

## CHAPTER 1

Gracey

*September 1987*

MY MOM WAS THE OPPOSITE of Clair Huxtable. Whenever Mrs. Huxtable talked to her children in that lovey-dovey tone on *The Cosby Show*, I thought, *Why can't I have a mom like that?*

Clair's voice was smooth and confident. Mom's was soft and unsure: "Honey, how about you put on your coat before going out?" Clair would have said, "Gracey, put your coat on before you open that door!" If I came home in a funk because my kind-of-sort-of not really not-at-all boyfriend, Sebastian, rejected me like he does whenever he gets a new girlfriend, Clair would have gotten me a warm cup of milk, a slice of cake, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, "Sit down, honey. Tell me what that silly old boy Sebastian did today."

My mom would take one look at me, draw a deep breath, and look around awkwardly like she was trying to find the right words between the flowers on the blue-and-green wallpaper. She'd eventually ask me how my day was. I'd say fine, and she wouldn't press any further. I mean, dang, "Are you okay?" would have worked.

But at least she'd been there.

After all, she was peaceful. And she didn't yell like Grandma did, and she was pretty. And she baked. Chocolate chip anything was good for me. Francine liked snickerdoodles, which we all know she got from watching a cooking show on WTTW, 'cause I never seen Black people around here serve them as an afternoon snack except Mom, and that was because Francine was forever asking for them. She knew how to use her position as the youngest to get what she

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wanted. Joanna liked lemon cookies, but Mom hardly ever made those. She considered sugar cookies a nice compromise. I've heard people say the oldest kids never get what they want, and yeah, from what I've seen of Joanna's life, that was kind of true.

Sometimes the way Mom looked at us let us know she loved us, but her real thoughts were trapped inside her body and, in order to know what was really going on, we had to read, pick apart, and divvy up whatever her soul offered. We had to listen to her breathe, like the way she sighed deep at night with a sliver of a high-pitched hum. That let us know she was tired of trying to figure out whatever it was she was forever trying to figure out, but she was gonna stick with it anyway.

We had to watch her eyes, the way they lit up when she saw us walk through the door after school. We had to soak in the way she traced our hairline with her fingers when we were waking out of sleep; the touch of her thumb to our cool cheeks when we were crying. We had to watch which piece of baked chicken she'd give us at dinner and compare the sizes of our cake for dessert. We watched for her reaction to us when we stood next to her on the porch and watched the sun go down. If she smiled, she loved us; if she sighed and looked down the street, we were a nuisance. Having Mom around was like watching the sky in the spring. When she was okay, the sun shined and she made the world a happier place to live in, but when she wasn't, it was overcast. But even with all that quietness of her soul and our gray days, we knew we were better off with her home than not.

Who knew emptiness could fill every nook in a space with such thick silence? My eyes opened in the blue of dawn, and there it was—a thick, silent presence that flowed in and out of my body. The smell of polished wooden floors became the scent of barrenness; and the faint smell of greens and ham hocks lingering in the walls released chatter from early summer when we were all here. It was so quiet after Mom left that I welcomed the sound of cars passing by and crackheads fussing outside our window on their way to the main street.

So when Sebastian, with his olive skin and wavy hair, tall and fine, and with them sprouting muscles and little peach-fuzzed mustache, came out with that joke—“Yo’ mama so stupid, I taught her to do the running man and she didn’t come back”—I snapped. I pounced on him like a panther.

’Course everyone was doing the running man dance at parties, so the whole class busted out laughing, but it felt like they knew my business and were making fun of me. The truth of it made my soul ache. Now I wished I hadn’t gone off ’cause I broke my own rule about staying out of trouble so me and my sisters could remain invisible. If nobody saw us, nobody could snoop in our business, and we could stay in our empty old house. I was starting to hate our hollow home, but it was still the only place in the world that kept us sane. And we didn’t want anybody from school butting in, especially not my eighth-grade teacher. She’d be trying to fix everything and all the while blowing up our world.

