

HARTFORD SYNKING

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The novel alternates between two voices: Nora Roy, a Shakespeare-quoting geek with the reputation of a hardened murderer; and Malik Robinson, a computer-whiz golden boy destined for success. Nora Roy is drawn into the crimes of Malik's older brother (her long-ago and still-present crush, Ozzie) as Malik begins dating a suburban girl with whom he has, on the surface, little in common. Nora Roy's shy and budding neighborhood romance with Ozzie is set against, and soon collides with, Malik's head-over-heels cross-town love affair. When Nora Roy discovers that Ozzie is having trouble footing the bills for his mother's Parkinson's treatment, she enlists Malik's help to stage more lucrative thefts. Malik has the perfect robbery opportunity: his girlfriend's largely absent parents would not notice a necklace missing here, a ring missing there in their spacious suburban home. As Nora Roy, Malik, and Ozzie begin stealing from suburbia, they struggle with questions of morality and identity, asking themselves how far they are willing to go and what relationships they are willing to risk.

Chapter 1

NORA ROY

1.

I was a bowlegged toddler.

Here is the second thing you should know about me: I mark time in hip-sway and bullet.

The third is a story. Five years ago – I was seventeen – I shot my uncle in the chest.

My hand was trembling – after, not before. I slipped into his apartment like an assassin, which wasn't so hard to do because Ma had the extra set of keys to his place and I know where she keeps everything. When you walk into his apartment, there is this little hallway and you don't have to take no more than two steps to see the kitchen on the right. He was eating his dinner – mac and cheese, half of it spilled on his beater – standing up next to the microwave. Fool didn't even have time to look up before I aimed right at his chest. First shot hit and he dropped his fork. The second shot was to get the point across. He looked up at me, but I'm not sure if he recognized who it was on account of him being half dead already. That's when my hand started trembling. I started thinking about all the ways you could get caught murdering somebody. It's always the weapon that gives it away on shows. The gun was Ma's, so I had to get rid of it in case anyone came looking for the killer. Nobody ever did.

2.

Don't get shook – you got bones in your closet too. And please: don't mistake my purpose here. This ain't a confessional and you don't know no more about God or Storytelling than me. You see: where there is smoke, there is pain and there is a story and there is a line of dominoes. I just pushed the first push.

Welcome to Hartford.

3.

The city spits. In the summer, it's a dirty kind of humid and the air spits drops at you till your clothes are wet and heavy and all you can think about is a shower. The city coughs awake with truck ignitions and deli openings, and doesn't really get moving till the subway riders are hurled out onto the streets like wads of sticky gum. Downtown gets crowded with suits real fast, and dudes selling shwarmas to suits, and dudes with lists saying who can and who can't go into buildings filled with suits. Hartford ain't for dopes. There are lanes you got to travel in and places that you probably shouldn't travel to if you don't have people there. Neighborhoods are like mouths and if you don't taste right, you get chewed up and spit back to where you came from.

I live in the North End. That's the part of the city closest to the tobacco fields. No accident that my neighborhood is black, and I'm talking American slave black – the Jamaicans and Dominicans live in Hartford East. People think picking only happened in the South, but before my grandma died she told me about how her dad came up to Hartford from somewhere in Georgia every summer to work fields for some extra

change. My grandma used to say that the only reason he moved for good was because he fell for a pretty housemaid and couldn't let go.¹ Some dudes fall hard like that – hard enough to settle in Hartford, right next to the tobacco fields, in a place called the North End.

I live in the house my grandma bought. It's got three rooms, two levels plus a basement, and family everywhere. I don't have siblings. I wanted some for a long time, just so it wouldn't be so lonely. I know it's weird saying that because we always had, like, six or seven people living in the house – cousins who ran away from their houses, uncles who couldn't land a job, Ma's boyfriends who ate food and didn't buy none. You learn pretty fast that the place you find most fights is right at home. Didn't really matter what time it was, always someone talking a bit too much shit to the wrong person. That's why it would've been cool to have a brother or a sister who had my back.

The rest of the block wasn't busy – mostly old married people waiting for someone to talk to.

4.

Okay, so, sometimes I pretend like we got more money than we do. We got a house and that's more than most people in the North End. The problem is my Ma ain't got a clue when it comes to saving and not giving her money away to every smooth talking asshole that promises her a ring and every guilt tripper in the family that says something about bloodlines. It was my grandma who knew how to hold on to cash.

¹ My great-grandma was the pretty housemaid, just in case you didn't catch on.

My block is where all the doctors and teachers (like my grandma) and preachers lived before they moved to the suburbs or Reagan wrecked their bank accounts. The reputation of money – the smell of it – that stuck. The street has big, old oak trees that arch over the lawns to the one side and sidewalks on the other side. The houses have backyards, garages, porches. Look quick and it would be real pretty. Look close and you'd think, damn, those houses need new paint jobs and new floors.

In high school, kids already assumed I had wealth because of the address, and I'd let them believe it if it meant they called me "Bougie Bitch" instead of looking too close at my ripped jeans. The nickname changed after some ninth grader saw me leaving my uncle's building after I did what I did. When it came out that my uncle was dead, the punk went around school whispering, "You know Bougie B? She did it. I saw her coming straight out of that building that day." The kid started talking like he had seen it – "two shots, nigga, and she cold, nothing but ice in her eyes." Worse, fools believed him. They repeated the story, gave it background, threw purpose my way saying, "Bougie? Chick blasted her uncle because he called her a slut" and "I heard he stole a hundred from her, so she did him right" and "that niggess don't take no disrespect, watch yourself around her." The rumour didn't quit. It stamped me.

Motherfuckers started calling me "Double Shot." I probably should've shut that ninth grade punk up right from the beginning for my own safety. But he didn't see nothing and

no way the cops were going to be trying too hard on a North End murder or listen too close to high school gossip. Besides, Double Shot is a better name than Bougie Bitch.

5.

What you got to know about Hartford and my Ma is that they can't help everybody. They can't protect you from being called Bougie Bitch or Double Shot or the million other crappy things that people do to each other. They just weren't built like that. It took me twenty years to stop blaming them for every shitty thing that happened to me and maybe, one day, I'll start helping them out a little bit because Hartford is a mess and Ma ain't doing too hot either. I haven't really figured out who builds cities or people, but whoever it is, they fucked up real bad and I'm pretty damn pissed about that.²

6.

Don't get it twisted, I can be honest about the good things, too. We can start with Ozzie Robinson. I'll be real about him: Ozzie Robinson ain't shit. And I've been in love with that Ain't-Shit since middle school. He was nice back then, before he lost his virginity to Vicki MoFuckin Davis and turned into a giant man-ho.

We read *Romeo and Juliet* in our 8th grade English class and the only three kids who knew what the hell was going on were me, Ozzie Robinson, and Vicki Davis. That's why Ozzie read all of Romeo's lines in class. Vicki Davis beat me to Juliet because I was

² When I get real angry, I go off on tangents. That's why I make lists – they help me get back to the point.

too busy nerding out and didn't have the balls to raise my hand. Two things happened after that: I got obsessed with Ozzie Robinson and I got obsessed with Shakespeare.³

Ozzie and Vicki Davis dated for six months in ninth grade⁴ and then he broke her heart. Lots of chicks after that, but ain't nobody got time for those stories. Plus, they make me feel queasy and jealous.

7.

You probably think I'm a huge dork, and I am, but not in the way that most people think about dorks. Smart kids got their asses pretty well kicked at my high school. No one kicked my ass. I was an undercover dork, sitting at the back of the class, never raising my hand, never looking happy when tests were handed out. The only reason Ozzie and Vicki Davis got away with reading Shakespeare was that they looked like Zulu royalty. Usually people like the light-skinned type, but those two were a blacker the berry kind of thing, you know? I couldn't get away with that nonsense. I'm pretty but nobody is sitting here confusing me for Tyra Banks. And I dress like a dude. I wasn't trying to have boys poking at me when I hit puberty and there ain't nothing comfortable about tight jeans, so I wear them baggy and I throw on white tanks or jerseys.

My ma says I look like her. That's true, I guess. We're both short and kind of skinny and somewhere between light and dark skinned. When the Ethiopians started creeping up

³ You know what my English teacher said? Shakespeare wasn't trying to write in a fancy way – that dude made words up and screwed with grammar rules and wrote how he liked English to sound. So, I figure, if that smartass fool can do it, why can't I?

⁴ I spent all of ninth grade calling Ozzie "the son and heir of a mongrel bitch," but that was before I knew his mom and now I wish I hadn't been disrespecting her like that for a year.

on the North End, some people thought I was one of them – I got a long nose and big eyes, and that’s what everyone was saying made an Ethiopian look like an Ethiopian and not a Dominican.⁵ I put an end to that talk in 10th grade when I got cornrows. My ma stopped comparing us then, too. Ain’t nobody confusing me for nothing else now.

8.

Ma and me and everybody else chill at Edgewood Street during the summer. Edgewood Street is like my street with the oak trees and the lawns that ain’t all that green. One side of the street doesn’t have houses though because Edgewood Street is right next to Kendall Park. Nothing real special about Kendall – it’s a giant square, like the size of two football fields, with grills and tables set up on every side. People show up on weekends with their new cars and new girls and new opinions. Summertime, it gets crowded when nobody wants to sweat inside and school is out: tests and homework can’t distract kids from the important things, like who’s been working out and who’s been taking trips to McDonalds. Everybody watches everybody. And everybody watched Oz.

Dude was six feet and two inches of syncopated muscle movement. Defined, etched out: hips on a home-run swivel, torso swinging gentle like a lullaby. Veins rode steady on his arms. Joints broke off and snapped back at each step. Mosiac turned into film. Ozzie was a slavemaster’s wetdream.

Sitting on their porches, grandfathers nodded at him when he passed.

⁵ I have no fucking idea why an Ethiopian or a Dominican has got to look a certain way. I’m just trying to tell you what people were saying to me, so if you’re an Ethiopian or if you got an Ethiopian girlfriend or boyfriend, just sit back for a second.

Grandmothers shook their heads and remembered when their bodies steamed too.

Chicks gawked. Posed and squawked.⁶

The brothers were not better. Stared. They took mental notes on what he wore (white Air Force Ones, jeans, and white tee. No one wore simple like he wore simple.); the exact angle of his head tilt (ten to twelve degrees to the right); and just how much attention to pay the ladies (glance at the flyest one for two-and-a-half seconds, nothing verbal). The hard dudes paid even higher tribute, muttering about the exact level of Ozzie's whackness and all the shit wrong with his shit.⁷

Oz's crew, four strong, acted like he was a prophet foretelling the next cash windfall, the next party to kill all parties, the next chick to serve as queen bee till the next-next chick came along. Yeah, they made good money. Yeah, they didn't use fists too much. But is that really enough to follow him up and down the street like poodles on a leash? I told you what I think: Ozzie Robinson Ain't Shit.

9.

July 18, Edgewood Street.

⁶ "You, minion(s), are too saucy."

⁷ "And thou misshapen Dick!"

What the hell is he doing? Is he headed in my direction? Okay, so, look cool, shit, this shirt is a joke, doesn't even go with the jeans right, cornrows are fraying on top, should've had them done, stand up so he can't see them as well? No, don't care about what he thinks, and plus he's the type of dude who likes hard to get. Likes hard to get? Not trying to 'get' a thing, especially him, what a jackass.

How does he keep those kicks so clean?

So, yes, I'll admit it. I remember the spot and the day he asked me to teach him about guns. First words Ain't Shit ever said to me.

Chapter 2

MALIK

At the age of sixteen, with little warning and no condoms, I discovered sex. I was not a virgin, simply virginal. Two girls preceded Kinley: the first, prudish and hesitant, rebranded herself a born-again Christian after we slept together a handful of times; the second, performative and insecure, decided she needed to be with someone or someones who could help her find herself. The sex, with both, included averted gazes and long periods of silence. A sad and gutless innocence bred distance between us. The relationships (if that is what they were) ended easily, like a train slowing at its final stop. There was no crying, if only because crying requires passion. Kinley was the third. Kinley bit.

We met three years ago. Kinley believes there was something else involved – destiny or witchcraft packed into speakers. Meeting at a public concert, I will admit, was unlikely. Held every other Sunday during the summers, Hartford's concert series never failed to draw large crowds and a few curious suburbanites. There were, however, few teenagers who came willingly. The hipsters and the goths were drawn by irony and boredom; everyone else between fifteen and twenty generally found other, cooler things to do. I followed Ozzie, my older brother, to the park; and Oz reluctantly decided to go after Kermit, his best friend, applied considerable pressure. (Kermit would go anywhere that promised a variety and lots of women.) Kinley, I later learned, thought that this would be

a good introduction to city culture: family-friendly musical outings during weekend daylight. Newly blessed with a license and a car, she rounded up her two best friends and spurned the suburbs for an urban anthropological expedition.

Couples and families made up most of the audience. The few Sunday hours when midafternoon rolled into evening and evening stumbled on night felt safe. The quarrelsome husband and wife down the block would not come to blows; the hyper-sensitive Latin King would not pick a fight with the shy kid up the street; the cousin or uncle with money issues and habits would not come around to ask for more than could be given. On Sunday afternoons, Hartford checked its pulse and regrouped. Blankets were laid on grass and mini-sandwiches were eaten. Eight year olds roamed Bushnell Park, the home of the summer concerts. The park's southern edge was bound by Hartford's gold-domed City Hall, a Disney-like palace complete with grey turrets and white columns at the entryway. Bold children battled pretend monarchs under the arches. The park sloped gently downwards from City Hall, and the dueling kids, till it settled into a small valley large enough for a stage and four or five hundred people. Behind the stage were a cluster of trees and Hartford's skyline.

