“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.”
people were still talking about it. Black Twitter and Tumblr have my back. Some assholes want me dead.

King’s not too happy either. Kenya told me he’s heated that I dry snitched.

The Saturday news programs discussed the interview too, dissecting my words like I’m the president or something. This one network is outraged by my “disregard for cops.” I’m not sure how they got that out the interview. It’s not like I was on some NWA “Fuck the Police” type shit. I simply said I’d ask the man if he wished he shot me too.

I don’t care. I’m not apologizing for how I feel. People can say what they want.

But it’s Saturday, and I’m sitting in a Rolls-Royce on my way to prom with a boyfriend who isn’t saying much of anything to me. Chris is more interested in his phone.

“You look nice,” I tell him. Which he does. His black tux with a light-blue vest and tie match the strapless tea-length gown I have on. His black leather Chuck Taylors are also a good match to my silver sequined ones. The dictator, a.k.a. my mom, bought my outfit. She has pretty good taste.

Chris says, “Thanks. You too,” but it’s so robotic, like he’s saying what he’s supposed to and not what he wants to. And how does he know what I look like? He’s barely looked at me since he picked me up from Uncle Carlos’s house.

I have no clue what’s wrong with him. Things have been fine between us, as far as I know. Now, out of nowhere, he’s all moody and silent. I would ask the driver to take me back to Uncle Carlos’s, but I look too cute to go home.

The driveway at the country club is lit with blue lights, and golden balloon arches hang over it. We’re in the only Rolls-Royce among a sea of limos, so of course people look when we pull up to the entrance.

The driver opens the door for us. Mr. Silent climbs out first and actually helps me out. Our classmates whoop and cheer and whistle. Chris wraps his arm around my waist, and we smile for pictures like everything’s all good. Chris takes my hand and wordlessly escorts me inside.

Loud music greets us. Chandeliers and flashing party lights light up the ballroom. Some committee decided the theme should be Midnight in Paris, so there’s a huge Eiffel Tower made out of Christmas lights. Looks like just about every junior and senior at Williamson is on the dance floor.

Let me say it. A Garden Heights party and a Williamson party are two very different things. At Big D’s party, people Nae-Naed, Hit the Quan, twerked and stuff. At prom, I honestly don’t know what the hell some of them are doing. Lots of jumping and fist pumping and attempts at twerking. It’s not bad. Just different. Way different.

It’s weird though—I’m not as hesitant to dance here as I was at Big D’s party. Like I said, at Williamson I’m cool by default because I’m black. I can go out there and do a silly dance move I made up, and everyone will think it’s the new thing.
White people assume all black people are experts on trends and shit. There's no way in hell I'd try that at a Garden Heights party though. You make a fool of yourself one time, and that's it. Everybody in the neighborhood will know and nobody will forget.

In Garden Heights, I learn how to be dope by watching. At Williamson, I put my learned dopeness on display. I'm not even that dope, but these white kids think I am and that goes a long way in high school politics.

I start to ask Chris if he wants to dance, but he lets my hand go and heads toward some of his boys.

"Why did I come to prom again?"

"Starr!" somebody calls. I look around a couple of times and finally spot Maya waving at me from a table.

"Girl-lee!" she says when I get there. "You look good! I know Chris went crazy when he saw you."

No. He nearly drove me crazy. "Thanks," I say, and give her a once-over. She's wearing a pink knee-length strapless dress. A pair of sparkly silver stilettos gives her about five more inches of height. I applaud her for making it this far in them. I hate heels.

"But if anybody's looking good tonight, it's you. You clean up nice, Shorty."

"Don't call me that. Especially since She Who Must Not Be Named gave me that nickname."

Damn. She Voldemorted Hailey. "Maya, you don't have to take sides, you know."

"She's the one not speaking to us, remember?"

Hailey's been on some silent treatment shit since the incident at Maya's house. I mean damn, I call you out on something, so I'm wrong and deserve the cold shoulder? Nah, she's not guilt-tripping me like that. And when Maya admitted to Hailey that she told me why Hailey unfollowed my Tumblr, Hailey stopped speaking to Maya, claiming she won't talk to either of us until we apologize. She's not used to both of us turning on her like this.

Whatever. She and Chris can form a club for all I care. Call it the Silent Treatment League of Young, Rich Brats.

I'm in my feelings just a tad. I hate that Maya got pulled into it though. "Maya, I'm sorry—"

"No need," she says. "Don't know if I told you, but I brought up the cat thing to her. After I told her about Tumblr."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And she told me to get over it." Maya shakes her head. "I'm still mad at myself for letting her say it in the first place."

"Yeah. I'm mad at myself too."

We get quiet.

Maya nudges my side. "Hey. We minorities have to stick together, remember?"

I chuckle. "Okay, okay. Where's Ryan?"

"Getting some snacks. He looks good tonight, if I say so myself. Where's your guy?"
“Don’t know,” I say. And don’t care at the moment.

The beautiful thing about best friends? They can tell when you don’t wanna talk, and they don’t push it. Maya hooks her arm through mine. “C’mon. I did not get dressed up to stand around.”

We head for the dance floor and jump and fist-pump along with the rest of them. Maya takes those heels off and barefoots it. Jess, Britt, and some of the other girls from the team join us, and we make our own little dancing circle. We lose our minds when my cousin-through-marriage, Beyoncé, comes on. (I swear I’m related to Jay-Z somehow. Same last name—we have to be.)

We sing loudly with Cousin Bey until we almost go hoarse, and Maya and I are really into it. I may not have Khalil, Natasha, or even Hailey, but I have Maya. She’s enough.

After six songs, we head back to our table, our arms draped around each other. I carry one of Maya’s shoes, and the other one dangles from her wrist by the strap.

“Did you see Mr. Warren do the robot?” Maya asks between laughs.

“Did I? I didn’t know he had it in him.”

Maya stops. She looks around without looking at anything at all. “Don’t look, but look to the left,” she mutters.

“The hell? Which one is it?”

“Look to the left,” she says through her teeth. “But quickly.”

