ELEVEN

Monday morning, I know something is up when I first step into Williamson. Folks are quiet as hell. Well, whispering really, in little huddles in the halls and the atrium like they’re discussing plays during a basketball game.

Hailey and Maya find me before I find them. “Did you get the text?” Hailey asks.

That’s the first thing she says. No hey or anything. I still don’t have my phone, so I’m like, “What text?”

She shows me hers. There’s a big group text with about a hundred names on it. Hailey’s older brother, Remy, sent out the first message.

Protesting today @ 1st period.
Then curly-haired, dimpled Luke replied:
Hell yeah. Free day. I’m game.

And Remy came back with:
That’s the point, dumbass.

It’s like somebody hit a pause button on my heart. “They’re protesting for Khalil?”

“Yeah,” Hailey says, all giddy and shit. “Perfect timing too. I so did not study for that English exam. This is, like, the first time Remy actually came up with a good idea to get out of class. I mean, it’s kinda messed up that we’re protesting a drug dealer’s death, but—”

All my Williamson rules go out the door, and Starr from Garden Heights shows up. “What the fuck that got to do with it?”

Their mouths open into perfectly shaped O’s. “Like, I mean . . . if he was a drug dealer,” Hailey says, “that explains why . . .”

“He got killed even though he wasn’t doing shit? So it’s cool he got killed? But I thought you were protesting it?”

“We are! God, lighten up, Starr,” she says. “I thought you’d be all over this, considering your obsession on Tumblr lately.”

“You know what?” I say, one second from really going off.
“Leave me alone. Have fun in your little protest.”

I wanna fight every person I pass, Floyd Mayweather style. They’re so damn excited about getting a day off. Khalil’s in a grave. He can’t get a day off from that shit. I live it every single day too.

In class I toss my backpack on the floor and throw myself
I wanna puke and scream and cry.
My classmates stampede toward the door. Maya’s the last one out. She glances back at me then at Hailey who motions her to come on. Maya follows her out.

I think I’m done following Hailey.
In the hall, chants for Khalil go off like sirens. Unlike Hailey, some of them may not care that he was a drug dealer. They might be almost as upset as I am. But since I know why Remy started this protest, I stay in my seat.

Chris does too for some reason. His desk scrapes the floor as it scoots closer to mine until they touch. He brushes my tears with his thumb.

“You knew him, didn’t you?” he says.
I nod.

“Oh,” says Mr. Warren. “I am so sorry, Starr. You don’t have to—you can call your parents, you know?”
I wipe my face. The last thing I want is Momma making a fuss because I can’t handle all this. Worse, I don’t wanna be unable to handle it. “Can you continue with the lesson, sir?” I ask. “The distraction would be nice.”
He smiles sadly and does as I ask.

For the rest of the day, sometimes Chris and I are the only ones in our classes. Sometimes one or two other people join us. People go out of their way to tell me they think Khalil’s death is bullshit, but that Remy’s reason for protesting is bullshit too. I mean, this sophomore girl comes up to me in the hall and
explains that she supports the cause but decided to go back to class after she heard why they were really protesting.

They act like I’m the official representative of the black race and they owe me an explanation. I think I understand though. If I sit out a protest, I’m making a statement, but if they sit out a protest, they look racist.

At lunch, Chris and I head to our table near the vending machines. Jess with her perfect pixie cut is the only one there, eating cheese fries and reading her phone.

“Hey?” I ask more than say. I’m surprised she’s here.

“S’up?” She nods. “Have a seat. As you can see, there’s plenty of room.”

I sit beside her, and Chris sits on the other side of me. Jess and I have played basketball together for three years, and she’s put her head on my shoulder for two of them, but I’m ashamed to admit I don’t know much about her. I do know she’s a senior, her parents are attorneys, and she works at a bookstore. I didn’t know that she’d skip the protest.

I guess I’m staring at her hard, because she says, “I don’t use dead people to get out of class.”

If I wasn’t straight I would totally date her for saying that. This time I rest my head on her shoulder.

She pats my hair and says, “White people do stupid shit sometimes.”

Jess is white.

Seven and Layla join us with their trays. Seven holds his fist out to me. I bump it.

“Sev-en,” Jess says, and they fist-bump too. I had no idea they were cool like that. “I take it we’re protesting the ‘Get Out of Class’ protest?”


Seven and I get Sekani after school, and he won’t shut up about the news cameras he saw from his classroom window, because he’s Sekani and he came into this world looking for a camera. I have too many selfies of him on my phone giving the “light skin face,” his eyes squinted and eyebrows raised.

“Are y’all gonna be on the news?” he asks.

“Nah,” says Seven. “Don’t need to be.”

We could go home, lock the door, and fight over the TV like we always do, or we could help Daddy at the store. We go to the store.

Daddy stands in the doorway, watching a reporter and camera operator set up in front of Mr. Lewis’s shop. Of course, when Sekani sees the camera, he says, “Ooh, I wanna be on TV!”

“Shut up,” I say. “No you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. You don’t know what I want!”

The car stops, and Sekani pushes my seat forward, sending my chin into the dashboard as he jumps out. “Daddy, I wanna be on TV!”
I rub my chin. His hyper butt is gonna kill me one day. Daddy holds Sekani by the shoulders. “Calm down, man. You not gon’ be on TV.”

“What’s going on?” Seven asks when we get out.

“Some cops got jumped around the corner,” Daddy says, one arm around Sekani’s chest to keep him still.

“Jumped?” I say.

“Yeah. They pulled them out their patrol car and stomped them. Gray Boys.”

The code name for King Lords. Damn.

“I heard what happened at y’all school,” Daddy says.

“Everything cool?”

“Yeah,” I give the easy answer. “We’re good.”

Mr. Lewis adjusts his clothes and runs a hand over his Afro. The reporter says something, and he lets out a belly-jiggling laugh.

“What this fool ’bout to say?” Daddy wonders.

“We go live in five,” says the camera operator, and all I can think is, Please don’t put Mr. Lewis on live TV. “Four, three, two, one.”

“That’s right, Joe,” the reporter says. “I’m here with Mr. Cedric Lewis Jr., who witnessed the incident involving the officers today. Can you tell us what you saw, Mr. Lewis?”

“He ain’t witness nothing,” Daddy tells us. “Was in his shop the whole time. I told him what happened.”

“I shall can,” Mr. Lewis says. “Them boys pulled those officers out their car. They weren’t doing nothing either. Just sitting there and got beat like dogs. Ridiculous! You hear me? Re-damn-diculous!”

Somebody’s gonna turn Mr. Lewis into a meme. He’s making a fool out of himself and doesn’t even know it.

“Do you think that it was retaliation for the Khalil Harris case?” the reporter asks.

“I shall do! Which is stupid. These thugs been terrorizing Garden Heights for years, how they gon’ get mad now? What, ’cause they didn’t kill him themselves? The president and all’a them searching for terrorists, but I’ll name one right now they can come get.”

“Don’t do it, Mr. Lewis,” Daddy prays. “Don’t do it.”

Of course, he does. “His name King, and he live right here in Garden Heights. Probably the biggest drug dealer in the city. He over that King Lords gang. Come get him if you wanna get somebody. Wasn’t nobody but his boys who did that to them cops anyway. We sick of this! Somebody march ’bout that!”

Daddy covers Sekani’s ears. Every cuss word that follows equals a dollar in Sekani’s jar if he hears it. “Shit,” Daddy hisses. “Shit, shit, shit. This mothah—”

“He snitched,” says Seven.


Daddy keeps saying, “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Do you think that the curfew the mayor announced today will prevent incidents like this?” the reporter asks Mr. Lewis.
I look at Daddy. “What curfew?”

He takes his hands off Sekani’s ears. “Every business in Garden Heights gotta close by nine. And nobody can be in the streets after ten. Lights out, like in prison.”