More interested in the scene than in the afro-jazz band, a consortium of amateur djembe drummers and horn players, Oz, Kermit, and I stood far away from the music and only a few dozen yards away from City Hall. From there Kermit could easily surveil the audience. Rejected a dozen too many times by black women, his chick radar was now

tuned to brown and white. At Bushnell Park, where faces of every color commented on the warm weather and nodded to the music, Kermit's radar was in heavy use.

Fixing on a blond right in front of the stage, he plotted his move. According to him, her jean shorts revealed thighs tasty as cream. In a rare moment of religious fervor and civic pride, he thanked the Lord and the city for late summers and free outdoor concerts.

Kermit adjusted his jacket and, before ducking away, leaned towards me: *Malik, watch me work my magic*. I smiled weakly, embarrassed for him. Rarely had I seen Kermit elicit genuine interest from a woman. Never had I seen him pull a number.

Kermit's swag quickly sizzled into surrender. He took a full four minutes to descend the hill, losing momentum and courage with each step. His shoulders drew inwards, his toes pointed pidgin. Like an errant boomerang, he swung around her, never inching close enough for contact, and hurried back to us on wobbly legs.

Kermit caught my look of pity immediately. Leaning over my shoulder, he spoke above the music: *I bet you can't get that white chick's digits*. I glanced at Oz. He looked at me and turned his chin slightly upward. I glanced again. He pulled his chin down, raised his eyebrows, and widened his eyes. The message splattered across my older brother's face was as clear as charisma: there is no shame in striking out, only in never stepping to the plate. I turned to Kermit and asked how much he was willing to put on the line. *Ten bucks*, he replied. *Fifteen*, I returned. Oz nodded his head, applauding my machismo. A

shot of satisfaction ran through me. Kermit chewed on his lower lip and eyed me. He stuck out his hand and I slapped it. It was settled: fifteen bucks if I got the number.

I had no strategy. Unlike my brother, my moments of success came with girls I had known for years. Girls that sat next to me in class. Girls whose mothers reminded me of my mother. This new and odd pursuit - a stranger, an alien, a white girl - was not in my wheelhouse. Kermit tried to jar me: *The art of Caucasian Female Navigation is a tricky thing, my man; girl fine as that, her boyfriend has got to be, like, a six-six quarterback; you ever seen a dude get slapped by a blond chick?* Oz put his arm around me and winked. Loudly, he said, *Watch my kid brother.*

I stalled while the afro-jazz band continued to play. I could not throw game while the music was blasting – no reason to go over there now. Mulling over introductory lines Ozzie had successfully played, I imagined them coming out of my mouth. I scrapped one after the other, aware of the enormous amount of smooth they required. The music, quite inconsiderately, stopped. *Time, little man, let's see what you got,* Kermit said.

Hands in pockets, I walked toward the blond girl. Acutely conscious of my worn jeans and slight physique, I rubbed my chin to see if any facial hair had wondrously appeared. The hill seemed altogether too small, time too quick. I wound around clumps of grandmothers and grandfathers, families and their picnic baskets, couples and their blankets. The crowd grew more youthful as I approached the stage. I passed by the yuppies and the hipsters, who stood at the precise distance at which one feels the

musicians' energy but no pressure to respond with physical movement. The goths, cloaked in black and mild self-hatred, hovered between the yuppie outskirts and the overeager couple dozen teens directly in front of the stage. The overeager folks took their cues from the handful of obnoxiously good-looking people at the stage's edge. Among them was the blond girl. She swayed from side to side, occasionally saying something to the brunette on her right or the light brown-skinned girl on her left. When they responded with a quick reply, she, benevolent in her popularity, would throw her head back in laughter.

I twisted my neck to the right and left, searching for anyone as out of place as I was. My mission, I began to feel, would end in disaster. This, I quietly acknowledged, was, for me, an unusual anxiety. While I could hardly deny a tinge of nerdiness, the sad fate of bookworms (to accurately and precisely view the social landscape, but, alas, seized by paralyzing awkwardness, never to participate in what, quite honestly, looked like a lot of fun) had never before been my destiny. I was far from a social outcast or pariah. I did not have a close group of friends, but was well liked by the popular kids and those not-so-popular kids as well. I knew about and was always invited to weekend parties; my name appeared on the rumor circuit, often in conjunction with a lady's; I said hey to people as I walked down the hall during break, working my way to history class, or math, or English.

This was not, however, a school hallway.

No longer at the top of the hill, but, rather, surrounded by those whom I had only observed from a distance, my chest began to tense and my back hunched forward.

I told myself that this was simple. I had done it many times before. There was nothing to fear. Yet the ease that characterized my flirtations with girls at school or on my block had dissipated and left, in its stead, a gnawing uncertainty. There was, it seemed, no line or angle or method to heighten the probability of that white girl, at this park, with all these eyes, saying yes to me. While surely pleasant, mixed race America told little of my city; there were few white girls attending my school, and fewer still who bought carefully and casually pre-torn shorts from H&M, or Macy's, or Anthropologie. When, exactly, would a kid from the North End find himself, in the natural rhythm of his day, chatting to a girl like that blond girl? Maybe if I was being bused out to a suburban school or if, God forbid, there was some cross-town program that brought students from different places together, but my high school couldn't afford arts classes, so innovative educational experiences were pretty much off the table. A few years ago, after a spike in city shootings, metal detectors were installed and police were planted at entrances and exits. Most students, I think, would have traded those amenities for a hot cafeteria breakfast, which might have had the extra bonus of replacing scowls with neutral expressions or even smiles. That said, it seems unlikely that a cafeteria meal would have tasted like anything but mush; Rita, the kindest of the lunch ladies, often doused the mashed potatoes with extra salt and pepper to gift them a little flavor. The football players, giant men with giant appetites, insisted on being served by Rita, as they knew she would give them an extra scoop. When the football and basketball teams were cut, due to budgetary

constraints, half of the players stopped showing up for classes, and a good chunk of the general student population followed suit. Why put up with police and pat-downs if one can't, at least, root for a team? On the plus side, the hallways and classrooms were a lot quieter and the cafeteria rarely ran out of mashed potatoes. These were not, I assumed, experiences that the blond would share.

It was, then, in my inability to hit on rich white girls that my education, and the general geography of my life had failed me in spectacular fashion.

Steeling myself for the imminent rejection, I pulled my hands out of my pockets and forced my feet from the ground. I decided that plunging into cold water was better than wading. I made a beeline towards her.

A dozen yards to go and a miracle: she turned her head and spotted me. And smiled. Confused, I wondered if this was the anticipated disaster disguised in politeness or a miracle among miracles. My nerves laid siege to my stomach. Did I have food on my face? Were my intentions so plain, so obvious? Or, perhaps, just perhaps, was she smiling at the why-not of springtimes?

In need of time to reassess the situation, I paused. The second act, a motley collection of folk musicians with tambourines and an ukelele, began to play. Their leader wore a green bandana around his forehead and carried an acoustic guitar. His singing, while only adequate, carried conviction. Soon, the handful of brave audience members in front

of the stage rocked to the left and right, bopped up and down. I stood, frozen in flirtatious limbo. No sign or slice of wisdom came from the band or the heavens. I thought of a hundred ways to be rejected and this was the worst: publicly.

For a half hour, while the tambourines rattled slightly off-beat, my head continually swiveled towards the blond girl. I noticed that hers did the same.

The music, once again, came to a close. I stared at my feet as if they were injured, as if they were the cause of my immobility. I counted to three. I filled my lungs with the closest thing to recklessness I could find. I lifted my head. A face, straw hair mussed and cheeks flushed red from dancing, was an arm's length from mine. Her gaze, direct, did not waver. Eye contact.

Hey, she said; *hey*, I sputtered in response. An astonishing level of sweet talk arrived like water flowing over a cliff: *My name's Malik and I'm not really sure why I'm talking to you right now – actually I am, but it's kind of embarrassing, and I'd rather not tell you the whole story – but I guess what I really wanted to ask, and feel free to say no, there's no pressure or anything, I don't want to be one of those guys who, you know, or even just give the impression that I'm one of those guys, so, -- graciously, mercifully, here she interrupted me. Malik, you talk almost as much as I do. Are you trying to ask me out?* I gulped a cartoonish gulp. *Yes.* Her face took on an expression of mock puzzlement. *Well, then, how about you start by asking me my name?* I nodded furiously and asked her name. *I'm Kinley. Now, ask me to coffee.* It is quite possible that, at this point, I blacked

out for an instant, I'm sure elegantly, before coming to my senses. *Do you want to get coffee sometime?* Kinley grinned a toothy grin and asked a question of her own: *You're not too great with the ladies, huh?* The tension fell out of my body and, without thought, a stream of laughter bubbled from my lips. *Actually, I'm really not all that bad at this. I'm just really nervous right now.* Kinley stuck her hand in her purse, retrieved a receipt and a pen, and scribbled down her number. *Use it,* she said.

Kermit glared at me when I returned, number in hand. He adopted a sullen and irritable demeanor the rest of the afternoon. Ozzie, in his usual over-bearing and cool manner, demanded I tell him what I said, how I said it, how the girl responded, what my next move was. Though I usually reveled in his approval, I, for the first time in memory, chafed under the scrutiny. Gripping the scrap of paper with Kinley's number on it, a wave of restlessness washed over me.

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We met at a Starbucks crammed between a local deli and a small theater downtown. Young and old professionals briskly walked to the register at the back, politely demanded specialty drinks, and briskly walked out. Kinley stood out in her purple corduroy pants and faux leather black jacket. I overdressed in black pants and a green striped collar shirt.

We shuffled to the front of the line where she ordered black coffee and I opted for the latte, a drink I treated myself to on occasion. Starbucks offered free wi-fi and so had become a destination of choice for me; my mother's salary, that of a secretary at a small

law firm, did not allow for high-speed internet access at home. Joined with another salary, we would have had plenty, at least enough to move out of the North End. But my father's habitual auto thefts and small-time gambling kept him away from our apartment and, as often as not, in trouble with the law. My mother, my brother, and I religiously chose not to speak of it and, instead, were waiting out, with various degrees of anger and frustration, his irresponsibility and current three-year jail sentence. It was less than a couple of months before he would be released, and still none of us raised the issue.

When I did think of him, I thought only of the twists, the junctures at which he went from a fully-fleshed and present father to a vague presence, more a memory haunting us than a member of the family. The first time he went to prison I was only seven and could not, for the young life in me, comprehend why my father, the very same man who had only days before bought me a black bicycle with streaks of red along its pipes, would be held in a box no bigger than my bedroom for six months. My mother, characteristically truthful, refused to pull punches: she did not pretend that he was out-of-town for work or visiting family in some far-flung city. Instead, she said, *Your father is going to jail*, and when I began to whimper, she offered only the most honest response: *He should have thought about us. Whenever you feel like doing something bad, you think about what it might do to your family.* With that the conversation was sealed and I, wholly swallowing her words, ran the back of my hand across my eyes and ceased crying, mustering up all the bravery my seven-year old heart could find.

Resentment grew over time as my father failed his promises. When he told the twelve-year old Oz, still in love with the old man, that he would never leave again and then, less

than a year later, was picked up for organizing an illegal gambling ring, the trust between the two was irreparably damaged. I believed in my father for a few years afterwards.

But his absences took their toll on me as well and, soon, I mirrored my brother's attitude, never mentioning my dad and pressing him out of my world, as if willpower alone could make irrelevant the vacancy he created. It was during this period of disillusionment that Ozzie decided to take charge of me, occupying the space my father forfeited. While he never completed his homework, he insisted that I finish mine and finish it with panache; there were to be no sloppy math errors or easily corrected grammatical missteps. His evenings were spent with friends and girls, rousing trouble from the night, while mine, he made clear, were to be spent hunched over books or work in the apartment's quiet. In red ink, he circled Bs on my report card and wrote, in the margins, *This would be good for me, but I know you can do better.*

Another double standard unveiled itself when Ozzie began encouraging me, strongly, to grow closer with some friends and cut ties with others. He took careful inventory of those with whom I hung out, and, when I was around thirteen, told the rebellious among them to stay away from me. Unlike the tact or grace some fathers exhibit, my older brother bullied away anyone he thought might get me in trouble, threatening physical harm with a glance, if not with words. He was, yes, too extreme in his methods, and I too easily convinced that Ozzie was always right. There was, nevertheless, an upside to his protective zeal: I remained on the straight and narrow, an honors student with nary a distraction or obstacle to success.

