1

August
Jamaica

'How much longer *now*?'

Tyrese let out a long, loud sigh, making certain his mum heard. He didn't want to be here. Here, underneath the beating sun. Here in the middle of nowhere. And here because his mum hadn't given him *any* other choice. That thought twisted inside him and his gaze prowled angrily along the landscape. 'Mum! *How long*?'

He flicked a glance at her. Having never been the most confident of drivers, she kept her eyes pasted to the narrow, uneven road. 'I'm not sure, honey, it's further than I remember – but we should be there quite soon.'

'You said that, like, forty minutes ago!' Tyrese turned his head away, continuing to watch the outside world go by.

He dangled his hand out of the car window, tracing invisible circles with the tips of his fingers on the hot metal door of the Jeep. They'd been driving for over three hours – his mum getting lost and going too slowly – travelling away from Kingston up the steep winding roads where the clouds wrapped around the mountains like a thick white ribbon. There they'd been greeted by a vivid blue sky and it had felt to Tyrese as if he'd entered a secret land above the earth. A

smouldering, scorching earth, the heat gluing itself to him, making him feel uncomfortable as it clasped around like a snake strangling its prey.

He'd given up wiping the trickling sweat off his face which tasted of salt. It was supposed to get cooler up the mountains, though the further they drove through the rainforest, the hotter and more humid it seemed to get. The breeze only teased him, bringing nothing but billows of warm air.

Even the cold can of Coke they'd bought at the airport had quickly turned warm; the ice cream he'd been so looking forward to had within minutes melted all over his hands, down his favourite T-shirt, running on to the car seat to leave a gooey mess everywhere. Now the whole car smelled of strawberry swirl and butterscotch ripple.

There'd been nothing good since he'd stepped off the plane, though there'd been nothing good *before* he'd got on the plane . . . nothing good for a *long time*. He just hated it all.

A sudden flutter cut through the line of Tyrese's faraway gaze and his stare followed a huge red bug with spindly black legs land and hitch a ride on the door. He quickly drew his hand back in at the same time as the Jeep swerved sharply, sending Tyrese sideward.

'Sorry about that, Ty,' his mum apologised chirpily, only just avoiding the large goat darting across the track.

More used to seeing her avoid buses and trams, Tyrese watched it disappear behind a bush. He suddenly felt more homesick than ever.

The Jeep slowed and his mum pulled up by a grove of

trees. Smiling, she turned to look at him. 'We're here! And can you smell that, Ty? That's ginger lilies. Oh, I love that smell.'

Tyrese's nose filled with the strong, sweet scent. He stared out at the twisting stretch of shrubs and plants which made the whole place feel like it was surrounded by a thick, towering green prison wall. He could hardly get his words out. 'Here? *This* is it?'

'Yes, it's gorgeous, isn't it? To be this far up in the mountains, is so lovely.'

'Where's Grammy's house?'

'Just there, through those trees . . . See it?'

Swivelling around in his seat, Tyrese felt some trapped sweat squishing round the top of his legs and between his butt cheeks. He took off his glasses and wiped away the smears with the bottom of his T-shirt.

Running his fingers through his light-brown Afro, he bit down on his lip. It was worse than he thought it was going to be. How could his mum think *this* was lovely? There was nothing. Just trees and more trees. Why weren't they staying near a town or village, or even near some of the brightly painted coloured houses he'd seen perched on the slopes of the hillsides when they'd passed the coffee plantation? Why would she bring him here, up in the mountains by a forest, miles from anywhere?

Fighting back his tears, feeling them catch at his throat, Tyrese glanced down at the no signal bar on his phone. 'I don't even know why we had to come.'

'You know why, sweetheart. We need a break, don't we?'

His mum smiled, tilting her head. Her cheeks were pinched red, her face shiny as if it'd been glazed in cooking oil and her hair seemed like it was trying to escape from the clutches of its messy bun.