When I got out of my fourth day of detention for doing the panther thing, Sebastian was waiting for me as he had all the other days. Mad as I was at him, seeing him always made me happy. I could hardly camouflage my smile. Soon as I turned the corner, he was in step with my rhythm. “So how was it?”

“Fine,” I said, clutching the straps of my backpack and never making eye contact. Secretly, I wanted to bury my head in his chest and tell him everything that was going on and shed a few tears but we—me and the crew inside my head—knew that wasn’t gonna happen, so I sucked it up and kept quiet. It was nice enough that he walked with me.

“You still salty about the yo’ mama joke?”

“You ask me that every day, Bastian.” I rolled my eyes. “I already told you I’m done with it.”

“Alright, alright, it just seems like something’s, you know, standin’ between me and you being cool, so I’ve been trying to figure it out.”

I shook my head like an Etch A Sketch to erase the conversation and change the subject. “Ever wonder what it’s like to be an orphan?”

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I could hear our steps like beats between my words. “Nobody to watch over you, nobody to answer to. You’re like some dandelion fuzz bouncing from thing to thing wherever the wind blows.”

“Why are we talking about orphans, Gracey? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just wonderin’.” I shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep the other night, and got to thinking about *Little Orphan Annie*. You know, the comic strip in the funny papers?”

“You shoulda gone to bed.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said.

Chicago’s WGCI was playing after-work jams, and all the cars on the main street were bumping the same song. We stopped at the crosswalk in front of the rib joint with the barber shop next door and did a little bounce with our hands in the air while we waited for the walking man to light up. It was me, Bastian, and the music in our awesome bubble. Folks were bobbin’ heads in their cars and giving us a thumbs-up. The moment was surreal, like the street was an extension of the comfort I was used to at home.

We finally walked across. “You think you can grow up to be a good person without parents?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t have a dad, and I’m a grow up to be dope!”

“I don’t have a dad anymore either.”

“Yeah.” Sebastian paused and nodded at his friend walking in the opposite direction. “I heard it’s super hard for girls. They get all mixed up and start looking for love in whack places. Then it’s a downward spiral of kids, brokenness, and heartache.”

I pushed him with my elbow. “You’re such a jerk.”

“You know I’m kidding,” he said, then laughed at his own joke. “We’re both gonna be fine. You’re not an orphan and neither am I. But even if we were”—he pointed up to the sky—“the Big Man upstairs would take care of us.”

I looked to the sky as well. Maybe that was what Mom was doing on the porch back in the day, praying to the Big Man upstairs.

“Whatever.”



Of course, my sisters and I didn't want to be classified as orphans, but it was how we felt. We were livin' in the fallout. Learned that word in history class. After a bomb, there was the fallout, and that was just as dangerous 'cause bricks could break loose and fall outta nowhere. Mom had only been gone a couple of weeks, but we were lost. We spent the first couple of days watching TV on the couch. We ate Twinkies and Zingers and cereal instead of dinner. We didn't go to bed or turn the lights off. We didn't take baths at night; we took short showers in the morning instead, which always made us a few minutes late to class.

We combed each other's hair but were afraid of washing it because it was too thick to detangle. Before, it took Grandma to comb through our waves with her thick afro comb. She parted our hair into jigsaw pieces and braided them, letting our hair air-dry overnight. It was the only time we got to go to bed without a scarf, and she always turned up the space heater in our room so we wouldn't catch cold. Then Mom would straighten our hair in the morning with a hot comb. The best we had as a replacement was Joanna, and she didn't have the patience to do anything but bunch our hair into one ponytail in the back of our heads. She pressed our bangs to make us look presentable, but that was it.

We didn't hardly do any homework. Not 'cause we didn't care. We just didn't have anyone to help us when we got stuck. Plus, we didn't have the energy to push past much of anything 'cause mostly all we could think about was where's Mom and why'd she leave after everything that happened over the summer and what were we gonna eat. And none of us got any of that deep, sound sleep we had when everyone was in the house—Mom, Dad, and even Grandma. A couple weeks in, and we were like house cats sitting on the windowsill, waiting for Mom to come home and take us back to normal.