Hailey and Luke are arm in arm in the entrance, posing for pictures, and I can’t even throw shade—with her gold-and-white dress and his white tux, they’re cute. I mean, just ‘cause we’ve got beef doesn’t mean I can’t compliment her, you know? I’m even happy she’s with Luke. It took long enough.

Hailey and Luke walk in our direction but brush right past us, her shoulder a couple of inches away from mine. She flashes us stank-eye. This chick. I probably shoot one back. Sometimes I give stank-eyes and don’t realize I’m giving them.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Maya says to Hailey’s back. “You better keep walking.”

Lord. Maya can go from zero to one hundred a little too quick. “Let’s get something to drink,” I say, pulling her with me. “Before you hurt yourself.”

We get some punch and join Ryan at our table. He’s stuffing his face with finger sandwiches and meatballs, crumbs falling onto his tux. “Where y’all been?” he asks.

“Dancing,” Maya says. She steals one of his shrimp. “You didn’t eat all day, did you?”

“Nope. I was about to starve to death.” He nods at me. “What’s up, Black Girlfriend?”

We joke around about that whole “only two black kids in the class are supposed to date” thing. “What’s up, Black Boyfriend?” I say, and I steal a shrimp too.

What do you know, Chris remembers he came with somebody and walks over to our table. He says hey to Maya and Ryan, then asks me, “You wanna take pictures or something?”
His tone is all robotic again. On a scale of one to ten on the “I’m done” meter, I’m at about fifty. “No thanks,” I tell him. “I’m not taking pictures with somebody who doesn’t wanna be here with me.”

He sighs. “Why do you have to have an attitude?”

“Me? You’re the one giving me the cold shoulder.”

“Dammit, Starr! Do you wanna take a fucking picture or not?”

The “done” meter blows up. Ka-boom. Blown to pieces. “Hell no. Go take one and shove it up your ass.”

I march off, ignoring Maya’s calls for me to come back. Chris follows me. He tries to grab my arm, but I snatch away and keep walking. It’s dark outside, but I easily find the Rolls-Royce parked along the driveway. The chauffeur isn’t around, or otherwise I would ask him to take me home. I hop in the back and lock the doors.

Chris knocks on the window. “Starr, c’mon.” He puts his hands against the window like they’re binoculars and he’s trying to look through the tint. “Can we talk?”

“Oh, now you wanna talk to me?”

“You’re the one who wouldn’t talk to me!” He bows his head, pressing his forehead against the glass. “Why didn’t you tell me you were the witness they’ve been talking about?”

He asks it softly, but it’s hard as a sucker punch in the gut. He knows.

I unlock the door and scoot over. Chris climbs in next to me.

“How did you find out?” I ask.

“The interview. Watched it with my parents.”

“They didn’t show my face though.”

“I knew your voice, Starr. And then they showed the back of you as you walked with that interview lady, and I’ve watched you walk away enough to know what you look like from the back, and . . . I sound like a pervert, don’t I?”

“So you knew me by my ass?”

“I . . . yeah.” His face goes red. “But that wasn’t all. Everything made sense, like how upset you got about the protest and about Khalil. Not that that wasn’t stuff to get upset about, ’cause it was, but it . . .” He sighs. “I’m sinking here, Starr. I just knew it was you. And it was, wasn’t it?”

I nod.

“Babe, you should’ve told me. Why would you keep something like that from me?”

I tilt my head. “Wow. I saw someone get murdered, and you’re acting like a brat ’cause I didn’t tell you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“But you think about that for a second,” I say. “Tonight you could hardly say two words to me because I didn’t tell you about one of the worst experiences of my life. You ever seen somebody die?”

“No.”

“I’ve seen it twice.”

“And I didn’t know that!” he says. “I’m your boyfriend, and
I didn’t know any of that.” He looks at me, the same hurt in his eyes like there was when I snatched my hands away weeks ago. “There’s this whole part of your life that you’ve kept from me, Starr. We’ve been together over a year now, and you’ve never mentioned Khalil, who you claim was your best friend, or this other person you saw die. You didn’t trust me enough to tell me.”

My breath catches. “It’s—it’s not like that.”

“Really?” he says. “Then what is it like? What are we? Just Fresh Prince and fooling around?”

“No.” My lips tremble, and my voice is small. “I . . . I can’t share that part of me here, Chris.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” I croak. “People use it against me. Either I’m poor Starr who saw her friend get killed in a drive-by, or Starr the charity case who lives in the ghetto. That’s how the teachers act.”

“Okay, I get not telling people around school,” he says. “But I’m not them. I would never use that against you. You once told me I’m the only person you could be yourself around at Williamson, but the truth is you still didn’t trust me.”

I’m one second away from ugly crying. “You’re right,” I say. “I didn’t trust you. I didn’t want you to just see me as the girl from the ghetto.”

“You didn’t even give me the chance to prove you wrong. I wanna be there for you. You gotta let me in.”

God. Being two different people is so exhausting. I’ve taught myself to speak with two different voices and only say certain things around certain people. I’ve mastered it. As much as I say I don’t have to choose which Starr I am with Chris, maybe without realizing it, I have to an extent. Part of me feels like I can’t exist around people like him.

I am not gonna cry, I am not gonna cry, I am not gonna cry.

“Please?” he says.

That does it. Everything starts spilling out.

“I was ten. When my other friend died,” I say, staring at the French tips on my nails. “She was ten too.”

“What was her name?” he asks.

“Natasha. It was a drive-by. It’s one of the reasons my parents put me and my brothers in Williamson. It was the closest they could get to protecting us a little more. They bust their butts for us to go to that school.”

Chris doesn’t say anything. I don’t need him to.

I take a shaky breath and look around. “You don’t know how crazy it is that I’m even sitting in this car,” I say. “A Rolls freaking Royce. I used to live in the projects in a one-bedroom apartment. I shared the room with my brothers, and my parents slept on a fold-out couch.”

