

THREE-TIME CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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THE LIFE I'M IN

A SISTER NOVEL TO THE BESTSELLING *THE SKIN I'M IN*

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*To survivors everywhere*

A BUS TO NOWHERE

June 26, 10 a.m.

## 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.

June 29, 3 p.m.

## CHAPTER 2

**THIS THE SECOND** time JuJu brung me to the bus station this week. The first time ain't work out so well. I cried like a baby, got loud and said I wasn't going nowhere and she couldn't make me. Somebody got the police. My sister wasn't happy about that.

JuJu been my guardian four years now. She's twenty-seven. I'm sixteen. She carries papers on her that prove she's responsible for me. "See." She had 'em out by the time he got to us.

"Char," my sister said after he gave the papers back and said for me to have a nice trip. "Let's go."

"Home?"

She didn't answer.

I followed her out the station, up the sidewalk into the parking garage next door. All the way home she ain't say nothing to me. That night I was in my pajamas in my bed thinking I was home for good when she told me I still had to go. She sat down on the edge of my bed. "No more chances, Char. I'm done."

Now we back at the Greyhound bus station. I'm outside next to the bus standing beside my sister—hoping. She beside me telling the man who loads suitcases onto the bottom of the bus to be extra careful with mine. It's brand-new, expensive, she says to him. She don't mention that her old boyfriend stole it from Macy's.

"JuJu. Can I stay, please?"

She turn her back to me and start walking. By the time I

catch up to her, she's inside the station. I gotta run to keep up.

Seem like everybody in the city going someplace. They lined up ten deep at the ticket counter on the other side of the room. Lined up beside doors to take buses to Texas, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, New Mexico—anyplace you can name. They rushing through the station with food and kids, in wheelchairs, pushing carriages—yelling at people that get in their way. Some of 'em stare at me on their way by. Could be because of my hair. I done it myself. I got four shiny long black braids—two up front and two in back—that stop at my stomach, and a yellow bandanna tied on my head. It might be my eyelashes they checking out. JuJu say they look like caterpillars.

Parts of me jiggle and shake when I walk. But not 'cause I'm making 'em. I'm getting big all over—mainly up top and on the bottom. I got thick pretty legs now too.

By the time we stand still, I'm out of breath and we're in the middle of the station. When she lift her shades up, I see her eyes is still red, puffy. “Charlese Jones! Everything can't go your way.”

“I know. I'm sorry. Don't holler.” I look around to see who watching.

JuJu takes my hand, says she not used to me being like this, “Nice—sad all the time.” She sits down in a row of black plastic chairs. I sit next to her. Her eyes blink a few times. I ain't sure if it's because she really don't want me to go, or maybe it's from the smoke always stinking up our house. When JuJu throw a party, they last two and three days. The one from Friday still going on at our house. All that smoke and weed. Drunken grown-ups everywhere. I ain't gonna miss that. But that don't mean I wanna go live with my grandparents.

“If you let me stay—”

“You can’t.”

“I was just gonna say I’ll work for you for free.”

She start digging around in her purse. “Why can’t I find it?”

I pull at my shorts. Not that it do any good. They tight and small, the way I like. I bought ’em with my own money. I work JuJu’s parties. Serve the drinks, make ’em sometimes too. People pay to get in. Pay extra for food and liquor. And they tip good. She didn’t have to pay me, I told her yesterday. “Just let me stay. Please.” She gave me half of what she cleared so far. I left my tip money home. For when I come back. ’Cause I’m coming back.

“Here.” JuJu stick her hand out. “Read it. So, you remember—you brung all this on yourself.”

The paper in her hand is folded small as a pack of Tic Tacs. It’s yellow with lines. I don’t take it fast enough, I guess. So, she drops it in my lap. I cross my legs. Some old dude near us smiles, likes how they look, I guess. The hair on his head is white as smoke. So is the hair sneaking out his ears. “Pervert,” my sister say. He gets up and leaves. “Watch out for men like him.” She always tells me that.

