

## SATURDAY, AUGUST 23, 10:11 A.M.



I'm supposed to be packing, but I really can't get it together. Sitting on the floor, surrounded by all my clothes and books and *stuff*, all I can think is: Why does it have to end like this? My seven weeks here went by in something like five seconds, and if it wasn't for what happened last night, everything would have been perfect. But now, it's all over.

*I need more time.*

I shake my head and try to let go of all my feelings. I need to focus. Mom and Dad are gonna be here any minute and I know the first thing Mom is gonna say is, "Why aren't you packed? When we talked yesterday, I told you to make sure you were ready when we got here."

And Dad will say something like, "Saturday traffic is so unpredictable, Caprice. It can be almost as bad as weekdays, especially on Route 17."

It's a little after ten o'clock in the morning, and good thing they're late because I can use the extra time. It's hard to finish packing when I don't really wanna leave.

I fold my T-shirts into perfect little rectangles. Too perfect. But all the folding and perfecting keeps me from thinking about anything else, keeps me from slipping into my feelings.

It keeps me from thinking about last night and how I messed everything up.

All of a sudden I'm hit with a wave of heavy sadness again.

"You okay?" my roommate Terra asks with that cute New Zealand accent I'm really gonna miss.

I glance up at her just long enough to see the worry in her eyes.

Then I look away. “Um, I’m sorry I ruined your last night. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s not *my* last night, silly. I’ll be back in a week.” She sits on the floor next to me.

“You know what I mean. I made you leave the party early and—”

“Caprice, I just want you to be alright,” she says. “I mean, last night I . . .” She shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You did everything right,” I say. “Seriously.”

The truth is, I still don’t know why I fell apart. It was scary. It’s still scary. I used to be able to keep all of it inside, but now, I don’t know. Maybe I can’t anymore.

“Do you wanna talk to your parents about it? I mean, maybe they—”

“No way!” The words tumble out of my mouth. “Can we just act like everything’s normal?”

“No problem.” She gives me a weak half smile. “Nothing happened.”

I breathe out and smile back. “Thanks.”

I lean over and give Terra a hug. All I have to do is try to let all those feelings go. My parents will be here any minute.

When I talked to Mom yesterday, she got another call in the middle of our conversation. It was someone calling from Baltimore, so she had to go. Probably something about Grandma.

After we hung up, I don’t know. It was hard to get in the mood for the party. Like, I hadn’t heard Mom mention Grandma in forever, and now, outta nowhere, she was getting a phone call about her. It kinda made me wonder what was going on, if Grandma was okay.

I still don’t know. But I try to push that out of my mind, too.

I stand up and look around the room one last time. Terra’s side

is lavender and gray and overloaded with books. My side looks like I was never here.

It's gonna be harder leaving Ainsley International School than I ever thought it would be. It's hard to explain, but I feel it. This seven-week Summer Leadership Program, and just *being* here, has changed me. On the outside, I know I'm still me, the same girl from Newark I was when I got here. But inside, I can feel it. I'm different.

I grab my phone off the desk and text Mom.

are u here

No answer.

"I wish you could stay," Terra says quietly. "Like, for good."

"Me too."

She gets up from the floor and moves over to her bed. "You're the best roommate I've had, and I've been here since fifth grade."

All I can do is smile.

"Did you see Ms. Adams dancing last night?" Terra asks, laughing. "What *was* that?"

I laugh with her. "Maybe that's the way they danced back in the eighties or something."

"Or like the seventies!"

"She's not *that* old," I say. "She's just kinda . . . *stiff*."

We burst out laughing even louder. I need this. I need to remember the fun things about the party.

Finally, I get a text back from Mom.

The head of school asked to meet with us. Be there after.

I suck in my breath. "Dr. Suzanne wants to meet with my parents," I tell Terra. "Do you think she knows what happened?"

“No way. I’m the only one.”

“Then what does she wanna talk to them about?”

Terra shrugs. “Let’s wait and find out.”

I sit down at my desk and remind myself to breathe. The meeting probably has nothing to do with last night. I’m just being paranoid.

A minute later I get another text, this time from Nicole.

what time are you getting here already

It’s only her sixth or seventh text of the morning, which is pretty good for her. I don’t wanna tell her about Mom and Dad’s meeting with the head of school, not until I know what it’s about, so I just text back:

mom and dad are late picking me up 😞

god i cant wait anymore!!!

i’ll text u when we’re on the way home

come straight to the center & get me



Seven weeks away hasn’t been easy. Not for either of us. I miss her so bad, and I know she misses me, too. Since I’ve been here, me and her texted all the time, but there’s hardly been time for anything else. I hadn’t actually heard Nicole’s voice since my first week here.

Terra takes her blanket and sheets off her bed. “I was hoping our parents would get to meet each other,” she says. “But my mum only left D.C. about two hours ago.”

My parents would like Terra's mom. I got to meet her already, my third week at Ainsley. She came up to talk to the Leadership Program about careers in diplomacy, which I didn't even know was a thing. Terra's mom is pretty famous in New Zealand. She won two gold medals in the Olympics for diving before Terra was born. The way she described her job—all of the traveling, meeting world leaders, trying to keep countries from going to war—sounded so cool. Terra said it *is* cool, but her mom is busy 24/7. It's definitely not something Terra would ever do for her career.

Me? I still don't know what I wanna do, and if this Summer Leadership Program was supposed to help with that, it didn't work. It just showed me that there are, like, a billion different careers out there.

