimming in sauce on my plate. *I'm sorry*, I tell the lamb. *Go easy*, I tell my stomach.

Uncle Rowan clears his throat. "You start school tomorrow," he says. "Bellwood is in a different league academically. You'll have to work hard." He says this like I'm some kind of slacker. Like I'm not a straight-A student. "You'll need to start thinking about college applications as well."

I pause and lower my fork. "I'm only a junior."

"If you want to get a leg up, you need to start now. Research schools, attend college fairs, build relationships with your teachers so you can ask for recommendation letters. Have you thought about extracurriculars?"

“Not yet.”

He shakes his head. “Not surprised. Coming from that school where all you kids care about is who’s dating whom. And who’s got the newest Air Jordans. The flyest snapbacks. When I was young, I seized the chance to be somebody, to pull myself out of the hood and make something of myself. I saved every penny I could. Learned how to invest. There wasn’t any opportunity that could present itself that I wouldn’t be ready for.” He shakes his finger at me. “Your mom, she always asked for handouts. And look at where we both turned out, the victim and the victor. And if it weren’t for your so-called father—”

I sigh and drop my fork onto my plate. Uncle Rowan ignores the loud clatter and continues, but I’m done listening.

There’s nothing he can tell me about Dad that I don’t already know. I know that he up and left. Took his notebooks full of physics and poetry. Took his prized mounted bass from that precious fishing trip with his boss. And left every single picture of me behind. My body still remembers his leaving, the clench in my heart, the sweat in my palms. It sits in the pit of my stomach always. So when it comes to Dad, that’s all I need to know.

I watch quietly as Uncle Rowan drags a chunk of meat through sauce.

“Where is Ms. Rosette from?” I ask, desperate for conversation that has nothing to do with me.

“Togo,” he says, and my mind goes white for a second. Togo sits next to Ghana, Dad’s country, arms touching like close kin. “I think she speaks your language. I mean, your dad’s language,” he corrects himself. And he’s right to, because Dad never bothered to share Eve with me. Uncle Rowan sweeps his finger in the red sauce and pops

it into his mouth, the most normal thing I've seen him do all day. "Anyway, she came highly recommended. It's the illegal ones that are the problem," he says. "They steal jobs from our people, and we do nothing to stop it."

This is where Mom and Uncle Rowan would have a fight. *Your uncle lost his religion in all that money*, she said once. She would quote the Bible to him, chapter and verse, something about kindness to strangers in a new land. She loves the Bible, even though the last time she went to church was when Jesus turned water into wine.

We sit in silence as Uncle Rowan sips from his glass and sighs absentmindedly between bites. I take note of the lines across his forehead, which weren't there years ago.

Raise your right hand for me. Do you understand that once you sign, you will have given up all your rights?

I push the voice away again.

Uncle Rowan takes a sip of his wine, pats his mouth with his napkin, and returns it to his lap. "I think you'll do fine here. It's a chance for you to grow up and face real responsibility. Responsibility you can't just hand over to someone else."

I snap my mouth shut to keep the words in. My face flushes from the heat of unsaid things. I heap shovels of coconut rice into my mouth, just to keep my tongue busy.

Ms. Rosette shuffles into the dining room, her dark hands stuffed into the pockets of her blue apron. "How does it taste?" she asks, looking hopefully from Uncle Rowan to me.

"Good, good." He nods. "The lamb is a bit too red for me, but we shouldn't get trichinosis."

She shakes her head. "You want apple pie or cherry pie for dessert? Both are ready to go."

I can feel his eyes on me. “What would you like, Janelle?”

Pie or no pie, I can’t spend another minute at the table with him. He’s not the Uncle Rowan I used to know, the one I used to curl up with on Christmas morning with hot cocoa and marshmallows. The one who read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* with all the voices, making me laugh until I cried. This Uncle Rowan doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t smile. And he thinks the worst of me.

“Can I be excused? I need to get ready for school tomorrow.”

He nods. “Good for you. Rosette, I’ll have some apple pie.”

“Yes, sir.” She leaves the room.

Upstairs in my new room, a very pink room, I stand on a rug the size of my old bedroom in Atlanta. I stare at wall-to-wall bookshelves and wall-to-wall curtains, and a bed big enough for six of me. I feel small, like there’s not enough of me to fill up this new world.

Uncle Rowan would agree. I’m the daughter of Paula Oakland and Kofi Afenyo, and I’m a walking statistic. The shame of it throbs like a fresh wound. I’m surer than before that no one in Delray needs to know my whole story.

Raise your right hand for me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and find the saved number that I think about calling every day but don’t. I press the call button and it goes right to voicemail.

“Hey, Sherry. It’s Jae. Janelle Afenyo. I just wanted to check that you got the email about my address change. Did you? Um . . . Please tell Anne I’m looking forward to seeing the picture. I can’t wait to see it. Thanks. Thank you.”

I hang up the phone, and in the space of quietness, my guilt grows. *This is all on you. Don’t forget that*, it says. But I could never

forget. I wear the memories in stitches, in pain that takes its time.
The body remembers everything.

Blinking quickly, I clear the wet haze of the bedroom.

Then, hungry for new air, I walk toward the curtains and pull them aside, and the world outside takes my breath away. There's the ocean, and the water is a black mirror with the moon glowing on its surface. Sailboats float past like mystical clouds. I push the window open and the breeze sweeps the water, kisses the moon, and makes the curtains dance. It brushes my skin with its warm fingers, making me think of Georgia and last goodbyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Jae

It's my first day at Bellwood High, and my body and mind are in two different places. My feet take me from room to room as I match the numbers on my schedule to the numbers on doors, getting lost in the flow of students who know exactly where they're going.

But my thoughts wander to a small air-conditioned room. Red plastic chairs. Cold. The serenity prayer on one wall, a glossy horse poster on another. And flowers. Lots of flowers. For thank-yous and sorrys and goodbyes. Whenever a teacher calls my name, I'm dropped back into my body, my feet on pristine tile, my back pressed against straight wood.

Soon enough, the second lunch bell rings and I find myself planted in the bathroom stall, leaning against the brick wall, listening to voices float through the hallways like smoke. I survey the stall door where phone numbers, names, and body parts are scribbled in black marker beneath the words *junior hos. sharing is caring.*

The words, not meant for me, still inject themselves like viruses into marrow. They multiply, until I forget that the words are written on gray metal and not under my skin.

Avoiding the pee spots on the floor, I shuffle my feet to ease the numbness, to feel my body be mine again.

There's chatter in the hallway. I instinctively hold my breath, put the toilet seat down, and step up, tucking my dress behind my knees. A woman's voice calls for the drifters to hurry to the cafeteria, and I'm left facing an imaginary Mom, who kisses her teeth, gives me a sour look, and says I'm just like Dad, hiding when things get too tough. *You need to be pressed if you want to be a diamond, Janelle.*

So much for leaving her voice back in Atlanta.

I jump when the bathroom door swings open and slams against the wall. The thud echoes in my chest and sends my heart quick-stepping. Heat surges through my body, fear clenches my lungs. *Breathe, Jae, breathe.*

The squeaky shuffle of shoes passes the first two stalls and stops when a body slams into the wall closest to me. I flinch, hug my knees closer.

"What the hell were you doing at my house, Tillman?" a voice asks in a sharp whisper. My brain slowly registers that it's a deep voice.

"Look, dude, I have no idea what the big deal is," another voice responds, cracking.

"Dude?" Shuffling feet. "Did you just *dude* me, Tillman?"

"Sorry, sorry. No need to get upset."

"Nobody knows where I live."

"I had no idea where you lived. Had I known, I would have said, 'To hell with it! I'm not delivering pizzas to that house!'" This voice rises like it's full of helium.

"Are you trying to be smart?"

“Smart? Not me. Dumb as a block.”

The silence is filled with agitated breaths. I tell my heart to settle. Nobody knows I'm here.

“Derek, come on.” Tillman's voice trembles. “This is a classic case of projection. You assume I'm feeling what you're feeling, but I'm not, I'm really not!”

“I know what projection means.”

“You *really* think people will stop liking you if they find out the truth? Any therapist worth their salt—”

“Shut up, Tillman.”

“Did you know *salt* and *salary* share a Latin root?”

“Tillman. Shut up!” Thud. “Say a word to anyone, I'll pluck the braces off your yellow teeth and make you swallow 'em. You know I can do that, right, book freak? You'll regret the day you met me.”

“Already happening.”

“Then get the hell out of here. Go eat your freaking cheese sandwich.”

