Ms. Rosalie opens it, and I catch a glimpse of a whole lot of money inside. “What in the world? Y’all know I can’t take this.”

“Yes, you can,” Daddy says. “We ain’t forgot how you kept Starr and Sekani for us. We weren’t ‘bout to let you be empty-handed.”

“And we know y’all are trying to pay for the funeral,” Momma says. “Hopefully that’ll help. Plus, we’re raising money around the neighborhood too. So don’t you worry about a thing.”

Ms. Rosalie wipes a new set of tears from her eyes. “I’m gonna pay y’all back every penny.”

“Did we say you had to pay us back?” Daddy asks. “You focus on getting better, a’ight? And if you give us any money, we giving it right back, God’s my witness.”

There are a lot more tears and hugs. Ms. Rosalie gives me a Freeze Cup for the road, red syrup glistening on the top. She always makes them extra sweet.

As we leave, I remember how Khalil used to run up to the car when I was about to go, the sun shining on the grease lines that separated his cornrows. The glimmer in his eyes would be just as bright. He’d knock on the window, I’d let it down, and he’d say with a snaggletooth grin, “See you later, alligator.”

Back then I’d giggle behind my own snaggletooth. Now I tear up. Good-byes hurt the most when the other person’s already gone. I imagine him standing at my window, and I smile for his sake. “After a while, crocodile.”

On Monday, the day I’m supposed to talk to the detectives, I’m crying out of nowhere, hunched over my bed as the iron in my hand spits out steam. Momma takes it before I burn the Williamson crest on my polo.

She rubs my shoulder. “Let it out, Munch.”

We have a quiet breakfast at the kitchen table without Seven. He spent the night at his momma’s house. I pick at my waffles. Just thinking about going into that station with all those cops makes me wanna puke. Food would make it worse.

After breakfast, we join hands in the living room like we always do, under the framed poster of the Ten-Point Program, and Daddy leads us in prayer.

“Black Jesus, watch over my babies today,” he says. “Keep them safe, steer them from wrong, and help them recognize
snakes from friends. Give them the wisdom they need to be their own people.

"Help Seven with this situation at his momma’s house, and let him know he can always come home. Thank you for Sekani’s miraculous, sudden healing that just so happened to come after he found out they’re having pizza at school today." I peek out at Sekani, whose eyes and mouth are open wide. I smirk and close my eyes. "Be with Lisa at the clinic as she helps your people. Help my baby girl get through her situation, Lord. Give her peace of mind, and help her speak her truth this afternoon. And lastly, strengthen Ms. Rosalie, Cameron, Tammy, and Brenda as they go through this difficult time. In your precious name I pray, amen."

"Amen," the rest of us say.

"Daddy, why you put me on the spot like that with Black Jesus?" Sekani complains.

"He knows the truth," Daddy says. He wipes crust from the corners of Sekani’s eyes and straightens the collar of his polo. "I’m trying to help you out. Get you some mercy or something, man."

Daddy pulls me into a hug. "You gon’ be a’ight?"

I nod into his chest. "Yeah."

I could stay like this all day—it’s one of the few places where One-Fifteen doesn’t exist and where I can forget about talking to detectives—but Momma says we need to leave before rush hour.

Now don’t get it wrong, I can drive. I got my license a week after my sixteenth birthday. But I can’t get a car unless I pay for it myself. I told my parents I don’t have time for a job with school and basketball. They said I don’t have time for a car then either. Messed up.

It takes forty-five minutes to get to school on a good day, and an hour on a slow one. Sekani doesn’t have to wear his headphones ’cause Momma doesn’t cuss anybody out on the freeway. She hums with gospel songs on the radio and says, "Give me strength, Lord. Give me strength."

We get off the freeway into Riverton Hills and pass all these gated neighborhoods. Uncle Carlos lives in one of them. To me, it’s so weird to have a gate around a neighborhood. Seriously, are they trying to keep people out or keep people in? If somebody puts a gate around Garden Heights, it’ll be a little bit of both.

Our school is gated too, and the campus has new, modern buildings with lots of windows and marigolds blooming along the walkways.

Momma gets in the carpool lane for the lower school. "Sekani, you remembered your iPad?"

"Yes, ma’am."

"Lunch card?"

"Yes, ma’am."

"Gym shorts? And you better have gotten the clean ones too."
“Yes, Momma. I’m almost nine. Can’t you give me a little credit?”

She smiles. “All right, big man. Think you can give me some sugar?”

Sekani leans over the front seat and kisses her cheek. “Love you.”

“Love you too. And don’t forget, Seven’s bringing you home today.”

He runs over to some of his friends and blends in with all the other kids in khakis and polos. We get in the carpool lane for my school.

“All right, Munch,” Momma says. “Seven’s gonna bring you to the clinic after school, then you and I will go to the station. Are you absolutely sure you’re up for it?”

No. But Uncle Carlos promised it’ll be okay. “I’ll do it.”

“Okay. Call me if you don’t think you can make it the whole day at school.”

Hold up. I could’ve stayed home? “Why are you making me come in the first place?”

“Cause you need to get out the house. Out that neighborhood. I want you to at least try, Starr. This will sound mean, but just because Khalil’s not living doesn’t mean you stop living. You understand, baby?”

“Yeah.” I know she’s right, but it feels wrong.

We get to the front of the carpool line. “Now I don’t have to ask if you brought some funky-ass gym shorts, do I?” she says.

I laugh. “No. Bye, Momma.”

“Bye, baby.”

I get out the car. For at least seven hours I don’t have to talk about One-Fifteen. I don’t have to think about Khalil. I just have to be normal Starr at normal Williamson and have a normal day. That means flipping the switch in my brain so I’m Williamson Starr. Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang—if a rapper would say it, she doesn’t say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her “hood.” Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she’s the “angry black girl.” Williamson Starr is approachable. No stalk-eyes, side-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto.

I can’t stand myself for doing it, but I do it anyway.

I sling my backpack over my shoulder. As usual it matches my J’s, the blue-and-black Elevens like Jordan wore in Space Jam. I worked at the store a month to buy them. I hate dressing like everybody else, but The Fresh Prince taught me something. See, Will always wore his school uniform jacket inside out so he could be different. I can’t wear my uniform inside out, but I can make sure my sneakers are always dope and my backpack always matches them.

I go inside and scan the atrium for Maya, Hailey, or Chris. I don’t see them, but I see that half the kids have tans from spring break. Luckily I was born with one. Someone covers my eyes.
“Maya, I know that’s you.”

She snickers and moves her hands. I’m not tall at all, but Maya has to stand on her tiptoes to cover my eyes. And the chick actually wants to play center on the varsity basketball team. She wears her hair in a high bun because she probably thinks it makes her look taller, but nope.

“What’s up, Ms. I Can’t Text Anyone Back?” she says, and we do our little handshake. It’s not complicated like Daddy and King’s, but it works for us. “I was starting to wonder if you were abducted by aliens.”

“Huh?”

She holds up her phone. The screen has a brand-new crack stretching from corner to corner. Maya’s always dropping it. “You haven’t texted me in two days, Starr,” she says. “Not cool.”

“Oh.” I’ve barely looked at my phone since Khalil got . . . since the incident. “Sorry. I was working at the store. You know how crazy that can get. How was your spring break?”

