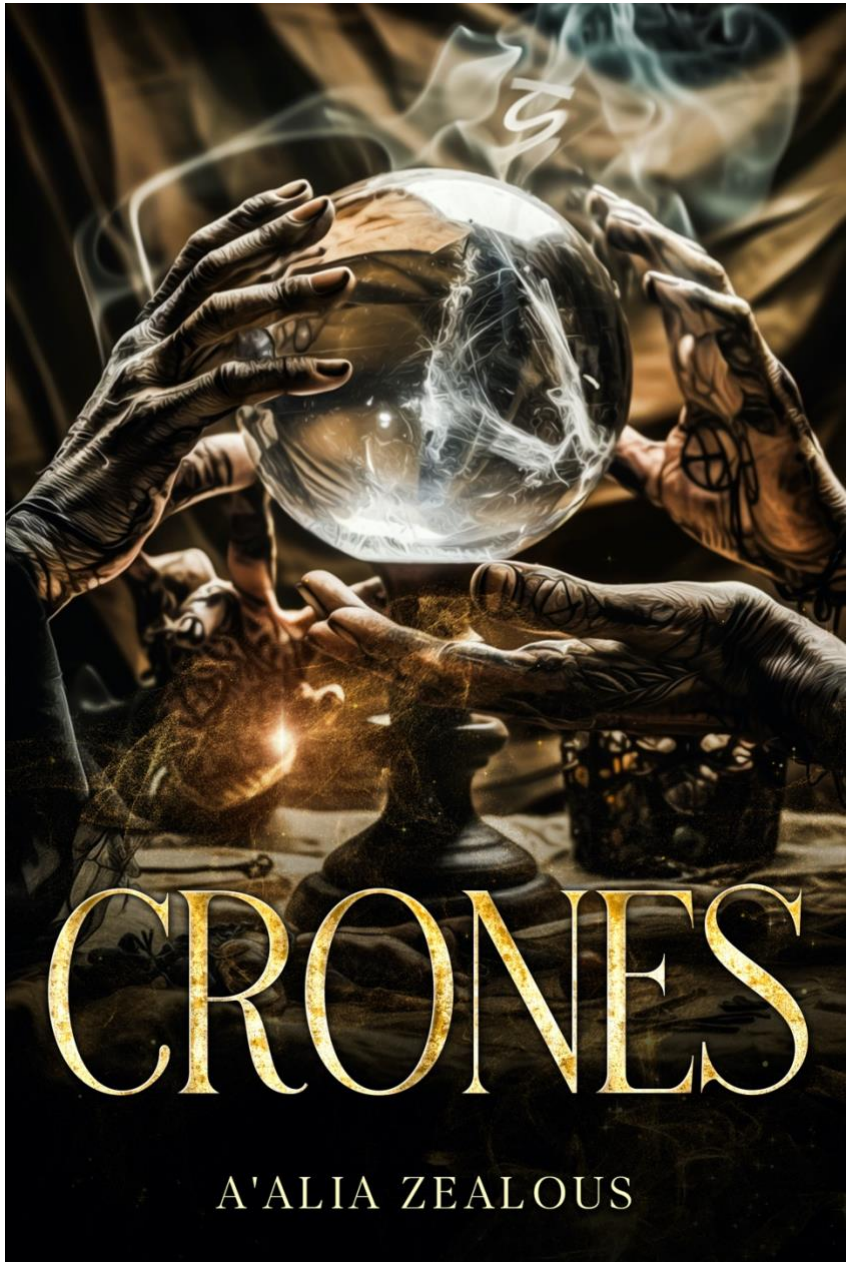


Crones

By A'alia Zealous

White Spider Publishing



CRONES

A'ALIA ZEALOUS



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PROLOGUE

I watch the young girl from behind the dark curtains, concealing myself from any curious onlookers that may be looking in from the street. Although that's unlikely, considering the deserted and quiet nature of this neighborhood. But it's always good to be careful.