I hold my breath for another body slam, but there's only the sound of retreating feet and the thud of the door. I let out a long sigh of relief.

I think I'm alone until feet move toward the other side of the bathroom. The tap turns on, running at full blast. Then there's the sound of water splashing, an agonized “*Shit!*” and sobs. They're almost inaudible, drowned out by the water, and for a moment I wonder if I'm just hearing things. What kind of bully cries after threatening his victim?

I'm stuck, afraid to move. But still, drawn to the familiar ache of tears. Like the way I cried when I realized Dad wasn't coming home again. Or the day I signed away the most beautiful gift, not

understanding the breadth of *forever*. The pain is so tangible I can almost hold it in my hands.

Trying to squelch my fear, I slowly step down from my crouched position on the toilet seat and grab my I LOVE LUCILLE canvas bag from the hook. *Sometimes sadness is loud and it needs to be heard*, I tell myself. I open the stall door, and the boy at the sink looks up into the mirror, startled.

I'm startled too. My feet won't move. My brain had conjured up an image of a boy on the other side of the door. A generic, everyday boy. Brown-haired and lanky. But my expectations have been demolished, completely ground into fine dust. There's nothing generic, nothing average about him. Boys like him make you think of dark and beautiful things.

He turns off the water, turns away from the mirror, and stares at me with eyes that remind me of black water and aching lungs and sinking deep. They're lined with dark lashes, shadowed by thick eyebrows. He shifts a white baseball cap over shiny black hair, and I can't tell if he's Latino or Indian or Middle Eastern or something else. As Dad would say, I can't tell where his parents are from.

He purses full lips. "What are you doing here?" His voice is still sandpaper, his eyebrows knit together. The muscles around his sharp jaw pulse. He turns quickly to the sink, holds his cap in one hand, and splashes water on his face with the other. He turns around, pulls up the bottom of his shirt to dry himself, muscled torso on display. My insides swim, and I forget why I left the stall in the first place.

"I thought this was the girls' bathroom," I finally answer, feeling my face warm. "I mean, it might be. I probably shouldn't assume . . ."

My voice trails off at the squinty, just-drunk-spoiled-milk expression on his face.

“Chill. Our school’s not that progressive.” He points over his shoulder to urinals against the wall, right before the first stall.

“Wow,” I whisper. How did I not see them? My face is burning up. I pray for a sinkhole to swallow me. I read they were all over Florida, and yet none has come to take me.

When I finally get the nerve to look at him again, his expression has shifted to one of curiosity.

“You’re new?” he asks.

I nod. “Jae. With an e.”

“You’re scared of the cafeteria or something?”

It’s not the cafeteria; it’s all the kids in it. But I respond, “Something.”

“So you’re spending lunch in the bathroom.” He’s squinting at me again.

Embarrassment holds my tongue. Nothing comes out.

He lets out a dry laugh. “You’re . . . different.” He pauses. “And I mean that in a good way.” He crosses his arms over his chest and examines my face, like he’s trying to memorize it. Then his gaze drops lower, sweeps slowly over the neckline of my dress, my waist-length locs, my meticulously moisturized legs. I watch every flicker of his eyes, how easily they move over me, like the world could be ending and he would still take his time.

I shift from foot to foot under his gaze. “Different? Why do you say that?” It’s not like I’m the only Black girl in school. There was a group of them standing at the lockers, straight hair, curly hair, and Afro meeting in a huddled circle. And there was one in my Advanced Placement Biology class, though she avoided eye

contact. Maybe she thought talking to me would make her Black too.

“I dunno,” he says. “Just a feeling. Like, everyone here basically looks the same, talks the same. They wouldn’t be caught dead in that, for sure.”

“A little rude,” I say. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” I look down at my white cheesecloth dress tied with a braided belt. My cocoa-colored legs end in sandals. My white canvas bag hangs over my shoulder.

“Besides the fact that you’ll need something more substantial than a tote bag for all your books? Nothing. I like your look, actually, it just doesn’t scream *Hey! I’m desperate for your attention*. And your hair. I like it. It’s nice.” He pauses. “Hey. Gotta go. But . . . good luck.” He gives me a tight-lipped smile and turns to the door.

“Wait!” I blurt out, because he’s about to leave and the fog has finally lifted. “Are you okay?”

He stops and faces me again. “What do you mean?”

I bite my lip. “I heard you—”

“You didn’t hear anything.” The edge is back in his voice.

“No, I heard you,” I insist. “I’m not *judging* you, I just . . . I heard you crying. You sounded extremely sad and I just . . . I wanna know if you’re okay.”

He inhales and exhales, nostrils flared, slow and deliberate like he’s trying to stay calm. But his eyes are piercing, as if by staring at me hard enough, he can make me disappear.

I shake my head, turn to leave, right as the bathroom door flies open and a tall boy with a tilted yellow hat strolls in. “Derek, come on, man. We’re . . .” His voice trails off when his eyes fall on me. “What the fuuuu . . .?”

I'm waiting for Derek to say something, but he looks down, takes off his hat, and runs his hand through his hair. A frivolous waste of time when he could have been explaining things.

His friend stands between us and crosses his arms. His eyes flick back and forth from Derek to me, and he laughs. "Valeria's not gonna like this."

"Not gonna like what?" Derek huffs. "We're not dating anymore. If you could finally get that through your sister's head, I'd be grateful." He starts walking to the door. "Miguel, let's go. Nothing happened here."

His friend grunts. "Be for real, man." Then slowly, a thin smile inches across his lips. He looks at me with an eyebrow raised, a shiny silver hoop pierced through it. "What are you doing in the bathroom? You just wait around for guys or something? Who's next?"

His voice is far away and tinny, like I'm falling, like I'm looking at the bathroom through a tunnel. This is the sinkhole. And Derek's not going to pull me out. He's like stone, his jaw locked shut.

"I thought this was the girls' bathroom," I say, my voice finally resurfacing.

Miguel laughs. "Yeah. Okay." He points to the urinals.

Derek shakes his head. "Come on," he says, and opens the door. "I told you, nothing happened."

His friend follows, glancing back at me one last time, his eyes dancing. "Ho," he says, the word like a sharpened dart that meets its target.

The door closes behind his laughter and I'm left standing alone, screaming at myself for stepping down, for leaving the stall, for trying to help. I press my lips together to keep them from shaking, tell myself to breathe.

My fresh start is gone. I'm right back where I used to be. The bathroom stall. The names and numbers.

This is how a blank slate gets covered with words that can never be erased.

genesis. again.

i am:

whoever you say

i am

the creation

of lesser gods

CHAPTER THREE

Derek

Soccer practice ends. The team heads to the locker room, I go to the bike racks. Miguel Montero's eyes are watching me, I can feel it. I throw on my backpack, jump on my bike, and pedal out of the parking lot toward the gravel road.

Miguel's not all bad all the time, but he loves to have fun at other people's expense. So if I don't stick around, they can't give me a hard time about Jae, the girl in the bathroom.

Are you okay?

How is it a perfect stranger seems to care the most?

The sound of crunching rocks beneath my tires is numbing. My mind wanders to—Jesus Christ—the look on Tillman's face when I got home last night.

I rode up to the front yard. He was walking back to his car with the pizza delivery sign on the roof. Mom was following him, and I heard everything she said. I recognized him right away, even in the dim light: his wire-framed glasses, his narrow eyes, his copper-colored hair. I'd known Tillman my whole life, and he'd never looked at me with pity. *He* was the outsider, the one with his nose

always in a book, the one always scribbling his mysterious notes. Now he knows my secrets, and he can look at me the same way I look at him.

I ride until mansions become bungalows. Some of them you could say, *I bet a sweet old granny lives there*. But not the other ones. You ride faster past those ones. You wonder what really goes on in those ones.

I roll up to our pink house, where a dark blue pickup truck is parked. My hands form a death grip around the handlebars. It's Peter Manganeli, Mom's boyfriend and all-around douchebag. He doesn't come around much these days because his wife is starting to ask questions.

The gate to the front yard screeches and scrapes the sidewalk. The path is overgrown with grass. I lock my bike to the paint-chipped porch, and when I reach for the front door, it swings open with ease. How many times do I have to tell them to keep it locked? Just a few doors down, sweet old Mr. Jefferson was robbed at gunpoint. He was eating meat pies in his tighy-whities.

Inside, the kitchen linoleum is stained with yellow and brown splotches. A lonely stick of incense on the counter fights to overpower the smell of smoke and booze.