“So you’ll be home tonight, Daddy?” Sekani asks.

Daddy smiles and pulls him closer. “Yeah, man. After you do your homework, I can show you a thang or two on Madden.”

The reporter wraps up her interview. Daddy waits until she and the camera operator leave and then goes over to Mr. Lewis.

“You crazy?” he asks.

“What? ’Cause I told the truth?” Mr. Lewis says.

“Man, you can’t be going on live TV, snitching like that. You a dead man walking, you know that, right?”

“I ain’t scared of that nigga!” Mr. Lewis says real loud, for everybody to hear. “You scared of him?”

“Nah, but I know how the game work.”

“I’m too old for games! You oughta be too!”

“Mr. Lewis, listen—”

“Nah, you listen here, boy. I fought a war, came back, and fought one here. See this?” He lifts up his pants leg, revealing a plaid sock over a prosthesis. “Lost it in the war. This right here.” He lifts his shirt to his underarm. There’s a thin pink scar stretching from his back to his swollen belly. “Got it after some white boys cut me ’cause I drank from their fountain.” He lets his shirt fall down. “I done faced a whole lot worse than some so-called King. Ain’t nothing he can do but kill me, and if that’s how I gotta go for speaking the truth, that’s how I gotta go.”

“You don’t get it,” Daddy says.

“Yeah I do. Hell, I get you. Walking around here, claiming you ain’t a gangster no more, claiming you trying to change stuff, but still following all’a that ‘don’t snitch’ mess. And you teaching them kids the same thing, ain’t you? King still controlling your dumb ass, and you too stupid to realize it.”

“Stupid? How you gon’ call me stupid when you the one snitching on live TV!”

A familiar whoop-whoop sound alarms us.

Oh God.

The patrol car with flashing lights cruises down the street. It stops next to Daddy and Mr. Lewis.

Two officers get out. One black, one white. Their hands linger too close to the guns at their waists.

No, no, no.

“We got a problem here?” the black one asks, looking squarely at Daddy. He’s bald just like Daddy, but older, taller, bigger.

“No, sir, officer,” Daddy says. His hands that were once in his jeans pockets are visible at his sides.

“You sure about that?” the younger white one asks. “It didn’t seem that way to us.”

“We were just talking, officers,” Mr. Lewis says, much softer than he was minutes ago. His hands are at his sides too. His parents must’ve had the talk with him when he was twelve.
“To me it looks like this young man was harassing you, sir,” the black one says, still looking at Daddy. He hasn’t looked at Mr. Lewis yet. I wonder if it’s because Mr. Lewis isn’t wearing an NWA T-shirt. Or because there aren’t tattoos all on his arms. Or because he’s not wearing somewhat baggy jeans and a backwards cap.

“You got some ID on you?” the black cop asks Daddy.

“Sir, I was about to go back to my store—”

“I said do you have some ID on you?”

My hands shake. Breakfast, lunch, and everything else churns in my stomach, ready to come back up my throat. They’re gonna take Daddy from me.

“What’s going on?”

I turn around. Tim, Mr. Reuben’s nephew, walks over to us. People have stopped on the sidewalk across the street.

“I’m gonna reach for my ID,” Daddy says. “It’s in my back pocket. A’ight?”

“Daddy—” I say.

Daddy keeps his eyes on the officer. “Y’all, go in the store, a’ight? It’s okay.”

We don’t move though.

Daddy’s hand slowly goes to his back pocket, and I look from his hands to theirs, watching to see if they’re gonna make a move for their guns.

Daddy removes his wallet, the leather one I bought him for Father’s Day with his initials embossed on it. He shows it to them.

“See? My ID is in here.”

His voice has never sounded so small.

The black officer takes the wallet and opens it. “Oh,” he says. “Maverick Carter.”

He exchanges a look with his partner.

Both of them look at me.

My heart stops.

They’ve realized I’m the witness.

There must be a file that lists my parents’ names on it. Or the detectives blabbed, and now everyone at the station knows our names. Or they could’ve gotten it from Uncle Carlos somehow. I don’t know how it happened, but it happened. And if something happens to Daddy . . .

The black officer looks at him. “Get on the ground, hands behind your back.”

“But—”

“On the ground, face-down!” he yells. “Now!”

Daddy looks at us. His expression apologizes for the fact that we have to see this.

He gets down on one knee and lowers himself to the ground, face-down. His hands go behind his back, and his fingers interlock.

Where’s that camera operator now? Why can’t this be on the news?

“Now, wait a minute, Officer,” Mr. Lewis says. “Me and him were just talking.”

“Sir, go inside,” the white cop tells him.
“But he didn’t do anything!” Seven says.

“Boy, go inside!” the black cop says.

“No! That’s my father, and—”

“Seven!” Daddy yells.

Even though he’s lying on the concrete, there’s enough authority in his voice to make Seven shut up.

The black officer checks Daddy while his partner glances around at all of the onlookers. There’s quite a few of us now: Ms. Yvette and a couple of her clients stand in her doorway, towels around the clients’ shoulders. A car has stopped in the street.

“Everyone, go about your own business,” the white one says.

“No, sir,” says Tim. “This is our business.”

The black cop keeps his knee on Daddy’s back as he searches him. He pats him down once, twice, three times, just like One-Fifteen did Khalil. Nothing.

“Larry,” the white cop says.

The black one, who must be Larry, looks up at him, then at all the people who have gathered around.

Larry takes his knee off Daddy’s back and stands. “Get up,” he says.

Slowly, Daddy gets to his feet.

Larry glances at me. Bile pools in my mouth. He turns to Daddy and says, “I’m keeping an eye on you, boy. Remember that.”

Daddy’s jaw looks rock hard.

The cops drive off. The car that had stopped in the street

leaves, and all of the onlookers go on about their business. One person hollers out, “It’s all right, Maverick.”

Daddy looks at the sky and blinks the way I do when I don’t wanna cry. He clenches and unclenches his hands.

Mr. Lewis touches his back. “C’mon, son.”

He guides Daddy our way, but they pass us and go into the store. Tim follows them.

“Why did they do Daddy like that?” Sekani asks softly. He looks at me and Seven with tears in his eyes.

Seven wraps an arm around him. “I don’t know, man.” I know.

I go in the store.

DeVante leans against a broom near the cash register, wearing one of those ugly green aprons Daddy tries to make me and Seven wear when we work in the store.

There’s a pang in my chest. Khalil wore one too.

DeVante’s talking to Kenya as she holds a basket full of groceries. When the bell on the door clangs behind me, both of them look my way.

“Yo, what happened?” DeVante asks.

“Was that the cops outside?” says Kenya.

From here I see Mr. Lewis and Tim standing in the doorway of Daddy’s office. He must be in there.

“Yeah,” I answer Kenya, heading toward the back. Kenya and DeVante follow me, asking about fifty million questions that I don’t have time to answer.

Papers are scattered all on the office floor. Daddy’s hunched
over his desk, his back moving up and down with each heavy breath.

He pounds the desk. “Fuck!”

Daddy once told me there’s a rage passed down to every black man from his ancestors, born the moment they couldn’t stop the slave masters from hurting their families. Daddy also said there’s nothing more dangerous than when that rage is activated.

“Let it out, son,” Mr. Lewis tells him.

“Fuck them pigs, man,” Tim says. “They only did that shit ‘cause they know ‘bout Starr.”

Wait. What?

Daddy glances over his shoulder. His eyes are puffy and wet, like he’s been crying. “The hell you talking ‘bout, Tim?”

“One of the homeboys saw you, Lisa, and your baby girl getting out an ambulance at the crime scene that night,” Tim says. “Word spread around the neighborhood, and folks think she’s the witness they been talking ‘bout on the news.”

Oh.

Shit.

