

CHAPTER 1

Gracey

July 1997

COMPARED TO THE ROLLING OF the ocean, Lake Michigan's lazy waves never meandered too far past the boulders, as if placed in eternal time-out. As I drove northward, Lake Shore Drive looked the same as ever. Sparsely dressed, pale bodies of all shapes and sizes walked along the boardwalk, unashamed as onlookers passed by in their overheated cars. I would have called the walkers tourists, but a good percentage were families trying to make up for the fact that they didn't go on a real vacation to Lake Geneva or Florida. To my left were the same skyscrapers that had been and always would be there—the Sears Tower, John Hancock Center, and the Ebony Building.

I hadn't exactly expected a "We Missed You" banner or "Welcome Home, Gracey" spelled out in lights over six floors on a high-rise, but a shout-out on WGCI or B96 to the tune of "Welcome Back" would have been nice. Maybe I thought too highly of myself, but the nerve of Chicago to act as if it hadn't missed me, like it hadn't even noticed I was gone. Sure, it'd been ten years, but—

I felt so small, like an ant in my cute little 1995 black Toyota Celica GT. I thought I'd be the cat's meow pulling up in my almost sports car. It was only two years old and looked brand-new when freshly washed, but no one even looked my way.

Maybe if I went to Englewood, where I was known, I'd be seen. I'd visit the folks who took care of me and my sisters when our mother went on a walkabout. I hadn't thought about those days for

years, and I wasn't looking forward to any reminders. Part of me wanted to pretend nothing had happened. Miss Nelda was probably the only person I'd really care to see, and I should have called.

Miss Nelda had been our safety net. Back in the day, we counted on her like we did oxygen. Hearing her raspy voice in my dreams, her controlled laugh, and seeing her finger wag when she was upset was a reminder that part of my childhood was suspended in midair while all the other kids were on the ground, walking.

I'd had many new days since then, and life was good.

I parked in front of C. R. Johnson Middle School in Evanston, where I'd just been hired as a seventh-grade Honors English teacher. It was a Monday afternoon during summer vacation. A faint musty smell lingered behind the kids who had just left summer school. I'd forgotten how hard it was to keep that armpit stink away when I was thirteen. It was almost impossible for boys. Any adults working in a middle school had to accept that their noses would be plagued with the sweet and sour mix of musty pits layered over with a big brother's fragrant cologne. Puberty in tweens seemed as hard to manage as menopause in middle-aged women. Thank goodness I was done with one phase and had a ways to go before the next.

The woman behind the desk in the main office met me with a smug smile, the kind given when you're trying to be polite and want to get back to work.

"Good afternoon, dear. How can I help you?" Her voice was nonsense with intentional bass. Only the bold would talk back to that tone. It was enough to make anyone double-check their self-esteem levels.

The woman seemed stuck in the sixties with her beige, horn-rimmed glasses tethered by a silver-plated chain. What kind of place was this? I looked around to make sure everything else was of the nineties decade. "Don't Do Drugs" posters were tacked on the wall, and a "Reading Is Totally Awesome" sign with two Ninja Turtles standing back-to-back was pasted to the front desk. Tupac by the watercooler. Apparently this was the only woman holding on to her

most memorable era, when admin assistants were secretaries and wore short pumps as if they were comfy gym shoes.

"I'm one of the new teachers starting in the fall. My name is Gracey Downing. Actually, you probably have me listed as Grace."

The woman looked up at me through her readers while tilting her chin down. She attempted to keep the bridge afloat with her forefinger.

"Um . . ." She pulled her glasses off and touched her cheek with her fingertips. "Didn't you get the voicemail I left about a week ago?"

"No, what did it say?" I stopped checking messages in our house ages ago. They were never for me, and my nephew liked to race through them to see if he got any.

I bit the inner lining of my lip to remain calm. The woman rubbed her earlobe with her thumb and index finger, nervously repositioning her earring.

"Well . . ." She seemed to be looking for the right words to explain awful news.

"Well, what?" I held my breath. "Am I fired already?"

