

***IF YOU
READ THIS***

KEREEN GETTEN grew up in Jamaica where she would climb fruit trees in the family garden and eat as much mango, guinep and pear as she could without being caught. She now lives in Birmingham with her family and writes stories about her childhood experiences. Her debut novel *When Life Gives You Mangoes*, also published by Pushkin Children's, was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Spark Award, Warwickshire Junior Book Award and the Jhalak Children's & YA Prize.

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I

The night before my birthday, Mama would always slip a note under my door. It would read:

Dear Ms Brie,

Thank you for staying at the Wonderland Hotel. We want to give you the experience of a lifetime, so to begin, please check your choices for breakfast in the morning:

CEREAL

PORRIDGE

FRUIT: MANGO

FRUIT: BANANA

FRUIT: PINEAPPLE
FRUIT: ALL THREE
EGG: SCRAMBLED
EGG: FRIED
EGG: OMELETTE
EGG: ALL THREE
BACON
SAUSAGE
PLANTAIN
ACKEE & SALTFISH
TEA
HOT CHOCOLATE
MILO
ORANGE JUICE
WATER

After Mama died, and after I could think about her again without crying, I would slip Mama's menu under Nana's door the night before my birthday, just like Mama used to slip the menu under mine. Every year, I listen for her to go to bed, and giggle under my pillow when she finds it. "What is this? This

girl really takes me for a hotel.” But every morning for the last three years, I’ve woken to the smell of breakfast, and all the foods on my list.

That was Nana. Always making a fuss when I asked her for something but doing it anyway.

This morning, though, I don’t smell the food I asked for. So I jump out of bed to see if Nana got my note last night.

The frilly dress she buys every year hangs on the back of the door. I ignore it and throw on one of my nicer tops and a pair of black shorts instead.

When I come out of my room, I hear voices and the faint sound of music. I enter the living room from the hallway and peer to the left into the small kitchen at the back of the house. The walls are bright green, painted over from when Mama woke one day and painted the entire kitchen pink because she saw it in a dream. She and Papa argued that day. He said no one painted their kitchen pink, and it made his head hurt.

Mama said, “Then we will be the first, and your head will get used to it.”

From the living room, I can see Nana bustling around with her back to me. She’s wearing a long pink dress that is supposed to match my frilly one.

Hers makes her look like an overgrown doll, but for some reason Nana likes to find us matching clothes for special occasions.

“Nana?” I call, entering the kitchen. I look around, confused. There is no food. The table is empty. Maybe she’s finally had enough of my requests.

She spins around, surprised. “What are you doing up?” she cries, then peers out the window before returning her gaze to me. Her long white hair sits on her shoulders, styled in the big curls she always wears when she dresses up. Nana has had the same hairstyle since I was born, and before, because I’ve seen photos of her back in the 1800s and her hair was the same then too. She’s tried to put make-up on over her usually bare skin, but Nana isn’t very good at make-up and her eyeliner makes her look like a pirate.

I frown. “It’s what people do in the morning, Nana. They wake up.”

She looks around, distracted. “Yes... yes, they do, but you think you can go back?”

I stare at her. “Go back?”

She nods, glancing out the window. “Yes, maybe go and change into that dress I left out for you.”

I point down to what I'm wearing. "Nana, I can't do the six-year-old Sunday-school look any more."

She looks at me, exasperated. "You can't make your Nana happy this one time, Brie? I'm an old woman and I only have one wish."

I let out a loud groan, throwing my face to the ceiling. "Nooooo, not the last-wish blackmail."

She fidgets with the tray in her hand. "It's just a dress."

"It's an embarrassment to dresses. All the other dresses disowned it. Even the shop owner didn't want it in the shop no more." I continue to moan about the dress, but she has already turned away.

"Put the dress on, Brie."

"The lady who made it threw it away because she regretted making it."

"Bridgette..."

"I bet there's a petition on social media demanding that this dress never be seen by human eyes."

"All I ask from you is one thing..."

"I'll die. The dress will kill me. I... can't... breathe..."
I pretend to collapse.

Auntie Elsa, Papa's sister, appears in the doorway, eyes beaming. "Brie," she says, surprised, then turns to Nana and whispers, "We're ready."

Nana heads towards the back door. She looks over her shoulder at me. "Brie, put on the dress. I'm not going to ask you again."

