

CHAPTER 1

CERTAIN DAYS ought to come with warning notices. **WARNING: This day will be hazardous to your health.** Instead, most days start out normal. Maybe even better than normal.

Which is so much worse.



I woke up feeling good. It was Thursday, and that meant choir practice. More than anything, I wanted to be a great singer. Not a rock star, but a singer who'd change the world with my voice, like Nina Simone, Whitney Houston, Adele, or Mahalia Jackson. I wanted my music to make people stop in their tracks.

Of course, seeing as I was only twelve and poor as dirt, that was a universe away, but if my voice teacher, Ms. Marion, had taught me anything, it was that even the most unlikely person could succeed.

“Didn’t the great Mahalia grow up in a house right here in New Orleans with thirteen people under one roof?” she said. “Didn’t she have to leave school in the fourth grade because her family couldn’t afford to send her anymore? If a black girl could rise up in the early 1900s when everything was against her, then a skinny little white girl like you hasn’t got any excuse.”

So I kept one of those tear-off calendars beside my bed and the last thing I did every night was to rip off that day’s page. It was a dumb calendar with facts about cars from a box of leftovers Ma hadn’t been able to sell online, but that hardly mattered. All I wanted was the pleasure of crumpling up every day of the week that wasn’t Thursday.

I sat up that morning and ran my fingers through my thick, tangled hair, and then I started a hum to warm up my vocal cords. Ms. Marion was a stickler about warming up properly.

Lazy singers never last.

Through the security bars on my window, I could see that the sky was full of clouds, ready to burst. The ominous streaks of gray might have been a sign, except in New Orleans storms can come and go in ten minutes flat—especially in June.

I got up and made my way into the shower, turning the water up hot and letting the spray scald my skin as I belted out the lead line of the gospel song my choir was practicing.

The Rainbow Choir was a chorus of kids made up of every race, color, and creed, and we were supposed to inspire a sense of community in our audiences. At least, that was Ms. Marion's vision. Me and my best friend, Keisha, had been founding members back when we were nine, but in the past three years, I wasn't sure we'd done any inspiring.

Still gave me an excuse to sing.

Ma and I lived in a rickety old shotgun house outside the Irish Channel. Our rooms were close together, so I was thankful Ma slept like the dead. Nothing woke her up—not even my powerful alto voice—so I could sing as loud as I wanted and let the acoustics in the bathroom carry the sound up to the ceiling.

I stepped out of the shower onto the gritty bare floor. New Orleans is hot as blazes in the summer, and I already felt sticky again—not a good sign this early in the day. I wished for the thousandth time that we had air-conditioning, but I propped open the bathroom window instead, hoping a breeze might come my way.

Nothing moved, outside or in.

I dressed, brushed my teeth, then pushed past the clutter to my bedroom. Ma's main job was as a baker at the Winn-Dixie on Tchoupitoulas, but as a side job she sold people's unwanted stuff online, and that meant our house was always chock-full of empty boxes, bubble wrap, foam peanuts, and random items like angel figurines, antique toys, or prom

dresses that had gone out of style. Ma figured out how much they were worth, put them up for auction, and if they sold, she got a percentage. If the stuff didn't sell, half the time it ended up staying here.

Ma's bedroom is at the end of the house, so I had to step over a dozen puzzles and dusty Xbox games in order to peek inside. She was asleep on the oversized bed, and her uniform from the previous night's late shift had been dropped where she'd taken it off. A McDonald's hamburger wrapper and half a tub of fries lay on a chair where several small cockroaches were feasting on the remains.

Cockroaches gave me the creeps, so I set Ma's garbage pail next to the chair and took out our shoe-on-a-stick, then quickly pushed the whole mess into the bin before the cockroaches could scamper away. I tied up the garbage bag extra tight, wanting to retch, but I choked the feeling down.

For a moment, I stood watching Ma's thin frame rise and fall with sleep. Ma looked peaceful with her auburn hair spread loose across her pillow, but she'd had more than her share of troubles, and if anything else came her way, I suspected she'd crumble like the plaster on the stairs of the New Heaven Baptist Church. Those steps had looked fine, right up until two giant slabs fell off the side, revealing the twisted metal bars underneath.

I covered Ma with a blanket and kissed her cheek, then

went outside to practice my vocal exercises on the front stoop, knowing it would be a long wait for choir.

I was right. It took half of forever and a quarter of eternity.

What I didn't know was that the whole time I was waiting, trouble was creeping up, and it was the kind of trouble that would leave me and Ma swirling in its wake.

