FOURTEEN

I end up at Maya's house. Truth be told, that's the farthest I can go in Uncle Carlos's neighborhood before the houses start looking the same.

It's that weird time between day and night when the sky looks like it's on fire and mosquitoes are on the hunt; all of the lights at the Yang house are already on, which is a lot of lights. Their house is big enough for me and my family to live with them and have a little wiggle room. There's a blue Infiniti Coupe with a dented bumper in the circular driveway. Hailey can't drive for shit.

No lie, it stings a little knowing they hang out without me. That's what happens when you live so far away from your friends. I can't get mad about it. Jealous maybe. Not mad.

That protest shit though? Now that makes me mad. Mad enough to ring the doorbell. Besides, I told Maya the three of us could talk, so fine, we'll talk.

Mrs. Yang answers, her Bluetooth headset around her neck. "Starr!" She beams and hugs me. "So good to see you. How is everyone?"

"Good," I say. She announces my arrival to Maya and lets me in. The aroma of Mrs. Yang's seafood lasagna greets me in the foyer.

"I hope it's not a bad time," I say.

"Not at all, sweetie. Maya's upstairs. Hailey too. You're more than welcome to join us for dinner. . . . No, George, I wasn't talking to you," she says into her headset, then mouths at me, "My assistant," and rolls her eyes a little.

I smile and take off my Nike Dunks. In the Yang house, shoe removal is part Chinese tradition, part Mrs. Yang likes people to be comfy.

Maya races down the stairs, wearing an oversized T-shirt and basketball shorts that almost hang to her ankles. "Starr!"

She reaches the bottom, and there's this awkward moment where her arms are out like she wants to hug me, but she starts lowering them. I hug her anyway. It's been a while since I got a good Maya hug. Her hair smells like citrus, and she hugs all tight and motherly.

Maya leads me to her bedroom. White Christmas lights hang from the ceiling. There's a shelf for video games, Adventure Time memorabilia all around, and Hailey in a beanbag.
chair, concentrating on the basketball players she's controlling on Maya's flat-screen.

"Look who's here, Hails," Maya says.

Hailey glances up at me. "Hey."

"Hey."

It's Awkward Central in here.

I step over an empty Sprite can and a bag of Doritos and sit in the other beanbag chair. Maya closes her door. An old-school poster of Michael Jordan, in his famous Jumpman pose, is on the back.

Maya belly flops onto her bed and grabs a controller off the floor. "You wanna join in, Starr?"

"Yeah, sure."

She hands me a third controller, and we start a new game—the three of us against a computer-controlled team. It's a lot like when we play in real life, a combination of rhythm, chemistry, and skill, but the awkwardness in the room is so thick it's hard to ignore.

They keep glancing at me. I keep my eyes on the screen. The animated crowd cheers as Hailey's player makes a three-pointer. "Nice shot," I say.

"Okay, cut the crap," Hailey grabs the TV remote and flicks the game off, turning to a detective show instead. "Why are you mad at us?"

"Why did you protest?" Since she wants to cut the crap, may as well get right to it.

"Because," she says, like that's reason enough. "I don't see what the big deal is, Starr. You said you didn't know him."

"Why does that make a difference?"

"Isn't a protest a good thing?"

"Not if you're only doing it to cut class."

"So you want us to apologize for it even though everybody else did it too?" Hailey asks.

"Just because everyone else did it doesn't mean it's okay." Shit, I sound like my mother.

"Guys, stop!" Maya says. "Hailey, if Starr wants us to apologize, fine, we can apologize. Starr, I'm sorry for protesting. It was stupid to use a tragedy just to get out of class."

We look at Hailey. She sits back and folds her arms. "I'm not apologizing when I didn't do anything wrong. If anything, she should apologize for accusing me of being racist last week."

"Wow," I say. One thing that irks the hell out of me about Hailey? The way she can turn an argument around and make herself the victim. She's a master at this shit. I used to fall for it, but now?

"I'm not apologizing for what I felt," I say. "I don't care what your intention was, Hailey. That fried chicken comment felt racist to me."

"Fine," she says. "Just like I felt it was fine to protest. Since I won't apologize for what I felt, and you won't apologize for what you felt, I guess we'll just watch TV."

"Fine," I say.
Maya grunts like it’s taking everything in her not to choke us. “You know what? If you two want to be this stubborn, fine.”

Maya flicks through channels. Hailey does that BS move where you look at someone out the corner of your eye, but you don’t want them to know that you care enough to look, so you avert your eyes. At this point it’s whatever. I thought I came to talk, but yeah, I really want an apology.

I look at TV. A singing competition, a reality show, One-Fifteen, a celebrity dance—wait.

“Back up, back up,” I tell Maya.

She flicks through the channels, and when he appears again, I say, “Right there!”

I’ve pictured his face so much. Actually seeing it again is different. My memory is pretty spot-on—a thin, jagged scar above his lip, bursts of freckles that cover his face and neck.

My stomach churns and my skin crawls, and I wanna get away from One-Fifteen. My instinct doesn’t care that it’s a photograph being shown on TV. A silver cross pendant hangs from his neck, like he’s saying Jesus endorses what he did. We must believe in a different Jesus.

What looks like an older version of him appears on the screen, but this man doesn’t have the scar on his lip, and there are more wrinkles on his neck than freckles. He has white hair, although there’s still some streaks of brown in it.

“My son was afraid for his life,” he says. “He only wanted to get home to his wife and kids.”

Pictures flash on the screen. One-Fifteen smiles with his arms draped around a blurred-out woman. He’s on a fishing trip with two small, blurred-out children. They show him with a smiley golden retriever, with his pastor and some fellow deacons who are all blurred out, and then in his police uniform.

“Officer Brian Cruise Jr. has been on the force for sixteen years,” the voice-over says, and more pics of him as a cop are shown. He’s been a cop for as long as Khalil was alive, and I wonder if in some sick twist of fate Khalil was only born for this man to kill.

“A majority of those years have been spent serving in Garden Heights,” the voice-over continues, “a neighborhood notorious for gangs and drug dealers.”

I tense as footage of my neighborhood, my home, is shown. It’s like they picked the worst parts—the drug addicts roaming the streets, the broken-down Cedar Grove projects, gangbangers flashing signs, bodies on the sidewalks with white sheets over them. What about Mrs. Rooks and her cakes? Or Mr. Lewis and his haircuts? Mr. Reuben? The clinic? My family?

Me?

I feel Hailey’s and Maya’s eyes on me. I can’t look at them.