"No, sweetie." She relaxed into her words. "Problem is you were never hired . . ." She gazed upward to rephrase. "I take that back. You were hired. I know we sent a letter and all of that. And you spoke to the principal . . . but . . . it's the silliest thing, really."

"What? Just say whatever you have to say." I locked eyes with her to show I meant business.

She slumped her shoulders. "We had to rescind the offer."

Words flew from my mind like startled sparrows in a barberry bush. And yet a familiar calm suspended my panic attack, like when you can't find your keys but you know they're in the house.

"Grace, did you hear me?" Her voice hit my thoughts and then echoed between my eardrums.

"So . . ." I struggled to speak, let alone draw air into my lungs. "I drove up from the South. And—"

"Mississippi, yes. I know that's a long ride. I remember when I was young, we used to take the trek down to Alabama, and it took forever, especially in those old Cadillacs. They were just—"

“This isn’t about you.” The words escaped my mouth before I could draw them back.

“Well, no, of course not. I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

Even as my brain tried to process at the speed of light, nothing made sense.

“I’m out.” I turned to go, and she didn’t chase after me like I thought she would. Nosy, trendy teachers paused their conversations to gauge my situation as I raced past, then returned to their banter. A lone student with a curly red high-top saw my distraught look and responded with wide eyes, running past me with his backpack bouncing. I made it to my Celica, where I burst into tears as soon as inertia pulled the door shut. This stupid car was too short for my tall frame. For a split second, I hated it. What good teacher drives an almost sports car? I should have gotten a simple Corolla.

How cruel could God be to allow this to happen to me? Alone again, left to my own devices to figure it out. I could drive back down South, but not one bone in my body wanted to go in that direction. The only people I knew here lived on the South Side of Chicago, but I wasn’t going back to my old neighborhood either. Evanston was where I belonged, and I wasn’t ready to give up on my new life just yet.

I drove to the lake and parked next to a lagoon with two fountains jetting artificially electric-blue water into the air. On the right was a private island for the ducks with a ramp allowing their ducklings to waddle up and down with ease. Spring ducks and wild geese treated the lagoon like an exclusive resort, tending to their wings and then disappearing into the lush greenery. I wanted to go in and see what went on beyond the curtain of foliage. On the benches around the lagoon, a mother and precocious toddler sat on a bench and fed bread-crumbs to curious waterfowl.

None of this made sense, I thought as I rounded the island. These birds had it made, and here I was without a roof over my head. How could this happen? Was it my fault? I totally should have called to make sure everything was okay before setting out. But then again, maybe I just wanted to get out of the South, and finding out that I

didn't have a job would've stopped me from coming. Suddenly, I had a greater understanding of actors who risked everything to move to Hollywood. Sometimes the only way to move forward in life is to go where you have no roots. That's what my heart had told me when I accepted the job, but now I wasn't so sure.

I looked past the lagoon and saw an L-shaped pier. The entry gates were open, and at the very end of the walkway was a faded yellow post with rust bleeding through the flaked paint and electrical gadgets at the top, a beacon of sorts for boats. Rocks were piled around the base of the pier to put distance between the thrust of the waves and the walkway. From the edge of the pier, the sun cast a spotlight on the sparkling waters, and the city's skyline stood as a gentle invitation to return to the old neighborhood.

I did an about-face, looking instead to the coastline of Northwestern University. I was better off out here where no one knew my name and I could think about what my next steps would be. *You've been here before*, I told myself. *On your own. You will get through this.* I pivoted back toward the Windy City and prayed, *God, get me through this without having to go home.*

I left the pier and walked up the shore, passing by rich white folks in golfing gear—women in skorts, tennis sneakers, and fitted visors. Men wore khaki shorts and collared shirts sporting the crocodile emblem. None of them acknowledged my existence. I looked down at myself to make sure I hadn't become invisible. A smile emerged. My brown-skinned body was still solid and contrasting with the pastel world around me. If I could see me, they could. Our worlds weren't that different.