The details of life back then are suddenly fresh. “The apartment smelled like cigarettes all the damn time,” I say. “Daddy smoked. Our neighbors above us and next to us smoked. I had so many asthma attacks, it ain’t funny. We only kept canned
goods in the cabinets 'cause of the rats and roaches. Summers were always too hot, and winters too cold. We had to wear coats inside and outside.

"Sometimes Daddy sold food stamps to buy clothes for us," I say. "He couldn't get a job for the longest time, 'cause he's an ex-con. When he got hired at the grocery store, he took us to Taco Bell, and we ordered whatever we wanted. I thought it was the greatest thing in the world. Almost better than the day we moved out the projects."

Chris cracks a small smile. "Taco Bell is pretty awesome."

"Yeah." I look at my hands again. "He let Khalil come with us to Taco Bell. We were struggling, but Khalil was like our charity case. Everybody knew his momma was a crackhead."

I feel the tears coming. Fuck, I'm sick of this. "We were real close back then. He was my first kiss, first crush. Before he died, we weren't as close anymore. I mean, I hadn't seen him in months and..." I'm ugly crying. "And it's killing me because he was going through so much shit, and I wasn't there for him anymore."

Chris thumbs my tears away. "You can't blame yourself."

"But I do," I say. "I could've stopped him from selling drugs. Then people wouldn't be calling him a thug. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you; I wanted to, but everybody who knows I was in the car acts like I'm made out of glass. You treated me normal. You were my normal."

I'm an absolute mess right now. Chris takes my hand and pulls me onto his lap so I'm straddling him. I bury my face in his shoulder and cry like a big-ass baby. His tux is wet, my makeup is ruined. Awful.

"I'm sorry," he says, rubbing my back. "I was an ass tonight."

"You were. But you're my ass."

"I've been watching myself walk away?"

I look at him and seriously punch his arm. He laughs and the sound of it makes me laugh. "You know what I mean! You're my normal. And that's all that matters."

"All that matters." He smiles.

I hold his cheek and let my lips reintroduce themselves to his. Chris's are soft and perfect. They taste like fruit punch too.

Chris pulls back with a gentle tug to my bottom lip. He presses his forehead against mine and looks at me. "I love you."

The "I" has appeared. My response is easy. "I love you too."

Two loud knocks against the window startle us. Seven presses his face against the glass. "Y'all bet' not be doing nothing!"

The best way to get turned all the way off? Have your brother show up.

"Seven, leave them alone," Layla whines behind him. "We were about to dance, remember?"

"That can wait. I gotta make sure he's not getting some from my sister."
“You won’t get any if you don’t stop acting so ridiculous!” she says.

“I don’t care. Starr, get out this car. I ain’t playing!” Chris laughs into my bare shoulder. “Did your dad tell him to keep an eye on you?”

Knowing Daddy . . . “Probably so.” He kisses my shoulder and his lips linger there a few seconds. “Are we good now?”

I peck him back on the lips. “We’re good.”

“Good. Let’s go dance.”

We get out the car, and Seven yells about us sneaking off and threatens to tell Daddy. Layla pulls him back inside as he says, “And if she push out a little Chris in nine months, we gon’ have a problem, partna!”

Ridiculous. Re-damn-diculous.

The music is still bumping inside. I try not to laugh as Chris really does turn the Nae-Nae into a No-No. Maya and Ryan join us on the dance floor, and they give me these “What the hell?” looks at Chris’s moves. I shrug and go with it.

Toward the end of a song, Chris leans down to my ear and says, “I’ll be right back.”

He disappears into the crowd. I don’t think anything of it until about a minute later when his voice comes over the speakers, and he’s next to the DJ in the booth.

“Hey, everybody,” he says. “My girl and I had a fight earlier.”

Oh, Lord. He’s telling all of our business. I look at my Chucks and shield my face.

“And I wanted to do this song, our song, to show you how much I love you and care about you, Fresh Princess.”

A bunch of girls go, “Awww!” His boys whoop and cheer. I’m thinking, please don’t let him sing. Please. But there’s this familiar boomp . . . boomp, boomp, boomp.

“Now this is a story all about how my life got flipped turned upside down,” Chris raps. “And I’d like to take a minute, just sit right there, I’ll tell you how I became the prince of a town called Bel-Air.”

I smile way too hard. Our song. I rap along with him, and mostly everyone joins in. Even the teachers. At the end, I cheer louder than anybody.

Chris comes back down, and we laugh and hug and kiss. Then we dance and take silly selfies, flooding dashboards and timelines around the world. When prom is over, we let Maya, Ryan, Jess, and some of our other friends ride with us to IHOP. Everybody has somebody on their lap. At IHOP, we eat way too many pancakes and dance to songs on the jukebox. I don’t think about Khalil or Natasha.

It’s one of the best nights of my life.
people who look like us compared to Uncle Carlos’s neighborhood.

Daddy pulls into the driveway of a brown-brick house at the end of a cul-de-sac. Bushes and small trees decorate the yard, and a cobblestone walkway leads up to the front door.

“C’mon, y’all,” Daddy says.

We hop out, stretching and yawning. Those forty-five-minute drives aren’t a joke. A chubby black man waves at us from the driveway next door. We wave back and follow my parents up the walkway. Through the glass of the front door, the house appears empty.

“Whose house is this?” Seven asks.

Daddy unlocks the door. “Hopefully ours.”

When we go inside, we’re standing in the living room. There’s a strong stench of paint and polished hardwood floors. Two halls, one on each side, lead away from the living room. The kitchen is right off from the living room with white cabinets, granite countertops, and stainless-steel appliances.

“We wanted you guys to see it,” Momma says. “Look around.”

I can’t lie, I’m afraid to move. “This is our house?”

“Like I said, we hope so,” Daddy replies. “We’re waiting for the mortgage to be approved.”

“Can we afford it?” Seven asks.

Momma raises an eyebrow. “Yes, we can.”

“But like down payments and stuff—”
“Seven!” I hiss. He’s always in somebody’s business.

