

@JosieTheJournalist: help i forgot how to write

CHAPTER 1

I've rewritten the same sentence five different times. No matter how I rearrange the words, they don't sound good enough to be published.

Clearly, Black films only receive critical acclaim when they heavily feature Black suffering. Where are our happy movies? They exist, but you don't see them winning Oscars.

I smack my keyboard. Nothing changes. I'm still on the living room couch, an episode of *Real Housewives* playing on the TV. My Word document stares back at me, cursor blinking as if daring me to rewrite the sentence for a sixth time. How am I supposed to end an op-ed like this? *In conclusion, I'm sure most of the people reading this are white and don't want to hear about race, but please don't cancel your subscription.*

I minimize the Word document, flipping to my email. No new messages. Still the same emails: one from Target, one from Spelman College confirming that I sent my application, a few from Instagram. Nothing from the contest. Nothing telling me whether I won or lost.

Ugh. I rub my forehead, staring up at the *Deep Focus*

magazine covers hanging above our TV. The Obamas, Serena Williams, and Jimi Hendrix. They've been hanging there forever, some of the best covers of my favorite magazine ever. Normally, they inspire me.

They're a little too in my face right now—while I'm waiting to hear back from the talent competition. If I win, I'll get the chance to write an actual cover story for the magazine. *Me* writing a *cover story* for *Deep Focus*.

I take a shaky breath. It's almost too much to think about.

I *should* be focusing on this op-ed I owe Monique. She enjoyed my last piece, and the one before it. That *should* make me feel better. But my anxiety doesn't pay attention to how I *should* feel. According to my sisters, I worry about everything, even the pointless, but especially the very important.

I glance at the inbox again. Still no change. The winners are supposed to hear back by the end of today. But why are they taking so long? What if they didn't like the samples I sent, or they thought my writing was too immature, or they got turned off by how much I write about race—

"Well, look here. Josie's right where we left her."

My head snaps up. Dad lumbers through the door, rolling a purple suitcase with one hand and holding his backpack strap with the other. I don't know why Alice is bringing so much stuff when she's just an hour away. She could come home every weekend, if she wanted.

Dad's still in his accountant uniform—white shirt, black tie—the air of math and numbers swirling around him. He glances at the muted TV. Blond women in sparkly dresses lunge for each other across a gigantic table. I shrug.

"I leave it on for background noise," I say.