"That you, kid?" an ogre-ish voice calls from the living room over the blaring TV. I don't respond. He'd know it was me if he'd locked the door.

My stomach growls. I open the cereal cupboard and find an industrial-sized canister of garam masala sitting right in front of my box of Coco Rocks. I'm annoyed that Mom would buy any spice at all when she barely cooks anymore—she barely does anything—and I'm annoyed that it's not in the spice cupboard where it belongs. I

push it aside and grab my Coco Rocks, and the box feels unbearably light. When I shake it, I'm greeted with the hollow rattle of two or three chocolaty pieces. Peter.

Jerk.

I reach into the fridge for some ginger ale and ease my hunger with large gulps before grabbing my backpack, heading to my room, and slamming the door.

Let there be light. I flick on the switch, and white orbs of light float like ghosts over glow-in-the-dark constellations on the ceiling. A Milky Way mural spans each wall, dark blues and blacks and purples, and stars twinkling in every hue. A giant solar system lamp with round globes arches over my bed. And a spaceship lamp on my desk illuminates the posters behind it: *Star Wars*, *Interstellar*, *Koi . . . Mil Gaya*.

It's a shrine to the cosmos, the closest I might ever get to religion. Maybe it's my attempt at harnessing all the creative energy of the universe.

On my desk sits a box of my half-baked movie scripts and loglines. Screenplays I might write one day. I haven't had any fresh ideas in weeks, and I'm hoping something will come to me.

But what if it doesn't? Maybe I should be like Mom and try different mediums, except not with colors. With words. A short story, maybe?

I toss my bag somewhere and push my chair up beneath the door handle, forming a barricade.

"Derek?" Mom calls from down the hall. She sounds good. Happy. But why can't she be happy when it's just the two of us?

I see her now, all spindly, stumbling a few steps before finding a windy path to my room.

Three tentative knocks sound on the door. “Derek?”

Maybe if I’m quiet she’ll forget I’m here.

“Derek?”

“Yeah.” My bed frame moans as I sink into it.

“Where were you?”

“Guam.”

I could remind her every day for the next year I have practice after school. It wouldn’t make a difference. Mom doesn’t really care where I am or what I do anymore.

There’s silence on the other side. And then she shuffles back to the living room. Hey, at least she put in her best effort, right?

With an hour to kill before my shift at the diner, I reach for my bag and pull out my history book, the only reading assignment for today. I flip it open and try to focus my eyes on the chapter headings, the dates, the pictures that should be telling a story but mean nothing. I can’t focus on history when shit is going to hit the fan *today*. Because in this house, happiness never lasts.

Mom used to date this doctor. She wasn’t so bad then. She still looked like Mom. Her hair was a long bright auburn. Her face was sharp and stunning. And her eyes weren’t sunken and dark-rimmed like they are now. When I was younger, I thought she looked like a princess, but I’d rather kiss a horse’s ass than tell her that.

I don’t know why she broke up with Dr. Rai, but after him, she brought home Peter the Degenerate. He has the temperament of a constipated gorilla. *Me angry! No poop to sling!*

“What do you see in him, anyway?” I asked in one of our Peter-related tiffs. “Dr. Rai was great. He was normal. He smelled good. He brought you flowers. Remember him?”

“Well, it sounds like you have a crush on Dr. Rai.”

“Gross. But see? Peter? You got nothing.”

Maybe Mom got rid of Dr. Rai because he made her feel guilty about my lack of Indian culture. “He’s lost,” he’d said once. “Completely confused. Doesn’t know Hindi.”

“He’s Gujarati,” she’d snapped back.

If it was anyone’s duty to teach me Gujarati, or Hindi even, it was my dad’s. He was, after all, the Indian one. But when it came to his culture, Dad was always too practical to be proud. *This is America*, was his answer to everything. He’d been that way since he and Mom met at Georgetown University, where frat boy Dad downplayed his Indian heritage. To him, India was like a distant relative, one he loved but didn’t miss very much. He preferred the version of it that didn’t require a plane ticket: frozen samosas popped into the oven, the occasional festival (if Mom dragged us there), or any movie with an A. R. Rahman soundtrack. So without Dad’s insistence that I was Indian, I never felt like I was, and *he’s Gujarati* never really sunk deep for me.

A hard knock on the door interrupts my thoughts. “I’m out of cigarettes. Run and get me a pack, will ya,” Peter says from behind the closed door.

“That’s illegal,” I say. “I’m not eighteen yet. Plus, homework. You know, *kid* stuff.”

There’s a THWONK so hard I expect a hairy hand to break through the wall. I jump up to open the door.

The first thing I see is Peter’s gorilla chest, the hair smothering a gold chain hanging from his neck. His graying black beard is oiled and man-scaped within an inch of its life. His nose is so delightfully freckled and his eyes so dreamy gray, there must have been a glitch at the hell factory that spawned him.

He's the kind of guy people talk about on the news: *He was such a nice man, I never thought he'd do such a thing.*

Peter drops a bill into my hand and I head outside to Mr. Brown's store a couple of blocks down. On the sign, DISCOUNT CORNR SHOP has no *e*. Everyone complains about it, says the sign makes the whole neighborhood look bad. Have they *seen* the neighborhood?

I walk in and Mr. Brown says, "Derek, Derek, Derek," with a cigar dangling out of the corner of this mouth. Guy always says my name three times, and he always has a cigar in his mouth like it's been surgically attached.

"Hey, Mr. Brown." I wave and head down the aisles. I grab a pack of ginger ale, some Coco Rocks, and a couple of TV dinners and diet sodas for Mom.

I drop the items on the counter, scoot my fake ID toward him, and point to Peter's favorite brand. "Two," I say.

Mr. Brown gives me a look.

"For my mom's boyfriend," I explain.

"No can do, Derek."

"Hey, Mr. Brown. This guy has, like, giant hands. And he's just looking for a reason. You know what I mean?"

His brown eyes stare at me unblinking, and then he snatches his cigar and shakes it at me like a thick finger. "Now, don't you come asking me again," he says, before popping the cigar back in his mouth and turning to unlock the glass case. "Make me lose my damn store."

As soon as I step outside, I crumple the receipt and shoot a three-pointer into a trash can. I glance down the street to the house and figure I have five minutes before Peter loses his shit.

Somewhere a dog is barking and a woman's shrill voice yells, "Minnie! Quiet!" A car drives past, blaring country music from behind tinted windows.

The houses on this street are almost identical. They might be different colors, but they're all really the same. Dusty lawns scattered with toys or broken furniture, screen doors that couldn't keep an insect out, let alone a human. There is one exception, though: Miss Carol's baby-blue house. She spends most of her time outside, planting flowers, trimming bushes, and cleaning windows. It's not enough to make the street look better, but I appreciate the effort.

I open one of the cigarette packs and pull out a lighter from my pocket. As I light up, I suddenly remember me and Dad on the veranda of the old house, how he passed a cigarette to me and watched as I inhaled and choked. His version of a PSA to never pick up the habit. He laughed and kissed my hair, which was dark and wavy like his.

Dad was never close to his parents, so he overcompensated with me. Presents on every occasion, including Bs on my report card, and an embarrassing shower of kisses. I secretly loved it. He was like my best friend. If best friends kissed your forehead and called you *beautiful boy*.

I imagine him watching me now, and I grind the cigarette into the concrete. *I'll stop, I promise him. At least I'm not vaping like all the other kids. You can't quit a habit when it's flavored Berry-gasmic Explosion.*

Bullshit, Dad says.

Back at the house, I drop the spare change into Peter's Godzilla-sized hand.

"Where's the receipt?" he asks.

"I tossed it." I want to say something snarky about a delivery fee, about him being stupid enough to send me out with his money, but I don't. I turn into my room and barricade the door.

The TV blares. Cops? Could he be any more predictable? I grab my phone and turn on a playlist. I've never been good at studying with music on, but I try anyway. For the next ten minutes, I read, not remembering the pages I just read. Finally, I turn off the music and toss my phone across the bed.

I open up my laptop and search through my movies for something mindless. I settle for *Koi . . . Mil Gaya*, because it's good in a cringy way and I'm feeling nostalgic. In the movie, a little blue alien named Jadoo heals a brain-damaged kid who goes on to have special powers. And of course, it's full of musical numbers and hip-hop dancing. Amazing.

But right before the first song, complete with a dancing-in-the-rain motif, the TV quiets and voices drift in from the living room. I close my laptop and rest my head beside it, staring at the ceiling. "Ladies and gentlemen," I whisper to the sticker constellation above me. "The show has just begun."

