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."
TWENTY

Three hours. That's how long I was in the grand jury room. Ms. Monroe asked me all kinds of questions. What angle was Khalil at when he was shot? Where did he pull his license and registration from? How did Officer Cruise remove him from the car? Did Officer Cruise seem angry? What did he say?

She wanted every single detail. I gave her as much as I could.

It's been over two weeks since I talked to the grand jury, and now we're waiting for their decision, which is similar to waiting for a meteor to hit. You know it's coming, you're just not exactly sure when and where it'll hit, and there ain't shit you can do in the meantime but keep living.

So we're living.

The sun is out today, but the rain fell in sheets as soon as we pulled into the parking lot of Williamson. When it rains like
that while the sun’s out, Nana says the devil is beating his wife. Plus, it’s Friday the thirteenth, a.k.a. the devil’s day, according to Nana. She’s probably holed up in the house like it’s doomsday.

Seven and I dash from the car into the school. The atrium’s busy as usual with people talking to their little cliques or playing around. The school year’s almost over, so everybody’s goof-off levels are at their highest, and white-kid goofing off is a category of its own. I’m sorry, but it is. Yesterday a sophomore rode down the stairs in the janitor’s garbage can. His dumb ass got suspension and a concussion. Stupid.

I wiggle my toes. The one day I wear Chucks it decides to rain. They’re miraculously dry.

“You’re good?” Seven asks, and I doubt it’s about the rain. He’s been way more protective lately, ever since we got word that King’s still pissed I dry snitched. I heard Uncle Carlos tell Daddy it gave the cops another reason to watch King closely.

Unless King threw the brick, he hasn’t done anything. Yet. So Seven’s always on guard, even all the way out here at Williamson.

“Yes,” I tell him. “I’m good.”

“All right.”

He gives me dap and goes off to his locker.

I head for mine. Hailey and Maya are talking at Maya’s locker nearby. Actually, Maya’s doing most of the talking. Hailey’s got her arms folded and rolls her eyes a lot. She sees me down the hall and gets this smug expression.

“Perfect,” she says when I get closer. “The liar is here.”

“Excuse me?” It’s way too early for this bullshit.

“Why don’t you tell Maya how you flat-out lied to us?”

“What?”

Hailey hands me two pictures. One is Khalil’s thugshot, as Daddy calls it. One of the pictures they’ve shown on the news. Hailey printed it off the internet. Khalil wears a smirk, gripping a handful of money and throwing up a sideways peace sign.

The other picture, he’s twelve. I know because I’m twelve in it too. It’s my birthday party at this laser tag place downtown. Khalil’s on one side of me, shoveling strawberry cake into his mouth, and Hailey’s on my other side, grinning for the camera along with me.

“I thought he looked familiar,” Hailey says as smugly as she looks. “He is the Khalil you knew. Isn’t he?”

I stare at the two Khalils. The pictures only show so much. For some people, the thugshot makes him look just like that—a thug. But I see somebody who was happy to finally have some money in his hand, damn where it came from. And the birthday picture? I remember how Khalil ate so much cake and pizza he got sick. His grandma hadn’t gotten paid yet, and food was limited in their house.

I knew the whole Khalil. That’s who I’ve been speaking up for. I shouldn’t deny any part of him. Not even at Williamson.

I hand the pictures back to Hailey. “Yeah, I knew him. So what?”
“Don’t you think you owe us an explanation?” she says. “You owe me an apology too.”
“Um, what?”
“You’ve basically picked fights with me because you were upset about what happened to him,” she says. “You even accused me of being racist.”
“But you have said and done some racist stuff. So…” Maya shrugs. “Whether Starr lied or not doesn’t make it okay.”
Minority alliance activated.
“So, since I unfollowed her Tumblr because I didn’t wanna see any more pictures of that mutilated kid on my dashboard—”
“His name was Emmett Till,” says Maya.
“Whatever. So because I didn’t want to see that disgusting shit, I’m racist?”
“No,” Maya says. “What you said about it was racist. And your Thanksgiving joke was definitely racist.”
“Oh my God, you’re still upset about that?” Hailey says. “That was so long ago!”
“Doesn’t make it okay,” I say. “And you can’t even apologize for it.”
“I’m not apologizing because it was only a joke!” she shouts. “It doesn’t make me a racist. I’m not letting you guys guilt trip me like this. What’s next? You want me to apologize because my ancestors were slave masters or something stupid?”
“Bitch—” I take a deep breath. Way too many people are watching. I cannot go angry black girl on her. “Your joke was hurtful,” I say, as calmly as I can. “If you give a damn about Maya, you’d apologize and at least try to see why it hurt her.”
“It’s not my fault she can’t get over a joke from freaking freshman year! Just like it’s not my fault you can’t get over what happened to Khalil.”
“So I’m supposed to ‘get over’ the fact he was murdered?”
“Yes, get over it! He was probably gonna end up dead anyway.”
“Are you serious?” Maya says.
“He was a drug dealer and a gangbanger,” Hailey says. “Somebody was gonna kill him eventually.”
“Get over it?” I repeat.
She folds her arms and does this little neck movement. “Um, yeah? Isn’t that what I said? The cop probably did everyone a favor. One less drug dealer on the—”
I move Maya out the way and slam my fist against the side of Hailey’s face. It hurts, but damn it feels good.
Hailey holds her cheek, her eyes wide and her mouth open for several seconds.
“Bitch!” she shrieks. She goes straight for my hair like girls usually do, but my ponytail is real. She’s not pulling it out.
I hit at Hailey with my fists, and she slaps and claws me upside my head. I push her off, and she hits the floor. Her skirt goes up, and her pink drawers are out for everybody to see. Laughter erupts around us. Some people have their phones out.
I'm no longer Williamson Starr or even Garden Heights Starr. I'm pissed.

I kick and hit at Hailey, cuss words flying out my mouth. People gather around us, chanting “Fight! Fight!” and one fool even shouts, “World Star!”