“We got everything taken care of,” Daddy says. “We’ll rent the house in the Garden out, so that’s gon’ help with the monthly payments. Plus...” He looks at Momma with this sly grin that’s kinda adorable, I gotta admit.

“I got the nurse manager job at Markham,” she says, smiling. “I start in two weeks.”

“For real?” I say, and Seven goes, “Whoa,” while Sekani shouts, “Momma’s rich!”

“Boy, ain’t nobody rich,” Daddy says. “Calm down.”

“But this helps,” says Momma. “A lot.”

“Daddy, you’re okay with us living out here with the fake people?” Sekani asks.

“Where you get that from, Sekani?” Momma says.

“Well, that’s what he always says. That people out here are fake, and that Garden Heights is real.”

“Yeah, he does say that,” says Seven.

I nod. “All. The. Time.”

Momma folds her arms. “Care to explain, Maverick?”

“I don’t say it that much—”

“Yeah, you do,” the rest of us say.

“A’ight, I say it a lot. I may not have been one hundred percent right on all of this—”

Momma coughs, but there’s a “Ha” hidden in it.

Daddy glares at her. “But I realize being real ain’t got anything to do with where you live. The realest thing I can do is to protect my family, and that means leaving Garden Heights.”

“What else?” Momma questions, like he’s being grilled in front of the class.

“And that living in the suburbs don’t make you any less black than living in the hood.”

“Thank you,” she says with a satisfied smile.

“Now are y’all gon’ look around or what?” Daddy asks.

Seven hesitates to move, and since he’s hesitant, Sekani is too. But shoot, I want first dibs on a room. “Where are the bedrooms?”

Momma points to the hall on the left. I guess Seven and Sekani realize why I asked. The three of us exchange looks.

We rush for the hall. Sekani gets there first, and it’s not my best moment, but I sling his scrainy butt back.

“Mommy, she threw me!” he whines.

I beat Seven to the first room. It’s bigger than my current room but not as big as I want. Seven reaches the second one, looks around, and I guess he doesn’t like it. That leaves the third room as the biggest one, and it’s at the end of the hall.

Seven and I race for it, and it’s like Harry Potter versus Cedric Diggory trying to get to the Goblet of Fire. I grab Seven’s shirt, stretching it until I have a good enough grip to pull him back and get ahead of him. I beat him to the room and open the door.

And it’s smaller than the first one.

“I call dibs!” Sekani shouts. He shimmies in the doorway of the first room, the biggest of the three.
Seven and I rock, paper, scissor it for the second-biggest room. Seven always goes with rock or paper, so I easily win.

Daddy leaves to get lunch, and Momma shows us the rest of the house. My brothers and I have to share a bathroom again. Sekani’s finally learned aim etiquette and the art of flushing, so it’s fine, I guess. The master suite is on the other hallway. There’s a laundry room, an unfinished basement, and a two-car garage. Momma says we’ll get a basketball hoop on wheels. We can keep it in the garage, roll it in front of the house, and play in the cul-de-sac sometimes. A wooden fence surrounds the backyard, and there’s plenty of space for Daddy’s garden and Brickz.

“Brickz can come out here, right?” I ask.

“Of course. We aren’t gonna leave him.”

Daddy brings burgers and fries, and we eat on the kitchen floor. It’s super quiet out here. Dogs bark sometimes, but wall-rattling music and gunshots? Not happening.

“So, we’re gonna close in the next few weeks or so,” Momma says, “but since it’s the end of the school year, we’ll wait until you guys are out for summer to move.”

“Cause moving ain’t no joke,” Daddy adds.

“Hopefully, we can get settled in before you go off to college, Seven,” Momma says. “Plus it gives you a chance to make your room yours, so you can have it for holidays and the summer.”

Sekani slurps his milk shake and says with a mouth full of froth, “Seven said he’s not going to college.”

Daddy says, “What?”

Seven glares at Sekani. “I didn’t say I wasn’t going to college. I said I wasn’t going away to college. I’m going to Central Community so I can be around for Kenya and Lyric.”

“Oh, hell no,” Daddy says.

“You can’t be serious,” says Momma.

Central Community is the junior college on the edge of Garden Heights. Some people call it Garden Heights High 2.0 ’cause so many people from Garden High go there and take the same drama and bullshit with them.

“They have engineering classes,” Seven argues.

“But they don’t have the same opportunities as those schools you applied to,” Momma says. “Do you realize what you’re passing up? Scholarships, internships—”

“The chance for me to finally have a Seven-free life,” I add, and slurp my milk shake.

“Who asked you?” Seven says.

“Yo’ momma.”

Low blow, I know, but that response comes naturally. Seven flicks a fry at me. I block it and come this close to flipping him off, but Momma says, “You bet’ not!” and I lower my finger.

“Look, you not responsible for your sisters,” Daddy says, “but I’m responsible for you. And I ain’t letting you pass up opportunities so you can do what two grown-ass people supposed to do.”

“A dollar, Daddy,” Sekani points out.

“I love that you look out for Kenya and Lyric,” Daddy tells
Seven, “but there’s only so much you can do. You can choose whatever college you want, and you’ll be successful. But you choose because that’s where you wanna be. Not because you trying to do somebody else’s job. You hear me?”

“Yeah,” Seven says.

Daddy hooks his arm around Seven’s neck and pulls him closer. Daddy kisses his temple. “I love you. And I always got your back.”

After lunch we gather in the living room, join hands, and bow our heads.

“Black Jesus, thank you for this blessing,” Daddy says. “Even when we weren’t so crazy about the idea of moving—”

Momma clears her throat.

“Okay, when I wasn’t so crazy about the idea of moving,” Daddy corrects, “you worked things out. Thank you for Lisa’s new job. Please help her and continue to be with her when she does extra shifts at the clinic. Help Sekani with his end-of-the-year tests. And thank you, Lord, for helping Seven do something I didn’t, get a high school diploma. Guide him as he chooses a college and let him know you’re protecting Kenya and Lyric.

