TWENTY-THREE

It's a quiet ride to Seven's grandma's house.

I told the truth. I did everything I was supposed to do, and it wasn't fucking good enough. Khalil's death wasn't horrible enough to be considered a crime.

But damn, what about his life? He was once a walking, talking human being. He had family. He had friends. He had dreams. None of it fucking mattered. He was just a thug who deserved to die.

Car horns honk around us. Drivers shout the decision to the rest of the neighborhood. Some kids around my age stand on top of a car as they shout, "Justice for Khalil!"

Seven maneuvers around it all and parks in his grandma's driveway. He's silent and unmoving at first. Suddenly he punches the steering wheel. "Fuck!"

DeVante shakes his head. "This some bullshit."
"Fuck!" Seven croaks. He covers his eyes and rocks back and forth. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

I wanna cry too. Just can't.
"I don't understand," Chris says. "He killed Khalil. He should go to prison."
"They never do," Kenya mutters.

Seven hastily wipes his face. "Fuck this. Starr, whatever you wanna do, I'm down. You wanna burn some shit up, we'll burn some shit up. Give the word."
"Dude, are you crazy?" Chris says.

Seven turns around. "You don't get it, so shut up. Starr, what you wanna do?"


They gave me the hate, and now I wanna fuck everybody, even if I'm not sure how.

"I wanna do something," I say. "Protest, riot, I don't care—"
"Riot?" Chris echoes.
"Hell yeah!" DeVante gives me dap. "That's what I'm talking 'bout!"

"Starr, think about this," Chris says. "That won't solve anything."

"And neither did talking!" I snap. "I did everything right, and it didn't make a fucking difference. I've gotten death
threats, cops harassed my family, somebody shot into my house, all kinds of shit. And for what? Justice Khalil won’t get? They don’t give a fuck about us, so fine. I no longer give a fuck.”

“But—”

“Chris, I don’t need you to agree,” I say, my throat tight. “Just try to understand how I feel. Please?”

He closes and opens his mouth a couple of times. No response.

Seven gets out and holds his seat forward. “C’mon, Lyric. Kenya, you staying here or you coming with us?”

“Staying,” Kenya says, her eyes wet from earlier. “In case Momma shows up.”

Seven nods heavily. “Good idea. She’ll need somebody.”

Lyric climbs off Kenya’s lap and runs up the walkway. Kenya hesitates. She looks back at me. “I’m sorry, Starr,” she says. “This ain’t right.”

She follows Lyric to the front door, and their grandma lets them inside.

Seven returns to the driver’s seat. “Chris, you want me to take you home?”

“I’m staying.” Chris nods, as if he’s settling with himself. “Yeah, I’m staying.”

“You sure you up for this?” DeVante asks. “It’s gon’ get wild out here.”

“I’m sure.” He eyes me. “I want everyone to know that decision is bullshit.”

He puts his hand on the seat with his palm facing up. I put my hand on his.

Seven cranks up the car and backs out the driveway. “Somebody check Twitter, find out where everything’s going down.”

“I got you.” DeVante holds up his phone. “Folks headed to Magnolia. That’s where a lot of shit happened last—” He winces and grabs his side.

“Are you up for this, Vante?” Chris asks.

DeVante straightens up. “Yeah. I got beat worse than this when I got initiated.”

“How’d they get you anyway?” I ask.

“Yeah. Uncle Carlos said you walked off,” says Seven. “That’s a long-ass walk.”

“Man,” DeVante groans in that DeVante way. “I wanted to visit Dalvin, a’ight? I took the bus to the cemetery. I hate that he by himself in the Garden. I didn’t want him to be lonely, if that make sense.”

I try not to think about Khalil being alone in Garden Heights, now that Ms. Rosalie and Cameron are going to New York with Ms. Tammy and I’m leaving too. “It makes sense.”

DeVante presses the towel against his nose and lip. The bleeding’s slacked up. “Before I could catch the bus back, King’s boys snatched me up. I thought I’d be dead by now. For real.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re not,” Chris says. “Gives me more time to beat you in Madden.”
DeVante smirks. “You a crazy-ass white boy if you think that’s gon’ happen.”

Cars are up and down Magnolia like it’s a Saturday morning and the dope boys are showing off. Music blasts, horns blare, people hang out car windows, stand on the hoods. The sidewalks are packed. It’s hazy out, and flames lick the sky in the distance.

I tell Seven to park at Just Us for Justice. The windows are boarded up and “Black owned” is spray-painted across them. Ms. Ofrah said they would be leading protests around the city if the grand jury didn’t indict.

We head down the sidewalk, just walking with no particular place to go. It’s more crowded than I realized. About half the neighborhood is out here. I throw my hoodie over my hair and keep my head down. No matter what that grand jury decided, I’m still “Starr who was with Khalil,” and I don’t wanna be seen tonight. Just heard.

A couple of folks glance at Chris with that “what the hell is this white boy doing out here” look. He stuffs his hands in his pockets.

“Guess I’m noticeable, huh?” he says.

“You’re sure you wanna be out here?” I ask.

“This is kinda how it is for you and Seven at Williamson, right?”

“A lot like that,” Seven says.

“Then I can deal.”

The crowds are too thick. We climb on top of a bus stop bench to get a better view of everything going on. King Lords in gray bandanas and Garden Disciples in green bandanas stand on a police car in the middle of the street, chanting, “Justice for Khalil!” People gathered around the car record the scene with their phones and throw rocks at the windows.

“Fuck that cop, bruh,” a guy says, gripping a baseball bat.

“Killed him over nothing!”

He slams the bat into the driver’s side window, shattering the glass.

It’s on.

The King Lords and GDs stomp out the front window. Then somebody yells, “Flip that mothafucka!”

The gangbangers jump off. People line up on one side of the car. I stare at the lights on the top, remembering the ones that flashed behind me and Khalil, and watch them disappear as they flip the car onto its back.

Someone shouts, “Watch out!”

A Molotov cocktail sails toward the car. Then—_whoompf_! It bursts into flames.

The crowd cheers.

People say misery loves company, but I think it’s like that with anger too. I’m not the only one pissed—everyone around me is. They didn’t have to be sitting in the passenger’s seat when it happened. My anger is theirs, and theirs is mine.

A car stereo loudly plays a record-scratching sound, then Ice
Cube says, "F*ck the police, coming straight from the underground. A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown."

You'd think it was a concert the way people react, rapping along and jumping to the beat. DeVante and Seven yell out the lyrics. Chris nods along and mumbles the words. He goes silent every time Cube says "nigga." As he should.

When that hook hits, a collective "F*ck the police" thunders off Magnolia Avenue, probably loud enough to reach the heavens.

I yell it out too. Part of me is like, "What about Uncle Carlos the cop?" But this isn't about him or his coworkers who do their jobs right. This is about One-Fifteen, those detectives with their bullshit questions, and those cops who made Daddy lie on the ground. Fuck them.

Glass shatters. I stop rapping.

A block away, people throw rocks and garbage cans at the windows of the McDonald's and the drugstore next to it.

One time I had a really bad asthma attack that put me in the emergency room. My parents and I didn't leave the hospital until like three in the morning, and we were starving by then. Momma and I grabbed hamburgers at that McDonald's and ate while Daddy got my prescription from the pharmacy.

The glass doors at the drugstore shatter completely. People rush in and eventually come back out with arms full of stuff.

"Stop!" I yell, and others say the same, but looters continue to run in. A glow of orange bursts inside, and all those people rush out.

"Holy shit," Chris says.