Tyrese knew she wanted an answer, but he stayed silent, watching yet another bug land on the Jeep. All he wanted was to be at home. Back in his bedroom on his own, just the way he liked it.

'And besides, Ty,' his mum continued, smiling again, 'Grammy and your cousin are really looking forward to seeing you. It'll be fun . . . Come on, there she is! This is going to be wonderful.'

The familiar knot in Tyrese's stomach told him otherwise, and memories like distant voices called on the wind.

2

Unsticking the back of his bare arms from the hot, sweaty leather seat, Tyrese stepped out of the Jeep, and the sun hit with a slap.

'Ty, now, don't forget we're here for the whole of the summer holiday.' His mum grabbed his arm gently. 'So try to make an effort, baby.'

He shrugged one shoulder, doubling it up to scratch his ear. 'Or what? We'll go back home?'

'Sweetheart, there's no need to be rude, I'm just asking you to try.'

Slipping his trainers back on and not bothering to answer her again, Tyrese trudged towards the bright green house with sun-bleached pink shutters where Grammy was standing on the porch waving with both hands.

He hadn't seen her since the last time he visited Jamaica, just before his fourth birthday. Not that he could really remember, and whenever they'd tried to FaceTime Grammy, the signal always dropped. But he recognised her from the photos they had hanging up in the kitchen at home. Though she looked older. She was reed-thin, hunched up, her skin smooth for someone her age, and she wore a light blue head

wrap which matched her blue dress. Dark circles like ink smudges rested under her brown eyes. They twinkled, and a large smile was drawn across her face.

Walking carefully down the wooden porch stairs to greet them, Grammy's arms stretched wide. 'Tyrese! Patty! Tyrese! Come, let me give you a hug. It's *so* good to see you both! How was your flight? Oh, Tyrese, look 'pon you! What! Look how tall!' Grammy cackled and hooted. She called over her shoulder: 'Marvin! Marvin! Dem here! Quick, dem here!'

His mum beamed. 'How are you?'

'Everything is everything. Me good.' Grammy beamed back.

The hug was tight and long. With Grammy's arms around him, Tyrese watched a boy appear from the side of the house by the swing bench. His hair was freshly braided in zigzag cornrows. He wore faded blue trousers, a striped T-shirt just as washed-out, and his trainers looked slightly too big for his feet, tied with colourful neon laces.

'Marvin, say hello to Tyrese,' Grammy encouraged.

Wiping some crumbs off the side of his mouth, Marvin revealed a grin. '*A long time me nuh si yuh, Tyrese. Weh yuh ah seh, wah gwaan?*' he said quickly.

Stepping away from Grammy's surprisingly strong embrace, Tyrese looked at his cousin. They were the same age, their birthdays only a month apart, but he'd only ever met him once and that had been ten years ago during his stay at Grammy's. 'Excuse me?'

'*A long time me nuh si yuh. Weh yuh ah seh, wah gwaan?*' Marvin repeated but then he burst out into laughter as loud,

warm and crisp as Grammy's had been. '*Bwoy, you don't know how fi chat Patois?*'

Grammy clipped Marvin on the back of the head gently. 'You're too chatty, Marvin. Of course him not know how to speak Patois.'

Rubbing his head and still laughing, Marvin stepped nearer to Tyrese. '*Me forget, yuh an English bwoy. A Manchester bwoy*! You want me to speak English for you, *Manchester bwoy?* Then I shall be the King of England.' Marvin put on a silly accent and, taking hold of Tyrese's hand, shook it. 'How do you do, Tyrese? How nice of you to come.' Then he burst into loud fits of giggles.

Grammy frowned. 'Stop teasing, Marvin . . . It's fine, Tyrese, come, take no notice of him. Now, say sorry, Marvin. Come now!'

Marvin shrugged. 'Just joking.' And he spun round to look at Tyrese's mum.