Shit. I'm gonna end up on that ratchet site.

Somebody yanks my arm, and I turn, face-to-face with Remy, Hailey's older brother.

“You crazy bi—”

Before he can finish “bitch,” a blur of dreadlocks charges at us and pushes Remy back.

“Get your hands off my sister!” Seven says.

And then they're fighting. Seven throws blows like nobody's business, knocking Remy upside his head with several good hooks and jabs. Daddy used to take both of us to the boxing gym after school.

Two security guards run over. Dr. Davis, the headmaster, marches toward us.

An hour later, I'm in Momma's car. Seven trails us in his Mustang.

All four of us have been sentenced to three days' suspension, despite Williamson's zero-tolerance policy. Hailey and Remy's dad, a Williamson board member, thought it was outrageous. He said Seven and I should be expelled because we “started it,” and that Seven shouldn't be allowed to graduate.

Dr. Davis told him, “Given the circumstances”—and he looked straight at me—“suspension will suffice.”

He knows I was with Khalil.

“This is exactly what They expect you to do,” Momma says. “Two kids from Garden Heights, acting like you ain't got any sense!”

They with a capital T. There's Them and then there's Us. Sometimes They look like Us and don't realize They are Us.

“But she was running her mouth, saying Khalil deserved—”

“I don't care if she said she shot him herself. People are gonna say a whole lot, Starr. It doesn't mean you hit somebody. You gotta walk away sometimes.”

“You mean walk away and get shot like Khalil did?”

She sighs. “Baby, I understand—”

“No you don't!” I say. “Nobody understands! I saw the bullets rip through him. I sat there in the street as he took his last breath. I've had to listen to people try to make it seem like it's okay he was murdered. As if he deserved it. But he didn't deserve to die, and I didn't do anything to deserve seeing that shit!”

WebMD calls it a stage of grief—anger. But I doubt I'll ever get to the other stages. This one slices me into millions of pieces. Every time I'm whole and back to normal, something happens to tear me apart, and I'm forced to start all over again.

The rain lets up. The devil stops beating his wife, but I beat the dashboard, punching it over and over, numb to the pain of
it. I wanna be numb to the pain of all of this.

“Let it out, Munch.” My mom rubs my back. “Let it out.”

I pull my polo over my mouth and scream until there aren’t any screams left in me. If there are any, I don’t have the energy to get them out. I cry for Khalil, for Natasha, even for Hailey, ’cause damn if I didn’t just lose her for good too.

When we turn on our street, I’m snot-nosed and wet-eyed. Finally numb.

A gray pickup and a green Chrysler 300 are parked behind Daddy’s truck in the driveway. Momma and Seven have to park in front of the house.

“What is this man up to?” Momma says. She looks over at me. “You feel better?”

I nod. What other choice do I have?

She leans over and kisses my temple. “We’ll get through this. I promise.”

We get out. I’m one hundred percent sure the cars in the driveway belong to King Lords and Garden Disciples. In Garden Heights you can’t drive a car that’s gray or green unless you claim a set. I expect yelling and cussing when I get inside, but all I hear is Daddy saying, “It don’t make no sense, man. For real, it don’t.”

It’s standing-room-only in the kitchen. We can’t even get in ’cause some guys are in the doorway. Half of them have green somewhere in their outfits. Garden Disciples. The others have light gray on somewhere. Cedar Grove King Lords. Mr.

Reuben’s nephew, Tim, sits beside Daddy at the table. I’ve never noticed that cursive GD tattoo on his arm.

“We don’t know when the grand jury gon’ make their decision,” Daddy says. “But if they decide not to indict, y’all gonna tell these li’l dudes not to burn this neighborhood down.”

“What you expect them to do then?” says a GD at the table. “Folks tired of the bullshit, Mav.”

“Straight up,” says the King Lord Goon, who’s at the table too. His long plaits have ponytail holders on them like I used to wear way back in the day. “Nothing we can do ’bout it.”

“That’s bullshit,” says Tim. “We can do something.”

“We can all agree the riots got outta hand, right?” says Daddy.

He gets a bunch of “yeahs” and “rights.”

“Then we can make sure it doesn’t go down like that again. Talk to these kids. Get in their heads. Yeah, they mad. We all mad, but burning down our neighborhood ain’t gon’ fix it.”

“Our?” says the GD at the table. “Nigga, you said you moving.”

“To the suburbs,” Goon mocks. “You getting a minivan too, Mav?”

They all laugh at that.

Daddy doesn’t though. “I’m moving, so what? I’ll still have a store here, and I’ll still give a damn what happens here. Who is it gon’ benefit if the whole neighborhood burns down? Damn sure won’t benefit none of us.”
“We gotta be more organized next time,” says Tim. “For one, make sure our brothers and sisters know they can’t destroy black-owned businesses. That messes it up for all of us.”

“For real,” says Daddy. “And I know, me and Tim out the game, so we can’t speak on some things, but all these territory wars gotta be put aside somehow. This is bigger than some street shit. And honestly all the street shit got these cops thinking they can do whatever they want.”

“Yeah, I feel you on that,” says Goon.

“Y’all gotta come together somehow, man,” Daddy says. “For the sake of the Garden. The last thing they’d ever expect is some unity around here. A’ight?”

Daddy slaps palms with Goon and the Garden Disciple. Then Goon and the Garden Disciple slap palms with each other.

“Wow,” Seven says.

It’s huge that these two gangs are in the same room together, and for my daddy to be the one behind it? Crazy.

He notices us in the doorway. “What y’all doing here?”

Momma inches into the kitchen, looking around. “The kids got suspended.”

“Suspended?” Daddy says. “For what?”

Seven passes him his phone.

“It’s online already?” I say.

“Yeah, somebody tagged me in it.”

Daddy taps the screen, and I hear Hailey running her mouth about Khalil, then a loud smack.

Some of the gang members watch over Daddy’s shoulder. “Damn, lil’ momma,” one says, “you got hands.”

