

MALAWI'S SISTERS

Prologue

Malawi felt good about Connie, a ruddy-faced white woman from Alabama with a Southern accent that made Malawi laugh. She drank gin straight-up and said the word “fuck” so often no one would ever guess she was a high-school math teacher. She’d taught in the Palm Beach County school system for almost as long as Malawi had been alive. That first week at school, when she heard the woman give a belly laugh in the teacher’s lounge, Malawi instantly adored her. And Connie had felt the same about Malawi, inviting her to dinner and sharing dirt on their colleagues. Malawi had only a handful of white friends, most of them liberal hipsters around her own age. Connie was well into her fifties, had voted for McCain in 2008 and for Mitt Romney in 2012. Malawi forgave her for that, putting it down to her Alabama upbringing.

They gathered at Connie’s house once a month. Sometimes they played Scrabble or watched a movie, but mostly they drank gin (Malawi added Coke—she liked being different) and talked about their students, good teaching strategies, their co-workers. Malawi could ask Connie advice on just about anything related to teaching. She made Malawi’s decision to move to West Palm Beach worth it. A spur-of-the-moment decision she had worried was the wrong move. But,

so far, her new life was working out. She could imagine settling down here, making a home for herself. Maybe even having a family. With the right guy.

Malawi had driven to Connie's house in Greenacres on Saturday night, calling her sister, Ghana, on the way there. They talked at least three times a week and texted almost every day. Malawi shared everything with Ghana—even the real reason she'd moved to Florida, though she didn't reveal his name. That was a secret she'd take to the grave.

Ghana hadn't talked to Mama or Kenya in months. Malawi understood perfectly well why. Yet a feeling, small, like one of those tiny chocolate eggs at Easter shifted in her stomach—a discomfiting recognition that those cracked spaces between them all shouldn't be left to grow. She'd needed to get away from the family, but the distance—while it had given her some clarity—had become greater than the miles. They should be better to one another. She would make an effort when she went back for a visit. Malawi made a promise to herself to bring everyone together.

For now, though, she'd met a new guy and wanted to get to know him better. Wanted to enjoy being in a relationship she didn't have to hide from everyone. Her new man was a physical therapist at the medical center. Tall, brown-skinned, and fine as hell. Marriage material, even. Malawi had a thing for older men, but he wasn't that much older, at least not compared to some of the others. He was smart and ambitious—traits she found sexy in a man, and he seemed to carry little baggage—no wives or other girlfriends, no kids, no strings she'd detected in the few months they had dated. Yeah, she could see this as a long-term thing.

He was disappointed she wasn't spending the evening with him and asked her to come over later, no matter how late it was. When Malawi left Connie's house well after midnight, she

called to tell him she was on her way. "I got something for you," he said, and she squirmed in her seat. He wouldn't say what it was. "Just don't take all night."

The GPS on her phone kept cutting out and she suspected she'd made a wrong turn somewhere, but with each turn she seemed to find her way deeper into a neighborhood she didn't know. The signal was weak and when she tried calling her man, the call dropped before she could say hello. One hand on the steering wheel, the other moving the phone around, trying to get a signal, and when she looked back at the road ahead something ran out in front of her. Looked like a bobcat. Just the other day she'd read about a recent sighting in the area. Instinctively, Malawi swerved and next thing she knew the airbag exploded in her face. Stunned, she sat for several moments as the airbag deflated, shaking, thinking maybe she shouldn't have had that last gin and Coke. She'd been sipping water throughout the night and didn't consider herself drunk, but couldn't remember exactly how many drinks she'd had.

Malawi rubbed her palms across her hot face. Carefully, she opened the car door and grimaced at the sight of the buckled front end of the Camry lodged against a light pole. Her immediate thought was to call her father, but instead she dialed her guy's number—still no service. Frustrated, she stood looking up and down the street. No traffic. No lights in any windows. It was after one a.m. She started walking, hoping to either get a signal on her phone or find someone still awake who would let her use theirs. Holding the cell phone out in front of her, she wandered a few minutes down the street until she saw a light in the front window of a small bungalow.