“My son loved working in the neighborhood,” One-Fifteen’s father claims. “He always wanted to make a difference in the lives there.”

Funny. Slave masters thought they were making a difference in black people’s lives too. Saving them from their “wild
African ways." Same shit, different century. I wish people like them would stop thinking that people like me need saving.

One-Fifteen Sr. talks about his son’s life before the shooting. How he was a good kid who never got into trouble, always wanted to help others. A lot like Khalil. But then he talks about the stuff One-Fifteen did that Khalil will never get to do, like go to college, get married, have a family.

The interviewer asks about that night.

"Apparently, Brian pulled the kid over 'cause he had a broken taillight and was speeding."

Khalil wasn’t speeding.

"He told me, ‘Pop, soon as I pulled him over, I had a bad feeling,’" says One-Fifteen Sr.

"Why is that?" the interviewer asks.

"He said the kid and his friend immediately started cursing him out—"

We never cursed.

"And they kept glancing at each other, like they were up to something. Brian says that’s when he got scared, ‘cause they could’ve taken him down if they teamed up."

I couldn’t have taken anyone down. I was too afraid. He makes us sound like we’re superhumans. We’re kids.

"No matter how afraid he is, my son’s still gonna do his job," he says. "And that’s all he set out to do that night."

"There have been reports that Khalil Harris was unarmed when the incident took place," the interviewer says. "Has your son told you why he made the decision to shoot?"

"Brian says he had his back to the kid, and he heard the kid say, ‘I’m gon’ show your ass today.’"

No, no, no. Khalil asked if I was okay.

"Brian turned around and saw something in the car door. He thought it was a gun—"

It was a hairbrush.

His lips quiver. My body shakes. He covers his mouth to hold back a sob. I cover mine to keep from puking.

"Brian’s a good boy," he says, in tears. "He only wanted to get home to his family, and people are making him out to be a monster."

That’s all Khalil and I wanted, and you’re making us out to be monsters.

I can’t breathe, like I’m drowning in the tears I refuse to shed. I won’t give One-Fifteen or his father the satisfaction of crying. Tonight, they shot me too, more than once, and killed a part of me. Unfortunately for them, it’s the part that felt any hesitation about speaking out.

"How has your son’s life changed since this happened?" the interviewer asks.

"All of our lives have been hell, honestly," his father claims. "Brian’s a people person, but now he’s afraid to go out in public, even for something as simple as getting a gallon of milk. There have been threats on his life, our family’s lives. His wife had to quit her job. He’s even been attacked by fellow officers."
“Physically or verbally?” the interviewer asks.

“Both,” he says.

It hits me. Uncle Carlos’s bruised knuckles.

“This is awful,” Hailey says. “That poor family.”

She’s looking at One-Fifteen Sr. with sympathy that belongs to Brenda and Ms. Rosalie.

I blink several times. “What?”

“His son lost everything because he was trying to do his job and protect himself. His life matters too, you know?”

I cannot right now. I can’t. I stand up or otherwise I will say or do something really stupid. Like punch her.

“I need to . . . yeah.” I say all that I can and start for the door, but Maya grabs the tail of my cardigan.

“Whoa, whoa. You guys haven’t worked this out yet,” she says.

“Maya,” I say, as calmly as possible. “Please let me go. I cannot talk to her. Did you not hear what she said?”

“Are you serious right now?” Hailey asks. “What’s wrong with saying his life matters too?”

“His life always matters more!” My voice is gruff, and my throat is tight. “That’s the problem!”

“Starr! Starr!” Maya says, trying to catch my eye. I look at her. “What’s going on? You’re Harry in Order of the Phoenix angry lately.”

“Thank you!” Hailey says. “She’s been in bitch mode for weeks but wants to blame me.”

“Excuse you?”

There’s a knock on the door. “Girls, is everything okay?” Mrs. Yang asks.

“We’re fine, Mom. Video game stuff.” Maya looks at me and lowers her voice. “Please, sit down. Please?”

I sit on her bed. Commercials replace One-Fifteen Sr. on the TV and fill in the gap of silence we’ve created.

I blurt out, “Why did you unfollow my Tumblr?”

Hailey turns toward me. “What?”

“You unfollowed my Tumblr. Why?”

She glances at Maya—quickly, but I notice—and goes, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the bullshit, Hailey. You unfollowed me. Months ago. Why?”

She doesn’t say anything.

I swallow. “Is it because of the Emmett Till picture?”

“Oh my God,” she says, standing up. “Here we go again. I am not gonna stay here and let you accuse me of something, Starr—”

“You don’t text me anymore,” I say. “You freaked out about that picture.”

“Do you hear her?” Hailey says to Maya. “Once again, calling me racist.”

“I’m not calling you anything. I’m asking a question and giving you examples.”

“You’re insinuating!”
“I never even mentioned race.”
Silence comes between us.
Hailey shakes her head. Her lips are thin. “Unbelievable.” She grabs her jacket off Maya’s bed and starts for the door. She stops, and her back is to me. “You wanna really know why I unfollowed you, Starr? Because I don’t know who the hell you are anymore.”
She slams the door on her way out.
The news program returns on the television. They show footage of protests all over the country, not just in Garden Heights. Hopefully none of them used Khalil’s death to skip class or work.
Out of nowhere, Maya says, “That’s not why.” She’s staring at her closed door, her shoulders a bit stiff.
“Huh?” I say.
“She’s lying,” Maya says. “That’s not why she unfollowed you. She said she didn’t wanna see that shit on her dashboard.”
I figured. “That Emmett Till picture, right?”
“No. All the ‘black stuff,’ she called it. The petitions. The Black Panther pictures. That post on those four little girls who were killed in that church. The stuff about that Marcus Garvey guy. The one about those Black Panthers who were shot by the government.”
“Fred Hampton and Bobby Hutton,” I say.
“Yeah. Them.”
Wow. She’s been paying attention. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She stares at her plush Finn on the floor. “I hoped she’d change her mind before you found out. I should’ve known better though. It’s not like that’s the first fucked-up thing she’s said.”
“What are you talking about?”
Maya swallows hard. “Do you remember that time she asked if my family ate a cat for Thanksgiving?”
“What? When?”
Her eyes are glossy. “Freshman year. First period. Mrs. Edwards’s biology class. We’d just gotten back from Thanksgiving break. Class hadn’t started yet, and we were talking about what we did for Thanksgiving. I told you guys my grandparents visited, and it was their first time celebrating Thanksgiving. Hailey asked if we ate a cat. Because we’re Chinese.”
Holy shit. I’m wracking my brain right now. Freshman year is so close to middle school; there’s a huge possibility I said or did something extremely stupid. I’m afraid to know, but I ask, “What did I say?”
“Nothing. You had this look on your face like you couldn’t believe she said that. She claimed it was a joke and laughed. I laughed, and then you laughed.” Maya blinks. A lot. “I only laughed because I thought I was supposed to. I felt like shit the rest of the week.”
“Oh.”
“Yeah.”
I feel like shit right now. I can’t believe I let Hailey say that.
Or has she always joked like that? Did I always laugh because I thought I had to?