I open the letter. Ask if she wants me to read it out loud. I had to sometimes when teachers sent home bad reports about me.

“No, Char, you too old for that.”

*Dear Mis Saunders:*

*I apologiz for stealing your watch and  
bullyin Maleeka into setting your classroom on  
fire.*

*I was having a bad day.*

*Char*

She never wrote back. Or treated me as good as she did Maleeka. That's why I got expelled.

I been to three different schools since they kicked me out McClenton Middle: a Catholic school, a charter school, and a white school in the suburbs where JuJu faked our address so I would get in. They all threw me out. The same thing gonna happen in Alabama, I told JuJu.

Looking her in the eyes, I tear up the note. Throw every single piece on the floor. JuJu tell me to clean it up. I don't. That was a practice copy, anyhow. There wasn't no mistakes in the one I mailed to Miss Saunders.

"See, Char. You admitted right there it was your fault."

I stand up.

She wanna know where I'm going.

I don't tell her.

I just start walking.

JuJu's right behind me. But she can't follow me everyplace, all the time, she been saying lately. I blew it running away, skipping school. If it wasn't for that she mighta let me stay.

They got two machines on the other side of the room. By the time I get there, I got my purse out my backpack and my wallet open. Four people in line ahead of me. JuJu is beside me when I ask how she found my letter. She says she was going through my drawers. Double-checking. Trying to make sure I didn't leave anything I might need later.

"I ain't need no letter."

"So, why'd you keep it?"

I put ten quarters in the machine. Press the Coke button. "I don't know. Guess I forgot about it."

The soda takes a roller coaster ride to the bottom. I rub the ice-cold bottle on my arm. Twist off the top. Sip and swallow. And ignore

my sister with her hand out wanting me to share. “Miss Saunders coulda gave me another chance.”

She look at me like I got two heads. “You had plenty of chances since you left McClenton Middle—a whole year’s worth. And what you do? Cut class. Fight everybody that looked your way. Quit therapy.”

I stopped therapy ‘cause I don’t need therapy. It’s stupid. You sit around and talk about stuff you don’t want to talk about—like my mother and father shot dead outside the chicken joint. So, I quit. Saved my sister all that money she was paying. Only, I ain’t tell her I quit. I would take the bus downtown. Window-shop. Sit on benches and talk to people, grown-ups mostly. I get along better with them anyhow. I get along better with boys more than girls.

“Here.” I hand JuJu what’s left.

She take a swig, then another one, then finishes the bottle. “I called her.”

“Called who?”

“Who you think—your old teacher. Miss Saunders.”

Before I ask why she called a teacher that don’t like me or her, JuJu bring up the time I ran away. She think I was with a boy. I wasn’t. One of her regulars let me sleep on his couch for two whole weeks. I told him I ran away because of my sister and her parties. But it was everything, not one thing. JuJu ain’t been herself since I got back.

“I didn’t know what else to do, Char. So, I called her. I mean—she helped Maleeka. You said that. So, I thought—”

I stop. “She told you to throw me out, didn’t she?”

JuJu got her arm through mine when she start walking. The exit door that lead you outside to my bus is halfway across the room. Her voice is quiet and calm when she brings up the bank teller job

she's starting next week. It's the first real full-time job she ever had. The pay is low, but she can work with that, she told me the other day, long as they pay her way to school like they promised. She never cared about school or working for other people till I stayed out that night. The party that's going on at our house right now is the last one she plan to throw. She did it for me, she said, so I would have spending money.

Before I can stop myself, I put my arms around her neck and hold on tight. "What if it don't work out? Can I come back home then?"

"Call me when you get to a rest stop." She lifts my arms, then puts her glasses back on. "That way I'll know you safe."

She don't say good-bye, I love you, or nothing. Turning around to leave, she stops. "I almost forgot." She pulls a big envelope out her purse. Makes me promise I'll read what's in it, like I ain't done enough reading already. I take it anyhow. And shove it in my back-pack. With my head up high, I leave her before she can leave me.



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