“Okay, I guess.” She munches on some Sour Patch Kids. “We visited my great-grandparents in Taipei. I ended up taking a bunch of snapbacks and basketball shorts, so all week long I heard, ‘Why do you dress like a boy?’ ‘Why do you play a boy sport?’ Blah, blah, blah. And it was awful when they saw a picture of Ryan. They asked if he was a rapper!”

I laugh and steal some of her candy. Maya’s boyfriend, Ryan, happens to be the only other black kid in eleventh grade,

and everybody expects us to be together. Because apparently when it’s two of us, we have to be on some Noah’s Ark type shit and pair up to preserve the blackness of our grade. Lately I’m super aware of BS like that.

We head for the cafeteria. Our table near the vending machines is almost full. There’s Hailey, sitting on top of it, having a heated discussion with curly-haired, dimpled Luke. I think that’s foreplay for them. They’ve liked each other since sixth grade, and if your feelings can survive the awkwardness of middle school you should stop playing around and go out.

Some of the other girls from the team are there too: Jess the co-captain and Britt the center who makes Maya look like an ant. It’s kinda stereotypical that we all sit together, but it worked out that way. I mean, who else will listen to us bitch about swollen knees and understand inside jokes born on the bus after a game?

Chris’s boys from the basketball team are at the table next to ours, egging Hailey and Luke on. Chris isn’t there yet. Unfortunately and fortunately.

Luke sees me and Maya and reaches his arms toward us. “Thank you! Two sensible people who can end this discussion.”

I slide onto the bench beside Jess. She rests her head on my shoulder. “They’ve been at it for fifteen minutes.”

Poor girl. I pat her hair. I have a secret crush on Jess’s pixie cut. My neck’s not long enough for one, but her hair is perfect. Every strand is where it should be. If I were into girls, I
would totally date her for her hair, and she would date me for
my shoulder.

“What’s it about this time?” I ask.

“Pop Tarts,” Britt says.

Hailey turns to us and points at Luke. “This jerk actually
said they’re better warmed up in the microwave.”

“Eww,” I say, instead of my usual “Ill,” and Maya goes,
“Are you serious?”

“I know, right?” says Hailey.

“Jesus Christ!” Luke says. “I only asked for a dollar to buy
one from the machine!”

“You’re not wasting my money to destroy a perfectly good
Pop Tart in a microwave.”

“They’re supposed to be heated up!” he argues.

“I actually agree with Luke,” Jess says. “Pop Tarts are ten
times better heated up.”

I move my shoulder so her head isn’t resting on it. “We can’t
be friends anymore.”

Her mouth drops open, and she pouts.

“Fine, fine,” I say, and she rests her head on my shoulder
with a wide grin. Total weirdo. I don’t know how she’ll survive
without my shoulder when she graduates in a few months.

“Anyone who heats up a Pop Tart should be charged,” Hailey
says.

“And imprisoned,” I say.

“And forced to eat uncooked Pop Tarts until they accept
how good they are,” Maya adds.

“It is law,” Hailey finishes, smacking the table like that
settles it.

“You guys have issues,” Luke says, hopping off the table.
He picks at Hailey’s hair. “I think all that dye seeped into your
brain.”

She swats at him as he leaves. She’s added blue streaks to her
honey-blond hair and cut it shoulder-length. In fifth grade, she
trimmed it with some scissors during a math test because she
felt like it. That was the moment I knew she didn’t give a shit.

“I like the blue, Hails,” I say. “And the cut.”

“Yeah,” Maya grins. “It’s very Joe Jonas of you.”

Hailey whips her head around so fast, her eyes flashing.
Maya and I snicker.

So there’s a video deep in the depths of YouTube of the
three of us lip-syncing to the Jonas Brothers and pretending to
play guitars and drums in Hailey’s bedroom. She decided she
was Joe, I was Nick, and Maya was Kevin. I really wanted to be
Joe—I secretly loved him the most, but Hailey said she should
have him, so I let her.

I let her have her way a lot. Still do. That’s part of being
Williamson Starr, I guess.

“I so have to find that video,” Jess says.

“Nooo,” Hailey goes, sliding off the tabletop. “It must
never be found.” She sits across from us. “Never. Ne-ver. If I
remembered that account’s password, I’d delete it.”
"Ooh, what was the account's name?" Jess asks. "JoBro Lover or something? Wait, no, JoBro Lova. Everybody liked to misspell shit in middle school."

I smirk and mumble, "Close."

Hailey looks at me. "Starr!"

Maya and Britt crack up.

It's moments like this that I feel normal at Williamson. Despite the guidelines I put on myself, I've still found my group, my table.

"Okay then," Hailey says. "I see how it is, Maya Jonas and Nick's Starry Girl 2000 —"

"So, Hails," I say before she can finish my old screen name. She grins. "How was your spring break?"

Hailey loses her grin and rolls her eyes. "Oh, it was wonderful. Dad and Stepmother Dearest dragged me and Remy to the house in the Bahamas for 'family bonding.'"

And bam. That normal feeling? Gone. I suddenly remember how different I am from most of the kids here. Nobody would have to drag me or my brothers to the Bahamas—we'd swim there if we could. For us, a family vacation is staying at a local hotel with a swimming pool for a weekend.

"Sounds like my parents," says Britt. "Took us to fucking Harry Potter World for the third year in a row. I'm sick of Butter Beer and corny family photos with wands."

Holy shit. Who the fuck complains about going to Harry Potter World? Or Butter Beer? Or wands?

I hope none of them ask about my spring break. They went to Taipei, the Bahamas, Harry Potter World. I stayed in the hood and saw a cop kill my friend.

"I guess the Bahamas wasn't so bad," Hailey says. "They wanted us to do family stuff, but we ended up doing our own thing the entire time."

"You mean you texted me the entire time," Maya says.

"It was still my own thing."

"All day, every day," Maya adds. "Ignoring the time difference."

"Whatever, Shorty. You know you liked talking to me."

"Oh," I say. "That's cool."

Really though, it's not. Hailey never texted me during spring break. She barely texts me at all lately. Maybe once a week now, and it used to be every day. Something's changed between us, and neither one of us acknowledges it. We're normal when we're at Williamson, like now. Beyond here though, we're no longer best friends, just... I don't know.

Plus she unfollowed my Tumblr.

She has no clue that I know. I once posted a picture of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy who was murdered for whistling at a white woman in 1955. His mutilated body didn't look human. Hailey texted me immediately after, freaking out. I thought it was because she couldn't believe someone would do that to a kid. No. She couldn't believe I would reblog such an awful picture.
Not long after that, she stopped liking and reblogging my other posts. I looked through my followers list. Awww, Hails was no longer following me. With me living forty-five minutes away, Tumblr is supposed to be sacred ground where our friendship is cemented. Unfollowing me is the same as saying “I don’t like you anymore.”

Maybe I’m being sensitive. Or maybe things have changed, maybe I’ve changed. For now I guess we’ll keep pretending everything is fine.

The first bell rings. On Mondays AP English is first for me, Hailey, and Maya. On the way they get into this big discussion-turned-argument about NCAA brackets and the Final Four. Hailey was born a Notre Dame fan. Maya hates them almost unhealthily. I stay out that discussion. The NBA is more my thing anyway.

We turn down the hall, and Chris is standing in the doorway of our class, his hands stuffed in pockets and a pair of headphones draped around his neck. He looks straight at me and stretches his arm across the doorway.

Hailey glances from him to me. Back and forth, back and forth. “Did something happen with you guys?”

My pursed lips probably give me away. “Yeah. Sort of.”

