

## P R E F A C E

AH. THERE YOU are. They said you would be coming soon. All these years they left me to rot and ruin . . . to die. And now here you come. A family trying to replace me. To erase me. Us.

But that will never happen. Because this is my house. Doesn't matter how many new coats of paint or how many floorboards they replace . . . this will always be my house. You'll never take it from me. It's mine. Paid for with my family's blood. It will always be mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. All mine. They can't take it from me.

You'll learn soon enough: my house, my rules. Everything that is yours is now mine. And you will obey my rules until the day you leave. That's right, you won't be staying here long. I'll make very sure of that.

Oh, and look. You brought me a little friend.

# O N E

## **ALARM: TIME FOR your pills!**

I miss the warmth of the sun.

I miss cloudless blue skies, rocky beaches, mountain views, palm trees, and cactus thorns. The moist plant soil in my hands, the prickle of aloe leaves . . . the memories are sharp, fresh broken pieces of glass cutting through me.

*Change is good. Change is necessary. Change is needed.*

For the past three days, I've seen nothing but endless cement highways from the back row of our minivan, the sky growing grayer with every passing state. And dude, I'd give my right tit just to lay eyes on anything other than suspect motels, greasy diners, and gas station bathrooms.

"Daddy, are we there yet?" Piper asks from the middle row, a book in her lap.

"Almost, sweetheart," Alec says from the driver's seat. "See that city skyline? We're about five miles away."

"Our new home," Mom says with a hopeful smile, threading

her golden-brown fingers through Alec's pale ones.

Piper watches them, her jaw clenching.

"I need to go to the bathroom. *Now*," she says, with an air of haughtiness that makes it impossible to breathe easy in the packed van.

"Seriously, again?" Sammy mumbles under his breath, straining not to take his frustration out on a comic book. Buddy, our German shepherd mix, nudges Sammy's arm, demanding he continue to rub behind his ears.

"But we're almost there, sweetie," Mom says to her, beaming sunshine. "Do you think you can hold it a bit longer?"

"No," she snaps. "It's not good to hold your pee. Grandma said."

Mom winces a smile and faces forward. She tries her damndest to defrost her, but Piper remains a block of ice no matter what you do.

Sammy, gnawing on an organic fruit roll-up, pops out an earphone, and leans over to whisper.

"This playlist should've lasted us the length of the trip according to Google Maps and I've already been through it twice. Should've added an extra day for Ms. Weak Bladder."

Piper stills, her neck straightening, pretending not to hear. But she's listening. She's always listening. That's what I've learned about her over the past ten months. She listens, stores information, and plots. Piper's a strawberry blond with cop- per freckles and pink lips that rarely form the semblance of a smile. From most angles, she is ghostly white. Enough for me

to think that maybe we should've stayed in California, if for no other reason than so that the sun could powder her cheek- bones.

"We'll get off at the next exit and find a gas station," Alec says to Mom. "No big deal, right?"

"Um, right," Mom replies, releasing his hand to wrap her long dreads into a high bun. She fidgets with her hair whenever she's uncomfortable. I wonder if Alec has picked up on that yet.

*Change is good. Change is necessary. Change is needed.*

I've repeated this mantra at least a million times as we've driven farther from the past toward an uncertain future. Uncertainty isn't necessarily a bad thing, just makes you feel cramped in a prison of your own making. But my guru told me whenever I start drowning in thoughts, I should hold tight to my mantra, a life preserver, and wait for the universe to send rescue, which has really worked over these last three months without my anxiety meds.

But then I see it. A black speck on my tan sundress.

"No, no no no . . .," I whimper, convulsing, as the memo- rized fact washes over me.

*FACT: Female bedbugs may lay hundreds of eggs, each about the size of a speck of dust, over a lifetime.*

All the cars on the freeway collide and my body bursts into flames.

Hundreds of eggs, maybe thousands, are being laid on my

dress, on my skin, every passing second. Hatching, mating, hatching all over my body, can't breathe, need air, no, need hot water, heat, sun, fire, burn the car, get it off get it off get it off! I snatch the speck with my nails, holding it up to the light, rubbing the soft fibers.

*Not a bedbug. Just lint. It's okay. You're okay. Okay okayokayokay okay . . .*

I flick it out the window and grip the glass terrarium on my lap before my bouncing knee can knock it off. I need a blunt, a brownie, a gummy . . . hell, I'd take a contact high right about now, I'm so desperate for numbness. Jittery nerves try to claw their way out from under the heavy skin suffocating them. I can't explode in here. Not in front of Sammy and especially not in front of Mom.

Grounding. Yeah, need to ground myself. *You got this, Mari. Ready? Go.* Five things I can see:

- 1) A blue city skyline, up ahead.
- 2) Burned-down church shaded by trees.
- 3) An old clock tower, the time wrong.
- 4) To the left, far in the distance, four white-gray windowless buildings that look like giant cinder blocks.
- 5) Closer to the freeway, some kind of abandoned factory. You can tell it hasn't been touched in years by the thick-ness of the weeds growing out the cracks in the parking lot and the art deco neon sign—Motor Sport—dangling

off the roof. The air whistling through all the broken windows must sound like whale chants.

Wonder what it's like inside. Probably some spooky decrepit shell of old America, hella dirty with World War II-era posters of women in jumpsuits, holding rivet guns. I hold my phone up to frame a shot before a text buzzes in from Tamara.

T-Money: Dude, u made it yet?

Me: No. We're driving nowhere fast. Think Alec's kidnapping us.

T-Money: Well, put on your locator so I can find your body.

Me: And I'm out of that gift you blessed me with. T-Money: Damn!!! Already?

Me: Didn't even make it two states.

T-Money: On 2nd thought, tuck and roll out that bitch ASAP.

I miss Tamara. And that's about it. Everyone else back home can die a slow death. Aggressive, right? See why I could use a blunt?

“Daddy, is there something wrong with me?”

Piper's high-pitched voice can slice cracks in porcelain. Alec eyes the rearview mirror at his daughter, her angelic

glow blinding him to reality.

“Of course not! What made you think that?”

“Sammy says I have a weak bladder. What does that mean?”

“What!”