Malawi gave a sigh of relief and walked up the path.

— 1 —

The trilling of the phone stirred Bet from sleep, but it was the thudding of her heart that opened her eyes. An inexplicable dread rising in her chest before she looked at the clock to see the time—three in the morning. She glanced at Malcolm, who had pushed the covers to the bottom of the bed as he often did in his sleep, especially in the summer. He lay on his side, his face turned away from her, his snore chugging into the air. She offered a silent prayer that the call would be nothing bad. Leaning on her right elbow, she reached with her left for the phone on the bedside table, another prayer for a wrong number, that she could snuggle into her husband's back and savor the memory of last night's kisses.

She grabbed the phone just before it rang a third time, her heartbeat erratic in her chest. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Walker?"

"Yes."

"This is Sheriff Wheeler of the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. Do you have—"

His words faded and Bet pressed the phone closer to her ear. The voice was low and deep. She reached over and turned on the lamp, the light pinching her eyes.

"What? What did you say?"

"Do you have a daughter named Malawi Walker?"

"Malawi? What happened? Is she all right?"

"Mrs. Walker, there's been an incident. Your daughter has been shot."

"What?" Bet swung her legs off the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress pressing the phone into her ear. "What?"

She couldn't breathe, yet a scream burst from her throat. Malcolm jumped up, his arm automatically reaching out to her. "It's Malawi," she yelled. "She's been shot."

Malcolm took the phone from her hand. "Hello? This is Judge Walker, Malawi's father." He listened and stared at Bet for what seemed an age, before responding. "Thank you, Sheriff. Yes, we'll get on the first flight we can." He touched her arm and the pressure of his hand was reassuring. "She's at the Palm Beach Hospital. The sheriff said it's a shoulder injury. You pack a bag. I'll call the hospital. Maybe they can give us an update. I'll find a flight."

Malcolm rushed downstairs to his office while Bet remained seated on the bed, struggling to bring into focus what he'd said. She had to pack. They were going to Florida. They were going to see Malawi. Pushing herself to move, she ransacked closets and drawers for necessities. She stumbled over the cat as Kitty silently appeared from one of her hiding spots, meowing at the sudden disturbance in the house. In a moment, Malcolm advanced back up the stairs, shouting that he'd booked an early flight leaving National in a few hours. He handed her the phone. "I'm on hold with the hospital." He gestured for her to take over listening to the tinny elevator music and stepped into the adjoining bathroom, closing the door behind him. She tried to picture her daughter being shot in the shoulder—over-dramatized scenes from movies clouded her mind; not images of Malawi. Bet took a deep breath.

She padded downstairs and put on a pot of coffee. Kitty followed and sprang from the floor to the chair, then up onto the counter and daintily pranced across to Bet, who tut-tutted and dumped the cat back on the floor with unnecessary force. She switched the phone from her right to her left and adjusted the salt-and-pepper shakers, aligning them just so. Her fingers were shaking. A voice came on the line and Bet threw out her daughter's name, stumbling through an

explanation that her daughter had been admitted a few hours ago, a gunshot wound. The voice couldn't find Malawi's name and suggested Bet call again in an hour. Bet huffed and glowered at the phone as if the voice could see her irritation, but the line was dead. She dialed Kenya's number and her oldest answered after the third ring, her voice muffled and sleepy.

She tried to explain, but her words got tangled around her tongue as if fighting against her mouth.

"Mama, slow down. What happened?"

Bet's head felt like it was in a tumble dryer and she was about to vomit. "We don't know yet. I'll call you when we know. I just—just wanted to let you know we're going down there."

"Do you need me to do anything?"

"Call Ghana for me. I can't— I just—" Tears blurred her vision. Before hanging up, she repeated her promise to call when they got to Florida. "Oh, and stop in and feed Kitty, will you?"

The room was thick with shadow, only a glow of light came from the bulb above the stove. When the coffee was done, she poured a large mug and sat at the breakfast table trying to stay calm.