“You crazy bi—,” Remy says on the phone. A bunch of smacks and oohs follow.

“Look at my boy!” Daddy says. “Look at him!”

“I ain’t know your lil’ nerdy ass had it in you,” a King Lord teases.

Momma clears her throat. Daddy stops the video.

“A’ight, y’all,” he says, serious all of a sudden. “I gotta handle some family business. We’ll meet back up tomorrow.”

Tim and all the gang members clear out, and cars crank up outside. Still no gunshots or arguing. They could’ve broken out into a gangsta rendition of “Kumbaya” and I wouldn’t be any more shocked than I am.

“How did you get all of them in here and keep the house in one piece?” Momma asks.

“I got it like that.”

Momma kisses him on the lips. “You certainly do. My man, the activist.”

“Uh-huh.” He kisses her back. “Your man.”

Seven clears his throat. “We’re standing right here.”

“Ay, y’all can’t complain,” Daddy says. “If you wouldn’t have been fighting, you wouldn’t have to see that.” He reaches over and pinches my cheek a little. “You a’ight?”

The dampness hasn’t left my eyes yet, and I’m not exactly smiling. I mutter, “Yeah.”
Daddy pulls me onto his lap. He cradles me and switches between kissing my cheek and pinching it, going over and over in a real deep voice, “What’s wrong with you? Huh? What’s wrong with you?”

And I’m giggling before I can stop myself.

Daddy gives me a sloppy, wet kiss to my cheek and lets me up. “I knew I’d get you laughing. Now what happened?”

“You saw the video. Hailey ran her mouth, so I popped her. Simple as that.”

“That’s your child, Maverick,” Momma says. “Gotta hit somebody because she didn’t like what they said.”

“Mine? Uh-uh, baby. That’s all you.” He looks at Seven. “Why were you fighting?”

“Dude came at my sister,” Seven says. “I wasn’t gonna let him.”

As much as Seven talks about protecting Kenya and Lyric, it’s nice that he has my back too.

Daddy replays the video, starting with Hailey saying, “He was probably gonna end up dead anyway.”

“Wow,” Momma says. “That lil’ girl has a lot of nerve.”

“Spoiled ass don’t know a damn thing and running her mouth,” says Daddy.

“So, what’s our punishment?” Seven asks.

“Go do your homework,” Momma says.

“That’s it?” I say.

“You’ll also have to help your dad at the store while you’re suspended.” She drapes her arms over Daddy from behind. “Sound okay, baby?”

He kisses her arm. “Sounds good to me.”

If you can’t translate Parentish, this is what they really said:

Momma: I don’t condone what you did, and I’m not saying it’s okay, but I probably would’ve done it too. What about you, baby?

Daddy: Hell yeah, I would’ve.

I love them for that.
PART 4

TEN WEEKS AFTER IT
Still no decision from the grand jury, so we’re still living.

It’s Saturday, and my family is at Uncle Carlos’s house for a Memorial Day weekend barbecue, which is also serving as Seven’s birthday/graduation party. He turns eighteen tomorrow, and he officially became a high school graduate yesterday. I’ve never seen Daddy cry like he did when Dr. Davis handed Seven that diploma.

The backyard smells like barbecue, and it’s warm enough that Seven’s friends swim in the pool. Sekani and Daniel run around in their trunks and push unsuspecting people in. They get Jess. She laughs about it and threatens to get them later. They try it once with me and Kenya and never again. All it takes is some swift kicks to their asses.

But DeVante comes up behind us and pushes me in. Kenya
shrieks as I go under, getting my freshly done cornrows soaked and my J's too. I have on board shorts and a tankini, but they're new and cute, meaning they're supposed to be looked at, not swam in.

I break the surface of the water and gulp in air.

"Starr, you okay?" Kenya calls. She's run about five feet away from the pool.

"You not gon' help me get out?" I say.

"Girl, nah. And mess up my outfit? You seem all right."

Sekani and Daniel whoop and cheer for DeVante like he's the greatest thing since Spide-Man. Bastards. I climb out that pool so fast.

"Uh-oh," DeVante says, and the three of them take off in separate directions. Kenya goes after DeVante. I run after Sekani because dammit, blood is supposed to be thicker than pool water.

"Momma!" he squeals.

I catch him by his trunks and pull them way up, almost to his neck, until he has the worst wedgie ever. He gives a high-pitched scream. I let go, and he falls on the grass, his trunks so far up his butt it looks like he's wearing a thong. That's what he gets.

Kenya brings DeVante to me, holding his arms behind him like he's under arrest. "Apologize," she says.

"No!" Kenya yanks on his arms. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry!" She lets go. "Better be."

DeVante rubs his arm with a smirk. "Violent ass."

"Punk ass," she snips back.

He flicks his tongue at her, and she goes, "Boy, bye!"

This is flirting for them, believe it or not. I almost forget DeVante's hiding from her daddy. They act like they've forgotten too.

DeVante gets me a towel. I snatch it and dry my face as I head to the poolside loungers with Kenya. DeVante sits beside her on one.

Ava skips over with her baby doll and a comb, and I naturally expect her to shove them into my hands. She hands them to DeVante instead.

"Here!" she tells him, and skips off.

And he starts combing the doll's hair! Kenya and I stare at him for the longest.

"What?" he says.

We bust out laughing.

"She got you trained!" I say.

"Man." He groans. "She cute, okay? I can't tell her no." He braids the doll's hair, and his long thin fingers move so quickly, they look like they'll get tangled. "My li'l sisters did me like this all the time."

His tone dips when he mentions them. "You heard from them or your momma?" I ask.

"Yeah, about a week ago. They at my cousin's house. She live in like the middle of nowhere. Mom's been a mess 'cause she
didn’t know if I was okay. She apologized for leaving me and for
being mad. She want me to come stay with them.”

Kenya frowns. “You leaving?”