“That douche,” Hailey says, reminding me why we’re friends—she doesn’t need details. If someone hurts me in any way, they’re automatically on her shit list. It started in fifth grade, two years before Maya came along. We were those “crybaby” kids who bust out crying at the smallest shit. Me because of Natasha, and Hailey because she lost her mom to cancer. We rode the waves of grief together.

That’s why this weirdness between us doesn’t make sense. “What do you want to do, Starr?” she asks.

I don’t know. Before Khalil, I planned to cold-shoulder Chris with a sting more powerful than a nineties R&B breakup song. But after Khalil I’m more like a Taylor Swift song. (No shade, I fucks with Tay-Tay, but she doesn’t serve like nineties R&B on the angry-girlfriend scale.) I’m not happy with Chris, yet I miss him. I miss us. I need him so much that I’m willing to forget what he did. That’s scary as fuck too. Someone I’ve only been with for a year means that much to me? But Chris . . . he’s different.

You know what? I’ll Beyoncé him. Not as powerful as a nineties R&B breakup song, but stronger than a Taylor Swift. Yeah. That’ll work. I tell Hailey and Maya, “I’ll handle him.” They move so I’m between them like they’re my bodyguards, and we go to the door together.

Chris bows to us. “Ladies.”

“Move!” Maya orders. Funny considering how much Chris towers over her.

He looks at me with those baby blues. He got a tan over break. I used to tell him he was so pale he looked like a marshmallow. He hated that I compared him to food. I told him that’s what he got for calling me caramel. It shut him up.
Dammit though. He’s wearing the *Space Jam* Elevens too. I forgot we decided to wear them the first day back. They look good on him. Jordans are my weakness. Can’t help it.

“I just wanna talk to my girl,” he claims.

“I don’t know who that is,” I say, Beyoncé’ing him like a pro.

He sighs through his nose. “Please, Starr? Can we at least talk about it?”

I’m back to Taylor Swift because the *please* does it. I nod at Hailey and Maya.

“You hurt her, and I’ll kill you,” Hailey warns, and she and Maya go in to class without me.

Chris and I move away from the door. I lean against a locker and fold my arms. “I’m listening,” I say.

A bass-heavy instrumental plays in his headphones. Probably one of his beats. “I’m sorry for what happened. I should’ve talked to you first.”

I cock my head. “We did talk about it. A week before. Remember?”

“I know, I know. And I heard you. I just wanted to be prepared in case—”

“You could push the right buttons and convince me to change my mind?”

“No!” His hands go up in surrender. “Starr, you know I wouldn’t—that’s not—I’m sorry, okay? I took it too far.”

Understatement. The day before Big D’s party, Chris and I were in Chris’s ridiculously large room. The third floor of his parents’ mansion is a suite for him, a perk of being the last born to empty-nesters. I try to forget that he has an entire floor as big as my house and hired help that looks like me.

Fooling around isn’t new for us, and when Chris slipped his hand in my shorts, I didn’t think anything of it. Then he got me going, and I really wasn’t thinking. At all. For real, my thought process went out the door. And right as I was at *that* moment, he stopped, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a condom. He raised his eyebrows at me, silently asking for an invitation to go all the way.

All I could think about was those girls I see walking around Garden Heights, babies propped on their hips. Condom or no condom, shit happens.

I went off on Chris. He knew I wasn’t ready for that, we already talked about it, and yet he had a condom? He said he wanted to be responsible, but if I said I’m not ready, I’m not ready.

I left his house pissed *and* horny, the absolute worst way to leave.

My mom may have been right though. She once said that after you go there with a guy, it activates all these feelings, and you wanna do it all the time. Chris and I went far enough that I notice every single detail about his body now. His cute nostrils that flare when he sighs. His soft brown hair that my fingers love to explore. His gentle lips, and his tongue that wets them
every so often. The five freckles on his neck that are in the perfect spots for kissing.

More than that, I remember the guy who spends almost every night on the phone with me talking about nothing and everything. The one who loves to make me smile. Yeah, he pisses me off sometimes, and I'm sure I piss him off, but we mean something. We actually mean a lot.

Fuckity fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm crumbling. "Chris . . ."

He goes for a low blow and beatboxes an all-too-familiar, "Boomp . . . boomp, boomp, boomp."

I point at him. "Don't you dare!"

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

He beat-boxes the instrumental and pops his chest and booty to the rhythm. People pass by us, laughing. A guy whistles suggestively. Someone shouts, "Shake that ass, Bryant!"

My smile grows before I can stop it.

*The Fresh Prince* isn't just my show, it's our show. Sophomore year he followed my Tumblr, and I followed him back. We knew of each other from school, but we didn't know each other. One Saturday, I reblogged a bunch of *Fresh Prince* GIFs and clips. He liked and reblogged every single one. That Monday morning in the cafeteria, he paid for my Pop Tarts and grape juice and said, "The first Aunt Viv was the best Aunt Viv."

It was the beginning of us.

Chris gets *The Fresh Prince*, which helps him get me. We once talked about how cool it was that Will remained himself in his new world. I slipped up and said I wish I could be like that at school. Chris said, "Why can't you, Fresh Princess?"

Ever since, I don't have to decide which Starr I have to be with him. He likes both. Well, the parts I've shown him. Some things I can't reveal, like Natasha. Once you've seen how broken someone is it's like seeing them naked—you can't look at them the same anymore.

I like the way he looks at me now, as if I'm one of the best things in his life. He's one of the best things in mine too.

I can't lie, we get the "why is he dating her" stare that usually comes from rich white girls. Sometimes I wonder the same thing. Chris acts like those looks don't exist. When he does stuff like this, rapping and beatboxing in the middle of a busy hall just to make me smile, I forget about those looks too.

He starts the second verse, swaying his shoulders and looking at me. The worst part? His silly butt knows it's working. "In West Philadelphia, born and raised"—c'mon, babe. Join in.

He grabs my hands.

*One-Fifteen* follows Khalil's hands with the flashlight.

He orders Khalil to get out with his hands up.

He barks at me to put my hands on the dashboard.

I kneel beside my dead friend in the middle of the street with my hands raised. A cop as white as Chris points a gun at me.
As white as Chris.
I flinch and snatch away.
Chris frowns. “Starr, you okay?”
Khalil opens the door. “You okay, Starr—”
Pow!
There’s blood. Too much blood.
The second bell rings, jolting me back to normal Williamson, where I’m not normal Starr.
Chris leans down, his face in front of mine. My tears blur him. “Starr?”

It’s a few tears, yeah, but I feel exposed. I turn to go to class, and Chris grabs my arm. I yank away and whirl on him.
His hands go up in surrender. “Sorry. I was . . .”
I wipe my eyes and walk into the classroom. Chris is right behind me. Hailey and Maya shoot him the dirtiest looks. I lower myself into the desk in front of Hailey.
She squeezes my shoulder. “That jackwad.”

Nobody mentioned Khalil at school today. I hate to admit it, because it’s like throwing him the middle finger, but I’m relieved.

Since basketball season is over, I leave when everybody else does. Probably for the first time in my life I wish it wasn’t the end of the day. I’m that much closer to talking to the cops.

Hailey and I trek across the parking lot, arm in arm. Maya has a driver to pick her up. Hailey has her own car, and I have a brother with a car; the two of us always end up walking out together.

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t want me to kick Chris’s ass?” Hailey asks.

I told her and Maya about Condomgate, and as far as they’re concerned Chris is eternally banished to Asshole Land.