— 2 —

Kenya poured a second cup of coffee knowing she would be wired all day, but what do you do at four in the morning after your mother calls to say your sister has been shot? She had tried to go back to sleep but had lain with the weight of her thoughts pressing on her, closing her eyes just to have them open again. So she got up quietly, trying not to disturb Sidney, put on her robe and tiptoed downstairs, her head wrapped in a silk scarf to keep her hair smooth. She left a message

for Ghana, emptied the dishwasher, took out chicken pieces to thaw, and sat at the breakfast bar nibbling at a hangnail as daylight gradually filled the kitchen.

As she gazed through the window at the bushes in the yard, irritation nipped the back of her neck at having to postpone the surprise party. And what to do with the huge sheet cake decorated with her parents' smiling faces and the words "Happy Anniversary" in purple icing? Kenya bit harder at the skin around her nails. She wanted to be magnanimous toward her sister, and yet this feeling that Malawi always ruined everything kept shoving its way into her thoughts. She didn't want to think this. Malawi was in pain, suffering a gunshot wound, for God's sake. It's not that she wasn't worried about her baby sister—of course she was—it was just that Malawi had always been a drama queen. Always had to be the center of everyone's attention. This was just another stupid cry to be noticed. Probably not even a shooting, but something else entirely.

She remembered missing her first-ever girls-and-boys party because Mama went into labor with Malawi. Instead of wearing her new dress and kissing her first crush, Kenya spent the night at Grandma's house with Ghana. She had imagined dancing the night away in her crush's arms, but instead, when she got to school the next day she heard he'd danced with Bethany Gilbert and kissed *her* goodnight. The kiss should have been Kenya's. From that night on Malawi became the center of their lives—and the bane of Kenya's.

Mama and Daddy always ran to her rescue, even now that she lived in Florida, off they went. They'd find she hadn't been shot. Just Drama Queen creating a crisis. Malawi moved south claiming a desire to be free of the family. As if *the family* was some kind of mafia she needed to escape. But Malawi wasn't the good girl their parents thought she was. For one thing, she was no stranger to smoking weed, and Kenya wondered if her sister had been experimenting with

something stronger. Had fallen in with a bad crowd. Didn't seem that long ago Malawi had called their parents in the middle of the night from West Baltimore because she'd hit a stop sign, apparently trying to reach her phone on the floor. So she said. She couldn't start the car and needed money to get it towed and repaired. When asked what she was doing in West Baltimore in the early hours of the morning, all she said was, "just visiting friends." Of course, Daddy immediately drove in the middle of the night from D.C. to save her, as if she couldn't have called Triple-A.

Kenya's coffee was cold now and she frowned at her thoughts. Everything would be fine. This was just Malawi being ridiculous, as usual.

Sidney came into the kitchen and murmured, "Good morning." She could tell he was tired from his slow gait and low voice. His hair had grown into a short afro and she wished he would get it cut, yet couldn't find words to say anything. She shifted her gaze to the window as he settled on a stool next to her, wearing white shorts and a striped Polo shirt, his skin tanned to almost black. He slurped his coffee—a sound she hated—and read the Post while waiting for a bagel to pop out of the toaster. He had returned yesterday from a business trip to South Africa. She knew that much to be true. As far as she could tell, he had never lied about where he had been, just who he'd been with.

The bagel popped up and Sidney remained still, reading. She wouldn't spread the cream cheese for him. She knew that's what he wanted, because that's what she usually did. The cheese should be spread as soon as the bagel popped up so it melted. She hated for anything toasted to sit and get cold. But she refused to do it today. Not anymore.

He glanced at her. "You okay, babe?"

“Um hmm.”

She took a sip of cold coffee, aware of his eyes on her, then he got up and spread the bagel himself. Between bites, he said, “I’ll be heading out soon. Meeting Jon for a round of tennis.”