They're talking about the three-foot glass vase Mom painted. At the bottom are baby birds that slowly transition up the side until they're adult birds in flight. It's the only thing in the house that looks expensive. When I told Mom how much I liked it, she said, "It's yours."

"That's something else, Nancy," Peter says. "That's really something else. You got some real talent in those hands of yours. Never seen anything like it. Look at how the light hits the little bird there."

I can almost feel Mom's pride swelling from behind the door, and she says something I can't hear.

Peter's quiet too. I imagine him taking a drag on his cigarette. His sparkling gray eyes becoming storm clouds. And then all I hear is Peter's voice changing and changing some more.

... think I'm gonna give you studio rent? ... Becca's watching the bank account like a hawk ... nickel I spend, she's asking me why ... probably your fault anyway ... hand's shaking ... hold a goddamn paintbrush ... losing too much weight, told you that already ... the haircut? Grow it out like you had it when I met you.

All the air's sucked out of me and I can't breathe.

Mom's yelling now, "You have no idea how much pain I'm in!"

"Oh, give me a break," Peter scoffs, and I know the fuse has been lit.

Mom starts screaming about Peter bringing alcohol into her house. I clench at Peter calling Mom a bitch, and wince at the loud crash, the sound of birds shattering into pieces.

Then silence. Even the silence is deafening.

I jump at the footsteps thundering past my room and out the front door. The door slams, and the soccer trophies on my desk tremble. Seconds later I hear the burbling engine of Peter's pickup disappearing down the street.

I pull the chair away from the door. "Mom?" I run to the living room and she's on her knees, picking up shattered pieces of the vase from the floor. There's a hole in the wall and glass scattered on the orange floral sofa below it.

Mom doesn't look at me, so I kneel beside her and turn her face, my heart beating hard in my chest.

"He didn't hit me," she says in that way, like Peter never would.

He wanted to.

"I got it," I tell her. She dumps the broken glass into my hands and kisses my forehead before shuffling off to the kitchen.

I pick up one of the larger pieces of glass with a whooping crane still intact, its wings arched in flight. I place the crane on the old splintered coffee table and wonder why he had to break the only beautiful thing we had.

I have a single thought, on repeat. *Bring Dad back. Bring Dad back. Bring Dad back.*

A new logline comes to me. I try not to forget it. I hold it as carefully as I'm holding the glass.

Logline #134: When kindhearted Nita lets loose a caged bird on the planet of Peril, bad luck falls upon her family.

Are you okay?

Jae. Her voice hovers in the silence as I drop the broken birds into the trash can. A glass splinter digs into my hand and leaves a small, swelling red mark when I pull it out.

Are you okay?

I look up at the ticking clock on the kitchen wall. I can't be late for my two-hour shift at the diner.

Are you okay?

I rip off my jersey and jump into the shower and try not to think about her dark eyes shining like glass. I try not to think about the dimples that appear like magic when she talks. I wonder if I could ever make her smile and how deep her dimples would get. I wonder what would happen if I touched her, or if I ever should.

Maybe she'd break like everything else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jae

I never should have left the bathroom stall.

His eyes feel like black water. Like something to sink into. To lose your breath for.

There's more than one way a body can drown.

The first time it happened was the summer after Dad left, on a weekend with no school and no money for a babysitter. Mom took me along to old Mrs. Higgins's house, which sat up on a hill at the end of a cul-de-sac where Confederate flags fluttered proudly from front porches. The house was so big I was shocked to see Mrs. Higgins's small, bent frame standing in the front door, wrinkles snaking through white skin. A taller woman with a stern face, Mrs. Higgins's daughter, came and stood behind her.

Mom and I made our way up the winding driveway, and it seemed like the steps to the front door went on forever. Inside, I ran my curious fingers along every shiny surface, along crystal vases and marble counters, shiny wooden seats and gold-framed mirrors, until Mom finally grabbed my arm and dragged me to the backyard, where she dropped me like an unwanted package.

“Just sit over there and don’t move,” she said, pointing to a table underneath an arching peach umbrella.

As I made my way across the yard, she closed the screen door and the voices inside floated toward me.

The younger Higgins said in a slow and careful drawl, “I’ll be here on the weekends to watch her, but we need you here every night from Sunday to Friday, without exception. I live hours away, you know, and I can’t just drop by if you decide not to show up for work.”

It was a miracle that Mom got the job considering what happened later that afternoon. Maybe the Higginses felt sorry for her.

I turned away from the voices coming from inside the house and looked down at the grass beneath the table. The brightest green I’d ever seen. Full like a carpet, with no broken glass or plastic littered around. I pulled my feet out of my shoes, stepped out from under the umbrella and into the sun.

I kept walking, feeling the different textures beneath my feet, until I stepped onto the smooth stone pathway that led to the pool.

I stood at the edge of the water, ripples whispering over smooth glass. A small seven-year-old stared back. Dark, thick lips, quiet eyes. Two braids rested at the collarbone with purple balls holding the ends together. I must not be pretty, I thought, if Dad could leave my pictures and leave me.

As I watched the water, I wanted nothing more than to be someone else, something else. Even a fish, like the one Dad had mounted up on the wall. He loved that fish more than anything, couldn’t leave it behind. I imagined myself with skin that glistened in the light. Silver. Feet that wiggled and propelled me through water so fast he’d have to use all his strength to catch me. I touched

the surface of the water with my toe, and the water changed shape and I disappeared. And when it settled again, smooth like glass, there I was. I waved my toe and erased my reflection. And then suddenly, like I really had become a fish, I plunged in.

Water and time slipped cold through my fingers. I begged and I couldn't hold them. There were fleeting moments of a captured breath, a vicious, hungry breath. And then it all slipped, and I disappeared, blackness surrounding blackness.

I woke to the sound of beeping machines in the hospital, to Mom frowning with her eyes wet and bright and red. "I told you not to leave the table."

The second time I drowned was after Austin Green leaned against my locker and said, "Hey, let me take you out." He was the tall basketball player with hair and eyes that said he was more than just Black. Everyone thought he was something special. And anyone he liked became something too. The whole world tried to tell me I was beautiful. But when Austin said it, I heard it. He caressed me with words I always wanted to be true.

He took me everywhere. To the movies, where he held my hand and whispered in my ear. To the ice cream parlor, where he scooped minty-chocolaty spoonfuls into my mouth. To his house, where I learned how real another person's skin could feel beneath my fingers. I learned how a body could scream without making a sound. Clenched thighs. Clenched breath.

But the day he stood with his friends and laughed, his eyes dancing, his lips saying, "It was only a dare," I found everything beautiful about me gone.

I realized I was drowning when I found myself staring at a bottle of Mom's painkillers in the cabinet. I remembered the blackness

surrounding blackness. The beautiful quiet. I wondered if I should let myself sink deeper, if I should come up for air at all.

I emptied the pills into my hand and busied my mind with counting them, trying to keep my hands from shaking. I counted more pills than good memories. More pills than years with Dad. More pills than people who would listen.

My phone rang and I closed my eyes to it. If I could just remember what it felt like to be gone, maybe I could do it. Be gone. Quiet.

There was silence again, and I wondered who had called. Who was on the other line waiting for me to pick up? What would they think if they could see me right now, with a bottle emptied out in my hand?

Each second in silence made me more afraid, like that moment before you step off the edge and free-fall.

The phone rang again, and this time it didn't stop.

Leave me alone, I whispered, hoping for silence that wouldn't come.

I made my way to my room, the pills still clutched in my fingers.

"What?" I asked, pressing the receiver to my ear. "What do you want?" I didn't know I was crying until I heard it in my voice.

"What do you mean, *what?*" Mom barked on the other end. "Is that how you answer the phone? What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Doesn't sound like nothing to me. Are you okay?"

I wiped my runny nose on my sleeve. For some reason, I had at that moment the distinct memory of her standing over a pot of newly planted portulacas that had quickly drooped and died. She was heartbroken. *What did I do wrong?* she asked herself as she yanked the dead stems out of the pot. *I must have done something wrong.*

I heard Mom's sigh on the other end. "I'm using the hospital phone right now, can't find my purse. Don't know if somebody took it or what. But I might need you to let me in when I get home. You hear me, Jae?"

"Okay."

She hung up the phone, and I stood at the door, waiting until she knocked.

I stayed because she needed me.

But Mom's not here now. I only have myself and this second chance. And that might be gone now too.

So I never should have left the bathroom stall.

