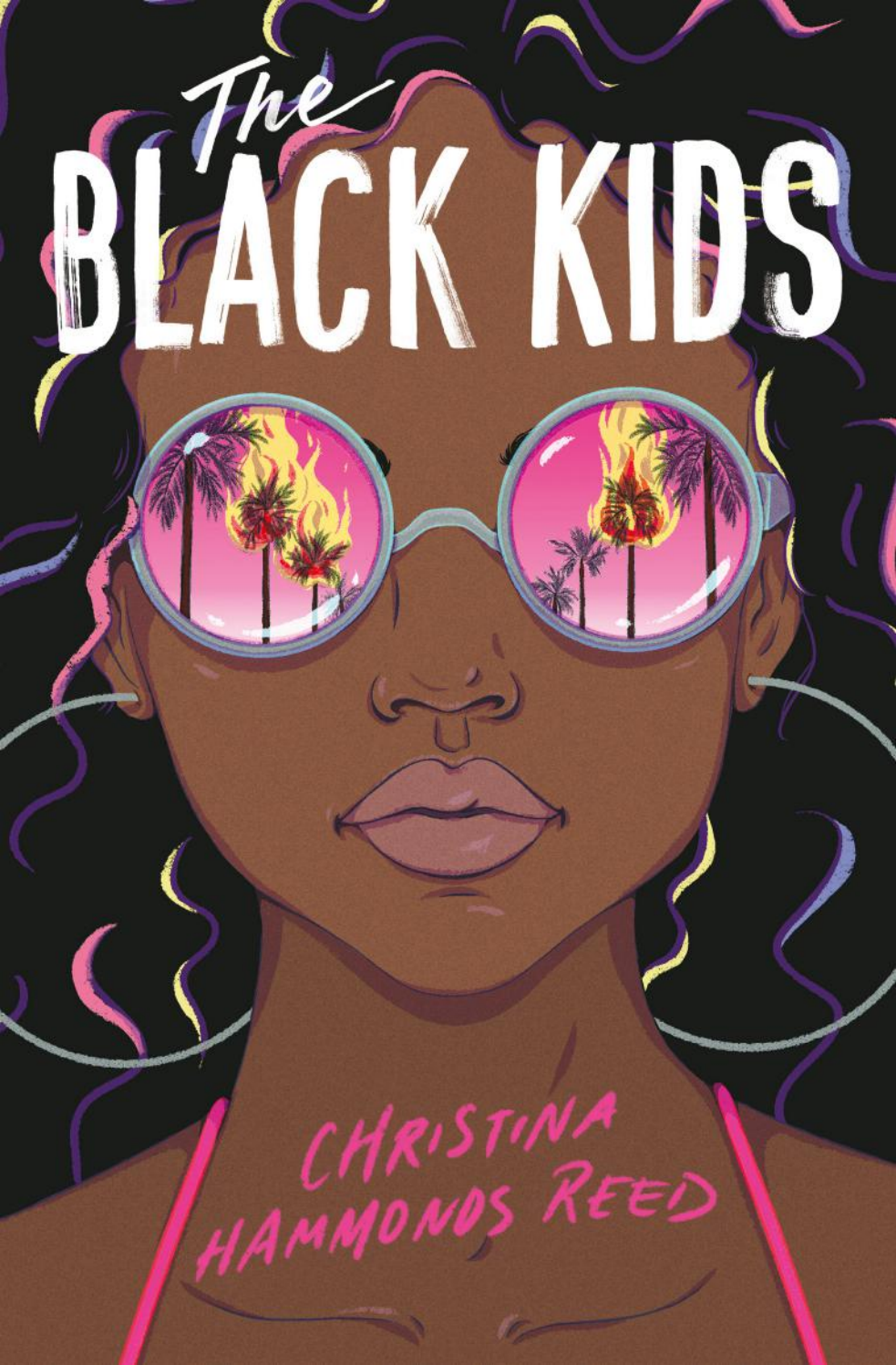
The
BLACK KIDS
CHRISTINA HAMMONDS REED

Dear early readers,

The Black Kids is the gripping story of Ashley Bennett, a wealthy black girl who attends a predominantly white private school in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. She's been part of her privileged, image-obsessed group of friends so long, she's accustomed to absorbing the blows of their casual racism. But when four white LAPD officers are acquitted for their beating of Rodney King, everything changes—and so does Ashley's worldview. As the city burns, she embarks on a harrowing, empowering journey of self-discovery and revelation about what it means to be one of "the black kids."

Vividly immersive, *The Black Kids* is a timeless story that shines a light on girlhood, on blackness, and on class—and the place where all three intersect. Its compassionate depiction of the experience of double consciousness will resonate with young people and adults alike, and readers navigating their own journeys of race and identity will find this book a lifeline.

Christina Hammonds Reed is poised to become one of YA's crucial voices, alongside such luminaries as Angie Thomas, Elizabeth Acevedo, Nic Stone, and Jason Reynolds. Her thoughtful and explosive storytelling offers no easy answers and invites much-needed empathy.

I am thrilled to share the unforgettable story of Ashley Bennett with you.

All my best,

Kendra Levin
Editorial Director
Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

PROLOGUE

FIRST. A MEMORY: The hillside set ablaze, the fire playing a game of hopscotch across the canyon. The air smelled like a campfire, and the sky was a palette of smudged eye shadow. A fireman, lethargic and ruddy, walked from door to door with a practiced calm warning people there was a chance they'd have to evacuate.

"You live here?" I heard him say to my father when he opened the door.

"Yes," my father said.

"You're the owner?" he said.

"I do believe that's what my deed says," my father said.

The mailman had said the same thing when we first moved in, and my father had responded in the exact same way, but the mailman's response was much more ebullient.

"Yes! Brotherman! Moving *on up*!"

"Make sure you have a bag ready to go," the fireman said. "Just in case."

He scratched his bulbous nose and peered into our house. Then,

having satisfied whatever curiosity he had, he turned and made his way down the tile steps.

My father followed after him. He walked to the side of the house where the hose was coiled snakelike, picked it up, and, with it in tow, headed toward the front of the house. There, he pressed the metal trigger. The force of the water startled him, but only a little. He hosed down our roof, spraying the shingles over and over again, so that the water dripped down like rain. My mother and I stood beside him, waiting. The neighborhood dogs barked in a chorus.

The Parker family was the first to leave the canyon, several hours after the fires began. Tim and Todd Parker, then fourteen and sixteen and already dead behind the eyes, had blown up our mailbox that first week after we moved in. Though my parents couldn't prove it, we knew. Tim and Todd followed their parents out of the house, wearing backpacks and holding a photo album and a trophy each. Their mother held what I'm pretty certain was an urn, which seemed silly to me back then, because if whoever was in there was already ash, what more could happen to them, really? This was before my grandma Opal died, before I realized the last pieces you carried of a person, no matter how small, could feel so big. Tim and Todd's father carried several paintings under his arm. Reproductions or originals, it was difficult to tell. Their black dog, Rocky, ran through Tim and Todd's legs. Mr. Parker looked over at my father and waved. I guess the possibility of losing everything had him feeling friendlier than usual.

One by one, over the course of the next two days, the rest of our neighbors packed up their suitcases and piled into their station wagons.

As the fires burned, a menagerie of animals began to trickle down the hillside. First the rabbits and squirrels, and then the coyotes began to wander down the streets, wide-eyed and emaciated. I even saw a deer.

At five years old, I found wonder in the burning, all the animals, the ash and the exodus. Two days after the fireman came by, with the air growing ever more apocalyptic, I stood next to my father, looked up, and placed my hands on my hips, surveying our prospects for survival.

"Maybe we should leave now, Daddy," I said.

"Go back inside; everything's going to be fine."

He kept muttering it to himself, as though he could save our pretty wooden house through the sheer force of repetition.

The joke goes that in Los Angeles we have four seasons—fire, flood, earthquake, and drought.

Fire season. It's part of the very nature of Los Angeles itself.