Flooded with a combination of thoughts and emotions she didn’t know what to do with, Kenya said nothing. This morning, everything was irritating her. She decided not to mention her mother’s call until she heard more. She acknowledged his comment with a nod, her teeth still nibbling at the skin around her nails, her mind on having to call everyone on the invite list to cancel the surprise party—surprise!—and thinking about her parents rushing off to Florida to rescue her sister. She listened but didn’t hear the crackling pages of the newspaper, Sidney crunching the bagel, the hum of the refrigerator.

After a while, Sidney said, “Okay, then,” and placed his mug on the empty plate, the clink bashing her ears. “I’ll see you later.” He left her with a kiss on her forehead.

— 3 —

Malawi has been shot. The words rolled and collided like marbles on a wooden floor; Ghana could make no sense of them. She deleted Kenya’s rambling message then called Malawi’s number but it went straight to voice-mail.

She sat on the couch in the dim morning light, her locs tied up with a scarf into a loose pile on top of her head, her latest tattoo, a vine of flowers curling over her shoulder and along the back of her neck, peeking around just below her right ear. She had wandered, naked, into the living room in search of her phone. The dull ache of a hangover squeezing her brain as she listened to her sister’s message. Grabbing Ryan’s T-shirt from the cushion next to her, she

covered herself then pulled her feet up onto the couch, straining the cell phone's charging cord. She leaned her arm on her knees and listened to the phone ring so many times, Ghana expected to get voice-mail, but her mother finally answered.

"Mama. What's going on?"

"We're in Florida. Me and your father." Her mother sounded weary. "Malawi's in the hospital. We've just landed at the airport. Once your father gets a car we'll go straight there."

Ghana tightened her knees into her chest. "Is she okay?"

"They said it was a shoulder wound. Look, I need to go. We'll call when we know for sure what's going on, okay."

Ghana ran back to the bedroom and jumped on the bed. Ryan lay on his stomach and shifted his head from left to right, but didn't open his eyes. He'd worked well past his regular evening shift and hadn't gotten home until after two a.m. She hesitated to wake him, but needed to talk. As a cop, he might have some perspective to help her understand what was happening with her sister.

She touched the milky-white skin right below his hairline, skin that gradually darkened to a golden brown along his shoulders and down his back. For a white boy, during the summer, he got as dark as she was. "Baby." She nudged his shoulder. "Wake up!"

He made a grunting noise, rolled onto his side and reached out for her, wrapping his arms around her waist and snuggling his face into her thigh. "Come back to bed," he said, his words muffled. She pushed him back so she could see his face.

"Malawi's been ..." She paused thinking maybe she was dreaming. *Malawi's been shot.* The phrase seemed absurd to say out loud.

Ryan's eyes flickered open; he squinted at her, his face soft and sleepy. "Huh?"

Clutching his forearm, her mind began to race, a barrage of questions filling her head: Should she fly down there, too? Was it a drive-by shooting? Could a shoulder injury be fatal? Was she overreacting? Daddy would be there soon to make sure Malawi was okay. And they'd call. Everything would be okay.

Ryan's eyelids slowly closed and his face fell into the pillow. She stared at him, feeling her throat tight, her pulse throbbing in her head. His arm made one more attempt to pull her back to bed; she shoved him away and went to the bathroom to shower. Maybe she would fly down there.

Waiting for the water to warm, she thought about calling Kenya to see if she knew anything more, but decided against it. Ghana hadn't talked to her older sister in months. Not since Christmas when everyone was home.

"You're not living up to your potential," Kenya had said. The family was gathered, as always, at their parents' home in Crestwood. Kenya loved that they grew up in the bourgie neighborhood, nicknamed the Gold Coast. That her daddy was a prominent judge, that she'd married a successful businessman, and that she went to law school and lived in a swanky house in Potomac, Maryland.

"Is that what *you're* doing?" Ghana had asked. "Living up to your potential with your two perfect kids and your big house and Louboutin shoes."

"I don't wear Louboutins." Kenya had looked at her feet, and with a straight face said, "These are Fendi."

Ghana looked to the ceiling. "Whatever."

"I'm serious, Ghana. Look at your life. You do massage. You do graphic design. You're all over the place. You live in a pitiful apartment in Anacostia."

