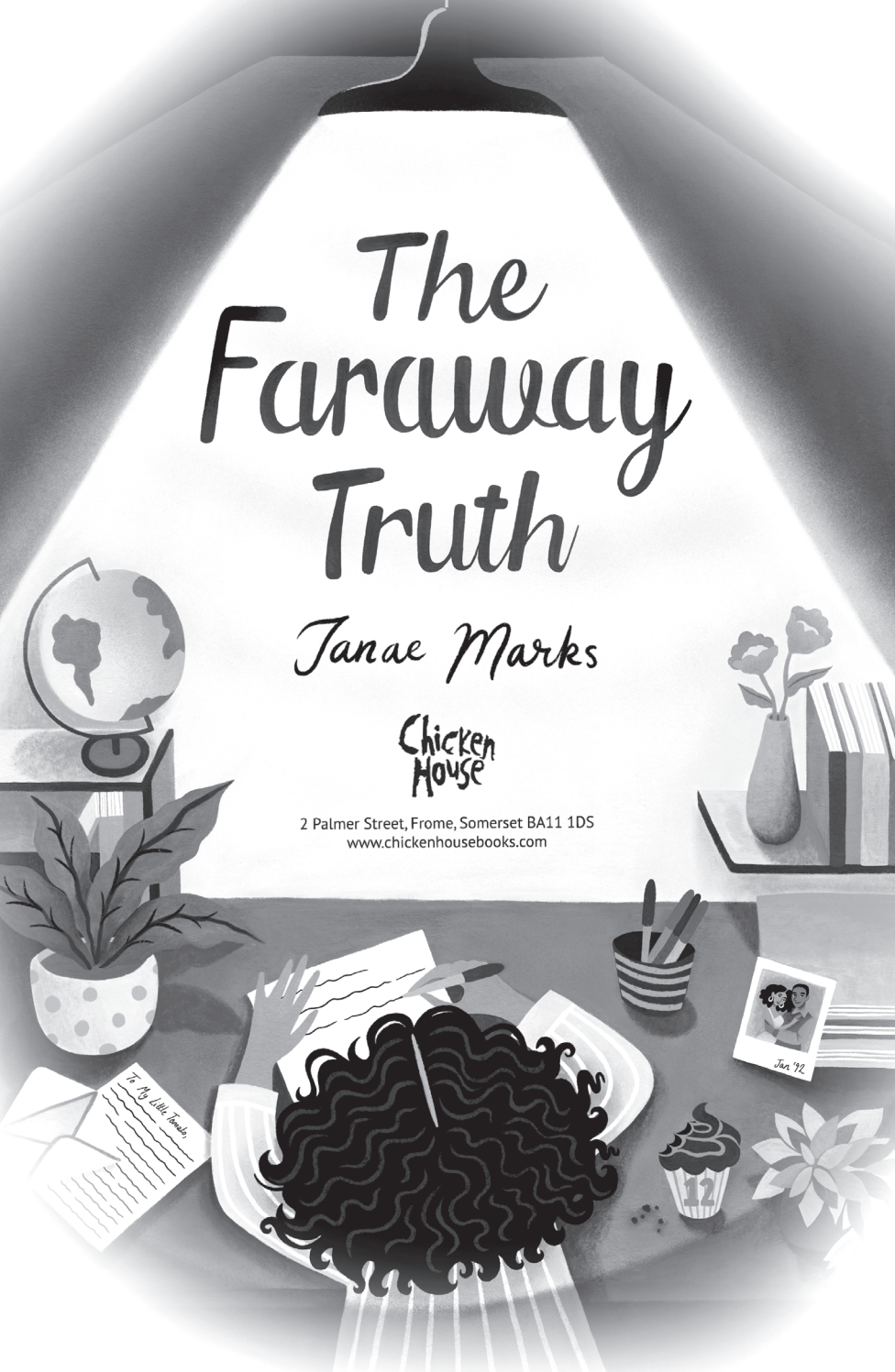


The Faraway Truth

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*For my mom and my daughter,
my biggest inspirations*



Chapter One

The day I turned twelve, I was certain it'd be my favourite 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 favourite neighbourhood 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 on to his head and rushed inside with the box of leftover cupcakes. Mom, using an umbrella, carried my gift bags. I hurried behind them, grabbing the mail from the mailbox next to our front door on the way in.

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

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

Just like that, my birthday didn't matter any more.

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 on to 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 make-up. 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?' Mom stared at the hall 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 towards 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 favourite 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.