CHAPTER 1

ON THE NEWS, they keep playing the video. The cops are striking the black man with their boots and batons across the soft of his body and the hard of his skull, until I guess they felt like they'd truly broken him, and, sure enough, they had. Four of the cops who beat him are on trial right now, a trial that some say is a battle for the very soul of the city, or even the country itself. It's something I should give a shit about, but I don't—not now.

Right now, birds chirp, palm trees sway, and it's the kinda Friday where the city seems intent on being a postcard of itself. Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch are on the radio singing "Good Vibrations," and it's no Beach Boys, but it'll do. Heather and I do the running man and hump the air to the beat; this even though she's told us, in no uncertain terms, that this song is lame, and the rest of us have terrible taste in music. We're several weeks away from being done with high school, and when I think about it too hard, it terrifies me. So right now I'm trying really hard not to care about anything at all.

After we exhaust ourselves, Heather and I collapse on the old pool chairs with their broken slats. The plastic creates geometry on my skin. Heather is pudgy and sometimes doesn't shave her pits. I can see the dark of her hair in patches in the center of her pasty outstretched arms. How she manages to stay that pale given how long and how often we bake ourselves I don't know. It's a spectacular feat of whiteness. Her lime-green toenail polish is chipped so that each nail vaguely resembles a state in the Midwest. Courtney's pool vaguely resembles a kidney.

Across from us, Kimberly and Courtney stretch their bodies out across two fat plastic donuts that are pink and tacky and rainbow sprinkled. They float into each other's orbits and back out again. Every so often they splash water at each other and shriek, "Omigod, stop it!"

Heather yells, "Jesus, get a room already."

Courtney laughs and squeezes Kimberly's boob like it's a horn.

They've ditched class two times a week for the last month. I don't ditch nearly as often as my friends do. But my parents and I are supposed to meet my crazy sister's new husband tonight, and it's gonna be a doozy of an evening, so it kinda felt like I owed it to my sanity to not be at school today. These are the places we go—the mall, somebody's pool, or our favorite, the beach. Our parents hate Venice because it's dirty and there are too many homeless people, tourists, and boom boxes blasting, which means we love it. We flop across our boogie boards and stare into the horizon. Occasionally, a wave comes and we'll half-heartedly ride it into the sand, our knees scraping against the grain. Then we stand, recover our bikinis from our butt cheeks, and charge back into the water

like Valkyries. Afterward, we eat at this place the size of my closet, where even the walls are greasy. The interior is bloodred and peeling, and a fat Italian caricature in neon announces, "PIZZA!" Just in case you couldn't tell. The previous owner, Georgi, was a skinny Italian with a villainous mustache who gave us free cookies; now the owner is a skinny Korean named Kim who does not.

After we eat, we watch the men with muscles like boulders under their skin, all of them so glazed and brown that the black men don't look so different from the white men and everything in between. Most of them lift barbells, but some of them lift and balance on top of each other, a grunting tangle of bodies in short shorts and muscle tees. Last weekend, one of the men grabbed Kimberly and lifted her up to the sky like an offering.

Afterward he tried to convince us to come back to his place, like we would be dumb enough to go just because he was blond and tan and could balance like a circus elephant.

"I've got alcohol," he said.

"Tempting, but no," Heather said.

"I wasn't talking to you anyway," he said.

"Ew, we're only seventeen," Courtney yelled when he grabbed at her.

"Then maybe you shouldn't walk around looking like that," he snapped back.

Heather kneed him in the nuts, then we took off running down the boardwalk.

"Hey, you little sluts!"

Tourists with sunscreened noses took pictures of us running, our heads thrown back with laughter. But when we were far enough

away, we crossed our arms in front of our chests, and Courtney bought a muscle tee with a kitten in a bikini that said "Venice, CA" from a nearby vendor. She threw it over herself like a security blanket.

That's why we decided to go to Courtney's house today. Here, we can wear our string bikinis like highlighters, bright neon signs that introduce us as women. It's better that there's nobody around to introduce us to.

Courtney gets out of the pool and walks over to where Heather and I lie on the deck chairs. She prances like the show pony she is across the hot concrete and squishes her butt next to mine until we're both on the chair together. We're so close I can feel her heartbeat. The hairs on her body are fine and blond; she shimmers a bit.

Courtney threads her arm through mine. The water from her body feels good against my skin.

"Would you rather . . . make out with Mr. Holmes, or with Steve Ruggles?" Kimberly's stomach is already bright red. She burns easily, and once, after we went to Disneyland, she spent the whole week shedding herself like a snake.

"Both. At the same time," Heather deadpans.

Steve Ruggles is built like a Twinkie, round and a little jaundiced. He sucks at intervals along the length of his arms, giving himself little purple bruises like lipstick smears. He has always been nice to me, but he's also undeniably strange, a boy who kisses himself while we learn about the Battle of Gettysburg. Mr. Holmes is our AP physics teacher, and half his face is cut into jagged ridges

like the cliffs along the ocean. The rumor is he was in a fire as a baby. Somebody else said it was a laboratory explosion. Both seem like superhero origin stories, and Mr. Holmes does kinda carry himself like somebody with a secret life. Although maybe that's just because he's different, and sometimes being different means hiding pieces of yourself away so other people's mean can't find them. Sometimes in class, I used to close one eye and see one half of him, then close the other to try to see the other half, like when you look at one of those charts at the eye doctor's. When I did that for long enough, both the scars and the good started to fade, so his face was a soft, mostly kind blur. Anyway, I think he caught me once, and so now I keep both eyes open wider than usual around him.

"Leave them alone," I say.

"I bet Mr. Holmes would be a good lay. Ugly guys try harder," Kimberly says. Kimberly acts like she knows everything about everything, even sex, which she's never had.

"So do you think I should do the entire thing or, like, leave a strip?" she says. The moles down the side of her sunburned body look like chocolate chips in strawberry ice cream.

"Leave your muff alone," Heather says.

Kimberly is getting her hoo-ha waxed for prom next week, and you'd think she was going in for open-heart surgery.

"I think a strip looks good," she says.

"Definitely." Courtney agrees with everything Kimberly says. Their moms are best friends, and they were born two weeks apart. They're more like sisters than friends. Kimberly's first name is actually Courtney, too, 'cause their moms wanted their daughters

to be twinsies. For a while, we called them Courtney One and Courtney Two, until Courtney Two had a growth spurt in sixth grade and everybody started calling her Big Courtney. That's when she started going by her middle name. Kimberly is superskinny, tall, and blond; Courtney is skinny-ish, short, and blond. Both have fake noses, and I've known them since the first day of school when we were five and Kimberly (then Courtney Two) still wet the bed.

Growing older with other people means stretching and growing and shrinking in all the right or wrong places so that sometimes you look at your friend's face and it's like a fun-house mirror reflection of what it used to be. Like, I used to have buckteeth that pushed their way into the world well before the rest of me, and a big-ass bobblehead on a superskinny body. I think I've mostly grown into myself now—though I do worry that my head might still be a tad big. That's the stuff you can see, though. It's easier to see those changes in yourself than what happens on the inside. Easier to see that stuff in other people, too.

For instance, now Courtney and Kimberly aren't into much other than themselves and boys, but Courtney used to be big into bugs. She used to collect roly-polies and ladybugs and sometimes these nasty-looking beetles. And then when we were in junior high, she got big into lepidopterology, which is all about butterflies and moths and stuff. It's a bit morbid, if you ask me, taking beautiful things and pinning them down to be admired. But that's kinda like what happens to some girls between junior high and high school, when being pretty gets in the way of being a full person.