That’s Piper. She’s all about the long game, waiting for the right moments to drop bombs. It’s chess, not checkers.

As my little brother argues with the parental unit about name-calling, Piper sits with a satisfied grin, staring out at the city she’ll undoubtedly take over.

You ever watch that first episode of *The Walking Dead*? You know, the one when Rick Grimes wakes up in his hospital bed, oblivious to the last forty-eight hours, then rides his horse through the apocalypse-ravaged streets, baffled to find the world has gone completely to shit? Well, that’s what it feels like driving up the desolate freeway exit into Cedarville.

Piper leans closer to the window, eyebrows pinched. “Daddy, was there a fire?”

I follow her gaze to the array of burnt homes lining the avenue.

“Um, maybe, sweetheart,” Alec says, squinting. “Or they’re just . . . really old.”

“Why don’t they fix them?”

“Well, this city has had some . . . financial problems in the past. But it’s getting better. That’s why we’re here!”

Sammy nudges me. “Mari, look.”

On his side, more abandoned buildings, stores, even schools. Signage hints they've been closed at least since the nineties.

"Goodness," Mom gasps. This is a long way from the beach town she grew up in. Where I grew up. Where I can never go back.

Alec turns a corner, down Maple Street. I only notice the name due to the crooked street sign swinging in front of a three-story redbrick Victorian mansion, the steeple roof caved in, soot framing the boarded-up windows, dead vines crawling up its side.

The next house, even worse. A white one-story bungalow, the roof like a half-ripped bag of potato chips, a tree growing in its frame. The next like a creepy dollhouse . . . on and on it goes.

Mom and Alec share an uneasy look.

"Where . . . are . . . we?" Sammy mumbles, taking it all in. "Oh!" Mom says, pointing. "There, up ahead. We're here!"

We park in front of a bright white carriage house, with a wide unfinished porch, bay windows, emerald grass, and a cobalt-blue door. A stark contrast to the rest of the homes on the block and the only one that has sprinkles of life as construction workers buzz about.

A white woman in a gray skirt suit waves from the front steps, a leather portfolio in hand.

"That must be Irma," Mom says, waving back. "She represents the Foundation. Be nice, everyone."



We slap on fake smiles, pour out of the van, and stand on the curb, looking up at our new home. But I can't help sneaking glances at the crumbling surroundings, waiting for a zombie to stumble out of the bushes.

Irma clicks down the driveway in her kitten heels, brown curls bouncing. Up close, she's older than her forced hair color gives her credit for.

"Hello! Hello! Welcome! You must be Raquel. I'm Irma Von Hoven, we spoke on the phone."

Mom shakes her hand. "Irma, yes, pleasure meeting you in person!"

"Congratulations again on winning the GWYP Residency. We are so happy to have you here in Cedarville!"

"Thank you! This is my husband, Alec; our son, Sam; and our daughters, Marigold and Piper."

"Stepdaughter," Piper corrects her.

Alec squeezes both of her shoulders with a chuckle. "Remember, sweetheart, we're a family now, right? Can you say hello to Ms. Von Hoven?"

"I thought *we* already did?"

Irma's eyes widen as she hugs her folder, then looks up at me. "My, aren't you a tall one!"

I sigh. "So I've heard a few million times."

"Uh . . . right. So how about a tour!"

Yes?"

"Yes, that would be great, thanks," Mom says, slightly deflated. "Sammy, leave Bud in the car."

“Come on in. And don’t mind the contractors, they’re just finishing up a couple of things here and there. We had a few hiccups some weeks back, but everything’s running smoothly now.”

The door creaks and we file into the foyer. Inside is massive. Three times the size of our beach shed, as my dad liked to call it.

“The house was originally constructed back in the early seventies but, of course, we’ve had it updated. Stainless steel appliances, some new plumbing, floors, the works. To the left, you have the living room, don’t mind the tools. To the right, a formal dining room, great for dinner parties. They just stained this staircase, isn’t it incredible?”

Wood. That’s all I see. Wood everywhere. Fresh places for bedbugs to burrow. . . .

*FACT: Bedbugs love to make their homes in mattresses, suitcases, books, cracks in the walls, outlets, and anything made of wood.*

“Back here, a gorgeous kitchen that opens up to the family room. Great place for the children to play. This little break- fast nook gets tons of natural light. Walk-in pantry, plenty of closet space ”

A million cherrywood cabinets, wood-trim bay windows, glossy floors wood, wood, and more wood.

With trembling hands, I set my terrarium next to a welcome basket of cured meats, cheeses, walnuts, and crackers. I grab the nuts and slam-dunk them in the trash, startling Irma.

Mom jumps in. “Sorry, Sammy’s allergic.”

“Oh, I see,” Irma says, lashes fluttering. “Um, first door over here, a small library. Could make a nice little office space.” I knock on a wall. Hollow. The place got good bones but shitty insulation. I give the floor a stomp, an echo vibrating up.

Irma shoots Mom a pointed stare.

“Um, their dad is an architect,” Mom offers sheepishly.

“Oh. I see.”

I don’t know why everyone’s looking at me like I’m the crazy one. If winters in the Midwest are anything like they are in movies, we’ll freeze to death come November! I punch a new alarm in my phone:

**10:25 a.m. ALARM: Order heated blankets.**

“What’s that?” Sammy asks, pointing to a door under the stairs. The dark warped wood stands out among the stained and polished interior.

“Oh. Yes, um, that’s the basement, but it’s off-limits. Mr. Watson will explain; he’s the supervisor. Shall we see about the bedrooms?”

We trek upstairs, congregating in the windowless hallway. A loud thump hits above us. Piper shrieks, grabbing hold of Alec. “Not to worry! They’re just working on the roof. Anyhoo, there’re four bedrooms—three plus a master with bath. The

master faces the front yard and has amazing light ”

“What do you think?” Mom whispers to me, beaming.  
“Nice, right?”

“It’s a lot of wood,” I mumble, scratching the inside of my arm.

“And over here, we have the upstairs bathroom. Giant, isn’t it? That’s a *real* working claw-foot tub.”

As they pile in to admire the checkered tile, I drift away from the tour to call Dad. It’s almost midnight in Japan, but he should still be up.

No signal. In the middle of a city? That’s impossible.