That's the problem. We let people say stuff, and they say it so much that it becomes okay to them and normal for us. What's the point of having a voice if you're gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn't be?

"Maya?" I say.

"Yeah?"

"We can't let her get away with saying stuff like that again, okay?"

She cracks a smile. "A minority alliance?"

"Hell, yeah," I say, and we laugh.

"All right. Deal."

A game of NBA 2K15 later (I whooped Maya's butt), I'm walking back to Uncle Carlos's house with a foil-wrapped plate of seafood lasagna. Mrs. Yang never lets me leave empty-handed, and I never turn down food.

Iron streetlamps line the sidewalks, and I see Uncle Carlos from a few houses down, sitting on his front steps in the dark. He's chugging back something, and as I get closer, I can see the Heineken.

I put my plate on the steps and sit beside him.

"You better not have been at your lil' boyfriend's house," he says.

Lord. Chris is always "lil'" to him, and they're almost the same height. "No. I was at Maya's." I stretch my legs forward and yawn. It's been a long-ass day. "I can't believe you're drinking," I say through my yawn.

"I'm not drinking. It's one beer."

"Is that what Nana said?"

He cuts me a look. "Starr."

"Uncle Carlos," I say as firmly.

We battle it out, hard stare versus hard stare.

He sets the beer down. Here's the thing—Nana's an alcoholic. She's not as bad as she used to be, but all it takes is one hard drink and she's the "other" Nana. I've heard stories of her drunken rages from back in the day. She'd blame Momma and Uncle Carlos that their daddy went back to his wife and other kids. She'd lock them out the house, cuss at them, all kinds of stuff.

So, no. One beer isn't one beer to Uncle Carlos, who's always been anti-alcohol.

"Sorry," he says. "It's one of those nights."

"You saw the interview, didn't you?" I ask.

"Yeah. I was hoping you didn't."

"I did. Did my mom see—"

"Oh yeah, she saw it. So did Pam. And your grandma. I've never been in a room with so many pissed-off women in my life." He looks at me. "How are you dealing with it?"

I shrug. Yeah, I'm pissed, but honestly? "I expected his dad to make him the victim."
“I did too.” He rests his cheek in his palm, his elbow propped on his knee. It’s not too dark on the steps. I see the bruising on his hand fine.

“So . . . .” I say, patting my knees. “On leave, huh?”

He looks at me like he’s trying to figure out what I’m getting at. “Yeah?”

Silence.

“Did you fight him, Uncle Carlos?”

He straightens up. “No, I had a discussion with him.”

“You mean your fist talked to his eye. Did he say something about me?”

“He pointed his gun at you. That was more than enough.”

His voice has a foreign edge to it. It’s totally inappropriate, but I laugh. I have to hold my side I laugh so hard.

“What’s so funny?” he cries.

“Uncle Carlos, you punched somebody!”

“Hey, I’m from Garden Heights. I know how to fight. I can get down.”

I’m hollering right now.

“It’s not funny!” he says. “I shouldn’t have lost my cool like that. It was unprofessional. Now I’ve set a bad example for you.”

“Yeah, you have, Muhammad Ali.”

I’m still laughing. Now he’s laughing.

“Hush,” he says.

Our laughter dies down, and it’s real quiet out here. Nothing
to do but look at the sky and all the stars. There’s so many of them tonight. It’s possible that I don’t notice them at home because of all the other stuff. Sometimes it’s hard to believe Garden Heights and Riverton Hills share the same sky.

“You remember what I used to tell you?” Uncle Carlos says.

I scoot closer to him. “That I’m not named after the stars, but the stars are named after me. You were really trying to give me a big head, huh?”

He chuckles. “No. I wanted you to know how special you are.”

“Special or not, you shouldn’t have risked your job for me. You love your job.”

“But I love you more. You’re one reason I even became a cop, baby girl. Because I love you and all those folks in the neighborhood.”

“I know. That’s why I don’t want you to risk it. We need the ones like you.”

The ones like me.” He gives a hollow laugh. “You know, I got pissed listening to that man talk about you and Khalil like that, but it made me consider the comments I made about Khalil that night in your parents’ kitchen.”

“What comments?”

“I know you were eavesdropping, Starr. Don’t act brand-new.”

I smirk. Uncle Carlos said “brand-new.” “You mean when you called Khalil a drug dealer?”
He nods. "Even if he was, I knew that boy. Watched him grow up with you. He was more than any bad decision he made," he says. "I hate that I let myself fall into that mind-set of trying to rationalize his death. And at the end of the day, you don't kill someone for opening a car door. If you do, you shouldn't be a cop."

I tear up. It's good to hear my parents and Ms. Ofrah say that or see all the protesters shout about it. From my uncle the cop though? It's a relief, even if it makes everything hurt a little more.

"I told Brian that," he says, looking at his knuckles. "After I clocked him. Told the chief too. Actually, I think I screamed it loud enough for everybody in the precinct to hear. It doesn't take away from what I did though. I dropped the ball on Khalil."

"No, you didn't—"

"Yes, I did," he says. "I knew him, knew his family's situation. After he stopped coming around with you, he was out of sight and out of mind to me, and there's no excuse for that."

There's no excuse for me either. "I think all of us feel like that," I mutter. "That's one reason Daddy's determined to help Devante."

"Yeah," he says. "Me too."

I look at all the stars again. Daddy says he named me Starr because I was his light in the darkness. I need some light in my own darkness right about now.
FIFTEEN

It takes an untouched stack of pancakes for Momma to say, “All right, Munch. What’s up?”

We have a table to ourselves in IHOP. It’s early morning, and the restaurant’s almost empty except for us and these big-bellied, bearded truckers stuffing their faces in a booth. Thanks to them, country music plays on the jukebox.

I poke my fork at my pancakes. “Not real hungry.”


Momma, Sekani, and I spent the night at Uncle Carlos’s house, and I know it was more because Momma’s mad at Daddy than it was about the riots. In fact, the news said last night was the first semipeaceful night in the Garden. Just protests, no riots. Cops were still throwing tear gas though.