In no time the building is in flames.

"Hell yeah!" says DeVante. "Burn that b*tch down!"

I remember the look on Daddy's face the day Mr. Wyatt handed him the keys to the grocery store; Mr. Reuben and all those pictures on his walls, showing years and years of a legacy he's built; Ms. Yvette walking into her shop every morning, yawning; even pain-in-the-ass Mr. Lewis with his top-of-the-line haircuts.

Glass shatters at the pawnshop on the next block. Then at the beauty supply store near it.

Flames pour out both, and people cheer. A new battle cry starts up:

_The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire! We don't need no water, let that mothafucka burn!_

I'm just as pissed as anybody, but this... this isn't it. Not for me.

DeVante's right there with them, yelling out the new chant. I backhand his arm.

"What?" he says.

Chris nudges my side. "Guys..."

A few blocks away, a line of cops in riot gear march down the street, followed closely by two tanks with bright lights.

"This is not a peaceful assembly," an officer on a loudspeaker says. "Disperse now, or you will be subject to arrest."

The original battle cry starts up again: "F*ck the police! Fuck the police!"
People hurl rocks and glass bottles at the cops.
“Yo,” Seven says.
“Stop throwing objects at law enforcement,” the officer says. “Exit the streets immediately or you will be subject to arrest.”
The rocks and bottles continue to fly.
Seven hops off the bench. “C’mon,” he says, as Chris and I climb off too. “We need to get outta here.”
“F**k the police! F**k the police!” DeVante continues to shout.
“Vante, man, c’mon!” says Seven.
“I ain’t scared of them! F**k the police!”
There’s a loud pop. An object sails into the air, lands in the middle of the street, and explodes in a ball of fire.
“Oh shit!” DeVante says.
He hops off the bench, and we run. It’s damn near a stampede on the sidewalk. Cars speed away in the street. It sounds like the Fourth of July behind us; pop after pop after pop.
Smoke fills the air. More glass shatters. The pops get closer, and the smoke thickens.
Flames eat away at the cash advance place. Just Us for Justice is fine though. So is the car wash on the other side of it, “black owned” spray-painted on one of its walls.
We hop into Seven’s Mustang. He speeds out the back entrance of the old Taco Bell parking lot, hitting the next street over.

“The hell just happened?” he says.
Chris slumps in his seat. “I don’t know. I don’t want it to happen again though.”
“Niggas tired of taking shit,” DeVante says, between heavy breaths. “Like Starr said, they don’t give a f**k about us, so we don’t give a f**k. Burn this b**ch down.”
“But they don’t live here!” Seven says. “They don’t give a damn what happens to this neighborhood.”
“What we supposed to do then?” DeVante snaps. “All that ‘Kumbaya’ peaceful shit clearly don’t work. They don’t listen till we tear something up.”
“Those businesses though,” I say.
“What about them?” DeVante asks. “My momma used to work at that McDonald’s, and they barely paid her. That pawnshop ripped us off a hell of a lot of times. Nah, I don’t give a f**k about neither one of them bitches.”
I get it. Daddy almost lost his wedding ring to that pawnshop once. He actually threatened to burn it down. Kinda ironic it’s burning now.
But if the looters decide to ignore the “black owned” tags, they could end up hitting our store. “We need to go help Daddy.”
“What?” Seven says.
“We need to go help Daddy protect the store! In case looters show up.”
Seven wipes his face. “Shit, you’re probably right.”
“Ain’t nobody gon’ touch Big Mav,” says DeVante.
“You don’t know that,” I say. “People are pissed, DeVante. They’re not thinking shit out. They’re doing shit.”

DeVante eventually nods. “A’ight, fine. Let’s go help Big Mav.”

“Think he’ll be okay with me helping out?” Chris asks. “He didn’t seem to like me last time.”

“Seem to?” DeVante repeats. “He straight up mean-mugged your ass. I was there. I remember.”

Seven snickers. I smack DeVante and tell him, “Shush.”

“What? It’s true. He was mad as hell that Chris is white. But ay? You spit that NWA shit like you did back there, maybe he’ll think you’re a’ight.”

“What? Surprised a white boy knows NWA?” Chris teases.

“Man, you ain’t white. You light-skinned.”

“Agreed!” I say.

“Wait, wait,” Seven says over our laughter, “we gotta test him to see if he really is black. Chris, you eat green bean casserole?”

“Hell no. That shit’s disgusting.”

The rest of us lose it, saying, “He’s black! He’s black!”

“Wait, one more,” I say. “Macaroni and cheese. Full meal or a side dish?”

“Uh...” Chris’s eyes dart around at us.

DeVante mimics the Jeopardy! music.

“How to earn a black card for three hundred, Alex,” Seven says in an announcer’s voice.

Chris finally answers, “Full meal.”

“Aww!” the rest of us groan.

“Whomp-whomp-whomp!” DeVante adds.

“Guys, it is! Think about it. You get protein, calcium—”

“Protein is meat,” DeVante says. “Not no damn cheese. I wish somebody would give me some macaroni, calling it a meal.”

“It’s like the easiest, quickest meal ever though,” Chris says.

“One box, and you’re—”

“And that’s the problem,” I say. “Real macaroni and cheese doesn’t come from a box, babe. It eventually comes from an oven with a crust bubbling on top.”

“Amen.” Seven holds his fist to me, and I bump it.

“Ohhh,” Chris says. “You mean the kind with breadcrumbs?”

“What?” DeVante yells, and Seven goes, “Breadcrumba?”

“Nah,” I say. “I mean there’s like a crust of cheese on top. We gotta get you to a soul food restaurant, babe.”

“This fool said breadcrumbs.” DeVante sounds seriously offended. “Breadcrumbs.”

The car stops. Up ahead a Road Closed sign blocks the street with a cop car in front of it.

“Damn,” Seven says, backing up and turning around.

“Gotta find another way to the store.”

“They probably got a lot of roadblocks around the neighborhood tonight,” I tell him.
"Fucking breadcrumbs." DeVante still can’t get over it. “I swear, I don’t understand white people. Breadcrumbs on macaroni, kissing dogs on the mouth—”

“Treating their dogs like they’re their kids,” I add.

“Yeah!” says DeVante. “Purposely doing shit that could kill them, like bungee jumping.”

“Calling Target ‘Tar-jay,’ like that makes it fancier,” says Seven.


Seven and I bust out laughing.

“Saying dumb shit to their parents,” DeVante continues. “Splitting up in situations when they clearly need to stick together.”

Chris goes, “Huh?”

“Babe, c’mon,” I say. “White people always wanna split up, and when they do something bad happens.”

“That’s only in horror movies though,” he says.

“Nah! Shit like that is always on the news,” says DeVante.

“They go on a hiking trip, split up, and a bear kills somebody.”

“Car breaks down, they split up to find help, and a serial killer murders somebody,” Seven adds.

“Like, have y’all ever heard that there’s power in numbers?” DeVante asks. “For real though.”

“Okay, fine,” Chris says. “Since you guys want to go there with white people, can I ask a question about black people?”

Cue the record scratching. No lie, all three of us turn and look at him, including Seven. The car veers off to the side of the road, scraping against the curb. Seven curses and gets it back on the street.

“I mean, it’s only fair,” Chris mumbles.

“Guys, he’s right,” I say. “He should be able to ask.”

“Fine,” says Seven. “Go ahead, Chris.”

“Okay. Why do some black people give their kids odd names? I mean, look at you guys’ names. They’re not normal.”

“My name normal,” DeVante says, all puffed-up sounding.