"Y'all, how long are we going to live like this?" Francine stood in the doorway in her footie pajamas, hands on her hips. She was good at living like a twelve-year-old. Other kids in our neighborhood were

eons beyond her. They knew all the bad words, they knew about sex, and they could do the fast-girl dances. But Francine was like them kids on *Sesame Street* and *3-2-1 Contact*—her mind was curious and her heart seemed weightless as a kite, like heaviness never lived in our home. Until now.

“I’m starving,” she whined. “If we don’t eat a decent meal soon, I’ll turn into a toothpick.”

Francine was also the most lost. She never respected the fact that Mom and Grandma didn’t get along. She didn’t understand why Mom only gave us a fraction of her love. And she didn’t understand that when Dad walked through the door and lightened the mood with his grin and booming voice, he was actually pretty drained from work. There was never anything in Francine that made her want to shrink back and protect herself from anybody in the house. She’d climb all over Dad like he was a growing tree in the back yard. She hugged Mom too, even when Mom could barely hug her back, and she kissed Grandma on the cheek on her most ornery days.

Don’t get me wrong, Francine would snap at you in a second if what you said hit her the wrong way. But for the most part, she loved and forgave freely without a second thought. It was only now that she was starting to feel the sting of absence with all our adults gone.

“Shut up, Frankie,” Joanna said. Not sure when she donned herself queen of the house at sixteen. “You’re such a baby. Grow up!”

“Why would I want to do that? Growing up is a slow process done gradually over time. Besides, you grown enough for all of us.”

I rolled my eyes and Joanna huffed, but Francine wasn’t done.

“I’m serious, you guys. I want real food. I can’t be expected to take care of myself.” She began walking the back of the couch like a tight-rope. “Whoa,” she said, almost falling. Pippi Longstocking flashed through my imagination. She’d never fall.

“Frankie, get down before you hurt yourself!” I yelled.

“That’s a very grown-up thing to say,” Francine announced, folding her arms over her chest. “I elect you to be our new mom, Gracey.” She jumped down and sat on the couch properly. “So what’s for dinner?”

“What?” Joanna gaped like a fish. “She can’t be our new mom. I’m older than her.”

“Yeah, but you don’t act like a mom,” Francine said. “You don’t care what I do. All you care about is that I don’t get on your nerves.”

Joanna shrugged. “Ain’t that how most moms are? Think about it—the grocery store, on the bus, at church. Moms act like you ain’t there and then the second you start cuttin’ up, they yell with that twisted, ugly face.”

“Our mom didn’t do that.” Francine tilted her head to the side. “Her face was always soft and sad. Sad and soft.”

Joanna shrugged again and walked a couple of steps to sit on the piano bench. Quietly she turned and played one random out-of-tune key at a time. The Methodist church on the corner was giving it away to make room for a new one, so Dad and his boys brought it in. We never got it tuned, but it made us look classy to the neighbors. None of us took lessons, but we could plunk out the melody of a song or two.

Joanna was a normal moody teenager like the rest of her friends. She knew all the latest songs and her wall was covered with posters of the latest actors and singers with their shirts off showing sweaty muscles, like it was a hundred degrees during the photo shoot. New Edition, Force MDs, Al B. Sure!, and Chico DeBarge—they surrounded her bed as she went to sleep. She liked to gossip with her friends and get all caught up in high school drama. She talked about her friends behind their backs and then got upset when it boomeranged back to her. Then she’d shut out the whole world and be mean to me and Francine. Of course, we’d take it ’cause we were pretty used to the women in our house being upset. Dad’s the one who was always loving us forever like a big teddy bear, even when the bickering was nonstop.

I blew out a big breath. “Come on, Frankie. Let’s go see what we can find to make for dinner.”

“Yes, let’s go, Mother!” Giggling, she squeezed my hand as we walked through the swinging door to the kitchen. We felt victorious for some reason, as if we were making progress in taking care of ourselves.