Her shoulders are hunched as she lazily ambles down the sidewalk with her friends, a breeze ruffling her springy curls. I was young like her once. Angry, emotional...lost.

I catch sight of Ba'sette out of the corner of my eyes. His sinuous, little body walks through the white fence, slinking closely behind her in the shadows.

Good kitty.

"Let's clean up ladies," I call to the backyard as I make my way back to Eartha and Tynetta in the garden.

With a flick of the wrist, all of the dishes and platters we used for breakfast disappear from the garden table back into the kitchen where they belong. They should be sitting on the countertop. One of us will need to load them in the dishwasher though. Our powers are quite limited, and they've only been growing weaker since we've sensed them.

A possible prodigy.

"Well, that was a nice get together, wasn't it?" Eartha smiles, stretching. A sponge appears in Tynetta's hand and she proceeds to wipe the crumbs off the table.

"It was, but I fear establishing a relationship with some of these children and gaining their trust is going to take much longer than anticipated. I don't think they have a good opinion of

us to begin with. Very odd.” I nod my head in agreement. The children of this neighborhood feel much more closed off than an average person would be, but I sense something great stirring here. Especially in the one that routinely walks by. We just have to coax it out.

“We’ll get there. Let’s just keep our eye on the situation and our heads down. We don’t want to scare her.”

I turn to head inside and hear Tynetta and Eartha follow not too far behind.

“You know, maybe this would be going a little smoother if you weren’t threatening to bake them your disgusting muffins every ten minutes Tynetta.”

I sigh. Here they go again.

“Well I’ll have you know *Eartha* that my cooking is exemplary, and you’re just a jealous hag.”

“Jealous of what? Your decrepit taste buds!?”

I shake my head exasperated. When will they learn to get along? They never fought this much when Dora was alive.

“Or, maybe it was you two’s excessive bickering that made them uncomfortable.” I glare at them over my shoulder as we enter the house, and at least they have enough good sense to look ashamed and guilty.

I take off my shoes by the entrance and head to a door hidden on the other side of the stairs right next to the living room. With a quick knock to unlock it, the large heavy door opens to reveal a cozy study.

Incense smoke wafts about as I make my way across the plush Indonesian carpet to one of the long oak desks situated to the left of the room.

“Let’s see here.” I remove the books and papers scattered across it to reveal an ancient and lightly browned map protected by glass resting on top of it. I stack the books and papers neatly on the edge of the desk with the others, being careful of Dora and her crystal ball.

Or should I say, Dora’s hands.

She was one of us, a skilled necromancer and seer. We wanted to keep her crystal ball with us in the house to commemorate her after she passed away with it in her hands, but when we tried to bury her...she wouldn't let go of the ball.

As time passed her body disintegrated, but not her hands connected to the ball. So we keep her stuffed hands holding her crystal ball propped up on a stand on the desk.

Since the overstuffed bookshelves behind me have no room, I put some of the books on the floor out of the way, then run my fingers across the thin glass covering the large blank map.

I bend so it can hear me and whisper.

"Show me the city." Ink slowly blooms onto the map, showing familiar streets and buildings. I sit down in my chair with a tired sigh. The purple cushions support my back and allow my popping joints to rest as I wait for the ink to finish appearing and show me the city and surrounding communities.

The Elders Council has been sending messages for weeks now. Spikes of magic have been popping up in many places, unusual spikes, and we've gotten correspondence that they're happening here as well.

The map completes itself and I lean over it, observing the little swirls of red dots scattered across the city. There's no pattern to them. No rhyme or reason, so it's hard to pinpoint where all of this is coming from and what's its purpose.

The Elders Council just wants us to monitor everything for now. Keep an eye out for anything unusual. They think maybe this could be the workings of some sort of meteor shower, or an eclipse happening in our solar system that we're not privy to that will pass, but I don't have a good feeling about this.

Regardless, we have to be prepared for anything. But we can't do that if we're constantly growing weaker by the day.

