

The title 'pizza my heart' is centered on the page. The word 'pizza' is in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. The word 'my' is in a smaller, grey sans-serif font. The word 'heart' is in a large, bold, grey sans-serif font. There are several hand-drawn, sketchy hearts and dots scattered around the text: one heart and two dots to the right of 'pizza', one heart and one dot to the left of 'heart', and one heart and one dot to the right of 'my'.

pizza
my
heart

Rhiannon Richardson

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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For all the friends who made my spontaneous
move to Ohio the wild, challenging, fun,
and memorable experience that it was.

chapter 1



“I can’t believe you’re abandoning me,” my best friend, Sasha, whines, looping her arm through mine as we cross the street.

Abandoning is hardly the right word. That would imply that I’m going willingly when, really, I’m being dragged kicking and screaming into this new version of my life.

“I’m being kidnapped,” I correct her.

Sasha laughs and shakes her head, her strawberry-scented cocoa-brown curls bouncing. The *thwack* of our flip-flops is rhythmic, thumping almost on beat with the basketball game in full swing at the park across the street. Some of the guys in our neighborhood get together on Friday evenings to play. My dad

joins in sometimes, when he's not working. Since Fridays are one of the busier nights at Soul Slice, *sometimes* means *almost never*.

But now that we're moving, I guess there won't even be *sometimes* anymore.

At the beginning of summer, moving day felt eons away. Suddenly it's almost here, a presence so distinct it might as well loop its arm through my free one and walk with Sasha and me.

Starting tomorrow, there will be no more running down to the corner store anytime I've got a craving for Takis or hot fries, demolishing the bag as I head to Sasha's brownstone, asking her mom to let me in so I can wash Taki dust off my red-tinted fingertips before Sasha and I plot our next adventure.

No more subway rides to Manhattan, to roam around the bookstore that's four stories tall, stop at the café that serves the best croissants, and buy art supplies (me) and makeup (Sasha). No more Washington Square Park, lunches by the arch, or weaving our way up to the Garment District so I can pick out fabric for my mom to sew into shirts.

I was born and raised here in Brooklyn, and I love New York. I love how there's always a new cobblestone street to explore, always a new boutique or museum. But now, no more city. And no more Sasha.

"Hey," Sasha says, pulling me from my well of nostalgia. "Look at it like a fresh start."

"I don't want a fresh start," I remind her, though she's not the one I need to make my case to.

My parents never said, *Hey, Maya, what do you think about picking up and moving to the outskirts of Philadelphia to open a second pizza shop?* I give them a little credit because obviously I would've said, *Hard pass*. Still, I used to be under the impression that where I lived had a little something to do with *me*. Now I know it has nothing to do with how I feel or what I want. It's all about my parents and their dreams. Speaking of which . . .

Sasha and I turn the corner and approach my parents' pizza place. Soul Slice is wedged between a dry cleaner's and the aforementioned Takis-selling corner store. It's a hole-in-the-wall, distinguished by the SOUL SLICE block lettering above the door, the green paint

faded from age. Through the front window, I see Mom behind the counter ringing up customers, and Dad in the back by the pizza oven.

“So, this is where the road ends,” I say, dragging out my words in a sigh. “Are you sure you can’t smuggle me into your basement for a few weeks until my parents give up on looking for me?” I ask Sasha, only half kidding.

Sasha gasps, play-slapping my arm. “Maya, *stop*.”

I can’t help but laugh, imagining myself hiding amid all the random things Sasha’s family exiles to the basement. I could probably fit inside one of the ridiculously giant ceramic vases her grandma sends every Christmas.

“I had to at least try,” I say, shrugging. “But, for real,” I add, “I love you.”

Sasha looks at me, her bushy eyebrows pinched in the middle of her forehead.

“I love you, too.” She pouts, which makes me pout.

Sasha’s phone vibrates, and I know it’s her mom asking where she is. I guilted her into hanging out a little while longer, but now there’s no more overtime.

We head into Soul Slice, immediately enveloped in the humid, pizza-scented air. I've basically grown up in this shop, with its sand-colored walls and matching linoleum tile floor. The air conditioner hasn't worked right in years, so we keep the door cracked open, which helps to draw in customers. You can smell the basil, oregano, fresh tomatoes, and melted cheese from blocks away. There are also the delicious scents of syrup, corn bread, fried chicken, and gravy from our specialty pizzas.

I squeeze behind the counter, saying hi to Thomas and Renee, who have worked here longer than I can remember. They're going to stay in New York and run the shop while we open Soul Slice 2.0.

Lucky them.

I sign in to the closed register so I can ring up Sasha's order. Even though I'm not technically an employee, I have an employee ID number that I use to sign in whenever my parents need me to cover the registers while one of them is on break or in the back for a meeting.

Sasha orders her usual—a Corn Bread Crust pie

that she'll bring home to her family for dinner. While her pizza's getting prepared, Sasha goes to say her goodbyes to my parents, who each give her a hug. When Sasha's pizza is ready, I hand her the warm cardboard box and then walk with her to the door.

"See you later, crocodile?" I say, like always.

"In a while, alligator," she says, her smile lopsided.

We hug each other, and I inhale the familiar strawberry smell of my best friend's hair. Then I watch from the window as she heads up the block. She turns around to wave to me before disappearing around the corner.

"Maya, honey," Mom says, appearing beside me. She wipes her hands on her apron. "Did you have a good day with Sasha?"

"Yeah," I say, because it's true, no matter how much it hurts that it was our *last* day.

"Dad and I are about to finish up here," Mom says, reaching for the end of one of my French braids, twirling it around her finger. "Why don't you hang out for a minute and then we can all walk home together and finish packing?"