THE HATE U GIVE

ANGIE THOMAS

BALZER + BRAY
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PART 1

WHEN IT HAPPENS
I shouldn’t have come to this party.

I’m not even sure I belong at this party. That’s not on some bougie shit, either. There are just some places where it’s not enough to be me. Either version of me. Big D’s spring break party is one of those places.

I squeeze through sweaty bodies and follow Kenya, her curls bouncing past her shoulders. A haze lingers over the room, smelling like weed, and music rattles the floor. Some rapper calls out for everybody to Nae-Nae, followed by a bunch of “Heys” as people launch into their own versions. Kenya holds up her cup and dances her way through the crowd. Between the headache from the loud-ass music and the nausea from the weed odor, I’ll be amazed if I cross the room without spilling my drink.
We break out the crowd. Big D’s house is packed wall-to-wall. I’ve always heard that everybody and their momma comes to his spring break parties—well, everybody except me—but damn, I didn’t know it would be this many people. Girls wear their hair colored, curled, laid, and slayed. Got me feeling basic as hell with my ponytail. Guys in their freshest kicks and sagging pants grind so close to girls they just about need condoms. My nana likes to say that spring brings love. Spring in Garden Heights doesn’t always bring love, but it promises babies in the winter. I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of them are conceived the night of Big D’s party. He always has it on the Friday of spring break because you need Saturday to recover and Sunday to repent.

“Stop following me and go dance, Starr,” Kenya says. “People already say you think you all that.”

“I didn’t know so many mind readers lived in Garden Heights.” Or that people know me as anything other than “Big Mav’s daughter who works in the store.” I sip my drink and spit it back out. I knew there would be more than Hawaiian Punch in it, but this is way stronger than I’m used to. They shouldn’t even call it punch. Just straight-up liquor. I put it on the coffee table and say, “Folks kill me, thinking they know what I think.”

“Hey, I’m just saying. You act like you don’t know nobody ‘cause you go to that school.”

I’ve been hearing that for six years, ever since my parents put me in Williamson Prep. “Whatever,” I mumble.

“And it wouldn’t kill you to not dress like . . .” She turns up her nose as she looks from my sneakers to my oversized hoodie. “That. Ain’t that my brother’s hoodie?”

Our brother’s hoodie. Kenya and I share an older brother, Seven. But she and I aren’t related. Her momma is Seven’s momma, and my dad is Seven’s dad. Crazy, I know. “Yeah, it’s his.”

“Figures. You know what else people saying too. Got folks thinking you’re my girlfriend.”

“Do I look like I care what people think?”

“No! And that’s the problem!”

“Whatever.” If I’d known following her to this party meant she’d be on some Extreme Makeover: Starr Edition mess, I would’ve stayed home and watched Fresh Prince reruns. My Jordans are comfortable, and damn, they’re new. That’s more than some people can say. The hoodie’s way too big, but I like it that way. Plus, if I pull it over my nose, I can’t smell the weed.

“Well, I ain’t babysitting you all night, so you better do something,” Kenya says, and scopes the room. Kenya could be a model, if I’m completely honest. She’s got flawless dark-brown skin—I don’t think she ever gets a pimple—slanted brown eyes, and long eyelashes that aren’t store-bought. She’s the perfect height for modeling too, but a little thicker than those toothpicks on the runway. She never wears the same outfit twice. Her daddy, King, makes sure of that.

Kenya is about the only person I hang out with in Garden
Heights—it’s hard to make friends when you go to a school that’s forty-five minutes away and you’re a latchkey kid who’s only seen at her family’s store. It’s easy to hang out with Kenya because of our connection to Seven. She’s messy as hell sometimes, though. Always fighting somebody and quick to say her daddy will whoop somebody’s ass. Yeah, it’s true, but I wish she’d stop picking fights so she can use her trump card. Hell, I could use mine too. Everybody knows you don’t mess with my dad, Big Mav, and you definitely don’t mess with his kids. Still, you don’t see me going around starting shit.

Like at Big D’s party, Kenya is giving Denasia Allen some serious stank-eye. I don’t remember much about Denasia, but I remember that she and Kenya haven’t liked each other since fourth grade. Tonight, Denasia’s dancing with some guy halfway across the room and paying no attention to Kenya. But no matter where we move, Kenya spots Denasia and glares at her. And the thing about the stank-eye is at some point you feel it on you, inviting you to kick some ass or have your ass kicked.

“Ooh! I can’t stand her,” Kenya seethes. “The other day, we were in line in the cafeteria, right? And she behind me, talking out the side of her neck. She didn’t use my name, but I know she was talking ’bout me, saying I tried to get with DeVante.”

“For real?” I say what I’m supposed to.

“Uh-huh. I don’t want him.”

“I know.” Honestly? I don’t know who DeVante is. “So what did you do?”

“What you think I did? I turned around and asked if she had a problem with me. Ol’ trick, gon’ say, ‘I wasn’t even talking about you,’ knowing she was! You’re so lucky you go to that white-people school and don’t have to deal with hoes like that.”

Ain’t this some shit? Not even five minutes ago, I was stuck-up because I go to Williamson. Now I’m lucky? “Trust me, my school has hoes too. Hoedom is universal.”

“Watch, we gon’ handle her tonight.” Kenya’s stank-eye reaches its highest level of stank. Denasia feels its sting and looks right at Kenya. “Uh-huh,” Kenya confirms, like Denasia hears her. “Watch.”

“Hold up. We? That’s why you begged me to come to this party? So you can have a tag team partner?”

She has the nerve to look offended. “It ain’t like you had nothing else to do! Or anybody else to hang out with. I’m doing your ass a favor.”

“Really, Kenya? You do know I have friends, right?”

She rolls her eyes. Hard. Only the whites are visible for a few seconds. “Them lil’ bougie girls from your school don’t count.”

“They’re not bougie, and they do count.” I think. Maya and I are cool. Not sure what’s up with me and Hailey lately. “And honestly? If pulling me into a fight is your way of helping my social life, I’m good. Goddamn, it’s always some drama with you.”
“Please, Starr?” She stretches the *please* extra long. Too long. “This what I’m thinking. We wait until she get away from DeVante, right? And then we . . .”

My phone vibrates against my thigh, and I glance at the screen. Since I’ve ignored his calls, Chris texts me instead.

Can we talk?
I didn’t mean for it to go like that.

Of course he didn’t. He meant for it to go a whole different way yesterday, which is the problem. I slip the phone in my pocket. I’m not sure what I wanna say, but I’d rather deal with him later.

“Kenya!” somebody shouts.

This big, light-skinned girl with bone-straight hair moves through the crowd toward us. A tall boy with a black-and-blond Fro-hawk follows her. They both give Kenya hugs and talk about how cute she looks. I’m not even here.

“Why you ain’t tell me you was coming?” the girl says, and sticks her thumb in her mouth. She’s got an overbite from doing that too. “You could’ve rode with us.”

“Nah, girl. I had to go get Starr,” Kenya says. “We walked here together.”

That’s when they notice me, standing not even half a foot from Kenya.

The guy squints as he gives me a quick once-over. He frowns for a hot second, but I notice it. “Ain’t you Big Mav’s daughter who work in the store?”
“And listening to Taylor Swift,” Bianca adds, talking around her thumb.

Okay, that’s somewhat true, but I’m not telling them that. “Nah, actually their parties are pretty dope,” I say. “One time, this boy had J. Cole perform at his birthday party.”

“Damn. For real?” Chance asks. “Shiiit. Bitch, next time invite me. I’ll party with them white kids.”

“Anyway,” Kenya says loudly. “We were talking ‘bout running up on Denasia. Bitch over there dancing with Devante.”

“Ol’ trick,” Bianca says. “You know she been running her mouth ‘bout you, right? I was in Mr. Donald’s class last week when Aaliyah told me—”

Chance rolls his eyes. “Ugh! Mr. Donald.”

“You just mad he threw you out,” Kenya says.

“Hell yes!”

“Anyway, Aaliyah told me—” Bianca begins.

I get lost again as classmates and teachers that I don’t know are discussed. I can’t say anything. Doesn’t matter though. I’m invisible.

I feel like that a lot around here.

In the middle of them complaining about Denasia and their teachers, Kenya says something about getting another drink, and the three of them walk off without me.

Suddenly I’m Eve in the Garden after she ate the fruit—it’s like I realize I’m naked. I’m by myself at a party I’m not even supposed to be at, where I barely know anybody. And the person I do know just left me hanging.

Kenya begged me to come to this party for weeks. I knew I’d be uncomfortable as hell, but every time I told Kenya no she said I act like I’m “too good for a Garden party.” I got tired of hearing that shit and decided to prove her wrong. Problem is it would’ve taken Black Jesus to convince my parents to let me come. Now Black Jesus will have to save me if they find out I’m here.