I drag my feet back to my room and stare at the frilly pink dress hanging on the back of the door. I sigh and take it off the hanger. At least it's only my family seeing me in this dress. It could be worse—the whole town could see me wearing it.

*

"Happy Birthday!" a chorus of voices shouts in unison.

I step outside to lots of familiar faces looking back at me. Everyone is here. My two best friends—Smiley and Femi—and their parents; Dion, my neighbour; and Dion's three younger brothers, all wearing the same white shirt, bow tie and blue jeans because their parents couldn't be bothered to buy them different clothes. Aunty Elsa, Papa's sister and her boyfriend, Julius. There are more neighbours and people from school who I barely speak to but Nana thinks are my friends because they're on my football team.

Our back garden has been transformed with fairy lights and balloons in the trees. A long table covered with a pink and white cloth is filled with food, drinks and a three-tier cake covered in pink icing. White chairs line the long table, and a separate, smaller table to the left is piled high with presents. But all I can see are people. People now staring back at me in my pink frilly dress. I feel sick.

Great. As if my life couldn't get any worse. I edge backward towards the house, but Nana reaches for my arm and links hers with mine.

"Nuh-uh. Don't you dare," she says through clenched teeth, forcing me to stay until they finish singing.

"Speech!" Julius shouts, and Aunty Elsa elbows him.

I close my eyes, hoping that when I open them this will all have been a dream. I hate attention. I can see the expectations as they wait for me to say something nice when all I want to do is run.

I clear my throat, wishing I could clear my backyard of all these people, but no. They're still here.

"Nana made me wear it," I say, pointing to the dress and the shoes.

An awkward silence falls among them except for a snort from Uncle Julius.

Nana turns to the sea of bemused faces. "Everyone, take a seat before the food gets cold," she announces.

They all sit down at the long table, while I am still rooted to the step.

Nana shoots me a look. "What's wrong with you?"

I want to tell her that if she hadn't forced me to wear the dress, none of this would have happened. Better still, if she hadn't invited the entire neighbourhood, she wouldn't feel so humiliated right now.

"Go and sit down and act like you want to be here," she says, before painting on a smile and asking everyone if they need anything.

I find a spot between Smiley and Femi and sit down, grateful that at least the table hides most of the outfit.

The table is buzzing with chatter as the sun rises higher behind us. Jackfruit, the local tourist guide, is playing music from five hundred years ago, and Nana is hobbling around the table with her bad hip, asking everyone if they need anything.

"Cool speech, Brie," Dion says from across the table.

My face gets hot, and I nearly choke on my pineapple. It's not that Dion and I have never talked—we used to talk all the time. Mama would take him to nursery with me when we were small, but then we got older, and he became cool and popular and I didn't. He got new friends and we grew apart.

We're so different now. I cringe when I think about the days I used to make him dress up as a doll and play make-believe.

Smiley nudges me under the table. "Don't ignore him," she hisses behind her hand. "Say something back."

I purse my lips at her before switching to a smile when I realize Dion is looking.

"Thank you for not coming," I blurt out.

Smiley and Femi snort with laughter on either side of me.

*

As the table empties, Aunty Elsa approaches me from behind. "You ready for your presents?"

This is my favourite part of my birthday. Not because I expect big, expensive things—we don't

have enough money for that. This is when I get to see if Nana and Papa have picked up on any of my hints in the past six months. It also means I don't have to stand in front of everyone again in this dress.

What I really want is a better phone so I won't get laughed at any more at school or want to hide it in my pocket when someone calls me. I only got a phone three years ago because Nana wanted a way to contact me if she was going to be late picking me up from school.

I wrap my arms around myself and follow her over to a smaller table. "Where's Papa?" I ask, suddenly realizing he is not in the crowd.

"He had to rush into work," Aunty Elsa tells me, "but he'll be back soon."

My heart sinks, and I try to hide how disappointed I am that he can't even be here for my birthday. I should be used to this by now. This isn't new; this is all the time. If it isn't my birthday, it's the school play or sports day. Papa is rarely around: work is always more important than me.

I feel Aunty Elsa's arm around my shoulder.

"He'll be here," she whispers in my ear.