Anyway, if I bring up my parents’ fight, Momma’s gonna tell me, “Stay outta grown folks’ business.” You’d think since it’s partially my fault they fought, it is my business, but nope.

“I don’t know who’s supposed to believe that you’re not hungry,” Momma says. “You’ve always been greedy.”

I roll my eyes and yawn. She got me up too early and said we were going to IHOP, just the two of us like we used to do before Sekani came along and ruined everything. He has an extra uniform at Uncle Carlos’s and can go to school with Daniel. I only had some sweats and a Drake T-shirt—not DA office appropriate. I gotta go home and change.

“Thanks for bringing me here,” I say. With my awful mood, I owe her that.

“Anytime, baby. We haven’t hung out in a while. Somebody decided I wasn’t cool anymore. I thought I was still cool, so whatever.” She sips from her steaming mug of coffee. “Are you scared to talk to the DA?”

“Not really.” Although I do notice the clock is only three and a half hours away from our nine-thirty meeting.

“Is it that BS of an interview? That bastard.”

Here we go again. “Momma—”

“Got his damn daddy going on TV, telling lies,” she says. “And who’s supposed to believe a grown man was that scared of two children?”

People on the internet are saying the same thing. Black
Twitter's been going in on Officer Cruise's dad, claiming his name should be Tom Cruise with that performance he put on. Tumblr too. I'm sure there are people who believe him—Hailey did—but Ms. Ofrah was right: it backfired. Folks who never met me or Khalil are calling BS.

So while the interview bothers me, it doesn't bother me that much.

"It's not really the interview," I say. "It's other stuff too."

"Like?"

"Khalil," I say. "DeVante told me some stuff about him, and I feel guilty."

"Stuff like what?" she says.

"Why he sold drugs. He was trying to help Ms. Brenda pay a debt to King."

Momma's eyes widen. "What?"

"Yeah. And he wasn't a King Lord. Khalil turned King down, and King's been lying to save face."

Momma shakes her head. "Why am I not surprised? King would do some mess like that."

I stare at my pancakes. "I should've known better. Should've known Khalil better."

"You had no way of knowing, baby," she says.

"That's the thing. If I would've been there for him, I—"

"Couldn't have stopped him. Khalil was almost as stubborn as you. I know you cared about him a lot, even as more than a friend, but you can't blame yourself for this."

I look up at her. "What you mean 'cared about him as more than a friend'?"

"Don't play dumb, Starr. Y'all liked each other for a long time."

"You think he liked me too?"

"Lord!" Momma rolls her eyes. "Between the two of us, I'm the old one—"

"You just called yourself old."

"Older one," she corrects, and shoots me a quick stank-eye, "and I saw it. How in the world did you miss it?"

"I dunno. He always talked about other girls, not me. It's weird though. I thought I was over my crush, but sometimes I don't know."

Momma traces the rim of her mug. "Munch," she says, and it's followed by a sigh. "Baby, look. You're grieving, okay? That can amplify your emotions and make you feel things you haven't felt in a long time. Even if you do have feelings for Khalil, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Even though I'm with Chris?"

"Yes. You're sixteen. You're allowed to have feelings for more than one person."

"So you're saying I can be a ho?"

"Girl!" She points at me. "Don't make me kick you under this table. I'm saying don't beat yourself up about it. Grieve Khalil all you want. Miss him, allow yourself to miss what could've been, let your feelings get out of whack. But like I told
you, don’t stop living. All right?”

“All right.”

“Good. So that’s two things,” she says. “What else is up?”

What isn’t up? My head is tight like my brain is overloaded. I’m guessing emotional hangovers feel a lot like actual hangovers.

“Hailey,” I say.

She slurps her coffee. Loudly. “What that li’l girl do now?”

Here she goes with this. “Momma, you’ve never liked her.”

“No, I’ve never liked how you’ve followed her like you can’t think for yourself. Difference.”

“I haven’t—”

“Don’t lie! Remember that drum set you begged me to buy. Why did you want it, Starr?”

“Hailey wanted to start a band, but I liked the idea too.”

“Hold up, though. Didn’t you tell me you wanted to play guitar in this ‘band,’ but Hailey said you should play drums?”

“Yeah, but—”


“Joe.”

“But who said you should be with the curly-headed one instead?”

“Hailey, but Nick was still fine as all get-out, and this is middle school stuff—”

“Oh!”

“Last year you begged me to let you color your hair purple. Why, Starr?”

“I wanted—”


Damn. There’s a pattern here. “Because Hailey wanted me, her, and Maya to have matching hair.”

“E-x-a-c-t-damn-l-y. Baby, I love you, but you have a history of putting your wants aside and doing whatever that li’l girl wants. Excuse me if I don’t like her.”

With all my receipts put out there like that, I say, “I can see why.”

“Good. Realizing is the first step. So what she do now?”

“We had an argument yesterday,” I say. “Really though, things have been weird for a while. She stopped texting me and unfollowed my Tumblr.”

Momma reaches her fork onto my plate and breaks off a piece of pancake. “What is Tumblr anyway? Is it like Facebook?”

“No, and you’re forbidden to get one. No parents allowed. You guys already took over Facebook.”

“You haven’t responded to my friend request yet.”

“I know.”

“I need Candy Crush lives.”

“That’s why I’ll never respond.”

She gives me “the look.” I don’t care. There are some things I absolutely refuse to do.

“So she unfollowed your Tumblr thingy,” Momma says, proving why she can never have one. “Is that all?”

“No. She said and did some stupid stuff too.” I rub my eyes.
Like I said, it’s too early. “I’m starting to wonder why we’re friends.”

“Well, Munch”—she gets another freaking piece of my pancakes—“you have to decide if the relationship is worth salvaging. Make a list of the good stuff, then make a list of the bad stuff. If one outweighs the other, then you know what you gotta do. Trust me, that method hasn’t failed me yet.”

“Is that what you did with Daddy after Iesha got pregnant?” I ask. “’Cause I’ll be honest, I would’ve kicked him to the curb. No offense.”

“It’s all right. A lot of people called me a fool for going back to your daddy. Shoot, they may still call me a fool behind my back. Your nana would have a stroke if she knew this, but she’s the real reason I stayed with your daddy.”

“I thought Nana hated Daddy?” I think Nana still hates Daddy.

Sadness creeps into Momma’s eyes, but she gives me a small smile. “When I was growing up, your grandmother would do and say hurtful things when she was drunk, and apologize the next morning. At an early age I learned that people make mistakes, and you have to decide if their mistakes are bigger than your love for them.”

