

EVE

BEFORE

I'm sitting at the breakfast nook sipping from a mug of cocoa when the phone rings. I'm lost in thought, staring out the back window at the lawn that now, in the throes of an early fall, abounds with leaves. They're dead mostly, some still clinging lifelessly to the trees. It's late afternoon. The sky is overcast, the temperatures doing a nosedive into the forties and fifties. I'm not ready for this, I think, wondering where in the world the time has gone. Seems like just yesterday we were welcoming spring and then, moments later, summer.

The phone startles me and I'm certain it's a telemarketer, so I don't initially bother to rise from my perch. I relish the last few hours of silence I have before James comes thundering through the front doors and intrudes upon my world, and the last thing I want to do is waste precious minutes on some telemarketer's sales pitch that I'm certain to refuse.

The irritating noise of the phone stops and then starts again. I answer it for no other reason than to make it stop.

"Hello?" I ask in a vexed tone, standing now in the center of the kitchen, one hip pressed against the island.

"Mrs. Dennett?" the woman asks. I consider for a moment

telling her that she's got the wrong number, or ending her pitch right there with a simple *not interested*.

"This is she."

"Mrs. Dennett, this is Ayanna Jackson." I've heard the name before. I've never met her, but she's been a constant in Mia's life for over a year now. How many times have I heard Mia say her name: *Ayanna and I did this...Ayanna and I did that...* She is explaining how she knows Mia, how the two of them teach together at the alternative high school in the city. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she says.

I catch my breath. "Oh, no, Ayanna, I just walked in the door," I lie.

Mia will be twenty-five in just a month: October 31st. She was born on Halloween and so I assume Ayanna has called about this. She wants to plan a party—a surprise party?—for my daughter.

"Mrs. Dennett, Mia didn't show up for work today," she says.

This isn't what I expect to hear. It takes a moment to regroup. "Well, she must be sick," I respond. My first thought is to cover for my daughter; she must have a viable explanation why she didn't go to work or call in her absence. My daughter is a free spirit, yes, but also reliable.

"You haven't heard from her?"

"No," I say, but this isn't unusual. We go days, sometimes weeks, without speaking. Since the invention of email, our best form of communication has become passing along trivial forwards.

"I tried calling her at home but there's no answer."

"Did you leave a message?"

"Several."

"And she hasn't called back?"

"No."

I'm listening only halfheartedly to the woman on the other end of the line. I stare out the window, watching the neighbors' children shake a flimsy tree so that the remaining leaves fall down upon them. The children are my clock; when they appear in the backyard I know that it's late afternoon, school is through. When they disappear inside again it's time to start dinner.

"Her cell phone?"

"It goes straight to voice mail."

"Did you—"

"I left a message."

"You're certain she didn't call in today?"

"Administration never heard from her."

I'm worried that Mia will get in trouble. I'm worried that she will be fired. The fact that she might already be in trouble has yet to cross my mind.

"I hope this hasn't caused too much of a problem."

Ayanna explains that Mia's first-period students didn't inform anyone of the teacher's absence and it wasn't until second period that word finally leaked out: Ms. Dennett wasn't here today and there wasn't a sub. The principal went down to keep order until a substitute could be called in; he found gang graffiti scribbled across the walls with Mia's overpriced art supplies, the ones she bought herself when the administration said no.

"Mrs. Dennett, don't you think it's odd?" she asks. "This isn't like Mia."

"Oh, Ayanna, I'm certain she has a good excuse."

"Such as?" she asks.

"I'll call the hospitals. There's a number in her area—"

"I've done that."

"Then her friends," I say, but I don't know any of Mia's friends. I've heard names in passing, such as Ayanna and Lau-

ren and I know there's a Zimbabwean on a student visa who's about to be sent back and Mia thinks it's completely unfair. But I don't *know* them, and last names or contact information are hard to find.

"I've done that."

"She'll show up, Ayanna. This is all just a misunderstanding. There could be a million reasons for this."

"Mrs. Dennett," Ayanna says and it's then that it hits me: something is wrong. It hits me in the stomach and the first thought I have is myself seven or eight months pregnant with Mia and her stalwart limbs kicking and punching so hard that tiny feet and hands emerge in shapes through my skin. I pull out a barstool and sit at the kitchen island and think to myself that before I know it, Mia will be twenty-five and I haven't so much as thought of a gift. I haven't proposed a party or suggested that all of us, James and Grace and Mia and me, make reservations for an elegant dinner in the city.

"What do you suggest we do, then?" I ask.

There's a sigh on the other end of the line. "I was hoping you'd tell me Mia was with you," she says.