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Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Ready. Set. Go.](#)

[What Had Happened Was...](#)

[The Apple of Our Eye](#)

[Mission \(Un\)Accomplished](#)

[The Odd Couple](#)

[Flesh and Blood](#)

[The Fast and the Furious](#)

[Right to Remain Silent](#)

[Guilty...Until Proven Innocent](#)

[Police State](#)

[Family Matters](#)

Past Is Always Present

Gotcha!

Like Father, Like Son

Ruby Bridges Brave

Vigilantes Get Ish Done

Don't Freeze

Baby Got Back Burners

Snitches Get Stitches

Each One Teach One

Well, I'll Be Damned

Outlawz

Funny Thing About Firsts

Truth Serum

At a Crossroads

No Disrespect

Receipts

Plus-one

Crash and Burn

We Got a Situation

If It Walks Like a Duck...

[Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?](#)

[Amerikkka](#)

[Unthinkable](#)

[Taking Chances](#)

[One Day at a Time](#)

[Eagle Has Landed](#)

[Let the Saints Say Amen](#)

[Will We Ever Be the Same?](#)

[Secrets Don't Stay Hidden Forever](#)

[Skeleton in the Closet](#)

[Kill Two Birds with One Stone](#)

[I Ain't Never Scared](#)

[Pillar of Salt](#)

[Coming Home](#)

[All Out of Options](#)

[It Gets Worse](#)

[Relief and Pain](#)

[The Truth Shall Set Us Free](#)

[X Factor](#)

[Two Months Later](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Additional Resources](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

For those seeking justice and rehabilitation, keep fighting.

Friday, April 23

Stephen Jones, Esq.

Innocence X Headquarters

1111 Justice Road

Birmingham, Alabama 35005

Re: Death Penalty—Intake Department

Dear Mr. Jones,

My dad has precisely 275 days before his execution. You're the only hope we have because every lawyer we've used has failed us. In the last appeal, Judge

Williams didn't take more than five minutes to consider.

We mailed a renewed application since it's now been seven years.

Please look into James Beaumont's application (#1756). We have all the court and trial files boxed up and ready to go.

Thank you for your time.

Tracy Beaumont

P.S. Jamal's going to college. Can you believe it? All that running added up to something. If you have those letters where I say he was wasting his time, please destroy them.

P.S.S. Next Saturday at 10:00 a.m. Jamal's doing an interview on The Susan Touric Show. You should check it out.

### **READY. SET. GO.**

Time runs my life. A constant measuring of what's gone and what's to come.

Jamal's hundred-meter dash is a blazing 10.06 seconds. That's how my older brother got this monumental interview. I'm not thinking about Jamal's record, though. I'm thinking about Daddy's time. Seven years—2,532 days served, to be

exact.

This running clock above my head's been in place since his conviction. That

moment branded me. Mama gripped the courtroom bench to keep from collapsing as each juror repeated *guilty*. I looked to Mama for an explanation.

The empty look in her eye cried out the answer: death.

Since then, it's ticktock.

Here at the TV station, Jamal rocks steadily in the guest chair, watching highlights of his track career with the producer during a commercial break. He glides his hands over his fresh barber cut, his mind more likely on the camera angles that'll best show his waves.

We're true opposites, despite our one-year difference.

He's patient.

Calm.

Thinking.

Living.

Loving.

He's everything on the outside I wish to be. Bringing people in, when nine out of ten, I'd rather push them out. That's why I hate that my mission crosses

paths with the biggest day of Jamal's life.

Five minutes and thirty-seven seconds until showtime.

As the commercial nears its end, I don't have to look up to know Mama's leaving the makeup room. The click of her heels echoes past a crew of engineers

and radiates as she circles around Jamal to the guest seating area on the side of

the studio stage. She enters like only a proud Black mother can, hair all pressed

and curled, with a sharp black skirt suit that fits her curvy figure.

Mama's been name-dropping everywhere she can about the news anchor

Susan Touric showcasing Jamal as a top athlete. I expected a live audience, but

the set is a small studio and crew. I look out to Susan Touric's interview desk with a backdrop image of Austin, the state capital. They've pulled out a white couch so there's space for my family to join Jamal at the end.