My mother bore an equal, if not greater, burden because of my father's absence. She, who loved him long before he began testing the legal system, still remained faithful and, other than her first conversation with me about his absence, never said a bad word about him. Her energies were aimed at maintaining what little we did have. Three meals a day, comfortable furniture, and internet access barely fast enough to stream audio. In middle school, when I began browsing the web extensively, my mother rummaged through her purse and handed me a five-dollar bill. *Starbucks has free wifi, sweetie, she said. You can get a small drink and work there as long as you like.*

The forty-five minute journey (two bus rides into downtown) was well worth the time. With a black coffee by my side, I would sit at the cafe for hours, as immersed in the deep recesses of the web as I would be in a novel. It was a relief to be away from the apartment, away from the neighborhood, away from the empty spaces, literal and figurative, that marked its landscape. My mother did her very best to fill our home with the things childhoods crave – care, and love, and attention, and maybe a few gifts here and there. A gap, financial or in the form of a lacking father or an overworked mother, did, however, always exist. When Ozzie was out with his friends and my mother was pulling a late night on the job, the apartment was hollow. In that hollowness, it reminded me of who I was: a lonely black boy in the North End, a place where lonely black boys don't fare too well. At the cafe, however, I was a virtually anonymous public wifi user, a browser flushed of my history and baggage; I was free to explore, and escape, and create myself at will.

Now, though, I was almost unbearably visible, on a date, a meeting almost entirely dedicated to seeing and being seen. Kinley and I fought over who would handle the bill. I felt like I had something to prove in the finances department; she didn't feel like she needed to prove a damn thing. She let me pay.

At first, I said little and sipped lots. We sat at the window counter next to the door and far away from the baristas and their machines. Kinley turned her body to mine; I operated in the strange limbo space between looking out the window and facing her. I wasn't exactly sure what white girls talked about. When I asked Ozzie, he responded unhelpfully: *Man, shit, what every other type of girl talks about.* I grinned, admiring my brother's colorblind bravado. Now, sitting across from Kinley's light orange freckles, my mind and mouth were stuck in flat-line. She flipped her hair; she chuckled at her own jokes; she fed off her own enthusiasm. She showed me the scar on her abdomen, proof that her appendix was indeed removed. She asked if I had any scars. Then I nodded and then she asked where and then came a dozen more anecdotes. The pace was astonishing. Every so often she reached out to touch my arm, as if sharing a secret.

Reveling in her own verbosity, it took twenty minutes before Kinley threw back her head and, in between boisterous shoots of laughter, proclaimed, *Shit, I really do talk a lot. You should tell me about you before I start up again. C'mon, save us from my motor-mouth.* Here, she casually touched my arm. A fish the size of my fist jumped into my stomach, settling only when it became clear that Kinley had no intention of removing her fingers

from my upper arm. This I had never experienced: the fish in my stomach, the silence stuck to my lips, and the fuzz blurring my thoughts.

I began slowly and used more than one long *ummm* in my soliloquy. I explained that I lived in the North End with my mother and older brother; that I liked sports, but never played them; that I liked novels and tried to write them; and that I had exactly one real friend, my older brother, Ozzie, and many other pseudo-friends who would invite me to eat with them or go to a party. Kinley, who had remained perfectly still, her eyes locked on mine, rushed into action once I finished my two-and-a-half minute monologue. *Okay, okay, okay*, she said, *I'll ask questions if all you're going to give me is the basics*. She pulled back her hair and tied it up, as if readying for an interrogation. Elbow on the counter and chin placed firmly into her palm, she scrunched her eyebrows and squinted. *Are you nervous*, she asked. I placed my elbow on the counter, put my chin in my palm, and decided that this, perhaps, was her version of flirting. *Very*. She bit her lower lip and smiled at the edges of her mouth. *What's your favorite book? What's your brother like? And why don't you play sports?* I paused for a split second, searching for the quickest way to give the most accurate answers. *Invisible Man. Very cool. No athletic talent*. She nodded and returned my answers with a fresh volley of questions. *What's it about? As cool as you? Catch!* She threw a pack of sugar at me and, when I caught it, tossed me a self-satisfied expression. *It's about race. No way. A little bit of talent*. She winked at me.

Kinley hopped off her stool, planted her feet, and, with her hands on her hips, declared that we would be taking a walk. *Clearly*, she said, *I'm not going to get anything out of you if we keep sitting here. Do you spend a lot of time downtown?* I nodded. *Perfect. Show me the places you like. That way, you talk, I listen.* With that, she grabbed her coffee and headed out the door before I could realize that, yes, I was indeed enjoying this date.

Movement relaxed us. Her arms swung loosely when she walked; my tongue eased as we rounded a corner a couple of blocks from Starbucks and wound our way up a sidestreet. We trekked northeast as I, sufficiently caffeinated and increasingly comfortable, pointed and postured and played expert. We passed an Egyptian food mart next to a two-story office-building-turned-mosque, where I would grab cheap falafel on days I spent at the public library. The Chinese clerk didn't speak much English; judging by the length of his conversations with the Egyptian and Moroccan customers, his Arabic was passable. At the end of the street, a Nigerian grocer's stood across from a barbershop. Yoruba rushed out of the grocer's doors and mingled with the barbershop's Marvin Gaye, Jurassic 5, Public Enemy. *My barber - a dark-skinned Dominican dude - he used to work there*, I told Kinley.

Eventually, office buildings gave way to construction, coffee shops to vacant lots.

Language died out, replaced by white noise: the drone of highways, the rush to suburbia.

As we came to downtown's northern edge, marked by Interstate 95, I languidly came to a

stop, ready to turn back. Kinley stopped beside me and nodded her head with conviction. She looked at the highway. She kept her eyes on it when she spoke next.

- *Have you ever been to Westlake?*

- *I don't really go out to the suburbs.*

- *What are you doing the rest of the afternoon?*

- *I didn't have any solid plans. I was going to take a look at college apps.*

- *In June?*

- *Yeah. Kind of worried about it.*

- *Everyone is. But you should take the day off. Come with me to Westlake.*

- *That's where you live?*

- *Yup. I'll give you a tour. You showed me Hartford, I'll show you Westlake.*

Chapter 3

NORA ROY

1.

You can find guns, no sweat, that wasn't a problem.⁸

The problem was finding a place we could shoot them without cops or neighbors bugging us. Plenty of open lots in the North End, but we had to scratch it because there are too many eyes around – same with downtown, it was too visible. We didn't go into the other parts of Hartford or the suburbs on account of a million reasons⁹ which means that we don't know nothing real about them including where you can shoot a gun in peace.

That left the fields.

2.

If you've ever been to Hartford, you probably came in on the I-95 and that cuts right through the suburbs on the south and west, and the tobacco farms to the north. You probably saw the tobacco and thought it was corn or something more wholesome, and maybe you even saw the fields we decided to shoot at, and you didn't in a million years think that some kids from a place you were told to ignore were using it for target practice.

⁸ I don't have stats or nothing, but this is the U dot S dot of A – people got guns. And it ain't a mystery that you don't exactly have to have a license or do a background check to buy one if you know the right person. And it ain't a mystery that the right person exists in every neighborhood. And it ain't a mystery that the right person doesn't ask questions.

⁹ This ain't social studies, so don't expect me to explain everything about everything, but some of the reasons are that there ain't no public transportation that goes out to the suburbs, shit is crazy expensive in the suburbs, we don't know nobody in the other parts of the city, and people look at you funny if you don't dress like them.

Tobacco grows pretty long. They plant the seeds as close together as they can get them so it's not like we were comfortable in the fields or like it was an easy place to shoot. Plus, you got to have water and shit (like, fertilizer) to do farming right which means that there is going to be mosquitos and bugs. I don't know how they do it in the South, but around Hartford they stick poles into the ground and stretch cloth between them so the tobacco gets some shade – it's like a circus tent except flat and white. They pull the fabric down at the edge of the fields so even during the day it's hard to see what's going on in there and, at night, it's pretty impossible.

3.

The meaning of enormity is not huge. Enormity means evil.

The enormity of what I was helping with ain't so enormous when you put it in the right perspective.

As a matter of fact, you could argue that there wasn't any enormity to it at all.¹⁰

4.

It's weird that Ozzie asked for lessons on shooting a gun. Who does that? It's not like he was about to get an assault weapon or a machine gun or a sniper rifle, something that needs teaching and practice. We had Glock 17s. That's the simplest kind of gun you can

¹⁰ "Strong reasons make strong actions."

use. You pretty much just aim and pull the trigger, and if your heart ain't beating too fast and your hand ain't too jittery, you're going to hit what you're aiming for.

What's weirder is that he asked me. It's not like I'm shooting people on the regular just for shits and giggles. And it's not like I practiced before the first time I shot someone. And, if I'm being honest, which I am, before doing target practice at the fields, I pulled the trigger exactly two times in my life and I already told you about that.

What I figured out was that Ozzie doesn't really match his reputation. He's pretty cautious. *No mistakes*, he kept telling his boys. *Focus*. He wanted to make sure everyone knew what the hell they were doing before they started doing it, especially when the it they were doing might mean someone catching a bullet in the ribs.

And why did Ain't Shit ask me? I want to tell you that it's because Ozzie had been looking for an excuse to talk to m since 8th grade English and that he always regretted Vicki MoFuckin Davis and that I had an effect on him, like making him go quiet on account of my lips or my eyes or my hips. The real reason is that in our neighborhood it's hard to find a person who has shot a gun and doesn't already have a crew or a gang or a connection that would want in on a new scam. I didn't have none of that. It was just me.

They called themselves the Knights of the Roundtable.¹¹ I thought that was stupid.

Big Sean was the only one Ozzie could really talk to on account of the rest being too caught up in pointless crap to have thoughts worth thinking on the not-pointless crap. They weren't best friends or nothing, but Ozzie respected Sean's intellect and the dude did have quiet wisdom to him. You had to ask to get him to talk but when you did, he'd blow your fucking mind – the kid was on some Einstein shit and you'd never guess because of his size. He was big: six-three and two hundred fifty pounds with a face round and soft as a marshmallow. At his funeral, he barely fit in the coffin. I only found out that his name was Shahrooz when his wife said, *Shahrooz prayed five times a day, every day* when she was giving her eulogy. I thought the beads were decoration.

Jeff and Jay always wore Converse sneakers and leather jackets. Everyone called them the Dominican twins, but they were just regular brothers – Jeff was a year older, Jay was an inch taller. Jeff wanted to be called El Pequeno Jefe, playing like he was a mob boss. Rumor was that Jeff and Jay's dad was a real crime ring boss who went by the name "El Gran Jefe" back in the DR. People said that El Gran Jefe was killed by his best friend with shot to the back of the head, execution-style, because The Big Boss couldn't keep it in his pants and was sleeping with his best friend's wife. Jeff and Jay's mom left the DR a few years later and came to live in Hartford with an aunt. Jeff was eight or nine when he came to the States. The DR never really left him, and why should it? El Pequeno Jefe paid his own way back to visit for a couple weeks every summer.

¹¹ I'm not going to tell you who Arthur was.

Jay was a lot quieter than his older brother, spent most of his time at Pequeno's heels, doing what he did and acting the way he acted. They did everything together, right down to playing wide receiver on varsity and being All-State for four straight years. Jay dropped three balls on purpose in his last game after he matched Jay's record for catches – he said it didn't feel right passing Pequeno's number.

And then, Kermit. Kermit was Ozzie's best friend since forever. His real name was William, but the last time somebody called him that was when they were filling out the birth certificate. Oz called him Lil' Kermit when they were kids, which Kermit thought was weird because they were the same age, and when he finally figured out what Oz was talking about, he threw a temper tantrum and started rolling through nicknames like a wannabe Rasta on four-twenty. He didn't change much between elementary and high school, still scrawny and short and nervous. He tried to talk low when everyone was hitting puberty before him, so he soundled like a frog got caught in his throat. We started calling him Kermit. He hated the name, so we kept using it.

6.

I came up Blue Hills Avenue, past the churches that used to be Italian or Irish, then American black, a little before our meeting time, which was midnight. I don't know nobody who goes to those churches now. I think it's mostly Caribbean women and their husbands and then the pastors in their pews, searching for congregations.

I saw Ozzie's beat down Chevy Impala¹² on the side of the road about five miles up I-95 and, when everybody got there, we drove down into the mini-valley between the highway and the fields. If you weren't looking for cars, there wasn't no way you'd spot them in the dark. We hiked a good thirty minutes into the fields because Ozzie wanted to make sure nobody would hear us and he didn't let us talk on the way over – Ozzie wanted everyone to, and I quote, *shut the fuck up in case some trigger-happy farmers feel like shooting niggas tonight*. I told you he's cautious.

Big Sean brought flashlights and when Ozzie finally felt like we were far enough away from the highway, we stuck a couple of them sideways in the dirt and pointed them at a tobacco plant. That was the target. Kermit pulled the guns out of his backpack and handed them around. Everybody looked at me.

Aight. It's your show, Ozzie said.

7.

Yeah, so, I wasn't exactly qualified to be giving shooting lessons. But, damn, when Ozzie Robinson asks you for help, you don't just say, *Actually, Oz, I only ever touched a gun once, maybe you should check your references*. You say: *Yeah, I can help, but you got to loop me in*. And then he agrees and then you have to come up with a lesson-plan which freaks you the fuck out because now you got to sell yourself as a badass bitch who keeps a glock strapped to her thigh and says things like, *I wish a nigga would* and *Take another motherfucking step and watch what motherfucking happens*.

¹² The kid drove an old cop car. Can you believe that?

I practiced my stank-face in the mirror.

The good thing is, because I'm a little obsessive about getting things right, I did internet research on how to shoot a gun and came up with a script – like a lesson-plan of what would go down that night. First, I explain shooting technique. Where your feet should be, how to hold the gun, when to fire (the exhale). When I'm done explaining, we pick an order and shoot in it, five shots a piece. Everyone gets sixty seconds for their five shots – and everyone has got to take all sixty so there won't be any premature triggers. Three rounds of that and then some constructive criticism. Then we take the time down to 45 seconds and do another three rounds. Then thirty seconds, then fifteen.

