New York Times bestselling author

RENÉE WATSON

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WATCH US RISE



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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

AUGUST

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JASMINE

I'm a month away from starting my junior year of high school, and I just found out my father only has four months to live.

I don't really hear all of what Mom and Dad are saying. Just the important words like "cancer" and "out of remission" and "stage four."

Chelsea is the first person I call. We've been friends since elementary school. I know once I tell her, she'll tell Nadine and Isaac, which is good because I only want to say it once.

I don't know what I'd do without Chelsea, Nadine, and Isaac.

They are the kind of friends who make even the ordinary day fun, who scrape every dollar they can to chip in on a birthday gift. The kind of friends who know the magic of making Rice Krispies Treats, the joy of curling up under blankets to watch back-to-back episodes of a favorite show with bowls of popcorn that we eat as fast as we can and make more. They are the kind of friends that show up at my house—even though I told them not to—to make sure I am okay.

Here they are on my stoop. Chelsea saying, "I needed to see your face."

Nadine hugs me. "We won't stay long . . . unless you want us to. Whatever you need, we got you."

Isaac doesn't say anything. He just looks at me, and I know he knows this feeling all too well. His mom died when we were in elementary school. I was too young to drop everything and rush over to his house back then, but I remember when he came back to school, his eyes empty of the light they usually carried. I remember when our teacher had us make Mother's Day cards to take home and how he left to go to the bathroom and never came back. After school, when I saw him in the hallway, his eyes were red.

Isaac just sits on the top step of the stoop, right next to me, and really, that's all I want. Just someone to be here. Yeah, he knows.

We don't last long outside because it is too hot. Harlem's sun is blazing down on us, so we go inside and sit in the living room. Dad is on the sofa. I sit next to him. No one knows what to say or do when they see Dad. Dad cuts through the tension, acting like his normal self, like today is just a regular sunny New York day. "The young *art-ivists* have arrived," he says. He calls us art-ivists because we're all growing into ourselves as artists and activists. Well, that's what he says.

Chelsea is the poet.

Nadine is the singer (and a pretty good DJ too).

Isaac is the visual artist.

I am the writer and actress.

According to Dad, art is never just art, and since there is so much going on in the world we should be using our art to say something, do something. So when he asks, "What have you all been up to this summer?" and we answer in syncopation with shrugging shoulders, saying *I don't know*, he says, "you mean to tell me you all haven't created *anything* this summer?" He gives us all a disappointed look and says to Chelsea, "Not even one poem?" Before she can answer, Dad says, "And, Isaac, I know you know better." He says this to Isaac because Isaac's grandparents were part of the Young Lords Party, a Puerto Rican civil rights group. They helped to start *Palante*, a newspaper in the South Bronx that told news of the Young Lords. "There is no way you get a pass for not doing anything meaningful this summer," Dad says.

Isaac doesn't even try to talk himself out of it.

Dad keeps fussing. "You all have had so much time to take advantage of the city, and you haven't done anything? *That* is some kind of tragedy." He is smiling, kind of.

"There hasn't been much to do," Nadine says.

Dad shakes his head. "There's always something to do in New York." He starts coughing—hard—and everyone panics, rushing to get him water, tissues. Chelsea especially. "I'm okay. I'm okay. Just allergies," Dad says. "Dying people have regular ailments too." He laughs, but none of us do. Then he says, "I know Jasmine told you. Thank you for loving her enough to come over."

Chelsea wipes a tear from her face. "My mom and dad told me to ask if there is anything we can do?" Her voice sounds frail, and that is never, ever a word I think of to describe Chelsea.

Isaac says, "Yeah, my dad was asking too. He said he'd call a little later."

Dad looks like he is actually trying to think up something. He says, "I'll reach out to your parents if I need to. But, um, I do have something I'd like the four of you to do."

I lean forward. Nadine and Isaac sit up straighter. Chelsea says, "Anything."

"Well, like I said, I think it's tragic that you all are wasting your summer away. I didn't grow up in New York," Dad says. "I wish I'd had this rich culture at my fingertips."

"Dad, what does this have to do with us supporting you?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't need the kind of support you think I need, sweetheart. I need you all to keep on working on you—your education, your life as artists—"

"*Dad*—"

"Just indulge me for a moment, okay?"

I sit back, lean against the cushions.

"Listen, I don't want your pity or worry," Dad says. "I want each of you to be out there learning and growing and discovering. You all are such talented artists—and I mean that. Get out, go see the places that present poetry, visual art, and theater made by people of color. Study some of the greats so your work can be influenced by them."

"Are you seriously giving us another summer challenge?" I ask. It's not the first time Dad has sent us on a summer scavenger hunt of the city, but usually it's a little more thought out. Like the time he sent us out with a map of Harlem and challenged us to find historical landmarks and spaces essential to the Harlem Renaissance. We had to take a photo in front of each place as proof. And then there was the time he challenged us to only go to movie theaters that showed independent films. We had to share our findings and write reviews. We're used to him sending us out with maps and a list of instructions. But I didn't expect this today.

"Let's call it the Brown Art Challenge," Dad says.

We all just look at him, blank stares.

"I'm serious. You want to show how much you love and care about me? Keep living," he tells us. "Go out and find some inspiration. Create some art in response to what you see."

Chelsea is the first to agree, saying, "Where should we start?"

And just like that, the four of are sitting with Dad plotting and planning: Bronx Museum, Studio Museum, El Museo del Barrio. "And bonus points to the person who can surprise me with a place that's not on the list," Dad says. "But not the Schomburg Center. That would be cheating." Dad works at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and in some ways, it's my second home. I love it when an exhibit is just about to open and Dad brings me, Jason, and Mom to see it before anyone else.

Mom comes home with my brother, Jason, who is eight. He's

been at summer camp all day and doesn't know about Dad yet. Mom gives me a look that tells me my company has to leave. And I wish they could stay because that would delay the moment my brother finds out that our dad is going to die. That would keep in these tears that want to fall so bad. I have been swallowing them since Chelsea, Nadine, and Isaac showed up. No matter how much Dad is trying to keep things normal with his New York City scavenger hunt, no matter how much we all try to laugh at his corny jokes, these tears are here. Pressing against my chest.

Mom says hello to everyone and takes Jason upstairs. She looks tired and worried and not like my mom at all.

Dad stands. "Thank you all for coming over."

We walk to the door. Chelsea opens her mouth, I think to say goodbye, but instead an avalanche of tears falls. And then Nadine starts. Isaac is looking down at the hardwood floors. Just staring.

"It's okay to cry," Dad says. "Feel whatever you need to feel. But listen, everything doesn't have to change just because the cancer is back. You four are starting your junior year. I want things to be as normal as possible, just like every other school year. No matter what happens this year, you all need to stay focused, do your best. Don't let me or any distraction get in your way," he says. "You all are just beginning."

Praise poem for the summer—
by Chelsea Spencer

Here's to the warmth & every yes.
To the grind of summertime
dripping cones & chlorine haze.

Here's to float & exist, show up.
Every challenge accepted. Revival
in East Harlem. Freedom!

Fighters printmaking our past
to light up our present. We're here.
The future of us.

How we study our ancestors.
Dance ourselves into existence.
Electric grind. See the struggles.

Together, we arrive, arms linked,
lungs loud as life. Our hearts
conjuring words

& poems. All of us riding each wave
toward eclipses & ellipses always
the ongoing. Always ahead.

Facing forward. Our lives a ripple
a nonstop jump-start.
Making our mark.

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