When the door finally stopped swinging, we heard a clashing bang

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on the piano keys, and then footsteps stomped up the stairs. On the real tip, Joanna had the same temperament as Grandma, though none of us would ever say it out loud.

Joanna wanted everybody to act the way they were supposed to. Mothers were supposed to mother, fathers were supposed to father, and grandmothers were supposed to be loving and supportive. It was like she had all these pent-up feelings because her friends were off and on, and only Daddy ever lived up to what he was supposed to . . . and then he died. And she couldn't say jack to us now about roles 'cause she just broke hers as older sister by refusing to take care of us.

"Don't mind her." Francine nudged my shoulder. "She's mad because she can't be the mom."

I yanked open the freezer and stared blankly. Everything was frozen, but I remembered Mom running meat under hot water for a long time to defrost it enough to cook. Grandma always complained that Mom didn't plan ahead enough, but she could pull a meal together no matter how late it was.

"We're not playing house, Frankie," I sighed.

"Oh yes we are," Francine said, her voice coated with attitude.

*Jesus, how long?*

## CHAPTER 2

Gracey

*May 1987*

ONE NIGHT, LIKE MOST EVERY night, my whole family watched sitcoms and laughed. Joanna sat on the shag carpet, Grandma was in her old rocking chair, Dad was in his cushy leather easy chair, and me and Frankie were next to Mom on the sunken red velvet couch that Dad found in an alley behind Miss Nelda's complex. Miss Nelda was our neighbor across the street who felt like extended family. She was Mom and Dad's go-to when they had a date night and Grandma had bridge with her old-lady friends.

Francine had her legs all stretched out on me, and Mom was sitting next to the edge with her legs crossed. Twenty minutes into the last show, there was a shift in the room like always. There were only a couple of minutes left, and me and my sisters knew that soon we'd have to get ready for bed and finish up whatever homework we hadn't done before TV time. Normally we'd either become really quiet so the adults would forget we were in the room and roll through the commercials into the next show, or we'd cause a distraction to get Daddy to go upstairs with us. That night I chose distraction.

"Frankie," I scolded. "Why you always gotta put your feet on me?"

"Cause you're comfortable." She squealed and stretched out even more.

"I don't care." I pushed her feet down grumpily.

"Ow," she whined. "Why are you so mean? I wasn't hurting you."

"I don't care . . . keep your feet off me. You're not a stupid cat."

"Meow."

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Daddy broke in with his deep, soothing voice. "Alright, alright, you all go upstairs. I'll be up shortly to check on you."

"But, Daddy, wait! I'm not sleepy," Francine said.

"Me neither. Can't we watch one more show before going upstairs?" I begged.

"They have school tomorrow, Moses," Mom said, uncrossing her legs. "And they haven't even finished their homework. You all should go to bed now."

"I'll never understand why I have to go to bed at the same time as them," Joanna complained. "I'm two years older than Gracey and four years older than Frankie. Now, does that make sense to you?"

"Yep." Grandma always had something to say. "Don't nobody want to see no kids all night after they done worked hard all day. Now get your behinds upstairs and get to bed."

We all rolled our eyes and kissed our teeth.

"Besides, Joanna," Dad said, "you don't have to go to sleep. Just chill in your room. You could read, catch up on homework, talk on the phone, dream up a plan of how you're going to be successful when you grow up—"

"But, Dad," Joanna protested. "Every other teenager in this world has full freedom in their house until well after midnight, and y'all in here acting like this is some private VIP room after nine o'clock."

"Maybe it is," Grandma said. "I got some steamy movies I been waitin' to see."

"Iona, that's enough outta you." Dad looked up toward us on the stairs. "You all don't mind your grandma; she gets more bitter the older she gets."

Thirty minutes after we had gotten into our pajamas, Dad came up and turned on our night-lights.

"All right, girls. Tell me one good thing about your day."

"Hmm . . ." Francine said. "I can't think of one."

"Nothing?" Dad questioned. "Nobody brought in cupcakes for their birthday?"