CHAPTER 2

ALL AFTERNOON, the temperature rose until the sidewalks steamed and the air was so still, I could barely breathe. I wasn't allowed to leave for choir practice until Ma woke up and we spent some time together, but that meant I waited around all day only to scrape by and barely make it to rehearsal before Ms. Marion called everyone onto the risers.

When Ma finally emerged from her bedroom dressed in her store uniform, my hair was damp against my forehead and frizzy from the humidity, and my patience had worn thin. I was sitting at the kitchen table eating a bowl of Apple Puffs with apple juice instead of milk because Ms. Marion says milk coats the vocal cords, making it difficult to sing.

"That is just plain gross," Ma said, leaning down to plant a kiss on the top of my head.

I shrugged. Wasn't that bad—the apple juice made the cereal tart against my tongue. "I have choir tonight," I reminded her.

She glanced at the clock. “You think I don’t know that?”

“And . . . tomorrow night is June Fest,” I mumbled, studying the floor. “You said you might come hear me sing the lead.”

“I told you I’d *think* about it,” Ma said, “but I’ve got work to do, and you know we need the money.”

I didn’t respond. Money was always tight, but even if she hadn’t been offered that shift, Ma would’ve found some other excuse.

“I’ve got to head out,” Ma said, grabbing her pass for the streetcar. “Are you sure you’ll be okay walking to choir practice by yourself?”

Ma said the same thing every week. She hated it when I went anywhere alone, but I didn’t have much choice since Keisha had dance class right before choir. And I wasn’t about to miss rehearsal.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, same as every week.

Ma paused, hovering in the doorway. “It’s not you I don’t trust, it’s . . .” She never finished that sentence, but she always relented. “Lock the door behind you when you leave. Don’t talk to strangers, and follow the path I laid out for you.”

I nodded, piling my empty bowl on top of the other dirty dishes in the sink. Five minutes later I was dressed in blue-jean shorts and a baggy T-shirt, ready to leave. Keisha said that being twelve meant it was time to start dressing like

women instead of girls, but that was a lot easier for her since she was tall and had curves in all the right places. Me, I liked to keep things simple.

I locked the door, then hurried down the front steps, pausing for a second at the gate to glance back again. Ma said it was crazy talk, but I could swear our house was tilting. Reminded me of the houses Keisha's dad, Dwayne, built out of cards. I cocked my head to one side, willing it to stay up, then sighed and took off down the street.

Three blocks later I turned the corner and slowed a bit. My neighborhood was mostly empty—a big, boring grid of look-alike, one-story houses with no color whatsoever. The people were mostly white, the buildings were gray, and the yards were small and bare. But the area where Keisha lived was sprawling and diverse, overlapping brick apartment buildings, two-story houses painted in shades of pink, blue, and purple, with fenced-in yards, giant elephant-ear bushes, and trees with strings of Mardi Gras beads stuck in their branches.

On Keisha's street, people sat on their front steps and called their hellos to one another. Children played hopscotch and teenagers blasted music from their open car windows. I wished me and Ma could live here. How could there be such a big difference when we were only a few blocks apart?

But at least I didn't live in No-Man's-Land, where half the buildings were empty and the other half were spray-painted

by gangs marking their territory. That was where police cars lingered, trash littered the streets, and no one in their right mind ventured after dark.

But the quickest way to choir practice?

Straight through the middle.

Ma would have a fit if she knew I went this way, but it would take me twice as long to walk all the way around, so I took a deep breath and forced myself forward. The key was not to stop. Keep my eyes locked ahead and my feet moving.

I hadn't gotten more than two blocks in when I saw the usual gang of men on the opposite side of the street, hanging out on the steps of a boarded-up building drinking beer. My heart raced, but I tried to look like I wasn't hurrying. I concentrated on the beat of my footsteps, and then I made up a melody and sang it in my head. I added and embellished until my focus was complete and there wasn't any part of my brain left to worry about what might be coming.

"Hey, white girl!"

A chorus of whistles and laughter shattered my song. One of the men flicked the still-glowing stub of his cigarette in my direction.

"Why don't you come over here and hang with us?" he called. It wasn't even funny, but they all laughed, slapping their knees. I walked faster, staring ahead, pretending not to smell the garbage baking in the heat or the stink of their

beer. But then one of them, a young guy I didn't recognize, said something new.

"Your cracker daddy still rotting in prison?"

I looked up quick and tripped over my own feet.

How did he know about that?

No one talked about my father. Ever. Only a handful of people knew that my father was behind bars for life. Keisha and her family knew, plus my school guidance counselor, and I suspected Ms. Marion, but other than that . . .

