

THE
HARLEM
CHARADE

NATASHA TARPLEY



SCHOLASTIC PRESS

NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tarpley, Natasha, author. | Title: The Harlem charade / by Natasha Tarpley. Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Scholastic Press, 2017. | Summary: Seventh-graders Jin, Alexandra, and Elvin come from very different backgrounds and circumstances, but they all live in Harlem, and when Elvin's grandfather is attacked they band together to find out who is responsible—and the search leads them to an enigmatic artist whose missing masterpieces are worth a fortune, and into conflict with an ambitious politician who wants to turn Harlem into an historic amusement park. | Identifiers: LCCN 2016040577 | ISBN 9780545783873 (hardcover) | Subjects: LCSH: Detective and mystery stories. | Political participation—Juvenile fiction. | African American artists—Juvenile fiction. | Studio Museum in Harlem—Juvenile fiction. | Community development—New York (State)—New York—Juvenile fiction. | Harlem (New York, N.Y.)—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Mystery and detective stories. | Studio Museum in Harlem—Fiction. | African Americans—Fiction. | Community life—New York (State)—Harlem—Fiction. | Political participation—Fiction. | Harlem (New York, N.Y.)—Fiction. | New York (N.Y.)—Fiction. | GSAFD: Mystery fiction. | LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Classification: LCC PZ7.T176 Har 2017 | DDC 813.54 [Fic] —dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016040577>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, February 2017

Book design by Carol Ly

Harlem, with its stately brownstones, honking horns, and bustling street life, passed in a blur as Jin Yi sprinted the entire ten blocks from school to her grandparents' bodega. Her student council meeting had run long, and now she was late. Her friend Rose, who was meeting her at the store to work on their history class project, would be arriving any minute.

Breathless, Jin flung open the heavy front door and rushed inside, where she promptly whacked her knee on the corner of a large box, which was nearly blocking the store's entrance. *Ow, ow, ow!*

"Pretty sure this is a fire code violation!" she yelled to no one in particular.

Normally, the store was neat and orderly. Halmoni could tell if just one can was out of place on the shelf. Jin's grandmother had eyes like an eagle. One Wednesday a month, though, on inventory night, the place turned into a labyrinth of boxes and crates full of new merchandise.



Argh! It was Wednesday. She had completely forgotten about inventory night when she'd invited Rose over to study, and now it was too late to cancel. Jin eyed the stacks of canned vegetables, cereal boxes, and other items waiting to be shelved or stored. Several of her family members usually showed up to help out, but even with the extra hands, she knew they would be here until midnight putting all this stuff away.

Jin sighed as she limped toward the back of the store, her knee still throbbing like crazy. She bent to rub it and nearly toppled over when her aunt, Ye-Eun, who worked in the store some afternoons, suddenly emerged from one of the aisles.

"Careful there, kiddo." She smiled, reaching for Jin's arm to steady her.

"I'm okay," Jin blushed. "I just didn't see you there," she muttered.

"Hard to see anything with all this stuff everywhere. But we'll get it cleared out tonight." She ruffled Jin's shoulder-length black hair. "Oh, and by the way, it's kimchi day!" she announced with a mischievous wink as she breezed out the door. The word *kimchi* was still hanging in the air when Jin smelled it—the undeniable and overpowering spicy odor of fermented cabbage, hot peppers, and fish sauce. On

kimchi days, Halmoni lugged large Tupperware containers full of kimchi that she had made days ago at their apartment to the bodega so they could jar it and sell it in the store. Halmoni was pretty famous for her kimchi. It always flew off the shelves, so they were constantly filling jars with the stuff—at least it seemed that way to Jin.

“Ah, Jinnie, you finally here.” Halmoni’s curly black hair, frizzy from years of home perms, popped up from behind the front counter. “Come help with kimchi.”

“My friend Rose is coming over to do homework, remember? Can I help you with the kimchi later? And, Halmoni, can we, um, keep the lid closed tight on the Tupperware for now? I love your kimchi, but I’m not sure Rose has ever tried it before . . .”

Halmoni took a big whiff from the kimchi-filled Tupperware in front of her. “Anybody don’t like kimchi, don’t need to come to my store.” She tossed her head back proudly. “But okay, we do kimchi later. Go and greet Harabeoji now.” She shoed Jin away.

“Thanks, Halmoni,” Jin said, walking toward the back of the store. She dumped her bag in the storeroom, then poked her head into the tiny office where her grandfather worked. “Hey, Harabeoji! How are you?”