I miss what we used to talk about then, when we'd have

sleepovers, our sleeping bags like cocoons, and play Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board and lift each other up higher and higher still with the tips of our fingers. I used to yammer endlessly about horses, even in junior high when my friends were more into the idea of riding boys. As far as I was concerned, Jason R. was all right, but he couldn't cleanly jump a triple bar. And as far as I knew, he didn't nuzzle you as though you were the only person in the world when you fed him baby carrots. And when Jason was drenched in sweat, it definitely didn't look majestic, even if Courtney and all the rest of the eighth-grade girls begged to differ. Eventually, I took a jump too fast and fell and broke my clavicle right before graduating from eighth grade. I stopped riding then, which I think my parents secretly didn't mind too much, 'cause they were paying a buttload for lessons. I was afraid that the next time I fell, I'd break my neck. I don't remember being afraid much before that. Anyway, Jason R. tried to make out with me at a party last year, but he's not anywhere near as cute as he was in eighth grade and he smells like spit, so I politely declined.

The other day, I leaned in to Courtney and said, "Remember your butterfly collection?" She scrunched up her new nose, frowned, and said, "That was so lame. Why would you even bring that up?" As if instead of whispering about butterflies I'd told the whole school how she'd wet her sleeping bag at my house that one time in junior high.

We're cheerleaders, and that makes some people think we're stupid, but we're not. Our bodies are power—like what I feel in my thighs when I bend and throw my full weight into a back tuck, that rush of blood to my head as for a few moments I feel weight-

less, knees tucked into my chest, skirt flying, before gravity catches up to me. Right there, in a tumbling pass, is the light and heavy of being a girl all at once.

"'Woman is the nigger of the world,'" Heather declared one day at lunch while Kimberly and Courtney tried on each other's lip gloss. It was around the time she stopped shaving her pits. At first I thought maybe I'd heard her wrong. But I know what that word feels like in my ears, the way my heart beats faster when I hear it. Even so, I tried to rationalize it. "I'm a Jewess and you're a Negress," she used to say as a joke. For a little while in ninth grade she even called us the two "Esses." I think it was her way of trying to find the black humor in the black numbers tattooed up her *bubbe*'s forearm, the black humor in my black skin.

Courtney sighed and said, "Don't say that word with Ashley sitting right here."

"It's cool. I get what she means," I said. I'm always saying things are cool when maybe they aren't. Sometimes I have so much to say that I can't say anything at all.

The doorbell rings and it's the boys. Things were easier before them. The first boy came in sixth grade. Travis Wilson and Courtney walked around school hand in hand and even kissed at the spring formal before they broke up that summer, when she decided he was taking up too much of her time. The second boy came the next fall. Brandon Sanders wasn't so bright, but he was pretty, and Kimberly liked having him around because she was going through her awkward phase when everybody called her Big Courtney. She needed to feel pretty. To feel wanted. I think

that's why she let him touch her boobs, and down below, too, which he then told the whole school about so that the boys ran around saying "Sniff my fingers" as a joke for a month straight. We became known as the "fast" girls, which meant that the other girls talked shit about us, but also wanted to be us. The third boy came for Heather. Charlie Thomas played in a band in his garage, and Heather would sit around and listen to them practice. Sometimes she would drag us along, too. Her relationship with Charlie ended when she caught him with the lead singer, Keith, and we probably should've seen that coming. Soon enough we were under attack, and there were more boys and more boys still. Boys with muscles. Boys with money. Funny boys. Skinny boys. Boys who were men and should've known better. Boys who told me how cool I was and asked if they should buy my friends red roses or pink roses or no roses at all. Boys at school dances who brushed up against my fingertips and thighs and told me how pretty I was before running off to dark corners with my blond friends.

Our boys are drunk.

Michael immediately walks over to the boom box and turns off our good vibrations. In the front yard, you can hear the hum of Courtney's gardener pushing a leaf blower across the lawn.

"This song is shit, you guys," he says, fumbling with the radio dial.

Michael is Kimberly's douche boyfriend. He's got these big, beautiful, sleepy eyes that always look like they're on the verge of winking at you. But it's not that you're in on any joke, it's that you *are* the joke. Like, if we were one of those third-grade coat hanger Styrofoam solar-system dioramas, he thinks he's the sun and Kim-

berly is the Earth, even though Earth isn't all that important unless you're on it. He's joined by Trevor, because Michael and Trevor are best friends who go everywhere together. Trevor is tall, with floppy hair that he lets fall into his face before he pushes it back. Michael is shorter, with tightly curled hair and muscles like a pit bull. He's on the wrestling team, but nobody much cares about the wrestlers. Michael is handsome because his face comes together in a way that people think is interesting, which is why people care about him even though his sport is full of boys in leotards bending each other into pretzels and shoving their skindogs in each other's faces.

Kimberly and Michael have been together since the end of ninth grade, before he shot up in height, so that for a while she was very tall and he was very short, but they were both beautiful, so nobody gave 'em too much shit. Kimberly has already picked out their children's names—Christy, Linda, and Naomi, after the models. And if they pop out a boy, his name will be Georgi, after the Italian who gave us free cookies. I think Kimberly mostly likes Michael because he's from New York and doesn't give a fuck, and she spends her summers there with her father. He wooed her and all the rest of us with those gruff vowels that drag out around corners and stop abruptly against consonants. Later, we found out that his real accent isn't nearly that thick and that he'd stolen those vowels from the outer boroughs. But by then it didn't matter; Kimberly was hooked. Heather says it's classic daddy issues.

We know Michael and Trevor about as well as you can know boys our age, by which I mean we laugh at their jokes and yell *ugh* when they annoy us and don't rat them out when they do truly stupid shit, like light branches on fire and set them in the middle

of the road just to see how passing cars respond. Honestly, sometimes being friends with boys our age is exhausting. It feels like it's a lot of listening to a bunch of jibber jabber about everything they like and why what we like is silly. Just because sometimes our music comes wrapped in glitter doesn't mean it's empty.

Michael finally decides on Power 106. He raises his hands in the air and they become weapons, his thumb and index fingers cocked like two guns. "*How do you know where I'm at when you haven't been where I've been, understand where I'm coming from . . .*"

He drunkenly swaggers through the lyrics he doesn't know. Like I said, Michael grew up partially in New York, so he likes to pretend he's more street savvy than the rest of us, even though he grew up in Midtown and lives in Brentwood.

Trevor joins in at the chorus, "*Here is something you can't understand—how I could just kill a man! Here is something you can't understand—how I could just kill a man!*"

They yell a few more verses and then run and cannonball into the pool.

Kimberly giggles at her boyfriend, and Courtney yells, "What the fuck?" because now she's wet again.

A plane flies overhead. Trevor traces its path through the sky with his finger.

"God, I can't get wait to get out of this shithole," Trevor says. "Move somewhere with a little fucking culture."

He just got his acceptance letter from NYU three days ago, and all of a sudden now everything about Los Angeles and California sucks. He also went to India with his parents last summer and now he's oh so deep and a vegetarian. Kimberly and Michael make out

across from me, which is awkward enough, but even more so after what happened last week. Normally I'd be talking, too, but the deeper she thrusts her tongue into his mouth, the more I feel like a dog with a mouthful of peanut butter.

"LA has plenty of culture," Heather says.

"Yeah? Like what?"

"I mean, maybe if you actually ventured out of the Westside . . ."

"Dude, just 'cause you've gone to a taco stand or two doesn't mean you know shit, either."

Trevor and Heather are always fighting, mostly because both can be equally insufferable. They both act like they're the only ones who watch CNN or read the newspaper and the rest of us know nothing about life just because we can't quote Sonic Youth deep cuts. Heather says the rest of us are book smart but not life smart, that we're sheltered from life's realities. But, like, I'm black. I'm not that sheltered.

"You guys want to go somewhere else?" Michael says. On his left ear are three freckles and a sunburn that gets worse by the minute.

"Venice?"

"Mars."

"The Beverly Center?"

"God, you guys are so lame sometimes."

"Shut up and shave your pits."

"Nobody's ever home at the house down the street from mine. Some Saudi prince bought it and they're doing major construction on it. They're, like, never there. And they've got a bitchin' pool."

"Why do we need to go to another pool when we're already at a pool?"

"'Cause it has a slide and a cave and shit?"