“Come on, Dad. We’re too old for *Romper Room*. Oh, wait!”—she interrupted herself excitedly—“I know what happened! My teacher liked my paper so much, she read a paragraph to the whole class.”

“Really? And how’d that make my baby girl feel?”

Francine paused and then shrugged. “Smart.”

He tucked her in. “Well, that’s because you are.” Francine melted in his smile.

“Gracey, what happened in your day?” Dad asked, shifting his body toward me.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope, nothing.”

“Who’d you walk home with?”

I covered my head with my blanket. “Daaadd!”

“What? What’s wrong?” Dad asked innocently while giggles bounced about from Francine’s side of the room.

“Did somebody special walk you home or something?”

I knew Dad was smiling with those dimples that made my heart warm. From the dark of my covers, I answered, “Sebastian.”

“Who?”

“Sebastian,” I said louder.

“Ooooh, Sebastian.” Dad pulled the cover from over my head and tickled me. Francine laughed to high heavens that night.

He even made Joanna laugh with a pillow fight. We could hear the flops as they popped one another with the pillows. Their laughter made us envious, but me and Francine knew not to barge in because this time was meant for the two of them. Besides, for some reason, I think we both wanted to make our time with him linger in our room. The faint smell of Dad’s cologne was still in the air, and it helped us sleep.

We didn’t open our eyes again until we heard Mom scream at four in the morning. We ran into the bedroom, and there was Dad, flat on the floor like he’d collapsed on his way back to bed from the

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bathroom. But why? Mom was pumping his heart, and Grandma was breathing into his mouth, but he wasn't moving. Finally, the sound of sirens roared down the street, and big men with clanky equipment you only see in hospitals stormed into our little house.

They moved us all out of the way, then bent over Dad. They had electrical pads that they rubbed together and placed on his bare chest after yelling "Clear!" His body jerked upward and then dropped to the ground just as lifeless as it was before. A couple more rounds and then finally, they called it. That meant that was when they called him gone. I looked at him on the floor, and he looked like an empty house. Nobody was home. No light to be seen nowhere, no sign of hope that maybe somebody was making their way to the door.

We all stood there waiting, holding our breath, ignoring the big people. Just waiting. Mom waited with her head on his heart as her tears dripped on his chest. Eventually, we realized he wasn't going to return.

I couldn't believe the sun had the nerve to still come up as if it didn't care about what just took place, as if my dad's life was so insignificant that the rest of the world could go on like normal. Folks around us still went to work that day, and children still ran down the street to make the school bus, and mean dogs still barked when the mailwoman passed by—and there we were, frozen in time, unable to move. Why should we move? How could we?

The fact that we were still breathing when he wasn't seemed unfair.

By the afternoon, though, our house was filled with food and flowers. Our phone was ringing off the hook, and people kept stopping by to sit with us. They had more questions than we had answers, so after a while, we were all exhausted. You can only say, "I don't know," so many times. And Grandma wasn't letting nobody cry more than we were in our living room.

To one woman, she said, "Honey, why don't you go home and get some rest. All that crying won't bring Moses back. Just stop it and go on home." So the lady left with a handkerchief to her nose and the apple Grandma put in her purse.

We had the funeral five days later, and afterward, everyone came to our house again. My sisters and me, we sat on the stairs and watched a sea of black move steadily around the living room, talking to one another and eating whatever sweet and soulful foods people set on the table. Mom was surprisingly present and spoke in soothing tones to all who came to console her. She reminded me of Diahann Carroll from *Dynasty*. And that was weird.

Even Joanna noticed. “Mom looks really intelligent right now,” she said. “I mean, not that I think she’s dumb. It’s just that she looks like she’s . . .”

“Awake,” I said flatly. It was the only word that came to mind.

“Yeah,” Joanna responded, as if I’d nailed it.

“I was gonna say 3-D,” Francine said.

“Frankie, what?” Joanna’s face was squinched around her glasses, which she only wore when she was willing to risk her vanity to see clearly.

“Well, ’cause that’s what we’re learning in class. There’s flat shapes and 3-D shapes, and Mom looks 3-D.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Awake, 3-D—she’s different.”