“I don’t know what you talking about.”

“Man, you named after a dude from Jodeci,” Seven says.

“And you named after a number! What’s your middle name? Eight?”

“Anyway, Chris,” Seven says. “DeVante’s got a point. What makes his name or our names any less normal than yours? Who or what defines ‘normal’ to you? If my pops were here, he’d say you’ve fallen into the trap of the white standard.”

Color creeps into Chris’s neck and face. “I didn’t mean—okay, maybe ‘normal’ isn’t the right word.”

“Nope,” I say.

“I guess uncommon is the word instead?” he asks. “You guys have uncommon names.”

“I know ‘bout three other DeVantes in the neighborhood though,” says DeVante.

“Right. It’s about perspective,” says Seven. “Plus, most of the names white people think are unusual actually have meanings
in various African languages.”

“And let’s be real, some white people give their kids ‘uncommon’ names too,” I say. “That’s not limited to black people. Just ’cause it doesn’t have a De- or a La- on the front doesn’t make it okay.”

Chris nods. “True enough.”

“Why you have to use ‘De-’ as an example though?” DeVante asks.

We stop again. Another roadblock.

“Shit,” Seven hisses. “I gotta go the long way. Through the east side.”

“East side?” DeVante says. “That’s GD territory!”

“And that’s where most of the riots happened last time,” I remind them.

Chris shakes his head. “Nope. Can’t go there then.”

“Nobody’s thinking about gangbanging tonight,” Seven says. “And as long as I stay away from the major streets, we’ll be all right.”

Gunshots go off close by—a little too close by—and all of us jump. Chris actually yelps.

Seven swallows. “Yeah. We’ll be all right.”

Because Seven said we’d be all right, everything goes wrong.

Most of the routes through the east side are blocked off by police, and it takes Seven forever to find one that isn’t. About halfway to the store the car grunts and slows down.

“C’mon,” Seven says. He rubs the dashboard and pumps the gas. “C’mon, baby.”

His baby basically says “fuck it” and stops.

“Shit!” Seven rests his head on the steering wheel. “We’re out of gas.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Chris says.

“I wish, man. It was low when we left your house, but I thought I could wait a while before I got gas. I know my car.”

“You obviously don’t know shit,” I say.

We’re next to some duplex houses. I don’t know what street
this is. I'm not familiar with the east side like that. Sirens go off nearby, and it's as hazy and smoky as the rest of the neighborhood.

"There's a gas station not too far from here," Seven says. "Chris, can you help me push it?"

"As in, get out the protection of this car and push it?" Chris asks.

"Yeah, that. It'll be all right." Seven hops out.

"That's what you said before," Chris mumbles, but he climbs out.

DeVante says, "I can push too."

"Nah, man. You need to rest up," says Seven. "Just sit back. Starr, get behind the wheel."

This is the first time he's ever let anyone else drive his "baby." He tells me to put the car in neutral and guide it with the steering wheel. He pushes next to me. Chris pushes on the passenger side. He constantly glances over his shoulder.

The sirens get louder, and the smoke thickens. Seven and Chris cough and cover their noses with their shirts. A pickup truck full of mattresses and people speeds by.

We reach a slight hill, and Seven and Chris jog to keep up with the car.

"Slow down, slow down!" Seven yells. I pump the brakes. The car stops at the bottom of the hill.

Seven coughs into his shirt. "Hold on. I need a minute."

I put the car in park. Chris bends over, trying to catch his breath. "This smoke is killing me," he says.

Seven straightens up and slowly blows air out his mouth. "Shit. We'll get to the gas station faster if we leave the car. The two of us can't push it all the way."

The hell? I'm sitting right here. "I can push."

"I know that, Starr. Even if you did, we'll still be faster without it. Damn, I don't wanna leave it here though."

"How about we split up?" Chris says. "Two of us stay here, two of us go get some gas—and this is that white-people shit you guys were talking about, isn't it?"

"Yes," the rest of us say.

"Told you," says DeVante.

Seven folds his hands and rests them on top of his dreads. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. We gotta leave it."

I get Seven's keys, and he grabs a gas can from the trunk. He caresses the car and whispers something to it. I think he says he loves it and promises to come back. Lord.

The four of us start down the sidewalk and pull our shirts over our mouths and noses. DeVante limps but swears he's all right.

A voice in the distance says something, I can't make it out, and there's a thunderous response like from a crowd.

Chris and I walk behind the other two. His hand falls to his side, and he brushes up against me, his sly way of trying to hold my hand. I let him.

"So this is where you used to live?" he says.
I forgot this is his first time in Garden Heights. “Yeah. Well, not this side of the neighborhood. I’m from the west side.”

“West siiiiiide!” Seven says, as DeVante throws up a W.

“The best siiiiiide!”

“On my momma!” DeVante adds.

I roll my eyes. People go too far with that “what side of the neighborhood you from” mess. “You saw that big apartment complex we passed? Those are the projects we lived in when I was younger.”

Chris nods. “That place where we parked—was that the Taco Bell your dad took you and Seven to?”

“Yeah. They opened a new one closer to the freeway a few years ago.”

“Maybe we can go there together one day,” he says.

“Bruh,” DeVante butts in. “Please tell me you ain’t considering taking your girl to Taco Bell for a date. Taco Bell?”

Seven hollers laughing.

“Excuse me, was anybody talking to y’all?” I ask.

“Ay, you my friend, I’m trying to help you out,” says DeVante. “Your boy ain’t got no game.”

“I have game!” Chris says. “I’m letting my girl know I’m happy to go with her anywhere, no matter what neighborhood it’s in. As long as she’s there, I’m good.”

He smiles at me without showing his teeth. I do too.

“Psh! It’s still Taco Bell,” says DeVante. “By the end of the night it’ll be Taco Hell with them bubble guts.”

The voice is a bit louder now. Not clear yet. A man and a woman run by on the sidewalk, pushing two shopping carts with flat-screen TVs in them.

“They wilding out here,” DeVante says with a chuckle, but grabs his side.

“King kicked you, didn’t he?” Seven says. “With those big-ass Timbs on, right?”

DeVante whistles a breath out. He nods.

“Yeah, he did that to my momma once. Broke most of her ribs.”

A Rottweiler on a leash in a fenced-in yard barks and struggles to come after us. I stomp my foot at it. It squeals and jumps back.

“She’s all right,” Seven says, though it seems like he’s trying to convince himself. “Yeah. She’s fine.”

A block away, people stand around in a four-way intersection, watching something on one of the other streets.

“You need to exit the street,” a voice announces from a loudspeaker. “You are unlawfully blocking traffic.”

“A hairbrush is not a gun! A hairbrush is not a gun!” a voice chants from another loudspeaker. It’s echoed back by a crowd.

We get to the intersection. A red, green, and yellow school bus is parked on the street to our right. It says Just Us for Justice on the side. A large crowd is gathered in the street to our left. They point black hairbrushes into the air.

The protestors are on Carnation. Where it happened.
I haven't been back here since that night. Knowing this is where Khalil . . . I stare too hard, the crowd disappears, and I see him lying in the street. The whole thing plays out before my eyes like a horror movie on repeat. He looks at me for the last time and—

“A hairbrush is not a gun!”

The voice snaps me from my daze.

Ahead of the crowd a lady with twists stands on top of a police car, holding a bullhorn. She turns toward us, her fist raised for black power. Khalil smiles on the front of her T-shirt.

“Ain't that your attorney, Starr?” Seven asks.