“Yes,” I say, for the hundredth time. “You’re violent, Hails.”

“When it comes to my friends, possibly. Seriously though, why would he even? God, boys and their fucking sex drive.”

She lightly elbows me. “Shut up.”

I laugh. “Why won’t you admit you like him?”

“What makes you think I like him?”

“Really, Hailey?”

“Whatever, Starr. This isn’t about me. This is about you and your sex-driven boyfriend.”

“He’s not sex-driven,” I say.

“Then what do you call it?”

“He was horny at that moment.”

“Same thing!”

I try to keep a straight face and she does too, but soon we’re cracking up. God, it feels good to be normal Starr and Hailey. Has me wondering if I imagined a change.

We part at the halfway point to Hailey’s car and Seven’s.

“The ass-kicking offer is still on the table,” she calls to me.

“Bye, Hailey!”
I walk off, rubbing my arms. Spring has decided to go through an identity crisis and get chilly on me. A few feet away, Seven keeps a hand on his car as he talks to his girlfriend, Layla. Him and that damn Mustang. He touches it more than he touches Layla. She obviously doesn’t care. She plays with the dreadlock near his face that isn’t pulled into his ponytail. Eye-roll worthy. Some girls do too much. Can’t she play with all them curls on her own head?

Honestly though, I don’t have a problem with Layla. She’s a geek like Seven, smart enough for Harvard but Howard bound, and real sweet. She’s one of the four black girls in the senior class, and if Seven just wants to date black girls, he picked a great one.

I walk up to them and go, “Hem-hem.”

Seven keeps his eyes on Layla. “Go sign Sekani out.”

“Can’t,” I lie. “Momma didn’t put me on the list.”

“Yeah, she did. Go.”

I fold my arms. “I am not walking halfway across campus to get him and halfway back. We can get him when we’re leaving.”

He side-eyes me, but I’m too tired for all that, and it’s cold. Seven kisses Layla and goes around to the driver’s side. “Acting like that’s a long walk,” he mumbles.

“Acting like we can’t get him when we’re leaving,” I say, and hop in.

He starts the car. This nice mix Chris made of Kanye and

my other future husband J. Cole plays from Seven’s iPod dock. He maneuvers through the parking lot traffic to Sekani’s school. Seven signs him out of his after-school program, and we leave.

“I’m hungry,” Sekani whines not even five minutes out the parking lot.

“Didn’t they give you a snack in after-school?” Seven asks.

“So? I’m still hungry.”

“Greedy butt,” Seven says, and Sekani kicks the back of his seat. Seven laughs. “Okay, okay! Ma asked me to bring some food to the clinic anyway. I’ll get you something too.” He looks at Sekani in the rearview mirror. “Is that cool—”

Seven freezes. He turns Chris’s mix off and slows down.

“What you turn the music off for?” Sekani asks.

“Shut up,” Seven hisses.

We stop at a red light. A Riverton Hills patrol car pulls up beside us.

Seven straightens up and stares ahead, barely blinking and gripping the steering wheel. His eyes move a little like he wants to look at the cop car. He swallows hard.

“C’mon, light,” he prays. “C’mon.”

I stare ahead and pray for the light to change too.

It finally turns green, and Seven lets the patrol car go first. His shoulders don’t relax until we get on the freeway. Mine neither.

We stop at this Chinese restaurant Momma loves and get food for all of us. She wants me to eat before I talk to the
detectives. In Garden Heights, kids play in the streets. Sekani presses his face against my window and watches them. He won’t play with them though. Last time he played with some neighborhood kids, they called him “white boy” ’cause he goes to Williamson.

Black Jesus greets us from a mural on the side of the clinic. He has locs like Seven. His arms stretch the width of the wall, and there are puffy white clouds behind him. Big letters above him remind us that Jesus Loves You.

Seven passes Black Jesus and goes into the parking lot behind the clinic. He punches in a code to open the gate and parks next to Momma’s Camry. I get the tray of sodas, Seven gets the food, and Sekani doesn’t take anything because he never takes anything.

I hit the buzzer for the back door and wave up at the camera. The door opens into a sterile-smelling hall with bright-white walls and white-tile floors that reflect us. The hall takes us to the waiting room. A handful of people watch the news on the old box TV in the ceiling or read magazines that have been there since I was little. When this shaggy-haired man sees that we have food, he straightens up and sniffs hard as if it’s for him.

“What y’all bringing up in here?” Ms. Felicia asks at the front desk, stretching her neck to see.

Momma comes from the other hallway in her plain yellow scrubs, following a teary-eyed boy and his mom. The boy sucks on a lollipop, a reward for surviving a shot.

“There go my babies,” Momma says when she sees us. “And they got my food too. C’mon. Let’s go in the back.”

“Save me some!” Ms. Felicia calls after us. Momma tells her to hush.

We set the food out on the break room table. Momma gets some paper plates and plastic utensils that she keeps in a cabinet for days like this. We say grace and dig in.

Momma sits on the countertop and eats. “Mmm-mm! This is hitting the spot. Thank you, Seven baby. I only had a bag of Cheetos today.”

“You didn’t have lunch?” Sekani asks, with a mouth full of fried rice.

Momma points her fork at him. “What did I tell you about talking with your mouth full? And for your information, no I did not. I had a meeting on my lunch break. Now, tell me about y’all. How was school?”

Sekani always talks the longest because he gives every single detail. Seven says his day was fine. I’m as short with my “It was all right.”

Momma sips her soda. “Anything happen?”

I freaked out when my boyfriend touched me, but—“Nope. Nothing.”

Ms. Felicia comes to the door. “Lisa, sorry to bother you, but we have an issue up front.”

“I’m on break, Felicia.”

“Don’t you think I know that? But she asking for you. It’s Brenda.”

Khalil’s momma.
My mom sets her plate down. She looks straight at me when she says, “Stay here.”

I'm hardheaded though. I follow her to the waiting room. Ms. Brenda sits with her face in her hands. Her hair is uncombed, and her white shirt is dingy, almost brown. She has sores and scabs on her arms and legs, and since she's real light-skinned they show up even more.

Momma kneels in front of her. “Bren, hey.”

Ms. Brenda moves her hands. Her red eyes remind me of what Khalil said when we were little, that his momma had turned into a dragon. He claimed that one day he'd become a knight and turn her back.

It doesn't make sense that he sold drugs. I would've thought his broken heart wouldn't let him.

“My baby,” his momma cries. “Lisa, my baby.”

Momma sandwiches Ms. Brenda's hands between hers and rubs them, not caring that they're nasty looking. “I know, Bren.”

“They killed my baby.”

“I know.”

“They killed him.”

“I know.”

“Lord Jesus,” Ms. Felicia says from the doorway. Next to her, Seven puts his arm around Sekani. Some patients in the waiting room shake their heads.


“I can't. My baby ain't here.”

“Yes, you can. You have Cameron, and he needs you. Your momma needs you.”

Khalil needed you, I wanna say. He waited for you and cried for you. But where were you? You don't get to cry now. Nuh-uh. It's too late.

But she keeps crying. Rocking and crying.

“Tammy and I can get you some help, Bren,” Momma says. “But you gotta really want it this time.”

“I don't wanna live like this no more.”

“I know.” Momma waves Ms. Felicia over and hands Ms. Felicia her phone. “Look through my contacts and find Tammy Harris's number. Call and tell her that her sister is here. Bren, when was the last time you ate?”