“I don’t know. Mr. Carlos and Mrs. Pam said I can stay
with them for my senior year. My momma said she’d be okay
with that, if it means I stay outta trouble.” He examines his
handiwork. The doll has a perfect French braid. “I gotta think
about it. I kinda like it out here.”

Salt-N-Pepa’s “Push It” blasts from the speakers. That’s
one song Daddy shouldn’t play. The only thing worse would be
that old song “Back That Thang Up.” Momma loses her damn
mind when it comes on. Really, just say, “Cash Money Records,
takin’ over for the ’99 and the 2000,” and she suddenly becomes
ratchet as hell.

She and Aunt Pam both go, “Heeey!” to Salt-N-Pepa and
do all these old dance moves. I like nineties shows and movies,
but I do not wanna see my mom and auntie reenact that decade in
dance. Seven and his friends circle around them and cheer
them on.

Seven’s the loudest. “Go, Ma! Go, Aunt Pam!”

Daddy jumps in the middle of the circle behind Momma. He
puts both hands behind his head and moves his hips in a circle.

Seven pushes Daddy away from Momma, going, “Nooo! Stooop!” Daddy gets around him, and dances behind Momma.


DeVante watches them with a smile. “You were right about
your aunt and uncle, Starr. They ain’t too bad. Your grandma
kinda cool too.”

“Who? I know you don’t mean Nana.”

“Yeah, her. She found out I play spades. The other day, she
took me to a game after she finished tutoring me. She called it
extra-credit work. We been cool ever since.”

Figures.

Chris and Maya walk through the gate, and my stomach
gets all jittery. I should be used to my two worlds colliding, but
I never know which Starr I should be. I can use some slang, but
not too much slang, some attitude, but not too much attitude,
so I’m not a “sassy black girl.” I have to watch what I say and
how I say it, but I can’t sound “white.”

Shit is exhausting.

Chris and his new “bro” DeVante slap palms, then Chris
kisses my cheek. Maya and I do our handshake. DeVante nods
at her. They met a few weeks ago.

Maya sits beside me on the loungers. Chris squeezes his big
butt between us, pushing both of us aside a little.

Maya flashes him a stink eye. “Seriously, Chris?”

“Hey, she’s my girlfriend. I get to sit next to her.”

“Um, no? Besties before testes.”

Kenya and I snicker, and DeVante goes, “Damn.”

The jitters ease up a bit.

“So you’re Chris?” Kenya says. She’s seen pictures on my
Instagram.
“Yep. And you’re Kenya?” He’s seen pictures on my Instagram too.

“The one and only.” Kenya eyes me and mouths, *He is fine!* Like I didn’t know that already.

Kenya and Maya look at each other. Their paths last crossed almost a year ago at my Sweet Sixteen, if you can consider that path-crossing. Hailey and Maya were at one table, Kenya and Khalil at another table with Seven. They never talked.

“Maya, right?” Kenya says.

Maya nods. “The one and only.”

Kenya’s lips curl up. “Your kicks are cute.”

“Thanks,” Maya says, checking them out for herself. Nike Air Max 95s. “They’re supposed to be running shoes. I never run in them.”

“I don’t run in mine neither,” Kenya says. “My brother’s the only person I know who actually runs in them.”

Maya laughs.

Okay. This is good so far. Nothing to worry about.

Until Kenya goes, “So where blondie at?”

Chris snorts. Maya’s eyes widen.

“Kenya, that ain’t—that’s not her name,” I say.

“You knew who I was talking about though, didn’t you?”

“You!” Maya says. “She’s probably somewhere licking her wounds after Starr kicked her ass.”

“What?” Kenya shouts. “Starr, you ain’t tell me about that!”

“It was, like, two weeks ago,” I say. “Wasn’t worth talking ’bout. I only hit her.”

“Only hit her?” Maya says. “You Mayweathered her.”

Chris and DeVante laugh.


So I tell her about it, without really thinking about what I say or how I sound. I just talk. Maya adds to the story, making it sound worse than it was, and Kenya eats it up. We tell her how Seven gave Remy a couple of hits, which has Kenya beaming, talking about, “My brother don’t play.” Like he’s only her brother, but whatever. Maya even tells her about the Thanksgiving cat thing.

“I told Starr we minorities gotta stick together,” Maya says.

“So true,” says Kenya. “White people been sticking together forever.”

“Well . . .” Chris blushes. “This is awkward.”

“You’ll get over it, boo,” I say.

Maya and Kenya crack up.

My two worlds just collided. Surprisingly, everything’s all right.

The song changes to “Wobble.” Momma runs over and pulls me up. “C’mon, Munch.”

I can’t dig my feet in the grass fast enough. “Mommy, no!”


Everybody lines up on the grassy area that’s become the
make shift dance floor. Momma pulls me to the front row. “Show ’em how it’s done, baby,” she says. “Show ’em how it’s done!”

I stay still on purpose. Dictator or not, she’s not gonna make me dance. Kenya and Maya egg her on in egging me on. Never thought they’d team up against me.

Shoot, before I know it, I’m wobbling. I have duck lips too, so you know I’m feeling it.

I talk Chris through the steps, and he keeps up. I love him for trying. Nana joins in, doing a shoulder shimmy that’s not the Wobble, but I doubt she cares.

The “Cupid Shuffle” comes on, and my family leads everybody else on the front row. Sometimes we forget which way is right and which is left, and we laugh way too hard at ourselves. Embarrassing dancing and dysfunction aside, my family’s not so bad.

After all that wobbling and shuffling, my stomach begs for some food. I leave everybody else doing the “Bikers Shuffle,” which is a whole new level of shuffling, and most of our party guests are lost as hell.

Aluminum serving trays crowd the kitchen counter. I stack a plate with some ribs, wings, and corn on the cob. I scoop a nice amount of baked beans on there somehow. No potato salad. That’s the devil’s food. All that mayonnaise. I don’t care if Momma made it, I’m not touching that mess.