"They still might meet," I say, standing up and helping Terra get the dirty sheets into her giant polka-dot laundry bag. "Depending on how long Dr. Suzanne keeps my parents in her office."

"True."

While we wait, I help Terra put clean sheets on her bed and straighten up the room so it'll look nice when she gets back from vacation.

*At least she gets to come back.*

I go down the hall to the supplies closet where they have brooms and dustpans. On the way, I pass Deja's empty room. She had to leave early to catch her flight home. After the party, I was supposed to meet her at the lake, where a lot of kids were hanging out. But I never made it there.

When I first came to Ainsley, I was kinda worried I was gonna be the only Black girl here, but there were three of us: Deja, Kimberly, and me. The only difference is, they're Ainsley students all year round. Deja took Kimberly home with her to Toronto for

the break. Kimberly is from Ghana, way too far to go home for just a week. I wish I'd gotten a chance to say goodbye.

Terra is sorting through her books when I get back. On top, she has this book that's required reading for the eighth graders. But instead of reading that, she's flipping through her Grand Canyon travel guide for the thousandth time.

"You excited about your trip?" I ask her.

"Can't wait!" she says. "My mum and I are on a mission to hike in every state in America, but the Grand Canyon is going to be the best."

Terra's already been to Montana, Texas, Maine, Oregon, and Hawaii. Places I've never been to and I'm *from* this country. Kinda embarrassing.

"What about you?" she asks me. "Going anywhere before summer's over?"

It's so funny, but I never even think about going anywhere. I can't even remember the last trip my family went on.

"No, I don't think so," I say. "My friends spend most of the summer at, like, our community center."

"Oh," she says. "That sounds like fun."

"It is," I say fast. "I missed most of everything, but it's okay there. Fun."

I need to stop rambling, so I begin sweeping my side of the room, under my desk and bed. Then I do the same for Terra's side while she finishes getting packed. It doesn't take long for our room to start looking pretty decent. *Our* room. It's weird how soon I started feeling at home here, and now it's over.

I look up and see Mom and Dad standing in the doorway.

"You're here!" I shout, and drop the broom. "What did Dr. Suzanne want? Tell me, tell me."

Dad clears his throat. “That the way you greet us after a whole summer away?”

Mom comes into the room and wraps her arms around me. It feels *so* good. “My baby,” she says. “I missed you so much.”

Dad’s hug is next. He brushes a loose loc from my face and kisses my forehead. Mom rubs my back. They’re both here. Together.

Yeah, they both drove me up to Ainsley at the start of the summer, but they hardly talked, and when they did it was only about the traffic or where we were gonna stop for lunch. Stuff like that. The three-and-a-half-hour car ride from Newark to upstate New York felt like two days.

While I’ve been at Ainsley, Mom went to Detroit to work with Dad and see if they were gonna get back together or stay separated. I can tell right away things between them are different. *Better*. Both of them are hugging me and smiling, and it’s like we’re a family again. Maybe they worked out whatever problems they had. Hopefully.

Dad says hi to Terra, and of course Mom hugs her. Then Mom sits down on my bed while Dad zips up my suitcase.

“Okay, I’ll end the suspense,” Mom says. She’s excited and kinda bouncy. “Dr. Suzanne called us yesterday and asked to meet with us before we picked you up. When we got here, she told us all about how impressed she’s been with you this summer.”

“She was?”

“She *is*.”

*Impressed*. I’ve been hearing that word a lot lately, ever since I decided to get serious about school and everything else. I mean, I’ve always done well in school, but in seventh grade I turned things up. Way up. All my teachers in Newark were *impressed*, too.

“What did she say?” I hold my breath waiting for Mom to tell me what’s going on.

“Dr. Suzanne told us about everything you did this summer, how well you fit in with the Ainsley girls, and how she believes this is a school you will blossom in.”

Me and Terra look at each other, and she lets out a little squeal.

“And because of all that,” Dad continues, “Dr. Suzanne asked your mom and me if we would be interested in having you attend Ainsley during the school year.”

Now Terra’s smile grows so large, she has to hide her happiness with her hands.

“What does that mean?” I ask Mom. It’s like I need to hear the words.

“Dr. Suzanne is inviting you to become a student here, tuition-free. Your dad and I will have to cover part of your room fees, but everything else will be taken care of by a scholarship.”

Finally, Terra can’t hold it in anymore. She starts giggling out loud.

That gets me giggling, too. “For the whole year?”

“Not just this year,” Mom says. “She said you can stay through high school, too. It’s all such an incredibly generous offer, something we could never afford otherwise. I mean, this school is expensive!”

“But—” In that moment, it feels like reality is starting to sink in, but I want everything to slow down. I need to think everything through. I mean, if I accept Dr. Suzanne’s offer, that would mean I’ll do eighth grade at Ainsley.

And not in Newark with Nicole.

“We told her we were sure you would jump at this opportunity,” Mom says.



Dad adds, "Because you been talking our ears off about how great this place is."

"Right!" Mom says. "Dr. Suzanne gave us this whole packet of information and forms and everything, but she wants you to call her sometime next week. I think she wants to make sure you haven't changed your mind about coming."

*Changed my mind?*

"But—" I start, before realizing I don't know what to say.

"I'm so happy," Terra says, and the next thing I know we're hugging and shrieking and jumping up and down. Even Mom and Dad have to laugh at us.

I know, there's still a lot to think about. But right now, I decide to just be happy.

I mean, this could be the second chance I wanted.

*If I decide to come back.*