I had a plan and I stuck to it. The beauty of it was simple: I didn't have to fire a single shot the whole night. Went over like gravy.

8.

Ozzie... Nice uh job. Just you know keep doing what it is you do. Kerm: you're a pussy. Kwan, what the fuck man, you sleeping, this shit should be exciting, you high nigga? Jefe, get off your brother's balls, why you lookin at him when you shoot? Do I got to say it in Spanish for you, Pequeno? Frena, pendejo. Jay, you too, slow down you premature two-minute motherfucker.

That was my constructive criticism. I thought you'd like to know what a badass bitch sounds like.

9.

Okay, no, I don't really think that me giving that constructive criticism to the Knights was particularly badass, because, yes, it was all an affect for effect. Just like writing, *I thought you'd like to know what a badass bitch sounds like* was an affect for effect. I don't think you fully understand who you're dealing with here. I get scattered, but this shit ain't thoughtless.

10.

Before Ozzie took a shot, he would tap his palm against his shirt twice. I thought it was a routine, like a baseball player does before a pitch. But then I noticed he had a routine for everything. He wiped the gun down, once on his right leg and once on his left, whenever anyone handed it to him. He rubbed his hands for a few seconds after he handed the gun to someone else. He took in two small breaths whenever he was about to start talking.

Big Sean caught me staring at Ozzie's palm-tapping-shirt routine. He leaned over and pretended to rub his eye so no one could see his mouth moving. "Don't say nothing about it, he doesn't like people knowing," Big Sean said.

"Knowing what?" I asked.

“He’s obsessive, but not like normal people get obsessed with stupid things. He’s got the disorder. Obsessive compulsive.”

I looked at Big Sean for a minute straight, but he stopped rubbing his eye and started watching Ozzie shoot again. Ozzie Robinson ain’t supposed to have flaws.

The OCD did explain the clean-as-bleach white kicks though.

11.

The irony of the whole mess is that Ozzie’s plan didn’t actually involve shooting a gun. It involved waving one around and playing like you were going to shoot it, but never really pulling the trigger.

He told me about it after the gun lesson was over. When we got back to the cars, Big Sean jumped in his car to get home to his kids. Kermit and the Dominican twins headed straight to a West Indian party right off of Blue Hills. “You going to come with us?” Kermit asked. Ozzie said he’d catch up with them after telling me about the scam. Kerm grumbled under his breath, but didn’t push it. Ozzie usually went to parties late.

The details. Big Sean works the night shift at a 7/11 on the corner of Thomaston and Charles. That’s about two miles south of the North End. They got one security camera and no police precincts nearby – the closest two are at the very top of the North End and right in the middle of downtown. It’s an easy mark, especially if you’ve got an in. So

Oz, Jeff, and Kermit pull up at about two in the a.m. and wait till nobody except Big Sean is in the store. Oz and Jeff put on ski masks and run in with guns out. At that moment, it just so happens that Big Sean ain't behind the counter – he's in front rearranging the gum and candy, which means he ain't protected by the plastic window and he can't hit the emergency police button under the cashier's desk. Jefe keeps his gun on Big Sean – who plays like he's terrified – while Oz goes back behind the register and clears it. As soon as they've got the cash, they run out and hop back into the car where Kermit is waiting to drive away. Big Sean takes a minute to catch his breath (poor dude has been traumatized) before he remembers to hit the police button. When the police get there, they interview him and take a look at the security camera's tape. Jay stays at home to alibi in case anything goes wrong.

No shots fired, no faces, nothing to tell who is who. No loose ends.

12.

A funny thing happened at the fields: Ozzie never made a move to leave. Wasn't like I was about to screw up the vibe or question what was going down, so we leaned against the back of his car and then sat on the hood and then sat there some more. I know what you're thinking – that we jumped into the backseat and put in work,¹³ and I'm not saying that part of me didn't want to do that, but we were stirring in something else that night, and it felt more important than a quick fuck. Oz wasn't in a good mood. He sounded *heavy*. It wasn't really about what he said – Oz wasn't the type to drop deep secrets on a first meet and he never talked about himself. He bragged about his brother and the

¹³ Pervs.

grades the kid got (straight As), and his mom's smarts and the way she managed the family. The heavy wasn't any of that. It was the sound at the bottom of his words. I know about sounds at the bottom of words. Sometimes they're desperate and sometimes they're greedy and sometimes they just ache, like a microphone that ain't been used in decades or an old, sagging couch put out on a corner. It's the aching sound that I hear in Ma's voice when she gets mad about stupid shit. When I got my cornrows in, she yelled at me for an hour because I did it without asking her, even though I know what she was really angry about was Freddy, her boyfriend for ten days, leaving her that morning and, in her head, maybe if she yelled at me – maybe if she busted into my life and stayed there long enough – I wouldn't leave her like Freddy did and she wouldn't be so goddamn lonely all the time. Ma's sound comes from her throat – it's tight and choked and you can even see the veins on her neck when she gets real amped.

I used to have a sound, too. It wasn't the aching one. It was more like the quiet sound a nail makes before a hammer comes down on it. That noise comes from the lungs trying to breathe.

Ozzie's wasn't like mine or Ma's. He wasn't any better at hiding it than me or Ma and it sure as hell had just as strong a hold on his words as it did on ours. It just came from someplace different. Ozzie was digging in his stomach, like someone was already buried there, and, I swear, you could hear the shovel in his voice.

Chapter 4

MALIK

Kinley drove a lime-green Honda Civic Coupe that smelled of factories and industrial strength cleaning agents. With only two doors, the Coupe felt as if it was meant to drive faster than the average sedan. Kinley had little trouble meeting that expectation. Once on the highway, she darted into the left lane and pressed her foot to the gas pedal. *It takes my dad thirty, thirty-five minutes to get to Hartford from Westlake*, Kinley told me. *I think I can do it in twenty.* The speed gauge displayed eighty-five, and she, left hand resting on the top of the wheel, grinned. At the mention of her father, a curious nervousness began scratching my stomach, made more persistent by Kinley's right hand, which frequently and with something akin to friendliness, kept reaching over the gear shift to tap my knee as she spoke.

I glanced at my watch and noted that we were barely beating rush hour. While I had never experienced the frustrations of a daily commute to work, local radio frequently notified its listeners of the awful congestion on I-95 South. In half an hour, downtown Hartford would drain of its suburban workers and the interstate would clog with their single passenger cars. Might Kinley's father be in one of those cars? Did Kinley plan on taking me on a tour of her town that included a visit to her house? Kinley's father, I assumed, would, upon his arrival home, fully expect to see his daughter unaccompanied by a teenage black male from the North End. This thought, quite naturally, brought me to

Kinley's mother; would she not be home as well? Would I not be expected to meet her? The scratching in my stomach intensified. Kinley, talking excitedly about the newly discovered freedom driving allowed her, would occasionally miss my knee with her conversational gesture, her fingers finding the middle of my thigh instead. She slowed the car and took the exit for Westlake.

A sign welcoming us to the town appeared to the right. "WESTLAKE: Where City Style Meets Village Charm." I read the catchphrase to Kinley as a question rather than a statement. She chuckled from below her collarbones. *I don't think seventy-five percent of the people here have ever lived in a city or a village. What the hell is 'city style,' anyway? We'll drive through Westlake center so you can see it for yourself.*

Trees lined the sides of the street. Kinley, now part-date and part-tour guide, told me that they were mostly maples and birches. She mentioned that the town's middle schools planted them as class projects, and, in the process, learned everything there was to know about the region's foliage. We passed the Emma Walton Park, a rose and flower garden the size of several city blocks. Built by an early twentieth-century tobacco baron in honor of his daughter, who, sadly, died from unknown causes before her eighteenth birthday, the park was almost a century old. *Lots of events happen at Emma Park – weddings, graduations, that sort of thing,* Kinley said. *I had my first kiss here.* I started thinking about her lips, full and, I imagined, warm. She had tossed her jacket on the backseat, revealing a loose-fit blouse through which the outline of a tank top could be

seen. Kinley rolled down her window and the wind caught her blouse, pressing it to her chest. I latched onto her voice, hoping it would still my wandering eye.

This is the lake the town is named for, Westlake, Kinley said. The lake melted out of the park and several waterfront restaurants dotted its edges. Paddle- and rowboats, rented at one of a handful of small docks, roamed the water, interrupting the paths of ducks and swans. A golf course, and an accompanying club, of which, Kinley noted, her father was a member, lay on slight hills across the street from the lake. Blues and greens were draped over the landscape, significantly disturbed only by the road on which Kinley and I drove.

As we continued on, the trees grew dense. Within a minute or two, we were, to my Hartford eye, encircled by forest. Another minute or two and the forest abruptly broke to reveal another park, no bigger than a baseball field, directly in front of us and around which the road circled. A Trader Joe's, in the middle of a series of shops that included a local pharmacy and a Bank of America, was on the park's left; on its right was City Hall, complete with Greco-Roman columns, and the Westlake Fire Station. Lining its base were a coffee-shop known for its bagels, a small craft and antique furniture store, and a local bookstore. Kinley, a frequent customer of Words & Worlds Books, went on at length about their stacks of cheap and classic literature, their self-brewed coffee, and the rocking chairs in which they encouraged browsers to sit and read. She had, it appeared, spent many an hour flipping pages written by long-dead authors at Word & Worlds.

The wind had nearly pushed Kinley's blouse off her left shoulder and I, staring, snapped a breath into my lungs and tried to refocus. In the park, several teenagers threw a Frisbee back and forth; a mother watched her toddler play with a dog; a couple sat on a bench, holding hands. Traffic was light and pedestrians were in no rush.

Kinley drove around the park once before idling in front of Word & Worlds. *What do you think?* she asked. I did not yet understand that the park next to which we sat, and the accompanying shops, were at the center of the town. This was downtown.

Think of the parks? They're nice, especially the one with the roses that's named after the dead girl. Embarrassment at calling the lady after whom the park was named "the dead girl" seized me.

Kinley nodded. *Emma Park is one of my favorites. But I meant what do you think of downtown.*

My surprise was plain. Before I could regain control of my face and pay downtown Westlake a compliment (*it seems really peaceful or it's cool that there is so much green space*), Kinley interjected with peals of laughter. She shook her head, allowing her hair to sweep across her shoulders. *I know. It's tiny*, she said. *I should've figured a tour of downtown Westlake would take about half a second. Want to go see the rest of the town? We can drive through my neighborhood, you could see where I live.*

A vision of Kinley's father laying eyes on me and promptly calling 9-1-1 came to mind. He would, I imagined, think I had conned his daughter into a trouble-filled fling, a lust made illicit by Hartford boundaries. My imagination chewed on that notion and found the trespass delicious. I looked away from Kinley and quickly swallowed, guiding my mind back to her question and encouraging a less sensual curiosity in my consciousness. Precisely how large were the houses in Kinley's neighborhood? Exactly how green were their lawns? And were there housewives clad in spandex powerwalking around the block? *Yeah*, I said. *I'd love to see your neighborhood*. With that, Kinley fired the ignition, spun a u-turn, and began driving away from downtown.

Westlake's roads were narrow and made entirely of curves. After several turns, I lost my sense of direction and succumbed to the twists of suburbia. Kinley, used to the roads, continued to speed along them, only slowing to announce, *This is my neighborhood*.

Two story houses with triangular roofs stood twenty or thirty yards away from the street and each other. Some were built with brick, but most sported wood paneling. Driveways led to two car garages. Lawns were simple and undecorated, grass preening in the sunlight. Thick lines of trees formed informal fences that demarcated one property from another. Perhaps there were chain-link fences hidden between the lines, an eyesore and note of mistrust best left concealed.

Kinley pulled to the curb and pointed out of her window. *That's mine*. A cobblestone driveway stretched to a garage and then past it, veering into a semi-circle that returned

the driveway to the street. *You don't want to park in the garage?* I asked. Kinley waved off the thought. *Nope, it's hell to open. C'mon, let me give you the tour.* My chest ticked back and I rubbed my hands down my thighs. Noticing my worry and intuiting its cause, Kinley said, *Don't worry, my parents aren't home. You're not going to meet anyone scary.* She got out of the car and started up the lawn.

I caught up to her at the front door, a dark oak-colored slab of wood meant less for a house than for a fortress. *Your parents aren't home?* My mind flushed with relief; then, a wave of possibility, a wave which I had, till that moment, held at bay, struck my limbs. It was as if a match was lit at my joints, lending them a light heat and tenderness.

Nope, they're not home. Kinley fumbled through her purse in an attempt to find her key.

They both work late?

She laughed softly with her head down. Having found the key, she placed it in the lock and turned. *You could say that. My dad works so late sometimes he doesn't come home, or at least come to this home. My mom is at my aunt's in New York half the time. That's where she is now.* She walked through the door to a lobby at least twice the size of my bedroom.

Damn. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring stuff up like that, I said.

Kinley looked at me over her shoulder. She flashed a smile before furrowing her eyebrows and pinching her mouth in mock indignation. *Are you just going to stand there? You need a written invitation? Come in, Malik.*

I followed Kinley, remaining half of a step behind her. The house's main artery was a hallway that shot off the lobby's end and past a living room on one side and a den on the other. The rooms' couches featured cushions that were lush, embroidered, and overstuffed, as if no one had bothered to sit in them, and no one was meant to. The carpets, beige in the living room and a reddish brown in the den, were oddly dirt-free. I listened to Kinley describing her home, but could not help but notice the pendulum in her hops. I pulled on my shirt and ran my hand down it in an instinctive, and useless, attempt to iron out wrinkles.