“I don't know. I don't—my baby.”

Momma straightens up and rubs Ms. Brenda's shoulder.

“I'm gonna get you some food.”

I follow Momma back. She walks kinda fast but passes the food and goes to the counter. She leans on it with her back to me and bows her head, not saying a word.

Everything I wanted to say in the waiting room comes bubbling out. “How come she gets to be upset? She wasn't there for Khalil. You know how many times he cried about her? Birthdays, Christmas, all that. Why does she get to cry now?”

“Starr, please.”

“She hasn't acted like a mom to him! Now all of a sudden,
he’s her baby? It’s bullshit!”

Momma smacks the counter, and I jump. “Shut up!” she screams. She turns around, tears streaking her face. “That wasn’t some lil’ friend of hers. That was her son, you hear me? Her son!” Her voice cracks. “She carried that boy, birthed that boy. And you have no right to judge her.”

I have cotton-mouth. “I—”

Momma closes her eyes. She massages her forehead. “I’m sorry. Fix her a plate, baby, okay? Fix her a plate.”

I do and put a little extra of everything on it. I take it to Ms. Brenda. She mumbles what sounds like “thank you” as she takes it.

When she looks at me through the red haze, Khalil’s eyes stare back at me, and I realize my mom’s right. Ms. Brenda is Khalil’s momma. Regardless.

SIX

My mom and I arrive at the police station at four thirty on the dot.

A handful of cops talk on phones, type on computers, or stand around. Normal stuff, like on Law & Order, but my breath catches. I count: One. Two. Three. Four. I lose count around twelve because the guns in their holsters are all I can see.

All of them. Two of us.

Momma squeezes my hand. “Breathe.”

I didn’t realize I had grabbed hers.

I take a deep breath and another, and she nods with each one, saying, “That’s it. You’re okay. We’re okay.”

Uncle Carlos comes over, and he and Momma lead me to his desk, where I sit down. I feel eyes on me from all around.
The grip tightens around my lungs. Uncle Carlos hands me a sweating bottle of water. Momma puts it up to my lips.

I take slow sips and look around Uncle Carlos's desk to avoid the curious eyes of the officers. He has almost as many pictures of me and Sekani on display as he has of his own kids.

“I’m taking her home,” Momma tells him. “I’m not putting her through this today. She’s not ready.”

“I understand, but she has to talk to them at some point, Lisa. She’s a vital part of this investigation.”

Momma sighs. “Carlos—”

“I get it,” he says, in a noticeably lower voice. “Believe me, I do. Unfortunately, if we want this investigation done right, she has to talk to them. If not today, then another day.”

Another day of waiting and wondering what’s gonna happen.

I can’t go through that.

“I wanna do it today,” I mumble. “I wanna get it over with.” They look at me, like they just remembered I’m here.

Uncle Carlos kneels in front of me. “Are you sure, baby girl?”

I nod before I lose my nerve.

“All right,” Momma says. “But I’m going with her.”

“That’s totally fine,” Uncle Carlos says.

“I don’t care if it’s not fine.” She looks at me. “She’s not doing this alone.”

Those words feel as good as any hug I’ve ever gotten.

Uncle Carlos keeps an arm around me and leads us to a small room that has nothing in it but a table and some chairs. An unseen air conditioner hums loudly, blasting freezing air into the room.

“All right,” Uncle Carlos says. “I’ll be outside, okay?”

“Okay,” I say.

He kisses my forehead with his usual two pecks. Momma takes my hand, and her tight squeeze tells me what she doesn’t say out loud—I got your back.

We sit at the table. She’s still holding my hand when the two detectives come in—a young white guy with slick black hair and a Latina with lines around her mouth and a spiky haircut. Both of them wear guns on their waists.

*Keep your hands visible.*

*No sudden moves.*

*Only speak when spoken to.*

“Hi, Starr and Mrs. Carter,” the woman says, holding out her hand. “I’m Detective Gomez, and this is my partner, Detective Wilkes.”

I let go of my mom’s hand to shake the detectives’ hands. “Hello.” My voice is changing already. It always happens around “other” people, whether I’m at Williamson or not. I don’t talk like me or sound like me. I choose every word carefully and make sure I pronounce them well. I can never, ever let anyone think I’m ghetto.

“It’s so nice to meet you both,” Wilkes says.
“Considering the circumstances, I wouldn’t call it nice,” says Momma.
Wilkes’s face and neck get extremely red.
“What he means is we’ve heard so much about you both,” Gomez says. “Carlos always gushes about his wonderful family. We feel like we know you already.”
She’s laying it on extra thick.
“Please, have a seat.” Gomez points to a chair, and she and Wilkes sit across from us. “Just so you know, you’re being recorded, but it’s simply so we can have Starr’s statement on record.”
“Okay,” I say. There it is again, all perky and shit. I’m never perky.
Detective Gomez gives the date and time and the names of the people in the room and reminds us that we’re being recorded. Wilkes scribbles in his notebook. Momma rubs my back. For a moment there’s only the sound of pencil on paper.
“All right then.” Gomez adjusts herself in her chair and smiles, the lines around her mouth deepening. “Don’t be nervous, Starr. You haven’t done anything wrong. We just want to know what happened.”
I know I haven’t done anything wrong, I think, but it comes out as, “Yes, ma’am.”
“You’re sixteen, right?”
“Yes, ma’am.”
“How long did you know Khalil?”

“Since I was three. His grandmother used to babysit me.”
“Wow,” she says, all teacher-like, stretching out the word. “That’s a long time. Can you tell us what happened the night of the incident?”
“You mean the night he was killed?”
Skit.
Gomez’s smile dims, the lines around her mouth aren’t as deep, but she says, “The night of the incident, yes. Start where you feel comfortable.”
I look at Momma. She nods.
“My friend Kenya and I went to a house party hosted by a guy named Darius,” I say.
Thump-thump-thump. I drum the table.
Stop. No sudden moves.
I lay my hands flat to keep them visible.
“He has one every spring break,” I say. “Khalil saw me, came over, and said hello.”
“Do you know why he was at the party?” Gomez asks.
Why does anybody go to a party? To party. “I assume it was for recreational purposes,” I say. “He and I talked about things going on in our lives.”
“What kind of things?” she questions.
“His grandmother has cancer. I didn’t know until he told me that evening.”
“I see,” Gomez says. “What happened after that?”
“A fight occurred at the party, so we left together in his car.”
“Khalil didn’t have anything to do with the fight?”
I raise an eyebrow. “Nah.”

_Dammit. Proper English._
I sit up straight. “I mean, no, ma’am. We were talking when the fight occurred.”

“Okay, so you two left. Where were you going?”

“He offered to take me home or to my father’s grocery store. Before we could decide, One-Fifteen pulled us over.”

“Who?” she asks.

“The officer, that’s his badge number,” I say. “I remember it.”

Wilkes scribbles.

“I see,” Gomez says. “Can you describe what happened next?”

I don’t think I’ll ever forget what happened, but saying it out loud, that’s different. And hard.

My eyes prickle. I blink, staring at the table.

Momma rubs my back. “Look up, Starr.”

My parents have this thing where they never want me or my brothers to talk to somebody without looking them in their eyes. They claim that a person’s eyes say more than their mouth, and that it goes both ways—if we look someone in their eyes and mean what we say, they should have little reason to doubt us.

I look at Gomez.