Part of me wanted to stop and find out how this complete stranger had heard about my father, but I'm not that dumb. Instead, I scanned the horizon for the steeple of the New Heaven Baptist Church. There it was, just four blocks up, rising above the rooftops.

"Why don't you and your mama take your sorry . . ."

The guy said something real bad. Too bad to repeat. The worst thing to do is react, but I flinched, and the drunk men laughed, excited that they'd gotten a rise out of me. That's when I broke into a run. The men had won and they knew it. When I was far enough away, I glanced over my shoulder and the young guy was holding out his fingers in the shape of a gun. Aiming it at me.

A shiver raced down my spine.

Finally, I reached the church. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with one bare arm. Every muscle in my body was tense, and I wanted to retch, right there on the sidewalk.

Instead, I forced my breathing to slow down and waited for my temples to stop throbbing. I thought about the people inside: our drummers setting up, Ms. Marion organizing her papers, kids milling around, getting ready to take their places on the risers. Then I thought about the music we'd make, knowing it would wash everything away.

Soon, the outside world would be muted. The laughing men would not come in, and the music could come out. I'd open my mouth and sing so loud, I'd blow this whole rotten neighborhood away.

CHAPTER 3

FIRST THING I did once I opened the front doors of the church and stepped inside was to look for Keisha. Ms. Marion called us the Two Musketeers, which was odd since everyone knows there's supposed to be three of those, but Ms. Marion was like that, always making things out the way she wanted them to be.

"You looking for the other Musketeer?" Ms. Marion called when she saw me peering around the sanctuary.

I nodded.

"She's over near the risers."

"Thanks," I said, slipping away as quickly as I could. I found Keisha standing tall with her arms crossed, staring down Mary-Kate Torelo, one of the few other white kids in the choir. Mary-Kate was one of the girls who'd joined last month after we'd performed at the Presbyterian church uptown. There were three of them: Mary-Kate, Amber Allen, and Faith Evans. All three wore the kind of designer clothes

you could only get if you were rich. They had long, spiraling hair, and they always had their nails done with decals and sparkles. Everyone knew their moms made them come, swept along by Ms. Marion's vision. But we also knew they hated every minute here.

"I'm telling you," Mary-Kate was saying, "that song wasn't even a gospel song when it was written, it was—"

Keisha cut her off. "Please," she said, "don't tell *me* about gospel."

Keisha had dark brown skin, and she usually wore her hair styled in dozens of long braids pulled back into a ponytail. She was wearing tight, curvy jeans and a fitted pink T-shirt that said DON'T MESS WITH THE PRINCESS—advice that Mary-Kate should have taken.

"You're not even African American," Keisha said, jutting out her hip. "White people don't know a thing about gospel."

Mary-Kate's eyes flashed. "That's racist," she said, even though it was obvious Keisha had only said it to bait her.

Keisha rolled her eyes. "No, it isn't," she argued. "Gospel is part of my heritage. I think I'd know if—" She stopped mid-sentence when she spotted me. "Tia! You're here!" She sprang over and wrapped her arms around me, nearly knocking me to the floor.

Mary-Kate scowled, ignoring my presence. "So if gospel is your heritage," she said to Keisha, "then why don't you have a problem with Tia singing the lead on 'I Know'?"

She meant because I was a skinny white girl with brown hair, dark brown eyes, and skin about as pale as a person's could be. Keisha didn't even pause.

"Because Tia does gospel the way it's supposed to be done," she said. "No one in the world can belt it out like she can."

Best friends are allowed to fudge the truth.

"Tia's voice is *okay*," Mary-Kate said, "but I could sing the lead just as well. In my last choir, I was always the soloist. Everyone knows Ms. Marion plays favorites and that's why she chose Tia. Again."

At Mary-Kate's church, I'd performed a song called "A Note to God" that Ms. Marion and I had been working on during my private lessons. It wasn't usually part of our program, but Ms. Marion thought the Presbyterians would like it. Afterward, Mary-Kate's mother had sought me out to tell me how moved she'd been by my performance, while Mary-Kate had tried to murder me with her glare.

"If you hate it here so much—" Keisha started, but she never had a chance to finish because that's when Ms. Marion called us to begin rehearsal.

"C'mon, children," Ms. Marion coaxed in her thick accent. "Y'all take your places on the risers."

Ms. Marion was originally from one of the parishes outside the city—Metairie or Slidell, I could never remember

which one. She didn't talk like New Orleans folk, smooth and neutral with just a hint of the south. She talked like a large, Southern woman, proud and loud.

Keisha gave Mary-Kate one last stare before pulling me onto the risers. We couldn't stand next to each other because Keisha was a soprano and I was an alto, but Keisha and I watched out for each other, so she wasn't about to leave me alone with Mary-Kate.