People glance over at me with that “who is this chick, standing against the wall by herself like an idiot?” look. I slip my hands into my pockets. As long as I play it cool and keep to myself, I should be fine. The ironic thing is though, at Williamson I don’t have to “play it cool”—I’m cool by default because I’m one of the only black kids there. I have to earn coolness in Garden Heights, and that’s more difficult than buying retro Jordans on release day.

Funny how it works with white kids though. It’s dope to be black until it’s hard to be black.

“Starr!” a familiar voice says.

The sea of people parts for him like he’s a brown-skinned Moses. Guys give him daps, and girls crane their necks to look at him. He smiles at me, and his dimples ruin any G persona he has.

Khalil is fine, no other way of putting it. And I used to take baths with him. Not like that, but way back in the day when we would giggle because he had a wee-wee and I had what his
grandma called a wee-ha. I swear it wasn’t perverted though. He hugs me, smelling like soap and baby powder. “What’s up, girl? Ain’t seen you in a minute.” He lets me go. “You don’t text nobody, nothing. Where you been?”

“School and the basketball team keep me busy,” I say. “But I’m always at the store. You’re the one nobody sees anymore.”

His dimples disappear. He wipes his nose like he always does before a lie. “I been busy.”

Obviously. The brand-new Jordans, the crisp white tee, the diamonds in his ears. When you grow up in Garden Heights, you know what “busy” really means.

Fuck. I wish he wasn’t that kinda busy though. I don’t know if I wanna tear up or smack him.

But the way Khalil looks at me with those hazel eyes makes it hard to be upset. I feel like I’m ten again, standing in the basement of Christ Temple Church, having my first kiss with him at Vacation Bible School. Suddenly I remember I’m in a hoodie, looking a straight-up mess . . . and that I actually have a boyfriend. I might not be answering Chris’s calls or texts right now, but he’s still mine and I wanna keep it that way.

“How’s your grandma?” I ask. “And Cameron?”

“They a’ight. Grandma’s sick though.” Khalil sips from his cup. “Doctors say she got cancer or whatever.”

“Damn. Sorry, K.”

“Yeah, she taking chemo. She only worried ’bout getting a wig though.” He gives a weak laugh that doesn’t show his dimples. “She’ll be a’ight.”

It’s a prayer more than a prophecy. “Is your momma helping with Cameron?”

“Good ol’ Starr. Always looking for the best in people. You know she ain’t helping.”

“Hey, it was just a question. She came in the store the other day. She looks better.”

“For now,” says Khalil. “She claim she trying to get clean, but it’s the usual. She’ll go clean a few weeks, decide she wants one more hit, then be back at it. But like I said, I’m good, Cameron’s good, Grandma’s good.” He shrugs. “That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah,” I say, but I remember the nights I spent with Khalil on his porch, waiting for his momma to come home. Whether he likes it or not, she matters to him too.

The music changes, and Drake raps from the speakers. I nod to the beat and rap along under my breath. Everybody on the dance floor yells out the “started from the bottom, now we’re here” part. Some days, we are at the bottom in Garden Heights, but we still share the feeling that damn, it could be worse.

Khalil is watching me. A smile tries to form on his lips, but he shakes his head. “Can’t believe you still love whiny-ass Drake.”

I gape at him. “Leave my husband alone!”

“Your corny husband. ‘Baby, you my everything, you all I ever wanted,’” Khalil sings in a whiny voice. I push him with
my shoulder, and he laughs, his drink splashing over the sides of the cup. “You know that’s what he sounds like!”

I flip him off. He puckers his lips and makes a kissing sound. All these months apart, and we’ve fallen back into normal like it’s nothing.

Khalil grabs a napkin from the coffee table and wipes drink off his Jordans—the Three Retros. They came out a few years ago, but I swear those things are so fresh. They cost about three hundred dollars, and that’s if you find somebody on eBay who goes easy. Chris did. I got mine for a steal at one-fifty, but I wear kid sizes. Thanks to my small feet, Chris and I can match our sneakers. Yes, we’re that couple. Shit, we’re fly though. If he can stop doing stupid stuff, we’ll really be good.

“I like the kicks,” I tell Khalil.

“Thanks.” He scrubs the shoes with his napkin. I cringe. With each hard rub, the shoes cry for my help. No lie, every time a sneaker is cleaned improperly, a kitten dies.

“Khalil,” I say, one second away from snatching that napkin. “Either wipe gently back and forth or dab. Don’t scrub. For real.”

He looks up at me, smirking. “Okay, Ms. Sneakerhead.” And thank Black Jesus, he dabs. “Since you made me spill my drink on them, I oughta make you clean them.”

“It’ll cost you sixty dollars.”

“Sixty?” he shouts, straightening up.

“Hell, yeah. And it would be eighty if they had icy soles.”

Clear bottoms are a bitch to clean. “Cleaning kits aren’t cheap. Besides, you’re obviously making big money if you can buy those.”

Khalil sips his drink like I didn’t say anything, mutters, “Damn, this shit strong,” and sets the cup on the coffee table. “Ay, tell your pops I need to holla at him soon. Some stuff going down that I need to talk to him ‘bout.”

“What kinda stuff?”

“Grown folks business.”

“Yeah, ’cause you’re so grown.”

“Five months, two weeks, and three days older than you.” He winks. “I ain’t forgot.”

A commotion stirs in the middle of the dance floor. Voices argue louder than the music. Cuss words fly left and right.

My first thought? Kenya walked up on Denasia like she promised. But the voices are deeper than theirs.

*Pop!* A shot rings out. I duck.

*Pop!* A second shot. The crowd stampedes toward the door, which leads to more cussing and fighting since it’s impossible for everybody to get out at once.

Khalil grabs my hand. “C’mon.”

There are way too many people and way too much curly hair for me to catch a glimpse of Kenya. “But Kenya—”

“Forget her, let’s go!”

He pulls me through the crowd, shoving people out our way and stepping on shoes. That alone could get us some bullets.
I look for Kenya among the panicked faces, but still no sign of her. I don’t try to see who got shot or who did it. You can’t snitch if you don’t know anything.

Cars speed away outside, and people run into the night in any direction where shots aren’t firing off. Khalil leads me to a Chevy Impala parked under a dim streetlight. He pushes me through the driver’s side, and I climb into the passenger seat. We screech off, leaving chaos in the rearview mirror.

“Always some shit,” he mumbles. “Can’t have a party without somebody getting shot.”

He sounds like my parents. That’s exactly why they don’t let me “go nowhere,” as Kenya puts it. At least not around Garden Heights.

I send Kenya a text, hoping she’s all right. Doubt those bullets were meant for her, but bullets go where they wanna go.

Kenya texts back kinda quick.

I’m fine.

I see that bitch tho. Bout to handle her ass.

Where u at?

Is this chick for real? We just ran for our lives, and she’s ready to fight? I don’t even answer that dumb shit.

Khalil’s Impala is nice. Not all flashy like some guys’ cars. I didn’t see any rims before I got in, and the front seat has cracks in the leather. But the interior is a tacky lime green, so it’s been customized at some point.

I pick at a crack in the seat. “Who you think got shot?”

Khalil gets his hairbrush out the compartment on the door.

“Probably a King Lord,” he says, brushing the sides of his fade. “Some Garden Disciples came in when I got there. Something was bound to pop off.”

I nod. Garden Heights has been a battlefield for the past two months over some stupid territory wars. I was born a “queen” ’cause Daddy used to be a King Lord. But when he left the game, my street royalty status ended. But even if I’d grown up in it, I wouldn’t understand fighting over streets nobody owns.

Khalil drops the brush in the door and cranks up his stereo, blasting an old rap song Daddy has played a million times. I frown. “Why you always listening to that old stuff?”

“Man, get outta here! Tupac was the truth.”

“Yeah, twenty years ago.”

“Nah, even now. Like, check this.” He points at me, which means he’s about to go into one of his Khalil philosophical moments. “Pac said Thug Life stood for ‘The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody.’”

I raise my eyebrows. “What?”

“Listen! The Hate U—the letter U—Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody. T-H-U-G L-I-F-E. Meaning what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out. Get it?”

“Damn. Yeah.”

“See? Told you he was relevant.” He nods to the beat and raps along. But now I’m wondering what he’s doing to “fuck everybody.” As much as I think I know, I hope I’m wrong. I need to hear it from him.
"So why have you really been busy?" I ask. "A few months ago Daddy said you quit the store. I haven't seen you since."

He scoots closer to the steering wheel. "Where you want me to take you, your house or the store?"

"Khalil—"

"Your house or the store?"

"If you're selling that stuff—"

"Mind your business, Starr! Don't worry 'bout me. I'm doing what I gotta do."

"Bullshit. You know my dad would help you out."

He wipes his nose before his lie. "I don't need help from nobody, okay? And that lil' minimum-wage job your pops gave me didn't make nothing happen. I got tired of choosing between lights and food."

"I thought your grandma was working."