In my grandmother's town, everyone spoke to everyone. We were excited to see each other, we even practiced in our heads seconds before opening our mouths how we'd greet one another, whether "Good mornin'" or "How you doin'?" or "Good to see you." Even on the South Side as a child, people saw me and my sisters in 3-D. You could reach out and poke us with your finger, and we'd flick you off like a fly. Here, folks seemed to be happier to see a shaggy, three-legged dog

hobbling along than a person of color. But that wasn't enough for me to go home. Something was drawing me here, an overarching thing I couldn't quite put my finger on but liked. I wanted it.

After a quick drink from an old, tarnished water fountain outside a public restroom, I headed back to my car with an *Evanston Review* I swiped from a bench. Positioning myself toward the warm violet horizon over the lake, I locked the doors and read the want ads until I dozed. Hours later, I could feel my mother's anxiety, so I found a pay phone by the bathroom and called.

"Good morning."

"Morning?" My mother sounded more than a little annoyed. "Grace, it's six thirty p.m. Why are you saying good morning? You all right?"

"Yes, sorry. Everything's fine."

"What time did you get in, and why didn't you call sooner?" I could imagine her on the other end of the line, standing over the sink, digging into a tub of black walnut ice cream from the Piggly Wiggly. That made me imagine Hank, my grandmother's husband, in the background saying, "They're the first-ever store to let us choose our food. Before that somebody had to go round and grab it for you."

Hank was our history buff, spewing facts whenever he found a teachable moment. "You know the Negro leagues were from the 1920s to the late 1940s," he'd announced to the folks in the stands watching my nephew, Charlie, play baseball. And when my grandmother came down with diabetes, he shook his head and said, "All them milkshakes and hamburgers—you know white bread is nothin' but sugar—we should have switched to wheat buns. You know Joseph Lee, a Black man, made the first automatic bread-making machine?" And we'd responded with the "huh" that was usually enough validation to satisfy him.

I shook off the memories and tried to keep my tone upbeat. "I got in around one o'clock and went straight to the school. Then I got tied up with things. You know how it goes."

"Yes, I know." Mom's voice raised its pitch and softened like it did when detecting trouble in my life. Her pauses were her ears working

in tandem with her Spidey sense, trying to pinpoint the issue. She was so different from when we were young. Attentive now and attuned to all of us, though some more than others.

First time my younger sister, Francine, had come home drunk, she yelled, “Hi, Mom,” ran straight upstairs to the bathroom, and turned on the shower. Mom marched up those oakwood stairs and opened the door to see Francine hurling into the trusty ivory tower. In the moment, Mom pulled Francine’s hair into a loose ponytail and rubbed her back with the tips of her manicured nails. But when my sister woke up the next morning and sat at the kitchen table with a hangover, Mom calmly said, “By the way, sweetie, you’re grounded for the next four weekends.”

Joanna, the oldest of us and mother of my nephew Charlie, uttered a high-pitched “Ope!” and continued drinking her cup of black coffee while pecking at her crossword puzzle. But honestly, after one weekend, Francine was back to running the streets.

The mother that Mom had become over the last decade would never have abandoned us when we were younger. To this day, we can tell guilt lingers in her heart like a sustained note on a busted violin. For the longest, she spoiled Francine, and Francine soaked it all up like honey butter on a warm sour-milk biscuit. But Joanna stayed cold-hearted and boarded up, with nowhere to pour her love except on her son. So then Mom poured her love into Charlie, too, and kept a close watch over Joanna as if her presence would keep my sister from going off the rails. It became evident she cared more for Joanna and Charlie than she did for me and Francine.

When Francine realized what was happening, it was like she’d been propelled into outer space without a tether. The cuddles stopped, the cooking of favorite meals at a moment’s notice slowed down, and worst of all, Mom closed the door to her and Francine’s movie, popcorn, and pajama nights in her queen-sized bed, and exchanged them for watching Thomas the Tank Engine with Charlie most evenings so Joanna could get enough rest to wake at 5:00 a.m. to prepare for class and go to work. Francine couldn’t do anything to get Mom’s attention back.