"Yeah, and you wouldn't set foot on that side of town, right?"

"That's not what I mean."

"You don't know anything about the people who live there, so shut up."

"I'm not talking about the people who live there. I'm talking about you and your lack of focus. You need to go back to school. Finish your degree."

"Go to hell, Kenya. My business is my business. Besides, I'm moving in with my boyfriend next month."

Before Kenya could say anything more, Li'l Sis had stepped in, as she often did. "Jesus, you two. Knock it off."

Malawi was the peacemaker. The one who wanted everyone to get along. And Ghana loved her desperately. They had talked yesterday evening. Malawi seemed happy to be in Florida, though she had confessed she missed everyone. She had met a guy and said they'd been dating for a few months. Last night, she was headed to a colleague's house for dinner, a woman who also taught Math at the same high school. Ghana couldn't remember the woman's name, but she had become somewhat of a mentor to Malawi. At least that's how Li'l Sis had described her. Malawi had called from her car, on her way to the woman's house. She'd been in good spirits and they'd laughed about her maybe stopping by her guy's house after dinner for a booty call on her way home. Ghana wondered if her sister had visited him and he'd gotten angry and hurt her somehow.

She turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, wrapping a large green towel

around her. In the steamy bathroom, the blood left her head and she sat on the edge of the tub.

“Good god, I hope not.”

— 4 —

It was just after eleven in the morning and the air was muggy and hot. Malcolm drove the rental straight to Palm Beach Hospital. The Taurus handled well enough but the GPS seemed to lack an accurate image of the terrain and they made several wrong turns causing Bet to fuss about taking too long. Malcolm kept quiet—anything he said would result in an argument. The flight had lasted just over two and a half hours, but had seemed to take forever. He hated flying, but Bet was worse so he feigned indifference to keep her calm. As the plane's wheels hit the tarmac, she gripped his hand so tightly the tips of his fingers turned white.

The massive parking garage had no open spaces until the fifth level, and all the while Bet fussed. “It's too hot. Why are so many people at the hospital already? Are these spaces for both staff and visitors? Shouldn't they separate them and have them marked? Visitors should get priority.”

He knew she was anxious but he needed her to stop talking. He couldn't think. “Bet, just give it a rest for a minute. Please!”

He backed the car into the space, exited and walked around the front to open her door. He took her hand and she huffed, but fell quiet. He looked for directions to the emergency room. After an agonizingly slow ride down on the elevator and a short walk, they found the ER crowded with a long line leading to the intake desk. Bet exclaimed, “Oh, Jesus Lord.”

Of course, he thought, the chaos and madness of a Saturday night spilling into the

emergency room on a Sunday morning. Malcolm told Bet to wait in line while he skipped to the front. "I need to see my daughter. She's been shot."

The heavyset woman behind the desk didn't look up. "Sir, you'll have to wait in line."

Ready to do battle if need be to get in immediately to see his daughter, he raised his voice fully aware of the effect his baritone could have in a courtroom. "I'm not here for service. My daughter is already here. In surgery."

The woman had blotchy pink skin and small blue eyes. She glanced at him and insisted, "You have to wait your turn."

"I am not waiting in line," he said. He didn't like to use his authority outside court, to throw his weight around, as Kenya liked to say. But he did when it was warranted. "My daughter has been shot and I need to speak to a doctor. Now!"

An orderly approached, a young Indian man maybe twenty-five at most, tall and skinny meeting Malcolm eye-to-eye, and asked the name of his daughter. This was a good man, Malcolm thought. Helpful with kind eyes. The young man disappeared behind sliding glass doors but only a few moments passed before he reappeared.

"Let me take you up to surgery," he said.

Malcolm waved to Bet who was already rushing to him. They followed the young man to an elevator. The doors slid closed, sealing them in, shutting out the cacophony of the waiting room, and Malcolm took a breath. He would see his daughter. He would take her hand and tell her he loved her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken those words or held her hand. Perhaps when she was little. They exited on a floor marked Surgery and the orderly took them down a short corridor with pale pink walls to the nursing station and explained that these were

Malawi Walker's parents. The nurse behind the desk had blonde hair tied back and looked young enough to be just out of high school. A momentary frown crossed her brow, making the hair rise on the back of Malcolm's neck.