"Remember, children," Ms. Marion said, "you are the living, musical embodiment of Martin Luther King's dream. Make me believe it!"

As we took our places, Ms. Marion started us humming, but we were flat. We practiced in Ms. Marion's church because it was free space, but it was hot—steaming even—and the lazy ceiling fans barely made a difference. No matter how hard Ms. Marion waved us on, the Rainbow Choir swayed half a beat too slow.

Everything was heavy.

"I know y'all can do better than this," Ms. Marion chided. "Y'all can *be* better than this." Ms. Marion's voice took on the singsong cadence of a preacher. "I *know*," she said, "don't I just know, don't I just *know*, don't I just know?" She raised one eyebrow before turning the singsong into a song-song, filling in the first words of the song we'd been practicing. "I knooooow."

She stomped one foot, shaking her arms in the air. Ms. Marion was a drama queen. In the back row the tenors started laughing and the altos covered their mouths with their hands. Ms. Marion grinned through the heat, and a bead of sweat ran down her plump cheek.

“Don’t I just knooooow,” she sang, stretching those words like a siren call. Off to one corner, the preacher man nodded and said “Amen, sister” as he gathered the hymn books off the red velvet pews.

“C’mon now,” she said, and some of the parents clapped and whistled, cheering us on.

“Sing it, children,” said old Nana Whiskers, who always came to practice even though no child belonged to her.

Ms. Marion sang, “Don’t you just knooooow?” turning it into a question as we hummed in the background. Then she made it a command. “Tell me if you know.”

“I know,” we sang in answer. Ms. Marion let our words come out loud and quick, then cut them off with a swipe of her fist.

“Do you *know*?” she asked again.

“I know,” we answered.

I snuck a glance behind me. Keisha lifted her chin like she did when she was ready, Tallulah Jackson wriggled her hips, and Tyrone Sanderson stomped in rhythm to the drum-beat. Even shy Kenny Lin, the Korean tenor with the stutter, smiled in anticipation.

“One more time,” Ms. Marion prodded.

“I KNOW.”

Now we had it, and our words filled the small sanctuary.

“Tia,” Ms. Marion said, nodding at me. I took a step forward so I was standing front and center and inhaled a deep breath. This was my moment.

I reached down inside, found the music waiting, and let it loose.

“I know that the Lord is good, that the Lord is good, that the Lord is good. That’s what I know.” My line soared above the choir, and I swear I felt my heart expand.

I sang like a magician pulling scarves from my sleeve. More and more scarves until it didn’t seem like there could be any left. They flew up and out, every one connected to the last in a flurry of color. I sent my cool, bright sounds into the thick June air, letting the scarves weave their way through the rafters of the old church.

That’s how it was that night.

The sound coming out of me was so loud, the preacher man stopped what he was doing and shut one of the big leather Bibles with a thump. Keisha’s mom, Ms. Evette, sat in the first pew rocking baby Jerome back and forth. She was a large woman with close-cropped hair and beautiful high cheekbones, and her eyes were shut in appreciation. I heard her murmur *hmmm* and Jerome pointed at me with his chubby baby fingers. Old Nana Whiskers watched him and laughed like a hyena.

The sound was still coming, sucking up every scrap of breath, and behind me the choir lent their voices. They didn't sing, but they let me know they felt it too.

"All right."

"Uh-huh."

"Go Tia."

I barely heard them. They were far, far away. Right then I didn't care about anything but my song soaring through the air. I didn't care that I was a twelve-year-old girl who didn't match the size or shape of a great singer. I didn't care that my father was in prison, and me and Ma barely scraped by. I didn't care that I was at church on a Thursday evening instead of home watching TV. I didn't even care that my own mother had never once come to hear me sing.

In that moment, nothing else mattered, so I let the sound pour out.

"I knooow," I sang, pushing the volume louder and fuller than I ever had before. "I knooow," I repeated, letting the spirit take over. *"I know, I know, I know, I know."*

Everyone was clapping, hooting and hollering, lifting their hands in praise. Ms. Marion stomped her feet and the preacher man yelled, "Hallelujah!"

The sanctuary was filled with celebration. Power pulsed around me, and I sucked it inside, filling my lungs to their fullest, ready to let loose the next phrase.

Ms. Marion laughed, shaking her head and stomp-

ing her feet, and Jo Jo Lawsen held up her open palms in praise. “I believe,” she cried from the second pew. “Oh Lord, I believe.”

And in that moment, so did I.

Until the sound of gunshots shattered the air.