Michael lives several blocks over, and so we decide to walk. Days like this, the salt of the ocean sticks in your nostrils and on your skin. Gravel rolls underfoot. There are homes with ivy hedges like forts and homes like wacky sculptures or with windows made up of other tiny windows. Occasionally you'll see a fading home fighting against being demolished for something in Technicolor.

The boys go barefoot, their wet feet leaving sloppy prints across the concrete.

As we walk, a red double-decker tour bus pulls up alongside us and stops in front of one of the houses. The voice inside it bellows, "This is where Tom Hanks lives."

"No, he doesn't!" we say.

Several ruddy-faced tourists stick their cameras out the windows. The dude who actually lives here is an accountant to the stars, according to Courtney. Maybe even to Tom Hanks. So perhaps the tour bus driver isn't that far off after all. Heather flashes them as they pull away.

Trevor drapes his arm around my shoulder. Everyone thinks he looks a little like Jason Priestley, but I think that's being generous. Trevor's my prom date, but I'm not into him like that. Sometimes it's nice just to be near another person, to feel their warmth and the blood coursing through their veins, and to feel the both of you alive.

"Oh shiiiit, love connection." Kimberly makes kissing faces in our direction. Michael looks back at us and rolls his eyes.

"Our kids would be so hot," Trevor says. "Mixed kids are the hottest."

Then he pulls away from me and retches into Tom Hanks's accountant's petunias.

There's a hole in the construction fence where you can just raise the green tarp and enter. I pause in front of it. "Guys, maybe we shouldn't go in there."

"Are you afraid?" Kimberly says.

Yes. Breaking and entering isn't exactly something someone who looks like me should do all willy-nilly. Or at all. But I don't want to call attention to myself. Not like that.

"No," I say. "It's just that . . ."

"You don't have to come, Ash. Nobody's making you do anything," Kimberly says. She says it all sweet and shit, but we all know it's a challenge.

"Dude, I promise you it's worth it." Michael winks.

Inside, the addition to the house is a skeleton, all bones and no meat, not yet. The dust sticks to our bodies as we walk through wood and nails and concrete slabs, but also beer bottles and cigarette butts. A tractor presides over all these building blocks like a promise. The pool remains untouched, an oasis, as though the owners decided that it—and only it—was perfect, which it is.

A few dead flies float on the water's surface. Trevor bends over to scoop them up with his hand.

Courtney, Heather, Kimberly, and I hold hands and jump. There's the rush of water, the cold, the velocity of our bodies. We sink, and then back up we pop.

"Marco . . ." Courtney yells.

"Polo . . ." Trevor belly flops in. Just like that, it's on.

We continue our call-and-response across the length of the pool. Courtney finds Heather first, and then Heather finds Kimberly. Kimberly finds Trevor, and Trevor finds Michael, until the only person left to be discovered is me. I've gotten good at being invisible. I swim under the water to the grotto. There, my friends are echoes. Dampened, they sound far away.

Inside, the walls are made of fake rock that's slightly slimy to the touch. There's a plastic opening where a light source should be, but the bulb's broken. Obscured from view, everything in the grotto feels like a secret.

"Marco!" Michael yells. He reaches his hands out and runs his fingertips across my shoulders, my face, my hair.

I don't say anything back. He splashes the water around us in mini waves.

You should know right now that I'm mostly a good person. I think.

I don't talk back to my parents, much. I would help an elderly person across the street, if there were any around. I get mostly As, with a few Bs in the subjects I don't care about. I even listen when Heather drones on about how plastic bags and aerosol hair spray make the planet hotter. All this is to say that I'm a good daughter. A good student. A good friend. A good sister. I don't have a choice.

"When you go out there in the world, you're not just you, Ashley," my grandma Opal said one summer while she braided my hair into four long strands that she embellished with yellow ribbons, "you're all of us, your family, black folks. You have to be better than those white kids around you. It's not fair, but that's the way it is."

"I'm good, Grandma," I said.

And I still am. Mostly.

"I found you . . . ," Michael whispers into the dark.

You should also know that I wasn't entirely honest about Michael. Yes, he's a douche. But he's also really funny in a New Yorky way, smart and a little overconfident, but also somehow self-deprecating and insecure, and he can be really sweet and a great listener, and he's got these beautiful curls like the ribbon on your favorite present.

Beneath the surface, he wraps his legs around mine and I wrap my arms around his shoulders until we're intertwined and our heartbeats pound in tandem. He smells like sunscreen. Water pours in sheets around us like rain. The last time we were alone together it was raining, but instead of some fancy-ass pool, the two of us were in Michael's crappy car. His lips graze my collarbone, and even though he's Kimberly's, together we're electric.

"Polo!" I yell.

Kimberly and Courtney get into an argument over the rules of Marco Polo—Kimberly thinks you can get out of the pool to avoid being tagged, but Courtney insists that's cheating, since we didn't agree upon "fish out of water" rules beforehand. To broker peace, I suggest we stop swimming and start drinking.

We pass the bottle around like a communion cup. I roll the bitter of the beer around on my tongue. I don't like beer, but we're underage, so we can't be choosy.

"What the hell?"

A crew of burly men in neon reflective vests and white hard hats enters, their faces red and sun chapped.

We scramble out of the pool and run through wood and glass and nails and trash. Pain hits my left foot, deep and searing. A piece of glass, part of a shattered beer bottle, is the culprit. The blood trickles in dark red lines down my foot.

I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be in AP physics right now, reviewing momentum and impulse. Right now, Mr. Holmes would be going into and out of focus.

"I'm calling the cops!" another hard hat yells after us.

"*Fuck tha police, fuck fuck fuck tha police*." Trevor laughs, then punctuates it with a belch.

Across town, the trial lets out for the day. The members of the jury step out into the open air and lift their faces to the sky, glad that after a long, dark day, there's a bit of sunshine left.

No, I don't care about any of it now. But I will.

CHAPTER 2

THE SQUAD CAR pulls up alongside us as we approach Courtney's house.

"We received a complaint," the officer inside says.

"Hi, Officer . . . Bradford," Kimberly says, looking at his name tag. She puts on that voice she uses to get boys to do what she wants. Unbothered, she twirls her hair into a rope and wrings it out so the water drips onto the concrete. He watches the water as it falls.

The rest of us stand silently behind her.

"Trespassing's a serious offense." The officer isn't too much older than we are. About twenty or so, brown haired with a whisper of a jawline. Officer Bradford squeaks and then overcorrects with too much bass. We're not that close, but we're also not that far from where the Rodney King beating occurred. I wonder if this officer knows those officers. Maybe he works out with them, plays basketball or does community fund-raisers with men who laughed afterward about beating a man until they fractured his skull, damaged his kidneys, and scrambled his brains.

"I think there's been some confusion," Kimberly says. "My dad's totally friends with the owner, and he said it was okay if we used the pool while he's away."

He doesn't buy it, but Kimberly's leaned over the window and all her beauty is spilling into his car. He pulls his eyes away and looks past her at the rest of us. Grandma Opal used to say that white kids wear their youth like body armor. Bradford's eyes land on me, and he squints as though he's found the root of our hooliganism.

"You could call him if you like," Kimberly offers.

Instead, he makes us sit in a row on the curb. Michael's legs are hairy and pale next to mine. The burn above his ears is getting worse. He crosses his eyes and sticks his tongue out at me. A Mercedes speeds around the corner.

"That guy was definitely speeding," Heather says. "That's a real danger to the neighborhood, officer."

Officer Bradford ignores her.

"You've been drinking?" He sniffs the air around us.

"No," we say in chorus.

"You've been smoking?"

"No."

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" he says.

"We're seniors."

"Truancy is against the law," he says.

It is?

"Driver's licenses and school IDs," he says. "Now."

He reaches for Michael's first.

"I don't have any ID on me." Michael shrugs. He's definitely lying, and Bradford definitely knows it.

Bradford asks Heather, and she gestures at her bikini top. "Doesn't exactly go with the outfit."