The floor creaks behind me, like a heavy foot pressed against the aged wood. Enveloped in the darkness, a chill crawls up my arms. Feels colder in here than outside. I turn in time to see a shadow pass under one of the bedroom doors.

*Thought she said they were on the roof.*

“Hello?” I say, creeping closer, keeping my steps light.

It’s faint, but there’s the slow inhale of breath as the shadow moves away. Then, silence.

I test the knob and the lock snaps. The door slowly swings open on its own, and I half expect to see someone standing right behind it.

But there’s no one.

The room is empty. The walls white and bare. Not even curtains on the windows facing a backyard filled with tall pine trees, branches shifting in the breeze.

“Oh,” I say, laughing at myself. Breeze, sun, branches . . . of course they’d paint shadows on the floor.

See why I need to relax?

The sun-drenched room with its small closet and lopsided floorboards is cozy, peaceful. My guru once said, “Home isn’t a place, it’s a feeling.” Maybe this place isn’t that bad. But in an instant, I’m distracted by the giant gaping hole in the molding of the window.

Well, not gaping. It’s tight, but there’s just enough space for bedbugs to set up shop.

I grab a credit card out of my wallet, gliding it down the crack.

*Can probably seal this up with some caulk. . . .*

Irma clicks into the room, my family behind her.

“And in here, we have . . . uh, dear? What are you doing?”

I straighten. “Um . . . checking for bedbugs.”

Mom winces a grin. “Mari is very, um . . . proactive when it comes to house care.”

Irma gapes but returns a fake smile. “Oh. Right, okay. Shall we convene in the kitchen?”

Sammy mouths “weirdo” at me with a smirk as we head downstairs.

“Oh, Mr. Watson,” Irma sings, waving at the older gentleman standing in the foyer. “This is the Anderson-Green family. I was just giving them a tour of their new home.”

Mr. Watson blows out some air, failing at hiding his

annoyance with Irma. He's bald with a thick graying beard and chocolate skin, standing a good six foot three. He takes off his hard hat and gives us a curt nod.

"Hello," he says. "Mind the water pressure. Don't work her too hard, she's new. Gotta check on the fellas."

He gives us another nod, slaps on his helmet, and slips out the front door.

"Oooook," Alec chuckles.

A man of few words. I like him already.

"Well," Irma sighs. "Shall we?"

Irma lays her portfolio out on the granite kitchen island, taking out various pamphlets and papers.

"Okey dokey. Here's the contract for you to sign. And for legal purposes, I must review the rules with you once more."

"Yes, of course," Mom says, Alec by her side, massaging her neck.

In an instant, Piper is behind him, tugging at his shirt. It would be comical, her endless need for his attention, if it wasn't so annoying.

Irma adjusts her glasses, reading off a paper. "As discussed, artists participating in the Grow Where You're Planted Residency, aka GWYP, are allowed to live in one of our restored historic homes free of charge for the length of the residency with the option to buy. Each quarter the artist, that's you, is expected to attend fundraising dinners, networking events, and galas, which will help promote the Sterling Foundation efforts to rebuild the

Cedarville community. At the end of the artist's residency, the artist must produce at least one major project, i.e., your new book. Terminating the agreement will result in immediate eviction and the artist must pay back the mortgage with interest plus any damages in accordance with the length of their stay."

"Daddy, what does *eviction* mean?"

Alec brushes Piper's hair behind her ears. "It means we would have to leave the house right away. But don't worry. That's never going to happen."

A warning laces Alec's words together tight.

Mom takes a deep breath. "So. Where do I sign?"

As Mom and Alec finalize the paperwork, I stand in front of a glass door leading to a narrow fenced-in backyard and try to call Dad like I promised, but my one bar of service can barely send a text. Outside, a construction worker stains the deck a dark cherrywood. His brushstrokes are hella rushed and erratic as sweat pours down the back of his neck.

*Dude, nervous much?*

Mom joins me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. A warm aura of peace radiating off her skin.

"Plenty of space for a new garden. We can build some raised flower beds over in that corner, fence it in so Bud won't mess with it."

She's trying to show me the silver lining in all this, and I can't see a glimmer. But she's happy. I've always wanted her to be happy.

“Oh! You’re into gardening?” Irma says behind us. “Cedarville has a terrific urban gardening program run through the library. Last Sunday of the month.”

Following Irma out to the front porch, we survey the neighborhood and I half expect a tumbleweed to blow by.

“Ms. Von Hoven, no offense, but where is, um, everybody?” Sammy asks, scratching his head. “Is there like a BBQ in another state we weren’t invited to?”

As far as little brothers go, I hit the lotto when it comes to Sammy. Mentally twice his age, with a wicked sense of humor and sarcasm for days, I can always count on him to break the tension by saying what everyone’s thinking.

Irma giggles. “Well, you are our first artist in residence! But there will be many more. The Sterling Foundation owns all the property on this side of Maple Street. Come! Let me give you a quick rundown.” She links arms with Sammy, heading to the end of the driveway. Piper slips between Mom and Alec, grabbing his hand as we follow.

“Okay! You, young sir, live on Maple Street, between Division and Sweetwater Avenues, in the Maplewood area of Cedarville,” she says, pointing while she talks. “Which makes up about fifteen blocks or so. Population around two thousand. Three blocks up Maple Street is Cedarville Park. Behind the park is the cemetery. Take a left on Sweetwater, four blocks up and you’re at Kings High School. Take a right, three blocks up and you’re at Benning Elementary, right next



to Pinewood Middle School. Now, take a left on Division for the local grocery and easy access to the freeways. You're about fifteen minutes away from downtown and the Riverwalk."

"There's a river?" Piper asks. For some reason, this interests her.

"Oh yes. Pretty walkway too. Lots of new restaurants, casinos, and an arcade. Now, a few tips for the parents, if I may. Sweetwater Avenue is like . . . the other side of the tracks, if you catch my drift. Your neighborhood is something of an up- and-coming area." Her voice deepens. "Lock your doors and windows every night. Never leave anything in the car or on the porch if you want to keep it, and don't let the children wander. Especially in these old houses."

You could hear a pin drop from a block over the way we all freeze.

