New York Times bestselling author

RENÉE WATSON

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LOVE IS A REVOLUTION

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What Momma Left Me

LOVE IS A REVOLUTION

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Revolution is not a one-time event . . . or something that happens around us rather than inside of us.

—Audre Lorde



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3 THINGS I WANT TO DO THIS SUMMER

1. Find a new hairstyle. According to Grandma, hair is a Black girl's crown. The thicker and longer the better, so I definitely won't cut it. But I like to experiment: perm it, dye it, weave it, wig it. This summer, I want to do something I haven't done before. Maybe I'll get highlights—chestnut ombré or copper brown. Maybe honey blonde. Subtle of course, just enough to add texture and depth.

2. Find time to spend with Imani, my cousin-sister-friend. We have a plan to hang out with our best friend, Sadie, and binge-watch everything on Netflix that we've been putting off because of too much schoolwork. We have a long, long list,

but it's not all senseless entertainment. There are a few documentaries on there too—music docu-series about some of our favorite singers—but still, it's informative and educational. So our brains will be learning something.

3. (And this is the most important) Find love.

And I want to find love because I want someone's hand to hold as we roam Harlem's summer streets. I want to find love because I am tired of being the fifth wheel with Imani and Asher, who act like they're married, and Sadie and Jackson, who swear they're not a couple but are always (no, really, *always*) together. It's the last week of June and the first weekend of summer break. We're just months away from being seniors, and I have only had one boyfriend—if I can even call him that. He moved to Philly after just one month of us making it official. And I know New York and Philly aren't oceans apart, but they're not around the corner either. We both thought it was too much of a distance for us to make it work. And I want to find love because now I don't have a date for winter formal, or the prom.

And I want to find love because . . . who doesn't? Who doesn't want someone to laugh with even when something

is corny and only funny if you know the inside joke? Who doesn't want someone to call at night and talk about tiny things like *what are you doing?* and *want to get something to eat?* And big things like *what's the one thing you want to do before you die?* and *what are you afraid of?* and *who do you want to be in the world?*

I want that.

But right now, it's not about what I want. Right now it's all about Imani, my cousin-sister-friend. It's her birthday, and I promised we could do whatever she wants. And of all the things Imani could want for her birthday, she jumps up off her bed and says, "Nala, do you want to come with me to the talent show tonight?

What I really want to say is *absolutely not*. First of all, it's raining. All of Harlem is drenched and somber. It would be one thing if it was just regular rain. But no. This is hot New York summer rain. This is a steamy downpour that just makes the air even more muggy and humid. What am I going to do with my hair tonight?

But a promise is a promise, so I get dressed and agree to venture out in this hotter-than-a-sauna storm because I'd do anything for Imani, my cousin-sister-friend, who shares her mom and dad with me. I've been living here since I was thirteen, when I got into a fight with Mom and I stormed out to spend the night at Aunt Ebony's and I've

been living here ever since. I'm seventeen now. Six months younger than Imani, and she never lets me forget it, as if being six months older than me really counts. There is no mistaking that we are family.

Whenever we go to Jamaica to visit our relatives, people we don't even know come up to us, saying, "You must be one of the Robertsons." Some people even think we're sisters—we look just like our mommas, who look just like each other. Strong genes, Grandma always says. Imani and I are what Grandma calls big boned. That's in our genes too. Imani always rolls her eyes whenever Grandma uses any other phrase for "fat" except the word "fat." "It's not a bad word unless you use it in a bad way," Imani always says. "I'm fat. It's just a description. It doesn't have to cast negative judgment."

And this is where we differ. I am not down with the Say-It-Loud-I'm-Fat-and-I'm-Proud movement. I don't have low self-esteem or anything, I just don't feel the need to talk about my weight or make statements about it or reclaim a word that was never mine in the first place.

I sit on Imani's bed. "So tell me what's going to happen tonight."

"A talent show," she says. Imani dabs her wrists with an oil she bought from a street vendor on 125th. I can hardly smell it, it's so soft. Then she pulls her chunky braids up in

a ponytail. Sadie did her hair two days ago so it still has that I-just-got-my-hair-done look.

"What's the prize?" I ask.

"I don't know. A trophy, maybe. Or a certificate. I can't remember. But who wins isn't important," Imani says.

"Easy for you to say. Tell that to the performers."

"Well, what I mean is, it's a talent show to raise money and awareness. It will be promoting Inspire Harlem and raising money for our activism programs," she says. "So it's more about the gathering and being together and raising money than someone winning a prize."