Mama smiles at Jamal, then at my little sister, Corinne, but I swear she throws some silent shade my way. Her not-so-subtle warnings have been going

on for the past month. She knows I want Daddy's story to seep out, but Mama

has made clear there is no room for Daddy on this occasion. Not because she don't love Daddy, but because she wants Jamal to have a clean slate at college as

Jamal, not "Jamal, the son of a murderer."

If it was a few years ago, I'd understand, but Daddy's got less than a year.

No extensions. No money for more appeals. While time uncoils itself from Daddy's lifeline, she's forbidden Susan Touric from mentioning him, too. The show agreed not to talk about Daddy in exchange for Jamal showing up; and if

Susan tries anything, Mama says we'll straight up leave.

Mama stands by me and leans near my ear. "Tracy, ain't it something to see your big brother's hard work paying off?"

"Mmm-hmm," I say, even though I'm still hoping the journalist in Susan can't help but fling open Pandora's box—on live television.

Mama won't be able to stop it then.

Then our truth can breathe free.

The fight for Daddy's appeal won't be in vain. People will finally hear the truth. Wake up to the fact that Lady Liberty has failed us. Failed so many others.

Angela Herron floats into the room with a twinkle of excitement in her eye.

Her long blond hair bounces with an unstoppable future. Angela's a new production intern for *The Susan Touric Show*, even though she's only a senior in high school, weeks away from graduating with Jamal's class. It's no coincidence

that her dad owns Herron Media back in Galveston County, where Jamal's worked the past two years. She'll always have it easy. I've worked my ass off to

be in the running for the school newspaper editor next year so just maybe I can

get into college internships early. Meanwhile, she's already advanced to a position most college grads can't get.

"Nervous?" Angela asks Jamal.

"Nah." Jamal's foot taps as he tries to play it cool.

"You got this." Angela hands Jamal a sheet of paper. "Here are the questions

Susan's asked the other guests."

"Thanks, Ang."

All the other interviews have the common thread of compelling American stories: a boy who battled cancer; an almost career-ending torn ACL; a girl hiding her gender at football tryouts. Each story a tearjerker. I'm hard pressed to believe that they'd leave out what's at the heart of Jamal's dedication. What he's had to overcome.

I glance over Jamal's shoulder and skim the questions, looking for my window of opportunity.

“Tracy,” Mama says. “Give your brother space.”

*Hater.* I step closer to Mama.

Angela goes over a few pointers. Before I can ear hustle more, Angela’s boyfriend, Chris Brighton, enters with a large box of doughnuts that appear tiny

in his hands. Chris is still built out from football season, his strawberry-blond hair tucked under a Texas A&M hat with his jersey number, 27, stitched on the

side. He’ll be playing there next year. Just like at school, he barely acknowledges us.

“Excuse me.” Angela goes to meet Chris, and I catch her mouthing, *What are you doing here?*

Chris places the box of doughnuts on the table. Angela touches his arm, like she’s trying to be sweet, but by the way her mouth is turned down, it’s obvious

that she’s irritated at him messing up her work flow.

“Can I have one?” Corinne asks, ogling the doughnuts.

Mama agrees, and Corinne tiptoes past Angela. When she reaches in, the box

slips.

“Watch it,” Chris snaps, catching the box. His square jaw is tight, like he can

flick Corinne away with a nasty glare.

Jamal jumps up. Chris’s ears get red as Angela shushes him, pointing to the

red flashing ON AIR sign.

*Sorry*, Corinne mouths, then takes a bite.

Jamal joins us, his arm now around Corinne, who's dressed in a striped yellow church dress. I chose a simple black A-line dress. My hair in an updo, sleek edges, and curls all out like a crown was placed on top of my head.

The camera cuts away from Susan, and they play a video of the four athletes

they've spotlighted in May.

"It's starting." Corinne nudges Jamal before clapping like there's a live audience. Crumbs flying everywhere.

Jamal chuckles and joins in with Corinne. I can't help but let a smile slip, and I clap softly because Jamal deserves this.