Just before the kitchen, the hallway sprang offshoots. To the right, Kinley explained, was her father's home office, a room with a large television meant for football Sundays, and a porch on which cigars could be smoked in peace. *We don't need to go there*, she said. To the left was a guest room, a sunroom with wicker chairs, and Kinley's bedroom. She took my hand, first cupping it in hers and then, after a moment's hesitation, slipping her fingers between mine.

C'mon, my room's the only one that's interesting, Kinley said. *The rest feel like someone died in them.* We walked to the left.

Kinley was right: only in her room did the house hint at the existence of life. Three bookshelves, haphazardly filled with children's books and novels, leaned against one wall. A queen-sized bed, green sheets unmade, rested as casually at the room's center. A window, the size of two doors, faced the backyard. Kinley, apparently, did not like carpet or modern flooring. Distinct from the house's renovated shine, her wooden floorboards, when stepped on, creaked and yawned, bulged in their midsections and strained at their edges. Streams of sun poured through the window and kissed them.

The room was hot, courtesy of the large windows, and Kinley took off her blouse, more comfortable in her tank top. Her shoulders, left bare in her white tank top, revealed apricot freckles. The light glanced off her arms and mingled with her hair.

Hesitant steps carried me next to her where I, too, looked over the backyard, little more than grass leading into tall and proud trees. In the room's quiet, shyness returned to me.

Thanks for coming with me, Kinley said.

In a gentle voice, I responded, *You take all your boys here?* She laughed, kindly, at the nervous joke.

Face still turned toward the backyard, she reached for my hand. Then, tumbling unbidden from my lips, came these silly words: *I think I like you.*

Kinley turned towards me. Within a hair's breadth of my body, hers was taut and lean and waiting, impatiently. Letting go of my hand, she placed both of hers on my jaw. Her lips, agitated, found mine.

Anxiousness rolled down the back of my head. I kissed her in return, gripped the small of her back and pulled her hips to me. Her fingers roamed my chest, my stomach, the crook between hip and thigh. She fumbled with my shirt buttons; I drew her shirt over her head. She fumbled with my belt; I unhooked her bra and lightly tugged at the top of her jeans. Winding her finger through my belt loop, she pulled me to the mattress. Before laying down she slid out of her jeans and, eyes never leaving mine, watched me do the same.

Lowering myself onto the bed, I pressed my mouth to hers and let it follow her downward arcs. Small white chin lifts to reveal a long neck; collarbone, strong and pronounced, dives into chest; pink nipples shiver as a draft passes us by; abdomen draws in, creases with muscle; bottom tenses, eases, and passes the shiver to tender calves, to thick ankles, to white toes. I returned up her body, lips touching inner thigh, grazing bellybutton, drawing teeth under her breast.

Unwilling to let my hand rest, I pressed it to the back of her neck, moved it upwards, held and released her hair. I noticed its silk bounce. It spilled across my face, and I went in desperate search of the earlobe it hid. Its scent, citrus, surprised me. She lifted her chest and curled her fingers around my briefs. *Take them off*, she said. I pushed myself to my

knees and did as she asked; she lifted her hips off the mattress and looked at me. *Take them off*, she said again, softer. I did as she asked.

Kinley pulled me to her. Eagerly, I followed. She ran her fingernails down my spine, threatening to draw blood. Her left hand gripped the spot between my bottom and hip. Her right curled to the front, wrapped around me, drew me to her. She locked her eyes on my eyes. They were aching more than blue-green. I pressed. Her back arched and released, her head came forward; she kissed my shoulder and her lips lingered, trembling against my skin; she kissed a second kiss, urgent and full and restless; Kinley bit, and she bit once more, and once more, and once more.

Chapter 5

NORA ROY

1.

We didn't spend romantic time. That week after the fields, Ozzie and me, we were with his team. There was a practical purpose to it: they wanted to keep an eye on me in case I got skittish. We were at Kendall Park or Kermit's tiny one-bedroom apartment right off of Vine Street¹⁴ most of the afternoons. Most nights we'd go to some house party thrown by people I didn't know and didn't really want to know.

I was fine with that as long as it meant I was on Ozzie's radar – and I was more on than on his radar. This one time when we are at a house party some slick dude wearing sunglasses at night tried handing me a drink and Ozzie basically dived across the room to intercept that shit. He looked at SunGlasses like he was about to end him right there. SunGlasses walked away.

“Don't ever let that nigga give you a drink,” Oz said.

“You going to get me a drink?”

¹⁴ Kermit was the only one who lived on his own – his parents had kicked him out on account of all the weed he smoked. A lot of parents wouldn't care about some recreational weed activities – some parents might even encourage it – but Kermit's dad was a Baptist preacher and his mom was the head of the church choir so they weren't about to have none of that going down. When Kermit got caught for the third time (dumbass smoking out his window like that made it impossible to know what was up) they booted him. He scrounged for a second and then his cousin, a shady motherfucker who slumlords like a pimp, got him the tiny one-bed apartment in exchange for a favor that hasn't been spelled out yet.

Ozzie smiled and, let me just say, fuck that asshole and his electric ass smile.

Maybe it was because the party was packed like a stripper's panty-line, but Oz held my hand and squeezed us through to the drinks table.

It was kind of sweet. This kid's OCD brain took ten minutes to make one drink.

Ozzie gave me the cup and stood next to me without anything in his own hand. "You don't want a drink?" I asked.

"I don't drink," he said, voice flat. "Stopped a while ago." He shot me another smile and winked. "Don't tell nobody. I just hold the cups."

Ozzie Robinson ain't drinking is like saying Ozzie Robinson ain't partying and everybody knows Ozzie Robinson parties. I stuffed the surprise back into my face.

"Why?"

"I gotta be able to think straight."

OCD. Got it. How are you supposed to plan and perfect and repeat if you can't think clear?

I decided to switch gears, push my luck. I pulled a middle school move from my sleeve.

“So. Who you trying for tonight?”

He looked at me sideways and scratched his chin with his knuckles. “I’m done messing around with these chicks like it don’t got any ramifications.”

His phone buzzed. I stayed in middle school mode.

“Who’s trying to get at you?”

He looked at the phone and his mouth dropped into a frown.

“One of them chicks. Like I said, I ain’t fucking with that though.”

You ever been jealous and happy at the same time? That’s what I felt like. My thoughts: number one, who was this persistent witch¹⁵ blowing up his phone and, number two, the dude is proving that he really ain’t playing around anymore.

I was about to say something stupid like, *What kind of chick are you looking for*, but right then Kerm pops out the basement door and starts shoving people on his way to the

¹⁵ I’m trying to tone down on this cussing thing, especially when it comes to other females, but, damn, I want to call that trick a bitch. I guess I just did. Whoops.

bathroom. Kid was holding his hand over his mouth because he had been cross-fading¹⁶ since two in the afternoon and vomit is the price for that.

“I can’t tell him this right now, he ain’t ready to hear it, but Kermit’s gotta cut back with that weed, nigga can’t even think straight most of the time,” Oz said. He looked at the bathroom door again. It was shut and behind it Kerm was probably puking his guts out and swearing to God that he would never cross-fade like that again. “Let’s get outta here. I didn’t come to babysit Kerm. He can get a ride with the Dominican twins.”

Leaving a party I didn’t like to be alone with the dude I did? Easy. Even if it was just to get a ride home, that was still ten minutes alone without his team loitering, intruding on my game.

Oz drove with his left hand on the wheel, his right on the shift. Looked like he was driving stick and even though he wasn’t, it was mad hot. Plus, his arms were cut like diamonds, in case you were wondering. I’ll admit, I got a bit thrown off, so I nosedived into business.

“I been wanting to ask. Why’d you all decide to start doing bigger jobs?”

The answer I was thinking might come was, *We want to get paid*, or *We got the skills to handle it now*, or *Just because, there ain’t gotta be a specific reason*. Instead?

¹⁶ That means smoking a shit ton of weed and drinking like you’re out to hurt somebody.

“My mom has got something going on right now. Kerm and all, they don’t know, but that’s the real reason I told them we gotta start doing these jobs.”

My brain got hype saying, *Personal. We just got personal – everybody relax, this asshole right here opened the door to some closer relationship type shit, gotta think about what to say back.* Split second later, though, he turned that table around.

“Why’d you agree to help us?”

Shit. My brain went, *Now I gotta make up some bull because the real reason is Ozzie Robinson.*

2.

Pause.

Got me going on and on about Ozzie when we got other shit to talk about, too. Patience, motherfucker.¹⁷

I got to tell you about my grandma. She was the only person me or Ma could go to when shit hit the fan. And this part of the story is about shit hitting the fan when Grandma was already dead.

¹⁷ Sorry. About calling you a motherfucker. I got caught up.

If I don't tell you how grandma danced, you won't know why Ma was where she was when I found her after her meltdown or why she was listening to what she was listening to.¹⁸

3.

Grandma danced after midnight.

She had maybe five feet on her and every inch was packed tight with muscle, so her night clothes – a baggy white shirt that went to her knees and tube socks – made her look like she didn't have any flesh on her at all. Plus, she stopped doing her hair when grandpa died, which was around the same time I was born, which meant that she had an old lady 'fro. It wasn't grey anymore – it was straight white. It stuck out in both directions like a lightning bolt made a part down the middle. When she danced, her hair wobbled just enough to make you think it might tip her over.

The first time I saw her it was on accident. I was seven or eight and it was like two or three in the morning and I was hungry. I was looking for something to eat – dark chocolate has been my favorite since I can remember and grandma always kept a stash of it behind the cereal, playing like she didn't know I was sneaking pieces. When I got to the kitchen door, it took me a quick minute to figure that the ghost thing in the room

¹⁸ I know I couldn't have stopped Ma from having a meltdown – and, damn, I know it's really not my job on account of me being her daughter and not the other way around – but if you ain't ever seen your Ma cry, and cry in the way that you don't know if she'd ever stop, then maybe you don't know what that moment does to a kid. Yeah, I spent most of the week with Ozzie. I was caught up in him. In fact, let's be real clear, even if you had told me what happened to Ma and didn't tell me about how she took it all – the consequences – I would've told you that there wasn't really nothing special about that week. Ma gets fired at least once a year. I would've said, why shouldn't I be hanging out with this dude I've liked since middle school? It's not logical, but I still get tripped up on guilt about it.

wasn't actually a ghost. It was my grandma, who should've been in bed on account of being old as times before black people could vote, and she wasn't trying to haunt shit, she was just swinging her body, soft, to music coming from the record player in the corner.¹⁹ Freddie King, he was her favorite. "Today I Sing the Blues."

I know it's weird for anyone to say this about their grandmother, but my grandma danced sexy. You can believe that.²⁰ Her knees bent just a bit and she put her arms out like they were circling somebody. She stepped a half-step and sway to the right, to the left, back again. Her eyes were shut real tight and her eyebrows were pulled in. Wrinkles as deep and secret as caves dug into her forehead and on the lines where her cheeks ran into her cheekbones. Hips were loose. Arms were easy. Feet – so much grace it was like gravity didn't need her anymore.

4.

The day after I first saw grandma dance, I asked Ma about it right before going to school. She smiled a smile that had a ton of looking back in it.

"We danced a lot when I was your age," she told me. "Grandma is pretty good at it, huh?"

I nodded and took the question as permission to spy on grandma late at night and didn't think twice about how happy Ma might've been back then.

¹⁹ I didn't even know that the record player worked. It sat on top of an old time speaker right next to the garbage can because nobody knew where the thing was supposed to go.

²⁰ "Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear."

5.

Exactly seven days after the fields, Ozzie dropped me off at my house after we left the party Kerm was puking at. He said, “catch you tomorrow?” and I said, “aight” and then he pressed the gas. It was around eleven and the humid wrapped around you like a coat. I watched the car drive away and stared down the street just thinking on what Ozzie and me were talking about.²¹ Keyshia, the neighbor from two doors down, was sitting on her porch in shorts and flip-flops, sipping on some lemonade, trying to cool off. Once Ozzie’s car rounded the corner, Keyshia called out to me, saying I should come over for a second.

Keyshia works at the same grocery store Ma works at. She is a big-boned lady and that’s not a joke. She ain’t fat and she ain’t built real muscular either, she’s just bigger sized than most humans. Once, in tenth grade history, we read that way-back-when being large was what people wanted because it meant that they didn’t have to do peasant shit all day. Women with rolls and curves, with literal fat asses and some chub on their cheeks, those were the hot ones. They would’ve thought Keyshia was a goddess,²² especially because she is real tall too – like a few inches over six feet. I’m telling you this so that you know when you stand on a porch in front of her, like I was standing in front of her, and her voice gets soft and she puts her hands on the top of your arms, you start to feel small in a good way, like someone is protecting you. Then, when Keyshia asks how your mom is

²¹ Why Big Sean was running around with us instead of going to some community college. He had his GED and was spelling bee smart – everybody knew this illegal crap could get you caught and put in jail. Big Sean had kids and a wife. Why fuck with that?