“Khalil pulled over to the side of the road and turned the ignition off,” I say. “One-Fifteen put his brights on. He approached the window and asked Khalil for his license and registration.”

“Did Khalil comply?” Gomez asks.

“He asked the officer why he pulled us over first. Then he showed his license and registration.”

“Did Khalil seem irate during this exchange?”

“Annoyed, not irate,” I say. “He felt that the cop was harassing him.”

“Did he tell you this?”

“No, but I could tell. I assumed the same thing myself.”

_Shit._

Gomez scoots closer. Maroon lipstick stains her teeth, and her breath smells like coffee. “And why was that?”

_Breathe._

_The room isn’t hot. You’re nervous._

“Because we weren’t doing anything wrong,” I say. “Khalil wasn’t speeding or driving recklessly. It didn’t seem like he had a reason to pull us over.”

“I see. What happened next?”

“The officer forced Khalil out the car.”

_Forced?_ she says.

“Yes, ma’am. He pulled him out.”

“Because Khalil was hesitant, right?”

Momma makes this throaty sound, like she was about to say something but stopped herself. She purses her lips and rubs my back in circles.
I remember what Daddy said—“Don’t let them put words in your mouth.”

“No, ma’am,” I say to Gomez. “He was getting out on his own, and the officer yanked him the rest of the way.”

She says “I see” again, but she didn’t see it so she probably doesn’t believe it. “What happened next?” she asks.

“The officer patted Khalil down three times.”

“Three?”

Yeah. I counted. “Yes, ma’am. He didn’t find anything. He then told Khalil to stay put while he ran his license and registration.”

“But Khalil didn’t stay put, did he?” she says.

“He didn’t pull the trigger on himself either.”

Shit. Your fucking big mouth.

The detectives glance at each other. A moment of silent conversation.

The walls move in closer. The grip around my lungs returns. I pull my shirt away from my neck.

“I think we’re done for today,” Momma says, taking my hand as she starts to stand up.

“But Mrs. Carter, we’re not finished.”

“I don’t care—”

“Mom,” I say, and she looks down at me. “It’s okay. I can do this.”

She gives them a glare similar to the one she gives me and my brothers when we’ve pushed her to her limit. She sits down but holds on to my hand.

Okay,” Gomez says. “So he patted Khalil down and told him he would check his license and registration. What next?”

Khalil opened the driver’s side door and—"

Pow!

Pow!

Pow!

Blood.

Tears crawl down my cheeks. I wipe them on my arm. “The officer shot him.”

“Do you—” Gomez starts, but Momma holds a finger toward her.

“Could you please give her a second,” she says. It sounds more like an order than a question.

Gomez doesn’t say anything. Wilkes scribbles some more. My mom wipes some of my tears for me. “Whenever you’re ready,” she says.

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod.

“Okay,” Gomez says, and takes a deep breath. “Do you know why Khalil came to the door, Starr?”

“I think he was coming to ask if I was okay.”

“You think?”

I’m not a telepath. “Yes, ma’am. He started asking but didn’t finish because the officer shot him in the back.”

More salty tears fall on my lips.

Gomez leans across the table. “We all want to get to the bottom of this, Starr. We appreciate your cooperation. I understand this is hard right now.”
I wipe my face on my arm again. "Yeah."

"Yeah." She smiles and says in that same sugary, sympathetic tone, "Now, do you know if Khalil sold narcotics?"

Pause.

What the fuck?

My tears stop. For real, my eyes get dry with the quickness. Before I can say anything, my mom goes, "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's only a question," Gomez says. "Do you, Starr?"

All the sympathy, the smiles, the understanding. This chick was baiting me.

Investigating or justifying?

I know the answer to her question. I knew it when I saw Khalil at the party. He never wore new shoes. And jewelry? Those little ninety-nine-cent chains he bought at the beauty supply store didn't count. Ms. Rosalie just confirmed it.

But what the hell does that have to do with him getting murdered? Is that supposed to make all of this okay?

Gomez tilts her head. "Starr? Can you please answer the question?"

I refuse to make them feel better about killing my friend. I straighten up, look Gomez dead in her eyes, and say, "I never saw him sell drugs or do drugs."

"But do you know if he sold them?" she asks.

"He never told me he did," I say, which is true. Khalil never flat-out admitted it to me.

"Do you have knowledge of him selling them?"

"I heard things." Also true.

She sighs. "I see. Do you know if he was involved with the King Lords?"

"No."

"The Garden Disciples?"

"No."

"Did you consume any alcohol at the party?" she asks.

I know that move from Law & Order. She's trying to discredit me. "No. I don't drink."

"Did Khalil?"

"Whoa, wait one second," Momma says. "Are y'all putting Khalil and Starr on trial or the cop who killed him?"

Wilkes looks up from his notes.

"I—I don't quite understand, Mrs. Carter?" Gomez sputters.

"You haven't asked my child about that cop yet," Momma says. "You keep asking her about Khalil, like he's the reason he's dead. Like she said, he didn't pull the trigger on himself."

"We just want the whole picture, Mrs. Carter. That's all."

"One-Fifteen killed him," I say. "And he wasn't doing anything wrong. How much of a bigger picture do you need?"

Fifteen minutes later, I leave the police station with my mom. Both of us know the same thing:

This is gonna be some bullshit.
In the gym everyone’s changed into their blue shorts and gold Williamson T-shirts, but class hasn’t started yet. To pass time, some of the girls challenged some of the boys to a basketball game. They’re playing on one end of the gym, the floor squeaking as they run around. The girls are all "Staaawp!” when the guys guard them. Flirting, Williamson style.

Hailey, Maya, and I are in the bleachers on the other end. On the floor, some guys are supposedly dancing, trying to get their moves ready for prom. I say *supposedly* because there’s no way that shit can be called dancing. Maya’s boyfriend, Ryan, is the only one even close, and he’s just doing the dab. It’s his go-to move. He’s a big, wide-shouldered linebacker, and it looks a little funny, but that’s an advantage of being the sole black guy in class. You can look silly and still be cool.

Chris is on the bottom bleacher, playing one of his mixes on his phone for them to dance to. He glances over his shoulder at me.

I have two bodyguards who won’t allow him near me—Maya on one side, cheering Ryan on, and Hailey, who’s laughing her ass off at Luke and recording him. They’re still pissed at Chris.

I’m honestly not. He made a mistake, and I forgive him. *The Fresh Prince* theme and his willingness to embarrass himself helped with that.

But that moment he grabbed my hands and I flashed back to that night, it’s like I suddenly really, *really* realized that Chris
is white. Just like One-Fifteen. And I know, I'm sitting here next
to my white best friend, but it's almost as if I'm giving Khalil,
Daddy, Seven, and every other black guy in my life a big, loud
"fuck you" by having a white boyfriend.

Chris didn't pull us over, he didn't shoot Khalil, but am I
betraying who I am by dating him?

I need to figure this out.

"Oh my God, that's sickening," says Hailey. She's stopped re-
cording to watch the basketball game. "They're not even trying."

They're really not. The ball sails past the hoop from an
attempted shot by Bridgette Holloway. Either homegirl's hand-
eye coordination is way off or she missed that on purpose,
because now Jackson Reynolds is showing her how to shoot.
Basically, he's all up on her. And shirtless.

"I don't know what's worse," Hailey says. "The fact that
they're going soft on them because they're girls, or that the girls
are letting them go soft on them."

"Equality in basketball. Right, Hails?" Maya says with a
wink.