"She was. When she got sick, them clowns at the hospital claimed they'd work with her. Two months later, she wasn't pulling her load on the job, 'cause when you're going through chemo, you can't pull big-ass garbage bins around. They fired her." He shakes his head. "Funny, huh? The hospital fired her 'cause she was sick."

It's silent in the Impala except for Tupac asking *who do you believe in?* I don't know.

My phone vibrates again, probably either Chris asking for forgiveness or Kenya asking for backup against Denasia. Instead, my big brother's all-caps texts appear on the screen. I don't know why he does that. He probably thinks it intimidates me. Really, it annoys the hell out of me.

WHERE R U?

U AND KENYA BETTER NOT BE @ THAT PARTY.

I HEARD SOMEBODY GOT SHOT.

The only thing worse than protective parents is protective older brothers. Even Black Jesus can't save me from Seven. Khalil glances over at me. "Seven, huh?"

"How'd you know?"

"'Cause you always look like you wanna punch something when he talks to you. Remember that time at your birthday party when he kept telling you what to wish for?"

"And I popped him in his mouth."

"Then Natasha got mad at you for telling her 'boyfriend' to shut up," Khalil says, laughing.

I roll my eyes. "She got on my nerves with her crush on Seven. Half the time, I thought she came over just to see him."

"Nah, it was because you had the Harry Potter movies. What we used to call ourselves? The Hood Trio. Tighter than—"

"The inside of Voldemort's nose. We were so silly for that."

"I know, right?" he says.

We laugh, but something's missing from it. *Someone's* missing from it. Natasha.

Khalil looks at the road. "Crazy it's been six years, you know?"

A whoop-whoop sound startles us, and blue lights flash in the rearview mirror.
When I was twelve, my parents had two talks with me.

One was the usual birds and bees. Well, I didn’t really get the usual version. My mom, Lisa, is a registered nurse, and she told me what went where, and what didn’t need to go here, there, or any damn where till I’m grown. Back then, I doubted anything was going anywhere anyway. While all the other girls sprouted breasts between sixth and seventh grade, my chest was as flat as my back.

The other talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me.

Momma fusses and told Daddy I was too young for that. He argued that I wasn’t too young to get arrested or shot.

“Starr-Starr, you do whatever they tell you to do,” he said. “Keep your hands visible. Don’t make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you.”

I knew it must’ve been serious. Daddy has the biggest mouth of anybody I know, and if he said to be quiet, I needed to be quiet.

I hope somebody had the talk with Khalil.

He cusses under his breath, turns Tupac down, and maneuvers the Impala to the side of the street. We’re on Carnation where most of the houses are abandoned and half the streetlights are busted. Nobody around but us and the cop.

Khalil turns the ignition off. “Wonder what this fool wants.”

The officer parks and puts his brights on. I blink to keep from being blinded.

I remember something else Daddy said. If you’re with somebody, you better hope they don’t have nothing on them, or both of y’all going down.

“K, you don’t have anything in the car, do you?” I ask.

He watches the cop in his side mirror. “Nah.”

The officer approaches the driver’s door and taps the window. Khalil cranks the handle to roll it down. As if we aren’t blinded enough, the officer beams his flashlight in our faces.

“License, registration, and proof of insurance.”

Khalil breaks a rule—he doesn’t do what the cop wants.

“What you pull us over for?”

“License, registration, and proof of insurance.”

“I said what you pull us over for?”

Khalil groans and takes his wallet out. The officer follows his movements with the flashlight.

My heart pounds loudly, but Daddy’s instructions echo in my head: Get a good look at the cop’s face. If you can remember his badge number, that’s even better.

With the flashlight following Khalil’s hands, I make out the numbers on the badge—one-fifteen. He’s white, mid-thirties to early forties, has a brown buzz cut and a thin scar over his top lip.

Khalil hands the officer his papers and license.

One-Fifteen looks over them. “Where are you two coming from tonight?”

“Nunya,” Khalil says, meaning none of your business.

“What you pull me over for?”

“Your taillight’s broken.”

“So are you gon’ give me a ticket or what?” Khalil asks.

“You know what? Get out the car, smart guy.”

“Man, just give me my ticket—”

“Get out the car! Hands up, where I can see them.”

Khalil gets out with his hands up. One-Fifteen yanks him by his arm and pins him against the back door.

I fight to find my voice. “He didn’t mean—”

“Hands on the dashboard!” the officer barks at me. “Don’t move!”

I do what he tells me, but my hands are shaking too much to be still.

He pats Khalil down. “Okay, smart mouth, let’s see what we find on you today.”

“You ain’t gon’ find nothing,” Khalil says.

One-Fifteen pats him down two more times. He turns up empty.

“Stay here,” he tells Khalil. “And you.” He looks in the window at me. “Don’t move.”

I can’t even nod.

The officer walks back to his patrol car.

My parents haven’t raised me to fear the police, just to be smart around them. They told me it’s not smart to move while a cop has his back to you.

Khalil does. He comes to his door.

It’s not smart to make a sudden move.

Khalil does. He opens the driver’s door.

“You okay, Starr—”

Pow!

One. Khalil’s body jerks. Blood splatters from his back. He holds on to the door to keep himself upright.

Pow!

Two. Khalil gasps.

Pow!

Three. Khalil looks at me, stunned.

He falls to the ground.

I’m ten again, watching Natasha drop.

An earsplitting scream emerges from my gut, explodes in
my throat, and uses every inch of me to be heard.

Instinct says don’t move, but everything else says check on Khalil. I jump out the Impala and rush around to the other side. Khalil stares at the sky as if he hopes to see God. His mouth is open like he wants to scream. I scream loud enough for the both of us.

“No, no, no,” is all I can say, like I’m a year old and it’s the only word I know. I’m not sure how I end up on the ground next to him. My mom once said that if someone gets shot, try to stop the bleeding, but there’s so much blood. Too much blood.

“No, no, no.”

Khalil doesn’t move. He doesn’t utter a word. He doesn’t even look at me. His body stiffens, and he’s gone. I hope he sees God.

Someone else screams.

I blink through my tears. Officer One-Fifteen yells at me, pointing the same gun he killed my friend with.

I put my hands up.

They leave Khalil’s body in the street like it’s an exhibit. Police cars and ambulances flash all along Carnation Street. People stand off to the side, trying to see what happened.

“Damn, bruh,” some guy says. “They killed him!”

The police tell the crowd to leave. Nobody listens.

The paramedics can’t do shit for Khalil, so they put me in the back of an ambulance like I need help. The bright lights spotlight me, and people crane their necks to get a peek.

I don’t feel special. I feel sick.

The cops rummage through Khalil’s car. I try to tell them to stop. Please, cover his body. Please, close his eyes. Please, close his mouth. Get away from his car. Don’t pick up his hairbrush. But the words never come out.
One-Fifteen sits on the sidewalk with his face buried in his hands. Other officers pat his shoulder and tell him it’ll be okay. They finally put a sheet over Khalil. He can’t breathe under it. I can’t breathe.

I can’t.

Breathe.

I gasp.

And gasp.

And gasp.

“Starr?”

Brown eyes with long eyelashes appear in front of me. They’re like mine.

I couldn’t say much to the cops, but I did manage to give them my parents’ names and phone numbers.


I open my mouth to respond. A sob comes out.

Daddy is moved aside, and Momma wraps her arms around me. She rubs my back and speaks in hushed tones that tell lies.

“It’s all right, baby. It’s all right.”

We stay this way for a long time. Eventually, Daddy helps us out the ambulance. He wraps his arm around me like a shield against curious eyes and guides me to his Tahoe down the street.

He drives. A streetlight flashes across his face, revealing how tight his jaw is set. His veins bulge along his bald head.

Momma’s wearing her scrubs, the ones with the rubber ducks on them. She did an extra shift at the emergency room tonight. She wipes her eyes a few times, probably thinking about Khalil or how that could’ve been me lying in the street.

My stomach twists. All of that blood, and it came out of him. Some of it is on my hands, on Seven’s hoodie, on my sneakers. An hour ago we were laughing and catching up. Now his blood . . .

Hot spit pools in my mouth. My stomach twists tighter. I gag.

Momma glances at me in the rearview mirror. “Maverick, pull over!”

I throw myself across the backseat and push the door open before the truck comes to a complete stop. It feels like everything in me is coming out, and all I can do is let it.

Momma hops out and runs around to me. She holds my hair out the way and rubs my back.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” she says.

When we get home, she helps me undress. Seven’s hoodie and my Jordans disappear into a black trash bag, and I never see them again.

I sit in a tub of steaming water and scrub my hands raw to get Khalil’s blood off. Daddy carries me to bed, and Momma brushes her fingers through my hair until I fall asleep.

Nightmares wake me over and over again. Momma reminds me to breathe, the same way she did before I outgrew asthma. I
think she stays in my room the whole night, 'cause every time I wake up, she's sitting on my bed.