²² I mean, if she was white.

doing, you can tell that the answer should probably be “Not so good now, but I’m helping her out and she’ll be alright in a couple days,” but it actually is “I don’t know, I haven’t been around much the last week, what happened?” Keyshia takes your hand and calls you sweetie and your intestines twist up into your stomach because Keyshia only calls people “sweetie” when there is a problem that ain’t being solved with a gift or a fight. She starts telling you the story and you’re careful to listen for the details because you know that, sometimes, it’s not the fireworks that explains the ending, it’s the tiny moments that cut to an inside place where we paint a picture of who we are. And when she is done, you stand quiet for a second, and you tell her, “thank you for telling me,” and you squeeze her hand, and you turn to leave, and you start walking home, and then walking faster.

6.

There was this one white lady, small chick with brown hair, maybe in her thirties, who comes down Ma’s lane at the grocery store. She was dressed real pretty and professional in a blue suit jacket and matching skirt. Chick was skinny and it showed in the way that she ate – she was buying nothing but some fruit and a bottle of wine. It was about a twenty-five dollar charge and the lady handed over forty in cash. Ma gave her fifteen back, but the lady started saying something about only getting five dollars and she was owed ten more. Keyshia said that Ma was calm, like super calm, at first – she told the lady that she definitely gave her a ten dollar bill because she only had one left in her counter and now it was gone. Keyshia said that the lady insisted on calling the manager,

that she didn't give Ma even a single drop of respect, like she didn't believe Ma could count or think.

When the manager came, the lady explained what she thought had happened in a serious voice, saying she didn't want to accuse nobody of stealing or maybe of just being bad at their job, but fair was fair and right was right. When she finished, Ma started saying something, just defending herself, still calm as can be. The lady swiveled her head till she was looking at Ma, but her body was still aimed straight at the manager. Keyshia had come over from her counter, the one next to Ma's, because she wanted to see exactly what was going down. Keyshia said the lady's eyes got bigger and her chin tucked in a little and her left eyebrow went up just enough to spot. Blue eyes, Keyshia said, and they were pretty, but when the lady looked at Ma, the eyes got squinty and they froze over hard like a lake in the middle of winter. Keyshia said that it wasn't like the lady was just seeing through Ma or just being a little bit disrespectful. No, it was like she was saying that Ma – that who Ma was as a person – was dirty, and that that dirt would never come off, that it was something permanent inside her that spilled up into her brain and leaked out in her skin. Keyshia said that there are some things worse than worthless and that's what that lady was calling Ma.

7.

What I think?

I think that lady gave Ma the same look that Ma gives herself in the mirror. I think that's why it set Ma off. Some pain you think you can keep to yourself and if you do face it on the outside, you face a half-version of it, something weak-ass and diluted or so big and absurd that you can laugh it off as being whack. When that lady gave it to Ma pure and raw and easy, it was like the world telling her, after all these years, that her first instinct about herself was right.

8.

Ma flipped. She got up in that white lady's face and fed her lines like *Bitch, I saw the way you was looking at me* and *Don't tell me you just being reasonable*. She shoved her groceries off the counter. She took off her nametag and her apron and threw them at the boss, and told him, "Fuck you man, you saw what was happening, you know." When she was walking out, Keyshia said, there were a couple of tears that started coming down.

The customers were looking at each other like they had just seen a crazy person. White lady starting talking indignant, saying something about a lawsuit, and, of course, the boss was apologizing like a pansy, telling her she would have free food for the next year.

Keyshia and another cashier went over to Ma's counter to help clean up because nobody else was about to do it. In between the tomatoes, in the spot the white lady had been standing in, in a spot a bill would have landed if the white lady had accidentally dropped it when Ma gave her her change, there was a ten-dollar bill.

9.

When I opened the door to my house, straight after talking to Keyshia, the first thing I saw was grandma dancing. That was confusing on account of grandma being dead and ghosts not being a real thing.²³ Then I noticed the sounds that were coming from the back of the house, where the kitchen is at, and it locked into place: Freddie King. “Today I Sing the Blues.” I just stood at the doorway for a second, listening. I hadn’t heard that song in a quick minute. I forgot how sweet it was – the guitar smacking its lips and trying to find a kiss, Freddie’s voice as much shout as sing, the piano tapping half pulse, half flutter.

I followed the song into our hallway and past the stairs and got to the kitchen. I stood at the doorway.

There wasn’t no mess or nothing dramatic happening. Honestly.

10.

If my eyes stayed above the counters then I would’ve thought the kitchen was kind of clean – no food on the counter, no dishes in the sink, no cupboards open. There ain’t space for a table or chairs in there, so it’s not like nothing could hide from me. It’s just that Ma wasn’t standing up and she had brought her whole world to the floor – that’s where I had to look. Right underneath the sink, in the black jeans and the black shirt that she wore at work, leaned up against the bottom cupboards. Her right leg was pulled up to her body and her left was sprawled on the white tile. She had her chin up in the air like a boxer before a fight.

²³ Well, I ain’t never seen one and that’s the kind of thing I really got to see to believe for myself.

I didn't smell any liquor, but there was a bottle of rum on her left and about a cup worth of it was gone. That wasn't a thing for Ma. Ma could drink. The liquor was probably more for the sting than for the drunk of it – when I turned sixteen, she told me that it's the first cup that burns the throat on the way down, the rest go easy. I got to admit, I was surprised, in a happy way, that she wasn't drunk or trying to get drunk. That can be twisted, when Ma decides to forget everything and has a few bottles to help her. But the second I got a bit relieved, thinking that things weren't so bad, I looked at Ma's face.

I don't know much about crying, but I know that when someone is crying loud and is gasping and maybe even shaking a bit, it means that they've got fight in them. It means that they ain't about to sink. Ma's crying wasn't like that kind of crying. There wasn't nothing showy about it, there wasn't even a noise to it. Her face wasn't ugly or weird or stretched – it was calm. Her tears came out one at a time, rolling slow till they hit her mouth or fell off her chin. She had never looked so peaceful and that was the scary part. Her body was relaxed. Tranquil. And I wanted to shake that tranquil shit out of her. I wanted to grab her by the shoulders. I wanted to tug at her eyebrows. I wanted to make her look me in the face and then I would tell her that, yeah, she was allowed to be sad and she was allowed to cry, but not like this – this was fucked up, I wanted to tell her, stand up on your feet and pull out your hair or throw glasses against a wall or just scream till your voice wakes up.

I moved the bottle from the floor to the counter and sat next to her. I took her left hand and held it with both of my hands. Ma didn't open her eyes. She didn't move or nothing. Her chin – that wrinkled like the tears were about to get heavier, but they stayed the same. Ma started saying something under her breath so quiet I couldn't hear her at first. I don't know who she was talking to. Maybe it was me because I was holding her hand or maybe it was God because her face was still turned up or maybe it was Grandma because she started to clench the bottom of the record player. What I know is that she was mumbling, "I'm sorry" to someone.

12.

I put Ma to bed that night. She laid on her bed comatose for a good thirty minutes before I heard her start snoring. I left her room and stood in the hallway, back pressed up against the wall.

I can't really remember too many of the things I was thinking, I was pretty frozen. I was running on survival instinct and that's what made me pull out my phone and scroll through all the names in my contacts and then call Ozzie Robinson's number convinced that his voice was the only voice I wanted to hear.

Chapter 6

MALIK

It is, in retrospect, remarkable that not a soul – not my brother or my mother – noticed my first few nights away from home; it is perhaps more remarkable that I thought nothing of my family's silence on the matter. They were, like me, preoccupied with corners of life about which I had no interest, or business, asking. Even had I been curious, our paths rarely crossed and never for longer than an hour or two. Our apartment felt like a place of pilgrimage, a spot where each of us would briefly return to acknowledge the sacredness of family before hurriedly resuming our daily, and nightly, activities.

Oz' hands-off approach to my life was more curious than my mother's, as her nosiness had been easing for a year or so. Oz' intrusions into my doings had remained remarkably consistent since the time I was ten, and now, when something interesting was actually happening, he was nowhere to be found. I would have expected a full questioning on my nightly whereabouts and my activities at those whereabouts, with particular attention paid to anything potentially illicit or dangerous. I would have expected him to insist on a meeting between Kinley and the family, a thinly disguised interview. Instead, Ozzie hardly noticed anything happening at home. There were, I assumed, girls or schemes distracting him. Rather than probing further, I kept my nose down and was grateful for the diversions keeping him occupied.

It was, then, without barrier or restriction that I constructed my days around my newfound and peculiar romance. Our first date, surprising to both Kinley and me, stretched from midafternoon to late evening; night had fallen and Sugarland had emptied of suburbanites by the time she drove me downtown. There she kissed my cheek, squeezed my hand, and told me that she was planning to visit the city fairly regularly. I responded by telling her that, *You know, it would be cool to see you, like, whenever you're in the area.* At that, my return to awkwardness, Kinley flashed a toothy grin and lightly stepped into her Honda Civic.

I slept fitfully that night. This was unusual as my room was something of a sanctuary to me. Small, one could barely open the door without it smacking against the bed. My desk, piled high with books, sat at the foot of my bed and beneath the room's window. The old oak dresser filled the last available nook, a spot to the left of the desk and no bigger than two feet wide. Though I fantasized about a workspace large enough for pacing, my affection for my room knew no bounds. Inside its four walls, I had room to read and write, imagine and float above the mundane, think and let thinking go; it was my cranny of peace. It had been years since a night of restless sleep snuck around its walls and, yet, there I lay, well past midnight, unable to find calm.

Thoughts of the afternoon looped through my mind: Kinley's figure laying on mine, entangled; the birthmark, an almost perfect oval, that rested beneath her hip; the mumbling noises she made when a contented nap wrapped around us. The memories, pleasant and pleasurable, soon gave way to agitation. Hot, I tossed my sheets, only to

retrieve them ten minutes later as a breeze cooled my skin. I wrestled with my pillow, arranging it this way and that, placing my hands underneath it and abruptly removing them. I stared at the ceiling; I closed my eyes; I stared at the ceiling again. I noticed the sweat underneath my knee, on my lower back, rising on my neck. Stretching my legs beneath me and my arms above, I took three deep breaths and found that my nerves refused to still. Cautiously, I allowed the thought tumbling through my body to reach my head: *What if she didn't want to see me again.*

Unbidden, explanations flooded my mind. Ripe for the tricking, was I only part and parcel of her Sugarland exploration? An experience catalogued as urban and left to dust among a dozen other adventures? The cruel irony was this: a part of me recognized the exchange, found it familiar, even predictable, desirable. She would get her story, her foray into the dark metropolis jungle, completed by an intimate tryst with a native; I would get the memory of her, the knowledge that, if only for an afternoon, that suburban girl was *with* me. Perhaps our afternoon together was nothing more than a release built into the system; perhaps it was a moment that would pacify us when curiosity or agitation spiked; perhaps it would assuage any inclination we felt to live in places we were not invited, to exist with people with whom we were not supposed to exist. Yes, I decided, as my stomach regained its hold on shooting worries. Yes, I should not expect anything more from that girl, Kinley. I should know that the "us" we had was a time-stamped thing and it expired the very instant her tires crossed from Sugarland to suburbia.

The issue now processed and settled, my brain welcomed fatigue and, within minutes, I was sleeping tranquilly.

At three-thirty in the morning, apparently unable to sleep, Kinley texted me:

Tues @ 8?

I responded immediately. *Yeah, for sure.*

:-) My place? You need a ride?

I thought for a moment. What if one of her parents came home and I needed a quick getaway? *That's okay. I'll ask my brother for his car.*

Okay. I'll leave the door open. I can't really hear the doorbell from my room.

Was Westlake really that safe? *I should just come right in?*

Yup! You have google maps on your phone?

I immediately started downloading the app. *Yeah.*

My address: 42 Haven Drive, Westlake

Haven Drive? Irony. *Perfect.*

~

On entering Kinley's house, at precisely eight o'clock on Tuesday evening, I registered several items I had previously overlooked: above, an elegant chandelier hanging over the lobby's center; below, a light green Persian rug that ran the length of the hallway; and, when I arrived at Kinley's room, a small lamp that sat, quite neatly, atop her bedside table. The bulb, lit underneath an orange lampshade, was more ember than light. Sitting next to it and on the mattress was Kinley.

Cross-legged in a pair of green shorts and a white v-neck t-shirt, she delicately balanced a book on her thighs, the feel and taste of which I recalled with devastating accuracy. I stood silently at the doorway, wondering if she would notice me. But for the gentle rise and fall of her chest, she rarely moved. Occasionally, a rogue strand of hair would fall in front of her face and she would, with pointer and middle fingers, push it back behind her ear. Her mouth would curve upwards in reaction to a line just read; her eyebrows might crumple, her nose might crinkle. She did not lift her eyes or fidget; nor did she show any sign of noticing me. When, finally, I asked, *What are you reading*, she was not startled in the least. *Your favorite*, Invisible Man, she said, without raising her head. *I'm only twenty pages in, so I'm not sure I like it yet.* I nodded slowly, flattered that she remembered and impressed that she was actually reading the novel. On the pillow next to her sat another book. Curious as to why there was a second laying on the bed, I asked, *What's the other*

one? Kinley, more engaged in the novel than attuned to my presence, responded bluntly: *If I'm going to read one of yours, you're going to read one of mine. Come sit. You can start it while I finish this chapter.*

A smidge of disappointment registered in my furrowed eyebrows; in stark contrast to our first meeting, I had, this time around, been fully expecting sex. Taking cues from Ozzie, I had stuffed three condoms in my wallet and applied a dab of cologne to the sides of my lower neck. My jeans were ironed, my face rid of admittedly little beard growth, and my chest, more skin than muscle, bulged from the twenty push-ups I managed that morning.