“Starr, go ring Kenya up,” Daddy says. “Vante, finish them floors.”

I head for the cash register, passing Seven and Sekani. The neighborhood knows.

I ring Kenya up, my stomach knotted the whole time. If the neighborhood knows, it won’t be long until people outside of Garden Heights know. And then what?

“You rang that up twice,” Kenya says.

“Huh?”

“The milk. You rang it up twice, Starr.”

“Oh.”

I cancel one of the milks and put the carton into a bag. Kenya’s probably cooking for herself and Lyric tonight. She does that sometimes. I ring up the rest of her stuff, take her money, and hand her the change.

She stares at me a second, then says, “Were you really the one with him?”

My throat is thick. “Does it matter?”

“Yeah, it matters. Why you keeping quiet ‘bout it? Like you hiding or something.”

“Don’t say it that way.”

“But it is that way. Right?”

I sigh. “Kenya, stop. You don’t understand, all right?”

Kenya folds her arms. “What’s to understand?”

“A lot!” I don’t mean to yell, but damn. “I can’t go around telling people that shit.”

“Why not?”

“Because! You ain’t see what the cops just did to my dad ‘cause they know I’m the witness.”

“So you gon’ let the police stop you from speaking out for Khalil? I thought you cared about him way more than that.”

“I do.” I care more than she may ever know. “I already talked to the cops, Kenya. Nothing happened. What else am I supposed to do?”
“Go on TV or something, I don’t know,” she says. “Tell everybody what really happened that night. They’re not even giving his side of the story. You’re letting them trash-talk him—”

“Excuse— How the hell am I letting them do anything?”

“You hear all the stuff they’re saying ’bout him on the news, calling him a thug and stuff, and you know that ain’t Khalil. I bet if he was one of your private school friends, you’d be all on TV, defending him and shit.”

“Are you for real?”

“Hell yeah,” she says. “You dropped him for them bougie-ass kids, and you know it. You probably would’ve dropped me if I didn’t come around ’cause of my brother.”

“That’s not true!”

“You sure?”

I’m not.

Kenya shakes her head. “Fucked-up part about this? The Khalil I know would’ve jumped on TV in a hot second and told everybody what happened that night if it meant defending you. And you can’t do the same for him.”

It’s a verbal slap. The worst kind too, because it’s the truth.

Kenya gets her bags. “I’m just saying, Starr. If I could change what happens at my house with my momma and daddy, I would. Here you are, with a chance to help change what happens in our whole neighborhood, and you staying quiet. Like a coward.”

Kenya leaves. Tim and Mr. Lewis aren’t far behind her. Tim

gives me the black power fist on his way out. I don’t deserve it though.

I head to Daddy’s office. Seven’s standing in the doorway, and Daddy’s sitting on his desk. Sekani’s next to him, nodding along to whatever Daddy’s saying but looking sad. Reminds me of the time Daddy and Momma had the talk with me. Guess Daddy decided not to wait until Sekani’s twelve.

Daddy sees me. “Sev, go cover the cash register. Take Sekani with you. ’Bout time he learned.”

“Aww, man,” Sekani groans. Don’t blame him. The more you learn to do at the store, the more you’re expected to do at the store.

Daddy pats the now-empty spot beside him on the desk. I hop up on it. His office has just enough space for the desk and a file cabinet. Framed photographs crowd the walls, like the one of him and Momma at the courthouse the day they got married, her belly (a.k.a. me) big and round; pictures of me and my brothers as babies, and this one picture from about seven years ago when my parents took the three of us to the mall for one of those J. C. Penney family portraits. They dressed alike in baseball jerseys, baggy jeans, and Timberlands. Tacky.

“You a’ight?” Daddy asks.

“Are you?”

“I will be,” he says. “Just hate that you and your brothers had to see that shit.”

“They only did it ’cause of me.”

“Nah, baby. They started that before they knew ’bout you.”
“But that didn’t help.” I stare at my J’s as I kick my feet back and forth. “Kenya called me a coward for not speaking out.”

“She didn’t mean it. She going through a lot, that’s all. King throwing Iesha around like a rag doll every single night.”

“But she’s right.” My voice cracks. I’m this close to crying. “I am a coward. After seeing what they did to you, I don’t wanna say shit now.”

“Hey.” Daddy takes my chin so I have no choice but to look at him. “Don’t fall for that trap. That’s what they want. If you don’t wanna speak out, that’s up to you, but don’t let it be because you’re scared of them. Who do I tell you that you have to fear?”

“Nobody but God. And you and Momma. Especially Momma when she’s extremely pissed.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. The list ends there. You ain’t got nothing or nobody else to fear. You see this?” He rolls up his shirt sleeve, revealing the tattoo of my baby picture on his upper arm. “What it say at the bottom?”

“Something to live for, something to die for,” I say, without really looking. I’ve seen it my whole life.

“Exactly. You and your brothers are something to live for, and something to die for, and I’ll do whatever I gotta do to protect you.” He kisses my forehead. “If you’re ready to talk, baby, talk. I got your back.”

I’m luring Brickz inside when it passes out front.

I watch it crawl down the street for the longest time till I get the sense to alert somebody. “Daddy!”

He looks up from pulling weeds around his bell peppers. “Are they for real with that?”

The tank resembles the ones they show on the news when talking about war in the Middle East. It’s the size of two Hummers. The blue-and-white lights on the front make the street almost as bright as it is in daytime. An officer is positioned on top, wearing a vest and a helmet. He points his rifle ahead.

A voice booms from the armored vehicle, “All persons found violating the curfew will be subject to arrest.”

Daddy pulls more weeds. “Some bullshit.”

Brickz follows the piece of bologna I dangle in front of him
all the way to his spot in the kitchen. He sits there all content, chomping on it and the rest of his food. Brickz won’t act crazy as long as Daddy’s home.

All of us are kinda like Brickz, really. Daddy being home means Momma won’t sit up all night, Sekani won’t flinch all the time, and Seven won’t have to be the man of the house. I’ll sleep better too.

Daddy comes in, dusting caked dirt off his hands. “Them roses dying. Brickz, you been pissing on my roses?”

Brickz’s head perks up. He locks his eyes with Daddy’s but eventually lowers his head.

“I bet’ not catch you doing it,” Daddy says. “Or we gon’ have a problem.”

Brickz lowers his eyes too.

I grab a paper towel and a slice of pizza from the box on the counter. This is like my fourth slice tonight. Momma bought two huge pies from Sal’s on the other side of the freeway. Italians own it, so the pizza is thin, herby (is that a word?), and good.

“You finished your homework?” Daddy asks.

“Yes.” A lie.

He washes his hands at the kitchen sink. “Got any tests this week?”

“Trig on Friday.”

“You studied for it?”

“Yes.” Another lie.

“Good.” He gets the grapes out the refrigerator. “You still got that old laptop? The one you had before we bought you that expensive-ass fruit one?”

I laugh. “It’s an Apple MacBook, Daddy.”

“It damn sure wasn’t the price of an apple. Anyway, you got the old one?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Give it to Seven. Tell him to look over it and make sure it’s a’ight. I want DeVante to have it.”

“Why?”

“You pay bills?”

“No.”

“Then I ain’t gotta answer that.”

That’s how he gets out of almost every argument with me. I should buy one of those cheap magazine subscriptions and say, “Yeah, I pay a bill, and what?” It won’t matter though.

I head to my room after I finish my pizza. Daddy’s already gone to his and Momma’s room. Their TV’s on, and they’re both lying on their stomachs on the bed, one of her legs on his as she types on her laptop. It’s oddly adorable. Sometimes I watch them to get an idea of what I want one day.

“You still mad at me ’bout DeVante?” Daddy asks her. She doesn’t answer, keeping her eyes on her laptop. He scrunches up his nose and gets all in her face. “You still mad at me? Huh? You still mad at me?”