But this time, she's gone. My eyes strain against the brightness of my neon-blue walls. The clock says it's five in the morning. My body's so used to waking up at five, it doesn't care if it's Saturday morning or not.

I stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling, trying to recap the night before. The party flashes in my mind, the fight, One-Fifteen pulling me and Khalil over. The first shot rings in my ears. The second. The third.

I'm lying in bed. Khalil is lying in the county morgue.

That's where Natasha ended up too. It happened six years ago, but I still remember everything from that day. I was sweeping floors at our grocery store, saving up for my first pair of J's, when Natasha ran in. She was chunky (her momma told her it was baby fat), dark-skinned, and wore her hair in braids that always looked freshly done. I wanted braids like hers so bad.

"Starr, the hydrant on Elm Street busted!" she said.

That was like saying we had a free water park. I remember looking at Daddy and pleading silently. He said I could go, as long as I promised to be back in an hour.

I don't think I ever saw the water shoot as high as it did that day. Almost everybody in the neighborhood was there too. Just having fun. I was the only one who noticed the car at first.

A tattooed arm stretched out the back window, holding a Glock. People ran. Not me though. My feet became part of the sidewalk. Natasha was splashing in the water, all happy and stuff. Then—

"Pow! Pow! Pow!"

I dove into a rosebush. By the time I got up, somebody was yelling, "Call nine-one-one!" At first I thought it was me, 'cause I had blood on my shirt. The thorns on the rosebush got me, that's all. It was Natasha though. Her blood mixed in with the water, and all you could see was a red river flowing down the street.

She looked scared. We were ten, we didn't know what happened after you died. Hell, I still don't know, and she was forced to find out, even if she didn't wanna find out.

I know she didn't. Just like Khalil didn't.

My door creaks open, and Momma peeks in. She tries to smile. "Look who's up."

She sinks onto her spot on the bed and touches my forehead, even though I don't have a fever. She takes care of sick kids so much that it's her first instinct. "How you feeling, Munch?"

That nickname. My parents claim I was always munching on something from the moment I got off the bottle. I've lost my big appetite, but I can't lose that nickname. "Tired," I say. My voice has extra bass in it. "I wanna stay in bed."

"I know, baby, but I don't want you here by yourself."

That's all I wanna be, by myself. She stares at me, but it feels like she's looking at who I used to be, her little girl with ponytails and a snaggletooth who swore she was a Powerpuff Girl.
Angie Thomas

It’s weird but also kinda like a blanket I wanna get wrapped up in.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you too.”

She stands and holds her hand out. “C’mon. Let’s get you something to eat.”

We walk slowly to the kitchen. Black Jesus hangs from the cross in a painting on the hallway wall, and Malcolm X holds a shotgun in a photograph next to him. Nana still complains about those pictures hanging next to each other.

We live in her old house. She gave it to my parents after my uncle, Carlos, moved her into his humongous house in the suburbs. Uncle Carlos was always uneasy about Nana living by herself in Garden Heights, especially since break-ins and robberies seem to happen more to older folks than anybody. Nana doesn’t think she’s old though. She refused to leave, talking about how it was her home and no thugs were gonna run her out, not even when somebody broke in and stole her television. About a month after that, Uncle Carlos claimed that he and Aunt Pam needed her help with their kids. Since, according to Nana, Aunt Pam “can’t cook worth a damn for those poor babies” she finally agreed to move. Our house hasn’t lost its Nana-ness though, with its permanent odor of potpourri, flowered wallpaper, and hints of pink in almost every room.

Daddy and Seven are talking before we get to the kitchen. They go silent as soon as we walk in.

“The hate u give

“Morning, baby girl.” Daddy gets up from the table and kisses my forehead. “You sleep okay?”

“Yeah,” I lie as he guides me to a seat. Seven just stares.

Momma opens the fridge, the door crowded with takeout menus and fruit-shaped magnets. “All right, Munch,” she says, “you want turkey bacon or regular?”

“Regular.” I’m surprised I have an option. We never have pork. We aren’t Muslims. More like “Christlins.” Momma became a member of Christ Temple Church when she was in Nana’s belly. Daddy believes in Black Jesus but follows the Black Panthers’ Ten-Point Program more than the Ten Commandments. He agrees with the Nation of Islam on some stuff, but he can’t get over the fact that they may have killed Malcolm X.

“Pig in my house,” Daddy grumbles and sits next to me. Seven smirks across from him. Seven and Daddy look like one of those age-progression pictures they show when somebody’s been missing a long time. Throw my little brother, Sekani, in there and you have the same person at eight, seventeen, and thirty-six. They’re dark brown, slender, and have thick eyebrows and long eyelashes that almost look feminine. Seven’s dreads are long enough to give both bald-headed Daddy and short-haired Sekani each a head full of hair.

As for me, it’s as if God mixed my parents’ skin tones in a paint bucket to get my medium-brown complexion. I did inherit Daddy’s eyelashes—and I’m cursed with his eyebrows
too. Otherwise I'm mostly my mom, with big brown eyes and a little too much forehead.

Momma passes behind Seven with the bacon and squeezes his shoulder. “Thank you for staying with your brother last night so we could—” Her voice catches, but the reminder of what happened hangs in the air. She clears her throat. “We appreciate it.”

“No problem. I needed to get out the house.”

“King spent the night?” Daddy asks.

“More like moved in. Ilesha talking about they can be a family—”

“Ay,” Daddy says. “That’s your momma, boy. Don’t be calling her by her name like you grown.”

“Somebody in that house needs to be grown,” Momma says. She takes a skillet out and hollers toward the hall, “Sekani, I’m not telling you again. If you wanna go to Carlos’s for the weekend, you better get up! You’re not gonna have me late for work.” I guess she’s gotta work a day shift to make up for last night.

“Pops, you know what’s gonna happen,” Seven says. “He’ll beat her, she’ll put him out. Then he’ll come back, saying he changed. Only difference is this time, I’m not letting him put his hands on me.”

“You can always move in with us,” says Daddy.

“I know, but I can’t leave Kenya and Lyric. That fool’s crazy enough to hit them too. He don’t care that they’re his daughters.”

“A’ight,” Daddy says. “Don’t say anything to him. If he puts his hands on you, let me handle that.”

Seven nods then looks at me. He opens his mouth and keeps it open a while before saying, “I’m sorry about last night, Starr.”

Somebody finally acknowledges the cloud hanging over the kitchen, which for some reason is like acknowledging me.

“Thanks,” I say, even though it’s weird saying that. I don’t deserve the sympathy. Khalil’s family does.

There’s just the sound of bacon crackling and popping in the skillet. It’s like a “Fragile” sticker’s on my forehead, and instead of taking a chance and saying something that might break me, they’d rather say nothing at all.

But the silence is the worst.


“Oh . . .”

That’s all anybody says for a minute.

Momma turns around to the skillet. “Don’t make any sense. That baby—” she says thickly. “He was just a baby.”

Daddy shakes his head. “That boy never hurt anybody. He didn’t deserve that shit.”

“Why did they shoot him?” Seven asks. “Was he a threat or something?”

“No,” I say quietly.
I stare at the table. I can feel all of them watching me again.

“He didn’t do anything,” I say. “We didn’t do anything. Khalil didn’t even have a gun.”

Daddy releases a slow breath. “Folks around here gon’ lose their minds when they find that out.”

“People from the neighborhood are already talking about it on Twitter,” Seven says. “I saw it last night.”

“Did they mention your sister?” Momma asks.

“No. Just RIP Khalil messages, fuck the police, stuff like that. I don’t think they know details.”

“What’s gonna happen to me when the details do come out?” I ask.

“What do you mean, baby?” my mom asks.

“Besides the cop, I’m the only person who was there. And you’ve seen stuff like this. It ends up on national news. People get death threats, cops target them, all kinds of stuff.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Daddy says. “None of us will.” He looks at Momma and Seven. “We’re not telling anybody that Starr was there.”

“Should Sekani know?” Seven asks.

“No,” Momma says. “It’s best if he didn’t. We’re just gonna be quiet for now.”

I’ve seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black, and all hell breaks loose. I’ve tweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down.

Now I am that person, and I’m too afraid to speak.

I wanna stay home and watch The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, my favorite show ever, hands down. I think I know every episode word for word. Yeah it’s hilarious, but it’s also like seeing parts of my life on screen. I even relate to the theme song. A couple of gang members who were up to no good made trouble in my neighborhood and killed Natasha. My parents got scared, and although they didn’t send me to my aunt and uncle in a rich neighborhood, they sent me to a bougie private school.

I just wish I could be myself at Williamson like Will was himself in Bel-Air.

I kinda wanna stay home so I can return Chris’s calls too. After last night, it feels stupid to be mad at him. Or I could call Hailey and Maya, those girls Kenya claims don’t count as my friends. I guess I can see why she says that. I never invite them over. Why would I? They live in mini-mansions. My house is just mini.