The two other women walk into the study. Eartha takes a seat in the seating area across from the desk while Tynetta stands next to me, arms crossed. I look up at them through my brows, my mind set.

“We have to continue to watch Nyrobi. Her potential magic is compatible with ours, I can feel it, and without her, ours will continue to dwindle until we have no magic at all.”

THE FIGHT

"Ugh, that place gives me the creeps!" Maria shudders as we stroll down Manistique Street. Her familiar words float on the crisp morning breeze. She says this every time we walk the three blocks to school. I don't know if she thinks continuously saying it will give her less creeps or not, but it doesn't help.

Nevertheless, I follow her gaze across the street to the big, electrifying blue house squatting on the other side. A complete contrast to the more muted white, beige, and red brick houses lining the street.

A spacious garden is connected to the left side of the house, surrounded by a wonky white fence that starts off with a short entrance, but grows taller as it encloses the rest of the yard and garden.

In all honesty, the house doesn't look that bad. You can tell the owners really take pride in their property.

Then again, the house itself isn't the problem.

Rather, the three, weird old lady's that live in the house and have a history of terrorizing anyone who dares to lay foot on their property is. That's what keeps the eight year olds screeching away in terror with warm puddles dribbling down their legs.

There've been countless stories of the cruelty of those women and how they make the children who live on this street do horrible things.

I catch a glimpse of one of the upstairs curtains shifting closed and a shudder trickles down my spine.

Are we being watched?

"Can we walk faster please?" Eriq urges. His light brown eyes shift uneasily as we pass by the house. His espresso hands grip the straps of his book bag and pull them closer to his shoulders.

"You know, I even heard that they bury dead people in their garden for fertilizer." Maria implies with wide eyes. She steps in-between Eriq and I and wraps her thin arms around the backs of our necks. I don't fight the gesture. Her weight pulls at my neck a bit, but her body blocks out some of the early fall chill.

She smirks at Eriq, her eyes casting a mischievous glint his way. Maria knows good and well stuff like that makes him skittish. The last thing I need this morning is to drag a seventeen year old boy who fainted on the sidewalk to school.

"Nyrobi, can you make her stop please?" He grumbles out the corner of his mouth. I take a handful of Maria's wavy black locks and give them a firm yank.

"Leave him alone Maria."

"Hey!" she jumps, quickly fixing her ponytail and casting a glare at me with her dark amber eyes.

I ignore it.

I don't know if anything she's saying is true, but I've seen other teens working in that garden during the summer. I'm certain I still saw one of them alive and kicking last week.

I wonder if they were being punished.

Whether they were or not, I don't need that type of drama in my life right now. So, rule one of this school year, avoid that house and those creepy ladies at all cost. I want smooth sailing until senior year.

"Anyway, my dad says they're just a bunch of lonely old crones. That's all." Eriq harrumphs as he continues marching forward. I'm sure believing his dad is his way of making himself feel better and not think of them as cannibal eating old ladies.

"Suurre. If that's truly what you believe, then I dare you to go knock on their door," Maria smirks.

I roll my eyes at the both of them as their bickering carries on. When they get like this it's better to drown them out. At least they're talking with each other instead of me. I'm more than happy to use the rest of the two blocks to school to keep to myself before I have to be surrounded by other loud teens high on hormones and nothing better to do. In fact, that's what I'm hoping to do all school year. Keep to myself and get my grades up.

Unfortunately, I was one of those children who messed around too much my freshman and sophomore year. I wasn't a bad kid, but I also don't have the *best* reputation with my teachers.

Now it's time to kick it into gear.

I have to get into a good college. Not that college is really my thing, the thought of more school makes me want to chop my toes off, but there's no other way I'm ever going to make it out of this place. I need to get into a nice college where I can break free of my parents and this neighborhood, and finally start my life. The closer I get to senior year, the more suffocated and anxious I feel. The more I yearn to break free.

Saint Angelou High comes into view as we join other students on their walk to school. The high school is pretty big. It stands six floors tall with tons of classrooms. But even with how big it is, our classrooms are overcrowded. It seems one big school still couldn't make up for the lack of schools in our area like the mayor, Mayor Hansleaf, and the district thought. Sometimes, I swear it's like they don't know the city at all.