I wasn’t too bothered. If anything, Francine had my condolences—I

was lucky to be on this earth as an oops baby, so who was I to complain? I was satisfied with Mom's special one-on-one attention that came around every blue moon, like rhubarb and strawberry pie at a Black family reunion. We had to savor the moments we were given with her. Besides, it was frustrating seeing her brain constantly trying to figure out how to say sorry in a way that excused her past and begged forgiveness for her present.

Who would have thought that even after going back and fixing what you messed up, the bad decisions would still haunt you like a haint that hovers near the back porch?

"What was it like?" Mom asked, still listening for signs of distress in my voice over the phone. "Does it . . . fit you?"

Lord, please help me get her off this phone. "Oh yeah, it's great. It looks like every other school on the inside—hallways, classrooms . . . but there is one interesting thing. It has bars like a prison in front of the school. Once you get closer, you realize the bars are decorations used to secure the courtyard."

"Oh, that is odd. Wonder who came up with that great idea?"

"I don't know, but everybody seems fine with it. How's the family? Y'all miss me?" I was hoping she'd take the ol' bait and switch.

"Yeah, we do. Charlie keeps asking, 'You hear from Auntie Grace yet? Ask her to get me a Bulls cap.'" I imagined Mom was half smiling, half grimacing as she accepted the change of topic even though it made her worry more. "And your grandmother and Hank won \$800 at the casino. You know they think God gives them special privileges since they're old. But it makes them happy."

We both laughed nervously, trailing into an awkward silence.

"So you like your classroom? You able to do it up nice?"

"Hmm? . . . Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, it's a typical room—blackboard, windows . . . you know the deal."

"Okay, well . . . did you find a place to stay yet, or are you still in a motel? You said they were taking care of it, right?"

"I'm in a nice setup, Mom. The views are wonderful, overlooking the lake." No lies told.

My mother took a deep breath . . . she knew something wasn't right. "Yeah," she said. "Listen, you got a pen?"

"Yes, for what?" I picked up the one in the booth.

"If anything goes down or you need anything at all, call Candi. She'd be happy to help you."

"Oh, Mom, come on. Everything's fine, and I have her number already."

"Take it down again."

"Mom, it's literally in my address book."

"312—"

"Mom, stop. I already have it."

"555-7254." She spat out the digits. "And don't be afraid to use it. You hear me? You always have a home on the South Side."

"I hear you. And I'm fine. It's great here in Evanston. I'm going to make a happy life for myself."

More silence—the sad, I-don't-believe-you kind.

"I love you, honey."

"Love you too, Mom." The tears were flowing before I hung up the receiver. Not because I was scared but because I didn't like letting my family down, and I was. They would have handled things much better if I had told them what happened. They would have said, "It's all right, Gracey. Don't worry. God has a better job for you." But now I was out on my own with nothing but sheet metal protecting me from the elements. I wiped the salty drops with the sleeve of my first-day-at-work outfit: a black polka-dot button-down blouse and black linen slacks.

Instead of sulking in my car, I got out and walked around so people wouldn't find me suspicious. It was one time I actually wished I could be invisible. Parents were home from their day jobs and spending time with their children at the park. They rode bikes as a family, always the mother bringing up the rear to make sure a chick didn't fall behind, the father in the front, leading the way. The ducks and people were pretty much the same, families trying to make the most of an easy day in the suburbs.

Whatever I was feeling was oddly familiar. My mind and body

already knew what to do, like following a worn path I'd walked in another country or a direction I frequented in my dreams. A strength from the core of my being kept me still even though none of this made sense and wasn't the least bit fair, not to me anyway. Maybe this was what "God with us" felt like. It was a saying that always resonated when I heard the name *Immanuel* around Christmas. Mary pondered who Jesus would be, and I pondered what his name meant. "God with us." How was God with us?

When the lifeguards finished their hours and shuffled off the beach in their orange flip-flops, I shed my shoes and trudged through the sand to the water's edge. The cool waves sloshed around my toes and quickly sank into the sand, making footprints. The last vestiges of light remained in the sky, and I was afraid to pray. Maybe I'd put myself in this situation by not checking messages. I'd just wanted to come here, to get away so badly. Had I tricked God or myself? Was God mad at me for creating this mess? If so, why was I also feeling peace? Was it even legal to be homeless and at peace?