I try really hard not to roll my eyes. "So, this is how you want to spend your birthday? At an Inspire Harlem talent show?"

"Don't start with me, Nala. You asked me what I want to do and this is what I want to do. We're going to Harlem Shake afterward. Does that make it better for you?"

"It's not about me. It's about what you want," I say. I mostly mean it.

"It's never about what I want," Imani mumbles.

She thinks I didn't hear her, but I did. I definitely did. "What is that supposed to mean?" I ask.

She ignores my question and keeps talking. "I don't know why you don't like my Inspire Harlem friends."

"I like them," I say. And then I mumble just like she

did, but softer to make sure she doesn't hear me. "They don't like me."

And here is Reason Number Two why I don't want to go: Imani and her Inspire Harlem friends. Inspire Harlem is an organization for Harlem teens that does community service projects and hosts awareness events about various social issues. Imani has been trying to get me to join for the past year. But I don't know, they're a little too . . . well, let's just say I don't think I'm a good fit.

The last Inspire Harlem event I went to was an open mic. The theme was Love Is Love. I thought it would be a night of love poems, sweet and beautiful sentiments about relationships with parents, partners, friends. But no. The first poem was an I-Love-to-Hate-You poem recited by a girl who wrote a poem to her ex-girlfriend. There were poems about loving people even though they aren't worthy of love and poems about how America doesn't love Black people, or Native people, or immigrants, or women.

It was not the Roses-Are Red-Violets-Are-Blue kind of poems I am used to.

And I should have known it would be that way. All the teens in Inspire Harlem are activists, which sometimes feels like a word that means their opinion is the only one that matters. I guess I just don't know if I could live up to the standards they have.

Just last night, Imani went through the junk drawer in the kitchen and threw out all the plastic straws Uncle Randy has been saving from delivery and takeout. "Isn't throwing away the unused straws just as bad as if I had used them and then thrown them away?" he asked.

She didn't have an answer for that.

And now she's on this I-only-take-five-minute-showers movement, and I'm all for her setting that as her own personal goal, but I like my warm, long showers and I don't need her shaking her head in disapproval every time I come out of the bathroom.

"All right, I'm going to get ready," I say. I walk through the passageway that connects our rooms. The alcove has drawers and cabinets on both sides—extra storage and closet space for all our stuff that Aunt Ebony keeps saying we need to go through so we can give away clothes we don't wear anymore.

As soon as I get in my room, I turn on music. I've found a new favorite artist, Blue, a Jamaican singer who mixes reggae and R&B. She's twenty-one and she's big, like me—or as Imani would proudly say, *fat*. I've been listening to her music nonstop. I have just finished putting my jeans on when Imani barges into my room. "I knocked, but you can't hear me with that music so loud," she says. She turns it down just a little. "I mean, I'm a fan too, but really? You've had the song on repeat all day."

"This from the queen of rewatching movies and saying the lines with the characters."

"Fair," Imani says. "Absolutely fair." We laugh, and then she closes my door so she can look at herself in the full-length mirror that hangs on the back. "I need your help. Which shirt should I wear?" Imani asks. Right now she only has on jeans and her bra. In her left hand she is holding a shirt that says, I Am My Ancestors' Wildest Dreams, and in her right hand, a shirt with a drawing of a closed fist raised and the word Resist under it. Both are black with white lettering.

"That one." I point to her left hand.

"Thanks." Imani puts the shirt on and comes over to my dresser to skim through my jewelry. We are always in and out of each other's rooms borrowing and swapping.

Now I am second-guessing my outfit. My green sundress seems too dressy and doesn't make any kind of statement. I look through my closet. I only own one graphic tee, and it says I Woke Up Like This. I'm pretty sure this isn't the shirt to wear around this activist crowd. I change into a black V-neck and jeans. I'll make it more stylish by adding some necklaces and bracelets. Aunt Liz taught me that accessories are the key to every outfit.

Imani has picked through all my bracelets and chooses the chunky silver one. She looks in the mirror. "You ready?"

"Do I look ready?" I point to my face that has no makeup, to my hair that is still wrapped in a scarf. "I need at least fifteen minutes." I plug in my flat iron, turn the dial up to the highest heat.

"We don't have fifteen minutes. Be ready in five."

"Ten," I call out. "Beauty takes time."

"Makeup doesn't make you beautiful."

"No, but it enhances it," I say. I pick up a tube of lipstick and hold it out toward Imani. "This color would look so good on you. You should let me do your makeup one day."