The last of the footage includes Jamal's records rolling up the screen. He's compared to competitive world athletes with Olympic gold medals. Then they show Jamal's last track meet of the season, where he beat the boys' high school

track record, tying the long-standing 1996 college record. I feel like I'm there again. The crowd cheered so loud it shook the bleachers. You knew something

special was about to happen. Jamal dropped to his knees when the scoreboard confirmed the new record.

"You know what you gonna say?" Corinne asks.

"Do I know what I'm gonna say?" Jamal bends down to Corinne so he can whisper. "You got advice for me, baby sis?"

"Don't say ummm."

I burst out a laugh, then cover my mouth when Mama nudges me.

“That all you got?”

“You say ummm a lot when you’re nervous.” Corinne shrugs and takes Mama’s hand.

“You hear her, Tracy?” Jamal elbows me. “I don’t say ummm a lot.”

“You kinda do.” I smirk.

“Yoooo. You wrong for saying that right before my interview. You know what’s gonna be stuck in my head now, right?”

“Yip,” I say. “Ummmm.”

“Ummmm,” Corinne joins in. We sound like a chorus at the side of the stage.

“Knock it off now, girls.” Mama wags her finger at us.

Angela cuts between us, gesturing for Jamal to follow her onto the studio’s stage while we take a seat offstage. Jamal gives her a wink when she wishes him

good luck. Her cheeks go pink. He can always make someone feel special.

Daddy says he’s got a heart of gold. I just wish he wouldn’t throw it around so

easily.

I watch Chris in the shadows. White privilege at its finest. Today he’s exhibiting classic toxic masculinity. I can tell Angela doesn’t want him here, but he’s too arrogant to think different. He acts that way in school, too, like he could get away with anything, since his dad is sheriff.

Poised and ready, Susan Touric faces the camera marked NBS ONE. She looks

like all the white newscasters they have at this station except the rotating weather girls of color. Susan's dressed in a white blouse and a gaudy necklace of

choice for the day. Her silky black hair is coiffed in a bob around her fake-tanned skin, and pink lipstick matches the color of her glasses.

The crew shifts into movement. The spotlight zooms in. The producer gives her a hand signal near the teleprompter. A green light blinks, and Susan plasters

on a smile. On cue, the music begins. My heart now beats at a rapid pace.

"Reporting live here at NBS World News. If you're just tuning in, we've been highlighting top scholar athletes across the country. I have the pleasure of

introducing a local star: the number one track athlete in the state of Texas, soon to be high school grad, Jamal Beaumont."

Jamal's dark brown skin shines as he flashes a wide smile. He sits lean and tall in a closely tailored dark blue suit, white shirt, and red tie he saved up for so Mama wouldn't worry about the cost.

The camera loves him. My stomach twists because I need the interview to bring attention to Daddy's case, but it'll take away from Jamal. I hope he'll forgive me once he realizes what I'm trying to do.

Bring Daddy home.

Alive.

"When did you first start running?" Susan leans forward and rests her hand

on her chin. The same way she begins every interview.

“You’re going to have to ask my mama, because I swear I came out running.”

Mama laughs, nudging me, then mouths, *It’s true. It’s true.*

I chuckle. Mama’s loving every second of this.

“When you’re not running, you’re also working at a local radio station and have your own show Thursday evenings.”

“Yes. I love it. I’m planning to major in communications and media.”

“One day you could be interviewing me.”

“That’s my sister’s thing. I’m more behind the scenes. Audio engineering.”

“Brains and brawn, huh?”

He gives her a modest smile. Susan eats it up.

“Do track stars run in the family? There’s usually more than one. Am I right?”

Jamal swallows, stopping for a millisecond, but I’m sure only Mama and I notice.

“The men in the family have those genes for sure.”

Jamal’s talking about Daddy. Before we moved to Texas, Daddy had his own

track glory days in New Orleans. His name kept his hometown business afloat in

tough times, with customers wanting to help him out. After the flood, all that was lost. People left, and the local history was forgotten. Life was still

hard a decade after Hurricane Katrina, so when Hurricane Veronica hit, we also left for

good.