She takes a deep breath. “Seven’s not a mistake, I love him to death, but Maverick made a mistake in his actions. However, all of his good and the love we share outweighs that one mistake.”

“Even with crazy Iesha in our lives?” I ask. Momma chuckles. “Even with crazy, messy, annoying Iesha. It’s a little different, yeah, but if the good outweighs the bad, keep Hailey in your life, baby.”

That might be the problem. A lot of the good stuff is from the past. The Jonas Brothers, High School Musical, our shared grief. Our friendship is based on memories. What do we have now?

“What if the good doesn’t outweigh the bad?” I ask.

“Then let her go,” Momma says. “And if you keep her in your life and she keeps doing the bad, let her go. Because I promise you, had your daddy pulled some mess like that again, I’d be married to Idris Elba and saying, ‘Maverick who?’”

I bust out laughing.

“Now eat,” she says, and hands me her fork. “Before I have no choice but to eat these pancakes for you.”

I’m so used to seeing smoke in Garden Heights, it’s weird when we go back and there isn’t any. It’s dreary because of a late-night storm, but we can ride with the windows down. Even though the riots stopped, we pass as many tanks as we pass lowriders.

But at home smoke greets us at the front door.

“Maverick!” Momma hollers, and we hurry toward the kitchen.

Daddy pours water on a skillet at the sink, and the skillet
responds with a loud sizzle and a white cloud. Whatever he burned, he burned it bad.

“Hallelujah!” Seven throws his hands up at the table. “Somebody who can actually cook.”

“Shut up,” Daddy says.
Momma takes the skillet and examines the unidentifiable remains. “What was this? Eggs?”

“Glad to see you know how to come home,” he says. He walks right by me without a glance or a good morning. He’s still pissed about Chris?
Momma gets a fork and stabs at the charred food stuck to the skillet. “You want some breakfast, Seven baby?”

He watches her and goes, “Um, nah. By the way, the skillet didn’t do anything, Ma.”

“You’re right,” she says, but she keeps stabbing. “Seriously, I can fix you something. Eggs. Bacon.” She looks toward the hall and shouts, “The pork kind! Pig! Swine! All’a that!”

So much for the good outweighing the bad. Seven and I look at each other. We hate when they fight because we always get stuck in the middle of their wars. Our appetites are the greatest casualty. If Momma’s mad and not cooking, we have to eat Daddy’s struggle meals, like spaghetti with ketchup and hot dogs in it.

“I’ll grab something at school.” Seven kisses her cheek.

“Thanks though.” He gives me a fist bump on his way out, the Seven way of wishing me good luck.

Daddy returns wearing a backwards cap. He grabs his keys and a banana.

“We have to be at the DA’s office at nine thirty,” Momma says. “Are you coming?”

“Oh, Carlos can’t do it? Since he the one y’all let in on secrets and stuff.”

“You know what, Maverick—”

“I’ll be there,” he says, and leaves.
Momma stabs the skillet some more.

The DA personally escorts us to a conference room. Her name is Karen Monroe, and she’s a middle-aged white lady who claims she understands what I’m going through.
Ms. Ofrah is already in the conference room along with some people who work at the DA’s office. Ms. Monroe gives a long speech about how much she wants justice for Khalil and apologizes that it’s taken this long for us to meet.

“Twelve days, to be exact,” Daddy points out. “Too long, if you ask me.”

Ms. Monroe looks a bit uncomfortable at that.

She explains the grand jury proceedings. Then she asks about that night. I pretty much tell her what I told the cops, except she doesn’t ask any stupid questions about Khalil. But when I get to the part when I describe the number of shots, how they hit Khalil in his back, the look on his face—

My stomach bubbles, bile pools in my mouth, and I gag.
Momma jumps up and grabs a garbage bin. She puts it in front of me quick enough to catch the vomit that spews from my mouth. And I cry and puke. Cry and puke. It's all I can do.

The DA gets me a soda and says, "That'll be all today, sweetie. Thank you."

Daddy helps me to Momma's car, and people in the halls gawk. I bet they know I'm the witness from my teary, snotty face, and are probably giving me a new name—Poor Thing. As in, "Oh, that poor thing." That makes it worse.

I get in the car away from their pity and rest my head against the window, feeling like shit.

Momma parks in front of the store, and Daddy pulls up behind us. He gets out his truck and comes to Momma's side of the car. She rolls her window down.

"I'm going to the school," she tells him. "They need to know what's going on. Can she stay with you?"

"Yeah, that's fine. She can rest in the office."

Another thing puking and crying gets you—people talk about you like you're not there and make plans for you. Poor Thing apparently can't hear.

"You sure?" Momma asks him. "Or do I need to take her to Carlos?"

Daddy sighs. "Lisa—"

"Maverick, I don't give a flying monkey's ass what your problem is, just be there for your daughter. Please?"

Daddy moves to my side of the car and opens the door. "Come here, baby."

I climb out, blubbering like a little kid who skinned her knee. Daddy pulls me into his chest, rubbing my back and kissing my hair. Momma drives off.

"I'm sorry, baby," he says.

The crying, the puking don't mean anything anymore. My daddy's got me.

We go in the store. Daddy turns on the lights but keeps the closed sign in the window. He goes to his office for a second, then comes back to me and holds my chin.

"Open your mouth," he says. I open it, and his face scrunches up. "Ill. We gotta get you a whole bottle of mouthwash. 'Bout to raise the dead with that breath."

I laugh with tears in my eyes. Like I said, Daddy's talented that way.

He wipes my face with his hands, which are rough as sandpaper, but I'm used to them. He frames my face. I smile. "There go my baby," he says. "You'll be a'ight."

I feel normal enough to say, "Now I'm your baby? You haven't been acting like it."

"Don't start!" He goes down the medicine aisle. "Sounding like your momma."

"I'm just saying. You've been extra salty today."

