

ONE

We drivin' into the sunset, the car burning up from the heat. I don't know if it's comin' from outside or from Mama, who's burning up angry at me. She ain't said nothin' to me since we left the principal's office 'bout a hour ago. But she got her foot pressed on the gas like we in a race, zoomin' past everyone on the expressway.

"I can't do this no more, Cole."

"Do what?" I say.

But I know. I only seen her this angry once before, and this is worse.

“Where we going?” I ask.

She don’t answer. By the time we hit the interstate outta Detroit, I can see she crying. I hate when she do that. It makes me feel bad inside, ’cause I’m always the one who makes her feel that way.

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

She wipes her eyes on her sleeve.

“Me too, baby. Me too,” she says, all sad.

I see the city slowly disappearing, turning into suburbs. I know she gotta work early in the morning, so we can’t be driving that far. I ask her again.

“Where we going?”

Cars is falling behind us ’cause she speedin’ *up*.

“Mama—”

She chokes it out: “Philadelphia.”

I laugh, then see she ain’t joking.

“*What?!*” I stare at her hard.

Her hands is shaking, so she grab the steering wheel tighter.

“*Philly?*” I say, my head spinning. “What for?”

She pulls on her hair and grunts. “I can’t be your mama right now. You need a man in your life.”

I try to let that sink in, but my ears is on fire. “What you talking about? Who’s in Philly?”

She sighs.

“Your daddy.”

My daddy.

Who I never met.

Who Mama never talks about.

Once I asked if she had a picture of him, and she said she burned 'em all. When I kept on her, all she said was he didn't care about us and now he gone and good riddance.

She never said nothing more.

Now I find out we gonna go see him?

"Why?"

She just holds up her hand like she can't even go there, like the idea that she gonna take me to him is the last thing she'd ever do.

But she doing it. And then it hits me: "You wanna get rid of me."

That gets her. I can see her holding that steering wheel so tight her knuckles is turning white. "I can't do this no more," she says to no one. "After twelve years, I got nothing left."

That's crazy talk. She can't leave me. "But you my mama! *You* supposed to watch out for me!"

She bites her lip, her eyes locked on some faraway place. "I used to think your daddy was a bad father . . . that he didn't know how to take care of us. But now I'm thinking there's something wrong with me 'cause I don't know why you are the way you are,"

she say. “Maybe he’s the only one left who can turn you around.”

She startin’ to scare me now, talkin’ like that. “I ain’t so bad, Mama. I can do better.”

She nod, fightin’ for words. “I know you can, baby. You just need someone that can show you the way. But that ain’t me no more, Cole.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearin’. “So you gonna leave me with some dude who never cared about us? Some guy who treated you so bad, you never talk about him?”

She stares ahead, her eyes wet. She ain’t disagreeing. “He’s different is all. But maybe different is what you need.”

And with that, she just shuts down.

I seen that look before. It means she made up her mind. I think about grabbing that steering wheel and turning the car around, but she like a rock and, deep down, I know I gone too far this time.

TWO

I stare out the window. Even though it's getting dark out, I can see we in the middle a nowhere. No lights from no city.

Nothing. It looks just like I feel, all empty inside.

I don't know why I stopped going to school. I guess I didn't wanna waste no more time with teachers and homework and all a that, 'cause what difference do it make in the end? I'll never do nothing great in my life. Do they really think I'm gonna be like Obama? Not a chance. I just feel sorry for Mama for thinking that I could be somebody.

She just found out yesterday that I missed the last four weeks of school. That I been hiding them letters and erasing the messages from the vice principal, even duckin' the truancy officer when he comes by.

With her working so much, that wasn't so hard to do 'cause I done it before and knew all the tricks. But it was the first time I got caught, on account of the truancy officer finding me tagging the back of the school cafeteria while school was going on. Stupid.

She really lost it when she found out they was gonna suspend me for the rest of the year. If I wasn't twelve, they woulda kicked me out for good, but now they talking about holding me back.