Those dark eyes. Those pretty eyes.

thoseeyescould drag me

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CHAPTER FIVE

Derek

My shift is nearly over. I'm putting a stack of paper napkins in the cupboard for my boss, Gina. I'm a whole foot taller than her, even with her piled-high Dolly Parton curls. My phone buzzes.

hey, at ur house, u home?

I feel like I'm on one of those drop-of-doom rides at the theme park. I'm strapped in, and my lunch just might come through my nose.

Miguel doesn't know where I live. But if he's at my house, that means I'm screwed. "Shit." I stare at my phone screen. "*Shit.*"

Gina looks up. She's wiping tables down, singing Aretha Franklin like she's a paid background vocalist. Without missing a lyric, she reprimands me with her blue eyes caked in layers of mascara.

coming now don't go in, I text back.

Then I apologize to Gina and I'm out the door by the time she yells something back. Within seconds I'm blazing down the street on my bike like it's the Batmobile. Then I'm in my old neighborhood, a place I never go unless I'm feeling morose. It's the picture-perfect world Mom and I left behind months ago.

On the day we moved, summer was painfully bright. We sat in the U-Haul, and shouts of *Cannonball!* and splashes from the neighbor's pool filtered through the windows. I would miss the ease of summer nights here, the stream of glitter sprinkling the ocean from shore to sun. Boats cutting through the shimmery trail, carrying girls and fun and laughter. As we pulled the U-Haul out of our street, the palm trees fanned the houses—three and four stories high—like they were regal. Then we drove away and parked the van in front of a pink bungalow that was nice enough, but would always be empty.

The problem now is, I haven't told the guys we moved yet.

I see Henry Lee's hair first. It's like an upscale landscaping in itself: jet-black, gelled into a Mohawk, and shaved on one side. Sometimes he sprays color on the tips. Freshman year, he had wavy hair with bangs and looked like a model. Sophomore year, he buzzed it short and bleached it blond. And now it's junior year and a whole different Henry.

When I pull up, neither he nor Miguel says anything. They're staring at my head.

"Shit," I say again.

"What's with the origami hat?" Henry asks.

"And the dumb vest." Miguel points at my chest like it's covered in snot.

I swing off my bike and lean it against the iron gate. "It's called work," I say, with the greatest nonchalance I can muster. "Wouldn't hurt you guys to get a job too."

"Damn. You sound like my mom," Henry says. "*You need a job, Henry! You don't know the value of money, Henry!*"

"Why get a job if you're not, like . . . poor?" Miguel asks.

Poor. The word sits on his tongue like a spoonful of sewer sludge sprinkled with roach juice and beetle dung. I want to punch him.

“Guys, it’s no big deal,” I say. “Just trying to learn a little responsibility. Wouldn’t kill you to do the same.”

“Mm, I disagree,” Miguel says.

A bad day for the guys is being grounded from yacht privileges. They have no idea things are different for me now.

Dad was always cool about paying for our hangouts and parties, even taking Miguel’s family with us on a cruise. So they’re not going to understand how bad things are now. I can’t tell them that Mom financially destroyed us, and that without my new job, I wouldn’t have any spending money, which includes school lunches. And more importantly, I wouldn’t have enough money to apply for college without a fee waiver. They wouldn’t understand. Or worse yet, maybe they would, and they’d stop hanging out with me.

Bottom line is, Miguel and Henry are all I have left from Before. They’re my only anchor to the past where I wish I could have stayed.

I look toward the house, and I can almost see our ghosts through the walls: me and Miguel and Valeria, running down the basement steps to play foosball; Mom and Dad, dancing barefoot on the kitchen tiles, blasting Bon Jovi; birthday hats; barbecues; board games; family dinners. Maybe we left pieces of ourselves in there. A lost game token down the vent, a forgotten box in the attic. That potted vine that hung in the kitchen that Mom forgot to take. Maybe we’re still in there.

The driveway is empty now, the curtains drawn. I’m praying for the front door to stay closed, for whoever lives there now to not be home.

“Why are you here?” I ask the guys. “I told you already. Mom doesn’t want anyone over.”

“Cause she’s grieving? It’s been two years, man,” Miguel says.

“So what? Grief isn’t linear.”

“Yo. Whatever. Just change out of those ridiculous clothes. McAllister found the keys to his dad’s bike. We’re gonna take it for a spin.”

On any other day I would have laughed at how dumb Brody McAllister’s dad was, but I’m feeling kind of dumb myself. Miguel and Henry are eyeing me, waiting.

“I can change later,” I say, walking toward Henry’s Benz parked at the curb.

“Ho-ho, no way!” Henry waves his hands in objection. “You’re gonna scare away all the chicks. Just go change.”

“Don’t feel like it.”

“Hey, you wanna hang or not?” Miguel adjusts his hat over his shiny eyebrow ring. “Seriously, you look fucking ridiculous.”

I look at the house again. Did I see a shadow move inside?

“I’ll just change here,” I say, pulling my shirt out of my backpack.

“How about those?” Henry points at my creased white pants. “No offense, but I don’t wanna see your balls. Just change inside, dude. Is there something you’re not telling us? What’s the problem?”

“Fine. Fine.” Sighing, I sling the bag over my shoulders. “Stay here.”

I push the wrought iron gate. Locked, of course. I hoist myself up onto one of the ornate spirals and pull myself over, then drop to the ground, feeling a slight tweak in my ankle, and bend down to rub the pain.

“Why didn’t you just use the code, genius?” Miguel asks.

“If I knew the code, I would have used the code. Genius,” I say. “Mom changed it. Changes it all the time and forgets to tell me. I told you. She’s not well.”

I shake out the pain and make my way up the stone driveway, past the gushing fountain, a wave of emotions riding me.

I miss this house. I miss everything about it, how it used to be. The curtains are a powdery blue now. Ours were striped gray and white. The rug used to say PEACE, not HOME SWEET HOME. I look at the drawn curtains before picking up the rug where the spare key used to be. It’s gone. Of course it is. I look over my shoulders at the guys. Henry is peering through the gate like a jailed man looking to freedom.

“Come on!” he yells.

I press a finger against my lip and make a sign like Mom’s sleeping. Then I make a last Hail Mary and wiggle the front door latch, push and pull fast, hoping the people who live here now put off fixing the door like we did. I push and pull again. Again. And finally, the front door swings open.

I’m in.

CHAPTER SIX

Jae

It's first period English and the teacher, Mrs. Aldana, is pacing the front of the room. Her long green skirt flows around her like waves.

“Twain began writing the manuscript in 1876,” she says. “What was significant about writing *Huckleberry Finn* during that time?”

She speaks in that accent of hers—a confection of Spanish and Quebec French—that some of the boys make fun of when she's not in earshot. But I think it's beautiful. Her lips are bright red; her hair tumbles in dark curls over her shoulders; and she drapes herself in scarves despite the muggy Floridian heat. She looks like a statue that belongs on the helm of a great ship, wind-blown, sun-kissed. With her talkative hands and her pacing and her fast speech, she holds everyone's attention.

Except for me. My mind is an unleashed thing that wanders, and soon I've lost myself in a field of memories and *what-ifs*, plucking regrets like flowers. Today I see Mom's dimply smile as my tiny hands slap a mound of dough, sending flour like smoke into the air. I see Dad sitting under the dim kitchen light with his notebook, his hand scribbling furiously, turning poetic phrases like the easy turn

of a leaf. I see Austin with his honey-colored eyes that are anything but sweet, and I remember the way he touched me and made my skin feel new and beautiful. I see a small office with red plastic chairs and a woman telling me to raise my right hand and make promises I can't understand.

"Jae Afenyo?"

My eyes refocus on Mrs. Aldana's face.

"Did you hear the question?" she asks, her eyes bubbling with energy.

I did hear the question. Didn't I?

The students sitting in the front rows swivel their necks around to stare at me. A hundred pairs of eyes. I feel like a circus animal expected to perform an amazing trick, but I don't know what it is.

The girl behind me whispers, "Is that her?" And I remember seeing her when I sat down, a dark-haired beauty who could play Selena Gomez in any biopic. I think her name was Valeria. But the question, *Is that her*, derails me.

How does she know me?

"I'm sorry. Could you please repeat the question?" I ask Mrs. Aldana.

Her smile is patient. "Of course. I asked about the significance of Twain writing the novel in 1876."

"Um . . ." I swallow. I know this. I've not only read *Huckleberry Finn*, but all of Twain's books.