I prayed anyway—silent at first, until my soul stirred. "Hey, God. Taking a chance here in case you're not mad at me or you don't think I'm completely off my rocker. Leaving home still feels right to me. But I don't know if that's good or bad, 'cause the thought of returning home feels bad, like playing-the-accordion-in-a-Miles-Davis-song bad. And I'm not super religious, you know that, like, we ain't all that close. But for real, tell me what to do and don't let me get my signals crossed and make a fool of myself."

Ominous clouds encroached on the open blue space before me. Damp permeated the air. I stood there for what might have been a full rotation of the sun because when I turned toward the land, the whole top of the world was heavy with dense gray clouds. I looked at the waters, and the gloom continued inching across the blue sky. The cityscape was cast in a shadow. Who knew boundaries existed in the heavens? I pulled my feet from the water and pranced across the sand, stopping to clean my feet under the sprinklers by the bathroom. A crack of lightning threatened to whip me as I ran to my car.

Just as I got the door shut with a light tug, the downpour began. “Is this your answer to my prayer? A storm?” I took an old towel from the back and dried my feet. Then I reclined my seat, turned the towel over, and used it to cover my head, letting the rain lull me to sleep. Way too many hours had crowded into this day.

When I next opened my eyes, the sun peeked over the line between the sky and water as a morning greeting. My head ached, probably because I’d forgotten about food, and the car was as warm as an oven turned on to wake the kitchen. Random walkers passed by and peered in to make sure I was still living. How many times had I done that while walking through the parking lot on my way to the grocery store? Looking at random folks lying out with their mouths wide open and junk covering the back seat and rear windows. At least my stuff was organized and neat, and I didn’t plan to be out here for very long. But then again, isn’t that what everyone says when the street becomes their motel?

I went to the washroom to tidy up, using the toiletries from my suitcase. My grandmother used to get on us for taking too many showers, so she taught us how to wash up with washcloths. We called them bird baths because birds flick water under their wings on the edge of fountains. “*Get all the smelly places where the sun don’t shine,*” Grandma’d say, “*and you can make it through the day feelin’ mighty fine.*” We still took our showers, but only three per week. Her lessons had come in handy before, and they did now too. No one was in the bathroom at six a.m., so I felt safe, my mind grounded. I decided to go back to C. R. Johnson Middle School to talk to the principal and see if anything could be done.

Before I left, I stopped by the pier, drinking in the sacredness of the heavens. Why the soft breaking of the waves reminded me of my baptism, I had no idea.

Grandma had insisted we all get baptized after we went up to the altar like fools pretending to get saved. Well, I was pretending until I wasn’t. I wanted the whole world to see me as some kind of special so my biological father could hear about it in the wind. Anyway,

Grandma had this notion that if we weren't baptized and one of us died before our time, we'd wind up in hell, and we were "*all too pretty to suffer in damnation.*" Jesus himself would feel so bad he'd have to stick his hand in the fire and pluck us out of there.

Imagine the three of us standing in our white robes, shivering from the air conditioner. Francine was scared our real shapes would show and everyone would see how flat she was, and Joanna was scared everyone would see how voluptuous she'd become from the pregnancy. Only thing I was thinking about was my hair since I'd just got it washed and pressed the night before. Mom tried her best to get it all under the swim cap, but I knew water would seep in and I'd have an Afro when they made me stand in front of the congregation like I'd just won a gold medal in the Olympics. And yet, that baptism was the closest I'd ever felt to God.

I closed my eyes, listening to the waves in Lake Michigan rustle to and fro. For a moment, the sound became the swishing of water in the baptismal pool. Every eye had been glued to me, and I remember hoping they wouldn't be disappointed, since I was sure God didn't know I existed. The pastor, who was also my paternal grandfather, put his basketball-holding-sized hand on my head, and I allowed myself to fall onto his forearm as he let me down gently into the water. For a second, it felt like I was trapped in a coffin. What if I couldn't get out? I started to panic, but then I thought, This must be what Jesus went through. When my grandfather brought me out of the water, something new rose within me, a spiritual presence of sorts.