"Don't be a smart-ass." Officer Bradford points to me and reaches his hand out. "You."

My black ass is not going to risk lying to a police officer. I pass my ID and license over to him with a slight tremble in my hand. I still had braces in my school ID photo. I used alternate colors on each tooth so my smile was a rainbow.

"Oh fuck," Kimberly whispers.

"I'm calling your school," he says.

And he does.

"Everything would've been fine if Ash wasn't with us," Kimberly says, laughing, as we walk back to her place. "Otherwise we'd totally have gotten away with it.

"'Cause you're black," she says by way of explanation.

Sometimes she says "black" like it's this really funny dirty word.

"Yeah, I got it," I say.

The first time I remember one of my parents being pulled over by a cop, I was eight. The day before, my mother had brought home a brand-new convertible, white with a tan interior, like a pair of buttery leather gloves against your skin. We had a girls' day, just the two of us, and she put the top down so that the wind blew about our faces and I reached up and out and tried to catch the sky in my fingertips. It felt a little like flying. My fingernails had been painted the pink of the inside of a seashell at the spa, same as my mother's, and the two Vietnamese spa owners had laughed

and shouted across the squeaky leather chairs at each other as they pushed back our cuticles. My mother and I were laughing, our hair undone in the wind, when we saw the flashing lights in our rearview mirror. The officer was younger than my mother, with the same wispy blond goatee he must've had in high school. He looked like a bullied kid turned bully, the kind of kid who'd been too big, too poor, or too dumb and was now more than happy to pull over anybody he deemed too anything. In our case, too black.

"Why are you pulling me over?" my mother asked. Her hair looked a little crazy, and she smoothed it down quickly.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"I live here. Just a few miles up the road." She recited the address.

"What apartment number?"

"None. It's a house. Is all this necessary?" she said.

"There's no plates on your car."

"That's because it's brand new. I just bought it."

"License and registration, please."

She slowly and carefully reached into the glove compartment for the little folder with her new-car paperwork and insurance, announcing everything she was doing as she did it, and then she passed it over to him along with her license. He made a big show of radio-ing everything in, hand resting on his gun, which hung right by my mother's head. Instead of staring over at her, I kept staring down at my new pink nails, afraid to look up.

When the voice on the other end finally confirmed ownership, he looked disappointed, then quickly discarded us like a Christmas toy come New Year's.

"Have a good day, ma'am," he said.

"You too, officer," my mother said, smiling.

But when she went to turn the key in the ignition, her hands were trembling. She rolled up the windows and pulled the convertible top up so the car grew small and dark and our heads no longer touched the open sky.

"Asshole," she muttered.

When Lucia pulls up to Kimberly's house, I'm already waiting outside. Inside, Kimberly's mom is yelling at Kimberly, so rather than watch a preview of our own inevitable parental verbal ass whuppings, the rest of us wait on her front steps. I wave to Heather and Courtney before I make the perp walk to the car. I've hardly even opened the car door before Lucia starts yelling at me, her pretty mouth an AK-47 shooting Spanish bullets. Her nails and mouth are always red, like a gash or a rose, and she says this reminds her that she's still a woman, even when covered in somebody else's dirt. The words keep coming out in a rat-a-tat-tat until finally she pauses and sighs. "I won't always be around, *mija*."

On the radio, a grown man yells at me to go to some for-profit college: "Aren't you sick of your dead-end life? What you waiting for?"

These are the ads they play on Spanish and Black people stations—bail bonds, cheap auto insurance, ads in which grown men berate your very existence. As we drive, the surfers pack up for the day along the rocks, reedlike and tan, half-naked and black from the waist down in their wet suits, like one of those half-chocolate Pocky snacks Heather brought back from her trip to Japan.

"Change the channel," Lucia says.

Lucia is my nanny, but I don't like to call her that 'cause it feels gross. She's short—shorter than any other adult I know. Like, I was taller than she is by the time I was ten. When she cleans, she can reach only to a little bit above my head, and so sometimes it seems like she spends the day going up and down ladders to reach hidden corners, like some life-size version of the game Chutes and Ladders. Her car is matte gray with missing hubcaps, a Corolla that looks like somebody tore the secrets from its seats.

"I don't know why you always hanging with those girls when you're always telling me how terrible they are," Lucia says.

"I'm not going to tell you anything if you all you do is use it against me," I say. ". . . And I never said they were terrible."

"You're lucky your parents weren't home," she says.

She's right, but also not. Once during sophomore year I ditched with Kimberly and Courtney, and the school called. Unluckily for me, on that particular day my dad just happened to be working from home and answered the phone. When I got home, he sat me down and made me calculate, down to the hour, how much they spent on my schooling to show me how much money I wasted when I didn't show up for class.

"We're not your friends' parents. You don't have some magic trust fund. This is still a sacrifice for us. We want more for you," he said.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure that nowadays my parents are far too concerned with work and analyzing what went wrong with their wayward daughter, Jo, to care about what I'm up to.

Jo is my troubled older sister. She dropped out of college and didn't tell them for a whole-ass semester. That's a lot more money

than I'm wasting. Her new husband is a musician who's really a construction worker, and she's a musician who's really a secretary, and they live in a shithole somewhere on Fairfax between the Orthodox Jews and the Ethiopians. I think she's angry at all the things my parents have done to her, or haven't.

To be honest, I don't remember her ever not being at least a little bit angry. When she was in high school, she got suspended for a month because she handcuffed herself to the flagpole up front to fight apartheid.

"We got plenty of people here to handcuff yourself to a pole for," my mother said.

"Josephine helped the Resistance, and she wasn't really French," Jo sassed back.

"She didn't have to worry about college applications."

"We got to help our black brothers and sisters abroad," Jo said.

Jo is named after Josephine Baker, who helped the French Resistance during World War II but also danced around Europe naked except for a costume made of strategically placed bunches of bananas. When we were little, my sister used to tell her friends she was named after Jo March from *Little Women*; this was back before she got all into being black. Both Jos are pains in the ass, as far as I can tell.

Two weeks after Jo's twenty-first birthday, she and the construction worker wed in the Beverly Hills Courthouse and didn't even invite any of us. My mother cried for weeks that her firstborn got married in "our own backyard and didn't say a thing! Not even to her mother!"

Tonight's dinner is to be the beginning of a truce.

My mother thinks my sister is on drugs, that her husband is forcing her to be some other her. I don't think that's it, though. Some girls are given away, but some girls run.

I think Jo ran away from my parents and away from me and away from the ocean because she was afraid of drowning. When she first started teaching me to drive, she drove me up the coast to Santa Barbara and back. The car charged forth in fits and starts, German engineering under teenage toes.

I was terrified of driving both of us off a cliff, of careening out of control, but Jo just said, "Steady. Steady."

It was a quiet ride. I started to tell Jo about school, about how Heather and Kimberly were fighting that month, about how my history teacher sometimes called the Civil War the War of Northern Aggression, about how I was thinking of getting bangs but, like, half the school had bangs, so I didn't know. Jo said I needed to concentrate, not talk, so I shut up. When I started to get exhausted from all the concentrating, we pulled off the freeway and parked and walked through the rocks and down to the sand. Two girls in wet suits sat in the back of a station wagon and waxed their surfboards. Fishermen balanced on the rocks and pulled in fish that gleamed. Then they gutted them, and out the red poured.

"Poor fish," Jo said.

"You eat fish," I said.

"Yeah, but I don't kill them for fun."

We watched as the men placed them in big plastic coolers.

"See, they're going to eat them."

Jo started to build a sand castle between us. She poured water from her water bottle into the sand and started moving the earth

in scoops toward the sky. When she was done, there was a moat and a bridge and two hills that were a home.

"Sometimes it feels like a piece of my brain is far off in the distance," she said, "and no matter how hard I swim, I can't quite get to it. And I'm getting so tired of swimming."

She waited for me to respond. I think I was supposed to say something, but I didn't know what.