I ain't never seen her so sad before, like she thought it was all her fault. It made me feel like dirt seeing her sittin' on the kitchen floor crying, but I knew there was nothin' I could do to help her, 'cept to let her get it all out. That's how we deal.

Today, Mama had to skip work to come in to talk to the principal. He went on and on about how I was in danger—rattling off a buncha numbers like how four outta every ten black boys drop outta school, and seven outta ten can't get no job and 'cause a that, six of us will end up in prison. I could see Mama sinking into herself, like he was saying it was all her fault for not being a good mama.

In the old days, seemed she had the energy to read to me and stuff, and we made drawings together or laid under the covers, talking about where we would go if we could live anywhere else but Detroit. . . .

But that was when I was a kid. Them days is gone. Kids can be happy 'cause they don't know better, but when you get older, well, you just know it's all a big lie. Last three years, Mama's been so moody, like a cloud passed in front of her face. Sometime she look at me and it's like she don't see me. I been on my own a lot 'cause a that and 'cause she gotta work so much. I been roaming the streets, skippin' school and hanging with my friends, staying out late, which she don't like. We ain't been doing nothing bad . . . but we ain't exactly been doin' nothing good neither.

It was weird hearing the principal say things about me like I wasn't there, even though I was. He told Mama that since there was a couple weeks left of school, he was gonna suspend me till the summer session started. He said that going to summer school was the only way I could get outta repeating the seventh grade, and not only did I have to show up, but I had to pass the end-of-year exam too. Then he said I needed to seriously think about my life so I could get my priorities straight. Otherwise, things was gonna get much worse for me, and I would end up like one of them boys he was talkin' about.

Looking at Mama's face, I could tell she already thought it was too late.

THREE

We drive for hours, Mama's eyes red from crying and being all tired out. When we finally stop for gas, she goes to a phone booth and makes a call.

I can't hear what she saying, but there's a fight going on. Her hands is all over the place, banging on the glass, pulling on her hair, biting her nails. Finally, she hangs up and just stands there, staring at the phone.

When she comes back to the car, I know I gotta say something.

"I can be better, Mama. I won't skip school no more. I promise."

She looks at me for the first time, her eyes searchin' mine. It's like she wanna remember my face. Her mouth is tight, but she takes my hand, shaking her head slowly. I know she wanna say something, but it feels like if she opens her mouth, she just gonna crumble apart like them old auto factories near our apartment.

Finally, she starts up the car.

I ask one last time. "Can we go home?"

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "No. Don't ask me again."

"But what about school? How'm I gonna do summer school if I ain't there?"