I wondered if it was Jesus, but I was too scared to ask. Adults were always so quick to point out what was wrong with children. I didn't want to risk a label like "special," so I let the lady drape a white towel around me.

I was so thankful to come out of that water alive and knowing I wasn't alone that I started crying in front of everybody, and the more I tried to stop, the harder I cried. The congregation was so touched, they started clapping, and Grandpa hollered into the microphone,

“Brothers and sisters, that’s the Holy Ghost all over her. That’s my granddaughter, y’all!”

Confused, I thought a ghost had come up with me and now it was all over me. In between gasping for air through my tears, I kept saying, “Get it off me! Get it off me!” which made everybody gush. Finally, my mother came and sat me in the front row next to her. She put my head on her shoulder and wrapped her arm around me until I was quiet enough to watch Francine get baptized. Hers was quiet and uneventful. Maybe ’cause she didn’t want to be like me.

On the way home, I asked about the Holy Ghost, and Hank said, “Oh, that’s what makes the tambourine go and the women start to shoutin’ up and down the aisle. If you caught the Holy Ghost today, you’re lucky all you had was tears.” Hank was laughing while he spoke. “You coulda been doing cartwheels up there.”

“Hank! Stop.” My grandmother whacked him on the shoulder.

“Gracey, the Holy Ghost is your friend,” Grandma explained. “That’s all you need to know. You can go anywhere in this world—over it, under it—and know you’re not alone. That’s the Holy Ghost for ya. Now let it go at that.”

Years later I realized that Hank was talking about the Holy Spirit, and *Spirit* and *Ghost* were words to describe the same. All I know is, when I came up out of that water, whether it was Jesus or the Holy Spirit, God was all over me. The waters flooded me, and then after, I cried on my mom’s shoulder, and the caked-on mud I carried within was finally washed away.

Standing on the pier listening to the peaceful murmurs of the morning lake, I closed my eyes and recalled the feeling I’d had when rising from my baptism. Drawing air into my lungs was a privilege, and I took full advantage of it that morning. With greed, I drew in as much as my lungs could hold and then pushed it out through my mouth, letting it escape without trepidation. There was so much more air to be had, and I was so thankful all over again. To have life, to have the Spirit as a friend, is about all we could ask for in this world. And as I turned to walk to my car, I thought I knew exactly what to do.

CHAPTER 2

Gracey

July 1997

“PLEASE LET ME WORK HERE, Principal Clemmons!” My hands were clasped together before my chin.

The short, tawny man stared back at me nervously. He probably wished he could press a security button under his desk as if he were a bank teller getting robbed. His head shone with authority, seemingly well used to being without hair. The sleeves of his suit jacket stopped short of his cuffs, as if he’d made the most of the junior section at Marshall Field’s. He was a slim man whose dress shirt outlined his stomach muscles, maybe to show that working out was his thing.

“Sir, I drove up from the South by myself for the promise of this job. I left a whole other life. You know how hard that was?”

“So I heard. Yes, I think I have an idea, Ms. Downing, seeing as I was born and raised in Alabama.”

“Okay then, you know. I can’t go back there, to the cows and the chickens and the slow-service Sonic where the best-tasting thing, the milkshake, is better than the burgers. The houses have Confederate flags hanging from the porches and Black folks are still ‘colored’ and the snuff inside people’s mouths—” I hurled a bit in my mouth just thinking about it, and Mr. Clemmons scooted back in his chair, tightening his grip on his fountain pen. He pulled something out of his drawer and stood.

“Listen, Grace.” He walked toward the door even though I was still sitting across from his desk. “I appreciate you coming by, but there’s

nothing for you here. We don't have the budget for another Black female teacher."

"What?" I turned to look at him. "What do you mean by a 'Black female teacher'?"

"You know what I mean, Grace. It's an unspoken code we all have to follow, from headquarters down. We have to make sure there's more of them than us or else they'll pull their kids out of the school, and our scores will drop 'cause our kids don't always perform well. Which, of course, isn't necessarily on them. It's the world we live in, the cards they're dealt."