"Five minutes, Nala. I'll be downstairs."

"I can't do nine steps in five minutes."

"Nine steps? Are you serious?" Imani's footsteps echo in the hallway as she runs down the stairs. "You better hurry up."

"And now it'll be twelve minutes since you kept talking to me." I laugh and begin my makeup routine. For me, the key to wearing makeup is making it look like I don't have any on.

9 STEPS FOR APPLYING MAKEUP

1. Primer. Because I have to make sure the foundation powder goes on smoothly.

2. Eyebrows. I use an eyebrow pencil to define my arch and make my brows full. They're already kind of thick, so I don't need to do too much.

3. Foundation. It took me a while to find the perfect match for my dark skin, but about a month ago Aunt Liz took me makeup shopping and we did a color-matching test, so now I know the perfect shade to use.

4. Blush. Yes, I wear blush. A warm brown blush so my face doesn't look so flat.

5. Eye shadow. Less is more. I do use color, but on a day like today, I'm keeping it simple.

6. Eyeliner. I use a felt tip. It goes on easier and doesn't smudge like pencil. I'm going for that evening smoky eye—it'll elevate this outfit I'm wearing.

7. Mascara. I'm not a fan of wearing so much mascara that it looks like spiders are crawling out of my eyes, but I do lay it on thick so I can have full, fluttering lashes.

8. Lipstick/Lip gloss. Sometimes I wear both, depending on the color and texture. Tonight, I'm doing lipstick. Even though it's gray outside, I'm going with a bright berry color for summer.

9. Look at myself in the mirror. I just sit and stare for one whole minute. Take in this beauty that everyone else will be seeing, make sure everything is just right.

And that's it. My face is complete.

Next, I touch up my hair with my flat iron, making sure my edges are straight. Since it's raining so hard, I pull it up in a sloppy-on-purpose ponytail, and as promised, twelve minutes have passed and I'm ready to go.

Just as I am pulling the plug out of the socket, Imani calls out to me. "Nala, we're going to be late! Come on."

"Coming." I grab my umbrella.

When I get downstairs, Imani is in the kitchen at the sink filling her metal water bottle. Uncle Randy and Aunt Ebony are here cooking together, and the way they have this kitchen smelling with sweet plantains and curry chicken makes me want to stay and eat dinner.

"Save some for me," I say. I kiss Aunt Ebony on her cheek.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm sure we'll be eating this chicken for the next few days. I'm making enough to last. Too hot to keep turning this stove on. Plus, I'm on summer vacation too, so that should mean I get a break from cooking." Aunt Ebony says this even though we all know she'll be back in the kitchen tomorrow cooking up something delicious and taking a plate over to Grandma. She is the oldest of Grandma's daughters. Her and Uncle Randy married in their last year of college. So even though they have been married for a long time, they are younger than the parents of a lot of my friends. Aunt Ebony teaches at an elementary school just a few blocks down the street, so it's summer break for her too.

Aunt Liz is two years younger and lives in a condo on 116th. She's a personal stylist and has a lot of famous clients. Aunt Liz is always, always dressed like she's going to be in a photo shoot. Even her pajamas are photo worthy.

And then there's my mom. She's the youngest, the only one who has a job and not a career. She's worked at clothing stores, restaurants, offices. They were all born in Spanish Town, the parish of St. Catherine, and moved to New York in their teens when Grandpa decided that the States would give his children a better life. Grandma says he was a man whose dreams wouldn't let him sleep. She'd wake up in the middle of the night, and he'd be at the

kitchen table working on a job application or writing out goals for the family.

Grandpa loved living in New York, but his heart was in Spanish Town. He went back to Jamaica at least twice a year. Grandma has tried to keep the tradition. We all go once a year, usually for Christmas since that's when Aunt Ebony is off from work. When we go, we stay in Kingston because that's where most of the family lives now.

Before Imani and I leave we have to go through our goodbye routine with Aunt Ebony and Uncle Randy: Where are you going? Who else is going to be there? When will you be back?

We leave and on our way to the library, I tell Imani, "We should have invited Sadie."

"Oh, she'll be there. She's a member of Inspire Harlem now."

"She is?" I ask.

"Yeah, I finally convinced her to join."

Sadie is in Inspire Harlem now. Why didn't I know this?