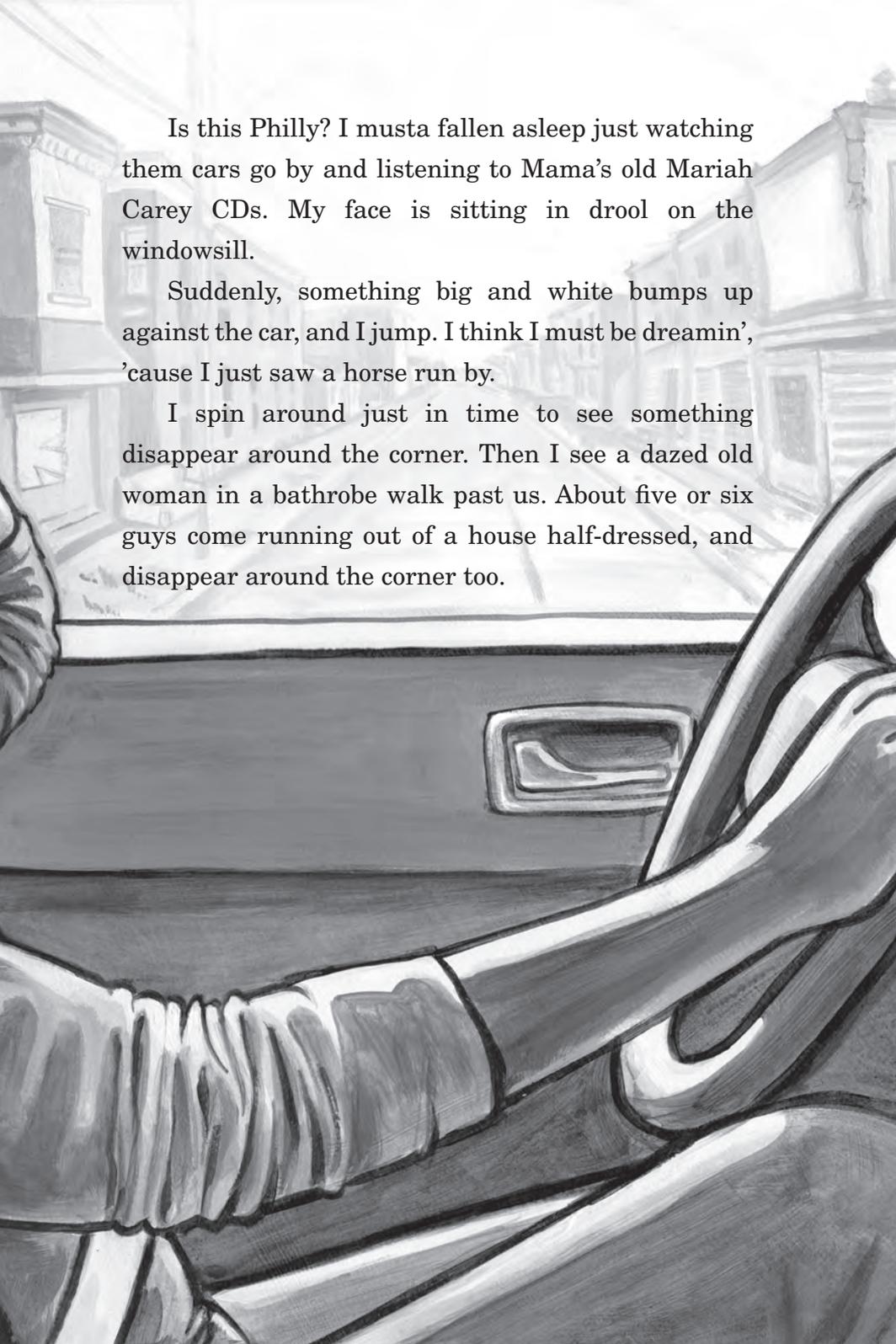
She shakes her head. "That's up to your daddy now."

We drive all night, stopping only at a drive-through and a coupla rest stops. I don't know how she can drive so much. I'm going crazy just sittin' here. I keep waiting for her to stop and turn around, but she don't.

Next thing I know, I see the sun coming up. It hurts my eyes. Did she drive through the night?

Mama stops the car, and my eyes focus in the side mirror. I can see we in the city somewhere, on some run-down street.





Is this Philly? I musta fallen asleep just watching them cars go by and listening to Mama's old Mariah Carey CDs. My face is sitting in drool on the windowsill.

Suddenly, something big and white bumps up against the car, and I jump. I think I must be dreamin', 'cause I just saw a horse run by.

I spin around just in time to see something disappear around the corner. Then I see a dazed old woman in a bathrobe walk past us. About five or six guys come running out of a house half-dressed, and disappear around the corner too.

What's going on?

Mama pays no mind. She staring at a building across the street.

This is definitely the 'hood. The buildings is all row houses cramped together, made of old brick and dark windows that feel like they watching us. The place is crumbling apart—overgrown vacant lots stand empty between buildings, some boarded up, some barely holdin' on.

“Wait here,” Mama says.

She gets out and walks up the stoop to the place she was staring at. Stands there awhile, then knocks. No one answers.

She knocks again, louder.

Finally someone opens the door. It's dark inside, so I can't see who it is. She goes in, the door closing behind her.

Where she going?