"They'd do well if I were teaching them."

"But you won't be." His voice dropped an octave.

"Wait a minute, aren't you Black? I mean . . ."

"And it takes a lot of compromise to stay in this space. I can't just up and do whatever I want. I've got a board and parents to answer to, and we need those test scores to meet state standards."

"Then let me start an after-school program for the disadvantaged kids who can't afford fancy tutors."

"Already got that. And programs during school to boot." He seemed to be losing his patience with me. "I'm sorry, young lady. With all due respect, my hands are tied. I'll walk you out."

I followed him out the door and through the outer office. The soles of our shoes hitting the linoleum was the only sound to break the awkward silence. I couldn't let my dream job go that easily.

"Mr. Clemmons, is there anything—"

"Not at this time, Ms. Downing." He stopped to open the heavy outer door and partially bowed. "You take care."

Before the door could close, I hollered, "Mr. Clemmons."

"Yes," he panted with great temperance.

"I hope one day you'll fight for teachers like me."

"Fighting isn't the problem, Ms. Downing. Losing is. We can't afford another loss."

I'd thought for sure the peace I'd felt yesterday and this morning was a sign that when I went back to the school, God would shine an

angelic light on me that would make Mr. Clemmons rethink his decision. Or maybe my pedagogical rhetoric would cause him to say, “Ms. Grace Downing, we need your expertise. Please come and join our team. We’ll even give you a starting bonus of \$4,000.” That would have been enough to put first and last months’ rent on an apartment and then get basic furniture like a bed, nightstand, couch, and nineteen-inch television. I wouldn’t need much else, maybe a towel or two on top of what I brought with me. I could get paper plates and plastic utensils at the grocery store until I could afford more.

I dropped into my car and turned the key. “There will be no miracles today.” The purr of the engine was comforting. After two years, the driver’s seat had the perfect imprint of my backside, so it knew how to hold me. The space between my knee and the pedal was good enough to keep the aches away, and the cushion on the armrest had me believing my elbow was on a cloud. Cool air blew in my face to the tune of Ahmad Jamal Trio’s “Darn That Dream.” Not everything was right, but it was going to be okay.

The other side of Evanston had more people my color. I could roll down the windows and crank up my radio a bit. Nobody batted an eye at me blasting Mariah Carey. These were my people walking down the street in shorts and tank tops and sandals from Payless Shoe-Source at the local strip mall. The Dollar Tree was just like the one in Mississippi, except they had more name-brand chocolate bars and less coconut options. I went in to buy a Snickers and asked, “Where do people go to chill around here? I just moved to the area, and I’m locked out of my house.” I wasn’t afraid to share my Southern twang. “Gotta wait until my husband comes home.”

The cashier had black and brown braids hanging down to her torso and thick liner surrounding her eyes. Her lips were freshly glossed. “Most folks, um, like to go over to Robert Crown or Mount Trashmore. There’s a park over there, and you can go walking and whatnot. Just go straight down Dodge. You’ll see Robert Crown on your left. It looks like a big community center, and Mount Trashmore—”

“Is a big hill.”

“Yup, how’d you know? It’s further down.”

“My dad used to take me and my sisters sledding back in the day.” I grinned back like I’d never connected with a genuinely nice person who smiled in response to something I said.

“Aw, you lucky. Girl, we just went up there with our snowsuits and rolled down.”

“It don’t matter,” I code-switched. “A good time is a good time.”

“Uh-huh, that’s what I tell my kids. Them ones with sleds wish they had bigger sleds . . . you’re never gonna be satisfied, so put them suits on and roll down.”

The drive to the big hill took all of six minutes. It looked just like I remembered. At the bottom was James Park, where the kids played softball and soccer and people walked the perimeter of the grounds for exercise. Evergreen trees grew along the length of the hill on both sides to deter people from going around the back, where the growth was wild and unkempt. Climbing the hill was no easy feat. Dried patches in the grass where people had paved a path helped me find my footing, but it felt like I was hiking at a forty-five-degree angle the whole time. Finally, I reached the top and stood, focusing on regulating my breath before taking in what I could see. The sight was unimpressive—cars and streets from a bird’s-eye view.

