

"Enticing and enthralling." —JEWELL PARKER RHODES

# FROM THE DESK — OF — Zoe Washington



JANAE MARKS



## Chapter One

*The day I turned twelve*, I was certain it'd be my favorite birthday yet, but then I got the letter.

I'd just had my dream birthday party at Ari's Cakes. Mom's friend Ariana owned the bakery in Beacon Hill, my favorite neighborhood in all of Boston. It had cute brick buildings and town houses, with cobblestone streets. There was a deli with baskets of fresh fruit for sale outside, a chocolate shop, a coffee shop, and a ton of fancy restaurants. And then there was Ari's Cakes, with its pretty, pale-blue awning and a wooden sign above it with the store's name written in white script. Her front window always had lots of cupcakes on display along



with fresh flowers. You could smell the sugar before you walked in.

Even though it was pouring rain outside, I felt like the luckiest girl. I'd been in a professional kitchen with my best friends, Jasmine and Maya, as we baked and decorated chocolate fudge cupcakes.

When my parents and I got home, Dad pulled his rain jacket hood onto his head and rushed inside with the box of leftover cupcakes. Mom, using an umbrella, carried my gift bags. I hurried behind them, and on my way in, grabbed the mail from the mailbox next to our front door.

While I kicked off my sneakers in our foyer, I flipped through the envelopes, checking to see if my great-aunt's birthday card arrived. She usually included money, and I was dying to add an egg separator to my baking supplies.

There was a catalog and some junk mail from credit card companies. And then I spotted a plain white envelope with my name, Zoe Washington, and my address handwritten in neat, blue print.

I glanced at the return address and froze. "Massachusetts State Penitentiary" was typed on the upper left corner, across from a waving American flag stamp. The name Marcus Johnson was written in that same blue handwriting above the prison's name.

It was a letter from Marcus. I'd never heard from before. I couldn't believe it.

Just like that, my birthday letter was here.

The envelope slipped from my hand and fell to the floor. My dog, Butternut, barked at it, but I snatched it up and ran to the front door.

Why would Marcus write to me?

I only owned one picture of him, the one Mom had given me, since Mom and Dad had died. It was a picture of Mom's pictures that Grandma had given me. Marcus and I were high school friends. I had a picture between the two of us. Marcus was at a Boston game, wearing a Boston sweatshirt and a huge smile, which was weird. So was the same smile as me. And Mom's skin was a little darker than mine.

Now Marcus was wearing an orange jumpsuit and was in prison.

I bet he didn't smile anymore.

I picked up the envelope and opened the seal, but all of a sudden I froze in place.

It was a letter from my convict father, a man I'd never heard from before. I couldn't believe it.

Just like that, my birthday didn't matter anymore.

The envelope slipped from my fingers, landing on the floor. My dog, Butternut, ran over and started licking it, but I snatched it up and dropped it onto the table next to the front door.

Why would Marcus write to me? Why now?

I only owned one picture of him, which Grandma had given me, since Mom would never approve. It was one of Mom's pictures that Grandma had saved from when Mom and Marcus were high school sweethearts. I'd hidden the picture between the pages of one of my journals. In it, Marcus was at a Boston Celtics game, wearing a team sweatshirt and a huge smile. My smile looked like his, which was weird. Someone I never met had the exact same smile as me. And his brown skin matched mine. Mom's skin was a little lighter.

Now Marcus was sitting in a prison cell, probably wearing an orange jumpsuit. That's how I imagined people in prison.

I bet he didn't smile much there.

I picked up the envelope and rubbed my thumb across the seal, but all of a sudden, my fingers stopped working and I froze in place. I wanted to read it, but I was also



terrified of what it might say. He'd committed a terrible crime. What if he'd written something scary? It was only a piece of paper, but the feeling wouldn't go away.

I took a deep breath and started to open the envelope again, but then I heard Mom come down the stairs. I knew it was Mom and not my stepdad, Paul, because she was humming a song, which she did a lot, especially in front of the bathroom mirror when she was putting on makeup. She had a pretty good voice, but she always said it was because of the bathroom acoustics. That was wrong, because my stepdad sometimes sang in the shower, and the acoustics didn't stop him from sounding like a dying coyote.

I quickly tucked the letter into the pocket on the inside of my rain jacket. It wouldn't be a good idea to show Mom. I was pretty sure she'd take it away without letting me read it. I hoped she couldn't hear how hard my heart was beating.

"I put the gift bags in your room," she said.

"Thanks."

"Did you have fun today?" she asked. "Your cupcakes came out so pretty."

"It was amazing!" I told Mom.

But now I couldn't focus on how amazing it was, not with Marcus's letter taking up so much space in my brain.

"This today's mail where I'd left the res

"Yup. I grabbed it

"Thanks." But the and her shoulders stressed—they lifted me, but it was a bit happy. She picked it through it, her shoulder position.

"I thought Aunt didn't see it." I swam had come. I wondered what if it made her about Marcus.

Mom smiled at one more birthday Hawaiian-ish pizza

I forced myself name I'd given me pepperoni instead thought it was good on half a pie.

"Sounds great my room, and,

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"This today's mail?" Mom stared at the foyer table,  
where I'd left the rest of it.

"Yup. I grabbed it from the mailbox."

"Thanks." But then her eyebrows scrunched together,  
and her shoulders did what they did when she was  
stressed—they lifted up toward her ears. She smiled at  
me, but it was a forced smile, like she wasn't actually  
happy. She picked up the pile of mail, and as she flipped  
through it, her shoulders slowly returned to their normal  
position.