“Yeah.” Now I knew Ms. Ofrah was about that radical life, but when you think “attorney” you don’t really think “person standing on a police car with a bullhorn,” you know?

“Disperse immediately,” the officer repeats. I can’t see him for the crowd.

Ms. Ofrah leads the chant again. “A hairbrush is not a gun! A hairbrush is not a gun!”

It’s contagious and echoes all around us. Seven, DeVante, and Chris join in.

“A hairbrush is not a gun,” I mutter.

*Khalil drops it into the side of the door.*

“A hairbrush is not a gun.”

*He opens the door to ask if I’m okay.*

*Then pow-pow—*

“A hairbrush is not a gun!” I scream loud as I can, fist high in the air, tears in my eyes.

“I’m going to invite Sister Freeman to come up and give a word about the injustice that took place tonight,” Ms. Ofrah says.

She hands the bullhorn to a lady who’s also in a Khalil shirt, and she hops off the patrol car. The crowd lets her through, and Ms. Ofrah heads toward another coworker who’s standing near the bus at the intersection. She spots me and does a double-take.

“Starr?” she says, making her way over. “What are you doing out here?”

“We . . . I . . . When they announced the decision, I wanted to do something. So we came to the neighborhood.”

She eyes beat-up DeVante. “Oh my God, did you get caught in the riots?”

DeVante touches his face. “Damn, I look that bad?”

“That’s not why he looks like that,” I tell her. “But we did get caught in the riots on Magnolia. It got crazy over there. Looters took over.”

Ms. Ofrah purses her lips. “Yeah. We heard.”

“Just Us for Justice was fine when we left,” Seven says.

“Even if it’s not, it’s okay,” says Ms. Ofrah. “You can destroy wood and brick, but you can’t destroy a movement. Starr, does your mother know you’re out here?”

“Yeah.” Don’t even sound convincing to myself.

“Really?”
“Okay, no. Please don’t tell her.”

“I have to,” she says. “As your attorney I have to do what’s in your best interest. Your mom knowing you’re out here is in your best interest.”

No, it’s not, ’cause she’ll kill me. “But you’re my attorney. Not hers. Can’t this be a client confidentiality thing?”

“Starr—”

“Please? During the other protests, I watched. And talked. So now I wanna do something.”

“Who said talking isn’t doing something?” she says. “It’s more productive than silence. Remember what I told you about your voice?”

“You said it’s my biggest weapon.”

“And I mean that.” She stares at me a second, then sighs out her nose. “You want to fight the system tonight?”

I nod.

“C’mon then.”

Ms. Ofrah takes my hand and leads me through the crowd.

“Fire me,” she says.

“Huh?”

“Tell me you no longer want me to represent you.”

“I no longer want you to represent me?” I ask.

“Good. As of now I’m not your attorney. So if your parents find out about this, I didn’t do it as your attorney but as an activist. You saw that bus near the intersection?”

“Yeah.”

“If the officers react, run straight to it. Got it?”

“But what—”

She takes me to the patrol car and motions at her colleague. The lady climbs off and hands Ms. Ofrah the bullhorn. Ms. Ofrah passes it over to me.

“Use your weapon,” she says.

Another one of her coworkers lifts me and sets me on top of the cop car.

About ten feet away there’s a shrine for Khalil in the middle of the street; lit candles, teddy bears, framed pictures, and balloons. It separates the protestors from a cluster of officers in riot gear. It’s not nearly as many cops as it was on Magnolia, but still . . . they’re cops.

I turn toward the crowd. They watch me expectantly. The bullhorn is as heavy as a gun. Ironic since Ms. Ofrah said to use my weapon. I have the hardest time lifting it. Shit, I have no idea what to say. I put it near my mouth and press the button.

“My—” It makes a loud, ear-splitting noise.

“Don’t be scared!” somebody in the crowd yells. “Speak!”

“You need to exit the street immediately,” the cop says. You know what? Fuck it.

“My name is Starr. I’m the one who saw what happened to Khalil,” I say into the bullhorn. “And it wasn’t right.”

I get a bunch of “yeahs” and “amens” from the crowd.

“We weren’t doing anything wrong. Not only did Officer
Cruise assume we were up to no good, he assumed we were criminals. Well, Officer Cruise is the criminal."

The crowd cheers and claps. Ms. Ofrah says, "Speak!"

That amps me up.

I turn to the cops. "I'm sick of this! Just like y'all think all of us are bad because of some people, we think the same about y'all. Until you give us a reason to think otherwise, we'll keep protesting."

More cheers, and I can't lie, it eggs me on. Forget trigger happy—speaker happy is more my thing.

"Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died," I say. "But this isn't about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!" I look at the cops again. "You hear me? Khalil lived!"

"You have until the count of three to disperse," the officer on the loudspeaker says.

"Khalil lived!" we chant.

"One."

"Khalil lived!"

"Two."

"Khalil lived!"

"Three."

"Khalil lived!"

The can of tear gas sails toward us from the cops. It lands beside the patrol car.

I jump off and pick up the can. Smoke whizzes out the end of it. Any second it'll combust.

I scream at the top of my lungs, hoping Khalil hears me, and chuck it back at the cops. It explodes and consumes them in a cloud of tear gas.

All hell breaks loose.


"Go to the bus!" she says.

I get about halfway there when Chris and Seven catch me. "C'mon!" Seven says, and they pull me with them.

I try to tell them about the bus, but explosions go off and thick white smoke engulfs us. My nose and throat burn as if I swallowed fire. My eyes feel like flames lick them.

Something whizzes overhead, then an explosion goes off in front of us. More smoke.

"DeVante!" Chris croaks, looking around. "DeVante!"

We find him leaning against a flickering streetlight. He coughs and heaves. Seven lets me go and grabs him by the arm.

"Shit, man! My eyes! I can't breathe."

We run. Chris grips my hand as tight as I grip his. There are screams and loud pops in every direction. Can't see a thing for the smoke, not even the Just Us bus.

"I can't run. My side!" DeVante says. "Shit!"

"C'mon, man," Seven says, pulling him. "Keep going!"

Bright lights barrel down the street through the smoke. A gray pickup truck on oversized wheels. It stops beside us, the
window rolls down, and my heart stops, waiting for the gun to come pointing out, courtesy of a King Lord.

But Goon, the Cedar Grove King Lord with the ponytails, looks at us from the driver's seat, a gray bandana over his nose and mouth. "Get in the back!" he says.

Two guys and a girl around our age, wearing white bandanas on their faces, help us into the back of the truck. It's an open invitation and other people climb in, like this white man in a shirt and tie and a Latino holding a camera on his shoulder. The white man looks oddly familiar. Goon drives off.

DeVante lies in the bed of the truck. He holds his eyes and rolls in agony. "Shit, man! Shit!"

"Bri, get him some milk," Goon says through the back window.

"Milk?"

"We're out, Unc," says the girl in the bandana.

"Fuck!" Goon hisses. "Hold on, Vante."

Tears and snot drip down my face. My eyes are damn near numb from burning.


The two guys in the bandanas grab some kid on the street by his arms and lift him into the truck. The kid looks around thirteen. His shirt is covered in soot, and he coughs and heaves.

I get into a coughing fit. Snorting is like hacking up hot coals. The man in the shirt and tie hands me his dampened handkerchief.

"It'll help some," he says. "Put it against your nose and breathe through it."

It gives me a small amount of clean air. I pass it to Chris, he uses it, passes it to Seven beside him. Seven uses it and passes it to someone else.

"As you can see, Jim," the man says, looking at the camera, "there are a lot of youth out here protesting tonight, black and white."