“Now, Lord, tomorrow is a big day for my baby girl as she goes before this grand jury. Please give her peace and courage. As much as I wanna ask you to work this case out a certain way, I know you already got a plan. I ask for some mercy, God. That’s all. Mercy for Garden Heights, for Khalil’s family, for Starr. Help all of us through this. In your precious name—”

“Wait,” Momma says.
I peek out with one eye. Daddy does too. Momma never, ever interrupts prayer.

“Uh, baby,” says Daddy, “I was finishing up.”

“I have something to add. Lord, bless my mom, and thank you that she went into her retirement fund and gave us the money for the down payment. Help us turn the basement into a suite so she can stay here sometimes.”

“No, Lord,” Daddy says.

“Yes, Lord,” says Momma.

“No, Lord.”

“Yes.”

“No, amen!”

We get home in time to catch a playoffs game.

Basketball season equals war in our house. I’m a LeBron fan through and through. Miami, Cleveland, it doesn’t matter. I ride with him. Daddy hasn’t jumped off the Lakers ship yet, but he likes LeBron. Seven’s all about the Spurs. Momma’s an “anybody but LeBron” hater, and Sekani is a “whoever is winning” fan.

It’s Cleveland versus Chicago tonight. The battle lines are drawn—me and Daddy versus Seven and Momma. Seven jumps on that “anybody but LeBron” bandwagon of hateration too.

I change into my LeBron jersey. Every time I don’t wear it, his team loses. Seriously, I’m not even lying. I can’t wash it
either. Momma washed my last jersey right before Finals, and Miami lost to the Spurs. I think she did it on purpose.

I take my lucky spot in the den in front of the sectional. Seven comes in and steps over me, putting his big bare foot near my face. I smack it away. “Get your crusty foot outta my face.”

“We’ll see who’s joking later. Ready for a butt whooping?”

“You mean am I ready to give one? Yep!”

Momma peeks around the doorway. “Munch, you want some ice cream?”

I gape at her. She knows I don’t eat dairy products during games. Dairy gives me gas, and gas is bad luck.

She grins. “How about a sundae? Sprinkles, strawberry syrup, whipped cream.”

I cover my ears. “La-la-la-la-la, go away, LeBron hater. La-la-la-la-la.”

Like I said, basketball season equals war, and my family has the dirtiest tactics.

Momma returns with a big bowl, shoveling ice cream into her mouth. She sits on the sectional and lowers her bowl into my face. “You sure you don’t want some, Munch? It’s your favorite too. Cake batter. So good!”

Be strong, I tell myself, but damn, that ice cream looks good. Strawberry syrup glistens on it and a big dollop of whipped cream sits pretty on top. I close my eyes. “I want a championship more.”

“Well, you aren’t getting that, so you may as well enjoy some ice cream.”

“Ha!” Seven goes.

“What’s all this smack up in here?” Daddy asks.

He takes the recliner on the sectional, his lucky spot. Sekani scurries in and sits behind me, propping his bare feet on my shoulders. I don’t mind. They haven’t matured and funkified yet.

“I was offering Munch some of my sundae,” Momma says.

“You want some, baby?”

“ Heck, nah. You know I don’t eat dairy during games.”

See? It’s serious.

“You and Seven may as well get ready for this butt whooping Cleveland ’bout to give y’all,” says Daddy. “I mean, it ain’t gon’ be a Kobe butt whooping, but it’s gon’ be a good one.”

“Amen!” I say. Except the Kobe part.

“Boy, bye,” Momma tells him. “You’re always picking sorry teams. First the Lakers—”

“Ay, a three-peat ain’t a sorry team, baby. And I don’t always pick sorry teams.” He grins. “I picked your team, didn’t I?”

Momma rolls her eyes, but she’s grinning too, and I hate to admit it but they’re kinda cute right now. “Yeah,” she says, “that’s the only time you picked right.”

“Uh-huh,” Daddy says. “See, your momma played for Saint Mary’s basketball team, and they had a game against Garden High, my school.”
“And we whooped their butts too,” Momma says, licking ice cream off her spoon. “Them lil’ girls ain’t have anything on us. I’m just saying.”

“Anyway, I’m there to watch some of the homeboys play after the girls’ game,” Daddy says, looking at Momma. This is so adorable, I can’t stand it. “I got there early and saw the finest girl ever, and she was playing her ass off on the court.”

“Tell them what you did,” says Momma, although we know.

“Ay, I was trying to—”

“Nah, nah, tell them what you did,” she says.

“I tried to get your attention.”

“Uh-uh!” Momma says, getting up. She hands me her bowl and stands in front of the TV. “You were like this on the sideline,” she says, and she kinda leans to the side, holding her crotch and licking her lips. We crack up. I can so see Daddy doing that too.

“During the middle of a game!” she says. “Standing there looking like a pervert, just watching me.”

“But you noticed me,” Daddy says. “Right?”

“Cause you looked like a fool! Then, during halftime, I’m on the bench, and he’s behind me, talking about”—she deepens her voice—“Ay! Ay, shorty. What’s your name? You know you looking good out there. Can I get your number?”

“Dang, Pops, you didn’t have any game,” Seven says.

“I had game!” Daddy argues.

“Did you get her number that night though?” Seven says.
my dad, and it doesn’t seem like much of a world at all.

But his footsteps rush back in. “Y’all a’ight?”

The weight on top of me lifts. Momma says she’s okay, and Sekani says he is too. Seven echoes them.

Daddy’s holding his Glock. “I shot at them fools,” he says between heavy breaths. “I think I hit a tire. Ain’t never seen that car before.”

“Did they shoot in the house?” Momma asks.

“Yeah, a couple shots through the front window,” he says. “They threw something too. Landed in the living room.”

I head for the front.

“Starr! Get back here!” Momma calls.

I’m too curious and too hardheaded. Glass shards glisten all over Momma’s good sofa. A brick sits in the middle of the floor.

Momma calls Uncle Carlos. He gets to our house in half an hour.

Daddy hasn’t stopped pacing the den, and he hasn’t put his Glock down. Seven takes Sekani to bed. Momma has her arm around me on the sectional and won’t let go.