I made the mistake of inviting them to a sleepover in seventh grade. Momma was gonna let us do our nails, stay up all night, and eat as much pizza as we wanted. It was gonna be as awesome as those weekends we had at Hailey’s. The ones we still have sometimes. I invited Kenya too, so I could finally hang out with all three of them at once.
ANGIE THOMAS

Hailey didn’t come. Her dad didn’t want her spending the night in “the ghetto.” I overheard my parents say that. Maya came but ended up asking her parents to come get her that night. There was a drive-by around the corner, and the gunshots scared her.

That’s when I realized Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another, and I have to keep them separate.

It doesn’t matter what I’m thinking about doing today though—my parents have their own plans for me. Momma tells me I’m going to the store with Daddy. Before Seven leaves for work, he comes to my room in his Best Buy polo and khakis and hugs me.

“Love you,” he says.

See, that’s why I hate it when somebody dies. People do stuff they wouldn’t usually do. Even Momma hugs me longer and tighter with more sympathy than “just because” in it. Sekani, on the other hand, steals bacon off my plate, looks at my phone, and purposely steps on my foot on his way out. I love him for it.

I bring a bowl of dog food and leftover bacon outside to our pit bull, Brickz. Daddy gave him his name ‘cause he’s always been as heavy as some bricks. Soon as he sees me, he jumps and fights to break free from his chain. And when I get close enough, his hyper butt jumps up my legs, nearly taking me down.

“Get!” I say. He crouches onto the grass and stares up at me, whimpering with wide puppy-dog eyes. The Brickz version of an apology.

THE HATE U GIVE

I know pit bulls can be aggressive, but Brickz is a baby most of the time. A big baby. Now, if somebody tries to break in our house or something, they won’t meet the baby Brickz.

While I feed Brickz and refill his water bowl, Daddy picks bunches of collard greens from his garden. He cuts roses that have blooms as big as my palms. Daddy spends hours out here every night, planting, tilling, and talking. He claims a good garden needs good conversation.

About thirty minutes later, we’re riding in his truck with the windows down. On the radio, Marvin Gaye asks what’s going on. It’s still dark out, though the sun peeks through the clouds, and hardly anybody is outside. This early in the morning it’s easy to hear the rumbling of eighteen-wheelers on the freeway.

Daddy hums to Marvin, but he couldn’t carry a tune if it came in a box. He’s wearing a Lakers jersey and no shirt underneath, revealing tattoos all over his arms. One of my baby photos smiles back at me, permanently etched on his arm with Something to live for, something to die for written beneath it. Seven and Sekani are on his other arm with the same words beneath them. Love letters in the simplest form.

“You wanna talk ’bout last night some more?” he asks.

“Nah.”

“A’ight. Whenever you wanna.”

Another love letter in the simplest form.

We turn onto Marigold Avenue, where Garden Heights is waking up. Some ladies wearing floral headscarves come out
the Laundromat, carrying big baskets of clothes. Mr. Reuben unlocks the chains on his restaurant. His nephew Tim, the cook, leans against the wall and wipes sleep from his eyes. Ms. Yvette yawns as she goes in her beauty shop. The lights are on at Top Shelf Spirits and Wine, but they’re always on.

Daddy parks in front of Carter’s Grocery, our family’s store. Daddy bought it when I was nine after the former owner, Mr. Wyatt, left Garden Heights to go sit on the beach all day, watching pretty women. (Mr. Wyatt’s words, not mine.) Mr. Wyatt was the only person who would hire Daddy when he got out of prison, and he later said Daddy was the only person he trusted to run the store.

Compared to the Walmart on the east side of Garden Heights, our grocery is tiny. White-painted metal bars protect the windows and door. They make the store resemble a jail.

Mr. Lewis from the barbershop next door stands out front, his arms folded over his big belly. He sets his narrowed eyes on Daddy.

Daddy sighs. “Here we go.”

We hop out. Mr. Lewis gives some of the best haircuts in Garden Heights—Sekani’s high-top fade proves it—but Mr. Lewis himself wears an untidy Afro. His stomach blocks his view of his feet, and since his wife passed nobody tells him that his pants are too short and his socks don’t always match. Today one is striped and the other is argyle.

“The store used to open at five fifty-five on the dot,” he says. “Five fifty-five!”

It’s 6:05.

Daddy unlocks the front door. “I know, Mr. Lewis, but I told you, I’m not running the store the same way Wyatt did.”

“It sho’ is obvious. First you take down his pictures—who the hell replaces a picture of Dr. King with some nobody—”

“Huey Newton ain’t a nobody.”

“He ain’t Dr. King! Then you hire thugs to work up in here. I heard that Khalil boy got himself killed last night. He was probably selling that stuff.” Mr. Lewis looks from Daddy’s basketball jersey to his tattoos. “Wonder where he get that idea from.”

Daddy’s jaw tightens. “Starr, turn the coffeepot on for Mr. Lewis.”

So he can get the hell outta here, I say to myself, finishing Daddy’s sentence for him.

I flick the switch on the coffeepot at the self-serve table, which Huey Newton watches over from a photograph, his fist raised for black power.

I’m supposed to replace the filter and put new coffee and water in, but for talking about Khalil Mr. Lewis gets coffee made from day-old grounds.

He limps through the aisles and gets a honey bun, an apple, and a pack of hog head cheese. He gives me the honey bun. “Heat it up, girl. And you bet’ not overcook it.”

I leave it in the microwave until the plastic wrapper swells and pops open. Mr. Lewis eats it soon as I take it out.

“That thang hot!” He chews and blows at the same time.
“You heated it too long, girl. ‘Bout to burn my mouth!”

When Mr. Lewis leaves, Daddy winks at me.

The usual customers come in, like Mrs. Jackson, who insists on buying her greens from Daddy and nobody else. Four red-eyed guys in sagging pants buy almost every bag of chips we have. Daddy tells them it’s too early to be that blazed, and they laugh way too hard. One of them licks his next blunt as they leave. Around eleven, Mrs. Rooks buys some roses and snacks for her bridge club meeting. She has droopy eyes and gold plating on her front teeth. Her wig is gold-colored too.

“Y’all need to get some Lotto tickets up in here, baby,” she says as Daddy rings her up and I bag her stuff. “Tonight it’s at three hundred million!”

Daddy smiles. “For real? What would you do with all that money, Mrs. Rooks?”

“Shiiit. Baby, the question is what I wouldn’t do with all that money. Lord knows, I’d get on the first plane outta here.”

Daddy laughs. “Is that right? Then who gon’ make red velvet cakes for us?”

“Somebody else, ’cause I’d be gone.” She points to the display of cigarettes behind us. “Baby, hand me a pack of them Newports.”

Those are Nana’s favorites too. They used to be Daddy’s favorites before I begged him to quit. I grab a pack and pass it to Mrs. Rooks.

She’s staring at me moments after, patting the pack against her palm, and I wait for it. The sympathy. “Baby, I heard what happened to Rosalie’s grandboy,” she says. “I’m so sorry. Y’all used to be friends, didn’t you?”

The “used to” stings, but I just say to Mrs. Rooks, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmm!” She shakes her head. “Lord, have mercy. My heart ‘bout broke when I heard. I tried to go over there and see Rosalie last night, but so many people were already at the house. Poor Rosalie. All she going through and now this. Barbara said Rosalie not sure how she gon’ pay to bury him. We talking ‘bout raising some money. Think you can help us out, Maverick?”

“Oh, yeah. Let me know what y’all need, and it’s done.”

She flashes those gold teeth in a smile. “Boy, it’s good to see where the Lord done brought you. Your momma would be proud.”

Daddy nods heavily. Grandma’s been gone ten years—long enough that Daddy doesn’t cry every day, but such a short while ago that if someone brings her up, it brings him down.

“And look at this girl,” Mrs. Rooks says, eyeing me. “Every bit of Lisa. Maverick, you better watch out. These li’l boys around here gon’ be trying it.”

“Nah, they better watch out. You know I ain’t having that. She can’t date till she forty.”

My hand drifts to my pocket, thinking of Chris and his texts. Shit, I left my phone at home. Needless to say, Daddy doesn’t know a thing about Chris. We’ve been together over a
year now. Seven knows, because he met Chris at school, and Momma figured it out when Chris would always visit me at Uncle Carlos’s house, claiming he was my friend. One day she and Uncle Carlos walked in on us kissing and they pointed out that friends don’t kiss each other like that. I’ve never seen Chris get so red in my life.

She and Seven are okay with me dating Chris, although if it was up to Seven I’d become a nun, but whatever. I can’t get the guts to tell Daddy though. And it’s not just because he doesn’t want me dating yet. The bigger issue is that Chris is white.

At first I thought my mom might say something about it, but she was like, “He could be polka dot, as long as he’s not a criminal and he’s treating you right.” Daddy, on the other hand, rants about how Halle Berry “act like she can’t get with brothers anymore” and how messed up that is. I mean, anytime he finds out a black person is with a white person, suddenly something’s wrong with them. I don’t want him looking at me like that.