A leathery man in neon shorts jogged by and smiled at us. We're pretty girls together, the kind that white folks assume are mixed with something else because we don't look like mammy dolls. We have heart-shaped faces and mouths and almond eyes and unassuming ancestral curves. Jo had these beautiful thick curls that cascaded down her back, but she cut it off above her ears, and my mother cried for, like, an hour over how she could do such a thing. My hair doesn't curl—it kinks—but it doesn't matter because it's relaxed anyway. I don't think my mother would cry if I cut it.

"I dropped out of school. Just for the semester," she said.

"Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. I . . . I'm going back. When I'm doing better. My counselor was the one who suggested it."

"Do Mom and Dad know?"

"They wouldn't get it. And don't tell them."

I got mad at her then, even though I knew I shouldn't.

Last year, New England was hit by Hurricane Bob, which is a pretty funny name for a hurricane. Like a sunburned white man with a beer gut and dad sneakers. Hurricane Jo is the black girl in ripped tights and Doc Martens drenching the rest of us in her

feelings, and it's like we either need to batten down the hatches or be swept away.

"What do you even do all day, then?"

"Wander around campus, sleep, listen to music; I don't know," she said. She bit her lip like she does to keep from crying, and I froze. Then, just like that, the moment passed.

"Let's go," she said.

Several weeks later, she met Harrison while wandering through campus. He wasn't a student, just one of the construction guys working on the new dorms. Also, Harrison is white, but so are most of our neighbors and friends.

She took me out to drive one more time after that. As we twisted along the coast, she gushed, "He's got the most beautiful eyelashes you've ever seen, Ash. He makes me happy. So happy."

"Eyelashes?"

"Jesus, Ash." She paused and took a deep breath. "So . . . I have something big to tell you. Huge, actually."

"All right."

She's so dramatic.

"I got married . . . I mean, it just kinda happened."

"You don't just *kinda* get married, Jo. What about Mom and Dad? What about me?"

Jo and I aren't as close as we could be, but I always figured I'd be her maid of honor and tell a funny story about us as kids or whatever as I toast the marriage. Or, like, at least be there.

"Are you pregnant?" I blurted out.

"Excuse you. No," she huffed.

"Sorry. . . . Congratulations," I eked out.

"Thanks. So, like, don't tell Mom and Dad."

"What the fuck, Jo?"

We didn't talk that much for the rest of our drive after that. She took me only to the edge of Malibu and back, and we didn't stop or anything. I called her once to see if she would take me out to practice driving again, but she said, "Have Lucia do it. I'm kinda busy right now."

I probably shouldn't have asked if she was pregnant.

Jo is smart and very sad, and secretly I think it's easier for my parents that she's gone, even if nobody wants to admit it. At least fighting *about* her is easier than fighting *with* her. How do you raise a sad black girl?

Every emotion is so combustible with Jo, every feeling at full volume. I feel like I've got all these emotions just on the tip of my tongue, but it's like I'm in the doctor's office going *ahhh* and there's that sad Popsicle stick without anything sweet pressing the feelings down.

"We aren't living the blues," my dad yelled once, after Jo barricaded herself in her room to cry about nothing, far as the rest of us could tell. "Not here. Not us."

Lucia says, "Your parents don't know what she's so sad about. Sadness for them is a cause and effect, not simply a way to be."

Concrete and billboards and people waiting for the bus. Furniture stores and fast food and gas stations and thrift stores. The longer we drive, the dirtier and grayer the city gets and the browner the people get, carrying shopping bags and pushing strollers and carts

across crosswalks. A man with a Moses beard rolls his wheelchair right into the street and holds up a yellow sign that says JESUS IS COMING!

Lucia slams on the brakes. *"¡Pendejo!"*

After all that business with the cop, I'm late getting home, so Lucia brought me an outfit in which to meet my sister's new husband, like I gotta dress up to see my own sister. Except she's accidentally grabbed one of Jo's dresses.

"That's Jo's dress," I say.

"But you wear it all the time," Lucia says.

"She doesn't know that," I say. "I'll just wear what I'm wearing."

My foot is still in pain, and my legs are still covered in dust.

"Don't you wanna look nice?" Lucia says.

"I don't care," I say.

"Yes, you do," she says.

"Fuck Jo," I say.

"Don't say that," Lucia says. "One day your parents will leave you and you'll just have each other."

Lucia's from Guatemala and has twin sons close to my age, Umberto and Roberto, whom she visits once a year. I can't picture her tiny body carrying a single baby, much less two at once. She had to lie in bed for two months before they were born, she said. Everything hurt and got swollen, and when she pressed her fingertips into her skin, they left little indentations, like when you press into the sand before the tide comes back in; she was that full of water and baby. Even though she says they're the loves of her life, she also says, "Don't have sex, *mija*."

I wonder if she felt better leaving them, thinking that at least,

even without her, they would move through the world together, tethered by their twindom.

The distance between my sister and me is fifteen songs. The first few songs are in Spanish; then there's some Madonna; then "Tears in Heaven," which is a pretty song by a racist about a baby falling out a window. Then "Under the Bridge." The Red Hot Chili Peppers went to Fairfax High School, and Heather's friend Jeannie's big sister says she sucked one of them off, which I guess makes them feel a little bit more real.

"Undadabrigdowtow is where I threw some love," Lucia wails along.

I don't think those are the lyrics.

Lucia loves music more than anybody else I know, a fact made almost tragic by her utter lack of musicality. Lucia's room is downstairs off the family room and a little bit smaller than mine. Her records are in a stack right under her nightstand, like at any time she might need to reach over in the middle of the night and listen to "Se Me Olvidó Otra Vez" or "Thriller."

After the song, the radio DJs open the lines for calls. "What do you think the verdict's gonna be, fam?"

"Fam" makes it sound like the whole city of Los Angeles is one great big dysfunctional family, and maybe it is.

"Guilty." The caller wheezes through his sentences. "Ain't nobody in their right mind wouldn't find them dudes guilty. We got that <beep> on video!"

"Not guilty," the next caller says. "The system's rigged against us. It was built that way, know what I mean?"

"We're here," Lucia says.

The buildings in my sister's new neighborhood have bars on the bottom windows, like somebody took the idea of picket fences and crafted them out of the stuff of weapons. Lucia says this is how you can tell a neighborhood is good or bad in this country: whether the fences are on the ground or on the windows.

Jo's apartment building is next to a 7-Eleven and a car repair shop and a chicken place; the air around the building smells like fried gasoline. I like the smell of gasoline. It's the smell of motion. The sidewalks have cracked and buckled in spots from some earthquake. Lucia parallel parks in front of one of them that looks like the game you play when you're a little kid—"This is the church, this is the steeple"—except the church is broken concrete and the people are the exposed roots, I guess.

For Heather's tenth birthday, all of us went down to her vacation house in La Jolla the week of the Fourth of July. We mostly spent our time running between the beach and the kitchen for meals, until the house itself was the sand beneath our feet. We boogie boarded and buried each other and built sand castles that we kicked down like little girl Godzillas. At night we settled into the living room in our sleeping bags and held flashlights under our chins in order to better tell stories about dead people. In the morning the ground jolted underneath us, and we scrambled into the doorway together, knelt down, and held our hands over our heads and touched our elbows together so that we looked like hearts.

"It's the Big One!" Kimberly yelled.

"We're gonna die!" Courtney yelled.

"Shut the hell up!" Heather yelled. And then we started laughing because we were scared, but not that much. Still, we pressed

our bodies against one another just in case. Best friends are the people you laugh with as the world around you shakes. Or at least they were then. I don't know now. Seems sometimes like growing older means the ground beneath you starts shake and you keep trying to find the right structures to hide under, the right people to huddle with, the right roots.

Jo and I are supposed to be from the same tree, but sometimes it feels like she's off being a willow while the rest of us are sequoias.

"What you waiting for?" Lucia says. *"¡Apúrate!"*

I quickly move to the back seat and slide my arms through my dress, Jo's dress. Outside, I flagellate myself with the towel to wipe the dust off. Lucia brushes my hair the way she did when I was little, and even though I'm old enough to brush it myself, I let her.