I refuse to eat outside, too many bugs that could get on my food. I plop down at the dining room table, and I’m about to go in on my plate.

But the damn phone rings.

Everybody else is outside, leaving me to answer. I shove a chicken wing in my mouth. “Hello?” I chomp in the other person’s ear. Rude? Definitely. Am I starving? Hell yeah.

“Hi, this is the front security gate. Isha Robinson is asking to visit your residence.”

I stop chewing. Isha was MIA at Seven’s graduation, which she was invited to, so why did she show up to the party she wasn’t invited to? How did she even find out about it? Seven didn’t tell her, and Kenya swore she wouldn’t. She lied and told her momma and daddy she was hanging with some other friends today.

I take the phone outside to Daddy because, shit, I don’t know what to do. I go out at a good time too. He’s trying—and failing—to Nae-Nae. I have to call him a second time for him to stop that atrocity and come over.

He grins. “You ain’t know your daddy had it in him, did you?”

“I still don’t. Here.” I hand him the phone. “That’s neighborhood security. Isha’s at the security gate.”

His grin disappears. He plugs one ear and puts the phone to the other. “Hello?”

The security guard talks for a moment. Daddy motions Seven to the patio. “Hold on.” He covers the receiver. “Your
momma at the gate. She wanna see you.”

Seven’s eyebrows knit together. “How did she know we’re here?”

“Your grandma’s with her. Didn’t you invite her?”

“Yeah, but not Ilesha.”

“Look, man, if you want her to come back for a li’l bit, it’s cool,” Daddy says. “I’ll make DeVante go inside so she won’t see him. What you wanna do?”

“Pops, can you tell her—”

“Nah, man. That’s your momma. You handle that.”

Seven bites his lip for a moment. He sighs through his nose. “All right.”

Ilesha pulls up out front. I follow Seven, Kenya, and my parents to the driveway. Seven always has my back. I figure he needs me to have his too.

Seven tells Kenya to stay back with us and goes toward Ilesha’s pink BMW.

Lyric jumps out the car. “Sevvie!” She runs to him, the ball-shaped ponytail holders on her hair bouncing. I hated wearing those things. All it takes is one hitting you between your eyes and you’re done. Lyric launches into Seven’s arms, and he swings her around.

I can’t lie, I always get a little jealous when I see Seven with his other sisters. It doesn’t make sense, I know. But they share a momma, and it makes things different between them. It’s like

they have a stronger bond or something.

But there’s no way in hell I’d trade Momma for Ilesha. Nope.

Seven keeps Lyric on his hip and hugs his grandma with one arm.

Ilesha gets out. A bob haircut has replaced her down-to-the-ass Indian import. She doesn’t even try to tug her hot-pink dress down that obviously rode up her thighs during the drive. Or maybe it didn’t ride up and that’s where it always was.

Nope. Wouldn’t trade Momma for anything.

“So you gon’ have a party and not invite me, Seven?” Ilesha asks. “A birthday party at that? I’m the one who gave birth to your ass!”

Seven glances around. At least one of Uncle Carlos’s neighbors is looking. “Not now.”

“Oh, hell yes now. I had to find out from my momma because my own son couldn’t be bothered to invite me.” She sets her sharp glare on Kenya. “And this li’l fast thang lied to me about it! I oughta whoop your ass.”

Kenya flinches like Ilesha already hit her. “Momma—”

“Don’t blame Kenya,” says Seven, setting Lyric down. “I asked her not to tell you, Ilesha.”

“Ilesha?” she echoes, all in his face. “Who the hell you think you talking to like that?”

What happens next is like when you shake a soda can real hard. From the outside, you can’t tell anything is going on. But then you open it, and it explodes.
“This is why I didn’t invite you!” Seven shouts. “This! Right now! You don’t know how to act!”

“Oh, so you ashamed of me, Seven?”

“You’re fucking right I’m ashamed of you!”

“Whoa!” Daddy says. Stepping between them, he puts his hand on Seven’s chest. “Seven, calm down.”

“Nah, Pops! Let me tell her how I didn’t invite her because I didn’t wanna explain to my friends that my stepmom isn’t my mom like they think. Or how I never once corrected anybody at Williamson who made the assumption. Hell, it wasn’t like she ever came to any of my stuff, so why bother? You couldn’t even show up to my graduation yesterday!”

“Seven,” Kenya pleads. “Stop.”

“No, Kenya!” he says, his sights square on their momma. “I’ll tell her how I didn’t think she gave a damn about my birthday, ‘cause guess what? She never has! ‘You didn’t invite me, you didn’t invite me,’” he mocks. “Hell no, I didn’t. And why the fuck should I?”

Iesha blinks several times and says in a voice like broken glass, “After all I’ve done for you.”

“All you’ve done for me? What? Putting me out the house? Choosing a man over me every single chance you got? Remember when I tried to stop King from whooping your ass, Iesha? Who did you get mad at?”

“Seven,” Daddy says.

“Me! You got mad at me! Said I made him leave. That’s what you call ‘doing’ for me? That woman right there”—he stretches his arm toward Momma—“did everything you were supposed to and then some. How dare you stand there and take credit for it. All I ever did was love you.” His voice cracks. “That’s it. And you couldn’t even give that back to me.”

The music has stopped, and heads peek over the backyard fence.

Layla approaches him. She hooks her arm through his. He allows her to take him inside. Iesha turns on her heels and starts for her car.

“I’esha, wait,” Daddy says.

“Nothing to wait for.” She throws her door open. “You happy, Maverick? You and that trick you married finally turned my son against me. Can’t wait till King fuck y’all up for letting that girl snitch on him on TV.”

My stomach clenches.

“Tell him try it if he wants and see what happens!” says Daddy.

It’s one thing to hear gossip that somebody plans to “fuck you up,” but it’s a whole different thing to hear it from somebody who would actually know.

But I can’t worry about King right now. I have to go to my brother.

