

THE LIFE
I'M IN

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CHAPTER 1

MAYBE I WAS born bad. Some people are, you know. I do bad things and bad things happen to me, no matter how hard I try to be good. Now my sister wants me gone. I don't know what I did this time exactly, 'cause I'm always doing something, she say. Like punching a teacher, making a girl set our classroom on fire. But I don't wanna go. I was born in this house, right in the living room. It's the only house I ever lived in. She don't care. Not no more. We leaving for Greyhound in a few hours.

Getting dressed in the dark, I leave my bonnet on. Then I walk over to the window to watch the sun come up. Every day it's another color. A different sun, seem like. Wish I was different. But the same old me still here doing the same old things I always done.

Zippping up my backpack, takes a while 'cause it's full. My sister JuJu would be mad about the things I snuck and put in here—gin, rum, that kind of stuff. I started to pack my coloring books and crayons, but I ain't done with those yet. JuJu said be ready first thing in the morning, but when I sit my backpack and suitcase out in the hall it's still dark, and her door is shut tight. Maybe she changed her mind. I changed my mind about some things, like calling Maleeka Madison, when I said I wouldn't never, ever speak to her no more in life. They kicked me out McClenton Middle because of her.

Maleeka ain't the same Maleeka she used to be. She don't walk the same. Don't even look the same. She got a fro now, wears

lipstick, not gloss, foundation, and eyeliner. I seen her online with her new friends. She go to a school for smart kids now. I don't go to school at all.

I'm in bed lying down when I call her. "Maleeka."

"Char?"

"Don't hang up."

"I wouldn't do that, Char."

"Oh."

She ask what I been up to. I ain't talked to her since last year. I done plenty of things since then. Only, I can't think of nothing good to tell her. When the quiet gets too loud, I tell her why I called. "She don't want me no more. She putting me out the house. Can you ask your mother to talk to her?"

Maleeka know who I'm talking about. She asks if JuJu still throwing them parties, but don't wait for the answer. She could ask her mother to get on the phone, she says, if I want her to.

"You ask her. She might tell me no."

Maleeka used to always do what I told her. She knew I'd beat her ass if she didn't. This time she say I should talk to her mother myself. "This is really important. It should come from you."

I sit up, breathe in slow and easy, so I don't get mad. "Please, Maleeka." I say it in a nice and quiet voice, when I really wanna roll my eyes and scream.

At first, she say okay. Then just that quick she change her mind. "I always did what you told me, Char. But not this time."

I hit the wall with a pillow. "Just ask her! She your mother!"

"One, two . . ."

"Stop that."

"Three . . ."

"What you doing? Why you counting?"

“I’m giving you time to apologize.”

“Huh?”

She see a counselor at school, she tells me. If people scream at her or she feels disrespected she supposed to count to five. “If they don’t quiet down or apologize by then, end the call, walk away, get help, my counselor says.”

She start counting again. I stop her when she get to four and a half, and apologize. I never do that. People apologize to me or else.

She’ll get her mom, she says, if I still want. I tell her not to. Her mother wouldn’t help me now anyhow. “How come nothing bad ever happens to you, Maleeka?”

“You know my dad died, Char. That’s something bad. And my mother—” She yawns, then say how her mother ain’t sad and depressed no more, or sewing to help her nerves. “She work for the cable company.”

“Oh. Tell her I said hi.”

“Last year she had breast cancer. She’s in remission though.”

I tell her I’m sorry to hear that. Out the blue, she tell me I’m smart. That maybe it’s not all my fault that I act the way I do. “Both your parents died. You had it way worse than me.”

I don’t talk about my parents to nobody. Not even JuJu. I almost tell Maleeka that, then change my mind. It wasn’t gonna come out so nice, I could tell. So, I go to my desk. Sit down to work on a picture I’m almost done coloring. We both quiet for so long, I get half the sky in my picture done.

“Where she sending you, Char?”

“To my grandparents.”

“She could change her mind. You never know.”

“You never know.”

I put down the Lemon Drop Yellow crayon. Pick up a white

one. Lay my arm on my desk, then my head on my arm, and take my time filling in the clouds. A therapist said coloring would be good for me, a way to relax, calm myself down and chill. I do it 'cause I like it now, and I'm good at it. I don't tell nobody, but when I color, seem like my whole body getting a massage.

“Char?”

“Yeah, Maleeka.”

“Have a nice trip.”

“Thanks.”

“You can text me, or call when you get there. But if you mean to me, Char, like you used to be—I won't give you no more chances.”

She gone before I get to have my say. I sit seven crayons aside to color the butterfly, fifteen more for the flowers in the garden. I like soft, light colors, so my pictures always look like spring, happy.

“You too big to color,” JuJu's girl friend told me once.

“Leave her alone,” my sister yelled. “There's worse things she could be doing.”

I never color outside the lines. I always take my time. 'Cause if you mess up, you gotta start all over again. And I hate starting over.