"Come in with me."

"You couldn't pay me enough."

But my parents have for a long time. Lucia has been privy to all our history, good and bad, for years. She's been the bearer of our family secrets for most of her adult life. Lucia's the only person around whom we don't have to pretend.

"It's gonna be like *American Gladiators* in there."

"I don't need front-row seats," she says.

I step into the heels she brought for me to wear. The pain radiates through my foot.

"Shit, that hurts," I say.

"That's what happens when you ditch school, *mija*." Lucia kisses my forehead and pushes me forward down the walkway, until the distance between Jo and me is only the sound of a bell.

• • •

"That's my dress" is the first thing my sister says to me in months. Her hair is back down to her shoulders now. She's fatter than she was, but maybe that's what happy looks like.

"Whatever," I say. "You left it behind."

"I'm so happy to finally meet you, Ash." Jo's husband, Harrison, is a bear of a man, easily seven feet tall, and I suspect he might be an actual giant. I'm not sure if he means to lift me off the ground when he hugs me, but he does. As the ground beneath me drops, for a few seconds I understand everything about the two of them. If Jo was drowning, of course she would choose a man who makes her fly. In his arms, I almost don't even mind that he's called me by my nickname entirely too soon. I'll forgive him this forced familiarity because I don't want this man to ever set me back down. I close my eyes and I'm a 747, Apollo 11, I can touch the stars and the planets and all that other gaseous shit up there.

"She'll get her hair caught in the ceiling fan." I hear my mother's voice. I open my eyes and there, behind Harrison, my mother sits at what appears to be a card table covered by a tablecloth.

"Jesus, Jo, you don't even have a real table?" I say.

"Not everybody gets everything handed to them," Jo says. She totaled not one but two new BMWs in high school.

Harrison sets me back down on the ground.

"Where's Daddy?" I ask.

"He's not coming," my mother says.

"Work, apparently," Jo says, like she doesn't believe it. "You smell like chlorine."

"What happened to your hair?" My mother inspects me. She's

haughty and very tall, but also always wears exquisite sky-high heels so that, according to Grandma Opal, "Don't nobody look down on her, not ever."

"Water," I say.

"I can only handle one problem child at a time."

"Thanks a lot, Valerie," Jo says. She loves to call my mother by her name because she knows it pisses her off.

Harrison places a record on their old record player. On its cover, a beautiful lighter-skinned woman with a wispy Afro rocks a space leotard. In her hands are person-size steel chopsticks, and her long brown legs are spread and bent at angles like a spider's. She looks confident, defiant. She looks like exactly the kind of woman my sister wants to be.

"Do you like Betty Davis?" Harrison asks me, or my mother; I'm not sure.

"Is that her?" I say, picking up the album cover.

"She was married to Miles Davis. Maybe she would've been taken more seriously if she hadn't been. She kicks ass. Listen."

The music coming out of the speaker is about what you'd expect from a sexy black space lady. She growls and purrs all over funk that sounds like the past and the future all at once. It also sounds like an album you might have sex to—like *they* might have sex to, which . . . gross.

When my mother isn't looking, Harrison smacks Jo's butt, and she breaks into a grin, the biggest I've seen her smile in ages. Their bodies are easy together, like a pair of matching socks folded into each other, worn in slightly different places but made of the same stuff.

For dinner, Harrison has made some sort of chicken dish with potatoes and vegetables, which is much more delicious than anticipated, given that they don't seem to have much of a kitchen.

"This is great," I say. "Who knew you could do all this with a Crock-Pot?"

"Harrison did all the real work." Jo looks over at Harrison adoringly. "He's a great cook."

"You chopped up all the vegetables!" he says, and squeezes her shoulder. Blech.

They keep their hands on each other under the table. It's as though she has to keep touching him, and he her, or they'd be lost. My sister the sock.

"Yes. It's quite the culinary experience you've created here," my mother says. This is not a compliment. The sweat beads like pearls along her collarbone. Jo's apartment lacks air-conditioning, and the whole place is already stuffy with the weight of everything unsaid.

There's a fridge and a sink with some cupboards, but no stove. There's an archway that separates the art deco kitchen from the living room, but the living room is also a bedroom. It's a studio, but it gets a lot of light. The sunset feels warm on its walls. Nothing has been remodeled since at least the 1930s or '40s, and so there are the ghosts of would-be actresses and writers and singers and dancers, of all the people who moved back home, or moved on, or up. Jo and the construction worker have decorated it so that it looks like the inside of a genie's bottle.

Jo seems more relaxed in her skin around Harrison. Maybe it's because Harrison sees Jo—not who she used to be, not who she

could be, just who she is right now in front of him. Maybe he makes her feel like that's enough.

Jo retrieves a bottle of champagne from within one of the cabinets. "In honor of our special day."

My mother purses her lips as Jo pours the champagne into mismatched glasses.

"Ashley's underage," my mother says as Jo pours for me.

"I'm pretty sure Ashley's had a drink or two by now." She continues to pour.

"Don't encourage bad behavior," my mother says.

"You know French kids don't binge drink. Because it's not a big deal there."

"Last I checked, we weren't French."

Jo sets the bottle down on the table and raises a glass that reads "Hawaii: The Aloha State."

"Ohana!" Harrison says, and together we clink.

"So, who are you, Ashley Bennett?" Harrison runs his tongue over the bit of chicken stuck in his crowded teeth. Jo reaches over and scrapes it off with her nail. My mother looks like she's going to vomit.

"I'm her sister . . . and her daughter." I laugh. "Um . . . I'm gonna graduate this year."

Harrison looks at me intently. His eyes are the color of dirty ocean water, refracting blue and green and brown all at once. His hair can't decide if it's red or brown. Everything on his head is indecisive. Also, he has three big red pimples on his left cheek that I know my mother will mention as soon as we're alone.

"What do you like? Who do you want to be?"

His probing seems earnest, but I don't have answers for any of it. My mother and sister look at me expectantly, like they're waiting for answers, too.

"I don't know," I mumble. "A doctor, maybe."

That answer usually gets adults off my back.

"It's okay. I didn't know at your age, either," he says.

"How old are you again, exactly?" my mother says.

"Twenty-one, same as Jo."

"A regular font of wisdom." My mother finishes her second glass of champagne.

"Have you been following the trial?" Harrison asks me.

There's only one trial to be following right now.

"Not closely," I say. I haven't really been following it at all.

"There's no way they won't convict them," Harrison says. "The evidence is right there, on video camera. That's the best thing about this new technology: It's so small that it democratizes the act of documentation. You can't just cover things up and lie to the people. Thank goodness that dude went to KTLA with it."

I nod. It's a very enthusiastic way to talk about grainy camcorder footage. The wound on my foot is starting to pulse like it's got its own heartbeat. If before it felt like a dull ache, now I'm convinced there's a chance I might have to amputate the whole thing.

"If they don't convict them, all hell's gonna break loose," Jo says. "The people are angry."

"The people?" My mother squints and somehow also raises her eyebrow practically all the way up to her scalp.

Jo ignores her and continues. "We have friends who are already

planning on protesting if they don't convict those assholes. 'Cause, like, it's not just about the cops, right? It's all of it. Yes, the LAPD is racist as hell, and black and brown communities get policed differently than white ones. That's a fact. But also, the schools suck. There's no jobs. You don't give people any opportunities to make something of themselves or to see a way out of the shit they're dealing with every day. There's no hope. And when kids turn to gangs or drugs, people act all surprised. Like, what the fuck did you think was gonna happen?"

She pauses for emphasis, and I'm pretty sure she threw the "fuck" in there just to fuck with our mother. I think my mother's gonna say, "Language, Josephine!" but she doesn't. After a sufficiently dramatic length of time, Jo continues.

"You can't disenfranchise a huge portion of the population and not expect shit to go down. I mean, what they did to him is awful, but really, Rodney's just the tip of the whole goddamn iceberg."