But the weight of a thousand stares could make someone forget their own name. In my old school, I wasn't the only brown face in class. There was someone to share the embarrassment with when the class talked about race. But here, it's just me, pretending to feel just fine talking about Huck and the runaway slave Jim while

curious eyes watch me every time someone says *N-word*. I wonder if the white kids feel heavy too, or if the weight of it is all on me.

I hear a voice to my right whisper, "Reconstruction."

Suddenly, my brain starts working again. I clear my throat. "Twain was writing during the Reconstruction period, just a decade after the end of the Civil War. There was still so much racism and terrorism then, and his own views on slavery had changed over the years. So maybe he was exploring the concept of freedom and what it meant to that society."

Mrs. Aldana nods and smiles. She turns to write on the board. "Any other comments?" she asks the rest of the class.

I turn to my right to look at the boy who whispered to me. His shoulder-length blond hair is pulled into a ponytail.

"Nice answer," he whispers.

I give a slight smile and try to refocus on Mrs. Aldana. But out of the corner of my eye, I see a boy with a tall Mohawk shaved on one side staring at me. I turn my head to look at him. He wiggles his eyebrows, and his eyes twinkle as if he finds me amusing. The way he's looking at me reminds me of the other boy in the bathroom yesterday with his yellow hat and eyebrow ring. Miguel, was it? I quickly look away and stare down at the book cover, at Huckleberry Finn and Jim floating away on the Mississippi.

Soon the bell rings. I shoot up, eager to pack my books and run off to second period. Eager to get away from the boy who seems to know something about me.

"You didn't need my help," the blond boy says. His words come out in a thick English accent that I didn't notice before. He's putting his reading book in his backpack.

"She caught me off guard," I explain.

“Well, Mark Twain is one of my favorite writers. I’m quite a fan of witty abolitionists. Did you know he also wrote under the names Josh and Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass?” He smiles and points to my white canvas bag, hanging on the arm of my chair, with I LOVE LUCILLE written in fluid, romantic letters. “And you’re a fan of Lucille Ball.”

I turn the bag over to the cartoon drawing of a brown-skinned, halo-haired woman. “Lucille Clifton. She’s one of my favorite poets.”

“You like poetry.” His eyebrows spring up and he reaches across the aisle for a handshake. “I’m William Shakespeare Huntington.”

“Shakespeare?”

“Not as good as Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass, but it is my real name.”

“I’m Janelle Afenyo. Everyone calls me Jae.”

“So, Jae,” William says in a way that makes me feel like he knows me already. The room has cleared out by now and we start walking through the rows of empty seats toward the door. “What are you doing after school today?” He stops and looks at me with intent blue eyes.

“Um . . .” I shrug.

“Well, then, I’d like to formally invite you to our first club meeting,” he says, pulling out a yellow piece of paper from his bag and placing it in my hand. “It would be good for you to have some camaraderie. Even Hemingway had friends. Think about it, Jae.” He pats my shoulder and heads into the hallway.

I glance quickly at the paper, slide it into my bag, and make my way to my locker. Maybe this is just what I need. A club. A group of built-in friends. Like a college sorority for readers. I could get along with people like that.

Luckily, my locker is right outside the English classroom, which means it's not one of the plain yellow ones. It's painted like the spine of a book cover. Mine is *Everything I Never Told You*, smack between *The Hate U Give* and *The Kite Runner*. It's strange that these painted lockers can make me sigh in relief, make me feel a little more like myself.

As I try to remember my locker combination, I hear laughter behind me. I look over my shoulder and my heart nearly falls out of my chest.

There he is.

Miguel, with his yellow hat tipped to the side. And the same boy with the Mohawk who was watching me in class. And Derek.

He's not laughing like Miguel, but he doesn't look happy to see me, either. Gone is the look of calm and quiet brooding. His arms are crossed over his chest and he looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

I fumble with my lock, hitting the wrong numbers each time, telling myself to breathe easy. After a few attempts, I finally get the combination right and open the door, and it knocks the bag off my shoulder.

Laughter.

I bend over to pick it up.

More laughter.

"Come on, guys," I hear Derek say.

I breathe through the heat burning my face. What exactly are they laughing at?

I see Austin's face flash before my eyes and that familiar wave of panic makes me grab my stomach. The sinking feeling. I'm washed in a flood of memories, from different times, different spaces.

You'll never know what this means to us.

Austin, what's going on?

Come on, it was all a joke. You had to know it was all a joke.

You made the right choice, Janelle.

Raise your right hand for me.

When the voices quiet down, the wave of panic recedes. I'm standing in front of the lockers again. I can feel the boys still watching me and I avoid looking over my shoulder. I look down at a piece of paper that floated to the ground when I opened my locker door. I don't have to pick it up to see what it says. In large block letters are the words: *MEET ME IN STALL 3*. I look up. Miguel breaks out into uncontrollable laughter and the boy in the Mohawk tries to hide his smile. Derek's face is frozen like stone.

I turn away, pretending to look for a textbook, and blink away tears. I let my own words drown out the noise outside me.

*LightShadowRainSunBreatheDeepCarryOnLightShadowRainSun-
BreatheDeepCarryOn.*

My breath begins to slow down. My heart begins to calm.

Light, shadow, rain, sun. Breathe deep. Carry on.

Light, shadow, rain, sun.

Breathe deep.

Carry on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Derek

It's after lunch. The junior counselor, Mr. Corrigan, calls me to his office. He's sitting at his desk in front of a long window. Half-closed blinds let the sun slip through. Outside, the gravel road is laid out like a dark ribbon and shadowed by trees. Mr. Corrigan leans across his desk and folds his hands on the shiny mahogany. It's hard not to notice the shape of his head, how it's as close to a perfect sphere as humanly possible, with round glasses perched in front of his eyes to make things worse.

I collapse into a cushioned chair across from him just as he says, "You were in my office four times last semester. Are you trying to break that record? Getting a head start?" He sighs. "It's the second day of school, Derek. You shouldn't be here already."

Yeah? Whose fault is that? I want to ask. But I settle for something less snarky. "I'm not too pleased about that either, Mr. Corrigan." Between the two of us, I'm more tired of seeing him than he is of seeing me, I'm sure of it.

He sits back in his seat and crosses his arms over his chest. His brown eyes pierce mine. He doesn't say a word and neither do I. He's

waiting. Waiting to see if I'll get uncomfortable and start talking. So I turn away and scan the titles on his bookshelf. *Helping the Struggling Adolescent*. *Teens in Therapy*. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. I try not to snicker, but the idea that these books could fix any of my problems is comical. I'm not the one who caused them.

The second hand on the wall clock is gliding around the circular face. Once. Twice. Three times. I think Mr. Corrigan's face would make a nice wall clock. I think the guys would appreciate that thought.

Finally, I sigh. "Okay. You win. Why am I here?"

"You don't know?"

I shrug. "Because you like me?"

Without taking his eyes off mine, he grabs a nearby pen and taps it against the desk. "We have reason to believe you broke into the house of one of the faculty yesterday evening."

I lean forward. "Faculty?"

"A teacher," he says, almost smug.

"A *teacher*?" I'm squeezing the life out of the cigarette box in my pocket.

He leans far back in his seat and it creaks beneath his weight. "That's a serious crime. Worse than anything you've done already."

By crimes, he means silly pranks. Like stringing the school mascot, Oluf the Wizard, up on the flagpole with a trail of condoms dangling behind him. Breaking into a teacher's house wasn't that. I was between a rock and a hard place, and it's not like I stole anything. I changed my clothes and ran out as soon as I heard footsteps upstairs. The most important thing is the guys still think I live there.

"How can you be so sure it was me?" I ask.

“I’m not going to indulge you, Mr. Patel. You know you did it, I know you did it, and most importantly,” he says, leaning over the desk again, “the video cameras on Mrs. Aldana’s property know you did it.”

Dammit.

Just then the door opens. I turn to see a tall, thin woman walk in and close the door behind her. She’s wearing a skirt the color of a Christmas tree. “Helluuu, Mr. Corrigan,” she sings with a bright smile. She lowers herself into the seat next to me and a waft of air like fresh rain envelops the room.

“You must be Derek,” she says with one hand on her chest, the other extended, like she’s greeting a dignitary. “I recognize you from the security footage.”

Uneasy, I shake her hand, absolutely sure she has some loose screws somewhere.

“So, what did I miss?” she asks, almost cheerfully.

“I was just telling Derek about the video cameras.”

I wince again, kicking myself. I forgot about the cameras because we never used them. Mom stopped paying the security service long ago.

“I would never have known it was you,” she says, patting my knee. “By the time I made it down the hall, you were already running out the door. My husband thought you might be a student, and the school was happy to check the video for me.”