He returns with a bottle of Listerine. "Here. Before you kill my produce with your breath."
“Like you killed those eggs this morning?”
“Ay, those were blackened eggs. Y’all don’t know ‘bout that.”
“Nobody knows ‘bout that.”
A couple of rinses in the restroom transform my mouth from a swamp of puke residue to normal. Daddy waits on the wooden bench at the front of the store. Our older customers who can’t walk much usually sit there as Daddy, Seven, or I get their groceries for them.
Daddy pats the spot next to him.
I sit. “You’re gonna open back up soon?”
“In a li’l bit. What you see in that white boy?”
Damn. I wasn’t expecting him to go right into it. “Besides the fact he’s adorable—” I say, and Daddy makes a gagging sound, “he’s smart, funny, and he cares about me. A lot.”
“You got a problem with black boys?”
“No. I’ve had black boyfriends.” Three of them. One in fourth grade, although that doesn’t really count, and two in middle school, which don’t count either ‘cause nobody knows shit about a relationship in middle school. Or about anything really.
“What?” he says. “I ain’t know ‘bout them.”
“Because I knew you’d act crazy. Put a hit on them or something.”
“You know, that ain’t a bad idea.”
“Daddy!” I smack his arm as he cracks up.
“Did Carlos know ‘bout them?” he asks.
“No. He would’ve ran background checks on them or arrested them. Not cool.”
“So why you tell him ‘bout the white boy?”
“I didn’t tell him,” I say. “He found out. Chris lives down the street from him, so it was harder to hide. And let’s be real here, Daddy. I’ve heard the stuff you’ve said about interracial couples. I didn’t want you talking about me and Chris like that.”
“Chris,” he mocks. “What kinda plain-ass name is that?”
He’s so petty. “Since you wanna ask me questions, do you have a problem with white people?”
“Not really.”
“Not really?”
“Ay, I’m being honest. My thing is, girls usually date boys who are like their daddies, and I ain’t gon’ lie, when I saw that white—Chris,” he corrects, and I smile. “I got worried. Thought I turned you against black men or didn’t set a good example of a black man. I couldn’t handle that.”
I rest my head on his shoulder. “Nah, Daddy. You haven’t set a good example of what a black man should be. You’ve set a good example of what a man should be. Duh!”
“Duh,” he mocks, and kisses the top of my head. “My baby.”
A gray BMW comes to a sudden stop in front of the store. Daddy nudges me off the bench. “C’mon.”
He pulls me to his office and shoves me in. I catch a glimpse
of King getting out the BMW before Daddy closes the door in my face.

Hands shaking, I crack open the door.

Daddy stands guard in the entrance of the store. His hand drifts to his waist. His piece.

Three other King Lords hop out the BMW, but Daddy calls out, “Nah. If you wanna talk, we do this alone.”

King nods at his boys. They wait beside the car.

Daddy steps aside, and King lumbers in. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I don’t know if Daddy stands a chance against King. Daddy isn’t skinny or short, but compared to King, who’s pure muscle at six feet, he looks tiny. It’s damn near blasphemous to think like that though.

“Where he at?” King asks.

“Where who at?”

“You know who. Vante.”

“How I’m supposed to know?” Daddy says.

“He was working here, wasn’t he?”

“For a day or two, yeah. I ain’t seen him today.”

King paces and points his cigar at Daddy. Sweat glistens on the rolls of fat on the back of his head. “You lying.”

“Why I gotta lie, King?”

“All the shit I did for you,” King says, “and this how you repay me? Where he at, Big Mav?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where he at?” King yells.
There are several agonizing seconds of Daddy and King staring each other down. Daddy's hand is at his waist like it's glued there.

King leaves, pushing the door hard enough to nearly break the hinges, the bell clanging wildly. He gets in his BMW. His minions follow, and he peels out, leaving the truth behind.

He's gonna mess me up if I rat on him.

Daddy sinks onto the old people's bench. His shoulders slump, and he takes a deep breath.

We close early and pick up dinner from Reuben's.

During the short drive home, I notice every car behind us, especially if it's gray.

"I won't let him do anything to you," Daddy says.

I know. But still.

Momma's beating the hell out of some steaks when we get home. First the skillet and now red meat. Nothing in the kitchen is safe.

Daddy holds up the bags for her to see. "I got dinner, baby," It doesn't stop her from beating the steaks.

We all sit around the kitchen table, but it's the quietest dinner in Carter family history. My parents aren't talking. Seven's not talking. I'm definitely not talking. Or eating. Between the disaster at the DA's office and King, my ribs and baked beans look disgusting. Sekani can't sit still, like he's itching to give every detail of his day. I guess he can tell nobody's in the mood.

Brickz chomps and slobbers over some ribs in his corner.

Afterward, Momma collects our plates and silverware. "All right, guys, finish your homework. And don't worry, Starr. Your teachers gave me yours."

Why would I worry about that? "Thanks."

She starts to pick up Daddy's plate, but he touches her arm. "Nah. I got it."

He takes all of the plates from her, dumps them in the sink, and turns the water on.

"Maverick, you don't have to do that."

He squirts way too much dishwashing liquid in the sink. He always does. "It's cool. What time you gotta be at the clinic in the morning?"

"I'll be off again tomorrow. I have a job interview."

Daddy turns around. "Another one?"

Another one?

"Yeah. Markham Memorial again."

"That's where Aunt Pam works," I say.

"Yeah. Her dad is on the board and recommended me. It's the Pediatrics Nursing Manager. This is my second interview for it actually. They want some of the higher-ups to interview me this time."

"Baby, that's amazing," Daddy says. "That means you're close to getting it, huh?"

"Hopefully," she says. "Pam thinks it's as good as mine."

"Why didn't you guys tell us?" Seven asks.
“Cause it’s none of y’all business,” Daddy says.

“And we didn’t want to get your hopes up,” Momma adds.

“It’s a competitive position.”

“How much does it pay?” Seven’s rude self asks.

“More than what I make at the clinic. Six figures.”

“Six?” Seven and I say.

“Momma’s gonna be a millionaire!” Sekani shouts.

I swear he doesn’t know anything. “Six figures is the hundred thousands, Sekani,” I say.

“Oh. It’s still a lot.”

“What time is your interview?” Daddy asks.

“Eleven.”

“Okay, good.” He turns around and wipes a plate. “We can look at some houses before you go to it.”

Momma’s hand goes across her chest, and she steps back.

“What?”

He looks at me, then at her. “I’m getting us outta Garden Heights, baby. You got my word.”

The idea is as crazy as a four-point shot. Living somewhere other than Garden Heights? Yeah, right. I’d never believe it if it wasn’t Daddy saying it. Daddy never says something unless he means it. King’s threat must’ve really got to him.

He scrubs the skillet that Momma stabbed this morning.

She takes it from him, sets it down, and grabs his hand.

“Don’t worry about that.”

“I told you it’s cool. I can get the dishes.”

“Forget the dishes.”

And she pulls him to their bedroom and closes the door.

Suddenly, their TV blares real loud, and Jodeci sings over it from the stereo. If that woman ends up with a fetus in her uterus, I will be completely done. Done.