Luckily, Momma hasn’t told him. She refuses to get in the middle of that fight. My boyfriend, my responsibility to tell Daddy.

Mrs. Rooks leaves. Seconds later, the bell clangs. Kenya struts into the store. Her kicks are cute—Bazooka Joe Nike Dunks that I haven’t added to my collection. Kenya always wears fly sneakers.

She goes to get her usual from the aisles. “Hey, Starr. Hey, Uncle Maverick.”

“Hey, Kenya,” Daddy answers, even though he’s not her uncle, but her brother’s dad. “You good?”

She comes back with a jumbo bag of Hot Cheetos and a Sprite. “Yeah. My momma wanna know if my brother spent the night with y’all.”

There she goes calling Seven “my brother” like she’s the only one who can claim him. It’s annoying as hell.

“Tell your momma I’ll call her later,” Daddy says.

“Okay.” Kenya pays for her stuff and makes eye contact with me. She jerks her head a little to the side.

“I’m gonna sweep the aisles,” I tell Daddy.

Kenya follows me. I grab the broom and go to the produce aisle on the other side of the store. Some grapes have spilled out from those red-eyed guys sampling before buying. I barely start sweeping before Kenya starts talking.

“I heard about Khalil,” she says. “I’m so sorry, Starr. You okay?”

I make myself nod. “I... just can’t believe it, you know? It had been a while since I saw him, but...”

“It hurts.” Kenya says what I can’t.

“Yeah.”

Fuck, I feel the tears coming. I’m not gonna cry, I’m not gonna cry, I’m not gonna cry...

“I kinda hoped he’d be in here when I walked in,” she says softly. “Like he used to be. Bagging groceries in that ugly apron.”

“The green one,” I mutter.
“Yeah. Talking about how women love a man in uniform.”
I stare at the floor. If I cry now, I may never stop.
Kenya pops her Hot Cheetos open and holds the bag toward me. Comfort food.
I reach in and get a couple. “Thanks.”
“No problem.”
We munch on Cheetos. Khalil’s supposed to be here with us.
“So, um,” I say, and my voice is all rough. “You and Denasia got into it last night?”
“Girl.” She sounds like she’s been waiting to drop this story for hours. “DeVante came over to me, right before it got crazy. He asked for my number.”
“I thought he was Denasia’s boyfriend?”
“DeVante not the type to be tied down. Anyway, Denasia walked over to start something, but the shots went off. We ended up running down the same street, and I clocked her ass. It was so funny! You should’ve seen it!”
I would’ve rather seen that instead of Officer One-Fifteen. Or Khalil staring at the sky. Or all that blood. My stomach twists again.
Kenya waves her hand in front of me. “Hey. You okay?”
I blink Khalil and that cop away. “Yeah. I’m good.”
“You sure? You real quiet.”
“Yeah.”
She lets it drop, and I let her tell me about the second round she has planned for Denasia.
He writes it on a pad. “All right. Beefs, tater salad, okra. Y’all want fried BBQ wings and fries? And extra sauce for you, Starr baby?”

He remembers everybody’s usual orders too somehow. “Yes, sir,” we say.

“All right. Y’all been staying out of trouble?”

“Yes, sir,” Kenya lies with ease.

“How ’bout some pound cake on the house then? Reward for good behavior.”

We say yeah and thank him. But see, Mr. Reuben could know about Kenya’s fight and would offer her pound cake regardless. He’s nice like that. He gives kids free meals if they bring in their report cards. If it’s a good one, he’ll make a copy and put it on the “All-Star Wall.” If it’s bad, as long as they own up to it and promise to do better, he’ll still give them a meal.

“It’s gon’ take ’bout fifteen minutes,” he says.

That means sit and wait till your number is called. We find a table next to some white guys. You rarely see white people in Garden Heights, but when you do they’re usually at Reuben’s. The men watch the news on the box TV in a corner of the ceiling.

I munch on some of Kenya’s Hot Cheetos. They would taste much better with cheese sauce on them. “Has there been anything on the news about Khalil?”

She pays more attention to her phone. “Yeah, like I watch the news. I think I saw something on Twitter, though.”

I wait. Between a story about a bad car accident on the freeway and a garbage bag of live puppies that was found in a park, there’s a short story about an officer-involved shooting that is being investigated. They don’t even say Khalil’s name. Some bullshit.

We get our food and head back to the store. Right as we cross the street, a gray BMW pulls up beside us, bass thumping inside like the car has a heartbeat. The driver’s side window rolls down, smoke drifts out, and the male, three-hundred-pound version of Kenya smiles at us. “What up, queens?”

Kenya leans in through the window and kisses his cheek. “Hey, Daddy.”

“Hey, Starr-Starr,” he says. “Not gon’ say hey to your uncle?”

You ain’t my uncle, I wanna say. You ain’t shit to me. And if you touch my brother again, I’ll— “Hey, King,” I finally mumble.

His smile fades like he hears my thoughts. He puffs on a cigar and blows smoke from the corner of his mouth. Two tears are tattooed under his left eye. Two lives he’s taken. At least.

“I see y’all been to Reuben’s. Here.” He holds out two fat rolls of money. “Make up for whatever y’all spent.”

Kenya takes one easily, but I’m not touching that dirty money. “No thanks.”

“Go on, queen.” King winks. “Take some money from your godfather.”
“Nah, she good,” Daddy says.

He walks toward us. Daddy leans against the car window so he’s eye level with King and gives him one of those guy handshakes with so many movements you wonder how they remember it.

“Big May,” Kenya’s dad says with a grin. “What up, king?”

“Don’t call me that shit.” Daddy doesn’t say it loudly or angrily, but in the same way I would tell somebody not to put onions or mayo on my burger. Daddy once told me that King’s parents named him after the same gang he later joined, and that’s why a name is important. It defines you. King became a King Lord when he took his first breath.

“I was just giving my goddaughter some pocket change,” King says. “I heard what happened to her li’l homie. That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah. You know how it is,” Daddy says. “Po-po shoot first, ask questions later.”

“No doubt. They worse than us sometimes.” King chuckles.

“But ay? On some business shit, I got a package coming, need somewhere to keep it. Got too many eyes on Ilesha’s house.”

“I already told you that shit ain’t going down here.”

King rubs his beard. “Oh, okay. So folks get out the game, forget where they come from, forget that if it wasn’t for my money, they wouldn’t have their li’l store—”

“And if it wasn’t for me, you’d be locked up. Three years, state pen, remember that shit? I don’t owe you nothing.” Daddy leans onto the window and says, “But if you touch Seven again, I’ll owe you an ass whooping. Remember that, now that you done moved back in with his momma.”

King sucks his teeth. “Kenya, get in the car.”

“But Daddy—”

“I said get your ass in the car!”

Kenya mumbles “bye” to me. She goes around to the passenger’s side and hops in.

“A’ight, Big Mav. So it’s like that?” King says.

Daddy straightens up. “It’s exactly like that.”

“A’ight then. You just make sure your ass don’t get outta line. Ain’t no telling what I’ll do.”

The BMW peels out.
That night, Natasha tries to convince me to follow her to the fire hydrant, and Khalil begs me to go for a ride with him.

I force a smile, my lips trembling, and tell them I can't hang out. They keep asking, and I keep saying no.

Darkness crawls toward them. I try to warn them, but my voice doesn't work. The shadow swallows them up in an instant. Now it creeps toward me. I back away, only to find it behind me.

I wake up. My clock glows with the numbers: 11:05.

I suck in deep breaths. Sweat glues my tank top and basketball shorts to my skin. Sirens scream nearby, and Brickz and other dogs bark in response.

Sitting on the side of my bed, I rub my face, as if that'll wipe the nightmare away. No way I can go back to sleep. Not if it means seeing them again.

My throat is lined with sandpaper and aches for water. When my feet touch the cold floor, goose bumps pop up all over me. Daddy always has the air conditioning on high in the spring and summer, turning the house into a meat locker. The rest of us shiver our butts off, but he enjoys it, saying, "A li'l cold never hurt nobody." A lie.

I drag myself down the hall. Halfway to the kitchen I hear Momma say, "Why can't they wait? She just saw one of her best friends die. She doesn't need to relive that right now."

I stop. Light from the kitchen stretches into the hallway.

"We have to investigate, Lisa," says a second voice. Uncle Carlos, Momma's older brother. "We want the truth as much as anyone."

"You mean y'all wanna justify what that pig did," Daddy says. "Investigate my ass."

"Maverick, don't make this something it's not," Uncle Carlos says.

"A sixteen-year-old black boy is dead because a white cop killed him. What else could it be?"

"Shhht!" Momma hisses. "Keep it down. Starr had the hardest time falling asleep."

Uncle Carlos says something, but it's too low for me to hear. I inch closer.

"This isn't about black or white," he says.