Irma lets out a laugh. "But really, Cedarville is one of the friendliest cities in the country. A little dirt just adds character."

"That's one way of looking at it," Sammy mumbles.

"All right. I think that just about covers it. Next month, Mr. Sterling would like to host a welcome dinner at his house for you. I'll send the particulars. Contractors should be done with everything in the next week or two. You have my number, so if any issues arise, please let me know. And once again, welcome to Cedarville!"

Irma waves as she heads to her car, leaving us stunned, arms full of the information she dumped on us.

As she drives off, I beat Sammy to the punch. “So . . . we’re not really staying here, right?”

Mom scoffs. “Why not?”

“Uh, for starters, have you looked around?” Sammy asks, motioning to the desolate street.

The brick house to our right choked in vines looks like nothing more than a giant hedge, wood slabs boarding up every window and door.

“Well,” Alec says. “She did say there will be more families here. Soon.”

“Guys,” Mom pleads. “This is a great opportunity, and most importantly, it’s a FREE house!”

“Yeah,” I chuckle, crossing my arms. “And you get what you pay for.”

“Free also means being *debt*-free,” Alec adds, the accountant wheels spinning behind his bright blue eyes.

“Think of it as an adventure. We’ll be pioneers!”

“Don’t you mean colonizers,” I snap, “since all of these were clearly already owned by somebody before?”

It’s now Alec’s turn to wince, and it feels justified after the number of times Piper has made Mom uneasy.

Piper yanks at Alec’s arm. “Daddy, can I pick out my room now?”

“Uh, sure, sweetie, sure. Let’s go check them out.”

Alec grasps Piper’s hand as they skip back inside, not bothering to check if his other kids want to pick their room as well.

But who am I kidding, Piper is always going to come first.

Mom studies our faces and holds up both of her hands. “Okay. So, I know you’re both . . . apprehensive. But look on the bright side: if it doesn’t work out, we’re only required to stay here for three years.”

“Three years!” we scream.

“That’s how the residency works. This will be a fresh, *debt-free* start. For *all* of us. Which is exactly what we need.”

She looks at me. “Right, Marigold?”

Ah, of course. *Debt-free* is needed since my stay at Strawberry Pines Rehabilitation Center wasn’t exactly cheap. Just short of tuition at an Ivy League college. This is a test. Most scenarios will play out like this from now on. And I can’t fail, or I’ll relinquish the minuscule freedom they’ve promised to give me. So I bite my tongue and spit out the practice mantra.

“Change is good. Change is necessary. Change is needed.”

Sammy rolls his eyes. “If you say so, Oprah.”

*Honk honk!*

The moving truck pulls up behind us.

“Just in time,” Sammy says. “Our old life has arrived.”

Mom dusts off her hands. “Sammy, run inside and get Alec. Marigold, can you start taking stuff out of the van? I don’t want those herbs to wilt and Buddy to melt.”

The van doors slide open and Buddy leaps out, licking my face as if we’ve been gone forever. Gotta love dogs for their unconditional love.

“Hey,” Mom says, approaching the drivers. “Thought you were supposed to be here this morning. What happened?”

One of the movers I recognize from California hops out of the truck as the others roll up the back door, unloading the ramp.

“Yeah, service is terrible around here! We stopped to ask for directions, but no one’s ever heard of this *Maple* Street.”

“Really? Who’d you ask?”

He chuckles and points behind us. “Your neighbors.”

Up the road, across Sweetwater Avenue, life has sprung up in the form of bodies trickling out of houses, standing on the half-dead lawns, staring back at us in silence.

“Whoa,” I mumble. Coming from a small white town, this is the most Black people I’ve ever seen in real life.

*Gotta show Tamara!*

I grab my cell phone from my pocket and Mom shoves my arm down.

“Marigold,” she whispers. “Don’t take pictures of people without asking them. It’s rude.”

“Don’t you think *they’re* being rude? They’re staring like we’re a pack of circus freaks.”

“Maybe it’s your beach cover-up, flip-flops, and hemp jewelry that’s making them stare,” Sammy laughs, jumping off the curb. He stands in the middle of the street and waves. “Hi!”

Silence. No response. Not even from the kids. Just a crowd of mannequins.

“Yikes,” Sammy mutters. “Thought she said Cedarville was the nicest city in the country?”

“Yes, Sammy. Aren’t you impressed by the welcoming committee?”

“Come on, you two,” Mom chuckles. “Let’s get to work!”

We help the movers unload the truck, lugging furniture and boxes inside. I supervised most of the packing and wrapping before we left, ensuring no bedbugs could hitch a ride to our new home.

DING DING DING

A chorus of alarms rings from upstairs, down, and outside. Phone alarms. Every contract worker has theirs set for the same time. Five thirty-five p.m. Tools drop all at once as the men scramble, sprinting out the door, diving headfirst into their cars.

“What’s going on?” Sammy asks, pulling a suitcase through the living room.

“I . . . I have no idea,” Mom says from the kitchen, unpacking a box of dishes.

Mr. Watson trots down the stairs and stops in the hall.

“Done for the day. Be back tomorrow. Cable and internet  
might be up late next week.”

“Next week!” Sammy shouts, gripping his heart.

“Electric company had to rewire this whole part of the neighborhood. No one has lived here in thirty years.”

“Really,” I mumble. “You could never tell.”

Mr. Watson nods once and rushes out the door. Car wheels squeal away.

“Guess they’re in a hurry to get home.” Mom shrugs.  
“Or maybe they’re all heading to a party.”

Doesn’t feel like they’re running toward something—rather, running away.

## T W O

I'VE ALWAYS HATED the smell of other people's houses. This house smells like wet wood. And not the kind you smell in the early morning dew, but the campfire burnt-logs- doused-with-water kind that no amount of paint and polish can mask.

The small tea candle under my oil dish flickers. Aromatherapy. One of the tricks I've learned to ease my anxiety. Soft music, plants, candles . . . you name it, I came ready. New places like this can tip my scales and I need to prove I can handle myself. Glad I bought an extra pack of incense and a vial of peppermint oil from my favorite apothecary shop back home.