Because we are running late, Imani is speed walking, which is hard to do in pouring-down rain. The puddles are splashing, and I am drenched. We don't say much to each other on the way to the library. Mostly because we are walking fast and are out of breath, but also because I can't

stop thinking about Sadie joining Inspire Harlem. Sadie usually agrees with me about Imani and her woke friends. The two of us tease Imani all the time, calling her Angela Davis Jr., and when we really want to get under her skin, we respond with "Yes, ma'am" when she's being bossy or nagging us about throwing something in the trash that should be recycled.

Maybe it's petty to be thinking like this, but I really don't want to go to this talent show tonight. Normally when I go to an Inspire Harlem event, Sadie and I sit together. We whisper our commentary to each other about everything that's happening. We nudge each other whenever someone says a corny Save-the-World mantra or cliché. We clear our throats as a signal that it's time to leave. There's always been a *we*—me and Sadie—at these events, with our own inside jokes. Me and Sadie telling Imani that the issues she cares about are serious but not *that* serious. Imani is my cousin-sister-friend, and Sadie is my best friend.

They are my *we*.

But now that Sadie has joined Inspire Harlem, who will I have?



5 REASONS I HATE THE RAIN

1. It makes my hair poof out into an Afro. And accidental Afros are not cute. At all.

2. It makes walking in New York a hazardous activity. Umbrellas bumping and clashing against shoulders and heads as we all squeeze past one another. (Why do people keep their umbrellas up even when walking under scaffolding?)

3. It makes the trash on the street smell even worse, and is there anything worse than the smell of wet garbage?

4. It settles into deep puddles at corners, and cars speed by, splashing me like I'm on a water park

ride. Except I'm not. There is nothing refreshing or fun about this water.

5. It paints the sky gray, and gray skies remind me of the day I left Mom's house—a storm of another kind. The sky was gray that day, and the rain was angry and it soaked my clothes, my bags, my shoes, and by the time I walked to Imani's house my face was wet from rain and snot and tears.

The talent show is held at the library on Lenox and 136th Street. Even though it's just a short walk from our brownstone, by the time we get there we look like we've been playing in a dunk tank. But most people here are soaked too, so it kind of doesn't matter. We put our umbrellas in a bucket at the door and go into the community room. There's music playing and the lights are dim. The one thing I can say about Inspire Harlem events is that they always have good music and good food. They also know how to transform a regular room into a space that makes you want to hang out, stay awhile. Normally this room is kind of bland, but tonight there's special lighting that sets a mood like we're at a real show at some nice theater downtown.

As soon as we step inside, people start crowding around Imani, hugging her and wishing her a happy birthday. Sadie hugs her first, then comes over to me and before I can even say hello, she is apologizing and looking at me with guilt in her eyes. "Don't be mad at me, okay?"

"Traitor," I say.

"I know. I know. But my mom told me I had to do something this summer. So it was either this or work at our family's candy store. And you know I'm not doing that." Sadie moves her long braids from the right to left. "Come with me. I'm sitting over there." Sadie points to the front row and starts walking.

The front row? *We* never sit that close up.

As soon as we sit down, Toya Perkins walks over. She struts in like a peacock. Head held high, showing off her undeniable beauty. Today, she is wearing a jean skirt with a black T-shirt that has the year 1619 in the center of her chest. A patterned wrap crowns her head. I've been to at least twenty Inspire Harlem events, but every time she sees me, she introduces herself like we've never met. She is carrying two clipboards in her hand, and when she gets in front of us, she hands one to Sadie and says, "You can't sit down yet, we're working the event. We need you to greet people and get them to sign up for the newsletter."

Sadie takes the clipboard and looks it over. "Oh, uh, sorry, I didn't know I needed to do this. I thought I was on the cleanup committee."

"We're all on the cleanup committee." Toya reaches in her pocket and pulls out a pen. "Here, make sure you give it back." Before walking away, she looks at me and says, "And hello, my name is LaToya. You look familiar."

"We've met. I'm Nala."

"Welcome, I hope you enjoy tonight's show." Toya shakes my hand and walks away.

Once Sadie is sure Toya is far enough away, she rolls her eyes. Then, she puts a fake smile on and holds the clipboard out to me. "Would you like to sign up?"

I play along. "For?"

Sadie puts on a telemarketing voice. "Our e-blast list. We send out a newsletter once a month. It's just a way for you to keep up with all our events and an occasional call to action."

"Oh, um, no—no thank you," I say.

Sadie says, "Suit yourself. But don't be mad when you realize you've missed the announcement on tips for fighting climate change. It's a must read." I know she's just messing with me when she says this, and it feels good to know that even though now she is one of them, she is still a part of my *we*.