“Yeah, but why?” Joanna cocked her head to the side as if it would help her better analyze the situation.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Maybe ’cause she has to be. Look at all these people!” Francine sounded frustrated, and I felt the same.

Miss Nelda passed by on her way out. She looked at each of us individually with her teary red-veined eyes and warm smile. “Y’all need anything, just come on over. I’m almost always home unless it’s Easter or Mother’s Day, and then I’m at the church. I go to the post office and Dunkin’ Donuts ’bout once a week, but that’s only in the mornings, you know.” We half smiled back and cleared her path.

We sat in silence the rest of the time, watching the black waves continue to wash in and out. We all knew if Dad were here, he’d have made a beeline straight for us, scooped us up, and taken us to McDonald’s for ice cream and then a movie. When we came back, everyone

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would have been gone and we could have our home back. But he was dead, and it would take us a long time to understand what that really meant—that there wasn't a single person in the room who cared for us as much as he had.

School ended a week later, and we all spent the summer adjusting. Grief was like an unwanted weight in our house that made our shoulders slouch more than we cared to notice. Sometimes we couldn't sleep at night, so we'd catch the sun on the way up and ride it into the day with a game of Double Dutch.

Francine would call from across the room, "Gracey, you awake?"  
"Yup, let's go."

Then we'd tap on Joanna's door, and she'd come out in her cotton pajama pantsuit, wire-rimmed glasses, and the long white cable rolled up in her hand. Our goal in the morning was to jump as fast as we could for as long as we could. The first neighbor to leave for work left at 6:14, so we'd stop at 6:05 according to Francine's stopwatch and go inside. Once we showered and got dressed, we'd go back to bed for another couple of hours.

It was easier to sleep in the day than it was in the night. The sun brought us comfort that the night couldn't afford.

## CHAPTER 3

Gracey

*June 1987*

THE FIRST DAY OF WARM weather in June was when the plastic film around our windows came down. Anything earlier had Grandma thinking there was a ghost in the house because of the cool breeze that seeped through the cracks. For me, it was probably one of the best days of the year. We all had to spring-clean with our aprons on and our bandannas tied around our heads as scarves.

Daddy used to put the word *beautiful* in front of our names to combat our complaints of feeling ugly. We had trouble understanding what qualified as ugly. All we knew was that if we went to school looking the way we looked with our hair hanging out of our scarves, we'd be called ugly. But when we looked in the mirror, we didn't really see ugly. And the girls they called ugly at school were beautiful to me and my sisters. They called kids ugly for the glasses they wore, the pimples they had, their dark skin, or their thickness. Only brown-skinned Barbies were safe from ugly. But Daddy made it so anyone could be beautiful. He defined that word so everybody was in. No matter how messy our hair was or how many blemishes were on our faces, even on our most pitiful, sickliest, sourest days, he still looked at us with that twinkle in his eye. And we kind of believed him.

So this year when the warm day came and Dad wasn't here, in honor of him, we tied the scarves around each other's heads and pulled at the plastic until the staples popped out.

"Beautiful Frankie, get that side." I tugged the edge of the loosened plastic sheet.

“Okay, Beautiful Gracey!” She ran and pulled her side out. And on we went until Joanna was ready to fold.

“Beautiful Joanna, here you go.” The plastic dropped to the floor, and she began to fold in the same manner of clean fitted sheets.

“Oof, this plastic smells awful when it gets old. Why do we have to save it year after year?” Joanna griped. “Daddy was so cheap, bless him.”

“Yeah, always ready to save a dollar by getting the black-and-white brand on the shelf.”

“Generic food sucks,” Francine muttered.

“Tell me about it. Copycat food without the magic that makes it taste like the name brand.”

“Shhh.” Joanna interrupted our conversation. “You hear that? Sounds like Mom and Grandma are having an argument again.” We opened the window and held our breath so we could catch every word.

“What’s this about, Mama?” Mom was tugging on Grandma’s suitcase, trying to pull it from her hands. “Why you leavin’ like this?”