Some of our neighbors checked in, like Mrs. Pearl and Ms. Jones. Mr. Charles from next door rushed over, holding his own piece. None of them saw who did it.

Doesn’t matter who did it. It was clearly a message for me.

I have this sick feeling like I got when I ate ice cream and played in hot weather too long when I was younger. Ms. Rosalie said the heat “boiled” my stomach and that something cool would settle it. Nothing cool can settle this.

“Did you call the police?” Uncle Carlos asks.

“Hell nah!” says Daddy. “How I know it wasn’t them?”

“Maverick, you still should’ve called,” Uncle Carlos says. “This needs to be recorded, and they can send someone to guard the house.”

“Oh, I got somebody to guard the house. Don’t worry about that. It definitely ain’t gon’ be no crooked pig who may have been behind this.”

“King Lords could’ve done this!” says Uncle Carlos. “Didn’t you say King made a veiled threat against Starr because of her interview?”

“I’m not going tomorrow,” I say, but I have a better chance of being heard at a Drake concert.

“It ain’t no damn coincidence that somebody’s trying to scare us the night before she testifies to the grand jury,” Daddy says. “That’s some shit your buddies would do.”

“You’d be surprised at how many of us want justice in this case,” says Uncle Carlos. “But of course, classic Maverick. Every cop is automatically a bad cop.”

“I’m not going tomorrow,” I repeat.

“I ain’t say every cop is a bad cop, but I ain’t gon’ stand here like a fool, thinking that some of them don’t do dirty shit. Hell, they made me lay face-down on the sidewalk. And for what? ’Cause they could!”
The Hate U Give

Angie Thomas

“It could’ve been either one of them,” Momma says. “Trying to figure out who did it will get us nowhere. The main thing is making sure Starr is safe tomorrow—”

“I said I’m not going!” I shout.

They finally hear me. My stomach holds a roiling boil. “Yeah, it could’ve been King Lords, but what if it was the cops?” I look at Daddy and remember that moment weeks ago in front of the store. “I thought they were gonna kill you,” I croak. “Because of me.”

He kneels in front of me and sits the Glock beside my feet. He lifts my chin. “Point one of the Ten-Point Program. Say it.”

My brothers and I learned to recite the Black Panthers’ Ten-Point Program the same way other kids learn the Pledge of Allegiance.

“We want freedom,” I say. “We want the power to determine the destiny of our black and oppressed communities.”

“Say it again.”

“We want freedom. We want the power to determine the destiny of our black and oppressed communities.”

“Point seven.”

“We want an immediate end to police brutality,” I say, “and the murder of black people, other people of color, and oppressed people.”

“Again.”

“We want an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people, other people of color, and oppressed people.”

“And what did Brother Malcolm say is our objective?”

Seven and I could recite Malcolm X quotes by the time we were thirteen. Sekani hasn’t gotten there yet.

“Complete freedom, justice, and equality,” I say, “by any means necessary.”

“Again.”

“Complete freedom, justice, and equality, by any means necessary.”

“So why you gon’ be quiet?” Daddy asks.

Because the Ten-Point Program didn’t work for the Panthers. Huey Newton died a crackhead, and the government crushed the Panthers one by one. By any means necessary didn’t keep Brother Malcolm from dying, possibly at the hands of his own people. Intentions always look better on paper than in reality. The reality is, I may not make it to the courthouse in the morning.

Two loud knocks at the front door startle us.

Daddy straightens up, grabs his Glock, and leaves to answer. He says what’s up to somebody, and there’s a sound like palms slapping. Then a male voice says, “You know we got you, Big Mav.”

Daddy returns with some tall, wide-shouldered guys dressed in gray and black. It’s a lighter gray than what King and his folks wear. It takes a hood-trained eye to notice it and
understand. This is a different set of King Lords.

"This is Goon." Daddy points to the shortest one, in front with the ponytails. "Him and his boys gon' provide security for us tonight and tomorrow."

Uncle Carlos folds his arms and gives the King Lords a hard look. "You asked King Lords to guard the house when King Lords may have put us in this position?"

"They don't mess with King," Daddy says. "They Cedar Grove King Lords."

Shit, they may as well be GDs then. Sets make all the difference in gangbanging, not colors. The Cedar Grove King Lords have been beefing with King's set, the West Side King Lords, for a while now.

"You need us to fall back, Big Mav?" Goon asks.

"Nah, don't worry about him," Daddy says. "Y'all do what y'all came to do."

"Nothing but a thang," Goon says, and gives Daddy dap. Him and his boys head back outside.

"Are you serious right now?" Uncle Carlos yells. "You really think gangbangers can provide adequate security?"

"They strapped, ain't they?" Daddy says.

"Ridiculous!" Uncle Carlos looks at Momma. "Look, I'll go with you to the courthouse tomorrow as long as they aren't coming too."

"Punk ass," Daddy says. "Can't even protect your niece 'cause you scared of what it'll look like to your fellow cops if you're working with gangbangers."

"Oh, you wanna go there, Maverick?" Uncle Carlos says.

"Carlos, calm down."

"No, Lisa. I wanna make sure I got this right. Does he mean the same niece I took care of while he was locked up? Huh? The one I took to her first day of school because he took a charge for his so-called boy? The one I held when she cried for her daddy?"

He's loud, and Momma stands in front of him to keep him from Daddy.

"You can call me as many names as you want, Maverick, but don't you ever say I don't care about my niece and nephews! Yeah, that's right, nephews! Seven too. When you were locked up—"

"Carlos," Momma says.

"No, he needs to hear this. When you were locked up, I helped Lisa every time your sorry-ass baby momma dropped Seven off on her for weeks at a time. Me! I bought clothes, food, provided shelter. My Uncle Tom ass! Hell no, I don't wanna work with criminals, but don't you ever insinuate I don't care about any of those kids!"

Daddy's mouth makes a line. He's silent.