Kenya’s at my side. We find him on the bottom of the staircase. He sobs like a baby. Layla rests her head on his shoulder. Seeing him cry like that . . . I wanna cry. “Seven?”
He looks up with red, puffy eyes that I’ve never seen on my brother before.
Momma comes in. Layla gets up, and Momma takes her spot on the steps.
“Come here, baby,” she says, and they somehow hug.
Daddy touches my shoulder and Kenya’s. “Go outside, y’all.”
Kenya’s face is scrunched up like she’s gonna cry. I grab her arm and take her to the kitchen. She sits at the counter and buries her face in her hands. I climb onto the stool and don’t say anything. Sometimes it’s not necessary.
After a few minutes, she says, “I’m sorry my daddy’s mad at you.”
This is the most awkward situation ever—my friend’s dad possibly wants to kill me. “Not your fault,” I mumble.
“I understand why my brother didn’t invite my momma, but . . .” Her voice cracks. “She going through a lot, Starr. With him.” Kenya wipes her face on her arm. “I wish she’d leave him.”
“Maybe she afraid to?” I say. “Look at me. I was afraid to speak out for Khalil, and you went off on me about it.”
“I didn’t go off.”
“Yeah, you did.”
“Trust me, no, I didn’t. You’ll know when I go off on you.”
“Anyway! I know it’s not the same, but . . .” Good Lord, I never thought I’d say this. “I think I understand Iesha. It’s hard to stand up for yourself sometimes. She may need that push too.”

“So you want me to go off on her? I can’t believe you think I went off on you. Sensitive ass.”
“I don’t either.”
We go silent.
Kenya wipes her face again. “I’m good.” She gets up. “I’m good.”
“You sure?”
“Yes! Stop asking me that. C’mon, let’s go back out there and stop them from talking about my brother, ’cause you know they’re talking.”
She heads for the door, but I say, “Our brother.”
Kenya turns around. “What?”
“Our brother. He’s mine too.”
I didn’t say it in a mean way or even with an attitude, I swear. She doesn’t respond. Not even an “okay.” Not that I expected her to suddenly go, “Of course, he’s our brother, I’m extremely sorry for acting like he wasn’t yours too.” I hoped for something though.
Kenya goes outside.
Seven and Iesha unknowingly hit the pause button on the party. The music’s off, and Seven’s friends stand around, talking in hushed tones.
Chris and Maya walk up to me. "Is Seven okay?" Maya asks.

"Who turned the music off?" I ask. Chris shrugs.

I pick up Daddy's iPod from the patio table, our DJ for the afternoon that's hooked up to the sound system. Scrolling through the playlist, I find this Kendrick Lamar song Seven played for me one day, right after Khalil died. Kendrick raps about how everything will be all right. Seven said it's for both of us.

I hit play and hope he hears it. It's for Kenya too.

Midway through the song, Seven and Layla come back out. His eyes are puffy and pink but dry. He smiles at me a little and gives a quick nod. I return it.

Momma leads Daddy outside. They're both wearing cone-shaped birthday hats, and Daddy carries a huge sheet cake with candles lit on top of it.

"Happy birthday to ya!" they sing, and Momma does this not-as-embarrassing shoulder bounce. "Happy birthday to ya! Happy birth-day!"

Seven smiles from ear to ear. I turn the music down.

Daddy sets the cake on the patio table, and everybody crowds around it and Seven. Our family, Kenya, DeVante, and Layla—basically, all the black people—sing the Stevie Wonder version of "Happy Birthday." Maya seems to know it. A lot of Seven's friends look lost. Chris does too. These cultural differences are crazy sometimes.
“Love you too, Pops.”

The cake is one of Mrs. Rooks’s red velvets. Everybody goes on and on about how good it is. Uncle Carlos pigs out on at least three slices. There’s more dancing, laughing. All in all, it’s a good day.

Good days don’t last forever though.

PART 5

THIRTEEN WEEKS AFTER IT—THE DECISION
In our new neighborhood I can simply tell my parents “I’m going for a walk” and leave.

We just got off the phone with Ms. Ofrah, who said the grand jury will announce their decision in a few hours. She claims only the grand jurors know the decision, but I’ve got a sinking feeling I know it. It’s always the decision.

I stick my hands in the pockets of my sleeveless hoodie. Some kids race past on bikes and scooters. Nearly knock me over. Doubt they’re worried about the grand jury’s decision. They aren’t hurrying inside like the kids back home are probably doing.

Home.

We started moving into our new house this past weekend. Five days later, this place doesn’t feel like home yet. It could be
all the unpacked boxes or the street names I don’t know. And it’s almost too quiet. No Fo’ty Ounce and his creaky cart or Mrs. Pearl hollering a greeting from across the street.

I need normal.

I text Chris. Less than ten minutes later, he picks me up in his dad’s Benz.

The Bryants live in the only house on their street that has a separate house attached to it for a butler. Mr. Bryant owns eight cars, mostly antiques, and a garage to store them all.

Chris parks in one of the two empty spots.

“Your parents gone?” I ask.

“Yep. Date night at the country club.”

Most of Chris’s house looks too fancy to live in. Statues, oil paintings, chandeliers. A museum more than a home. Chris’s suite on the third floor is more normal looking. There’s a leather couch in his room, right in front of the flat-screen TV and video game systems. His floor is painted to look like a half basketball court, and he can play on an actual hoop on his wall.

His California King-size bed has been made, a rare sight. I never knew there was anything larger than a king-size bed before I met him. I pull my Timbs off and grab the remote from his nightstand. As I throw myself onto his bed, I flick the TV on.