Eriq and Maria's bickering cease to grumbles as we cross the street and head across the spacious lawn to the burgundy school doors.

My face tingles in relief as we step inside, out of the morning cold. I fluff out my curly hair, fixing whatever style the wind attempted to do.

"Jesus Christ!" Maria shivers, rubbing her arms through her thin purple jacket over her blouse. "Are we being punished or something?!" There's no reason for it to be this cold." Eriq smirks

at her, looking comfortable in his thick gray hoodie. We're still in the warmer months of fall, but some of the mornings have definitely taken on a chill.

The bell for class rings, signaling that we only have five minutes to get to homeroom.

"Welp, that's me. I'll see you guys later," Eriq calls over his shoulder. "We'll meet up for lunch."

"See ya!" Maria and I both call back over the heads of passing students. Then she turns to me with a pained expression.

"Alright, let's get this day of torture started." I giggle and loop my arm into hers.

"It's okay Maria. It'll be lunchtime before you know it. Then you can share with me whatever baked goods your abuela made this time." I smirk at her begrudged face as we trudge down the hall to our first period. She likes to pretend that she doesn't like sharing, but I know for a fact that abuela puts extra cookies in her bag just for me. She whispered it to me one time when I was staying over like she was using Maria to smuggle drugs to me.

School goes by at a leisurely pace and I keep to myself as usual, pretending that I'm invisible.

So far so good.

I pull out my phone to check the time. *Thank god.* I just have one more class until lunch. Just at that thought alone my stomach begins to grumble. I didn't have any breakfast this morning and now my stomach feels like it's eating itself.

When the bell finally rings, I dodge my way down the long white tiled halls to fourth period, ignoring the rowdy kids congesting the corridor. The only thing I can think about is getting to my class and away from all these people as quickly as possible, when suddenly, a group of students semi-circling the lockers to my left catches my attention.

I slow my pace, angling my head to stare through the bodies that have gathered.

What can I say, I don't like being in people's mess, but I'm also kinda nosey. I blame Maria for passing on such a bad

habit to me. I'll just take a peek to see what's going on then I'll be on my way. It'll make for good gossip for Maria when I see her. She's all about the drama.

I stand on my tippy toes to look over the noisy crowd and spot a familiar girl pressed up against the lockers. She's visibly trying to make herself as small as possible, and as I peer a little closer, I slowly recognize the short, crop haired girl from my homeroom.

"Asia?" I mumble under my breath. Asia's back is firmly pressed against the gray lockers as she stares up at a tall figure looming over her. I roll my eyes, recognizing the tall lanky girl immediately.

Why am I not surprised?

Beastly Destiny stares down at Asia with cold, menacing pale eyes and flaring nostrils. I can't hear what they're talking about over the loud chatter, but the smattering of kids with their cellphones out recording, and the aggressive stance Destiny is taking on, told me all I needed to know.

Destiny is one of the biggest bullies I've ever met. She thinks she can control people through intimidation, especially since she's tall and strong from being on the volleyball team. She tried it on me once, it didn't go the way she thought. We've been enemies since freshman year.

This isn't good.

I watch Beastly Destiny shove Asia up against the locker and get in her face.

Not a pretty sight.

Immediately I turn away, telling my feet to move and mind my own business.

This isn't my fight.

But my feet don't budge.

My mind drifts to all the times I was partnered with Asia in class. She was nice and would let me borrow supplies from time to time. Not to mention my eternal hatred for Beastly Destiny. My mortal enemy.

The thought of walking away and letting her get away with being a giant bully again disgusts me. There's no way I can let that llama neck with an attitude problem think she can traipse down the halls spreading fear dust wherever she goes. Not this year.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I push my way through the circle of kids and situate myself in front of Asia, shoving Destiny back.