Uncle Carlos snatches his keys off the coffee table, gives my forehead two pecks, and leaves. The front door slams shut.
NINETEEN

The smell of hickory bacon and the sound of way too many voices wake me up.

I blink to soothe my eyes from the assault my neon-blue walls are giving them. It takes me a few minutes lying here to remember it's grand jury day.

Time to see if I'll fail Khalil or not.

I put my feet in my slippers and head toward the unfamiliar voices. Seven and Sekani are at school by now, plus their voices aren't that deep. I should be worried about some unknown dudes seeing me in my pajamas, but that's the beauty of sleeping in tanks and basketball shorts. They won't see much.

The kitchen's standing-room-only. Guys in black slacks, white shirts, and ties are at the table or standing against the wall, shoveling food in their mouths. They have tattoos on their faces and hands. A couple of them give me quick nods and mumble "S'up" through mouths full of food.

The Cedar Grove King Lords. Damn, they clean up nicely. Momma and Aunt Pam work the stove as skillets full of bacon and eggs sizzle, blue flames dancing beneath them. Nana pours juice and coffee and runs her mouth.

Momma barely looks over her shoulder and says, "Morning, Munch. Your plate's in the microwave. Come get these biscuits out for me, please."

She and Aunt Pam move to the ends of the stove, stirring the eggs and turning the bacon. I grab a towel and open the oven. The aroma of buttery biscuits and a heat wave hit me head-on. I pick the pan up with the towel, and that thing is still too hot to hold for long.

"Over here, lil' momma," Goon says at the table.

I'm glad to put it down. Not even two minutes after I set it on the table, every last biscuit is gone. Goddamn. I grab my paper towel-covered plate from the microwave before the King Lords inhale it too.

"Starr, get those other plates for your dad and your uncle," Aunt Pam says. "Take them outside, please."

Uncle Carlos is here? I tell Aunt Pam, "Yes, ma'am," stack their plates on top of mine, grab the hot sauce and some forks, and leave as Nana starts one of her "back in my theater days" stories.

Outside, the sunlight's so bright it makes the paint on my
walls seem dim. I squint and look around for Daddy or Uncle Carlos. The hatch on Daddy’s Tahoe is up, and they’re sitting on the back of it.

My slippers scuff against the concrete, sounding like brooms sweeping the floor. Daddy looks around the truck. “There go my baby.”

I hand him and Uncle Carlos a plate and get a kiss to the cheek from Daddy in return. “You sleep okay?” he asks.

“Kinda.”

Uncle Carlos moves his pistol from the space between them and pats the empty spot. “Keep us company for a bit.”

I hop up next to them. We unwrap the plates that have enough biscuits, bacon, and eggs for a few people.

“I think this one’s yours, Maverick,” Uncle Carlos says. “It’s got turkey bacon.”

“Thanks, man,” Daddy says, and they exchange plates.

I shake hot sauce on my eggs and pass Daddy the bottle. Uncle Carlos holds his hand out for it too.

Daddy smirks and passes it down. “I would’ve thought you were too refined for some hot sauce on your eggs.”

“You do realize this is the house I grew up in, right?” He covers his eggs completely in hot sauce, sets the bottle down, and licks his fingers for the sauce that got on them. “Don’t tell Pam I ate all of this though. She’s always on me about watching my sodium.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t tell,” Daddy says. They bump fists to seal the deal.

I woke up on another planet or in an alternate reality. Something. “Y’all cool all of a sudden?”

“We talked,” Daddy says. “It’s all good.”

“Yep,” says Uncle Carlos. “Some things are more important than others.”

I want details, but I won’t get them. If they’re good though, I’m good. And honestly? It’s about damn time.

“Since you and Aunt Pam are here, where’s DeVante?” I ask Uncle Carlos.

“At home for once and not playing video games with your li’l boyfriend.”

“Why does Chris always have to be ‘li’l’ to you?” I ask. “He’s not little.”

“You better be talking about his height,” says Daddy.

“Amen,” Uncle Carlos adds, and they fist-bump again.

So they’ve found common complaining ground—Chris. Figures.

Our street is quiet for the most part this morning. It usually is. The drama always comes from people who don’t live here. Two houses down, Mrs. Lynn and Ms. Carol talk in Mrs. Lynn’s yard. Probably gossiping. Can’t tell either one of them anything if you don’t want it spread around Garden Heights like a cold. Mrs. Pearl works in her flower bed across the street with a little help from Fo’ty Ounce. Everybody calls him that ’cause he always asks for money to buy a “Fo’ty ounce from the licka sto’ real quick.” His rusty shopping cart with all of his belongings is in Mrs. Pearl’s driveway, a big bag of mulch on
the bottom of it. Apparently he has a green thumb. He laughs at something Mrs. Pearl says, and people two streets over probably hear that guffaw of his.

"Can't believe that fool's alive," Uncle Carlos says. "Would've thought he drank himself to death by now."

"Who? Fo'ty Ounce?" I ask.

"Yeah! He was around when I was a kid."

"Nah, he ain't going nowhere," says Daddy. "He claims the liquor keeps him alive."

"Does Mrs. Rooks live around the corner?" Uncle Carlos asks.

"Yep," I say. "And she still makes the best red velvet cakes you ever had in your life."

"Wow. I told Pam I have yet to taste a red velvet cake as good as Mrs. Rooks's. What about um...?" He snaps his fingers. "The man who fixed cars. Lived at the corner."

"Mr. Washington," says Daddy. "Still kicking it and still does better work than any automotive shop around. Got his son helping him too."

"Li'l John?" Uncle Carlos asks. "The one that played basketball but got on that stuff?"

"Yep," says Daddy. "He been clean for a minute now."

"Man." Uncle Carlos pushes his red eggs around his plate. "I almost miss living here sometimes."

I watch Fo'ty Ounce help Mrs. Pearl. People around here don't have much, but they help each other out as best they can. It's this strange, dysfunctional-as-hell family, but it's still a family. More than I realized until recently.

"Starr!" Nana calls from the front door. People two streets over probably hear her like they heard Fo'ty Ounce. "Your momma said hurry up. You gotta get ready. Hey, Pearl!"