Mr. Corrigan nods. “Now. What do we do with you?” he asks me.

I shrug. A part of me doesn’t really care.

“My door is always open if you need to talk,” he says. “I keep telling you that, but you never come. Until you get in trouble, that is.”

I wouldn't come at all if he didn't summon me like a peasant.

There's a knock on the door.

"Come in, Mrs. Patel," Mr. Corrigan says, and my heart drops.

Mom?

She opens the door too quickly and almost falls through. Her face is sweaty, her eyes bloodshot, and her short hair sticks to the moisture on her forehead.

"Hello," she says. "Sorry to be so late. I had to rush here from the art studio. Short notice, you know." She nearly falls into one of the chairs.

I lower my head. She's wearing slacks that are way too baggy on her now, and her white blouse is wrinkled, with a yellow stain on the shoulder.

She doesn't ease into the tirade. "What were you *thinking*, Derek? Breaking into a teacher's house? I don't know what to do with you. What do I do?"

I wash my hands over my face and let out a loud groan. "Why does everyone ask me that? You're the adults here, aren't you?"

She looks from Mr. Corrigan to Mrs. Aldana. "I'm doing my best," she says to them, and her voice catches in her throat. "I didn't raise him to be this way. I taught him to ask questions, but never to be disrespectful. He was a good boy. The sweetest thing."

"Oh, I think he still is," Mrs. Aldana interjects. She's beaming at me.

I laugh involuntarily. "How do you know?" I'm surprised by the meanness in my voice, how it pops up when I least expect it.

"I've learned to trust what I feel about people." She pauses and presses her bright red lips together, as if feeling for the right words. "And Derek. You were in a hurry, weren't you? You left a note anyway. I think that makes you a good person."

I blink. Look down.

“I believe you need a place to unleash your thoughts. An outlet,” she continues.

“I’m not doing counseling,” I say quickly. I look at Mr. Corrigan with the hardest glare I can muster. “I’ll save you the time. *Derek, how does that make you feel?* Like shit, Mr. Corrigan. I always feel like shit.”

“Derek!” Mom whisper-yells. She hates hearing me curse, even though she and Peter curse like teen gamers when they fight. God forbid if I do it. Typical adult hypocrisy.

Mom suddenly clamps her mouth shut and the muscles around her eyes tense. She leans forward and presses her hand against her temple.

“Are you okay, Mrs. Patel?” Mr. Corrigan asks.

“Just a headache,” she says, her voice straining. “It’s what happens when you have a son who causes so much trouble. Don’t worry, it will pass.”

“That headache’s not my fault,” I mutter.

“You be quiet,” Mom snaps.

Mrs. Aldana leans over to put a gentle hand on Mom’s shoulder. “I can get you some Tylenol from the office.”

Mom smiles through her pain. “Thank you. I have my meds at home. Just as soon as we’re done here . . .”

“Sure! Let’s conclude this matter so you can get going,” Mrs. Aldana says. “Derek, the reason we brought you here is to help you.” She’s looking me straight in the eyes. “You’re full of potential, I can see it.”

“It’s just gas,” I say. God, why is she being so nice at a time like this? And why does it feel like she can see me—really see me? It makes me want to run for the hills.

Mr. Corrigan ignores my quip. “We wouldn’t be helping you if we let this go unchecked,” he says.

“Then why don’t you just have me arrested?”

Mrs. Aldana finally stops smiling. She frowns like I’ve said something ridiculous. “You don’t need to be locked up, you need to be set free.”

I clamp my mouth shut to hold in the laughter, but it shoots out in a blaze of salivary glory. I wipe my mouth with my sleeve. Can they blame me? I mean, lady, come on.

Mrs. Aldana continues. “I’m mentoring the poetry club this year. We’ll be hosting a free verse poetry reading—”

“Free what?”

“Free verse poetry. I think—we think it would be a good idea for you to join the club this semester. The other option, Derek, is community service.”

“I’d rather play leapfrog with unicorns.”

“You’ll need to go to the office after school today and sign up for one or the other. Leapfrog is not an option.”

In a mere second, my friends’ faces flash before my eyes. A poetry club? Community service? Either way, they’ll never let me live this down. I’ll be the laughingstock of the soccer team. I’ll never get any girls ever again.

“I can’t,” I say. “I have soccer practice every day after school, remember? I’m the best player on the team. Can’t miss it.”

“We’ve already talked to the coach and he believes, as we do,” says Mrs. Aldana, “that you could stand to miss practice on Tuesdays.”

“Every Tuesday?” My jaw drops open on its hinge. I’m swimming for excuses, anything to get me out of this. *It was just a joke, a stupid prank gone wrong. And I left a note! FIX THE STRIKE PLATE. Doesn’t that count for anything? There’s no reason to sentence me to social purgatory.*

After what seems like hours of trying to find the right words, only one comes to mind.

“Fuck.”



I follow Mom out to the parking lot, staring at the hair plastered against her neck.

“Mrs. Aldana’s kinda weird, huh?” I say to her back. “I can see the headlines now: Teacher disappears teen poets.” My laugh is awkward, but Mom’s not listening anyway. She’s walking fast toward the farthest end of the lot, where Peter’s blue truck is parked. There’s movement inside.

“You guys made up already?” I ask. Depending on how big their fights get, they can stop talking for weeks. But Mom’s car is at the shop after she hit a tree, and it doesn’t look like she’ll be getting it back anytime soon. Not if she keeps losing art students. Looks like she’d rather make up with Peter than ask someone else for a ride.

“That’s none of your business,” she says, walking faster. “You need to think about your own life. Before you end up in jail.”

I stop walking, which makes her stop. She turns to face me and I stuff my hands in my pockets. I’m so used to seeing distaste in her eyes, it shouldn’t bother me anymore, but it still makes me want to shrink till I’m invisible. And that makes me want to fight back, because who is she to make me feel so small?

“What, Mom? You forgive Peter for being a dick all the time. But you can’t give your own kid a break.”

“I don’t know what you have against Peter, but I wish you’d just let it go.”

I want to scream. *Bring Dad back. Bring Dad back.* It feels like a million waves are crashing in my head and all I can do to quiet the noise is close my eyes and breathe deep and grit my teeth. When I open my eyes again, Mom is walking away.

“Do you even care about me?” I ask. I don’t mean for it to come out this way, like I’m fourteen and scared again.

“Of course I care,” she says, frowning.

“As much as you care about Peter? And your pain meds?”

Mom’s face is bright red now, and her lips are pressed into a tight line like she’s trying to keep herself from blowing up. But I don’t care. I’m not the one who smashed her vase into a thousand pieces. Maybe I’m a stupid kid and I do stupid things, but at least I don’t try to hurt the people I love.

“You believe in past lives? Rebirth, right? Maybe in your next life, you’ll love your son, too.” I swallow a lump in my throat, turn away, and pull a cigarette out of my pocket. *Sorry, Dad.*

Mom calls my name as I walk past the school doors toward the grove. “Derek, where are you going? Don’t play the martyr now. Get back to class.”

I finally stop and look at her. Her hand is holding her purse strap in place on her shoulder. Even from where I’m standing, I can see her hand shake.

“I’m not the one who broke your vase,” I say. I leave her in the lot and walk into the quiet woods.

When I’m in the thick of it, I sit on a tree stump and rest my elbows on my knees. Let my eyes fall to the space between my feet. Somewhere there’s an open classroom window. The sound of laughter filters through. I try to remember the last time I felt that good.



The school's main office looks much nicer than any high school should. It's dimly lit, with light fixtures installed in the dark wood panels along the walls. On a table is a small fountain, and the sound of trickling water interrupts the silence. One of the student volunteers, a senior, is sitting behind the secretary's desk.

"Hey, Derek," she says as I walk in.

I almost stop in my tracks. Should I know her? Her strawberry-blond hair falls around her shoulders and she has a light spattering of freckles on her nose. There aren't many girls around here that look like that.

"Uh . . ." I squint, searching through my memory bank for her name.

"Sarah?" Her upper lip curls up, revealing teeth. "You don't remember me?"

"I, uh . . . I wish I could say I do."

"You kissed me at Miguel's party? Your freshman year?"

I'm starting to notice that every statement she makes rises like a question. "Hm." I don't remember her or her lips. I did a lot of kissing my freshman year. Including with Valeria, which, in hindsight, was a mistake. It's hard to shake her off once she sinks her teeth into you.

Sarah drops her head to leaf through an open notebook. After she's made a point of ignoring me, she snaps, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I need to sign up for community service. Or a poetry club."