"What's your problem Destiny? Why don't you leave people alone? Are you that desperate for attention?" Destiny stumbles, surprised by the intervention. A chorus of "oohh's" from the other students causes further instigation. She glares at me.

"Oh, I'm sorry Nyrobi. Was this your little friend?" she sneers. "Why don't you just mind your own business! No one was even talking to you."

"Oh yeah?! Well I just made it my business!" I snap back.

This really isn't my business, and Asia and I aren't even that close. Maybe I'm just in a mood to lash back at *someone* for *something*. Or maybe it's because it's Beastly Destiny, and I've had enough of her crap. Regardless, there's no way I'm backing down now.

If I can just get her to back off then we can all go about our merry way. No harm, no foul.

Apparently, Destiny has other plans.

Her nostrils flare as she shoves up her sleeves taking on a defensive stance. I catch a glimpse of a shimmery orange tattoo on her upper left arm, right above her elbow. It's a strange shape, like a 3-D triangle with an infinity symbol running through it.

It's ugly.

Destiny sucks her teeth at me, bringing my attention back to her.

"Fine then, you can get it too," she shrugs, then swings without warning. I dodge and block with my forearm, surprising even myself, and reflexively punch her in the face. The punch is effective at stunning her, but it isn't hard enough to make her

back down. Before I know it, we're both tumbling on the ground pulling and punching wherever we can.

I can barely hear the loud cheers of the kids over the blood pumping in my ears. Those martial arts classes I took growing up definitely came in handy, but I wish I would have stuck with it.

Destiny clocks me on the cheek and I can already feel the formation of a few bruises assembling on my arm and torso.

Students suddenly scatter as an authoritative bark pushes its way through the crowd. Two sets of hands pull both me and Destiny apart just as her knee catches me in the stomach.

I grit my teeth and try to yank out of the teacher's grasp. No way am I letting her have the last hit.

I want my lick back!

But the teacher holds me down, telling me to calm myself. Furiously I do as he says, even though *she's* the one who wanted to fight!

"Get to your classes now! All of you!" he barks.

The rest of the kids who were brave enough to linger scramble out of the hall to their classes. The male teacher stands me up against the locker while Mrs. Lance, the art teacher, keeps Destiny up against the other side of the lockers.

"Have the both of you lost your minds!" She bellows, looking at me specifically with disappointment. My cheeks warm with shame. Mrs. Lance is one of my favorite teachers. She's always encouraged me and helped me out. She was one of the people I promised that I would stay out of trouble. It hasn't even been a full month since school has started.

I grind my teeth in agitation.

"The principal's office. Now!" Destiny looks at the male teacher with wide eyes.

"Mr. Farley I didn't do any—"

"I said to the principal's office!"

Both teachers grab us by the arms and escort us down the long hall to the teacher's elevator where we stand awkwardly

next to each other as Mr. Farley gives us an earful about respect for the school grounds and whatnot.

The elevator dings on the first floor, right next to the principal's office, and my stomach drops. Principal Halter is a no-nonsense woman, so I'm not surprised when she calls my dad minutes later and suspends me for a week without hesitation.

Man is he going to be pissed when he gets home.

I exit out of her office and sit in one of the red chairs in the hall while Principal Halter talks to Destiny and calls her parents. I can hear her bawling her eyes out while she's trying to explain to her dad what happened.

Tsk, figures. The biggest bullies are usually the biggest babies.

I pick at my nails and bounce my leg as I stare at the floor. The adrenaline has officially worn off, now all I feel is irritation and annoyance at Destiny...and at myself.

That was so stupid of me! I could have just minded my business and avoided all of this, but I just couldn't let it go could I?! I couldn't let Destiny keep having her way.

Angry tears prick at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

My dad's going to be so upset. I promised this year would go well and he wouldn't have to worry about me. Now look at me. It's still the first month of school!

The door to the principal's office swings open and Mrs. Lance steps out with her hands on her hips. She slowly walks over to me and bends by my knees.