"Yes! Wait." She eyes Maya suspiciously. "Are you making
fun of me or are you serious, Shorty?"

"Both," I say, leaning back on my elbows, my belly pooching
out my shirt—a food baby. We just left lunch, and the cafeteria
had fried chicken, one of the foods Williamson gets right. "It's
not even a real game, Hails," I tell her.

"Nope." Maya pats my stomach. "When are you due?"

"Same day as you."

"Aww! We can raise our food offspring as siblings."

"I know, right? I'm naming mine Fernando," I say.

"Why Fernando?" Maya asks.

"Dunno. It sounds like a food baby name. Especially when
you roll the r."

"I can't roll my r's." She tries, but she makes some weird
noise, spit flying, and I'm cracking up.

Hailey points at the game. "Look at that! It's that whole
'play like a girl' mind-set the male gender uses to belittle women,
when we have as much athleticism as they do."

Oh my Lord. She's seriously upset over this.

"Take the ball to the hole!" she hollers to the girls.

Maya catches my eye, hers glimmering sneakily, and it's
middle school déjá vu.

"And don't be afraid to shoot the outside J!" Maya shouts.

"Just keep ya head in the game," I say. "Just keep ya head
in the game."

"And don't be afraid to 'shoot the outside J,'" Maya sings.

"Just get’cha head in the game," I sing.

We bust out with "Get’cha Head in the Game" from High
School Musical. It'll be stuck in my head for days. We were
obsessed with the movies around the same time as our Jonas
Brothers obsession. Disney took all our parents' money.

We're loud with it now. Hailey's trying to glare at us. She
snorts.
“C’mon.” She gets up and pulls me and Maya up too.
“Get’cha head in this game.”
I’m thinking, *Oh, so you can drag me to play basketball
during one of your feminist rages, but you can’t follow my
Tumblr because of Emmett Till?* I don’t know why I can’t make
myself bring it up. It’s Tumblr.
But then, it’s Tumblr.
“Hey!” Hailey says. “We wanna play.”
“No we don’t,” Maya mutters. Hailey nudges her.
I don’t wanna play either, but for some reason Hailey makes
decisions and Maya and I follow along. It’s not like we planned
it to be this way. Sometimes the shit just happens, and one day
you realize there’s a leader among you and your friends and it’s
not you.
“Come on in, ladies.” Jackson beckons us into the game.
“There’s always room for pretty girls. We’ll try not to hurt you.”
Hailey looks at me, I look at her, and we have the same
deadpan expression that we’ve had mastered since fifth grade,
mouths slightly open, eyes ready to roll at any moment.
“Alright then,” I say. “Let’s play.”
“Three on three,” Hailey says as we take our positions.
“Girls versus boys. Half court. First to twenty. Sorry, ladies,
but me and my girls are gonna handle this one, mm-kay?”

Bridgette gives Hailey some serious stank-eye. She and her
friends move to the sideline.

The dance party stops and those guys come over, Chris
included. He whispers something to Tyler, one of the boys who
played in the previous game. Chris takes Tyler’s place on the
court.

Jackson checks the ball to Hailey. I run around my guard,
Garrett, and Hailey passes to me. No matter what’s going on,
when Hailey, Maya, and I play together, it’s rhythm, chemistry,
and skill rolled into a ball of amazingness.

Garrett’s guarding me, but Chris runs up and elbows him
aside. Garrett goes, “The hell, Bryant?”
“I’ve got her,” Chris says.
He gets in his defensive stance. We’re eye to eye as I dribble
the ball.
“Hey,” he says.
“Hey.”
I do a chest-pass to Maya, who’s wide open for a jump shot.
She makes it.
Two to zero.

“Good job, Yang!” says Coach Meyers. She’s come out her
office. All it takes is a hint of a real game, and she’s in coaching
mode. She reminds me of a fitness trainer on a reality TV show.
She’s petite yet muscular, and God that woman can yell.

Garrett’s at the baseline with the ball.

Chris runs to get open. Stomach full, I have to push harder
to stay on him. We’re hip to hip, watching Garrett try to decide
who to pass to. Our arms brush, and something in me is acti-
vated; my senses are suddenly consumed by Chris. His legs look
so good in his gym shorts. He’s wearing Old Spice, and even just from that little brush, his skin feels so soft.

"I miss you," he says. No point in lying. "I miss you too."

The ball sails his way. Chris catches it. Now I’m in my defensive stance, and we’re eye to eye again as he dribbles. My gaze lowers to his lips; they’re a little wet and begging me to kiss them. See, this is why I can never play ball with him. I get too distracted.

"Will you at least talk to me?" Chris asks.

"Defense, Carter!" Coach yells.

I focus on the ball and attempt to steal. Not quick enough. He gets around me and goes straight for the hoop, only to pass it to Jackson, who’s open at the three-point line.

"Grant!" Coach shouts for Hailey.

Hailey runs over. Her fingertips graze the ball as it leaves Jackson’s hand, changing its course.

The ball goes flying. I go running. I catch it.

Chris is behind me, the only thing between me and the hoop. Let me clarify—my butt is against his crotch, my back against his chest. I’m bumping up against him, trying to figure out how to get the ball in the hole. It sounds way dirtier than it actually is, especially in this position. I understand why Bridgette missed shots though.

"Starr!" Hailey calls.

She’s open at the three. I bounce-pass it to her.
stare at Hailey as she jogs away, blue-streaked hair bouncing behind her.

I can’t believe she said... She couldn’t have. No way.

The ball falls out my hands. I walk off the court. I’m breathing hard, and my eyes burn.

The smell of postgame funk lingers in the girls’ locker room. It’s my place of solace when we lose a game, where I can cry or cuss if I want.

I pace from one side of the lockers to the other.

Hailey and Maya rush in, out of breath. “What’s up with you?” Hailey asks.

“Me?” I say, my voice bouncing off the lockers. “What the hell was that comment?”

“Lighten up! It was only game talk.”

“A fried chicken joke was only game talk? Really?” I ask.

“It’s fried chicken day!” she says. “You and Maya were just joking about it. What are you trying to say?”

I keep pacing.

Her eyes widen. “Oh my God. You think I was being racist?”

I look at her. “You made a fried chicken comment to the only black girl in the room. What do you think?”

“Holy shit, Starr! Seriously? After everything we’ve been through, you think I’m a racist? Really?”

“You can say something racist and not be a racist!”

“Is something else going on, Starr?” Maya says.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” I snap.

“Because you’re acting so weird lately!” Hailey snaps back. She looks at me and asks, “Does this have something to do with the police shooting that drug dealer in your neighborhood?”

“Wh-what?”

“I heard about it on the news,” she says. “And I know you’re into that sort of thing now—”

That sort of thing? What the fuck is “that sort of thing”?

“And then they said the drug dealer’s name was Khalil,” she says, and exchanges a look with Maya.

“We’ve wanted to ask if it was the Khalil who used to come to your birthday parties,” Maya adds. “We didn’t know how, though.”

The drug dealer. That’s how they see him. It doesn’t matter that he’s suspected of doing it. “Drug dealer” is louder than “suspected” ever will be.

If it’s revealed that I was in the car, what will that make me? The thug ghetto girl with the drug dealer? What will my teachers think about me? My friends? The whole fucking world, possibly?

“I—”

I close my eyes. Khalil stares at the sky.

“Mind your business, Starr,” he says.

I swallow and whisper, “I don’t know that Khalil.”