But where do I go when I run out? Where's the nearest Trader Joe's? Yoga studio? Coffee shop? Vegan spots? A place to get my hair braided? Most importantly, where am I going to find weed? I'd probably be able to answer all these questions with at least one bar of decent cell service. Well, at least the Trader Joe's part. I grab my phone to set a reminder . . .

**11:00 a.m. ALARM: Ask about stores.**

Buddy jumps on the end of my bed, burrowing himself in blankets. He spends most of his time with Sammy but loves sleeping with me.

On my hands and knees, I crawl around the room, inspecting the baseboards with a phone flashlight, scrubbing them with hot soapy water, caulking holes, and adding a few drops of cinnamon oil.

*FACT: Bedbugs hate the smell of cinnamon.*

Heat treatment would be best for any eradication, but my blow-dryer and steamer are still at the bottom of a box somewhere, so these simple preventative measures will have to do for now.

*Cough! Cough! Cough!*

“Daddy! Marigold’s smoking again!”

Alec’s feet storm down the hall and hit my threshold, his mouth in a tight line, accusations dripping off his tongue. From the floor, I meet his glare with equal disdain. He sighs and about-faces into Piper’s room across the hall.

“Sweetheart, she’s not smoking. It’s those smelly sticks we talked about, remember?”

She fakes another cough. “I can’t breathe.”

“You want me to close your door?”

“No! I’m scared.”



I slam my door shut, taking a moment to appreciate having a handle again. Mom took the lock off my last door, leaving nothing but a gaping hole, privacy a laughable concept.

“Just for safety, baby,” she had said, eyes full of pity.

Couldn’t even argue; I deserved it.

After another hour of cleaning, the house settles down and I switch to headphones, listening to a meditation app that helps quiet the mind.

*Clink. Clink. Clink.*

You can hear everything from my new room. Crying pipes. Breathing wood. Trees brushing against the ceiling. Cicadas singing in the backyard. Dishes rattling.

Someone moving downstairs.

Buddy sits up, ears perked, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

“Ugh . . . Buddy, chill,” I grumble in a sleepy daze, throwing the covers over my head. “It’s just the wind.”

“Who left this glass out?”

Mom is holding up one of her Waterford crystal glasses in the kitchen, a wedding gift passed down by her grandmother. Well, first wedding. I don’t even think she had a registry for her courthouse ceremony to Alec.

“Not me,” Sammy says, grabbing his granola from the adjacent cabinet.

“Remember, no dishes in the sink. Everyone is responsible for themselves.”

“We know that. But does everyone else?” Sammy laughs.

I shrug. “I don’t know what to tell you, Mom. But someone was up walking around last night.”

“Not me,” Sammy says. “I was knocked out.”

Mom looks at the glass, then at its home on the top shelf of the cabinet.

“It’s too high for Piper.....”

“Maybe she climbed on the counter.”

“No butts on the counter,” Piper admonishes from the stairs. “Grandma said.”

I chuckle. Of course she’d be listening from somewhere. She has an ear for dramatics.

Mom clears her throat and smiles. “Good morning, Piper. Sleep well? What can I get you for breakfast?”

Piper joins us in the kitchen with a mischievous grin. “Bacon and eggs.”

Mom folds her hands. “Sweetie, we’ve been over this before ..... we don’t eat that.”

“Well, *I* do. And so does Daddy, when he’s not with *you*.”

Mom straightens, her smile dimming. She turns away, pouring herself a cup of coffee, probably to keep from reacting.

BEEP BEEP BEEP

### **8:05 a.m. ALARM: Time for your pills!**

Damn, almost forgot.

“Marigold,” Mom says, waving two of Sammy’s EpiPens before placing them in the cabinet above the fridge. “Pens .

..  
here.”

“Isn’t that a little high for Piper without butts on the coun- ter?”

Mom smirks. “Knock it off.”

“Good morning, everybody!” Alec enters looking refreshed. Not like someone who’s been up all hours of the night drink- ing out of Mom’s crystal glass.

“Morning,” Mom and Sammy say.

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood!” Alec sings into Mom’s ear, and she giggles. Piper’s face turns crimson, head ready to pop off her shoulders.

“Daddy, I’m hungry.”

“Me too, sweetheart,” he says, still holding Mom. “So, what’s on the agenda today, babe?”

“Unpacking and more unpacking. I want to at least set up my office. I’m so behind on my deadline. How about you?”

“Well, I was going to take Piper to breakfast.” Mom blinks. “Oh. Really?”

“Yeah. Figured I’d take her to get a bite to eat, then do a store run.”

She sips her coffee. “Hm. For everyone or just Piper?”

Alec straightens. “For everyone, babe! Of course. Um, do you want to write a list?”

“Sure.”

“Uh, hey, Sammy. Care to join us?”

Sammy shakes his head and grabs the oat milk out of the fridge.

“No thanks. I’m still setting up my room. Wanna be ready for when the internet is up and running.”

“Okay then.” Alec looks to Piper. “Well, let’s get going, sweetie.”

Alec doesn’t bother to ask me. He knows better.

As they back out of the driveway, the contractors pull up slow, each staring at the house with dread in their eyes, and somehow, I know the feeling.

“Morning, ma’am,” Mr. Watson mumbles as he enters the kitchen. “You, um, happen to see a hammer lying around? About this big, red-and-black handle?”

Mom shakes her head. “No, I haven’t.”

Mr. Watson shifts on his back foot. “Oh. Uh, okay. Just one of the fellas . . . he must have lost it somewhere.”

He rejoins the others in the front yard, delivering the news, which is followed by a tense yet hushed debate, each worker looking hella wary of stepping inside.

The rest of the day, I bounce around helping Sammy and Mom empty boxes. Being a newly crowned minimalist, I don’t have much to unpack: a few shirts, shorts, and dresses, all either white or cream in color; white-plastic-framed photos; white com- forter set; and Bluetooth speaker. Everything else was burned.

With Mom in her office and Sammy taking a break to play video games, I decided to focus on common areas of the house, spraying a mixture of rubbing alcohol and distilled water in the nooks and crevices, vibing to some Post Malone.

*FACT: Spraying 91 percent solution isopropyl alcohol directly in infested surfaces will help kill or repel bedbugs, dissolving their cells and drying out their eggs.*

The cozy living room is the ideal place for bedbugs to make their home. I launch an attack around the window frames and built-in bookshelves, being mindful of the staining.