We evacuated to Texas, but Daddy never ran again. During his trial, they said it was his speed that got him all the way across town so quick. Daddy's fast, but he's not Superman fast.

I watch Jamal, nervous with how he'll handle this.

"Well, they must be proud," Susan says.

"He is." Jamal hesitates after he says "he." He looks directly into the camera,

and I smile at his secret way of acknowledging Daddy, and his ability to sidestep

additional questions is impressive. Jamal's not going to let this interview go down like that.

I'm both proud and nervous. I bite my lip, regretting that I tried all week to persuade him to use this as an opportunity to talk about Daddy's appeal. Now Jamal's guarded, each word carefully crafted to avoid Daddy coming up.

"One thing I love about highlighting you, Jamal, is that you could have chosen to go anywhere in the country, but you chose Baylor. Everyone thought

you were going to Track Town, Oregon, or North Carolina. Why Baylor?"

"I'm a mama's boy. Plain and simple. Got my two sisters over there." Jamal points to us. "And I can be home in less than four hours if I need to. What can I



say?”

“I’m sure your family loves that you’ll be close. Let’s bring them out now.”

Angela leads Mama to the stage, where she sits next to Jamal. Corinne squishes in, and I end up at the edge of the couch.

The hot lights beam down on me. I’m dizzy now, with one thing on my mind.

The thing everyone here is thinking about, the thing that hasn’t been said but

that’s boiling near the surface.

“Let’s meet your sister Corinne.”

Corinne’s round face immediately goes blank; her eyes bulge, like they’re about to pop.

“How old are you, Corinne?”

“Seven.”

“You love your brother?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m gonna be real sad when he goes off to college.”

“I bet you are. What’s special about your brother?”

“He’s fast. And...when he packs my lunch, he always leaves me notes. I’m gonna miss that.”

“What kind of notes?”

“Nice stuff.” Corinne pauses. “Like if he knows I’m worried about

something or trying to be funny. Like, ‘Smile. I’m watching you, Bighead.’”

Susan laughs awkwardly.

“It’s okay if he says Bighead.” Corinne shoots me a warning. “Only he can say it, though.”

I chuckle, because she’s told the world her nickname from Jamal, and now he’ll have to triple his notes to her.

“Or on Mondays when I’m real sad, he always leaves me a note like, ‘I love you more than the sun.’ I keep all those.”

Her voice has a heaviness to it no seven-year-old’s should have. The thing that goes unsaid in our family. That missing piece of us that keeps us down because we only see Daddy an hour on Saturday or Monday.

“Tracy.” Susan tries to stay upbeat. “You’re a year behind Jamal. Are you also an athlete? College plans?”

“I used to do track.” I pause, looking at Corinne, and then go for it. “I’m a school journalist and organize Know Your Rights workshops in the community.”

Mama digs her finger into my side. I have to grind my jaws together to keep a smile.

Susan’s face is expressionless before she turns to Mama.

“Mrs. Beaumont, what do you think about your son?”

“I’m so proud of Jamal. Anyone would be lucky to have him. He’s respectful. Dedicated. Charming. There’s no one like him.”

“I’ve definitely picked that up.” Susan rests her hand on her chin again.  
“Bet

your husband is real proud, too.”

“He is.” Mama gives a tight smile.

Three minutes left on the show clock. My chest floods like I’m being filled by water. Time’s almost up. Susan has opened the door to talk about Daddy. I know that what hurts Jamal will hurt Mama. But we all want Daddy home. I can’t let this opportunity pass us by. I speak before Susan asks Mama another question.

“College seems so distant because I’ve been focused on helping my father’s appeal.”

Mama parts her lips. A small gasp escapes.

Jamal flinches, and it’s like a wave has come crashing down over the entire interview.

“Jamal.” Susan turns to my brother. “Is this what influenced your decision to

stay close to home?”

Jamal’s expression goes blank.

Susan keeps going when Jamal doesn’t answer. “Because your father is in Polunsky Prison.”