I force a smile and push down the knot in my throat. Swallowing it hurts every time as though it's the first time. I'm embarrassed and hurt that Papa can't take a few hours off for my birthday. Aunty Elsa and Julius could do it; even our neighbours could be here. But not Papa. It's as if spending time with me is the hardest thing for him.

I take a deep breath and bite my lip as Nana joins us at the table. She and Aunty Elsa surround me, kissing my face and stroking my hair, neither of them saying a word, but I know what they're telling me—that it's OK.

Nana picks up a small box covered with silver wrapping paper and hands it to me. "Right, this one first," she says. She beams at me the way Nana does when she wants me to do the same, to smile.

So I do what she asks: I force a smile that hides my disappointment.

"It's from your father," Nana says, "to store things in. He bought it from the wood carver on the beach."

I stare inside the box and wonder when he found the time to get this when he barely has time for me. Maybe, just like for Christmas and other people's

birthdays, he gives Nana a list so she can buy my presents for him.

"It's nice," I murmur.

"Pick ours next," Julius calls from the table. Auntie Elsa glares at him. "What?" he says, throwing his hands in the air. "She just opened an empty box. Ours will look like gold." He chuckles to himself but stops abruptly when Nana shoots him a look.

Nana hands me presents one by one, and the morning moves slowly, like when you're in your last class at school and the clock doesn't seem to move.

Nana has a story for every present, or she forces whoever bought the present to stand up and tell everyone why they chose that present, and I wish she wouldn't talk so long. I wish she wouldn't make such a big deal over every present. I don't understand why everyone is here. Half these people weren't here for my eleventh birthday or my tenth, so why are they here now? Why this birthday? What's the big deal about being twelve?

Her voice swims in and out like a wave and I try to focus. I try to smile, and I try to remember to say thank you for every present I open. But my heart isn't in it because Papa isn't here.

I get a hamper basket from Smiley and Femi, filled with all my favourite chocolates and a bag of tamarind balls. A locket with a photo of the family, including Mama, from Uncle Julius and Auntie Elsa. The photo is old. I look about three years old in it and Papa is smiling so I know it's old. I stare at the photo, remembering how things changed so much after Mama died. How one day everything was perfect and then it wasn't.

"Thank you, Auntie Elsa and Uncle Julius."

Dion's mother gets me perfume. Nana gets me a pair of white trainers.

"The lady at the shop told me all the kids are wearing them," she says, nodding to the box in my hand.

I see movement from the corner of my eye and look up expecting to see Papa, but it's not; it's Uncle Julius getting more food. I return my empty gaze to the shoebox.

"Thanks, Nana," I mumble without looking up.

I'm hoping this is it and Nana will send everyone home so I can stop pretending.

"There's one more," Nana says, and my heart sinks. She looks over to the house, frowning. "Where's your father? He's supposed to be here for this."

“I’ll call him,” Julius says, taking out his phone and walking away from the table.

We wait in silence as he calls Papa’s phone, Nana with the final gift box in her hand and Auntie Elsa with her arms tightly around my shoulder. We wait in silence, except for Dion’s three brothers, who start hitting each other.

Julius turns and shakes his head, slipping the phone back in his pocket. “Some emergency at work,” he says, giving me a quick, reassuring smile. “He says to carry on but he will be here as soon as he can.”

The embarrassment of what people must be thinking weighs heavy. I can imagine what they are saying under their breaths. *Why isn’t he here? It’s her birthday.* I avoid their eyes so I can’t see what they are thinking. I twist my fingers to stop myself from feeling.

Nana sighs, exchanging a look with Auntie Elsa before her eyes lower to the box in her hand. I feel Auntie Elsa’s fingers pressing into my skin. I feel her body stiffen beside me and I look at her. She forces a smile, stroking my shoulder, but her eyes are misty, as though she is about to cry. I’m confused about why Auntie Elsa is so upset that Papa’s not here.

Nana looks down at the box, but instead of handing it to me, she holds it close to her chest. She pauses, then looks over at Aunty Elsa next to me. "If her father isn't here to do it, then it should be you."

Aunty Elsa lets go of me and moves over to Nana and takes the box. They both glance at me with a look I have seen so many times, the one that says *Poor girl, poor Brie*. I feel a knot in my stomach, and I press my hands into the fold of my dress.

"This," Aunty Elsa says, looking down at the box. "This is from your mama."

And it's as if I lose my breath.