"I'm the token, huh?" Chris mutters to me before coughing. I'd laugh if it didn't hurt.

"And you have people like this gentlemen, going around the neighborhood, helping out where they can," the white man says. "Driver, what's your name?"

The Latino turns the camera toward Goon.

"Nunya," Goon says.

"Thank you, Nunya, for giving us a ride."

Woooww. I realize why he looks familiar though. He's a national news anchor, Brian somebody.

"This young lady here made a powerful statement earlier," he says, and the camera points toward me. "Are you really the witness?"

I nod. No point hiding anymore.

"We caught what you said back there. Anything else you'd like to add for our viewers?"

"Yeah. None of this makes sense."

I start coughing again. He leaves me alone.
When my eyes aren’t closed I see what my neighborhood has become. More tanks, more cops in riot gear, more smoke. Businesses ransacked. Streetlights are out, and fires keep everything from being in complete darkness. People run out of the Walmart and carry armfuls of items, looking like ants rushing from an anthill. The untouched businesses have boarded-up windows and graffiti that says “black owned.”

We eventually turn onto Marigold Avenue, and even with the fire in my lungs I take a deep breath. Our store is in one piece. The windows are boarded up with that same “black owned” tag on them, like it’s lamb’s blood protecting the store from the plague of death. The street is pretty still. Top Shelf Spirits and Wine is the only business with broken windows. It doesn’t have a “black owned” tag either.

Goon stops in front of our store. He jumps out, comes to the back of the truck, and helps everyone out. “Starr, Sev, y’all got a key?”

I pat my pockets for Seven’s keys and toss them to Goon. He tries each key until one unlocks the door. “In here, y’all,” he says.

Everyone including the cameraman and reporter go in the store. Goon and one of the guys in the bandana get DeVante and carry him inside. No sign of Daddy.

I crawl onto the floor and fall on my stomach, blinking fast. My eyes burn and fill with tears.

Goon sets DeVante on the old people’s bench before running toward the refrigerator.

He rushes back with a gallon of milk and pours it onto DeVante’s face. The milk momentarily turns him white. DeVante coughs and sputters. Goon pours more.

“Stop!” DeVante says. “You ‘bout to drown me!”

“I bet your eyes ain’t hurting no more though,” Goon replies.

I half-crawl, half-run to the refrigerators and get a gallon for myself. I pour it on my face. The relief comes in seconds.

People pour milk onto their faces while the cameraman records it all. An older lady drinks from a gallon. Milk pools on the floor, and a college-aged guy lies face-down in it and gasps for air.

When people get the relief they need, they leave. Goon grabs a bunch of cartons of milk and asks, “Ay, can we take this in case somebody needs it on the street?”

Seven nods and sips from a carton.

“Thanks, lil’ homie. If I see your pops again I’ll tell him y’all here.”

“You saw our—” I cough and sip some milk, dousing the flames in my lungs. “You saw our dad?”

“Yeah, a lil’ while ago. He was looking for y’all.”

Oh, shit.

“Sir,” the reporter says to Goon, “can we ride along? We’d like to see more of the neighborhood.”

“Ain’t no thang, homie. Hop in the back.” He turns to the camera and twists his fingers so they resemble a K and an L.
“Cedar Grove Kings, baby! Crowns up! Addi-o!” He gives the King Lord call. Leave it to Goon to throw gang signs on live TV.

They leave us alone in the store. Seven, Chris, I are in the pool of milk with our knees up to our chests. DeVante’s arms and legs dangle off the old people’s bench. He chugs back some milk.

Seven takes his phone from his pocket. “Damn. My phone’s dead. Starr, you got yours?”

“Yeah.” I have way too many voice mails and way too many texts, most of them from Momma.

I play the voice mails first. They start out safe enough with Momma saying, “Starr baby, call me as soon as you get this, okay?”

But they soon become, “Starr Amara, I know you’re getting these messages. Call me. I’m not playing.”

They progress to, “See, you’ve taken this too far. Carlos and I are heading out the door right now, and you better pray to God we don’t find you!”

And on the last message, left a few minutes ago, Momma says, “Oh, so you can’t return my calls, but you can lead protests, huh? Momma told me she saw you on live TV, giving speeches and throwing tear gas at cops! I swear I’m gon’ snatch your life if you don’t call me!”


Seven glances at his watch. “Damn. We’ve been gone about four hours.”


“Maybe the four of us can get a place in Mexico?” says Chris.

I shake my head. “Not far enough for our mom.”

Seven picks at his face. The milk has dried and formed a crust. “All right, we need to call them. And if we call from the office phone, Ma will see it on the caller ID and know we’re not lying when we say we’re here. That’ll help, right?”

“We’re at least three hours too late for any help,” I say.

Seven stands and gives me and Chris a hand up. He helps DeVante off the bench. “C’mon. Make sure y’all sound remorseful, all right?”

We head for Daddy’s office.

The front door creaks. Something thuds onto the floor.

I turn around. A glass bottle with flaming cloth—

Whoomf! The store is suddenly lit bright orange. A heat wave hits like the sun dropped in. Flames lick the ceiling and block the door.
TWENTY-FIVE

An entire aisle is already engulfed.

"The back door," Seven says, choked up. "The back door!"

Chris and DeVante follow us down the narrow hall near Daddy's office. It leads to the restroom and the back door where deliveries are unloaded. Smoke's already filling the hall.

Seven pushes the door. It doesn't budge. He and Chris ram their shoulders against it, but it's bulletproof, shoulder-proof, everything-proof. The burglar bars won't let us out anyway.

"Starr, my keys," Seven croaks.

I shake my head. I gave them to Goon, and the last time I saw them he left them in the front door.

DeVante coughs. It's getting harder to breathe with all the smoke. "Man, we can't die up in here. I don't wanna die."

"Shut up!" Chris says. "We're not gonna die."

I cough into the crook of my arm. "Daddy may have a spare," I say, and my voice is thin. "In his office."

We rush back down the hall, but the office door is locked too.

"Fuck!" Seven screams.

Mr. Lewis limps into the middle of the street. He grips a baseball bat in each hand. He glances around, like he's trying to figure out where the smoke is coming from. With the boards on the windows, he can't see the inferno in the store unless he looks through the front door.

"Mr. Lewis!" I scream as loud as I can.

The guys join in. The smoke strangles our voices. The flames dance feet away, but I swear it's like I'm standing in them.

Mr. Lewis limps toward the store, squinting his eyes. They widen as he looks in through the door, straight at us on the other side of the flames. "Oh Lord!"

He limps into the street faster than I've ever seen him move.

"Help! These kids stuck up in here! Help!"

There's a loud crackling to our right. The fire takes out another shelf.

Mr. Reuben's nephew, Tim, runs over and opens the front door, but the flames are too much.

"Go to the back door!" he calls to us.

Tim almost beats us getting there. He yanks hard on the door, and the glass rattles. The way he's pulling, the door will come off eventually. We don't have eventually time though.
Tires screech outside.
Moments later, Daddy runs up to the back door.
“Watch out,” he tells Tim, moving him out the way.
Daddy fumbles for his keys and sticks several in the lock while muttering, “Please, God. Please.”
I can barely see Seven, Chris, or DeVante for all the smoke, and they’re coughing and wheezing next to me.
A click. The knob turns. The door flies open. We rush out. Fresh air fills my lungs.
Daddy pulls me and Seven through the alley, around the corner, and across the street to Reuben’s. Tim gets DeVante and Chris. They make us sit on the sidewalk.
Tires screech again, and Momma goes, “Oh my God!”
She runs over, Uncle Carlos on her heels. She holds my shoulders and helps me lie on the sidewalk.
“Breathe, baby,” she says. “Breathe.”
But I have to see. I sit up.
Daddy attempts to run into the store for God knows what. The flames swath him back. Tim rushes a bucket of water from his uncle’s restaurant. He runs into our store and douses it on the flames, but he’s forced to jump back too.
People trickle onto the street, and more buckets of sloshing water are hauled into the store. Ms. Yvette carries one from her beauty shop. Tim tosses it onto the fire. Flames eat away at the roof, and smoke billows from the windows of the barbershop next door.