“Cause it’s too cold here,” Grandma said, frowning. “I always did plan to move back to Miss’sippi. This is as good a time as any, before the winter hits.”

“The winter? Summer hasn’t even set in good, and you’re talking about leaving before the winter? Try again, Mama. Why now? Why today?”

“Because it’s Monday.”

“So what?”

Grandma froze like she was trying to come up with something clever. “So Monday is the best day to start afresh. And Moses was our buffer. Without him, we’re like bad knees, bone on bone.”

“Mama, what about these girls? Our family. Don’t we mean anything to you?”

“Yeah,” Francine whispered low enough for only us to hear. “Don’t we mean anything?”

“Charlotte, you’re a grown woman. You better get in that house and take care of your family. I can’t do it for you.”

“Is this about Micah, Mama? You know I tried to tell Moses. I ran out of time. I didn’t know—”

“Who’s Micah?” I whispered. Shoulders shrugged.

“Ain’t got nothin’ to do with Micah. That’s between you and God now.”

Grandma’s taxi driver honked the horn, urging her to hurry. Mom grabbed her arm. People peeped through their curtains, and some boldly stood on their lawns to listen.

“Then you’re leaving because Moses is gone, and you think we don’t have enough money to take care of you. I told you not to worry about that, Mama.”

“Charlotte, I’m leaving ’cause I got to go.” The taxi driver loaded Grandma’s suitcase in the trunk and opened the door for her.

“Ain’t you gonna say goodbye to the girls?”

“I already said my goodbyes, Charlotte—last night while you was still sleepin’ in the bed at five o’clock in the evening.”

“I just lost my husband a month ago, Mama!” Mom screamed. “What do you want me to do—turn cartwheels up and down the street?”

Grandma pointed to the house.

Mom whirled around and saw us looking out the living room window. She stood there, trying to read us, and we tried to read her. We could see the word *sorry* in her startled eyes. She didn’t mean for us to see or hear any of this. We wanted to tell her to get out the street and come inside. We knew not to go outside and make things worse. The neighborhood had already had enough drama for the day.

“Fine. Goodbye, Mama,” was all our mom said as she turned back around and closed the taxi door. She chose our peace over her own. After the car drove away, Mom pulled the lapels of her housecoat toward each other and tugged the tie tighter around her waist. We could tell she was hurt even if we couldn’t grasp all the reasons, so we went upstairs to me and Frankie’s room.

“Who’s the Micah dude?” I asked again, scratching my head. “Did Mom cheat on Dad?”

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Francine hummed while deep in thought. “I don’t think so. She’s not good with flirting.”

“Yeah,” Joanna said. “That’s the last thing she would do. Forget all that—when did Grandma come to say goodbye to us?”

“She didn’t.” I plopped down, cross-legged, on my bed. “She was obviously lying.”

“Yeah, but for real.” Francine sat on the floor in front of her bed, using her pillow to cushion against the metal frame. “We did watch a movie together, and we had popcorn, and she let us stay up as long as we wanted.”

“And when it was time to say good night, she said . . .” Joanna paused.

And then we said in unison, “I love you.”

## CHAPTER 4

Gracey

*September 1987*

ME AND MY SISTERS DIDN'T find out Mom was gone till we got home from school. We came in, threw our backpacks on the ground, and went straight to the kitchen for our afternoon snack.

"Mom, can we have pork chops for dinner?" Francine asked. No one answered.

"Mom?" Francine called. "Mom!" She went upstairs, and we could hear her sneakers thumping on the floorboards. "Mom? Where are you?"

She came down the stairs. "You guys, where's Mom? She feels gone."

Joanna shrugged. "She's probably at the store or running an errand for Grand—I mean somebody, whoever."

Francine was right, the house did feel weird. We were becoming familiar with the eerie silence of an empty house, but this was different. Then my little sister reached into the cookie jar and pulled out a letter instead of a Nestlé Toll House cookie. She read it silently to herself, the paper close to her eyes. Her face took on sadness like the start of rain.

"What?" I asked.