"I hope you don't think I'm going to decide for you."

"Well, do they have information sheets or something?"

She riffles through a large accordion folder sitting on the desk and pulls out a few flyers. “This is the sign-up sheet for the Green Planet Club.”

“You mean Green Earth?”

“*Nooo?* This is the Green *Planet* Club. They do a lot of fundraisers for environmental causes, but mostly they pick up trash on the beach or along Atlantic Avenue.”

I clench my teeth. If I have to do something wholesome with my time, I’d prefer it not to be so public. “Do they wear orange jumpsuits, too?”

Sarah rolls her eyes. “Yes or no?”

“Any other options?”

“Tutoring at the local church.”

“How far is it?”

“Probably fifteen minutes.”

“By car?”

“Of course.”

I sigh. Right now, the best option seems to be the poetry club. At least I could get away with no one finding out. The meetings would be in one of the classrooms. I could slip in and out without anyone knowing. “How about the poetry club?”

She slaps a paper in front of me. On the top is scrawled *The Free Verse Society*, and there are two names on the list. William Huntington. Jae Afenyo.

“Wait.” I hold up the sheet and point at the neat cursive at the bottom. “This girl. Did you see her?”

“Um . . . yeah?”

“She’s this high?” I put my hand at chest level. “Long hair? Super cute?”

Sarah sits back and frowns again. "Black. She's Black."

I grab the pen on the desk and scribble my name on the bottom, right beneath Jae's name. "Hey, there's no room number here."

"They meet in the grove?"

"The grove?"

I push the paper toward Sarah and give her a genuine smile. "Thanks."

I head to my locker, feeling a little better. No, it's not ideal. The poetry club is still social exile. But Jae will be there. For a minute, I let myself indulge in thoughts of her. The soft eyes. The cute dimples. The milky voice. *Are you okay?*

I open my locker and start planning my first poetic masterpiece.

*There once was a naked mole
Who slid down a stripper pole
He felt rather stiff
Attempted the splits
And tore him another black hole*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jae

I step into the cool shade of the grove and feel the soft grass bow beneath my feet. The sharp whistles from the soccer field are far away now, and it's eerily quiet. The only voices I hear are the birds tweeting from their branches overhead. I wonder if I'm in the right place.

Then I see the gold flash of Mrs. Aldana's scarf. She's sitting on a giant log behind a huge fire pit. A white boy with carefully coiffed red hair is lying on a blanket on the forest floor with an Asian girl. She's wearing a jean jacket that looks like a scrapbook of her favorite things: buttons, feathers, colorful patches, and pins. Her eyes are lined with thick black eyeliner, and she has leopard-print makeup on her eyelids. William's sitting on a tree stump nearby and waves me over like he's been waiting to see me all day. He nods toward an empty stump next to him and I sit down and drop my bag with a thump beside me.

"You made it," he whispers, leaning sideways. "Welcome."

"Thanks."

“As we wait for our last student,” Mrs. Aldana says, “let’s take in the beauty of what surrounds us. There’s a reason so much poetry is written about nature.”

There isn’t much time to take in any beauty before I hear a twig snap behind me. The birds silence overhead. Someone gasps. The footsteps stop and I turn around to see him standing there, as unexpected as the first time I saw him.

“There you are! Our star student,” Mrs. Aldana sings. “Take a stump, Derek!”

Derek walks past me, his head lowered, staring at the ground through dark lashes. The air around him smells like cigarettes and I’m glad I’ve found another reason to dislike him. Besides the fact that he failed to stand up to his friends for me—not once but twice. Or that he threatened to beat up a kid in the bathroom. Why did I ever leave the stall to talk to him? Why didn’t I just let the jerk cry?

He sits down and leans over with his elbows on his knees and stares hard at the ground.

“What are you doing here?” I hiss under my breath.

“Hell if I know,” he answers, not even sparing me a glance.

Mrs. Aldana is saying something, but my mind is spinning like a marble in a drain and I can’t hear a word. He’s not supposed to be here. This is supposed to be my place to get away from people like him.

“You can’t be here.”

He laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I snap.

“What’s funny is you actually think I wanna be here.”

Mrs. Aldana claps her hands together. “Welcome to the Free Verse Society, everyone! I promise I won’t be here long. I’ll soon leave you to your own devices—for better or for worse. But first, I always like to begin the introductory meeting with a small exercise. So settle into your seats and close your eyes. Breathe deep. Fill your lungs with fresh air.”

“More like toxic ashtray,” I mutter.

Derek guffaws and I cross my arms over my chest and lean away from him. I don’t want to breathe deep and all that. Not just because Derek stinks of old casino, but because I didn’t sign up for a meditation circle. I didn’t sign up to get inside my own head. I don’t like it in there.

I just don’t have the time for this mess. There’s calculus homework today, which will probably take me twice as long to complete as everyone else because we didn’t have calculus at my old school. *Bellwood is in a different league academically. You’ll have to work hard.* When Uncle Rowan asks me what I was doing after school, what will I say? I was taking deep breaths and touching trees?

“If you’re feeling resistance to this, it’s normal,” Mrs. Aldana says quietly, and I peek through one eye to see if she’s hovering nearby, maybe sucking up my energy, reading my thoughts. But she’s sitting calmly on her tree stump. “Just take a few minutes to observe all those thoughts wandering through the corridors of your mind like uninvited guests. Watch them come and go.”

My arms are still crossed, but I take a deep breath. I can’t leave. After what happened with Derek’s friends, I need someone. I need this group. And I can’t let Derek ruin this for me.

And then there’s Dad. Dad loved poetry. His poems sat at the kitchen table with his physics books, side by side like the

contradiction he was. I need poetry like I need memories of him. I burrow deep, hoping someday I'll find him in a title, at the end of a stanza, at the signing of a poet's name.

So I take a deep breath, and I observe.

The corridor of my mind is dark and it's full. Thoughts wander in and out like lost souls. One stays long. It's familiar. It says, *They can't love you if they know you*. It says, *Everyone stops loving you eventually*.

I see Uncle Rowan's face. His stern eyes, his bald, shiny head. At any moment, he could disappear. He could decide I'm too much trouble and send me away. *A disappointment*. That's what Mom's eyes said for the past year. And now Austin's looking at me with that slippery smile and his face is getting closer to mine until it disappears too. Then I'm riding the bus to the hospital, wearing nothing but loneliness around my skin. I'm standing at the street corner where my world changes again.

"Good," Mrs. Aldana says, and I'm sitting in the grove, surrounded by people who don't know what I am or who I've been.

She reads us a poem, "The Meadow" by Kate Knapp Johnson, and asks us, "What's your interpretation of that line? What does it mean to leave thinking for thought?"

"It's complete drivel," Derek says. "Doesn't make any sense."

"To you," I snap, and my face flushes. "Sorry. I mean, it does make sense if you think it through. To me, the word *thinking* feels active here. It's something you do with intention. But the word *thought* feels passive. It's something you get lost in."

Mrs. Aldana nods, looking back and forth from me to Derek. "In your silence, how many thoughts did you *plan* to think? Of course, that's not how thoughts work. The beauty of writing is

paying attention and exploring the thoughts that are worth our time, letting go of the thoughts that aren't. Giving our thoughts their proper weight. The page is where we can re-create ourselves into who we want to be."

It's not that easy, I think. You can't write away the truth.

"We can't always know what a poet means," she continues. "Our only job is to approach the text with curiosity. Keep this in mind when you read each other's poems."

Mrs. Aldana reaches into a large tote bag and pulls out a stack of small notebooks. She walks around the fire pit and gives one to each of us. I look at the notebook on my lap, lit by the sun peeking through the canopy. It's a beautiful dark blue with white swirls. I look down at my high-waisted blue pants and white shirt. Each notebook is different, and each one seems to belong to the right person.

"You'll have five minutes at the beginning of each meeting to write a free verse poem. Can someone tell us what free verse is?"

"It's poetry without a prescribed form," William says.

I smile at how the word *form* fills his English mouth.

"Right." Mrs. Aldana nods. "It's poetry that has its *own* form. It creates its *own* rules. Your five-minute poem is where you can unleash your thoughts without judgment. You cannot ask questions about anyone else's poem. Understand? You'll have other opportunities to critique and give feedback. With that said, I want you all to write your first poem right now. This is your attempt to answer the question Who am I?"

Derek lets out a slow, loud sigh. He's rude, but I agree. I didn't come here to talk about me. The last thing I want to do is talk about