“My shop!” Mr. Lewis cries. Mr. Reuben stops him from running toward it. “My shop!”
Daddy stands in the middle of the street, breathing hard, looking helpless. A crowd has gathered, and people watch with their hands pressed to their mouths.
Bass rattles nearby. Daddy slowly turns his head.
The gray BMW is parked in the intersection near the liquor store. King leans up against it. Some other King Lords stand alongside him and sit on the hood of the car. They laugh and point.
King stares straight at Daddy and takes out his cigarette lighter. He sparks a flame.
Iesha said King was gonna fuck us up because I dry snitched. That meant my whole family.
This is it.
“You son of a bitch!” Daddy marches toward King, and King’s boys advance toward Daddy. Uncle Carlos stops him. The King Lords reach for their pieces and tell Daddy to bring it. King laughs like it’s a comedy show.
“You think this shit funny?” Daddy yells. “Punk ass, always hiding behind your boys!”
King stops laughing.
“Yeah, I said it! I ain’t scared of you! You ain’t shit to be scared of! Trying to burn up some kids, you fucking coward!”
“Oh uh-uh!” Momma starts for King, and Uncle Carlos has to work overtime to hold her back too.
“He burned Maverick’s store down!” Mr. Lewis announces to everybody, in case we didn’t hear. “King burned Maverick’s store down!”

It bubbles around the crowd, and narrowed eyes set on King. Of course, that’s when the cops and the fire truck decide to show up. Of course. Because that’s how it works in Garden Heights.

Uncle Carlos convinces my parents to back away. King lifts his cigar to his lips, eyes gleaming. I wanna get one of Mr. Lewis’s baseball bats and knock him upside his head.

The firefighters get to work. The cops order the crowd to back up. King and his boys are really amused now. Shit, it’s like the cops are helping them out.

“You need to be getting them!” Mr. Lewis says. “They the ones who started the fire!”

“That old man don’t know what he talking about,” King says. “All this smoke done got to him.”

Mr. Lewis starts to charge at King, and an officer has to hold him back. “I ain’t crazy! You did start it! Everybody know it!”

King’s face twitches. “You better watch yourself, lying on folks.”

Daddy glances back at me, and there’s this expression on his face that I’ve never seen before. He turns around to the cop who’s holding Mr. Lewis and says, “He ain’t lying. King did start it, Officer.”

Ho-ly shit.
Daddy snitched.
“It’s my store,” he says. “I know he started the fire.”
“Did you see him do it?” the cop asks.
No. That’s the problem. We know King did it, but if nobody saw it . . .

“I saw him,” Mr. Reuben says. “He did it.”
“I saw him too,” Tim says.
“So did I,” Ms. Yvette adds.

And shit, now the crowd is echoing the same thing, pointing at King and his boys. I mean, everybody’s snitching. The rules no fucking longer apply.

King reaches for his car door, but some of the officers draw their guns and order him and his boys to the ground.

An ambulance arrives. Momma tells them about our smoke inhalation. I snitch and tell them about DeVante, although his black eye makes it obvious he needs help. They let the four of us sit on the curb, and they put oxygen masks on us. I thought I wasn’t that bad anymore, but I forgot how nice clean air is. I’ve been breathing in smoke since I got to Garden Heights.

They look at DeVante’s side. It’s purple-looking, and they tell him he’ll need to go in for X-rays. He doesn’t wanna go in the ambulance, and Momma assures the paramedics that she’ll take him in herself.

I rest my head on Chris’s shoulder as we hold hands, oxygen masks on both of us. I’m not gonna lie and say tonight was
better because he was here—frankly this has been one fucked-up night, nothing could make it better—but it doesn’t hurt that we went through it together.

My parents come our way. Daddy’s lips thin, and he mumbles something to Momma. She elbows him and says, “Be nice.”

She sits between Chris and Seven. Daddy hovers over me and Chris at first, as if he’s expecting us to make room for him.

“Maverick,” Momma says.

“A’ight, a’ight.” He sits on the other side of me.

We watch the firefighters put out the flames. No point though. They’re only saving a shell of the store.

Daddy sighs, rubbing his bald head. “Damn, man.”

My heart aches. We’re losing a family member, for real. I’ve spent most of my life in that store. I move my head off Chris and rest it on Daddy’s shoulder. He puts his arm around me and kisses my hair. I don’t miss that smug look that crosses his face. Petty.

“Wait a minute.” He pulls away. “Where the hell y’all been?”

“That’s what I wanna know,” Momma says. “Acting like you can’t answer my texts or calls!”

Really? Seven and I almost died in a fire, and they’re mad ’cause we didn’t call them? I lift my mask and say, “Long night.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was,” Momma says. “We got ourselves a li’l radical, Maverick. All on the news, throwing tear gas at the cops.”

“After they threw it at us,” I point out.

“Whaaat?” Daddy says, but in that impressed way. Momma cuts him a side-eye, and he says in a more stern tone, “I mean, what? What you do that for?”

“I was mad.” I fold my arms onto my knees and stare at my Timbs through the gap. “That decision wasn’t right.”

Daddy puts his arm around me again and rests his head against mine. A Daddy-snuggle. “Nah,” he says. “It wasn’t.”

“Hey,” Momma beckons me to look at her. “The decision may not have been right, but it’s not your fault. Remember what I said? Sometimes things will go wrong—”

“But the key is to keep doing right.” My eyes drift to my Timbs again. “Khalil still deserved better than that.”

“Yeah.” Her voice thickens. “He did.”

Daddy looks past me at my boyfriend. “So . . . Plain-Ass Chris.”

Seven snorts. DeVante snickers. Momma goes, “Maverick!” as I say, “Daddy!”

“At least it’s not white boy,” Chris says.

“Exactly,” Daddy says. “It’s a step up. You gotta earn my tolerance in increments if you gon’ date my daughter.”

“Lord.” Momma rolls her eyes. “Chris, baby, you’ve been out here all night?”

The way she says it, I can’t help but laugh. She’s basically asking him, “You do realize you’re in the hood, right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Chris says. “All night.”
Daddy grunts. “Maybe you do got some balls then.”

My mouth drops, and Momma says, “Maverick Carter!”

Seven and DeVante crack up.

But Chris? Chris says, “Yes, sir, I’d like to think I do.”

“Daaaaamn,” says Seven. He reaches to give Chris dap, but Daddy cuts him a hard eye and he pulls his hand back.

“Aight, Plain-Ass Chris,” Daddy says. “Boxing gym, next Saturday, you and me.”

Chris lifts his oxygen mask so fast. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said—”

“Calm down, I’m not gon’ fight you,” Daddy says. “We gon’ train. Get to know each other. You been seeing my daughter for a minute now. I gotta know you, and you can learn a lot about a man at a boxing gym.”

“Oh…” Chris’s shoulders relax. “Okay.” He puts the oxygen mask back on.