“Ill, man,” Seven says, knowing the deal too. “They’re too old for that.”

“Too old for what?” Sekani asks.

“Nothing,” Seven and I say together.

“You think Daddy meant that though?” I ask Seven. “We’re moving?”

He twists one of his dreads at the root. I don’t think he realizes he’s doing it. “Sounds like y’all are. Especially if Ma gets this job.”

“Y’all?” I say. “You’re not staying in Garden Heights.”

“I mean, I’ll visit, but I can’t leave my momma and my sisters, Starr. You know that.”

“Your momma put you out,” Sekani says “Where else you gonna go, stupid?”

“Who you calling stupid?” Seven sticks his hand under his armpit, then rubs it in Sekani’s face. The one time he did it to me I was nine. He got a busted lip, and I got a whooping.

“You’re not gonna be at your momma’s house anyway,” I say. “You’re going away to college, hallelujah, thank Black Jesus.”

Seven raises his brows. “You want an armpit hand too? And
I'm going to Central Community so I can stay at my momma's house and watch out for my sisters.


"Yeah, I do," he says.

"No, you don't."

"Yeah."

"Shut the hell up." I end that argument.

"Ooh!" Sekani holds his hand out. "Gimme my dollar!"

"Hell no," I say. "That shit doesn't work with me."

"Three dollars!"

"Okay, fine. I'll give you a three-dollar bill."

"I've never seen a three-dollar bill," he says.

"Exactly. And you'll never see my three dollars."
Ms. Ofrah arranged for me to do an interview with one of the national news programs today—exactly a week before I testify before the grand jury next Monday.

It's around six o'clock when the limo that the news program sent arrives. My family's coming with me. I doubt my brothers will be interviewed, but Seven wants to support me. Sekani claims he does too, but really he's hoping he'll get "discovered" somehow with all those cameras around.

My parents told him about everything. As much as he gets on my nerves, it was sweet when he gave me a handmade card that said "Sorry." Until I opened it. There was drawing of me crying over Khalil, and I had devil horns. Sekani said he wanted it to be "real." Little asshole.

We all head out to the limo. Some neighbors watch curiously from their porches and yards. Momma made all of us, including
Daddy, dress up like we’re going to Christ Temple—not quite Easter formal but not “diverse church” casual. She says we’re not gonna have the news people thinking we’re “hood rats.”

So as we’re walking to the car, she’s all, “When we get there, don’t touch anything and only speak when somebody speaks to you. It’s ‘yes, ma’am’ and ‘yes, sir,’ or ‘no, ma’am’ and ‘no, sir.’ Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three of us say.

“All right now, Starr,” one of our neighbors calls out. I get that just about every day in the neighborhood now. Word’s spreading around the Garden that I’m the witness. “All right now” is more than a greeting. It’s a simple way people let me know they got my back.

The best part though? It’s never “All right now, Big Mav’s daughter who works in the store.” It’s always Starr.

We leave in the limo. I drum my fingers on my knee as I watch the neighborhood pass by. I’ve talked to detectives and the DA, and next week I’ll talk to the grand jury. I’ve talked about that night so much I can repeat it back in my sleep. But the whole world will see this.

My phone vibrates in my blazer pocket. A couple of texts from Chris.

My mom wants to know what color your prom dress is.

Something about the tailor needs to know ASAP.

Oh, shit. The Junior-Senior Prom is Saturday. I haven’t bought a dress. With all this Khalil stuff, I’m not sure I wanna go. Momma said I need to get my mind off things. I said no. She gave me “the look.”

So I’m going to the damn prom. This dictatorship she’s on? Not cool. I text Chris back.

Uh . . . light blue?

He responds:

You don’t have a dress yet?

I’ve got plenty of time, I write back. Just been busy.

It’s true. Ms. Ofrah prepared me for this interview every day after school. Some days we finished early, and I helped out around Just Us for Justice. Answered phones, passed out flyers, anything they needed me to do. Sometimes I listened in on their staff meetings as they discussed police reform ideas and the importance of telling the community to protest not riot.

I asked Dr. Davis if Just Us could have a roundtable discussion at Williamson like they do at Garden High. He said he didn’t see the need.

Chris replies to my prom text:

Okay, if you say so

Btw Vante says sup.

About to kill him on Madden

He needs to stop calling me Bieber tho

After all that “white boy trying to be black” shit DeVante said about Chris, lately he’s at Chris’s house more than I am. Chris invited him over to play Madden, and all of a sudden
they’re “bros.” According to DeVante, Chris’s massive video game collection makes up for his whiteness.

I told DeVante he’s a video game thot. He told me to shut up. We’re cool like that though.

We arrive at a fancy hotel downtown. A white guy in a hoodie waits under the awning leading up to the door. He has a clipboard under his arm and a Starbucks cup in his hand.

Still, he somehow manages to open the limo door and shake our hands when we get out. “John, the producer. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He shakes my hand a second time. “And let me guess, you’re Starr.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you so much for having the bravery to do this.”

There’s that word again. Bravery. Brave peoples’ legs don’t shake. Brave people don’t feel like puking. Brave people sure don’t have to remind themselves how to breathe if they think about that night too hard. If bravery is a medical condition, everybody’s misdiagnosed me.

John leads us through all of these twists and turns, and I’m so glad I’m wearing flats. He can’t stop talking about how important the interview is and how much they wanna get the truth out there. He’s not exactly adding to my “bravery.”

He takes us to the hotel courtyard, where some camera operators and other show people are setting up. In the middle of the chaos, the interviewer, Diane Carey, is getting her makeup done.

It’s weird seeing her in the flesh and not as a bunch of pixels on TV. When I was younger, every single time I spent the night at Nana’s house she made me sleep in one of her long-ass nightgowns, say my bedtime prayers for at least five minutes, and watch Diane Carey’s news report so I could be “knowledgeable of the world.”

“Hi!” Mrs. Carey’s face lights up when she sees us. She comes over, and I gotta give the makeup lady props ’cause she follows her and keeps working like a pro. Mrs. Carey shakes our hands. “Diane. So nice to meet you all. And you must be Starr,” she says to me. “Don’t be nervous. This will simply be a conversation between the two of us.”

The whole time she talks, some guy snaps photos of us. Yeah, this will be a normal conversation.

“Starr, we were thinking we could get shots of you and Diane walking and talking around the courtyard,” John says. “Then we’ll go up to the suite and do the conversations between you and Diane; you, Diane, and Ms. Ofrah; and finally you and your parents. After that, we’ll be all set.”