I watch him. Hope this pushes him to speak up on Daddy’s innocence. But he’s staring past the camera like he wants this to be over.

“Not too long a drive from Baylor to see him or your family.” Susan uses her

hands like there’s an actual map.

Jamal stays composed. “I couldn’t find a reason in the world to go

somewhere else. I wouldn’t want to miss any time with Pops, Moms, Corinne.”

Jamal gives me a once-over. “My dear sister Tracy.”

Shame runs through my veins when Jamal singles me out.

“I can imagine,” Susan says. “You don’t get that time back. Every week counts.”

She’s wrong; every second counts.

“Now, your father, how long has he been sitting on death row?”

*Sitting?* Why do people say *sitting*? Like he’s waiting patiently in line with a number in his hand.

“Yes. Ma’am. He’s...umm.” Jamal shoots a look at Mama. He’s starting to flounder.

The crew is buzzing, scrambling at the breach of contract.

“He’s been, umm...on death row nearly seven years since the conviction,”

Jamal says.

Inside I scream out in joy that he doesn’t skirt the issue.

“Must be painful.”

“A lot of pain felt from him missing in our lives.” Jamal pauses when his gaze is caught on Mama. “I’m sure there’s a lot of hurt, of course, from the families who lost the Davidsons that night.”

Daddy’s innocent. Why did he say it like that?

“But I take all that and train. I run. I care for my family. I work. I live my life freely because my dad can’t. I don’t need to be at a big track school. Not when

the thing that matters is putting in work to help take care of my family. That’s

something I can control. No one can beat me.” Jamal gives a shy smile. Slows

down his rapid pace of talking. “In my head, I mean. Everyone has to lose sometime. But in my head, I can’t lose. Because I’m growing with each race.”

“Your dedication’s a rare trait, Jamal.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I don’t let things get me down. That’s why I’m so glad you highlighted me, and we can focus on my accomplishments.” Jamal smiles, unaffected by her prodding questions. I almost believe him.

“Must be hard, though.” She puts her delicate hand on her chin again. “Your father’s death sentence, having to start over from New Orleans, and then... the challenges in Texas.”

“Texas is home now. I plan to keep it that way.” Jamal keeps his fake grin.

It aches to watch Jamal hold his composure. He’s avoiding the topic as best he can. Mama’s scowl says she’ll slam it shut if Susan tries her.

“How long does your father have on death row?” Susan’s voice goes low.

“Two hundred and sixty-seven days.” I say it because knowing how long Daddy has left is the air I breathe. Time to live. To appeal. To turn back time.

Mama whips her head at me. The camera follows.

“Two hundred and sixty-seven days,” Jamal repeats. “That’s why we want to

keep our family together and focus on the good.”

“Yes.” Susan touches Jamal’s shoulder this time. “I can’t imagine how hard it must be having your father in prison. Convicted of a double murder.

Unimaginable.”

“Our father is innocent,” I say. “He’s been trying to appeal. But we don’t have the financial resources to prove his innocence.”

I’ve been writing to Innocence X to take Daddy’s case. They represent people wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death. Especially those in underserved communities. People who can’t afford their bail, let alone an attorney with a team of expert witnesses to prove their client’s innocence.

After seven years of letters and no response, I’m getting Innocence X’s attention. Today.

“If your father is innocent, I’m sure the system will work.”

“No,” I say. “The system has failed us. Continues to fail us.”

“I don’t know much about the details of his case, but we can talk after the show, since we’ve reached the end of the interview time. Jamal, what would you

—”

She’s cutting me off. I can’t let her take this time away from me. I haven’t said enough. I stand so the camera is forced to focus on me.

“Do you know how many men have been put to death who were later exonerated postmortem?” I point to the camera. “What about conviction rates by

race and class? The system works if you have the money to defend yourself.”

Backstage, the crew creeps to the edge of the stage. My legs are Jell-O underneath me. I’m close to collapsing right here, so I form a fist that fills me with courage.

“My father is innocent, and we have the evidence, but not the legal support to appeal his case. There are hundreds, thousands, of cases like his. Innocent people sentenced all the time.”