Mrs. Pearl shields her eyes and looks our way. "Hey, Adele! Haven't seen you in a while. You all right?"

"Hanging in there, girl. You got that flowerbed looking good! I'm coming by later to get some of that Birds of Paradise."

"All right."

"You not gon' say hey to me, Adele?" Fo'ty Ounce asks. When he talks, it jumbled together like one long word.

"Hell nah, you old fool," Nana says. The door slams behind her.

Daddy, Uncle Carlos, and I crack up.

The Cedar Grove King Lords trail us in two cars, and Uncle Carlos drives me and my parents. One of his off-duty buddies occupies the passenger's seat. Nana and Aunt Pam trail us too.

All these people though, and none of them can go in the grand jury room with me.

It takes fifteen minutes to get to downtown from Garden Heights. There's always construction work going on for some new building. Garden Heights has dope boys on corners, but downtown people in business suits wait for crossing lights to change. I wonder if they ever hear the gunshots and shit in my neighborhood.

We turn onto the street where the courthouse is, and I have
one of those weird déjà-vu moments. I’m three, and Uncle Carlos drives Momma, Seven, and me to the courthouse. Momma cries the entire drive, and I wish Daddy were here because he can always get her to stop crying. Seven and I hold Momma’s hands as we walk into a courtroom. Some cops bring Daddy out in an orange jumpsuit. He can’t hug us because he’s handcuffed. I tell him I like his jumpsuit; orange is one of my favorite colors. But he looks at me real seriously, and says, “Don’t you ever wear this, you hear me?”

All I remember after that is the judge saying something, Momma sobbing, and Daddy telling us he loves us as the cops haul him off. For three years I hated the courthouse because it took Daddy from us.

I’m not thrilled to see it now. News vans and trucks are across the street from the courthouse, and police barricades separate them from everybody else. I now know why people call it a “media circus.” It seriously looks like the circus is setting up in town.

Two traffic lanes separate the courthouse from the media frenzy, but I swear they’re a world away. Hundreds of people quietly kneel on the courthouse lawn. Men and women in clerical collars stand at the front of the crowd, their heads bowed.

To avoid the clowns and their cameras, Uncle Carlos turns onto the street alongside the courthouse. We go in through the back door. Goon and another King Lord join us. They flank me and don’t hesitate to let security check them for weapons.

Another security guard leads us through the courthouse. The farther we go, the fewer people we pass in the halls. Ms. Ofrah waits beside a door with a brass plate that says Grand Jury Room.

She hugs me and asks, “Ready?”

For once I am. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll be out here the whole time,” she says. “If you need to ask me something, you have that right.” She looks at my entourage. “I’m sorry, but only Starr’s parents are allowed to watch in the TV room.”

Uncle Carlos and Aunt Pam hug me. Nana pats my shoulder as she shakes her head. Goon and his boy give me quick nods and leave with them.

Momma’s eyes brim with tears. She pulls me into a tight hug, and it’s at that moment, of all the moments, that I realize I’ve gotten an inch or two taller than she is. She plants kisses all over my face and hugs me again. “I’m proud of you, baby. You are so brave.”

That word. I hate it. “No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are.” She pulls back and pushes a strand of hair away from my face. I can’t explain the look in her eyes, but it knows me better than I know myself. It wraps me up and warms me from the inside out. “Brave doesn’t mean you’re not scared, Starr,” she says. “It means you go on even though you’re scared. And you’re doing that.”

She leans up slightly on her tiptoes and kisses my forehead.
as if that makes it true. For me it kinda does.

Daddy wraps his arms around both of us. “You got this, baby girl.”

The door to the grand jury room creaks open, and the DA, Ms. Monroe, looks out. “We’re ready if you are.”

I walk into the grand jury room alone, but somehow my parents are with me.

The room has wood-paneled walls and no windows. About twenty or so men and women occupy a U-shaped table. Some of them are black, some of them aren’t. Their eyes follow us as Ms. Monroe leads me to a table in front of them with a mic on it.

One of Ms. Monroe’s colleagues swears me in, and I promise on the Bible to tell the truth. I silently promise it to Khalil too.

Ms. Monroe says from the back of the room, “Could you please introduce yourself to the grand jurors?”

I scoot closer to the mic and clear my throat. “My name—” My small voice sounds like a five-year-old’s. I sit up straight and try again. “My name is Starr Carter. I’m sixteen years old.”

“The mic is only recording you, not projecting your voice,” Ms. Monroe says. “As we have our conversation, we need you to speak loud enough for everyone to hear, okay?”

“Yes—” My lips brush the mic. Too close. I move back and try again. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. You came here on your own free will, is that correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have an attorney, Ms. April Ofrah, correct?” she says.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You understand you have the right to consult with her, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You understand you’re not the focus of any criminal charges, correct?”

Bullshit. Khalil and I have been on trial since he died. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Today, we want to hear in your own words what happened to Khalil Harris, okay?”

I look at the jurors, unable to read their faces and tell if they really want to hear my words. Hopefully they do. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, since we have that understanding, let’s talk about Khalil. You were friends with him, right?”

I nod, but Ms. Monroe says, “Please give a verbal response.”

I lean toward the mic and say, “Yes, ma’am.”

Shit. I forgot the jurors can’t hear me on it and it’s only for recording. It doesn’t make any sense that I’m so nervous.

“How long did you know Khalil?”

The same story, all over again. I become a robot who repeats how I knew Khalil since I was three, how we grew up together, the kind of person he was.

When I finish, Ms. Monroe says, “Okay. We’re going to
discuss the night of the shooting in detail. Are you okay with that?"

The un-brave part of me, which feels like most of me, shouts no. It wants to crawl up in a corner and act as if none of this ever happened. But all those people outside are praying for me. My parents are watching me. Khalil needs me. I straighten up and allow the tiny brave part of me to speak. “Yes, ma’am.”

PART 3

EIGHT WEEKS AFTER IT