Chris steps out his Chucks and sits at his desk, where a drum pad, a keyboard, and turntables are hooked up to a Mac. “Check this out,” he says, and plays a beat.
“My dad gambles.”
“I grew up in the projects.”
“I grew up with a roof over my head too.”
I sigh and start to turn my back to him.
He holds my shoulder so I won’t. “Don’t let this stuff get in your head again, Starr.”
“You ever notice how people look at us?”
“What people?”
“People,” I say. “It takes them a second to realize we’re a couple.”
“Who gives a fuck?”
“Me.”
“Why?”
“Because you should be with Hailey.”
He recoils. “Why the hell would I do that?”
He doesn’t get it, but I don’t wanna talk about it anymore. I wanna get so caught up in him that the grand jury’s decision isn’t even a thing. I kiss his lips, which always have and always will be perfect. He kisses me back, and soon we’re making out like it’s the only thing we know how to do.
It’s not enough. My hands travel below his chest, and he’s bulging in more than his arms. I start unzipping his jeans.
He grabs my hand. “Whoa. What are you doing?”
“What do you think?”

His eyes search mine. “Starr, I want to, I do—”
“I know you do. And it’s the perfect opportunity.” I trail kisses along his neck, getting each of those perfectly placed freckles. “Nobody’s here but us.”
“But we can’t,” he says, voice strained. “Not like this.”
“Why not?” I slip my hand in his pants, heading for the bulge.
“Because you’re not in a good place.”
I stop.
He looks at me, and I look at him. My vision blurs. Chris wraps his arms around me and pulls me closer. I bury my face in his shirt. He smells like a perfect combination of Lever soap and Old Spice. The thump of his heart is better than any beat he’s ever made. My normal, in the flesh.

Chris rests his chin on top of my head. “Starr...”
He lets me cry as much as I need to.

My phone vibrates against my thigh, waking me up. It’s almost pitch-black in Chris’s room—the red sky shines a bit of light through his windows. He sleeps soundly and holds me like that’s how he always sleeps.

My phone buzzes again. I untangle myself out of Chris’s arms and crawl to the foot of the bed. I fish my phone from my pocket. Seven’s face lights up my screen.

I try not to sound too groggy. “Hello?”
“Where the hell are you?” Seven barks.
“Has the decision been announced?”
“No. Answer my question.”
“Chris’s house.”
Seven sucks his teeth. “I don’t even wanna know. Is DeVante over there?”
“No. Why?”
“Uncle Carlos said he walked out a while ago. Nobody’s seen him since.”
My stomach clenches. “What?”
“Yeah. If you weren’t fooling around with your boyfriend, you’d know that.”
“You’re really making me feel guilty right now?”
He sighs. “I know you’re going through a lot, but damn, Starr. You can’t disappear on us like that. Ma’s looking for you. She’s worried sick. And Pops had to go protect the store, in case . . . you know.”
I crawl back to Chris and shake his shoulder. “Come get us,” I tell Seven. “We’ll help you look for DeVante.”
I send Momma a text to let her know where I am, where I’m going, and that I’m okay. I don’t have the guts to call her. And have her go off on me? Nah, no thanks.
Seven is talking on his phone when he pulls into the driveway. By the look on his face, somebody’s gotta be dead.
I throw open the passenger door. “What’s wrong?”
“Kenya, calm down,” he says. “What happened?” Seven listens and looks more horrified by the second. Then he suddenly says, “I’m on my way,” and tosses the phone on the backseat. “It’s DeVante.”
“Whoa, wait.” I’m holding the door, and he’s revving up his engine. “What happened?”
“I don’t know. Chris, take Starr home—”
“And let you go to Garden Heights by yourself?” But shoot, actions are louder. I climb in the passenger seat.
“I’m coming too,” Chris says. I let my seat forward, and he climbs in the back.
Luckily, or unluckily, Seven doesn’t have time to argue. We pull off.

Seven cuts the forty-five-minute drive to Garden Heights to thirty. The entire drive I plead with God to let DeVante be okay.
The sun’s gone by the time we get off the freeway. I fight the urge to tell Seven to turn around. This is Chris’s first time in my neighborhood.

But I have to trust him. He wants me to let him in, and this is the most “in” he could get.

At the Cedar Grove Projects there’s graffiti on the walls and broken-down cars in the courtyard. Under the Black Jesus mural at the clinic, grass grows up through the cracks in the sidewalk. Trash litters every curb we pass. Two junkies argue loudly on a corner. There’s lots of hoopties, cars that should’ve been in the junkyard a long time ago. The houses are old, small.
ANGIE THOMAS

Whatever Chris thinks doesn’t come out his mouth.
Seven parks in front of Isha’s house. The paint is peeling, and the windows have sheets in them instead of blinds and curtains. Isha’s pink BMW and King’s gray one make an L shape on the yard. The grass is completely gone from years of them parking there. Gray cars fitted with rims sit in the driveway and along the street.

Seven turns his ignition off. “Kenya said they’re all in the backyard. I should be good. Y’all stay here.”

Judging by those cars, for one Seven there’s about fifty King Lords. I don’t care if King is pissed at me, I’m not letting my brother go in there alone. “I’m coming with you.”

“No.”

“I said I’m coming.”

“Starr, I don’t have time for—”
I fold my arms. “Try and make me stay.”
He can’t, and he won’t.
Seven sighs. “Fine. Chris, stay here.”

“Hell no! I’m not staying out here by myself.”

We all get out. Music echoes from the backyard along with random shouts and laughter. A pair of gray high-tops dangle by their laces from the utility line in front of the house, telling everybody who can decipher the code that drugs are sold here.

Seven takes the steps two at a time and throws the front door open. “Kenya!”

THE HATE U GIVE

Compared to the outside, the inside is five-star-hotel nice. They have a damn chandelier in the living room and brand-new leather furniture. A flat-screen TV takes up a whole wall, and tropical fish swim around in a tank on another wall. The definition of “hood rich.”

“Kenya!” Seven repeats, going down the hall.

From the front door I see the back door. A whole lot of King Lords dance with women in the backyard. King’s in the middle in a high-backed chair, his throne, puffing on a cigar. Isha sits on the arm of the chair, holding a cup and moving her shoulders to the music. Thanks to the dark screen on the door, I can see outside but chances are they can’t see inside.