She laughs and playfully pushes at him. “Move, boy. No,
I'm not mad at you. Now give me a grape.”

He grins and feeds her a grape, and I just can't. The cuteness is too much. Yeah, they're my parents, but they're my OTP. Seriously.

Daddy watches whatever she's doing on the computer, feeding her a grape every time he eats one. She's probably uploading the latest family snapshots on Facebook for our out-of-town relatives. With everything that's going on, what can she say? “Sekani saw cops harass his daddy, but he's doing so well in school. #ProudMom.” Or, “Starr saw her best friend die, keeps her in your prayers, but my baby made the honor roll again. #Blessed.” Or even, “Tanks are rolling by outside, but Seven's been accepted into six colleges so far. #HeIsGoingPlaces.”

I go to my room. Both my old and new laptops are on my desk, which is a mess. There's a huge pair of Daddy's Jordans next to my old laptop. The yellowed bottoms of the sneakers face the lamp, and a layer of Saran Wrap protects my concoction of detergent and toothpaste that'll eventually clean them. Watching yellowed soles turn icy again is as satisfying as squeezing a blackhead and getting all the gunk out. Ah-maz-ing.

According to the lie I told Daddy, my homework is supposed to be done, but I've been on a “Tumblr break,” a.k.a. I haven't started my homework and have spent the last two hours on Tumblr. I started a new blog—The Khalil I Know. It doesn't have my name on it, just pictures of Khalil. In the first one he's thirteen with an Afro. Uncle Carlos took us to a ranch so we could “get a taste of country life,” and Khalil's looking side-eyed at a horse that's beside him. I remember him saying, “If this thing makes a wrong move, I'm running!”

On Tumblr, I captioned the picture: “The Khalil I know was afraid of animals.” I tagged it with his name. One person liked it and reblogged it. Then another and another.

That made me post more pictures, like one of us in a bathtub when we were four. You can't see our private parts because of all the suds, and I'm looking away from the camera. Ms. Rosalie's sitting on the side of the tub, beaming at us, and Khalil's beaming right back at her. I wrote, “The Khalil I know loved bubble baths almost as much as he loved his grandma.”

In just two hours, hundreds of people have liked and reblogged the pictures. I know it's not the same as getting on the news like Kenya said, but I hope it helps. It's helping me at least.

Other people posted about Khalil, uploaded artwork of him, posted pictures of him that they show on the news. I think I've reblogged every single one.

Funny though: somebody posted a video clip of Tupac from back in the day. Okay, so every video clip of Tupac is from back in the day. He's got a little kid on his lap and is wearing a backwards snapback that would be fly now. He explains Thug Life like Khalil said he did—The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody. 'Pac spells out “Fucks” because that kid is looking dead in his face. When Khalil told me what it meant I kinda understood it. I really understand it now.
I grab my old laptop when my phone buzzes on my desk. Momma returned it earlier—hallelujah, thank you, Black Jesus. She said it’s only in case there’s another situation at school. I got it back though, don’t really care why. I’m hoping it’s a text from Kenya. I sent her the link to my new Tumblr earlier. Thought she’d like to see it since she kinda pushed me to do it.

But it’s Chris. He took note from Seven with his all-caps texts:

OMG!
THIS FRESH PRINCE EPISODE
WILL’S DAD DIDN’T TAKE HIM WITH HIM
THE ASSHOLE CAME BACK AND LEFT HIM AGAIN.
NOW HE’S HAVING A BREAKDOWN WITH UNCLE PHIL
MY EYES ARE SWEATING
Understandable. That’s seriously the saddest episode ever.

I text Chris back:
Sorry :(. And your eyes aren’t sweating. You’re crying, babe.

He replies:
LIES!
I say:
You ain’t gotta lie, Craig. You ain’t gotta lie.

He responds:
DID YOU REALLY USE A LINE FROM FRIDAY ON ME???

So watching nineties movies is kinda our thing too. I text back:
Yep ;)

He replies:
BYE, FELICIA!

I take the laptop to Seven’s room, phone in hand in case Chris has another Fresh Prince breakdown. Some reggae chants meet me in the hall, followed by Kendrick Lamar rapping about being a hypocrite. Seven sits on the side of the lower bunk, an open computer tower at his feet. With his head down, his dreads hang loosely and make a curtain in front of his face. DeVante sits cross-legged on the floor. His Afro bobs to the song.

A zombie version of Steve Jobs watches them from a poster on the wall along with all these superheroes and Star Wars characters. There’s a Slytherin comforter on the bottom bunk that I swear I’ll steal one day. Seven and I are reverse HP fans—we liked the movies first, then the books. I got Khalil and Natasha hooked on them too. Momma found the first movie for a dollar at a thrift store back when we lived in the Cedar Grove projects. Seven and I said we were Slytherins since almost all Slytherins were rich. When you’re a kid in a one-bedroom in the projects, rich is the best thing anybody can be.

Seven removes a silver box from the computer and examines it. “It’s not even that old.”

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Big D asked me to fix his computer. It needs some new
DVD drives. He burnt his out making all them bootlegs."

My brother is the unofficial Garden Heights tech guy. Old ladies, hustlers, and everybody in between pay him to fix their computers and phones. He makes good money like that too.

A black garbage bag leans against the foot of the bunk bed with some clothes sticking out the top of it. Somebody put it over the fence and left it in our front yard. Seven, Sekani, and I found it when we came home from the store. We thought it may have been DeVante’s, but Seven looked inside and everything in it belonged to him. The stuff he had at his momma’s house.

He called Iesha. She said she was putting him out. King told her to.

"Seven, I’m sorry—"

"It’s okay, Starr."

"But she shouldn’t have—"

"I said it’s okay." He glances up at me. "All right? Don’t sweat it."

"All right," I say as my phone vibrates. I hand DeVante the laptop and look. Still no response from Kenya. Instead it’s a text from Maya.

Are u mad @ us?

"What’s this for?" DeVante asks, staring at the laptop.

"Daddy wants you to have it. But he said let Seven check it out first," I tell him as I reply to Maya.

What do u think?

"What he want me to have it for?" DeVante asks.

"Maybe he wants to see if you actually know how to operate one," I tell DeVante.

"I know how to use a computer," DeVante says. He hits Seven, who’s snickering.

My phone buzzes three times. Maya has responded.

Definitely mad.

Can the 3 of us talk?

Things have been awkward lately.

Typical Maya. If Hailey and I have any kind of disagreement, she tries to fix it. She has to know this won’t be a "Kumbaya" moment. I reply:

Okay. Will let u know when I’m @ my uncle’s.

Gunshots fire at rapid speed in the distance. I flinch.

"Goddamn machine guns," Daddy says. "Folks acting like this is a war zone or some shit."

"No cussing, Daddy!" Sekani says from the den.

"Sorry, man. I’ll add a dollar to the jar."

"Two! You said the ‘g-d’ word."

"Alright, two. Starr, come to the kitchen for a second."

In the kitchen, Momma speaks in her “other voice” on the phone. "Yes, ma’am. We want the same thing." She sees me. "And here’s my lovely daughter now. Could you hold, please?"

She covers the receiver. "It’s the DA. She would like to talk to you this week."

Definitely not what I expected. "Oh..."
“Yeah,” Momma says. “Look, baby, if you’re not comfortable with it—”

“I am.” I glance at Daddy. He nods. “I can do it.”

“Oh,” she says, looking from me to Daddy and back. “Okay. As long as you’re sure. I think we should meet with Ms. Ofrah first though. Possibly take her up on her offer to represent you.”

“Definitely,” Daddy says. “I don’t trust them folks at the DA office.”

“So how about we see her tomorrow and meet with the DA later on this week?” Momma asks.