I get outta the car and think about going after her. Then I notice something move behind me. A coupla sleepy-eyed gangbangers have come outta one of the buildings, looking around.

The tall skinny one sees me and elbows his friend, who's built like a bull. They both older, maybe eighteen or something. They stare at me, and I get back into

the car. Maybe they seen I was wearing my Pistons jersey. Dag. I know Philly is no fan of the Pistons.

When I see them coming over, I slouch down. They don't look happy, checking out the car like it's some alien spaceship that just landed on their block. They looking at the plates that shows we not from here.

Mama comes outta the house. She looks dead, like a zombie moving toward me. But that don't stop the guys behind us making comments, like how she so fine and all a that.

She ignores them, opens the trunk, and starts grabbing some big trash bags full of stuff.

"What you doing?" I say through the window.

She drags a few bags across the way and dumps them on the stoop. One of 'em tears open, and I see it's full of *my* stuff!

"Mama?"

She come back, grabs two more bags.

I jump outta the car. "Mama, what's going on—?"

The guys behind me is making fun, crying, *Mama, Mama.*

I run after her and grab her arm. "What you *doin*?"

She drops the bags, stares at the ground. "You're staying here with your daddy."

My heart stops.

“You really gonna leave me?”

She starts back to the car.

I hold on. “You can’t leave me here.”

She stares at the ground. “You stay with your daddy. I can’t help you no more.”

“But Mama!” I cry out.

The guys laugh at me. “Mommy, Mommy!” I wanna kill ’em, but I don’t have time.

She gets in the car and closes the door.

I bang on the window. “You can’t leave me!”

She looks at me, tears in her eyes. She says something all quiet, but I can’t hear what she talking about.

Then, in the reflection of the car window, I see a man behind me on the stoop.

I swing around and see a dude dressed—well, he looks like a cowboy.

Got a big ol’ white cowboy hat, western shirt, big gold belt buckle, and cowboy boots. He looks like a cowboy except for the gray dreads coming down to his shoulders and the fact that he as black as me.

He picking up the bags and starting back into the house.

“Hey!” I yell, running over.

He looks at me kinda funny.

Then it hits me. “You my . . . daddy?” I ask.

He laughs, I guess 'cause he too old for that. “Not me, boy. They call me Jamaica Bob, on account of the dreads. I work with your daddy.”

I take the bags from his hand. “I ain’t staying.”

I hear the car start up and swing around. “Mama!”

She looks at me scared. She mouths—*I’m sorry*.

Then it’s like everything happens all at once.

A horse—that big white horse I thought I saw before—jumps out from around the corner just as Mama’s car takes off. She looking back at me and don’t see this monster coming.

There’s a bunch of guys chasing the horse, and they see what’s gonna happen before Mama or the horse can—

BOOM!

Mama’s car sideswipes the horse. It hits the front of the car and the hood, then tumbles like a ton of bricks.

I can feel it hit the ground, and it’s a awful sound—flesh and bone and metal all crunching together with the smell of burned rubber.

“Mama!”

I run toward the car. Mama looks in shock at the blood on the hood of her car. Her hands is shaking.

The horse is lying on its side, foaming at the mouth, its hoofs scraping at the brick street, trying to get up. All the guys is frozen like someone took a picture of 'em, their jaws hanging open.

I try to open the car door, but it's stuck. I bang on the window. "Mama! You okay?"

The only sound I hear is that horse kicking and scraping as it rolls around in pain.

And that's when I see my daddy.

I can tell it's him 'cause as soon as I see him walk onto the street, it's like I'm lookin' into the future or something. He looks exactly like me, only taller and older. And he definitely ain't in a good mood.

I'm about to say something, but he just brushes past me.

Then I see the gun in his hand.

Holy—

I think he gonna go after Mama, but he stops in front of her window, and when she forces the door open, he just pushes it back closed and points her away, like she done enough damage for one day.