She looked at Malcolm. "I'm so sorry," she said then closed her eyes as if she'd said something she shouldn't have.

Bet began to moan, "Oh my God. Oh my God."

So sorry. These words were not enough for Malcolm. He needed to hear why she was sorry. He needed to know what had happened, though didn't want to think of the possibilities. But he asked anyway.

"You should talk to Dr. Kosi. He can explain." The nurse beckoned the orderly who had been standing a few feet away, at the ready if needed. Malcolm heard a child heaving rasping coughs and a flash of Malawi as a baby, wheezing and coughing, making painful noises only babies can make, noises that grasp the heart and squeeze. Malcolm was ready to search for his daughter in the recovery room leading off to the right of the nurse's station, glass partitions and modest curtains giving little privacy to the afflicted. He wanted to find Malawi behind one, sitting up in the bed, giggling and rolling her eyes at her stupidity for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not shot at all, but merely scraped from a fall requiring a few stitches. Not surgery.

Dr. Kosi strode up to the counter with a calm sense of urgency, clipboard in hand, passing it to the nurse with the confidence that she knew what to do with it, ready to rush to the next in line with a medical complaint.

"Dr. Kosi, this is um ..."

The nurse paused, as if trying to remember Malawi's name.

“These are the girl’s parents, the girl who was ...”

“Mr. and Mrs. Walker.” Dr. Kosi made eye contact with Malcolm. “Please, follow me.”

He led them into a small office, walls lined with certificates, and offered them a seat but everyone remained standing, an awkward silence freezing the air. The doctor said, “I’m sorry ...” And there it was again, that phrase, *I’m sorry*. For what? Malcolm wanted to yell, but he held the doctor’s gaze and waited.

A screech, short and high-pitched escaped Bet and Malcolm felt her fingers clawing at him, her weight growing heavy on his arm as she interpreted the doctor’s apology. A step ahead of Malcolm, already accepting what he was not willing to accept. He needed to hear the words, to believe what had, so far, been unsaid. “What do you mean?”

Dr. Kosi wavered but only for a second, a slight flicker in the eyes, then he said, “She died during surgery. We did all we could and worked on her for several hours, but she lost too much blood.”

“I don’t understand. The sheriff said she was shot in the shoulder. Just a shoulder injury.”

“She was shot twice, Mr. Walker.” He looked at Bet who was almost doubled over now moaning into Malcolm’s forearm. “She was taken downstairs. Nurse Templeton can show you.”

Malcolm looked at the blinds covering the window. He knew what was downstairs. The word “downstairs” was better than the word “basement,” which was where most hospitals housed the morgue. He and Bet were here now to identify their baby girl, not to console her and pay the hospital bill, though that would come later in the mail. Malcolm wasn’t sure his daughter had health insurance. He should know these things. As her father, he should know whether or not his daughter had health insurance.

“Why don’t you take a moment and sit down,” said Dr. Kosi, extending his arm to the chairs behind them.

Malcolm gripped Bet by the shoulders, almost dragging her to a standing position. He thought the words, let’s sit, but nothing came out of his mouth. He tried to take a step but his feet were weighted with invisible blocks and his knees began to shake. He almost dropped Bet in an effort to grab the desk to stop himself from falling. “Please, Bet,” he said, feebly. This was not the judge’s voice. It was the voice of a tiny man afraid of having to identify his daughter’s body.