She grinned. 'It's lovely to see you again, Marvin,' she said, giving him a hug despite the blistering heat.

'Aunt Patty, do you know how to speak Patois?'

She winked at Marvin, her blue eyes becoming brighter as she stood fanning herself with the bottom of her grey linen shirt which seemed to swamp her tall, slender frame. 'No, your uncle tried to teach me a few times but in the end he gave up. I think I was a very bad student.'

'So, how come he didn't teach you Patois, Tyrese? You never want to learn? You not a Yard man at heart?' Marvin giggled again, turning back to look at his cousin.

Tyrese dipped his gaze to the ground. He could feel his

heart beginning to race. Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone? Why did his stupid cousin think it was funny? Once again, he wished he was back at home in the safety of his bedroom.

'I don't know what the joke is,' Tyrese whispered, already annoyed by how much Marvin laughed, especially as he didn't think there was anything at all to laugh about.

'Why, were you a bad student too, dat it?'

'Whatever,' Tyrese mumbled.

'You want me to teach you? I can! Maybe I'm a better teacher than your dad!'

Tyrese's jaw jutted. He stared up at his cousin. 'Don't talk about my dad like that. Just leave me alone, yeah.'

Marvin raised his eyebrows, glanced at his aunt Patty, glanced back at Tyrese. 'Sorry, Ty, I only meant your dad—'

'. . . I don't care what you meant,' Tyrese snapped, interrupting his cousin.

'Tyrese, that's quite enough!' his mum said, flushing a deeper red. 'Marvin's only having a bit of fun. It's no big deal.'

Tears weren't far from Tyrese's eyes. He spun around to glare at her, but he didn't say anything.

The silence hit down harder than the heat. It sizzled away until Grammy broke it.

'*Lawd Gee*, Marvin! *Nuh trouble trouble, til trouble trouble yuh*. Stop causing mischief, now hush, say no more!' She turned to Tyrese, squeezed his hand. Smiled. 'Why don't you go and get yourself freshened up, Ty? Marvin can take you to your room . . . Oh, and, Tyrese, welcome back to Jamaica.'

3

Having taken a quick shower to freshen up, Tyrese sat on the single metal bed in the guest room. He didn't know which was louder, Marvin's singing coming from the kitchen or the noise of the insects outside making it sound like the whole of Grammy's house was surrounded by rattlesnakes.

He yawned, rubbing coconut oil between the palms of his hands, careful not to drop any on his clothes. He glanced at the time: four p.m. He already felt so tired. Maybe he should lie down? The large pillow *did* look so comfy and inviting, but he hated going to sleep. Sleep only meant he'd dream, and dreaming meant he'd be taken back to his old life: to the life he'd had before that day in March at Manchester airport when his mum had met him at the arrivals lounge, her face burnt with tears, a whispered scream of pain as she told him the news.

He hated remembering, he hated *that* memory. It gnawed away at him like a disease. And when he did wake, the instant his eyes fluttered open, he was hit all over again with remembering what he'd lost . . . Yes, to sleep, to dream, would only be to wake, and realise there were no more yesterdays, only today.

He yawned again. Well, he'd just stay awake, that's what he'd do. He'd go for a walk. It was better that way, and he was fine as long as he didn't think too much.

Chewing on his lip, Tyrese fought to push everything out of his mind. He massaged the oil through his Afro and, gulping for air, blinked away the prickling behind his eyes.

Standing, he grabbed his baseball cap and headed for the door, but his breath caught like he'd stepped outside on an ice-cold winter's day. On the bedside cabinet was a photograph. Him and his dad. Smiling. Laughing. His mum behind the camera, telling them to keep still, stop giggling, stand straight. The last photo of them ever taken.

He pounced. Diving at it as if he were plunging into the depths of the ocean. Grabbing and turning the frame in his hand to find the clips, to tear the photo out of its white wooden frame, which he dropped on the floor with a clatter.