I grab another slice of pizza and take a bite. It’s cold now, but cold pizza is the best pizza. “So two days of no school?”

“Oh, you’re going to school,” she says. “And did you eat any salad while you’re eating all that pizza?”

“I’ve had veggies. These little bitty peppers.”

“They don’t count when they’re that little.”

“Yeah, they do. If babies can count as humans when they’re little, veggies can count as veggies when they’re little.”

“That logic ain’t working with me. So, we’ll meet with Ms. Ofrah tomorrow and the DA on Wednesday. Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah, except the school part.”

Momma uncovers the phone. “Sorry for the delay. We can come in on Wednesday morning.”

“In the meantime tell your boys the mayor and the police chief to get them fucking tanks out my neighborhood,” Daddy says loudly. Momma swats at him, but he’s going down the hall.

“Claim folks need to act peaceful, but rolling through here like we in a goddamn war.”

“Two dollars, Daddy,” Sekani says.

When Momma hangs up, I say, “It wouldn’t kill me to miss one day of school. I don’t wanna be there if they try that protest mess again.” I wouldn’t be surprised if Remy tried to get a whole week off because of Khalil. “I need two days, that’s all.” Momma raises her brows. “Okay, one and a half. Please?”

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “We’ll see. But not a word of this to your brothers, you hear me?”

Basically, she said yes without saying yes outright. I can deal with that.

Pastor Eldridge once preached that “Faith isn’t just believing but taking steps toward that belief.” So when my alarm goes off Tuesday morning, by faith I don’t get up, believing that Momma won’t make me go to school.

And to quote Pastor Eldridge, hallelujah, God shows up and shows out. Momma doesn’t make me get up. I stay in bed, listening as everybody else gets ready for the day. Sekani makes it his business to tell Momma I’m not up yet.

“Don’t worry about her,” she says. “Worry about yourself.”

The TV in the den blares some morning news show, and Momma hums around the house. When Khalil and One-Fifteen are mentioned, the volume lowers a whole lot and doesn’t go
back up until a political story comes on.

My phone buzzes under my pillow. I take it out and look. Kenya finally texted me back about my new Tumblr. She would make me wait hours for a response, and her comment is short as hell:

It's aight

I roll my eyes. That's about as close as I'm gonna get to a compliment from her. I text back.

I love you too

Her response?

I know 😊

She's so petty. Part of me wonders though if she didn't respond last night 'cause of drama at her house. Daddy said King's still beating lesha up. Sometimes he hits Kenya and Lyric too. Kenya's not the type to talk about it like that, so I ask:

Everything okay?

The usual, she writes back.

Short, but it says enough. There isn't much I can do, so I just remind her:

I'm here if you need me

Her response?

You better be

See? Petty.

Here's the messed-up part about missing school: you wonder what you would be doing if you went. At eight, I figure Chris and I would just be getting to history since it's our first class on Tuesdays. I send him a quick text.

Won't be at school today.

Two minutes later, he replies.

Are you sick? Need me to kiss it and make it better?

Wink wink

He seriously typed “wink wink” instead of two wink emojis. I'll admit, I smile. I write back:

What if I'm contagious?

He says:

Doesn't matter. I'll kiss you anywhere. Wink wink.

I reply:

Is that another line?

He responds in less than a minute.

It's whatever you want it to be. Love you Fresh Princess.

Pause. That “I” word completely catches me off guard, like a player from the other team stealing the ball right as you're about to make a layup. It takes all of your momentum and you spend a week wondering how that steal slipped up on you.

Yeah. Chris saying “love you” is like that, except I can't waste a week wondering about it. By not answering, I'm answering, if that makes sense. The shot clock is winding down, and I need to say something.

But what?

By not saying “I” before “love you,” he's making it more casual. Seriously, “love you” and “I love you” are different.
Same team, different players. “Love you” isn’t as forward or aggressive as “I love you.” “Love you” can slip up on you, sure, but it doesn’t make an in-your-face slam dunk. More like a nice jump shot.

Two minutes pass. I need to say something.

Love you too.

It’s as foreign as a Spanish word I haven’t learned yet, but funny enough it comes pretty easily.

I get a wink emoji in return.

Just Us for Justice occupies the old Taco Bell on Magnolia Avenue, between the car wash and the cash advance place. Daddy used to take me and Seven to that Taco Bell every Friday and get us ninety-nine-cent tacos, cinnamon twists, and a soda to share. This was right after he got out of prison, when he didn’t have a lot of money. He usually watched us eat. Sometimes he asked the manager, one of Momma’s girlfriends, to keep an eye on us, and he went to the cash advance place next door. When I got older and discovered that presents don’t just “show up,” I realized Daddy always went over there around our birthdays and Christmas.

Momma rings the doorbell at Just Us, and Ms. Ofrah lets us in.

“Sorry about that,” she says, locking the door. “It’s just me here today.”

“Oh,” Momma says. “Where are your colleagues?”

“Some of them are at Garden Heights High doing a roundtable discussion. Others are leading a march on Carnation where Khalil was murdered.”

It’s weird to hear somebody say “Khalil was murdered” as easily as Ms. Ofrah does. She doesn’t bite her tongue or hesitate.

Short-walled cubicles take up most of the restaurant. They have almost as many posters as Seven has, but the kind Daddy would love, like Malcolm X standing next to a window holding a rifle, Huey Newton in prison with his fist up for black power, and photographs of the Black Panthers at rallies and giving breakfast to kids.

Ms. Ofrah leads us to her cubicle next to the drive-through window. It’s kinda funny too ’cause she has a Taco Bell cup on her desk. “Thank you so much for coming,” she says. “I was so happy when you called, Mrs. Carter.”

“Please, call me Lisa. How long have you all been in this space?”

“Almost two years now. And if you’re wondering, yes, we do get the occasional prankster who pulls up to the window and tells me they want a chalupa.”

We laugh. The doorbell rings up front.

“That’s probably my husband,” Momma says. “He was on his way.”

Ms. Ofrah leaves, and soon Daddy’s voice echoes through the office as he follows her back. He grabs a third chair from another cubicle and sets it halfway in Ms. Ofrah’s office and
halfway in the hall. That’s how small her cubicle is.

“Sorry I’m late. Had to get DeVante situated with Mr. Lewis.”

“Mr. Lewis?” I ask.

“Yeah. Since I’m here, I asked him to let DeVante help around the shop. Mr. Lewis needs somebody to look out for his dumb behind. Snitching on live TV.”

“You’re talking about the gentleman who did the interview about the King Lords?” Ms. Ofrah asks.

“Yeah, him,” says Daddy. “He owns the barbershop next to my store.”

“Oh, wow. That interview definitely has people talking. Last I checked it had almost a million views online.”

I knew it. Mr. Lewis has become a meme.

“It takes a lot of guts to be as upfront as he is. I meant what I said at Khalil’s funeral, Starr. It was very brave of you to talk to the police.”

“I don’t feel brave.” With Malcolm X watching me on her wall, I can’t lie. “I’m not running my mouth on TV like Mr. Lewis.”

“And that’s okay,” Ms. Ofrah says. “It seemed Mr. Lewis impulsively spoke out in anger and frustration. In a case like Khalil’s, I would much rather that you spoke out in a more deliberate and planned way.” She looks at Momma. “You said the DA called yesterday?”

“Yes. They’d like to meet with Starr tomorrow.”

“Makes sense. The case was turned over to their office, and they’re preparing to take it to a grand jury.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“A jury will decide if charges should be brought against Officer Cruise.”

“And Starr will have to testify to the grand jury,” Daddy says.

Ms. Ofrah nods. “It’s a bit different from a normal trial. There won’t be a judge or a defense attorney present, and the DA will ask Starr questions.”

“But what if I can’t answer them all?”

“What do you mean?” Ms. Ofrah says.