Following Kinley's instructions, I sat down on the mattress and picked up the book. *Brave New World*. I had neither read nor heard of it. Science fiction was not my cup of tea, but the novel's premise seemed interesting enough: a man feels something is terribly wrong with the sterile, scientifically advanced utopia in which he lives. I idly flipped to the front page, hoping that Kinley would soon complete her chapter and we might, perhaps, do something – well, one thing – other than read.

At first, my eyes meandered from the page to Kinley's thigh, back to the page, to Kinley's thigh again. They lingered on her knee, her calve, her foot with its sandal tan and her toes with their red nail polish. Sticky emotion buffeted my thoughts; anxiety, lust, and doubt roamed across my torso. I looked at the window and spotted the first few stars reaching through the summer sky. I let my gaze rest there and watched the colors shift outside. The evening's light blue adopted shades of navy; the stars' hesitant white turned

bold and gained a tinge of yellow. Gradually, my mind's whirl slowed. I noted the scratchy feel of paper on the tips of my thumbs; the wrinkles and wear on the novel's front and back covers; the scent of books printed decades ago, that of cooled dust and black ink. My eyes returned to the page.

As often happened to me, and, I soon learned, to Kinley as well, the novel's story worked its way past my eyes and into my imagination, rudely displacing all else. I swallowed the first page whole. While I could have attempted a conversation with Kinley, a conversation that would, in all likelihood, lead to a kiss – a kiss that would lead to much more. Yet I continually chose to read additional pages – the second, the third, the fourth. When my brain would recall where and with whom I sat, it would distractedly strike a bargain with my body: only one more line, only one more paragraph, only one more page. The details and tensions of my new world soon preoccupied my mind: how was this utopia constructed? by and for whom was it regulated? was its medicated harmony truly a form of bliss?

The pages of our novels crackled delicately when flipped. Aside from that, the room remained comfortably quiet. I entered the intimate nook wherein I planted imagined worlds and searched, consciously and not, for a slice of grace. Kinley and the bed upon which we sat disappeared. From the novel rose a London soulless and ancient. I imagined the uneven press of cobblestone streets against my feet. I trudged to factories more machine than human, more virtual than alive. The morning fog, crisp and gentle, brushed my cheeks.

Absorbed in a place I had never been and a time I would never see, it took me a moment to realize that the pressure on my fingers was not make believe. While my right hand held the novel, my left rested on the spot between Kinley and me. Kinley had, quite casually, placed her right hand on my left.

Instead of the rush of hormones produced on our first date, her touch eased the tension in my upper back, calmed my stomach. It was not permission or censure in her gesture, but encouragement. *This*, she seemed to say, *is exactly what we should be doing*.

The oddity of our first encounter, I now realize, was rivaled only by the oddity of our second: we sat reading, without interruption, for more time than either lust or hormones would have predicted. Eventually, words on the page bled into one another and the letters were no longer decipherable. Our bodies, held rigid while we read, were in need of uncoiling. We did not look at our phones or think of the time. Without so much as a sentence exchanged, Kinley clicked off the lamp and we undressed.

When I lay down on the mattress, Kinley moved towards me, setting her head on the crook between my shoulder and chest. It felt like home, like a ball in a glove. We were, for a moment, still. Our knees touched beneath the sheets. Nighttime suburban house lights dueled with stars and together they filtered through the window. The creaky floorboards were quiet and only occasionally would the grumble of a car drift from the street and into the room. It was that instant – before our torsos shifted slightly and our

breath turned shallow; before Kinley kissed my neck and before I squeezed the muscle beneath her ribs; before she rolled her hips on mine and before I drew her shirt away from her body; before one touch became a thousand and before my skin caught fire and before the night grew elastic and illusory – it was that instant, when we were still, that I remember best.

Chapter 7

NORA ROY

1.

Ozzie came over like a bullet. I'm not playing, that dude took ten minutes to get to my place and all I had to tell him on the phone was, "I ain't doing too hot, Ma is tripping out," and he said "Want do you need? You want me to come by?" and then I said "Yeah." When we hung up, I remembered that I forgot to lock the door so I texted him quick: *Doors ain't locked. Just come in. I'm upstairs.*

Ten minutes later, I heard his car pull up. Ten minutes means that he didn't circle the block twice, which must've had his OCD going berserk. That's a hard thing to do, shut off that itch in your brain. But Ozzie did it and he did it to make sure I was doing okay.

2.

I know you're waiting for the sex. You're thinking that it's me and him in a house pretty much alone on account of Ma being knocked out, and that we're both in our twenties so there has got to be some hormones flying around, and I'm sad and he comforts me and one thing leads to another and then we're knocking back headboards like we were holding a grudge against them. But that's not how it went down. I ain't the type to screw because I'm vulnerable and Oz ain't the type to take advantage of someone being depressed.

And no, we didn't do no let's-talk-it-all-out stuff either. Not that I'm opposed on principle to that way of doing things, just that I don't like people playing with my head and that's what people always want to do.

When Ozzie found me in the hallway, he didn't miss a beat. He sat down next to me, close enough so that our thighs were touching but not so close that we were rubbing up against each other. And then he did something most people wouldn't: he stayed.

3.

Ozzie slept on the couch. It's lumpy and brown and the middle cushion is torn on a diagonal. He didn't ask for any sheets or nothing. I probably should've asked him how he slept in the morning, but he looked fresh, like he slept at the Hilton. I looked like a slob. My 'rows were fraying and my eyes had whit gunk on the edges. I checked in on Ma right when I woke up and she was still knocked out. It was only, like, eight in the morning, so I didn't get worried. Instead, I made the mistake of going downstairs without looking in a mirror to see if Ozzie was still there, and he was, and then he saw me looking a hot mess.

"Hey," he said. "I got some food. Breakfast sandwiches. You like bacon?"

I nodded and noticed how his shirt still didn't have wrinkles in it and got confused.

"How's your shirt so clean?" I asked.

Ozzie looked to the right and down at his feet. “I took it off and put it on the table so it wouldn’t get messed up.” He switched the topic. “You want the sandwich?” He handed it to me and started fumbling with his keys.

“How’s your mom doing?”

“Asleep.”

“You got plans for the day?”

“Not really.” Staying at home the whole day meant biting my nails, waiting for Ma to wake up or act out or, worse, doing nothing. “I’m thinking it might be good to get out for a minute.”

“That’s what I was going to say.”

“You got any ideas?”

“I gotta drive my Mom to the doctor’s in a second, she’s got an appointment at ten.”

Ozzie glanced out the living room window at his car.

“Yeah, for sure, you gotta do what you gotta do, I didn’t mean –“

“No, I’m thinking you could come with us.”

“Come with you?”

“Yeah, I mean, if you don’t have nothing else to do?”

“I don’t have nothing to do.” In retrospect, I probably gave him that answer a little too fast and with a little too much eager in my voice.

4.

Ozzie’s mom was waiting outside her apartment building. Her hair was cut short, and she made it work, like she was styling some straight-from-the-motherland look. Helped that she was tall and stood straight, like an arrow was shot up her spine and got stuck there. Purple suit pants and a white blouse. Gold dangly earrings. I looked at my too-sizes-too-big grey tee and curled my shoulders.

I was in the backseat because I was trying to show some respect to Ozzie’s mom. When she slid into the front, she looked back at me and nodded, a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

“Who, pray tell, is this lovely young woman, Oswald?” *Oswald?*

“Mom. You gotta call me that?”

“That’s your name, yes? I named you, did I not?”

“Yes, but –“

“But your friends call you Ozzie or Oz like some demented wizard.”

“The wizard’s name ain’t Oz, he was from a place called Oz.”

“And that’s what’s important here?”

“If you’re going to be talking about my favorite movie, yeah.”

Ozzie’s mom turned to me. “Would you believe that this boy watched that movie every day for three years when he was a child?”

“Mom, you telling stories already?”

“I’m not allowed to tell stories?”

“You don’t even know her name.”

“Well, son, could that be because you haven’t introduced us?”

Ozzie put his head back on the carseat and let out a breath that broke into laughs. “Aight, aight. Mom, this is my friend Nora Roy. Nora Roy, this is my mom, Mrs. Robinson.”

“How old are you, Nora?” Mrs. Robinson asked.

“Twenty-four.”

“Twenty-four? Seems old enough. How about you call me Elle, then?”

“That works for me, Elle,” I said.

Elle returned her gaze to Ozzie. “Will Nora Roy be joining us today?”

“Yeah. She ain’t really having a good day.”

“And why is that?”

“Mom, you can’t just ask people sh-,” Elle put a warning in her eyes. “You can’t just ask people stuff like that.”

Elle looked at the ceiling and mumbled something in the way my grandma used to when she prayed to Jesus for patience with some ignorant, brat-ass child.

“Nora, Osmond hasn’t told you why we are going to the hospital?”

“Mom, you ain’t gotta tell -- ”

“Shhh, let us talk, boy. Nora, has he told you why?”

“No, he hasn’t,” I said.

Elle looked me dead in the eye and kept her voice even. “I have Parkinson’s, an advanced version of it. And do you know why Oswald is driving?”

I didn’t know much about the disease, but I knew that it makes people shake. “Because your hands could start shaking and that could be dangerous.”

“That’s right. So. Let’s conclude that we are all having a rough day. What, exactly, is the nature of yours?”

I decided to tell the truth. “My ma had a breakdown and I don’t like seeing her like that and I ain’t got nowhere to go.”

Elle lifted her head slow and brought it back down even slower. “I’m sorry to hear that. You’re welcome here with us, dear.” She curved her back into the seat, got comfy, closed her eyes.

“Oswald, was that so hard? Press the gas, let’s get to it.”

5.

Hospitals and me don’t really get along. Like, at all. I’ve got a few reasons, starting with those blue and green colors that look like death just vomited on the walls. And the smell – that sanitized stuff jannies in the afterlife use to clean the shit out of limbo. The most important reason, though, is my grandma. When she started falling down, scraping and cutting and bruising, the hospital would charge more than what Ma made in a month for a few stitches. I’m not an economist, but that can’t be right. The hospital is saying the five minutes it takes to stop the bleeding on my grandma’s knee is worth the one-hundred-and-sixty hours Ma puts in at work?

6.

Why ain’t anyone building hospitals that look like somewhere people actually want to go? I’m not trying to down the architects, but Sugarland City Hospital is a jail with bigger windows. Slabs of concrete stacked on slabs of concrete.

The parking lot is the size of a few football fields, but it’s always full anyway. We parked on the street and walked through the lot. You enter the hospital through two giant

sets of revolving doors and as soon as your toe hits the floor, you start to feel queasy. At least I do. The receptionist is off to the right and halls stretched out either end. Elle was out in front of us and she knew exactly where she was going, we just followed her to the elevators.

Seventh floor. I had never been up there. The walls were still that lame green color and the lights were still fluorescent in the way that made me turn into a deer (with the headlights and all). I liked how quiet it was, though. I don't think quiet is the right word, actually. It was hushed. A place where people spoke soft and waited, nice and patient, for bad news. Even the footsteps were hushed. It's like everyone had agreed that the worst thing you could do up there was to disturb other people with noise.

The sign giving directions said that neurology was to the right and we went to the right, so I figured that Parkinson's had something to with the brain. We passed a small waiting room – the seats were a different shade of the same lame green – before going through massive double doors and hitting a carpeted hallway with a nurse manning a reception desk on the left. He asked Elle to check in and then pointed to the corner room down the hall. Elle walked there straight-backed like she was about to conquer something, instead of there being some shit messing with her neurons.

Gretchen Elliott, M.D. Nothing fancy about the plaque on her door, except for the letters and you can let that one go because the woman did spend half her life in med school, why not spot her an M and a D? I wanted to take a look at her, size her up. Whenever I came

to the hospital with grandma, we would get the JV doctors – the ones who were driving straight into puberty with wispy beards or lipstick with a bit of glitter. Doc Elliott was a different story. Homegirl's name was *Gretchen* – chick is not to be played with. You know what Gretchens do? Gretchens study. Gretchens roll their eyes at people who can't keep up in the classroom. Gretchens take no prisoners.

Before I could catch a glimpse, Ozzie turned to me. “You know, I think maybe it might be good if it was just me and my Mom in there.” My head inched back for a second but then I got over the surprise – why was I surprised in the first place? I had just met Elle and here I was thinking that I was going to sit in on her appointment. I told Oz that for sure it was better if it was him and his Mom in there and turned back down the hallway to the waiting room.

7.

There wasn't a whole lot to do in the waiting room. And I was there for a good forty-five minutes. I'm telling you this so you know I'm not some kind of a freak who goes around memorizing who works where and what they do for a living. I just did it this time because the TV was turned to *Sponge Bob*²⁴ and the magazines were *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* and *Glamour*. Ain't nobody in there looks like me and I don't really care what kind of baby Brad and Angelina are adopting now.²⁵ There wasn't anyone else in the

²⁴ I had enough of *Squarepants* when I was growing up. That yellow ocean sucker was the way Ma would shut me up when she was trying to do something.