"Bullshit," says Daddy. "If this was out in Riverton Hills
and his name was Richie, we wouldn’t be having this conversa-
tion.”

“I heard he was a drug dealer,” says Uncle Carlos.
“And that makes it okay?” Daddy asks.
“I didn’t say it did, but it could explain Brian’s decision if
he felt threatened.”

A “no” lodges in my throat, aching to be yelled out. Khalil
wasn’t a threat that night.

And what made the cop think he was a drug dealer?
Wait. Brian. That’s One-Fifteen’s name?
“Oh, so you know him,” Daddy mocks. “I ain’t surprised.”
“He’s a colleague, yes and a good guy, believe it or not. I’m
sure this is hard on him. Who knows what he was thinking at
the time?”

“You said it yourself, he thought Khalil was a drug dealer,”
looking at Khalil? Explain that, Detective.”

Silence.

“Why was she even in the car with a drug dealer?” Uncle
Carlos asks. “Lisa, I keep telling you, you need to move her and
Sekani out of this neighborhood. It’s poisonous.”
“I’ve been thinking about it.”

“And we’re not going anywhere,” Daddy says.

“Maverick, she’s seen two of her friends get killed,”
Momma says. “Two! And she’s only sixteen.”

“And one was at the hands of a person who was supposed
to protect her! What, you think if you live next door to them,
they’ll treat you different?”

“Why does it always have to be about race with you?” Uncle
Carlos asks. “Other races aren’t killing us nearly as much as
we’re killing ourselves.”

“Ne-gro, please. If I kill Tyrone, I’m going to prison. If a
cop kills me, he’s getting put on leave. Maybe.”

“You know what? There’s no point having this conversa-
tion with you,” Uncle Carlos says. “Will you at least consider
letting Starr speak to the detectives handling the case?”

“We should probably get her an attorney first, Carlos,”
Momma says.

“That’s not necessary right now,” he says.

“And it wasn’t necessary for that cop to pull the trigger,”
says Daddy. “You really think we gon’ let them talk to our
daughter and twist her words around because she doesn’t have
a lawyer?”

“Nobody’s going to twist her words around! I told you, we
want the truth to come out too.”

“Oh, we know the truth, that’s not what we want,” says
Daddy. “We want justice.”

Uncle Carlos sighs. “Lisa, the sooner she talks to the detec-
tives, the better. It will be a simple process. All she has to do is
answer some questions. That’s it. No need to spend money to
get an attorney just yet.”

“Frankly, Carlos, we don’t want anyone to know Starr
was there," Momma says. "She's scared. I am too. Who knows what's gonna happen?"

"I get that, but I assure you she'll be protected. If you don't trust the system, can you at least trust me?"

"I don't know," says Daddy. "Can we?"

"You know what, Maverick? I've just about had it with you—"

"You can get out my house then."

"It wouldn't even be your house if it wasn't for me and my mom!"

"Y'all stop!" Momma says.

I shift my weight, and goddamn if the floor doesn't creak, which is like sounding an alarm. Momma glances around the kitchen doorway and down the hall, straight at me. "Starr baby, what you doing up?"

Now I have no choice but to go to the kitchen. The three of them are sitting around the table, my parents in their pajamas and Uncle Carlos in some sweats and a hoodie.

"Hey, baby girl," he says. "We didn't wake you up, did we?"

"No," I say, sitting next to Momma. "I was already awake. Nightmares."

All of them look sympathetic even though I didn't say it for sympathy. I kinda hate sympathy.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Uncle Carlos.

"Sekani has a stomach bug and begged me to bring him home."
Uncle Carlos’s promises are guarantees, sometimes even more than my parents’. He never uses that word unless he absolutely means it.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.” Uncle Carlos comes over and gives me two kisses to my forehead, the way he’s done since he used to tuck me in. “Lisa, just bring her after school on Monday. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Momma gets up and hugs him. “Thank you.” She walks him down the hall, toward the front door. “Be safe, okay? And text me when you get home.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sounding like our momma,” he teases.

“Whatever. You just better text me—”

“Okay, okay. Good night.”

Momma comes back to the kitchen, pulling her robe together. “Munch, your father and I are visiting Ms. Rosalie in the morning instead of going to church. You’re welcome to come if you want.”

“Yeah,” Daddy says. “And ain’t no uncle pressuring you to go.”

Momma cuts him a quick glare, then turns to me. “So, you think you’re up for it, Starr?”

Talking to Ms. Rosalie may be harder than talking to the cops, honestly. But I owe it to Khalil to pay his grandmother a visit. She may not even know I was a witness to the shooting. If she somehow does and wants to know what happened, more than anybody she has the right to ask.

“Yeah. I’ll go.”

“We better find her an attorney before she talks to the detectives,” Daddy says.

“Maverick.” Momma sighs. “If Carlos doesn’t think it’s necessary just yet, I trust his judgment. Plus I’ll be with her the entire time.”

“Good thing somebody trusts his judgment,” says Daddy. “And you really been thinking again ’bout moving? We discussed this already.”

“Maverick, I’m not going there with you tonight.”

“How we gon’ change anything around here if we—”

“Mav-rick!” she says through gritted teeth. Whenever Momma breaks a name down like that, you better hope it’s not yours. “I said I’m not going there tonight.” She side-eyes him, waiting for the comeback. There isn’t one. “Try and get some sleep, baby,” she tells me, and kisses my cheek before going to their room.

Daddy goes to the refrigerator. “You want some grapes?”

“Yeah. How come you and Uncle Carlos always fighting?”

“’Cause he a buster.” He joins me at the table with a bowl of white grapes. “But for real, he ain’t never liked me. Thought I was a bad influence on your momma. Lisa was wild when I met her though, like all them other Catholic school girls.”

“I bet he was more protective of Momma than Seven is with me, huh?”
“Oh, yeah,” he says. “Carlos acted like he was Lisa’s daddy. When I got locked up, he moved y’all in with him and blocked my calls. Even took her to a divorce attorney.” He grins. “Still couldn’t get rid of me.”

I was three when Daddy went in prison, six when he got out. A lot of my memories include him, but a lot of my firsts don’t. First day of school, the first time I lost a tooth, the first time I rode a bike without training wheels. In those memories, Uncle Carlos’s face is where Daddy’s should’ve been. I think that’s the real reason they’re always fighting.

Daddy drums the mahogany surface of the dining table, making a thump-thump-thump beat. “The nightmares will go away after a while,” he says. “They’re always the worst right after.”

That’s how it was with Natasha. “How many people have you seen die?”

“Enough. Worst one was my cousin Andre.” His finger seems to instinctively trace the tattoo on his forearm—an A with a crown over it. “A drug deal turned into a robbery, and he got shot in the head twice. Right in front of me. A few months before you were born, in fact. That’s why I named you Starr.” He gives me a small smile. “My light during all that darkness.”

Daddy chomps on some grapes. “Don’t be scared ’bout Monday. Tell the cops the truth, and don’t let them put words in your mouth. God gave you a brain. You don’t need theirs. And remember that you didn’t do nothing wrong—the cop did.

Don’t let them make you think otherwise.”

Something’s bugging me. I wanted to ask Uncle Carlos, but I couldn’t for some reason. Daddy’s different though. While Uncle Carlos somehow keeps impossible promises, Daddy keeps it real with me. “You think the cops want Khalil to have justice?” I ask.

Thump-thump-thump. Thump . . . thump . . . thump. The truth casts a shadow over the kitchen—people like us in situations like this become hashtags, but they rarely get justice. I think we all wait for that one time though, that one time when it ends right.

Maybe this can be it.

“I don’t know,” Daddy says. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Sunday morning, we pull up to a small yellow house. Bright flowers bloom below the front porch. I used to sit with Khalil on that porch.

My parents and I hop out the truck. Daddy carries a foil-covered pan of lasagna that Momma made. Sekani claims he’s still not feeling good, so he stayed home. Seven’s there with him. I don’t buy this “sick” act though—Sekani always gets some kinda bug right as spring break ends.

Going up Ms. Rosalie’s walkway floods me with memories. I have scars tattooed on my arms and legs from falls on this concrete. One time I was on my scooter, and Khalil pushed me off ’cause I hadn’t given him a turn. When I got up, skin was
ANGIE THOMAS

missing from most of my knee. I never screamed so loud in my life.

We played hopscotch and jumped rope on this walkway too. Khalil never wanted to play at first, talking about how those were girls’ games. He always gave in when me and Natasha said the winner got a Freeze Cup—frozen Kool-Aid in a Styrofoam cup—or a pack of “Nileators,” a.k.a. Now and Laters. Ms. Rosalie was the neighborhood Candy Lady.

I was at her house almost as much as I was at my own. Momma and Ms. Rosalie’s youngest daughter, Tammy, were best friends growing up. When Momma got pregnant with me, she was in her senior year of high school and Nana put her out the house. Ms. Rosalie took her in until my parents eventually got an apartment of their own. Momma says Ms. Rosalie was one of her biggest supporters and cried at her high school graduation like it was her own daughter walking across the stage.