Harrison nods enthusiastically and adoringly. The way he looks at her makes me want to gag a little bit. She's just my sister, not Che or Mother Theresa or, like, Naomi Campbell or whatever.

"Yes, Josephine." My mother sighs.

This is how we spent a good number of dinners in high school: Jo ranting about her injustice of the week, the rest of us agreeing with her and occasionally interrupting to say "Please pass the peas/salt/hot sauce." There are so many battles Jo and I don't have to fight. We're lucky black girls. My parents worked really hard to make us so. It's like Jo feels guilty for all that good fortune. *Why can't you just be lucky? Be happy? Be grateful,* they think. Harrison's a white dude, so maybe all our good luck he just thinks of as his

birthright. Maybe that's why Jo can be indignant with him, why they can be indignant together, without all the business of being too grateful getting in the way.

"You know, you haven't asked to see my ring yet," Jo says to my mother.

"I didn't know there was anything to see."

Jo reaches her hand across the table. My mother looks over at the ring and takes my sister's hand in hers, bringing it in closer. It seems that right there, in that moment, the full weight of my sister comes crashing down on her head.

"It belonged to my mother," Harrison says. In the center of the ring is a big pearl from some prize oyster. It looks like Harrison dove into the depths himself to pick it out special for Jo, it fits her so perfectly. It's ornamented with a halo of tiny diamonds and sapphires that rests on a simple gold band. It doesn't look particularly expensive—at least not compared to the mass on my mother's hand—but it is elegant.

On the wall above Harrison's head, there's a simple framed photo of Harrison and Jo at the courthouse. He wears an ill-fitting blue suit, something grabbed last minute at the big and tall store. She wears a simple white minidress with long sleeves. I know that dress, like I know nearly everything beautiful in my sister's closet, but I can't remember why. I know it like I know the blue satin dress that looked like the sky and nearly showed her ass. It was ruined when she got too drunk and spilled wine on herself at my father's office Christmas party. Or the black suit with the slightly cropped shirt she wore to my grandma's funeral. My great-uncle Wally's wife, Evaline, made a fuss about how disrespectful Jo was

for wearing pants and a crop top to Grandma Opal's funeral, but Grandma Opal was a sassy old bag herself—her words, not mine—so Jo looked straight at Great-Aunt Evaline and said, "Grandma thought you were boring."

"Your parents are okay with this?" My mother shakes a bit as she speaks to Harrison, a soda bottle about to blow.

"My mother is dead, and I don't much care what my father thinks," Harrison says. There's an edge to his politeness now.

This is not going to end well. I'm glad my father isn't here. Once he yelled at some guy my sister was seeing the summer after her freshman year of college just for bringing her home too late. "Nothing good happens after midnight!" he said.

"I'm an adult! We were just talking," Jo said.

"You can talk in the daytime. I didn't just fall off the turnip truck!" he said.

I swear, sometimes my parents sound like the white people in a 1950s sitcom—minus, like, the segregation, etc. I wonder what Harrison's parents and grandparents were doing then, which side they were on. Did they sign petitions or hold up signs and fight alongside us, or did they stand idly by? Or worse? I wonder if my mother's wondered the same thing, or Jo. Maybe that's what my mom really meant by "Your parents are okay with this?"

Anyway, in moments like these, I've found that it's best to provide a distraction. I take my foot out of my shoe and lift it to the card table.

"I ditched school and cut myself on a dirty beer bottle today. I should probably get a tetanus shot, right? It kinda feels like my foot could fall off."

"Get your foot off the table, Ashley," my mother says. "Now."

"It's not a real table."

"Tetanus is for nails, not beer bottles," Jo says. She seems vaguely annoyed I'm there. But she always seems vaguely annoyed at my general existence. Of course she's not grateful.

"Why were you ditching school?" my mother says.

"Senior ditch day," I lie.

"Were you drinking?"

"No. We cut through a construction site to get to Michael's house."

She can tell I'm lying, but she's too mad at Jo to have any anger left for me.

"Let me see." Harrison takes his big bear hands and places them around my foot. "Once when I was a kid, I was on the roof helping my dad with this project he was working on. Anyway, I stepped on this nail, and it went clean through my Chucks. Ripped right through my foot."

For a few seconds, my mother and sister forget to antagonize each other. Both stare at Harrison, enthralled.

"Did you have to go to the emergency room?" my sister says.

"Nah, my dad said it was too expensive." He laughs.

My mother and sister look on, horrified. Mouths agape, they look like the exact same person. Two people who belong to each other.

"Got a bit of a fever and the area was kinda swollen for a month, but it healed up. No lockjaw!" He laughs again. "Dessert?"

Jo and the construction worker have started a band together. After dessert, they sit down with their guitars and sing for us. Jo's voice is

raw, and Harrison's guitar is tender. Together, they're magic. They don't have a name for themselves, not yet. When they're done, Jo looks at my mother, expectant.

"That was nice."

"That's it?" Jo says.

"What? It was."

The two of them stare each other down across the room.

"Alright, whatever," Jo says. She bites her lower lip and fixes her gaze on some random spot in the corner.

"You guys are really good," I say.

She softens. "Thank you."

"Anyway, we should get going. Ashley has homework to do," my mother says.

As we head out the door, out of my mother it finally bubbles up and pops.

"Come home," she says. "Being poor isn't romantic. Not for us."

Jo looks off into the distance, then back. She bites her lip again as if she's going to cry.

"You've been very rude to my husband. In his home," Jo says quietly. From the front door, you can hear Harrison washing the dishes, humming their shared song to himself.

"Your husband?" my mother scoffs. "You're a child playing house."

Jo starts to shut the door on my mother.

"Don't you dare." My mother pushes back against her, and back and forth the door goes, Jo's bare foot versus my mother's heels. Finally, the door snags my mother's stockings and the tear runs in

a ladder up and up and up. My mother stops what she's doing to look down and inspect it. Jo uses the distraction to slam the door in her face.

Honestly, I don't know why Jo just can't get it together. But also, why can't my mother just tell Jo she's good?

Sometimes I feel like I'm the door being pushed back and forth between the two of them. Why is it that they can never say the right words to each other? Why do they leave so much space between them for all the wrong ones to fall in?

"This is not what we sent you to college for!" my mother yells at the closed door.

Over the buckled sidewalks on our way back to the car, we see three black boys in a row against the white brick of the 7-Eleven, arms spread like stars, a mini constellation. Or starfish stuck to a rock.

The policemen are shorter than the boys are but thicker, two ruddy bricks in uniform. The guns at their sides are terrifying, and I'm not even being patted down.

Earlier, Officer Bradford didn't pat Courtney or Kimberly or Heather or Trevor or Michael down. Me neither, even if he did look at me longer than he did the rest.

"I ain't done nothing," the littlest black boy yells. He doesn't look much past twelve or thirteen, but maybe he's scrawny.

"We can't walk?" the middle one says. "You gon' arrest us for walking?"

The police officer presses his knee into the little boy's back, hard, and he begins to cry.

"This is what she chooses to live in," my mother says, "after everything your father and I sacrificed to make sure she didn't."

"You don't gotta do that to him," the oldest boy says. "We been doin' exactly what you say."

He turns back to talk to the officer and the officer pushes his head into the wall.

"Should we do something?" I ask my mother. I think of the man in the video, beaten until his brain doesn't even work right. Her mind's too fixed on Jo for her to hear me. Or, rather, to actually listen.

"Like what, Ashley?" she says. "She doesn't want to come home. She wants to be a grown-up, let her be a fucking grown-up."

I think back to what my dad said that time Jo barricaded herself in her room to cry: "We aren't living the blues. Not here. Not us."

The three boys look like each other—cousins, or brothers maybe. The littlest one cries louder and louder still.

"Shut up," the cop says.

"It'll be alright, lil man," the boy's brother says.

The distance between them is just a few fingertips.

"God, did you see his pimples?" my mother says.