It’s a betrayal worse than dating a white boy. I fucking deny
him, damn near erasing every laugh we shared, every hug, every tear, every second we spent together. A million “I’m sorry”s sound in my head, and I hope they reach Khalil wherever he is, yet they’ll never be enough.

But I had to do it. I had to.

“Then what is it?” Hailey asks. “Is this, like, Natasha’s anniversary or something?”

I stare at the ceiling and blink fast to keep from bawling. Besides my brothers and the teachers, Hailey and Maya are the only people at Williamson who know about Natasha. I don’t want all the pity.

“Mom’s anniversary was a few weeks ago,” Hailey says. “I was in a shitty mood for days. I understand if you’re upset, but to accuse me of being racist, Starr? How can you even?”

I blink faster. God, I’m pushing her away, Chris away. Hell, do I deserve them? I don’t talk about Natasha, and I just flat-out denied Khalil. I could’ve been the one killed instead of them. I don’t have the decency to keep their memories alive, yet I’m supposed to be their best friend.

I cover my mouth. It doesn’t stop the sob. It’s loud and echoes off the walls. One follows it, and another and another. Maya and Hailey rub my back and shoulders.

Coach Meyers rushes in. “Carter—”

Hailey looks at her and says, “Natasha.”

Coach nods heavily. “Carter, go see Ms. Lawrence.”

What? No. She’s sending me to the school shrink? All the teachers know about poor Starr who saw her friend die when she was ten. I used to bust out crying all the time, and that was always their go-to line—see Ms. Lawrence. I wipe my eyes. “Coach, I’m okay—”

“No, you’re not.” She pulls a hall pass from her pocket and holds it toward me. “Go talk to her. It’ll help you feel better.”

No it won’t, but I know what will.

I take the pass, grab my backpack out my locker, and go back into the gym. My classmates follow me with their eyes as I hurry toward the doors. Chris calls out for me. I speed up.

They probably heard me crying. Great. What’s worse than being the Angry Black Girl? The Weak Black Girl.

By the time I get to the main office, I’ve dried my eyes and my face completely.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Carter,” Dr. Davis, the headmaster, says. He’s leaving as I’m going in and doesn’t wait for my response. Does he know all the students by name, or just the ones who are black like him? I hate that I think about stuff like that now.

His secretary, Mrs. Lindsey, greets me with a smile and asks how she can assist me.

“I need to call someone to come get me,” I say. “I don’t feel good.”

I call Uncle Carlos. My parents would ask too many questions. A limb has to be missing for them to take me out of school. I
only have to tell Uncle Carlos that I have cramps, and he’ll pick me up.

Feminine problems. The key to ending an Uncle Carlos interrogation.

Luckily he’s on lunch break. He signs me out, and I hold my stomach for added effect. As we leave he asks if I want some fro-yo. I say yeah, and a short while later we’re going into a shop that’s walking distance from Williamson. It’s in a brand-new mini mall that should be called Hipster Heaven, full of stores you’d never find in Garden Heights. On one side of the fro-yo place, there’s Indie Urban Style and on the other side, Dapper Dog, where you can buy outfits for your dog. Clothes. For a dog. What kinda fool would I be, dressing Brickz in a linen shirt and jeans?

On a serious tip—white people are crazy for their dogs.

We fill our cups with yogurt. At the toppings bar, Uncle Carlos breaks out into his fro-yo rap. “I’m getting fro-yo, yo. Fro-yo, yo, yo.”

He loves his fro-yo. It’s kinda adorable. We take a booth in a corner that’s got a lime-green table and hot-pink seats. You know, typical fro-yo decor.

Uncle Carlos looks over into my cup. “Did you seriously ruin perfectly good fro-yo with Cap’n Crunch?”

“You can’t talk,” I say. “Oreos, Uncle Carlos? Really? And they’re not even the Golden Oreos, which are by far the superior Oreos. You got the regular ones. Ill.”
“Girl, please. I went to class in labor with you,” she says. “I pay too much money for you to go to Williamson so you can leave because of cramps.”

I almost point out that I get a scholarship too, but nah. She'd become the first person in history to hit someone through a phone.

“Did something happen?” she asks.

“No.”

“Is it Khalil?” she asks.

I sigh. This time tomorrow I'll be staring at him in a coffin.

“Starr?” she says.

“Nothing happened.”

Ms. Felicia calls for her in the background. “Look, I gotta go,” she says. “Carlos will take you home. Lock the door, stay inside, and don't let anybody in, you hear me?”

Those aren't zombie survival tips. Just normal instructions for latchkey kids in Garden Heights. “I can't let Seven and Sekani in? Great.”

“Oh, somebody's trying to be funny. Now I know you ain't feeling bad. We'll talk later. I love you. Mwah!”

It takes a lot of nerve to go off on somebody, call them out, and tell them you love them within a span of five minutes. I tell her I love her too and pass Uncle Carlos his phone.

“All right, baby girl,” he says. “Spill it.”

I stuff some fro-yo in my mouth. It's melting already. “Like I said. Cramps.”

“I'm not buying that, and let's be clear about something: you only get one 'Uncle Carlos, get me out of school' card per school year, and you're using it right now.”

“You got me in December, remember?” For cramps also. I didn't lie about those. They were a bitch that day.

“All right, one per calendar year,” he clarifies. I smile. “But you gotta give me a little more to work with. So talk.”

I push Cap'n Crunch around my fro-yo. “Khalil's funeral is tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“I don't know if I should go.”

“What? Why?”

“Because,” I say. “I hadn't seen him in months before the party.”

“You still should go,” he says. “You'll regret it if you don't. I thought about going. Not sure if that's a good idea, considering.”

Silence.

“Are you really friends with that cop?” I ask.

“I wouldn't say friends, no. Colleagues.”

“But you're on a first-name basis, right?”

“Yes,” he says.

I stare at my cup. Uncle Carlos was my first dad in some ways. Daddy went to prison around the time I realized that "Mommy" and "Daddy" weren't just names, but they meant something. I talked to Daddy on the phone every week, but he
didn’t want me and Seven to ever set foot in a prison, so I didn’t see him.

I saw Uncle Carlos though. He fulfilled the role and then some. Once I asked if I could call him Daddy. He said no, because I already had one, but being my uncle was the best thing he could ever be. Ever since, “Uncle” has meant almost as much as “Daddy.”

My uncle. On a first-name basis with that cop.

“Baby girl, I don’t know what to say.” His voice is gruff. “I wish I could—I’m sorry this happened. I am.”

“Why haven’t they arrested him?”

“Cases like this are difficult.”

“It’s not that difficult,” I say. “He killed Khalil.”

“I know, I know,” he says, and wipes his face. “I know.”

“Would you have killed him?”

He looks at me. “Starr—I can’t answer that.”

“Yeah, you can.”

“No, I can’t. I’d like to think I wouldn’t have, but it’s hard to say unless you’re in that situation, feeling what that officer is feeling—”

“He pointed his gun at me,” I blurt out.

“What?”

My eyes prickle like crazy. “While we were waiting on help to show up,” I say, my words wobbling. “He kept it on me until somebody else got there. Like I was a threat. I wasn’t the one with the gun.”

Uncle Carlos stares at me for the longest time.

“Baby girl.” He reaches for my hand. He squeezes it and moves to my side of the table. His arm goes around me, and I bury my face in his rib cage, tears and snot wetting his shirt.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He kisses my hair with each apology. “But I know that’s not enough.”