Daddy grins. It’s a little too mischievous for my liking. He’s gonna kill my poor boyfriend.

The cops load King and his boys into patrol cars, and the crowd claps and cheers. Finally, something to celebrate tonight.

Uncle Carlos strolls over. He’s got on a wifebeater and shorts, which is so not Uncle Carlos, yet something about him still looks detectivey. He’s been in cop mode since his colleagues arrived.

Uncle Carlos gives this old-man grunt as he lowers himself onto the sidewalk next to DeVante. He grabs the back of DeVante’s neck the same way Daddy grabs Seven’s. Man hugs, I call them.

“I’m glad you’re safe, kid,” he says. “Even if you do look like a truck ran over you twice.”

“You not mad I left without telling y’all?”

“Of course I’m mad. I’m actually pissed. But I’m happier that you’re safe. Now, my mom and Pam, that’s a whole different story. I can’t save you from their wrath.”

“Are you putting me out?”

“No. You’re grounded, probably for the rest of your life, but that’s only because we love you.”

DeVante cracks a smile.

Uncle Carlos pats his knees. “Sooo… thanks to all these witnesses, we should get King for arson.”

“Oh, for real?” Daddy says.

“Yep. It’s a start, but not really enough. He’ll be out by the end of the week.”

And back to the same ol’ shit. With targets this time.

“If y’all knew where King’s stash was,” DeVante says, “would that help?”

Uncle Carlos says, “Probably, yeah.”

“If somebody agreed to rat on him, would that help?”

Uncle Carlos turns completely toward him. “Are you saying you want to turn witness?”

“I mean…” DeVante pauses. “Will it help Kenya, her momma, and her sister?”
“If King went to jail?” says Seven. “Yeah. A lot.”
“It’ll help the whole neighborhood, honestly,” Daddy says.
“And I’ll be protected?” DeVante asks Uncle Carlos.
“Absolutely. I promise.”
“And Uncle Carlos always keeps his promises,” I say.
DeVante nods for a moment. “Then I guess I will turn wit-
ness.”
Holy shit again. “You’re sure about that?” I ask.
“Yeah. After seeing you face those cops the way you did,
I don’t know, man. That did something to me,” he says. “And
that lady said our voices are weapons. I should use mine, right?”
“So you’re willing to become a snitch,” Chris says.
“On King,” Seven adds.
DeVante shrugs. “I already need the stitches. Might as well
snitch.”

TWENTY-SIX

It’s around eleven the next morning, and I’m still in bed. After
the longest night ever I had to seriously get reacquainted with
my pillow.

My mom flicks on the lights in my new room—good Lord,
it’s too many lights in here. “Starr, your partner in crime is on
the phone,” she says.

“Who?” I mumble.

“Your protest partner in crime. Momma told me she saw
her hand you that bullhorn on TV. Putting you in danger like
that.”

“But she didn’t mean to put me in—”

“Oh, I’ve dealt with her already, don’t worry. Here. She
wants to apologize to you.”

Ms. Ofrah does apologize for putting me in a bad situation
and for the way things turned out with Khalil, but she says she's proud of me.

She also says she thinks I have a future in activism.

Momma leaves with the phone, and I turn onto my side. Tupac stares back at me from a poster, a smirk on his face. The Thug Life tattoo on his stomach looks bolder than the rest of the photo. It was the first thing I put in my new room. Kinda like bringing Khalil with me.

He said Thug Life stood for "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody." We did all that stuff last night because we were pissed, and it fucked all of us. Now we have to somehow un-fuck everybody.

I sit up and grab my phone off my nightstand. There are texts from Maya, who saw me on the news and thinks I'm dope personified, and texts from Chris. His parents grounded him, but he says it was so worth it. It really was.

There's another text. From Hailey, of all people. Two simple words:

I'm sorry.

Not what I expected; not that I expected to get anything from her; not that I even wanna deal with her. This is the first time she's spoken to me since our fight. I'm not complaining. She's been nonexistent to me too. I respond anyway.

Sorry for what?

I'm not being petty. Petty would be saying, "New number, who dis?" There's a damn near endless list of things she could be apologizing for.

About the decision, she says.

And that you're upset with me.

Haven't been myself lately.

Just want everything to be how it used to be.

The sympathy for the case is nice, but she's sorry I'm upset? That's not the same as apologizing for her actions or the garbage she said. She's sorry I reacted the way I did.

Oddly enough, I needed to know that.

You see, it's like my mom said—if the good outweighs the bad, I should keep Hailey as a friend. There's a shit ton of bad now, an overload of bad. I hate to admit that a teeny-tiny part of me hoped Hailey would see how wrong she was, but she hasn't. She may not ever see that.

And you know what? That's fine. Okay, maybe not fine, because it makes her a shitty-ass person, but I don't have to wait around for her to change. I can let go. I reply:

Things will never be the way they used to be.

I hit send, wait for the text to go through, and delete the conversation. I delete Hailey's number from my phone too.

I stretch and yawn as I creep down the hall. The layout of our new house is way different than our old one, but I think I can get used to it.

Daddy clips some roses at the kitchen counter. Next to him Sekani inhales a sandwich, and Brickz stands on his hind legs with his paws on Sekani's lap. He watches the sandwich the same way he watches a squirrel.

Momma flips switches on the wall. One causes a grinding
“Yeah. A li’l damaged, but alive. I’m gon’ try something different with them. Putting them in new soil can be like hitting a reset button.”


“Stop talking with your mouth full, boy!” Momma scolds.

Daddy nods toward the newspaper on the counter. “Yeah. Check it out, Li’l Black Panther.”

I’m on the front page. The photographer caught me mid-throw. The can of tear gas smokes in my hand. The headline reads “The Witness Fights Back.”

Momma rests her chin on my shoulder. “They’ve discussed you on every news show this morning. Your nana calls every five minutes, telling us a new channel to watch.” She kisses my cheek. “I know you better not scare me like that again.”

“I won’t. What are they saying on the news?”

“They calling you brave,” Daddy says. “But you know, that one network gotta complain, saying you put them cops in danger.”

“I didn’t have a problem with those cops. I had a problem with that tear gas can, and they threw it first.”

“I know, baby. Don’t even stress it. That whole network can kiss my—”

“Dollar, Daddy.” Sekani grins up at him.

“Roses. They can kiss my roses.” He smudges dirt on Sekani’s nose. “You ain’t getting another dollar outta me.”

“He knows,” Seven says, glaring at Sekani. Sekani gets
guilty puppy-dog eyes that could give Brickz some competition. Momma moves her chin off my shoulder. “Okay. What’s that about?”

“Nothing. I told Sekani we gotta be careful with money now.”

“He said we might have to go back to Garden Heights too!” Sekani rasps. “Do we?”

“No, of course not,” Momma says. “Guys, we’ll make this work.”

“Exactly,” Daddy says. “If I have to sell oranges on the side of the street like the Nation brothers, we’ll make it.”

“Is it okay to leave though?” I ask. “I mean, the neighborhood is messed up. What are people gonna think about us leaving instead of helping fix it?”

Never, ever thought I’d say something like that, but last night has me thinking about all of this so differently, about me differently. About Garden Heights differently.

“We still can help fix it,” Daddy says.

“Right. I’m gonna do extra shifts at the clinic,” Momma says.

“And I’m gon’ figure something out to do about the store till I get it renovated,” says Daddy. “We ain’t gotta live there to change things, baby. We just gotta give a damn. Aight?”

“All right.”