"I thought Auntie Lillian's card might've come, but I  
didn't see it." I swallowed hard, thinking of the letter that  
had come. I wondered if I should tell Mom about it. But  
what if it made her mad or upset? She didn't like to talk  
about Marcus.

Mom smiled at me for real. "It'll come. Anyway, there's  
one more birthday surprise for you. We're going to order  
Hawaiian-ish pizza for dinner."

I forced myself to smile. "Hawaiian-ish" was the  
name I'd given my favorite pizza combo—pineapple and  
pepperoni instead of ham. Since my mom and stepdad  
thought it was gross, we usually only got those toppings  
on half a pie.

"Sounds great." I cleared my throat. "I'm gonna go to  
my room, and, um . . . put my gifts away."



It was a total lie, but that's not what Mom noticed. "You're not going to take your jacket off?" she asked.

Marcus's envelope was still in my pocket, right over my heart, which was beating fast.

"I'll take it off in my room." I walked away before Mom could say anything else.

What could Marcus have to say to me?

I had to know.



## Chapter Two

I shut my bedroom door and opened the envelope. The paper inside was a piece of loose-leaf, like what Mom would buy to put into my school binders. The words filling the page were written in the same blue handwriting from the front of the envelope, except the print wasn't as neat. I stood in the middle of my bedroom and read the letter from start to finish. And then I read it again. Everything was quiet except for my heartbeat echoing in my eardrums.

*To my Little Tomato,  
Happy Birthday. I can't believe you're twelve*



years old. What. Do I sound like a broken record when I say that you're growing up so fast? Do you even know what a broken record is? Everybody used to listen to CDs when I was growing up, but my dad-your grandpa-kept a record player in the corner of the living room. He always says that music sounds better coming from a record player. He might be right. His favorite singer is Stevie Wonder. Have you ever heard any of his songs? He has a pretty great voice. There's this one song called "Isn't She Lovely." You should look it up sometime. Stevie's saying exactly how I feel about you, my baby girl. Well, you're not a baby anymore, but I know you're still a pretty lovely at this age.

I wish I could give you a hug and see your smiling face on your big day. I'm sorry I can't be there to celebrate with you. I know your mom is doing something special. She was always good at knowing how to celebrate birthdays when we were together.

Even if you never reply to these letters, I'll keep writing them. Though I hope you'll write

me back one day. In the  
to know that I think about  
Love,  
Daddy

All I could do was stand  
my hands. I was like the Tin  
he needed to be called. My  
they'd weigh a million pounds

Why did Warner sound  
it seem like he was a baby  
was writing from prison.  
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He seemed normal. I  
dad. Like my stepdad.  
music. I'd heard of her  
a couple of his songs. I

I read the letter again  
Tommy? It was about  
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This was the first one  
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me back one day. In the meantime, I want you  
to know that I think about you every day.

Love,

Daddy

All I could do was stand there staring at the paper in  
my hands. I was like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* when  
he needed to be oiled. My arms and legs felt stiff, like  
they'd weigh a million pounds if I tried to move them.

Why did Marcus sound so . . . nice? Mom always made  
it seem like he was a bad person. He didn't seem like he  
was writing from prison. I wasn't sure how someone in  
prison would sound, exactly, but I guessed they wouldn't  
be so smart.

He seemed normal. He liked music, like any other  
dad. Like my stepdad, who was into classical and jazz  
music. I'd heard of Stevie Wonder, and I thought I knew  
a couple of his songs. I'd look up "Isn't She Lovely" later.

I read the letter again. Why had he called me Little  
Tomato? It was kind of weird. I liked tomatoes, especially  
the little ones, but I didn't want to be called one.

What did Marcus mean when he wrote "these letters"?  
This was the first one I'd ever gotten from him. It didn't  
make any sense.



None of this did.

I stared at my striped rug as a million thoughts swirled around my head like cake batter in a mixer.

Should I write him back? What will happen if I do?

I had no idea Marcus thought about me. But what if he was pretending to be nice to me because he wanted something from me? What, though?

Maybe I should throw the letter away.

There was a knock on my bedroom door, which made me jump two feet and almost drop the letter. I clutched the loose-leaf paper in my now-sweating hands.

"Hey, Zoe?" It was Mom.

I tensed up. "One second!" I stuffed the letter back into the envelope and tucked it underneath my purple comforter. I remembered I was still wearing my jacket, so I took it off and threw it over the back of my desk chair.

Then I cracked my bedroom door open.

"Trevor's here," Mom said.

Trevor? What's he doing here?

As if she could hear my thoughts, Mom said, "He wants to give you his birthday present, since he wasn't at your party."

There was a reason for that: he wasn't invited.

"Can you tell him I'm busy?" I whispered.

Mom's glare made it clear she was not about to do that.

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"Please? It's my birthday, and . . . he's not my friend anymore." Not after he made our friendship out to be a total joke.

Mom's expression softened a little. "When are you going to tell me what happened?"

I shook my head. No way was I telling her anything. She'd probably force me to forgive Trevor, and that was not going to happen.

"You know, as a brand-new twelve-year-old," Mom said, "you're old enough to understand how rude it'll be if you don't come out and thank him for the gift in person." She forced my door open wider. "C'mon."

All I wanted to do was read Marcus's letter again and figure out what it all meant, and what I should do next.

But first I had to deal with my ex-best friend.