“I—the gun in the car stuff. On the news they said there may have been a gun in the car, like that changes everything. I honestly don’t know if there was.”

Ms. Ofrah opens a folder that’s on her desk, takes a piece of paper out, and pushes it toward me. It’s a photograph of Khalil’s black hairbrush, the one he used in the car.

“That’s the so-called gun,” Ms. Ofrah explains. “Officer Cruise claims he saw it in the car door, and he assumed Khalil was reaching for it. The handle was thick enough, black enough, for him to assume it was a gun.”

“And Khalil was black enough,” Daddy adds.

A hairbrush.

Khalil died over a fucking hairbrush.

Ms. Ofrah slips the photograph back in the folder. “It’ll be
interesting to see how his father addresses it in his interview tonight."

Hold up. "Interview?" I ask.

Momma shifts a little in her chair. "Um... the officer's father has a television interview that's airing tonight."
I glance from her to Daddy. "And nobody told me?"

"Cause it ain't worth talking about, baby," Daddy says.

I look at Ms. Ofrah. "So his dad can give his son's side to the whole world, and I can't even have mine and Khalil's? He's gonna have everybody thinking One-Fifteen's the victim."

"Not necessarily," Ms. Ofrah says. "Sometimes these kinds of things backfire. And at the end of the day, the court of public opinion has no say in this. The grand jury does. If they see enough evidence, which they should, Officer Cruise will be charged and tried."

"If," I repeat.

A wave of awkward silence rolls in. One-Fifteen's father is his voice, but I'm Khalil's. The only way people will know his side of the story is if I speak out.

I look out the drive-through window at the car wash next door. Water cascades from a hose, making rainbows against the sunlight like it did six years ago, right before bullets took Natasha.

I turn to Ms. Ofrah. "When I was ten, I saw my other best friend get murdered in a drive-by."

Funny how murdered comes out easily now.

"Oh." Ms. Ofrah sinks back. "I didn't—I'm so sorry, Starr."

I stare at my fingers and fumble with them. Tears well in my eyes. "I've tried to forget it, but I remember everything. The shots, the look on Natasha's face. They never caught the person who did it. I guess it didn't matter enough. But it did matter. She mattered." I look at Ms. Ofrah, but I can barely see her for all the tears. "And I want everyone to know that Khalil mattered too."

Ms. Ofrah blinks a lot. "Absolutely. I—" She clears her throat. "I would like to represent you, Starr. Pro bono, in fact."

Momma nods, and she's teary-eyed too.

"I'll do whatever I can to make sure you're heard, Starr. Because just like Khalil and Natasha mattered, you matter and your voice matters. I can start by trying to get you a television interview." She looks at my parents. "If you're okay with that."

"As long as they don't reveal her identity, yeah," Daddy says.

"That shouldn't be a problem," she says. "We will absolutely make sure her privacy is protected."

A quiet buzzing comes from Daddy's way. He takes out his phone and answers. The person on the other end shouts something, but I can't make it out. "Ay, calm down, Vante. Say that again?" The response makes Daddy stand up. "I'm coming. You call nine-one-one?"

"What's wrong?" Momma says.

He motions for us to follow him. "Stay with him, a'ight? We on the way."
“King himself gave me that one,” he says. “He ain’t come in
till them other ones got me down. Ol’ punk ass, looking like a
black Michelin Man.”

I snort.

“This ain’t funny,” Daddy says. “I told you they was gon’
come after you.”

“And I told you I ain’t scared! If this the worst they could
do, they ain’t did nothing!”

“Nah, this ain’t the worst,” says Daddy. “They could’ve
killed you!”

“I ain’t the one they want dead!” He stretches his fat finger
my way, but he looks beyond me at DeVante. “That’s the one
you need to worry ‘bout! I made him hide before they came in,
but King said he know you helping that boy, and he gon’ kill
him if he find him.”

DeVante backs away, his eyes wide.

I swear, in like two seconds Daddy grabs DeVante by his
neck and slams him against the freezer. “What the hell you do?”

DeVante kicks and squirms and tries to pull Daddy’s hands
from his neck.

“Daddy, stop!”

“Shut up!” His glare never leaves DeVante. “I brought you
in my house, and you ain’t been honest ‘bout why you hiding?
King wouldn’t want you dead unless you did something, so
what you do?”

“Mav-rick!” Momma breaks his name down real good.
“Let him go. He can’t explain anything with you choking him.”
Daddy releases, and DeVante bends over, gasping for air. "Don't be putting your hands on me!" he says.

"Or what?" Daddy taunts. "Start talking."

"Man, look, it ain't a big deal. King tripping."

"Is he for real? "What did you do?" I ask.

DeVante slides onto the floor and tries to catch his breath. He blinks real fast for several seconds. His face scrunches up. Suddenly he's bawling like a baby.

I don't know anything else to do, so I sit in front of him. When Khalil would cry like that because his momma was messed up, I'd lift his head.

I lift DeVante's. "It's okay," I say.

That always worked with Khalil. It works with DeVante too. He stops crying as hard and says, "I stole 'bout five Gs from King."

"Dammit!" Daddy groans. "What the hell, man?"

"I had to get my family outta here! I was gonna handle the dudes that killed Dalvin, and shit, all that would do was make some GDs come after me. I was a dead man walking, straight up. I didn't want my momma and my sisters caught up in that. So I got them some bus tickets and got them outta town."

"That's why we can't get your momma on the phone," Momma realizes.

Tears fall around his lips. "She didn't want me coming anyway. Said I'd get them killed. Put me out the house before they left." He looks at Daddy. "Big Mav, I'm sorry. I should've told you the other day. I did change my mind 'bout killing them dudes though, but now King wants me dead. Please don't take me to him. I'll do anything. Please?"

"He bet' not!" Mr. Lewis limps out Daddy's office. "You help that boy, Maverick?"

Daddy stares at the ceiling like he could cuss God out.

"Daddy," I plead.

"A'ight! C'mon, Vante."

"Big Mav," he whimpers, "I'm sorry, please—"

"I'm not taking you to King, but we gotta get you outta here. Now."

Forty minutes later, Momma and I pull up behind Daddy and DeVante in Uncle Carlos's driveway.

I'm surprised Daddy knows how to get here. He never comes out here with us. Ne-ver. Holidays, birthdays, none of that. I guess he doesn't wanna deal with Nana and her mouth.

Momma and I get out her car as Daddy and DeVante get out the truck.

"This is where you're bringing him?" Momma says. "My brother's house?"

"Yeah," Daddy says, like it's no big deal.

Uncle Carlos comes from the garage, wiping oil off his hands with one of Aunt Pam's good towels. He shouldn't be home. It's the middle of a workday, and he never takes sick days. He stops wiping his hands, but the knuckles on one of them are still dark.
DeVante squints against the sunlight and looks around like we brought him to another planet. “Damn, Big Mav. Where we at?”

“Where are we?” Uncle Carlos corrects, and offers his hand. “Carlos. You must be DeVante.”

DeVante stares at his hand. No manners at all. “How you know my name?”

Uncle Carlos awkwardly lets his hand fall to his side. “Maverick told me about you. We’ve discussed getting you out here.”

“Oh!” Momma says with a hollow laugh. “Maverick’s discussed getting him out here.” She narrows her eyes at Daddy. “I’m surprised you even knew how to get out here, Maverick.”

Daddy’s nostrils flare. “We’ll talk later.”

“C’mon,” Uncle Carlos says. “I’ll show you your room.”

DeVante stares at the house, his eyes all big. “What you do to get a house like this?”

“Dang, you’re nosy,” I say.

Uncle Carlos chuckles. “It’s okay, Starr. My wife’s a surgeon, and I’m a detective.”

DeVante stops dead. He turns on Daddy. “What the fuck, man? You brought me to a cop?”