"What is it?" Joanna stopped moving.

Francine said nothing.

We lunged forward and snatched the letter out of her hand. And then our kitchen felt like it was hit with a monsoon.

## THIS AIN'T NO PROMISED LAND

“You made Mom run away!” Francine yelled at Joanna. “If you weren’t so mean to her, she would have stayed.”

“What are you talking about?” Joanna shouted back.

Francine, not taking the time to explain, pushed her to the ground and unloaded with punches and slaps.

“Frankie, stop!” I yelled, as I ducked her flailing arms and pulled her small frame off Joanna.

“I hate you,” Francine yelled through tears and gasps for air. “What are we going to do now? Huh? We have no family.” She collapsed on the stairs and wailed, “What did we do to deserve this? Why is this happening? Where’s God?”

I sat on the stairs next to her, hugging my knees but having nothing to say. I knew God was with us, but I didn’t know how to explain that to Francine. God was holding us, that was all I knew. Even in our aloneness, we were still being held. We were warm; we could think; we still had each other.

I was confused too, though. I thought we were finally starting to break into Mom’s space. We could ease into her silence, and she wouldn’t casually move to cover her womb as if we might try to burst from her all over again. She wasn’t breathing to brace herself so much, and she never seemed bothered by the shade of brown that covered our growing, curving bodies like those mothers who were afraid society couldn’t handle our Blackness. So why would she leave when we were finally starting to get comfortable around each other?

“I bet she left ’cause we didn’t do our chores when she told us to,” Francine whispered.

“What? Frankie, that’s stupid,” Joanna quipped from the velvet couch. “Don’t nobody leave ’cause their children don’t clean up. What kind of love is that?”

Francine shrugged. “I don’t know. It could happen, I think.”

“Nah.” I shook my head. It had to be more than that. “I think she left ’cause she was scared of something.”

Joanna’s palm flipped up. “Like what?”

Francine gasped and put her hand over her mouth. “Was she afraid of us?”

“Nah, something deeper, like—”

“The dark!” Francine belted out.

“Yeah, like being alone in the dark,” I said.

“I’d be afraid if I had to sleep alone in the dark,” Francine said. “I forgive her. No, actually I don’t. That’s a stupid reason. All she had to do was come sleep with us.”

“I’ll never forgive her,” Joanna said.

Then it dawned on me. My heart sank. “She had to sleep in the same bed, in the same room where Daddy died.”

“That is kind of awful,” Joanna said as if deep in thought. She rubbed the soft fuzz of baby hair around her edges, then stopped suddenly. “You guys are so immature,” she snapped. “People don’t leave because they’re afraid of the dark. They leave ’cause they don’t wanna be responsible for other people.”

“So what are you saying?” Francine stood up with a balled fist.

Joanna stood up to meet her. “What d’you think I’m sayin’?”

“That *your* mama didn’t want *you*.” Francine stepped closer to challenge her big sister. “But you can’t say she didn’t want me, ’cause I’m the one who helped her cook and we look ‘the split of each other,’ like Grandma says.”

“Come on, you guys. It doesn’t matter why she left.” My arms were out like a referee. “She’s gone and we don’t know where. Nothing we do to fix whatever we did wrong can bring her back.”

“Look, I am too young to be grown, so y’all better figure something out,” Francine said with a twang in her voice.

“We need a plan.” I took my fluffy ponytail down and put it back up again to help me think. “If the cops find out, they’ll split us up and put us in foster care.”

“We’re not going to foster care,” Joanna said.

“Fragglerock!” Francine exclaimed. “I can’t be away from you guys. I promise you, I wouldn’t be able to breathe. I’m already having

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trouble catching my breath just thinking about it. It's too much. *No más. ¡No más!*"

Daddy had loved watching old matches and explaining them to us. I remember all of us staring at Sugar Ray Leonard's opponent saying those words when he lost the boxing match. I never thought we'd see ourselves as anything other than Sugar Ray champs, shaking up the world like Muhammad Ali, yet here we were, like Roberto Duran, saying "no more."