Just when Sadie is about to walk away, here comes Toya

again, hovering and clearly eavesdropping. "Did you need something?" Sadie asks, because she is not the type of person to let people go unchecked.

"Oh, no, I was just taking everything in. I mean, isn't it such a powerful thing to be here in this sacred space?"

I smile because what else am I supposed to do? I have no idea why Toya is calling this library sacred. Maybe she says this about all libraries. Maybe she loves books. Sadie doesn't seem to get it either. We both just look at Toya, faces blank.

Toya must realize that we don't have a clue about what she's referring to. She lowers her voice. "You do know where you are, don't you? This is the Countee Cullen Library."

"Oh," I say.

But not dramatic or heartfelt enough, because she goes on. "You know, Countee Cullen . . . the Harlem Renaissance poet . . . the teacher?"

I got nothing.

Sadie nods, but I think she is just nodding to make Toya stop talking.

"Before the library was built, A'Lelia Walker's townhouse was here. You know, A'Lelia Walker—the daughter of Madam C. J. Walker? She opened her home as a gathering space for writers during the Harlem Renaissance, and now it's this library."

Note to self: Look up Countee Cullen and Madam C. J. Walker.

"Sadie, we should mingle. We need to get more sign-ups," Toya says. "Nala, are you coming with us to Harlem Shake? We're all going out later to celebrate Imani. Wait, you're her cousin, right?"

Of course I'm going, and you know that we are related. Imani is *my* cousin-sister-friend. Why wouldn't I be there?

I nod.

"Perfect," she says.

The lights flicker, giving everyone a sign that the show is about to start. So much for them signing up more people. Sadie sits next to me, and the first two rows fill up with Inspire Harlem teens. I notice that just about everyone sitting in this section is wearing a graphic tee that has some kind of statement on it or the face of someone important. I recognize two of the faces. Malcolm X and Maya Angelou. The rest, I have no idea.

Maybe one of them is Countee Cullen.

Imani walks over to us and sits next to me, in the middle of her birthday crew. The lights dim even more, and once it is completely blacked out, there is cheering and clapping. The stage lights are too dark at first, so I can't really see the person talking. "Good evening, everyone. We're here

tonight to remember Harlem, to honor Harlem, to critique Harlem, to love Harlem . . . we're here tonight to Inspire Harlem."

There are shouts and whistles and so much clapping.

Then, finally, the lights rise.

And I see him.

"My name is Tye Brown, and I will be your host for the evening." While everyone is still clapping, he says, "Tonight's going to be a special night," and then I swear he looks at me and says, "Sit back and enjoy." I almost yell out *I will! Oh, I will!* but I keep it together and settle into my seat.

I whisper to Imani, "Who is he? I've never seen him before."

"Tye. He's new," she says.

And I turn to Sadie and whisper, "I mean, if I had known guys like that were a part of this, maybe I would have joined too."

Sadie laughs.

"Shh!" Imani scolds us.

I sit back, give my full attention to Tye. He explains what Inspire Harlem is and talks us through how the night will go. Then, his voice gets serious and he says, "Singer and activist Nina Simone said, 'It's an artist's duty to reflect the times in which we live.' This isn't your typical talent

show. Each act has thought about the message in their art, the mission behind their performance."

A few people clap when he says this.

"This is a supportive, brave space—please only show love for everyone who has the courage to come to the stage," Tye says. And then, he smiles the most gorgeous smile I have ever seen and says, "Let's begin."

I don't believe in love at first sight. I don't even know if I believe that there's such a thing as a soul mate or one true love. But right now, in this moment, I am ready to profess my love for Tye Brown.

Okay, fine, I don't really love him. I don't know him (yet), but there are some things I know about him in just the first thirty minutes of the talent show, and those things, I love.

3 THINGS I ALREADY LOVE ABOUT TYE BROWN

1. I love his dark skin. The way his white shirt contrasts against his deep brown complexion. I love his style. How his shirt has the letters *B L A C K* across his chest, making him a living poem.

2. I love the way his deep voice bellows out, filling up the space, how his voice is electric shock

waves when he needs to amp up the crowd, how it is a warm hug when he welcomes each person to the stage.

3. I love that when the fourth person gets choked up with tears because he can't remember the lyrics to his rap, Tye comes from backstage and stands next to him, putting his hand on his shoulder. I love how they just stand there for a whole minute and the audience is silent, how Tye asks, "Do you want to start over?" I love how Tye stands there while the boy performs, never leaving his side, bobbing his head and moving to the beat.