“Watch your mouth,” Daddy says. “And I brought you to somebody who actually wanna help you.”

“A cop though? If the homies find out, they gon’ think I’m snitching.”
She scoffs, and I know where Momma gets it from. "A lil' trouble, huh? Tell the truth, boy." She lowers her voice and asks with suspicious, squinted eyes, "Did you kill somebody?"

"Momma!" my momma says.

"What? I better ask before y'all have me sleeping in the house with a murderer, waking up dead!"

What in the . . . "You can't wake up dead," I say.

"Li'l girl, you know what I meant!" She moves from the doorway. "I'll be waking up in Jesus's face, trying to figure out what happened!"

"Like you going to heaven," Daddy mumbles.

Uncle Carlos gives DeVante a tour. His room is about as big as me and Seven's rooms put together. It doesn't seem right that he only has a little backpack to put in it, and when we go to the kitchen Uncle Carlos makes him hand that over.

"There are a few rules for living here," Uncle Carlos says. "One, follow the rules. Two"—he pulls the Glock from DeVante's backpack—"no weapons and no drugs."

"I know you ain't bring that in my house, Vante," Daddy says.

"King probably got money on my head. You damn right I got a piece."

"Rule three," Uncle Carlos speaks over him. "No cursing. I have an eight-year-old and a three-year-old. They don't need to hear that."

'Thank you, Goddamn!" Ava's new favorite word is "Goddamn!"

"Rule four," Uncle Carlos says, "go to school."

"Man," DeVante groans. "I already told Big Mav I can't go back to Garden High."

"We know," Daddy says. "Once we get in touch with your momma, we'll get you enrolled in an online program. Lisa's momma is a retired teacher. She can tutor you through it so you can finish the year out."

"Like hell I can!" Nana says. I don't know where she is, but I'm not surprised she's listening.

"Momma, stop being nosy!" Uncle Carlos says.

"Stop volunteering me for shit!"

"Stop cursing," he says.

"Tell me what to do again and see what happens."

Uncle Carlos's face and neck go red.

The doorbell rings.

"Carlos, get the door," Nana says from wherever she's hiding.

He purses his lips and leaves to answer. As he comes back I can hear him talking to somebody. Then somebody laughs, and I know that laugh 'cause it makes me laugh.

"Look who I found," Uncle Carlos says.

Chris is behind him in his white Williamson polo and khaki shorts. He has on the red-and-black Jordan Twelves that MJ wore when he had the flu during the '97 finals. Shoot,
makes Chris finer for some reason. Or I have a Jordan fetish.

"Hi." He smiles without showing teeth.

"Hi." I smile too.

I forget that Daddy is here and that I potentially have a big-ass problem on my hands. That only lasts about ten seconds though because Daddy asks, "Who you?"

Chris extends his hand to Daddy. "Christopher, sir. Nice to meet you."

Daddy gives him a twice-over. "You know my daughter or something?"

"Yeah." Chris stretches it kinda long and looks at me. "We both go to Williamson?"

I nod. Good answer.

Daddy folds his arms. "Well, do you or don’t you? You sound a lil’ unsure ‘bout that."

Momma gives Chris a quick hug. All the while Daddy mean-mugs the hell outta him. "How are you doing, sweetie?" she asks.

"I’m fine. I didn’t mean to interrupt anything. I saw your car, and Starr wasn’t at school today, so I wanted to check on her."

"It’s fine," says Momma. "Tell your mom and dad I said hello. How are they?"

"Hold up," Daddy says. "Y’all act like this dude been around a minute." Daddy turns to me. "Why ain’t I never heard ‘bout him?"

It’s gonna take a hell of a lotta boldness to put myself out there for Khalil. Like "I once told my militant black daddy about my white boyfriend" kinda boldness. If I can’t stand up to my dad about Chris, how can I stand up for Khalil?

Daddy always tells me to never bite my tongue for anyone. That includes him.

So I say it. "He’s my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Daddy repeats.

"Yeah, her boyfriend!" Nana pipes up again from wherever she is. "Hey, Chris baby."

Chris glances around, all confused. "Uh, hey, Ms. Montgomery."

Nana was the first to find out about Chris, thanks to her master snooping skills. She told me, "Go ‘head, get your swirl on, baby," then proceeded to tell me about all of her swirling adventures, which I didn’t need to know.

"The hell, Starr?" Daddy says. "You dating a white boy?"

"Maverick!" Momma snaps.

"Calm down, Maverick," Uncle Carlos says. "He’s a good kid, and he treats her well. That’s all that matters, isn’t it?"

"You knew?" Daddy says. He looks at me, and I don’t know if that’s anger or hurt in his eyes. "He knew, and I didn’t?"

This happens when you have two dads. One of them’s bound to get hurt, and you’re bound to feel like shit because of it.

"Let’s go outside," Momma says tightly. "Now."

Daddy glares at Chris and follows Momma to the patio.
The doors have thick glass, but I still hear her go off on him.

“C’mon, DeVante,” Uncle Carlos says. “Gonna show you the basement and the laundry room.”

DeVante sizing Chris up. “Boyfriend,” he says with a slight laugh, and looks at me. “I should’ve known you’d have a white boy.”

He leaves with Uncle Carlos. What the hell that’s supposed to mean?

“Sorry,” I tell Chris. “My dad shouldn’t have gone off like that.”

“It could’ve been worse. He could’ve killed me.”

True. I motion him to sit at the counter while I get us some drinks.

“Who was that guy with your uncle?” he asks.

Aunt Pam ain’t got one soda up in here. Juice, water, and sparkling water. I bet Nana has a stash of Sprite and Coke in her room though. “DeVante,” I say, grabbing two apple juice boxes.

“He got caught up in some King Lord stuff, and Daddy brought him to live with Uncle Carlos.”

“Why was he looking at me like that?”

“Get over it, Maverick. He’s white!” Momma shouts on the patio. “White, white, white!”

Chris blushes. And blushes, and blushes, and blushes.

I hand him a juice box. “That’s why DeVante was looking at you that way. You’re white.”

“Okay?” he asks more than says. “Is this one of those black things I won’t understand?”

“Okay, babe, real talk? If you were somebody else I’d side-eye the shit out of you for calling it that.”

“Calling it what? A black thing?”

“Yeah.”

“But isn’t that what it is?”

“Not really,” I say. “It’s not like this kinda stuff is exclusive to black people, you know? The reasoning may be different, but that’s about it. Your parents don’t have a problem with us dating?”

“I wouldn’t call it a problem,” Chris says, “but we did talk about it.”

“So it’s not just a black thing then, huh?”

“Point made.”

We sit at the counter, and I listen to his play-by-play of school today. Nobody walked out because the police were there, waiting for any drama.

“Hailey and Maya asked about you,” he says. “I told them you were sick.”

“They could’ve texted me and asked themselves.”

“I think they feel guilty about yesterday. Especially Hailey. White guilt.” He winks.

I crack up. My white boyfriend talking about white guilt.

Momma yells, “And I love how you insist on getting somebody else’s child out of Garden Heights, but you want ours to stay in that hellhole!”
“You want them in the suburbs with all this fake shit?” Daddy says.

“If this is fake, baby, I’ll take it over real any day. I’m sick of this! The kids go to school out here, I take them to church out here, their friends are out here. We can afford to move. But you wanna stay in that mess!”

“’Cause at least in Garden Heights people ain’t gonna treat them like shit.”

“They already do! And wait until King can’t find DeVante. Who do you think he’s gonna look at? Us!”

“I told you I’ll handle that,” Daddy says. “We ain’t moving. It ain’t even up for discussion.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really.”

Chris gives me a bit of a smile. “This is awkward.”

My cheeks are hot, and I’m glad I’m too brown for it to show. “Yeah. Awkward.”