Her eyes is red with tears, like her heart been ripped in two. She tries the key and pumps the gas until the engine chokes to life. The car backs out

slowly, her bumper half off and grating on the street, leaving a small trail of sparks. She stops when she knocks into some trash cans. It feels like she can't do nothing right today.

Mama stares at me, like maybe this'll be the last time I'll ever see her. Then she turns down a alley and is gone.

I look at the skid marks on the empty street and feel everyone behind me staring at my back. I hear that horse gasping for breath, and it feels like me—like I had all the wind sucked right outta me. I can't breathe.

The horse moans and groans, getting louder and louder until I hear the cock of the gun and a loud *BANG!*

Then it's quiet again.

FOUR

It seem like a year passes before someone says something.

“Where Mrs. Elders at?”

Someone else says, “I saw her wandering. I told her to fix that gate, but no. Now look.”

Jamaica Bob butts in. “That’s a shame, man. This one coulda been one righteous horse if Mr. Elders was still here, bless his soul. Can’t blame a widow for this mess.”

Then the man I think is my daddy says, “Better get it off the street before the City hears about it.”

“But Harp, it ain’t our business.”

“Ain’t our business? You know anything that goes down on Chester Avenue, they’ll be blaming us. We can’t give ’em any reason to close us down.”

They argue back and forth, but my daddy gets his way. I can hear them trying to move that horse as Jamaica Bob walks past me toward a old beat-up truck.

I stare at the ground as he passes, and something catches my eye. It’s a bracelet, thin and gold with a little butterfly on it. I remember when Mama bought it when we went to the fair one time. It musta come off when I was grabbin’ at her arm.

I pick it up and pocket it. It’s like a little piece of her she left behind.

Jamaica Bob’s getting a rope outta the back of the pickup truck and tying it to the legs of the dead horse. It takes six guys to help out. Some neighbors watch from their stoops or windows, none too happy, especially when they start hosing off all that blood on the street.

My daddy stands silent, his back to me. He’s wearing a white T, old jeans, and Timberland boots. His hair is short and nappy, his arms lean and strong. The gun still hangs by his side. The others get

the horse tied to the bumper of the truck and start dragging it down the street.

Bob says, “Just put it behind the corral till we figure this out.”

Everyone follows the horse and truck, leaving only me, Bob, and the man who’s supposed to be my daddy.

Bob finally looks at me, then him, then back at me again. “Man! He even looks like you, Harp.”

Daddy turns to me for the first time, sighs. He looks me up and down, makes a face. “Can’t be mine. Too scrawny.”

“Harp, I remember when you was twelve, and let me tell you, you was no Mike Tyson.”

Harp grimaces at me, nods. “Coltrane.”

I shake my head. “Nobody calls me that. It’s Cole.”

He smiles. “Yeah. Well, it seems like I been nobody to your mama your whole life, so I’m gonna call you by your proper name, since I gave it to you.”

That’s a new one.

“*You* named me? Why would you call me something stupid like Coltrane? Who ever heard of a name like *that*?”

Bob fans his face with his hat. “Man, the boy clearly don’t know his jazz history.”

Harp scowls. “Well, you can call me Harper. Then we’ll be even.”

He stares at the brick street, kicks at a old brick sticking out. “Look, I know you don’t want to be here. And I can’t say that I want you here neither. Heard you was in trouble . . . or maybe you *was* the trouble. Which is it?”

I shrug. He don’t know me.

He shakes his head. “Before last night, I haven’t heard from your moms in forever. Then she just calls me up out of the blue. . . .” He kicks the brick outta its hole in the ground.

I don’t know what to say.

He mutters some swear word, picking up that brick and throwing it into a vacant lot. Then without looking at me, he says, “You can spend the night, and after that . . . we’ll see what’s what.” He gazes up at the sky like he can’t believe all of this was dumped in his lap on the same day. “In the meantime, you do what I say, and maybe I’ll make it through the next couple days. Now get your bags and go on inside, *Coltrane*.”

He already gettin’ on my nerves. But he the one holding a gun, so I just shut my trap and pick up my bags off the stoop.