"Nyrobi, what has gotten into you?" she sighs. I shrug my shoulders, looking away. I really don't want to talk about this right now. "You're a smart girl, and I know you can do way better than this." I stay quiet, not looking her in the eyes. If I do, who knows what kind of emotions might come up. She sighs and shakes her head. "If you ever need to talk, you can always talk to me. When you come back from your suspension I want to see better from you. Okay?" I nod my head, unable to speak. I hate

disappointing people I actually like, but Destiny deserved that punch. It's all her fault.

Principal Halter comes out of her office and looks over at me, the sobs of Destiny trailing behind her.

"Since your father is at work, he gave us permission to let you walk home. I expect you to walk straight there, no pit stops." I nod my head and mumble.

"Yes ma'am."

I get up and Mrs. Lance follows me, escorting me to my locker where I grab my stuff, then she walks me to the school entrance.

"Remember Nyrobi," I stop and turn to her. "I want you to really use this time to do some self-reflection. Next year you'll be a senior, and something like this won't bode well when you start applying to colleges. Understand me?" I nod my head. She's right, it could ruin my chances of getting out of this place. Then where would I be? "Alright, get home safely."

I nod and wave my hand at her as I turn and walk down the street. Maria's really going to be pissed when I don't show up for lunch.

I take my time as I head back home. I don't know what my father's going to say when he gets to the house, but most likely I'll be grounded for the whole time that I'm suspended. This may very well be the last time I'm let outside until they let me come back to school, so I might as well enjoy it.

I listen to the leaves rustle through the trees and the quietness of the neighborhood. It isn't as cold as it was this morning, thank god.

A sleek black cat walking further up ahead catches my attention. I scrunch my brows at the peculiar way it's moving. Its body sways and stumbles over its little paws as if someone just got done swinging it around in circles by its tail before letting it go. I almost wonder if I should call a vet or something by the way it's zigzagging from the sidewalk into the street and tripping over its own feet.

It must be sick or something.

As I approach Manistique Street, I make sure to march facing straight ahead. I don't even want to look at the dark blue house looming on the other side of the road. Staring at me. Watching me. Who knows, those creepy old women could be peering out the windows right now. Planning to see who looks easy enough to snatch up.

Minutes later, I make it back home with a huff.

That wasn't too bad.

The house is quiet as usual, and I don't know if that makes me feel relieved or unsettled, as usual.

I head straight upstairs to my room and open up my laptop, scrolling through my socials until evening approaches and I hear my dad's keys rustling in the front door.

"Nyrobi, come down here!" he calls from downstairs.

Uh oh, I'm really going to get it now. So long freedom.

I hop off my bed and head into the short hallway, then stop in my tracks at the top of the stairs. I was fully expecting to see my angry father by the door. What I *wasn't* expecting was to see my angry mother there too!

Both of my parents look up at me from the front door with their arms crossed. He must've called her while he was at work and picked her up from the other side of town. But why?!

"Come down into the living room, we need to talk." My dad says. His mustache and closely cropped beard makes his face look even more angular and stern. I cautiously descend the stairs and walk past my mother, her hair freshly braided in long braids. It's like walking past a mirror. Her dark gingerbread skin is a flawless backdrop to her deep cedar brown eyes, full lips, and wide nose. My mother is stunning, but that doesn't make up for her being in and out of my life for the past seven years. And her showing up now definitely doesn't make up for it either.

I make my way into the living room where I plop down onto the brown couch, steeling myself for the confrontation to come. They both follow and stand in front of me. I can tell this conversation is going to be brutal by how the lines in my dad's copper skin sink further into his face. He's already had to work a

double shift at the hospital, so to come back to this, I'm sure he's livid.

"Really Nyrobi? A fight?" he gruffs. I don't say anything. "What in your right mind would make you think getting in a fight at school was a good idea? You punched a girl in the face!"

"Dad, she was bullying another girl. Did you just want me to let her bully someone else?"

"If that's the case then I expect you to be smart and grab a teacher, not take things into your own hands."

"No way, I'd be a snitch if I got a teacher!"