Momma kisses my cheek and runs a hand over my hair. “Look at you. Community minded all of a sudden. Maverick, what time did the claims agent say he was coming?”

Daddy closes his eyes and pinches the space between them. “In a couple of hours. I don’t even wanna see it.”

“It’s okay, Daddy,” Sekani says, with a mouth full of sandwich. “You don’t have to go by yourself. We’ll go with you.”

So we do. Two police cars block off the entrance to Garden Heights. Daddy shows them his ID and explains why we need to go in. I’m able to breathe during the whole exchange, and they let us through.

Damn, I see why they aren’t letting people in though. Smoke has taken up a permanent residence, and glass and all kinds of trash litter the streets. We pass so many blackened frames of what used to be businesses.

The store is the hardest to see. The burned roof folds into itself like the slightest wind will knock it over. The bricks and burglar bars protect charred rubble.

Mr. Lewis sweeps the sidewalk in front of his shop. It’s not as bad off as the store, but a broom and a dustpan won’t make it better.

Daddy parks in front of the store, and we get out. Momma rubs and squeezes Daddy’s shoulder.

“Starr,” Sekani whispers, and looks back at me. “The store—”

His eyes have tears in them, and then mine do too. I drape my arms over his shoulders and hug him to me. “I know, man.”

A loud creaking sound approaches and somebody whistles a tune. Fo’ty Ounce pushes his shopping cart down the sidewalk. As hot as it is, he’s wearing his camouflage coat.
He comes to an abrupt stop in front of the store, like he just noticed it.

"Goddamn, Maverick," he says in that fast, Fo' ty Ounce way where it all sounds like one word. "What the hell happened?"

"Man, where were you last night?" Daddy says. "My store got burned up."

"I went on the other side of the freeway. Couldn't stay here. Oh nooo, I knew these fools would go crazy. You got insurance? I hope you do. I got insurance."

"What for?" I ask, because seriously?

"My life!" he says, like it's obvious. "You gon' rebuild, Maverick?"

"I don't know, man. I gotta think about it."

"You have to 'cause now we won't have no store. Everybody else gon' leave and never come back."

"I'll think about it."

"Okay. If you need anything, let me know." And he pushes his cart down the sidewalk but comes to an abrupt stop again. "The liquor store gone too? Oh nooo!"

I snicker. Only Fo' ty Ounce.

Mr. Lewis limps over with his broom. "That fool got a point. Folks will need a store around here. Everybody else gon' leave."

"I know," Daddy says. "It's just—it's a lot, Mr. Lewis."

"I know it is. But you can handle it. I told Clarence what happened," he says of Mr. Wyatt, his friend who used to own the store. "He thinks you oughta stick around. And we were talking, and I think it's about time for me to do like him. Sit on a beach, watch some pretty women."

"You're closing the shop?" Seven asks.

"Who's gonna cut my hair?" Sekani adds.

Mr. Lewis looks down at him. "Not my problem. Since you gon' be the only store around here, Maverick, you'll need more space when you rebuild. I wanna give you the shop."

"What?" Momma sputters.

"Whoa, now, wait a minute, Mr. Lewis," Daddy says.

"Wait nothing. I got insurance, and I'm gonna get more than enough from that. Ain't nothing I can do with a burned-up shop. You can build a nice store, give folks something to be proud to shop in. All I ask is that you put up some pictures of Dr. King alongside your Newey Whoever-He-Was."

Daddy chuckles. "Huey Newton."

"Yeah. Him. I know y'all moving, and I'm glad, but the neighborhood still needs more men like you. Even if you just running a store."

The insurance man arrives a little later, and Daddy gives him a tour of what's left. Momma gets some gloves and garbage bags from the truck, passes them to me and my brothers, and tells us to get to work. It's kinda hard with people driving by and honking their horns. They yell out stuff like "Keep y'all heads up" or "We got your back!"

Some of them come and help out, like Mrs. Rooks and Tim. Mr. Reuben brings us ice-cold bottles of water, 'cause
this sun ain't no joke. I sit on the curb, sweating, tired, and one hundred percent ready to be done. We aren't anywhere near finished.

A shadow casts over me, and somebody says, "Hey."

I shield my eyes as I look up. Kenya's wearing an oversized T-shirt and some basketball shorts. They look like Seven's.

"Hey."

She sits next to me and pulls her knees up to her chest. "I saw you on TV," she says. "I told you to speak out, but damn, Starr. You took it kinda far."

"It got people talking though, didn't it?"

"Yeah. Sorry about the store. I heard my daddy did it."

"He did." No point in denying it, shoot. "How's your momma?"

Kenya pulls her knees closer. "He beat her. She ended up in the hospital. They kept her overnight. She got a concussion and a whole bunch of other stuff, but she'll be okay. We saw her a li'l while ago. The cops came, and we had to leave."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They raided our house earlier and wanted to ask her some questions. Me and Lyric gotta stay with Grandma right now."

DeVante struck already. "You okay with that?"

"I'm relieved, actually. Messed up, huh?"

"Nah, not really."

She scratches one of her cornrows, which somehow makes all of them move in the same back-and-forth motion. "I'm sorry for calling Seven my brother and not our brother."

"Oh." I kinda forgot about that. It seems minor after everything that's happened. "It's all right."

"I guess I called him my brother 'cause it made it feel like he really was my brother, you know?"

"Um, he is your brother, Kenya. I honestly get jealous of how much he wants to be with you and Lyric."

"Because he thinks he has to be," she says. "He wants to be with y'all. I mean, I get why. He and Daddy don't get along. But I wish he wanted to be my brother sometimes and didn't feel like he had to be. He ashamed of us. 'Cause of our momma and my daddy."

"No, he's not."

"Yeah, he is. You ashamed of me too."

"I've never said that."

"You didn't have to, Starr," she says. "You never invited me to hang out with you and them girls. They were never at your house when I was. Like you ain't want them to know I was your friend too. You were ashamed of me, Khalil, even the Garden, and you know it."

I go quiet. If I face the truth, as ugly as it is, she's right. I was ashamed of Garden Heights and everything in it. It seems stupid now though. I can't change where I come from or what I've been through, so why should I be ashamed of what makes me, me? That's like being ashamed of myself.

Nah. Fuck that.

"Maybe I was ashamed," I admit. "But I'm not anymore.
And Seven's not ashamed of you, your momma, or Lyric. He loves y'all, Kenya. So like I said, our brother. Not just mine. Trust, I'm more than happy to share if it means getting him off my back."

"He can be a pain in the ass, can't he?"
"Girl, yes."

We laugh together. As much as I've lost, I've gained some good stuff too. Like Kenya.
"Yeah, all right," she says. "I guess we can share him."
"Chop-chop, Starr," Momma calls, clapping her hands as if that'll make me move faster. Still on her dictatorship, I swear. "We've got work to do, Kenya, I got a bag and some gloves with your name on them if you wanna help out."

Kenya turns to me like, seriously?

"I can share her too," I say. "Matter of fact, please take her."

We laugh and stand up. Kenya glances around at the rubble. More neighbors have joined in on cleaning up, and they form a line that moves trash out the store and into the trash cans on the curb.

"So what y'all gon' do now?" Kenya asks. "With the store, I mean."

A car honks at us, and the driver yells out to let us know he has our back. The answer comes easily.

"We'll rebuild."

Once upon a time there was a hazel-eyed boy with dimples. I called him Khalil. The world called him a thug.
realizing and shouting and marching and demanding. They're not forgetting. I think that's the most important part.

Khalil, I'll never forget.
I'll never give up.
I'll never be quiet.
I promise.