He takes my hand and taps his fingertips against my fingertips, one at a time. He laces his fingers through mine, and we let our arms swing together in the space between us.

Daddy comes in and slams the door behind him. He zeroes straight in on our joined hands. Chris doesn’t let go. Point for my boyfriend.

“We’ll talk later, Starr.” Daddy marches out.

“If this were a rom-com,” Chris says, “you’d be Zoe Saldana and I’d be Ashton Kutcher.”

“Huh?”

He sips his juice. “This old movie, *Guess Who*. I caught it when I had the flu a few weeks ago. Zoe Saldana dated Ashton Kutcher. Her dad didn’t like that she was seeing a white guy. That’s us.”

“Except this isn’t funny,” I say.

“It can be.”

“Nah. What’s funny though is that you watched a rom-com.”

“Hey!” he cries. “It was hilarious. More of a comedy than a rom-com. Bernie Mac was her dad. That guy was hilarious, one of the Kings of Comedy. I don’t think it can be called a rom-com simply because he was in it.”

“Okay, you get points for knowing Bernie Mac and that he was a King of Comedy—”

“*Everyone* should know that.”

“True, but you don’t get a pass. It was still a rom-com. I won’t tell anyone though.”

I lean over to kiss his cheek, but he moves his head, giving me no choice but to kiss him on the mouth. Soon we’re making out, right there in my uncle’s kitchen.

*Hem-hem!* Somebody clears their throat. Chris and I separate so fast.

I thought embarrassment was having my boyfriend hear my parents argue. Nope. Embarrassment is having my mom walk in on me and Chris making out. Again.
“Don’t y’all think y’all should let each other breathe?” she says.
Chris blushes down to his Adam’s apple. “I should go.”
He leaves with a quick good-bye to Momma.
She raises her eyebrows at me. “Are you taking your birth control pills?”

“Mommy!”
“Answer my question. Are you?”
“Yeeees,” I groan, putting my face on the countertop.
“When was your last cycle?”
Oh. My. Lord. I lift my head and flash the fakest of fake smiles. “We’re fine. Promise.”
“Y’all got some nerve. Your daddy was barely out the driveway, and y’all slobbering all over each other. You know how Maverick is.”

“Are we staying out here tonight?”
The question catches her off guard. “Why would you think that?”
“Because you and Daddy—”
“Had a disagreement, that’s all.”
“A disagreement the whole neighborhood heard.” Plus one the other night.
“Starr, we’re okay. Don’t worry about it. Your father’s being... your father.”
Outside, somebody honks his car horn a bunch of times.
Momma rolls her eyes. “Speaking of your father, I guess

Mr. I’m-Gonna-Slam-Doors needs me to move my car so he can leave.” She shakes her head and heads toward the front.
I throw Chris’s juice away and search the cabinets. Aunt Pam may be picky when it comes to drinks, but she always buys good snacks, and my stomach is talking. I get some graham crackers and slather peanut butter on them. So good.
DeVante comes in the kitchen. “Can’t believe you dating a white boy.” He sits next to me and steals a graham cracker sandwich. “A wigga at that.”

“Excuse you?” I say with a mouth full of peanut butter. “He is not a wigga.”

“Please! Dude wearing J’s. White boys wear Converse and Vans, not no J’s unless they trying to be black.”

Really? “My bad. I didn’t know shoes determined somebody’s race.”
He can’t say anything to that. Like I thought. “What you see in him anyway? For real? All them dudes in Garden Heights who would get with you in a second, and you looking at Justin Bieber?”

I point in his face. “Don’t call him that. And what dudes? Nobody in Garden Heights is checking for me. Hardly anybody knows my name. Hell, even you called me Big Mav’s daughter who work in the store.”

“’Cause you don’t come around,” he says. “I ain’t never seen you at a party, nothing.”
Without thinking, I say, “You mean parties where people
get shot at?" And as soon as it leaves my mouth, I feel like shit. "Oh my God, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

He stares at the countertop. "It's cool. Don't worry about it."

We quietly nibble on graham crackers.

"Um . . ." I say. The silence is brutal. "Uncle Carlos and Aunt Pam are cool. I think you'll like it here."

He bites another graham cracker.

"They can be corny sometimes, but they're sweet. They'll look out for you. Knowing Aunt Pam, she'll treat you like Ava and Daniel. Uncle Carlos will probably be tougher. If you follow the rules, you'll be okay."

"Khalil talked 'bout you sometimes," DeVante says.

"Huh?"

"You said nobody knows you, but Khalil talked 'bout you. I ain't know you was Big Mav's daughter who—I ain't know that was you," he says. "But he talked 'bout his friend Starr. He said you were the coolest girl he knew."

Some peanut butter gets stuck in my throat, but it's not the only reason I swallow. "How did you know—oh. Yeah. Both of y'all were King Lords."

I swear to God whenever I think about Khalil falling into that life, it's like watching him die all over again. Yeah, Khalil matters and not the stuff he did, but I can't lie and say it doesn't bother me or it's not disappointing. He knew better.

DeVante says, "Khalil wasn't a King Lord, Starr."

"But at the funeral, King put the bandana on him—"

"To save face," DeVante says. "He tried to get Khalil to join, but Khalil said nah. Then a cop killed him, so you know, all the homies riding for him now. King not 'bout to admit that Khalil turned him down. So he got folks thinking that Khalil repped King Lords."

"Wait," I say. "How do you know he turned King down?"

"Khalil told me in the park one day. We was posted up."

"So y'all sold drugs together?"

"Yeah. For King."

"Oh."

"He didn't wanna sell drugs, Starr," DeVante says. "Nobody really wanna do that shit. Khalil ain't have much of a choice though."

"Yeah, he did," I say thickly.

"No, he didn't. Look, his momma stole some shit from King. King wanted her dead. Khalil found out and started selling to pay the debt."

"What?"

"Yeah. That's the only reason he started doing that shit. Trying to save her."

I can't believe it.

Then again, I can. That was classic Khalil. No matter what his momma did, he was still her knight and he was still gonna protect her.

This is worse than denying him. I thought the worst of him. Like everybody else.
“Don’t be mad at him,” DeVante says, and it’s funny because I can hear Khalil asking me not to be mad too.

“I’m not—” I sigh. “Okay, I was a little mad. I just hate how he’s being called a thug and shit when people don’t know the whole story. You said it, he wasn’t a gangbanger, and if everybody knew why he sold drugs, then—”

“They wouldn’t think he was a thug like me?”

Oh, damn. “I didn’t mean . . . .”

“It’s cool,” he says. “I get it. I guess I am a thug, I don’t know. I did what I had to do. King Lords was the closest thing me and Dalvin had to a family.”

“But your momma,” I say, “and your sisters—”

“They couldn’t look out for us like King Lords do,” he says. “Me and Dalvin looked out for them. With King Lords, we had a whole bunch of folks who had our backs, no matter what. They bought us clothes and shit our momma couldn’t afford and always made sure we ate.” He looks at the counter. “It was just cool to have somebody take care of us for a change, instead of the other way around.”

“Oh.” A shitty response, I know.

“Like I said, nobody likes selling drugs,” he says. “I hated that shit. For real. But I hated seeing my momma and my sisters go hungry, you know?”

“I don’t know.” I’ve never had to know. My parents made sure of that.

“You got it good then,” he says. “I’m sorry they talking 'bout Khalil like that though. He really was a good dude. Hopefully one day they can find out the truth.”

“Yeah,” I say quietly.

DeVante. Khalil. Neither one of them thought they had much of a choice. If I were them, I’m not sure I’d make a much better one.

Guess that makes me a thug too.

“I’m going for a walk,” I say, getting up. My head’s all over the place. “You can have the rest of the graham crackers and peanut butter.”

I leave. I don’t know where I’m going. I don’t know much of anything anymore.