Kenya peeks into the hall from one of the bedrooms. “In here.”

DeVante lies on the floor in the fetal position at the foot of a king-size bed. The plush white carpet is stained with his blood as it trickles from his nose and mouth. There’s a towel beside him, but he’s not doing anything with it. One of his eyes has a fresh bruise around it. He groans, clutching his side.

Seven looks at Chris. “Help me get him up.”
Chris has paled. “Maybe we should call—”

“Chris, man, c’mon!”

Chris inches over, and the two of them sit DeVante up against the bed. His nose is swollen and bruised, and his upper lip has a nasty cut.

Chris passes him the towel. “Dude, what happened?”
“I walked into King’s fist. Man, what you think happened? They jumped me.”

“I couldn’t stop them,” Kenya says, all stuffed-up sounding like she’s been crying, “I’m so sorry, DeVante.”

“This shit ain’t your fault, Kenya,” DeVante says. “Are you a’ight?”

She sniffs and wipes her nose on her arm. “I’m okay. He only pushed me.”

Seven’s eyes flash. “Who pushed you?”

“She tried to stop them from beating my ass,” DeVante says. “King got mad and pushed her out the—”

Seven marches to the door. I catch his arm and dig my feet into the carpet to keep him from moving, but he ends up pulling me with him. Kenya grabs his other arm. In this moment, he’s our brother, not just mine or hers.

“Seven, no,” I say. He tries to pull away, but my grip and Kenya’s grip are steel. “You go out there and you’re dead.”

His jaw is hard, his shoulders are tense. His narrowed eyes are set on the doorway.

“Let. Me. Go,” he says.

“Seven, I’m okay. I promise,” Kenya says. “But Starr’s right. We gotta get Vante outta here before they kill him. They just waiting for the sun to set.”

“He put his hands on you,” Seven snarls. “I said I wouldn’t let that happen again.”

“We know,” I say. “But please don’t go back there.”
“Now I’m Momma?” she says. “What happened to that ‘Iesha’ shit from the other week? Huh, Seven? See, baby, you don’t know how the game work. Let Momma explain something to you, okay? When DeVante stole from King, he earned an ass whooping. He got one. Anybody who helps him is asking for it too, and they better be able to handle it.” She looks at me. “That goes for dry snitches too.”

All it takes is her hollering for King . . .

Her eyes flick toward the back door. The music and laughter rise in the air. “I tell y’all what,” she says, and turns to us. “Y’all better get DeVante’s sorry ass out my bedroom. Bleeding on my carpet and shit. And got the nerve to use one of my damn towels? Matter of fact, get him and that snitch out my house.”

Seven says, “What?”

“You deaf too?” she says. “I said get them out my house. And take your sisters.”

“What I gotta take them for?” Seven says.

“Because I said so! Take them to your grandma’s or something, I don’t care. Get them out my face. I’m trying to get my party on, shit.” When none of us moves, she says, “Go!”

“I’ll get Lyric,” Kenya says, and leaves.

Chris and Seven each take one of DeVante’s hands and pull him up. DeVante winces and cusses the whole way. Once on his feet, he bends over, holding his side, but slowly straightens up and takes steadying breaths. He nods. “I’m good. Just sore.”

“Hurry up,” Iesha says. “Damn. I’m tired of looking at y’all.”

Seven’s glare says what he doesn’t.

DeVante insists he can walk, but Seven and Chris lend their shoulders for support anyway. Kenya’s already at the front door with Lyric on her hip. I hold the door open for all of them and look toward the backyard.

Shit. King’s rising off his throne.

Iesha goes out the back door, and she’s in his face before he can fully stand up. She grabs his shoulders and guides him back down, whispering in his ear. He smiles widely and leans back into his chair. She turns around so her back is to him, the view he really wants, and starts dancing. He smacks her ass. She looks my way.

I doubt she can see me, but I don’t think I’m one of the people she’s trying to see anyway. They’ve gone to the car.

Suddenly I get it.

“Starr, c’mon,” Seven calls.

I jump off the porch. Seven holds his seat forward for me and Chris to climb in the back with his sisters. Once we’re in, he drives off.

“We gotta get you to the hospital, Vante,” he says.

DeVante presses the towel against his nose and looks at the blood staining it. “I’ll be a’ight,” he says, like that quick observation tells him what a doctor can’t. “We lucky Iesha helped us, man. For real.”
Seventeen snorts. “She wasn’t helping us. Somebody could be bleeding to death, and she would be more worried about her carpet and getting her party on.”

My brother is smart. So smart that he’s dumb. He’s been hurt by his momma so much that when she does something right he’s blind to it. “Seven, she did help us,” I say. “Think about it. Why did she tell you to take your sisters too?”

“’Cause she didn’t wanna be bothered. As always.”

“No. She knows King will go off when he sees DeVante’s gone,” I say. “If Kenya’s not there, Lyric’s not there, who do you think he’s gon’ take it out on?”

He says nothing.

Then, “Shit.”

The car makes an abrupt stop, lurching us forward then sideways as Seven makes a wide U-turn. He hits the gas, and houses blur past us.

“Seven, no!” Kenya says. “We can’t go back!”

“I’m supposed to protect her!”

“No, you’re not!” I say. “She’s supposed to protect you, and she’s trying to do that now.”

The car slows down. It comes to a complete stop a few houses away from Leshia’s.

“If he—” Seven swallows. “If she—he’ll kill her.”

“He won’t,” Kenya says. “She’s lasted this long. Let her do this, Seven.”

A Tupac song on the radio makes up for our silence. He raps about how we gotta start making changes. Khalil was right. ’Pac’s still relevant.

“All right,” Seven says, and he makes another U-turn. “All right.”

The song fades off. “This is the hottest station in the nation, Hot 105,” the DJ says. “If you’re just tuning in, the grand jury has decided not to indict Officer Brian Cruise Jr. in the death of Khalil Harris. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Harris family. Stay safe out there, y’all.”