CREAAAAAKKK . . .

I don't hear the creak, I feel it. The floorboard behind me bending under some heavy weight.

"I know, Sammy," I groan without turning. "I know this looks crazy. But you'll all thank me when we're not throwing our mattresses in a bonfire."

I pop out an AirPods and glance over my shoulder. I'm alone but not alone at the same time. Because I can still sense the essence of someone . . . lingering like a low fog.

"Sammy?"

A door squeaks down the hall. I speed through the living room and into the kitchen. Empty. The family room, the kitchen and nook, even the foyer.

"Mom?"

The door to her office is closed but Fela Kuti sings through the bottom sweep, meaning she's in the zone.

An icy chill taps up my spine as I make a U-turn, stopping short. The basement door is cracked open, a whistling breeze streaming through it.

*Was this open before?*

I test the door, its hinges squeaking softly, and peer down- stairs into the endless darkness, clicking the light switch twice. Nothing.

“Hello?” I call, voice echoing, but only silence responds. Pushing it closed, I drift to the living room, unable to shake the sense I’m being followed when something in the corner moves toward me, fast.

“AHH!” I scream, stumbling back.

Buddy stands in the middle of the room, tail wagging, a goofy grin as if saying, “Hi! I’ve missed you!”

I laugh, rubbing his head. Been cooped up in here way too long. There’s only so much you can do without contact with the outside world before you slowly start losing your shit.

One bar. Still. I’ve now tested all the corners of the house, searching for a signal. Buddy follows me around like we’re play- ing a game, sniffing behind each spot I leave.

It’s time to go exploring. The neighborhood seems pretty walkable. Helpful, considering Mom and Alec made it clear there’s no way in hell I will ever get a car again. They barely let me walk to Tamara’s house alone. That, along with an eight thirty curfew and mandatory bag inspections . . . you could almost mistake my situation for house arrest.

“Where are you going?” Sammy asks from the top of the stairs.

I clip Bud’s leash to his collar and slip on my sneakers.

“Gonna take Bud for a walk. See if I can get better service on the corner or something. Wanna come?”

Sammy shrugs, thumping down the stairs. “Sure. Can’t believe Alec’s still not back with Piper yet. It’s been hours.”

“Dude, the longer that brat is gone, the better,” I say, and throw the door open, running right into a fist.

“Mari!” Sammy screams before catching me as I fall back on my ass. Buddy barks frantically and I’m seeing white spots. “Oh shit! Damnnn, you okay?” a deep voice says from . . . somewhere. The room is spinning too fast for me to place him.

*Wait, him?*

“Mom!” Sammy screams. “Mom, help!”

Mom rushes out of her office. “Marigold! What happened?”

“Aye yo, my bad! I was just about to knock, your doorbell’s broke . . . and . . . yo, I’m so sorry! Here, let me help.”

Two rough hands grip my arm, trying to pull me up, but I yank away.

“Dude . . . what the hell,” I snap, eyes refocusing.

The man who punched my right eye wasn’t exactly a man. Couldn’t be much older than me, with light brown eyes and thick dreads hanging by his neck. I’m suddenly aware that I’m sprawled out in front of him like a chalk outline and quickly sit up. The room twirls as Mom examines me.

“Can I help you?” she asks, mildly annoyed.

“Uh, yeah. Yusef Brown. I’m with Brown Town Mowing Company. We, um, met your husband at the gas station around

the corner. Said y'all looking to do some yard work and asked us to stop by."

He's a rich mocha brown. The hot chocolate with coconut milk on a chilly day by the beach type of brown. God, I hope these stupid flowery words dancing in my head aren't leaking out my mouth.

Mom huffs. "Help me get her to her feet, Sammy. We need to walk around, make sure she doesn't have a concussion."

"Nah, let me," Yusef insists.

"I'm fine, I . . ."

Swoooooosh . . . and I'm on my feet, a wobbly spin top.

"There ya go. You aight? And . . . daaaamn girl. You tall!"

"Thanks, Captain Obvious," I grumble.

Except he's tall too. At least six foot five. Didn't think they even made boys this size. In Cali, I just about towered over everyone in my sophomore class.

"Nice place you got here," he muses, walking me around the kitchen island. "How about some water? Whenever I get my ass beat, I always ask for water first."

"Yes. Water," I groan, unwilling to talk in full sentences.

Mom shakes her head. "Let me make an ice pack.

Sammy,  
get your sister some water."

Sammy moves about the kitchen, the color drained from his face, feet dragging, never taking his eyes off me. Same look he had six months ago when he found me. Poor kid, I've scared him. Again.



“I’m fine, Sammy, it’s okay.”

He nods and gives me a cup of water, hand trembling.  
Yusef offers him a fist bump.

“What up doe, Sam. I’m Yusef. Aye, don’t worry about your sis, she’s a champ.” He stops to wink at me. “I punched homie up the block yesterday and he still sleep.”

Sammy’s eyes widen. Yusef cracks a brilliant smile and pats him on the shoulder.

“I’m messing with you, man! Aye, you want some candy? Might be a little melted but I got a Snickers and—

” “NO!” I scream.

“Drop it!” Mom shrieks.

Yusef drops the Snickers, holding both hands up.

“Sorry, Sammy is allergic to . . . well, everything,” I explain.  
“But especially nuts.”

“That’s probably why my husband reached out to you. I mentioned last night needing to keep the weeds down for Sammy’s allergies.”

“Oh. My bad. Ain’t trying to take out both ya kids.”

Mom chuckles while gently laying an ice pack over my eye. I hold in a whimper, wincing through the crisp cold.

Yusef studies me. One hand still holding my elbow, he leans forward and sniffs.

*Is he smelling my hair?*

“Mm. That smells good,” he says. “What is that?”

“It’s lavender,” Mom says. “Will help with the bruising.”

He nods and replaces her hand with his, holding the ice pack in place. So close, I'm able to snag a good look at him. He's cute, in a cute-and-I-know-it type of way. I'm allergic to nuts like this too.

There's a knock at the door.

"Oh, that's probably my uncle, wondering what I'm doing up in here."