Three years later, Ms. Rosalie saw Momma and me at Wyatt’s—this was way before it became our store. She asked my mom how college was going. Momma told her that with Daddy in prison, she couldn’t afford daycare and that Nana wouldn’t take care of me 'cause I wasn’t her baby and therefore I wasn’t her problem. So Momma was thinking about dropping out. Ms. Rosalie told her to bring me to her house the next day and that she better not say a word about paying her. She babysat me and later Sekani the whole time Momma was in school.

Momma knocks on the door, rattling the screen. Ms.

Tammy answers in a head wrap, T-shirt, and sweatpants. She unhooks the locks, hollering back, “Maverick, Lisa, and Starr are here, Ma.”

The living room looks just like it did when Khalil and I played hide-and-seek in it. There’s still plastic on the sofa and recliner. If you sit on them too long in the summer while wearing shorts, the plastic nearly glues to your legs.

“Hey, Tammy girl,” Momma says, and they hug long and hard. “How you doing?”

“I’m hanging in there.” Ms. Tammy hugs Daddy, then me. “Just hate that this is the reason I had to come home.”

It’s so weird looking at Ms. Tammy. She looks the way Khalil’s momma, Ms. Brenda, would look if Ms. Brenda wasn’t on crack. A lot like Khalil. Same hazel eyes and dimples. One time Khalil said he wished Ms. Tammy was his momma instead so he could live in New York with her. I used to joke and tell him she didn’t have time for him. I wish I never said that.

“Where you want me to put this lasagna, Tam?” Daddy asks her.

“In the refrigerator, if you can find room,” she says, as he heads toward the kitchen. “Momma said folks brought food all day yesterday. They were still bringing it when I got here last night. Seems like the whole neighborhood has stopped by.”

“That’s the Garden for you,” Momma says. “If folks can’t do anything else, they’ll cook.”

“You ain’t ever lied.” Ms. Tammy motions to the sofa.
“Y’all, have a seat.”

Momma and I sit down, and Daddy comes back and joins us. Ms. Tammy takes the recliner that Ms. Rosalie usually sits in. She gives me a sad smile. “Starr, you know, you sure have grown since the last time I saw you. You and Khalil both grew up so—”

Her voice cracks. Momma reaches over and pats her knee. Ms. Tammy a takes a deep breath and smiles at me again. “It’s good to see you, baby.”

“We know Ms. Rosalie gon’ tell us she fine, Tam,” Daddy says, “but how she really doing?”

“We’re taking one day at a time. The chemo’s working, thankfully. I hope I can convince her to move in with me. That way I can make sure she’s getting her prescriptions.” She sighs through her nose. “I had no idea Momma was struggling like she was. I didn’t even know she’d lost her job. You know how she is. Never wanna ask for help.”

“What about Ms. Brenda?” I ask. I have to. Khalil would’ve.

“I don’t know, Starr. Bren . . . that’s complicated. We haven’t seen her since we got the news. Don’t know where she is. If we do find her though . . . I don’t know what we’ll do.”

“I can help you find a rehab facility near you,” Momma says. “She’s gotta wanna get clean though.”

Ms. Tammy nods. “And that’s the problem. But I think . . . I think this will either push her to finally get help or push her over the edge. I hope it’s the former.”

Cameron holds his grandma’s hand as he leads her into the living room like she’s the queen of the world in a housecoat. She looks thinner, but strong for somebody going through chemo and all of this. A scarf wrapped around her head adds to her majesty—an African queen, and we’re blessed to be in her presence.

The rest of us stand.

Momma hugs Cameron and kisses one of his chubby cheeks. Khalil called him Chipmunk because of them, but he’d check anybody stupid enough to call his little brother fat.

Daddy gives Cameron a palm-slap that ends in a hug. “What’s up, man? You okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

A big, wide smile spreads across Ms. Rosalie’s face. She holds her arms out, and I walk into the most heartfelt hug I’ve ever gotten from somebody who’s not related to me. There’s not any sympathy in it either. Just love and strength. I guess she knows I need some of both.

“My baby,” she says. She pulls back and looks at me, tears brimming in her eyes. “Went and grew up on me.”

She hugs my parents too. Ms. Tammy lets her have the recliner. Ms. Rosalie pats the end of the sofa closest to her, so I sit there. She holds my hand and rubs her thumb along the top of it.

“Mmm,” she says. “Mmm!”

It’s like my hand is telling her a story, and she’s responding. She listens to it for a while, then says, “I’m so glad you came...
over. I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I say what I’m supposed to.

“You were the very best friend that boy ever had.”

This time I can’t say what I’m supposed to. “Ms. Rosalie, we weren’t as close—”

“I don’t care, baby,” she says. “Khalil never had another friend like you. I know that for a fact.”

I swallow. “Yes, ma’am.”

“The police told me you were the one with him when it happened.”

So she knows. “Yes, ma’am.”

I’m standing on a track, watching the train barrel toward me, and I tense up and wait for the impact, the moment she asks what happened.

But the train shifts to another track. “Maverick, he wanted to talk to you. He wanted your help.”

Daddy straightens up. “For real?”

“Uh-huh. He was selling that stuff.”

Something leaves me. I mean, I kinda figured it, but to know it’s the truth . . .

This hurts.

But I swear I wanna cuss Khalil out. How he could sell the very stuff that took his momma from him? Did he realize that he was taking somebody else’s momma from them?

Did he realize that if he does become a hashtag, some people will only see him as a drug dealer?

He was so much more than that.

“But he wanted to stop,” Ms. Rosalie says. “He told me, ‘Grandma, I can’t stay in this. Mr. Maverick said it only leads to two things, the grave or prison, and I ain’t trying to see either.’ He respected you, Maverick. A lot. You were the father he never had.”

I can’t explain it, but something leaves Daddy too. His eyes dim, and he nods. Momma rubs his back.

“I tried to talk some sense into him,” Ms. Rosalie says, “but this neighborhood makes young men deaf to their elders. The money part didn’t help. He was going around here, paying bills, buying sneakers and mess. But I know he remembered the things you told him over the years, Maverick, and that gave me a lotta faith.”

“I keep thinking if only he had another day or——” Ms. Rosalie covers her trembling lips. Ms. Tammy starts for her, but she says, “I’m okay, Tam.” She looks at me. “I’m happy he wasn’t alone, but I’m even happier you were with him. That’s all I need to know. Don’t need details, nothing else. Knowing you were with him is good enough.”

Like Daddy, all I can do is nod.

But as I hold Khalil’s grandma’s hand, I see the anguish in her eyes. His little brother can’t smile anymore. So what if people end up thinking he was a thug and never cared? We care.

Khalil matters to us, not the stuff he did. Forget everybody else.

Momma leans across me and sets an envelope in Ms. Rosalie’s lap. “We want you to have that.”
Ms. Rosalie opens it, and I catch a glimpse of a whole lot of money inside. “What in the world? Y'all know I can't take this.”

“Yes, you can,” Daddy says. “We ain't forgot how you kept Starr and Sekani for us. We weren't 'bout to let you be empty-handed.”

“And we know y'all are trying to pay for the funeral,” Momma says. “Hopefully that'll help. Plus, we're raising money around the neighborhood too. So don't you worry about a thing.”

Ms. Rosalie wipes a new set of tears from her eyes. “I'm gonna pay y'all back every penny.”

“Did we say you had to pay us back?” Daddy asks. “You focus on getting better, a'ight? And if you give us any money, we giving it right back, God's my witness.”

There are a lot more tears and hugs. Ms. Rosalie gives me a Freeze Cup for the road, red syrup glistening on the top. She always makes them extra sweet.

As we leave, I remember how Khalil used to run up to the car when I was about to go, the sun shining on the grease lines that separated his cornrows. The glimmer in his eyes would be just as bright. He'd knock on the window, I'd let it down, and he'd say with a snaggletooth grin, “See you later, alligator.”

Back then I'd giggle behind my own snaggletooth. Now I tear up. Good-byes hurt the most when the other person's already gone. I imagine him standing at my window, and I smile for his sake. “After a while, crocodile.”

On Monday, the day I'm supposed to talk to the detectives, I'm crying out of nowhere, hunched over my bed as the iron in my hand spits out steam. Momma takes it before I burn the Williamson crest on my polo.

She rubs my shoulder. “Let it out, Munch.”

We have a quiet breakfast at the kitchen table without Seven. He spent the night at his momma's house. I pick at my waffles. Just thinking about going into that station with all those cops makes me wanna puke. Food would make it worse.

After breakfast, we join hands in the living room like we always do, under the framed poster of the Ten-Point Program, and Daddy leads us in prayer.

“Black Jesus, watch over my babies today,” he says. “Keep them safe, steer them from wrong, and help them recognize