"So you'd rather get in a fight and risk your education than to look uncool in front of your little friends?!" My mom interjects with pursed lips. I glare at her, because I for sure wasn't talking to her. "Fix your face," she seethes. I sit there, shifting my eyes from her to the floor.

"So, what? you're just going to come back to the house when I get in trouble and pretend like you're parenting me?" I rasp, my eyes becoming misty. I blink hard so I don't cry. I hate crying.

"Watch your tone, Nyrobi. She's still your mother," My father says. I cross my arms, unable to hold my temper.

"Well not to me!"

"Nyrobi!"

"Malcom...." My mom stops him, putting her hand on his shoulder while shaking her head. "It's okay."

I continue to stare at the floor while we stew in the silence...

"Are we done now? Can I go back to my room?" My throat hurts from trying to keep the tears at bay. I don't want to cry in front of my parents. I don't want them to see that they have any effect on me...because they don't.

"You're grounded for a week," he seethes. "No going out on the weekends, no hanging out with your friends."

"Fine. Can I be excused?" He nods and I get up from the couch and storm towards the stairs.

"And no computer!" he calls after me. "I'll be up there to take it."

I make it to my room and grab the computer off of my bed. I don't want to see or speak to either of them for the rest of the night, so I set it in the hall for them to take.

With my back slumped up against the door I look around my darkening room. The pink night light plugged into the wall by my desk and the white one leaking out from the open bathroom door to my right are the only sources offering reprieve from the setting sun.

I run and jump onto my bed, burying my face in the pillows

"Aaarrgghh!" I hate them! I hate this place! I hate school! I hate everything!

The tears come spilling out of my eyes, soaking my pillow. This is so stupid. I can't believe I'm the one in trouble for knocking some sense into a bully. And of course he would call mom. She hasn't lived with us for seven years and somehow, she gets to come in and out and dole out punishments?!

I chuck one of my pillows across the room and watch it splat against the wall before falling flat to the ground. I grab another pillow from the head of my bed to bury my face in.

I feel so empty and upset, I don't even know what to do with myself. They both looked at me like I'm just some troublemaker. I roll my eyes.

Whatever.

Someday I'm going to make it out of here and they won't ever have to worry about seeing me again.

The thoughts racing through my head make me feel exhausted and anxious. My body grows fatigued as the tears continue to stream from my face and soak my pillow.

Well, mission to stay out of trouble until senior year was a complete fail. I don't want to even think anymore. I just want the world to go away. There's no point.

I squeeze my eyes shut and will my brain to shut off. But since my body hates me just as much as my parents do, I wind up

laying there for a few hours staring at the ceiling. Eventually my mind shows me some mercy, and I'm able to cry myself to sleep.

A distant knocking bounces around in my consciousness.

"Nyrobi." A voice calls. My eyes slowly open, feeling sticky and crumbly from the dried tears gluing them together. The knocking comes again, and I realize it's coming from my bedroom door. I moan and turn my head just as it opens. My mom stands in the door frame, her arms crossed.

She's still here?!?

"It's time to get up and get dressed." I look over to my clock on my nightstand. It's eight o'clock and I don't have school. Did she forget already?

"I thought I was suspended?" I ask hoarsely, clearing my throat of sleep.

"You are," she quips. "But you're not lazing about the house while you're suspended. Come on, get up." I stretch and rub my eyes. "I met some nice older women at the store who let children work in their garden for community service. Get dressed so you can get some breakfast and we can head over there. I'm not asking." She closes my door behind her before I can say anything and protest. I moan and drag myself out of bed.

Is she serious? Nice older women? What kind of nice older women live around here with a garden?

I sleepily pad to the bathroom and manage to make it to the sink. Splashing cold water on my face and neck sends a jolt of energy through me and I feel awake enough to grab my toothbrush. Suddenly, my heart speeds up and my chest constricts anxiously with a shudder as her words come rushing back to me.

Nice old ladies with a garden? No! She can't be talking about...!