Maybe this would be a great time to bug God about the situation again, seeing as I was ever so slightly closer to heaven.

“Okay, God.” My eyes were level, not looking up. “You didn’t do a miracle today. That’s fine. It’s all good. I have faith that somehow you’re going to turn this thing around, and in a month or two, I’ll be teaching here and living in a great apartment, and my mother and sisters and nephew will come visit me and lift me up as the greatest thing since sliced bread. Please, God, remember me. Tell me what to do.”

“You think God lives on Mount Trashmore?”

I spun. “Where’d you come from?” I shrieked at the old man with a disheveled beard who’d appeared from nowhere.

“Me?” He gestured with his head toward the back of the hill.

“You live here?”

"I live anywhere I want on any given day, but mostly here."

"So you're homeless."

"Did I say that?" He felt more like a sage from another realm than a stranger.

"No, but . . ."

"I didn't imply it either. Or did I?"

My shoulders tensed and I glanced behind me to chart a mad dash down the hill if needed. "Dude, why are you talking to me?"

"God don't live here. That's all I wanted to tell you. You're wasting your breath. And why do you want to live here so bad anyway? This is a hard town. You're either known by the good your family did or the bad. If it's for good, they can't wait to have you by their side. And if it was bad, you gotta wait for people to forget, the same way they make you wait seven years for bad credit to be removed from your credit report. And even then, there's no forgetting. They push it down when they talk to you so it doesn't come up, but it's still there. You should go where you can be free to be you."

I frowned. "What? You're not making any sense."

"Fair enough. Go on, keep talking to God then." He waved me off and turned to walk away on his knobby legs. He took staggered steps along the grooves down the back of the mountain and soon disappeared.

For a split second, I wanted to go home to my sometimey mother and my family. As fast as momentum would carry me without losing my balance, I ran down, treading the path that had already been paved. When I got to my car, my hands trembled as I tried to get my key in the door. Finally inside, I drove to the other part of town and got out to sit on a bench by the lagoon. "Jesus, I was just trying to get a word in with you, and that creep showed up. Who was he? Why'd you let that happen?"

The nervous energy in my body had me jittery, so I changed into my leggings and a T-shirt. My Nikes lifted my arches, and I went on my way up the shoreline, hoping jogging would do its normal trick. Francine got me into running when she was on the track team. She com-

peted in short distances, but she and I would run two miles around the residential streets in the morning, at least until she started drinking. We thought she was just doing what young people do. Not one of us could tell you when it happened exactly, but after a while the alcohol took hold of her.

She'd tell you it started with wine coolers at sleepovers. It felt as harmless as Kool-Aid until it began to summon her when she least expected it, like before an exam or party or after a run. But that acquired taste matured over time to vodka and whatever juices were on the side of the fridge.

It bothered all of us that she drank so much. When she wasn't around, we talked about our worst fears and pitched ideas to help, but we didn't really have the bandwidth to deal with it directly, no room in our hearts for the pain. We'd been through enough already. We were supposed to be rebuilding our lives, not tacking on new problems. Grandma always ended those conversations with, "Give her time to figure it out. I'm sure it's just a phase."

I pounded up the lakeshore, my anxiety increasing instead of lessening. I still hadn't eaten enough food or drank enough water, and I was all out of the chips, apples, tangerines, and sandwiches my grandmother had packed for me. The houses I ran past were mansions, but through the windows, all I saw were elderly folks puttering around their antiquated furniture. Every home sagged with isolation. I turned my nose up. What a lifeless way to live. With each perfectly lined lawn, opulence and oppression pressed down.

I stopped in front of towering condos to catch my breath and considered what it must be like to wake up each morning next to this body of water. I didn't know a soul in these homes. Even if I could have this, I wouldn't want it.

Hands on my hips, I walked the rest of the way back and staggered to a stop. With a groan, I surrendered my body to my almost-sports car and locked the doors. Then I crawled into the back seat, curled up like a Siamese cat in need of a nap, and went to sleep. I couldn't care less who saw me.