A tight pain in his chest.

He crumpled the photo in his hand, squeezing it, taking the very life out of it.

'What's that, Ty? Everything OK?' His mum appeared at the door, smiling, worry outlining her words.

Tyrese quickly pushed the photo into the pocket of his shorts. 'Nothing. Just rubbish.'

Her eyes flickered with suspicion but she held her smile. 'Fancy coming for a snack before supper time? Though I need to warn you, Grammy's cooking enough for an army and then some.'

'No thanks. I'm just going to go for a walk. Have a look around.'

'Well, that's good, I'm glad you're going to get some fresh air, a bit of exercise. Just be careful, Ty, OK? Don't go too far . . . are you sure you're all right?'

Using his foot to quickly tap the empty photo frame under the bed without his mum noticing it, Tyrese clenched the photo tighter in his pocket. He shrugged. 'Yeah, course, why wouldn't I be?'

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Quickly stomping along the dusty track, past the chicken pen and away from Grammy's house, Tyrese kicked at every stone and stick in sight. But nearing the top of a steep slope, he slowed down, the heat gripping him, making it seem like he was dragging a sack of rocks behind him.

He squeezed his hands into fists, shut his eyes. He'd give anything not to feel like he did. He couldn't believe his mum really expected him to spend the *whole* summer here. It was all because she'd listened to his stupid counsellor, Jonathan or 'Johnny' as he always liked to be called.

Johnny knows best, sweetheart. Johnny has dealt with this kind of stuff before. Johnny says time away is the best thing for you. Johnny thinks getting out of your bedroom and going to see family is just what you need right now.

Well, it wasn't Johnny who was stuck here. It was him. He let out a long, audible groan at the thought and opened his eyes.

Looking around, Tyrese suddenly realised how far he'd

walked. The sun was beginning to go down. Wisps of mountain mist rose slowly, although the heat in the forest still sat wet and clammy like an unwelcome guest.

He couldn't see Grammy's house at all now. The track he'd come along wound up the mountain, disappearing round the corner. Everywhere was so silent. He couldn't even hear the insects any more. Plants and shrubs that Tyrese had never seen before grew waist-high along the narrow track. Strange-shaped trees with enormous gnarled trunks covered in green and yellow moss surrounded him, reaching up and weaving together to block out the sun, leaving only a gloomy, fading light.

He glanced at his watch. 5.25 p.m. Should he turn back? No, that would mean having to speak to everyone. He just didn't want to deal with that.

Swatting a mosquito that looked like it was getting ready to take a bite at his arm, Tyrese continued heading up the track, though he'd hardly gone a few more paces when he heard a twig snap.

He stopped, listened, quickly glanced around, but hearing nothing more, he continued, passing a fallen rotten tree cloaked in giant fungus and teeming with woodlice.

He stopped again, certain he'd heard the crunch of footsteps behind him.

Turning around, Tyrese expected to see his mum. There was nobody there, although he called out anyway: 'Mum? Mum, is that you?'

Nothing.

Just the faint call of a bird high up in a tree . . . What was that smell? He sniffed. Smoke. It smelled as if someone had been burning wood. Frowning, Tyrese shifted his stare. Then he heard another twig snap, only closer this time. His gaze danced through the trees. 'Marvin, if that's you, it's not funny, OK? *Marvin?* Marvin, just come out from wherever you're hiding, yeah.'

He licked his lips, tasted the dryness of his mouth. All he could hear now was the sound of his own breathing. Even the bird was silent. It felt like the quietness was closing in on him like a rising tide.

Scanning the forest again, he was careful not to let his gaze wander towards the dark corridor of trees. Maybe he should just go back to Grammy's after all?

About to head off down the track, something caught his eye . . . There, through the thick wall of palm and eucalyptus trees. What was it? He pushed his glasses further up his nose, squinted, his heart lurching. There was something moving in the patch of shadows . . .