One of the production people mics me up as John gives me a rundown of this walk and talk thing. “It’s only a transitional shot,” he says. “Simple stuff.”

Simple my ass. The first time, I practically power-walk. The second time, I walk like I’m in a funeral processional and can’t answer Mrs. Carey’s questions. I never realized walking and talking required so much coordination.
Once we get that right, we take an elevator to the top floor. John leads us to a huge suite—seriously, it looks like a penthouse—overlooking downtown. About a dozen people are setting up cameras and lighting. Ms. Ofrah’s there in one of her Khalil shirts and a skirt. John says they’re ready for me.

I sit in the loveseat across from Mrs. Carey. I’ve never been able to cross my legs, for whatever reason, so that’s out the question. They check my mic, and Mrs. Carey tells me to relax. Soon, the cameras are rolling.

“Millions of people around the world have heard the name Khalil Harris,” she says, “and they’ve developed their own ideas of who he was. Who was he to you?”

*More than he may have ever realized.* “One of my best friends,” I say. “We knew each other since we were babies. If he were here, he’d point out that he was five months, two weeks, and three days older than me.” We both chuckle at that. “But that’s who Khalil is—was.”

Damn. It hurts to correct myself.

“He was a joker. Even when things were hard, he’d somehow find some light in it. And he . . .” My voice cracks.

I know it’s corny, but I think he’s here. His nosy ass would show up to make sure I say the right things. Probably calling me his number one fan or some annoying title that only Khalil can think of.

I miss that boy.

“He had a big heart,” I say. “I know that some people call him a thug, but if you knew him, you’d know that wasn’t the case at all. I’m not saying he was an angel or anything, but he wasn’t a bad person. He was a . . .” I shrug. “He was a kid.”

She nods. “He was a kid.”

“What do you think about people who focus on the not-so-good aspect of him?” she asks. “The fact that he may have sold drugs?”

Ms. Ofrah once said that this is how I fight, with my voice. So I fight.

“I hate it,” I say. “If people knew why he sold drugs, they wouldn’t talk about him that way.”

Mrs. Carey sits up a little. “Why did he sell them?”

I glance at Ms. Ofrah, and she shakes her head. During all our prep meetings, she advised me not to go into details about Khalil selling drugs. She said the public doesn’t have to know about that.

But then I look at the camera, suddenly aware that millions of people will watch this in a few days. King may be one of them. Although his threat is loud in my head, it’s not nearly as loud as what Kenya said that day in the store.

Khalil would defend me. I should defend him.

So I gear up to throw a punch.

“Khalil’s mom is a drug addict,” I tell Mrs. Carey. “Anybody who knew him knew how much that bothered him and how much he hated drugs. He only sold them to help her out of
a situation with the biggest drug dealer and gang leader in the neighborhood.”

Ms. Ofrah noticeably sighs. My parents have wide eyes.

It's dry snitching, but it's snitching. Anybody who knows anything about Garden Heights will know exactly who I'm talking about. Hell, if they watch Mr. Lewis's interview they can figure it out.

But hey, since King wants to go around the neighborhood lying and saying Khalil repped his set, I can let the world know Khalil was forced to sell drugs for him. “His mom's life was in danger,” I say. “That's the only reason he'd ever do something like that. And he wasn't a gang member—”

“He wasn't?”

“No, ma'am. He never wanted to fall into that type of life. But I guess—” I think about DeVante for some reason. “I don't understand how everyone can make it seem like it's okay he got killed if he was a drug dealer and a gangbanger.”

A hook straight to the jaw.

“The media?” she asks.

“Yes, ma'am. It seems like they always talk about what he may have said, what he may have done, what he may not have done. I didn't know a dead person could be charged in his own murder, you know?”

The moment I say it, I know it's my jab to the mouth.

Mrs. Carey asks for my account of that night. I can't go into a lot of details—Ms. Ofrah told me not to—but I tell her we did everything One-Fifteen asked and never once cussed at him like his father claims. I tell her how afraid I was, how Khalil was so concerned about me that he opened the door and asked if I was okay.

“So he didn't make a threat on Officer Cruise's life?” she questions.

“No, ma'am. His exact words were, 'Starr, are you okay?’ That was the last thing he said, and—”

I'm ugly crying, describing the moment when the shots rang out and Khalil looked at me for the last time; how I held him in the street and saw his eyes gloss over. I tell her One-Fifteen pointed his gun at me.

“He pointed his gun at you?” she asks.

“Yes, ma'am. He kept it on me until the other officers arrived.”

Behind the cameras, Momma puts her hand over her mouth. Fury sparks in Daddy's eyes. Ms. Ofrah looks stunned.

It's another jab.

See, I only told Uncle Carlos that part.

Mrs. Carey gives me Kleenex and a moment to get myself together. “Has this situation made you fearful of cops?” she eventually asks.

“I don't know,” I say truthfully. “My uncle's a cop. I know not all cops are bad. And they risk their lives, you know? I'm always scared for my uncle. But I'm tired of them assuming. Especially when it comes to black people.”
“You wish that more cops wouldn’t make assumptions about black people?” she clarifies.

“Right. This all happened because he”—I can’t say his name—“assumed that we were up to no good. Because we’re black and because of where we live. We were just two kids, minding our business, you know? His assumption killed Khalil. It could’ve killed me.”

A kick straight to the ribs.

“If Officer Cruise were sitting here,” Mrs. Carey says, “what would you say to him?”

I blink several times. My mouth waters, but I swallow. No way I’m gonna let myself cry or throw up from thinking about that man.

If he were sitting here, I don’t have enough Black Jesus in me to tell him I forgive him. Instead I’d probably punch him. Straight up.

But Ms. Ofrah says this interview is the way I fight. When you fight, you put yourself out there, not caring who you hurt or if you’ll get hurt.

So I throw one more blow, right at One-Fifteen.

“I’d ask him if he wished he shot me too.”

SEVENTEEN

My interview aired yesterday on Diane Carey’s Friday Night News Special. This morning, John the producer called and said it’s one of the most-watched interviews in the network’s history.

A millionaire, who wishes to remain anonymous, offered to pay my college tuition. John said the offer was made right after the interview aired. I think it’s Oprah, but that’s just me because I’ve always imagined she’s my fairy godmother and one day she’ll come to my house saying, “You get a car!”

The network’s already got a bunch of emails in support of me. I haven’t seen any of them, but I received the best message in a text from Kenya.

Bout time you spoke out.
Don’t let this fame go to your head tho.
The interview trended online. When I looked this morning,