Yeah, those are the things I love about Tye. It was definitely worth coming out in the rain tonight.

The next person up is a girl named Gabby. Her hair is pulled back in a neat ponytail, and I can't tell if the glasses she is wearing are for necessity or fashion. She sings a song she wrote just for this event, and that alone should make her the winner. I feel sorry for the people coming after her.

The next performance is a group of steppers. They have the crowed hyped. By the time they are done, I think maybe they might beat Gabby. But if they do, it'll be close. I completely tune out during the next act. A girl is singing

some type of Heal-the-World song, and I am bored and barely listening to her. It's not that she can't sing—the song is just corny. To me anyway. All I am thinking about is when will Tye be coming back to the stage. But once the girl stops singing, the lights come up for a short intermission.

Most people rush to the bathrooms. I walk over to the snack table—I want to get something to drink and also, I see that Tye is standing over there. I am trying to think of something to say to him, but I can't even get my mouth to open. Up close he is even more handsome and now I can smell his cologne. I just want to run away and look at him from across the room.

"Enjoying the show?" Tye asks. He is talking to me. To me.

"Um, yes, I—I'm really, yes, I'm enjoying it." *Get it together, Nala Robertson. Come on.*

"Are you new to Inspire Harlem?"

"Oh, no. I'm not a part of it. Hi, I'm Nala. Imani is my cousin. She invited me."

"Oh, Imani? That's my girl. I'm Tye." He shakes my hand, which I think is kind of formal, but holding his hand feels like holding silk and I want to hold on to him and never let him go. Tye lets go and fills his water bottle. He takes a long drink.

Say something, Nala. Say something. "Inspire Harlem is a great program. Imani really likes being in it."

"Yeah. I love it so far. I'm excited about what we've planned for this summer. Did Imani tell you about it?"

"No," I say. But of course she did. I just want to keep talking to him.

"All summer long we'll be having awareness events—I'm the team leader for our community block party. You should come," Tye says. I have never heard someone sound so excited about a community service project. Tye steps away from the table because we're holding the line up. I realize I don't even have anything in my hand, no water or plate of veggies and dip to play it off like I didn't just come over here to talk with him. "What about you? What are you up to this summer?" he asks.

"Oh, I'm, um, I'm . . . I volunteer for an organization that offers activities for elderly people in the neighborhood. We do, um, like arts and crafts stuff with them—nothing super important or at the magnitude of Inspire Harlem," I say. He doesn't need to know that really, I am just talking about the one time last month when I spent the day at Grandma's helping her put a puzzle together.

"That's great that you're doing that," Tye says.

"Yeah, some of them don't have family that come visit and just need to get out of their apartments and do something. We do all kinds of activities with them."

"Like what?"

"Um, well, like I mentioned, arts and crafts . . . um,

knitting. We also have story time, not like kindergarten story time, but I read novels to them and sometimes we just play games and build puzzles."

All of this is a true-lie.

I've done these things with Grandma and her friends. Just not with a formal group of people or with an organization. But I had to say something. I mean, I couldn't tell him that I'm spending my summer watching Netflix and trying out the summer flavors of ice cream at Sugar Hill Creamery.

Ms. Lori, the director of Inspire Harlem, walks over to us. "Tye, we're just about ready to start the second half," she says. "Five minutes."

"Okay." Tye refills his water bottle one more time. "Nice to meet you, Nala," he says. "Are you coming to hang with us afterward?"

"At Harlem Shake? Yes. I wouldn't miss celebrating Imani's birthday, plus, they have the best burgers," I say.

"One of the best veggie burgers in the city."

Veggie? Is he vegetarian? I think of something to say. "Yeah. It's so hard to find good vegetarian food." And by that I mean, most vegetarian food is the absolute worst food ever.

"Oh, you're vegetarian?" Tye asks.

I give a slow yes. A yes that's a lie with no truth in it at all.

"I'm a pescatarian," he tells me.

"A what?"

"I eat fish," he says.

"Oh yeah, me too," I say.

"So, you're not a vegetarian?"

I clear my throat. "I'm a vegetarian who's sometimes a pescatarian." *Stop the lies, Nala. Stop it.*

Ms. Lori comes back over and tells Tye it's time to start.

"It was nice to meet you, Nala. I gotta go. But we'll talk more. Harlem Shake?"

"Yes, I'll be there," I say. "And nice to meet you too. You're a really good host. I'm glad I came tonight."

And this is not a lie.