"I'll get it," Mom says, jogging over.

"So, didn't catch your name," he says, grinning.

"Marigold Anderson," I answer flatly.

"Marigold," he muses. "An annual. Bloom, then die. Interesting."

I don't know how to take that, so I change topics. "You live around here?"

"Ain't far. Over on Rosemary and Sweetwater, by the middle school."

"Hey! That's where I'll be starting next week," Sammy chimes in.

"Oh, for real? I went there too. Watch out for Ms. Dutton. Miserable old bird!" He smiles at me. "So I guess you'll be starting at Kings High?"

I roll my eyes. "Guess so."

"New schools are tough, but at least you'll have one friend there to start."

*Who said anything about us being "friends"?*

Mom returns with an older bald-headed man, the

resemblance striking. Yusef's uncle takes in the room—the Snickers bar on the floor, his nephew icing some random girl's face—and huffs.

“Boy, what you get yourself into this time?”

“Hey yo, Unc, this here's Marigold and my main man Sam.”  
He chuckles. “Nice to meet y'all. I'm Mr. Brown.”

Mom walks Mr. Brown to the backyard, showing him the hedges that needed trimming and Sammy takes Buddy out front to calm him, leaving Yusef and me alone. He keeps the ice pack pressed on my face, his eyes wandering from the ceiling lights to the floors, like he's taking inventory.

“You know I could handle this on my own, right?” I grumble.

“Yeah, but it's way more fun with me helping, right?”  
He leans over my shoulder, nodding at my terrarium.  
“That's a fly-ass succulent garden you have there. Biggest sempervivum I've ever seen. And that stone pattern pretty . . . what? What you laughing at?”

“It's just funny hearing a dude . . . I don't know, gush over terrarium patterns.”

He shrugs. “Hey man, everybody's got their thing. Where'd your moms get this? These be costing a fortune online.”

“I made it.”

“Ha! For real? Look at you with the skills, Cali.”

A nickname. Something blooms inside my chest and I rip it at the root.

“So, been working with your uncle for a while, huh?”

“Since I was a kid. He’s more into the lawn care, weed whacking stuff. I’m the gardener. The artist.”

“I used to have a garden,” I mumble, surprised I’d blurt out something so . . . personal.

“Really. Well, maybe we can work on a new one together.” He smiles. “You know I got all the right tools.”

Cocky, arrogant, and knows he’s good-looking . . . the exact thing I don’t need right now. I yank the ice pack from his hand.

“Um, yeah, think it’s time for you to go.”

He laughs. “Chill! I was just messing with you!”

I cross my arms. “Shouldn’t you go see if your uncle needs your help or something?”

Yusef’s face falls as he weighs his options, whether to push it or let it go. He chooses the latter, shaking his head before brushing by me. The back door closes and I take a deep breath. *Don’t overthink it*, I coach myself, patting both my pockets.

*He’s not worth the trouble and . . . hey, where’s my phone?*

If there was a positive of once having bedbugs, it’s that I now can literally find a needle in a haystack with razor-sharp precision. I retrace my steps in the foyer, through the living room and kitchen. Must have fallen in all the commotion, but the floor is clear, the counters and surfaces bare. With no Wi-Fi, I can’t use the Find My Phone app on my computer, but perhaps I can call myself with Mom’s phone. That’s if she has even a bar of service.

“Mom! Can I borrow your phone?” I ask from the deck. “I can’t find mine.”

“Sure, hun, it’s in my room.”

Yusef eyes me and I rush back inside.

*Don’t overthink it. You’re not responsible for other people’s emotions.  
Only your own.*

At the stairs, my phone waits for me, lying neatly faceup on the middle of the third step, as if it planted itself there. I scratch my scalp, digging a bit too hard. It wasn’t here. I know it wasn’t here because I looked. I couldn’t possibly miss this huge white dot on a slab of oak wood. Someone must have put it here.

Sammy. It had to be.

## T H R E E

“FIRST FULL DAY in the big city and you get your ass whooped.”

“Shut up, Sammy,” I laugh.

Sammy splashes me with water as I dry off our dinner plates. If we were back home, I would’ve skipped dinner, headed down the road to Tamara’s, hit a blunt, and recounted my run-in with Yusef. If we had Wi-Fi I would’ve at least FaceTimed her.

“Guys, you know we have a dishwasher, right?” Alec says, pointing to the machine by my legs.

“Oh right. I forgot,” I say with a shrug. “We’ve never had a dishwasher before.”

“And it’s much more fun washing them together,” Sammy says, splashing water again.

Piper looks on from the dining table, her face unreadable. Probably trying to find something to end our revelry. It’s like she’s allergic to happiness.

“Hey, hey, guys! Watch the floors!” Mom warns. “All right,

I'm off to bed. My back is killing me.”

Alec rounds the table and massages her shoulders.

“You guys gonna be all right without me tomorrow?”

Alec quips, kissing the top of her head.

“We were fine without you today when you sent stranger- danger here to knock out my sister and poison me.”

Alec and Mom hit Sammy with the same look, before Mom pats Alec's hand.

“We'll be fine, babe. Don't worry about us. Tomorrow is a big day!”

When Mom was first accepted to the residency, Alec wasn't too pleased with the idea of moving. Money was tight and he had trouble finding work around town after my . . . incident. But then the Sterling Foundation hooked him up with a finan- cial analyst position at one of their partner firms. He was full steam ahead after that.

“Daddy, can you read me a bedtime story?” Piper asks eagerly.

“How about you read me one instead, huh? Starting fifth grade soon!”

Piper winces a smile. She's not excited about starting school either. Something, for once, we have in common.

“Oh babe, have you seen my watch?” Alec asks. “I can't find it anywhere.”

“Did you look in the tray in the bathroom?”

“Nothing there. Weird, I just had it.”

Alec takes Piper to bed and Mom heads to her office, leaving Sammy and me to finish the kitchen. I stare into the hallway mirror at a welt the size of a large fist on my cheek and the bags under my eyes. This place has aged me overnight.

“Ew, Marigold!” Sammy wrinkles his nose.

“What?”

“You farted,” he gags, covering his mouth.