* * *

They stared at her. Her skin was a sickly pale brown. Taupe, Bet thought. She wanted to say it wasn’t her. Not her baby girl, her Mowie. The floor seemed to buckle and the walls bent and the entire room swayed. Like a carnival ride that shook you up and left you nauseous and upset, unable to stand straight for several moments afterward. Bet placed her hands on her knees and stared at the floor expecting her entire insides to be expelled all over the linoleum. She closed her eyes and, as if whispering a mantra, said, “Don’t make this be real,” several times, then she felt Malcolm’s hand on her sacrum. Everything stopped swaying, and it was real. She looked again at her baby’s face, so serious and composed. The doctor had said she was shot in the chest and right shoulder; her body was covered with a pale green cloth that showed only her neck and face. With the back of her hand, Bet touched Mowie’s cheek and inhaled sharply at the chill of it. She leaned forward and kissed where her hand had been. Though cool, the skin shifted slightly under her touch. Real, yet not real, like a clone made without Mowie’s vibrancy. Without life. She placed her head next to Mowie’s cheek and began to cry, tears that trickled quietly across Bet’s nose.

She shouldn't have gone to Florida. Bet knew it had been a mistake. All that talk of needing real independence. Ghana and Kenya had real independence and they hadn't moved out of the area.

"You're being ridiculous, Mowie," Bet had said during one of her daughter's Sunday visits. Before moving to Florida, Malawi often came to visit on the weekends, bringing laundry because she disliked being in the dirty laundry room of her Baltimore apartment building; the machines were slow and unreliable. Bet would miss those visits, though sometimes they had annoyed her. An irritation she couldn't quite express. Malawi had been overly attached to her parents, or rather to her father. In three more years, the girl would have been thirty; she should have been making more of an effort to find a husband.

"Times have changed Mommy," she'd said, rolling her eyes at Bet. "I don't need to have a man to get along in this life." Perhaps not, Bet thought, but it wouldn't have hurt.

Her daughter had sat on the settee in the studio while Bet worked on a painting; the smell of a roast in the oven filled the house. Her legs curled under her, Malawi pulled the ear buds out and announced she had accepted a job offer. No warning. No lead-in. Just, "I've gotten a job in Florida. At a high school in Palm Beach."

Bet was unsure what to say while her daughter's large eyes watched, waiting for some overreaction from her mother before continuing. "I just, like, need to be in a place where, you know, no one knows our family. Everybody here knows Daddy."

"That's not true, not everyone. What a silly thing to say." Bet didn't know why she had been so contrary. It did seem that everyone knew Malcolm. His father had been a city councilman for a number of years back in the seventies and eighties and his mother had worked

with Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height at the National Council of Negro Women. The family was well known in D.C. But still, she told her daughter, "You're being ridiculous."

"Well, it's a good job opportunity," Malawi said.

"Teaching high school math? How many schools do we have here in the D.C. area?" Bet rapidly swirled her paintbrush on the palette, mixing yellow and blue to create a swampy dark green. "You really couldn't have gotten a job here?"

"Seriously? Baltimore wasn't good enough. Now Florida isn't good enough."

"There's a lot of crime in the city of Baltimore. Even the surrounding county would have been a safer choice."

Malawi stood up then, stretched her arms above her head and offered a bored sigh.

"Where's Daddy?"

"In his office, I suppose." Bet jabbed the canvas with blotches of almost-black green blobs, spoiling the forest landscape. "He won't be happy with you leaving."

"He'll just have to get over it," Malawi said and ambled to the stairs, taking them two at a time up to the main level of the house. Bet listened for her daughter's feet to cross the landing to Malcolm's office, but instead she heard the hardwood floor creak in the den and a burst of noise from the television.

Malawi's dismissal that day had hurt Bet, but she never spoke of it. They didn't always talk but Bet had enjoyed those moments when Mowie chose to sit with her over being with her father. Sometimes, Bet would sketch her daughter curled on the settee, bopping her head, listening through earbuds to some kind of music Bet found wretched on the ears, all thud, thud, thud with words she couldn't understand. Now, she regretted not making more of those times

together, not going after her that day to convince her to stay near home, not hugging her more and revealing how much those moments in the studio had meant to Bet.

With her head resting on her daughter's cheek, Bet whispered the words now and they fell silent on Malawi's cold skin. "I always loved you as much as your daddy did. I should have made sure you knew."