Susan’s spiderlike eyelashes blink rapidly. Her legs point toward Jamal because she knows this should be his interview, but the journalist in her focuses on me.

“What evidence do you have proving your father’s innocence?”

The producer throws his arms up in frustration.

“He was home all evening,” I say.

“You were young then. I’m sure it’s hard to remember. I barely remember what I had for lunch.”

“That’s not something you forget, ma’am. A small town with a double murder, everyone locked in the memories of where they were that day.”

“He was home,” Mama interjects, even though I know she’s angry at me.

“This interview today is about Jamal, but I can’t sit here and not defend my husband. He. Is. Innocent.”

“Then who do you suspect killed the Galveston couple?”

“Mark and Cathy Davidson were murdered, but not by my father or his business partner, Jackson Ridges. Other suspects have been recently identified,”

I say.

Mama’s and Jamal’s expressions turn hard.

I know Mama doesn’t like when I lie, but we need to catch Innocence X’s attention.

“Unfortunately, the Galveston Police Department refuses to look into them, but we will find a legal team to represent my father’s case. When they study what we have, we’ll prove his innocence and the real killer will be arrested.”

As soon as the interview is over, Jamal jumps out of his seat.

“Tracy.” Mama’s got her hand on her hip. Susan Touric steps between us.

Along with the producer, she blocks my view of Mama, but not before I witness

how upset she is.

“This is unacceptable,” Mama says. “We had an agreement.”



“I stayed within my parameters,” Susan says. “Your daughter—”

Mama puts her hand up to me as I draw in closer to join the conversation.

Her gesture is instantly sobering. This won’t be the time or place to talk to Mama. She won’t listen to a word I say. I want this to be a moment to celebrate

because I did what I’d planned, but to everyone else around me this isn’t a celebration. I’m standing in the rubble of a building I blew up.

I follow Jamal, who is now in the hallway with Angela. Jamal’s shaking his head, and Angela is tearing up. Her boyfriend, Chris, paces as he waits for Angela on the other side of the studio.

“Jamal.” I reach for his shoulder, but he brushes me away. My cheeks are hot. “Jamal, I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. Go to Ma.” His voice is expressionless.

“I mean it. I’m sorry.”

“I knew you’d make it go the way you wanted to. Just wish you wouldn’t have done it like that.”

His response isn’t what I expected. I wanted him to be upset with me. Shout.

Yell. Anything to help me figure out how to approach him, but he doesn’t budge.

“Give me a second, please,” I start.

“I don’t wanna hear it.” Jamal walks back to the studio.

I turn my head to find Mama. Angela stands in my way.

“You’re so selfish. You think you know everything, but you don’t,” she says.

“My father’s innocent.” I turn away from her.

“It’s not just this. It’s the same thing with the school paper, always about you

and what you want to do. Think about how Jamal must feel.” Angela shakes her

head, then storms out the exit doors. The Texas heat sucks the air out of my lungs until the door shuts behind her.

Mama’s no longer on the stage. The only person left is Corinne. She hasn’t

moved from the interview couch. She’s crying. Jamal gets to her first; a sob builds in my throat watching them. Jamal sinks down to his knees and wraps his

arms around her waist. I stand awkwardly behind him, wanting to help but knowing I did this. Corinne puts her arms around Jamal’s neck, her tears wetting

his collar. The hurt I’ve forced onto my family knocks me backward as I look down at Corinne’s searching eyes.

“Everyone is angry,” Corinne says.

Jamal brushes her hair back. “Sometimes people do things that hurt because they think they’re helping.”

I shut my eyes and hope it’s not a lie.

**WHAT HAD HAPPENED**

**WAS...**

Mama's silence is worse than being scolded. I can't take it anymore, so I text

my homegirl Tasha for a ride to Polunsky Prison. Maybe this way I can smooth

things over with Daddy before Mama and Jamal get to him on Monday.

Tasha's twenty minutes away on foot if I cut across the field from my house.

She lives on an old historic block that seems to be forgotten. The rows of shotgun homes perch up close to the sidewalk along dusty potholed roads. I swiftly approach her dull-green-colored house.