“No I didn’t!” I sniff the air and reel back. “Ugh, what the hell is that!”

The pungent stench makes it seem like we’re living inside a porta potty. Pinching noses, we walk around in circles until Sammy stops at a vent, right below the hallway mirror under the stairs.

“It’s coming from in there.”

The next morning, Mr. Watson sniffs from a safe distance, then shakes his head.

“I don’t smell anything.”

It’s not his lack of interest. It’s the way he won’t even go near the vent that makes me glance up from my coffee. Even Piper, swinging her legs on the stool at the kitchen island, slurping up her Honey Nut Cheerios, seems curious.

“Are you sure?” Mom asks, perplexed. “The kids said they smelled something.”

“Could’ve just been passing.”

“So random animals roll through here and fart often,”



Sammy chuckles. “Bud’s farts are lethal but nothing like that. It smelled like something died in here.”

Mr. Watson stiffens. It’s slight but noticeable.

Mom wipes her hand on a dish towel. “It must have come from the basement. Should we check?”

There’s a few silent seconds before Mr. Watson says, “We don’t go to the basement.”

It came out hard, violent even. Mom gapes at him. He tips his hat and quickly walks away.

Sammy nods his head. “Well, that went well.”

CLICK!

With a loud snap, the TV is on, volume set to a thousand. An image of an old white man in a blue suit sitting at a mahog- any desk fades in, the city’s unmistakable skyline in the green screen background as he shouts.

*“And so I say to you, cast the wickedness out of your heart for the good of thy neighbor, cleanse thy soul with fire!”*

“Who’s that?” Sammy asks, drifting into the family room.

The cable guy pops up from behind the TV stand, dusting off his hands.

“That’s Scott Clark,” he says, wrapping a cord around his arm. “He gives the daily sermon on local channel twelve.”

“Daily?” I ask. “You mean he hollers like this every day?”

The cable guy frowns. “Y’all not Christian?”

“No. We’re, uh, spiritualists.” “Like Scientology?”

“What? No! We . . . just believe in a higher power.”

He rolls his eyes. “If you say so. Cable’s up but internet’s gonna take a little time.”

*“I see abundances in your future. God knows where the money is and he wants to give it to you. God wants to touch your life! But he needs your help. And if you call now, order your free HOLY SEEDS and follow the instructions, I promise, there will be an anointing on your life. Trust me. I would not lead you wrong.”*

Despite the rhetoric, I’m drawn into the skeleton-looking white-haired man who seems to be on death’s door, shouting with his last breath. His neck is pulsing red, skin pasty, gray eyes bulging, blue veins like ivy vines on his temples. It’s like a car crash you can’t turn away from.

“Everyone in Cedarville watches him,” the cable guy adds. “He’s a mighty prophet around here.”

BEEP BEEP

### **8:05 a.m. ALARM: Time for your pills!**

*“In the name of Jesus, you will be delivered from drugs, from debt, from wickedness and sin ”*

By late afternoon, we have the entire house unpacked and the place is starting to look like a real home. I stand by the vent a few more times, sniffing. Nothing.

*Maybe it really was just a passing .....thing.*

DING DING DING

Scattering boots thump from every corner of the house, descending the stairs and out the front door. Mr. Watson

doesn't bother to say goodbye this time.

We gather around the table for dinner, scarfing down a root vegetable medley and salad. Alec makes Piper a grilled cheese sandwich and fries.

"Mom, can you pick up some more oat milk?" Sammy says between bites. "We're out."

"What? Already? Alec just bought some yesterday."

Sammy chuckles. "Well, I'm not the only one in the house using it."

"I don't drink that nasty stuff," Piper declares.

Maybe that's why Piper's so pale, the lack of nutrients. I don't think I've seen her take so much as a gummy vitamin.

She catches me staring, eyes narrowing, and picks the crust off her triangle slice.

"I saw someone last night," she says, concentrating on her plate.

Alec snags a fry. "Who?"

"I don't know. Someone in the hallway." "What were they doing?" he asks.

She shrugs. "Just standing." "Was it Marigold?"

I narrow my eyes. "Why would you automatically think it's me?"

Alec doesn't spare me a glance. "Just a simple question."

Yeah, a simple *loaded* question, he means. I look to Mom, who shakes her head at me, hoping to avoid confrontation.

“It wasn’t Marigold, it was . . . somebody else. She said she used to live here.”

Alec smiles and gives Mom a wink. “Oh. Really? Is this a new special friend?”

Piper stays quiet and builds a small fort with her fries as if she didn’t just mention some stranger was hanging around the halls while we slept.

You ever wake up in bed and feel like you’re not . . . alone?

As I snuggle up to the wall, my eyes pop open, skin prickling at the whispering voices surrounding me, distant and muffled. *Someone is standing at the foot of the bed*, my senses scream. Stand- ing there, watching me dream. I sit up quick, heart racing. I’m alone. My covers are on the floor, the room freezing, the voices silent. . . .

And my door is wide open.

In the hall, no one else’s door is open besides mine. It’s silent, the house still asleep. But there’s a light on downstairs. Buddy trots in an infinity loop around the kitchen and family room, nose to the ground like a hunting hound.

“How the hell did you get out?” I ask before a twinkle of light catches my eye.

The glass cup is on the counter again.

I pick it up, glancing at its home on the shelf, the inside still damp with murky water. Or maybe .....milk.

“Weird,” I mumble.

CREEEEEEEEAK

Buddy freezes, his tail erect.

“It’s nothing, Bud, chillax,” I say, rinsing off the cup before shelving it. This place is old, full of old-house noises. My toes drum against the floor. Barefoot, I can fully feel that the house is strangely uneven, the ground tilting it forward, as if trying to feed its contents to the street. The cold bites into my bare legs. I check the time: 3:19 a.m.

“Bud, let’s go,” I order, and head for the stairs but hit a wall of a stench so violent I gag. It’s rancid. A decaying animal, a rotting corpse.

CREEEEEEEEAK

This time, the sound is distinct. Sharp. And close. Like it’s right next to me.

Like it’s coming from the hall closet.

A chill wraps my arms in ice, fear ramping up its engine. CREAK

“Shit,” I say, and take off, scrambling back to my room, Buddy at my heels.