Tasha's already out front. "You know I'm not one to judge, but damn, why'd

you go off like that?"

My face droops. "Nice to see you, too."

"I'm surprised your mama didn't skin you alive on television."

"It wasn't that bad, was it?"

"Train wreck." Tasha slams her palm and fist together. "Full-on collision."

*Damn.*

"If I take you to Polunsky, I'm not aiding and abetting, am I?"

"She didn't answer when I asked." I shake my head. "I didn't want to stick around for her to stop me."

"Come here." Tasha leans in to give me a hug. "Are you grounded?"

"Probably."

“Jamal pissed?”

“He won’t talk to me.” I put my head down. “Didn’t even come home with us, so I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

“Jamal’s not the type to hold grudges.” Tasha lets me in, and I enter her living room. “Remember when you washed his white jersey with your red pants?”

“Yeah,” I say, and chuckle. “He rocked that pink for weeks.”

“He’ll forgive you. Just don’t hold your breath if he ever gets another interview. No way he’ll let you in the building.”

“I know.” I let out a small smile that hurts, holding on to hope that Jamal won’t be mad forever.

I follow her down the hallway, passing two tiny bedrooms on the way to the kitchen that’s placed in the back of the house. Tasha only has two window units

for air-conditioning, but the long shotgun shape of the house lets cool air flow throughout.

When we get to the kitchen, Tasha’s sister, Monica, is practicing on her keyboard while her mom washes dishes. They all have the same long, thin braids, same flawless dark brown skin and high cheekbones. Folks easily confuse mother and daughters for sisters when they’re out shopping. Only thing

her mom’s missing is the large gold hoop earrings.

“Need any help?” I ask Tasha’s mom, Ms. Candice.

“Hey, Tracy.” She gives me a hug. “I’m good. I know you rushing. Tasha, get your daddy’s keys.”

“Daddy Greg! Tracy’s here.” She yells out the kitchen window instead of going out back.

She calls him Daddy Greg because she grew up not knowing what to call him, since he was in prison. She wanted to call him Greg, but calling him Daddy

was a requirement. *Say it with respect*, her mama always said to her. So Tasha did what she do, calling him *Daddy*, but making it a point to add in *Greg*.

We used to be on the same page about getting our dads back. The first time

Daddy Greg was out, Tasha was excited, but he barely stayed in the house and

disappeared days at a time. He had a hard time adjusting, especially when he couldn’t land a job, part of his parole. So back in jail he went. Three more years.

Now he’s done all his time, and Tasha don’t trust he won’t mess it all up again.

Her tone stays sharp with him. Unyielding. Unforgiving. He spent his time in prison only to come home to a new prison, where he’s free, but serving his own

penance through harsh glances and judging looks.

Tasha pounces on Monica’s keyboard and starts singing off-key.

“Stop.” Monica pulls it back toward her, then gives me a nod. “Hey, Tracy.”

I nod back.

“Tasha, quit playing around,” Ms. Candice says. “You know you can’t hold

no tune, so just leave it for your sister.”

“Damn, Mama, why you gotta say it with your chest like that? Can’t a girl dream? Be the next superstar. Try out for one of those talent shows.”

“You love to sing, baby. Got a real nice voice.”

Tasha smiles.

“But you ain’t no Whitney Houston.”

“Ain’t nobody trying to be Whitney, Mama.”

“What you want me to say. Beyoncé? Come on now. You best focus on school. Be a business major. Accountant, I say, because you always up in my business. Checking my wallet.”

I let out my first hearty laugh since before the Susan Touric interview. Glad I

chose to come see Tasha and not lock myself in my room, holding my breath every time someone comes up the stairs.

“That’s the problem with this generation, going on these reality shows because someone didn’t knock some sense into them before they get on the screen and have their dream snatched on live television.”

“That’s cold, Ma.” Tasha crosses her arms. Then scowls at Daddy Greg as he

enters, joining in naming all the careers she should try that require no musical talent.

When things finally die down, Daddy Greg hands over his keys and turns to me. “How’s ‘Tracy’s Corner’?”