²⁵ I mean, I think they got some white savior thing going on, but I got problems of my own to think about. Plus, I'll bet, just on a human level, they appreciate every single person who genuinely gives less than a fuck about their personal business because those are the only people who ain't trying to get in their personal business.

room and it's not like I'd be making small talk even if there was. So I sat. After ten minutes, I started feeling guilty that I wasn't with my Ma so I called her cell. She answered – that was a miracle – but only to grumble that she was tired and was going to sleep most of the day. That made me feel less guilty.

The only other thing to do was to look at the pinboard on the far side of the room. It was packed with emergency and health info – call this number if you've got this kind of sick, do this thing if you want to be this kind of healthy, eat this kind of food if you're feeling this kind of way. The only sheet that really stood out was in the right hand corner. It was plain white and printed on the thick paper people use for fancy stuff like invitations. A list of names ran down its center like a spine. There was a simple title at the top:

Sugarland City Hospital, Board of Directors.

The announcement said that four new members were elected and two were appointed a month ago. That meant that a quarter of the board was new, so they were letting people know. At the time, I thought it was nice that they were being transparent and all, putting their names up where people could see them.²⁶

8.

I wasn't trying to memorize them. It was just that some of the names were memorable.

Like:

²⁶ Later, I found out that City Council passed a law way back in the '60s saying that big ass organizations had to give people the names of board members and trustees and CEOs and C-other-Os. They figured a sheet on a pinboard was an easy way to do that before the internet and I guess the tradition stuck.

Pearl J. Parker.

Maple S. Madison.

Charles D. Bean.

Those names stick – it’s not like I was nerding out with them. Who doesn’t remember Maple Madison?

Look, my point is that I wasn’t plotting right then and I didn’t come up with the shit we wanted to do to those people by myself and, anyway, fuck it, what we wanted was justified. I memorized the names because they were funny in a corny way, not because I had a plan.

9.

Elle and Ozzie came back from Doc Elliott’s office looking just the same as they did going in. Maybe a bit tense, but mostly composed. Elle caught my eye and smiled without showing her teeth. I hadn’t noticed how much taller than me she was. Almost Ozzie’s height.

“It’s getting dangerously close to noon. Shall we go home for a little lunch? Nora, would you like to join us?” Elle asked. Using questions was her polite way of telling you

what was going to happen. I didn't mind – I was pretty happy at the idea of getting a free lunch and more time away from my house.

“Yeah, that'd be cool,” I said.

“Cool,” Elle said, some sly in her voice. She winked at me. “Just one thing, my dear. You'll be meeting my youngest, Malik.”

“Oh, yeah? Ozzie's told me a lot about him.”

“Yes, I'm sure,” Elle said. She looked me straight in the face and cut to the point.

“Malik does not know I'm ill. You are not to tell him or let it slip. We'll go to the store and pick up groceries. If he asks where we were, we were out grocery shopping.” Elle took my hand and squeezed it, turned down the hall and walked to the elevator. There wasn't really nothing else to say on the topic – and it's not like Elle would've been alright with me snooping around her family decisions. I glanced at Ozzie who was calm as warm tea. We followed Elle to the elevator.

Chapter 8

NORA ROY

1.

Malik was thin. I'm being nice. He was bone ass skinny. Not skinny like the starving people they show on TV, skinny like the long distance runners they show on TV. His skin was a little lighter than Ozzie's, he kept his hair a little longer, he spoke a little softer. He was reading – a book about some version of London in the future that he told me about once – when Ozzie and Elle and me got to their apartment. He didn't exactly jump when he walked through the door. He took a moment to finish the paragraph he was reading, closed the book slow, and then looked up.

“Hey Mom. Hey Oz.”

“Malik. When did you get in last night?” Elle asked.

“I heard him come in at eleven,” Ozzie said, trying to help out his little brother with a straight up lie. He was dropping me off at eleven. Elle made a humming sound in the back of her throat and a clicking noise with her lips. She let the issue drop, mumbling something like *These boys, staying out till God knows when*, and then started putting the groceries away. Malik opened his eyes big and mouthed *Thank You* to Ozzie. Ozzie tilted his head to Elle and mouthed back to Malik, *Go help*.

“Malik, have you met Nora Roy yet?” Elle said, putting milk in the fridge.

“No, Mom, I haven’t yet.”

Elle paused at the fridge, chilling.²⁷ “So go introduce yourself. All of eighteen and needs his mother to tell him to say hello, my name is Malik Robinson.” Elle laughed to herself and rubbed Malik’s back when he picked the loaf of bread and peanut butter out of the grocery bags.

“Hey. I’m Malik.”

“Nora,” I said.

“Cool,” Malik said. “So. You and Oz dating or what?”

That’s what you don’t expect from Malik. The kid is a wiseass, he gets up to mischief in the small ways. So when he asked that question, Elle swiveled around quick in surprise, Ozzie busted out laughing, and I just kept muttering, *No, no, no, we’re just friends*. Which was the truth. Sort of.

2.

²⁷ Pun intended. What’s up now.

When Elle finished unpacking the groceries she went to her room for a nap. I assumed that she would be having lunch with us, but Ozzie told me that she got tired a lot lately. We made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with Malik while she slept.

“Okay, so what were you doing last night?” Ozzie asked.

“You know. Coke and hookers,” Malik said.

“Coke and hookers?” Ozzie was not happy about the joke.

“I know it’s more expensive than crack, but I decided to move up to the real stuff. The hookers are just a side thing.”

“Got jokes all of a sudden.”

“I learned them from the hookers.”

“Alright. What else did you learn?”

“I learned that hookers don’t like to be called hookers.”

“What do they like to be called?”

“That’s unclear. I also learned that it’s very difficult to have too much coke.”

Oz raised both eyebrows. “You – you, Malik – had more than a line of coke?”

“I got the nostrils of a rhino.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Ozzie’s voice rose.

“You know what, it means...”

“It means your brother is a diehard cokehead. He can snort anything. I saw him myself, no lie,” I said, deciding to throw down with Malik in his crazy story and hoping to get Ozzie to rethink the rise in his tone.

“Nora Roy saw you snorting coke?” Ozzie asked

“Uh, yeah, yeah, she did. She’s my dealer.”

“I’m his dealer,” I said.

Ozzie took a bite of his sandwich. “I guess that’s better than one of the hookers.”

“They don’t like being called that,” I said.

“What?” Ozzie looked confused.

“The ladies Malik went to town with – Jayden, Raquel, and what was the last one’s name, Malik?”

“Her name was Gertrude.”

“That’s right. Gerty. Jayden, Raquel, and Gerty don’t like being called hookers.”

Ozzie took another bite and swallowed. “Aight. Last night, Nora sold Malik some coke
—

“A lot of coke,” Malik said.

“A pound of coke,” I said. “I gave him a good price.”

“Aight,” Ozzie continued, “last night, Nora sold Malik a pound of coke at a good price when Malik was chilling with some hook—, I mean some ladies named Jayden, Rachel, and Berty.”

“Jayden, Raquel, and Gerty,” I said.

“That’s the story you’re going with?” Oz asked.

“Yup, that’s the story.”

“You’re really not going to tell me?”

Malik leaned back up against the kitchen counter and folded his arms. “You wanna tell me all the things you been up to?”

3.

If you’re as smart as Malik was and people you care about are hiding things from you, you’re going to find out. Flat out, you know something is up. Why not press it? Why not push to know what’s going on? The thing is if you know somebody else’s secrets, they’re going to expect to know yours.

In conclusion: Malik was hiding some shit.

4.

“They charge you too much?” I asked Ozzie. He was looking at the grocery receipt.

“Naw. Just doing some numbers in my head. We can’t really be paying this much for food no more.”

I felt guilt rising up about that second PB&J sandwich.

5.

So, remember when I told you that I didn't memorize those names on purpose, that I didn't have a plan? That was true. This was the moment when they came back to me and the dots started to connect.

I started thinking, how much money does Pearl J. Parker have?

How about Mr. Bean?

Just as important: how much are they getting paid to sit on that board and make two-point-five decisions a year which, first, isn't much work and, second, just might be the two-point-five decisions that suck the cash straight from their patients' pockets?

I didn't have any data though, no answers to questions like how much money they had and how they got it and what decisions they were making. That's the first thing they teach you in high school science when you start doing experiments with weights and gravity – you have to get the data. Mrs. Hurley or Mr. Tappe says, *How do you know that gravity is 9.8 meters-per-second squared?* And everyone looks at the teacher funny, like, *Damn dude, you just told us about Newton with his apple, so that's how we know.* And then the teacher says, *You think everything teachers or parents or the police or the*

*mayor tells you is true? You have to know it for yourself. To know it for yourself, you need data.*²⁸

Data ain't a miracle, it can't make you immortal. You're still going to hit earth if you jump off a cliff and it's going to hurt. But once you take the measurements of it, once you understand its rules, maybe you can control the how and the where and the when of a fall.

6.

“Your brother, I’m not trying to be disrespectful or nothing, but he’s like the nerd-type? Into books and computers, right?”

Confusion flashed on Ozzie’s face. “He ain’t a nerd, he’s got friends and girls. But, yeah, he likes reading and messing around with computers.”

“You think I could talk to him for a minute?”

²⁸ I realize that your ninth and tenth grade science teachers were probably not as cool as Mrs. Applegate and Mr. Tappe, but, trust, the rest of my school was a fucking nightmare.

Chapter 9

MALIK

Ozzie brought a girl over for lunch. He rarely introduced his ladies to our mother, preferring to keep his dalliances casual. This girl did not, however, appear to be his type. Her hair was corn-rowed and she wore no lipstick. The shape of her body was hidden by oversized clothing, jeans and a white t-shirt. Historically, Ozzie liked high heels and bare mid-ribs. To her credit, the girl seemed sure of her place in the room, her shoulders straight back and her demeanor casual.

My mother was curiously at ease with the girl's presence. Immediately, she fell into a newly established routine: asking me where I had been the previous night. That question offered me no safe response. Remarkably free of drama, my budding romance with Kinley faced only three difficulties. First was transportation, a problem easily solved by Kinley's willingness to chauffeur me to and from Sugarland. Second was scheduling, a challenge we dealt with through compromise, late nights, and, crucially, her largely absent parents. Third was the keeping of secrets. This last obstacle did not, exactly, concern Kinley and me. Or, rather, it did not concern the internal mechanics of our relationship. We were wary of the whispers whispered on Westlake's well-groomed paths and the rumors swirled around the North End being overheard by our families. Our caution was not born from anxiety or uncertainty about one another or our backgrounds. I knew my mother and Ozzie would hardly care that Kinley was white and wealthy, as

long as she was kind and decent. Kinley claimed that her parents did not care enough about her to give a damn where I was from or what color I was.

Our secrecy grew from a desire, perhaps childish and overly sentimental, to keep what was precious ours, and only ours, for a moment longer. For the first time in my life, I was experiencing something akin to separation from my older brother. That nascent and fragile independence was inextricably tied to my relationship with Kinley. Exposing it to Ozzie and my mother threatened to collapse the distance I was now enjoying. Kinley, in her own explanation, did not want to expose me to her father. An asshole of the first order, he could and would disrupt whatever harmony was present between us. It was with these underlying sentiments in mind that we kept our relationship secret from our families.

For Kinley, this was simply and with little, if any, deception accomplished. Her mother, with whom she spoke once a week, was, in Kinley's accounts of their conversations, too absorbed with her own tribulations (a failing marriage and a rapidly declining social position due to that fraught relationship) to bother inquiring about Kinley's life. Kinley's father spent his hours at work and at a mistress' penthouse apartment in downtown Sugarland, about which Kinley was informed during one of her mother's boozy tirades. While Kinley had her suspicions, confirmation of her father's infidelity further disinclined her towards him. He was, in all likelihood, completely unaware of that distancing. Kinley's friends, familiar with her family situation (Westlake whispers), took her occasional absences in stride, assuming that she would retreat when emotions

overwhelmed her. Kinley referred to the space her friends would unquestioningly give her as the “silver lining in a family horror story.”

My family provided no such space. In the early days of my romance with Kinley, they noticed little. When they did notice something amiss, they operated under the safe assumption that my nights were spent engrossed in a book or deeply lost in some internet wormhole. As my room established a steady pattern of noiselessness, and I failed to emerge from it for a glass of water or a piece of dark chocolate, my mother’s suspicion grew. While she was used to Oz’s late nights, mine were always preceded by a well thought out notice: *Mom, I’m going to Jerome’s tomorrow, we’re gonna watch a movie. Is that okay?* In the week following my first date with Kinley, no such advance warning was given. After my fourth or fifth night away, my mother, pretending to read a novel, casually asked me where I had been and with whom. I responded with faux surprise, insisting that I thought I had told her about *The Godfather* marathon Jerome and I had been planning. *Don’t get distracted*, she said. *Remember you have college applications coming up. You’ll be the first Robinson to go.*

I took in her words, and rushed to my room to look over application materials for Trinity, Williams, Dartmouth. I was intent on going to a small but selective liberal arts school, somewhere I wouldn’t get lost among thousands of over-competitive energy drink junkies and a sprawling campus. Trinity and the University of Connecticut represented convenience, if not home. A set of Massachusetts schools – Williams, Amherst, the University of Massachusetts Amherst – were the right size and featured stellar

academics. Critically, they were far enough from the North End to give me space, but still only a couple of short bus trips away. I knew we could afford the tickets so I could come home over breaks and long weekends. Brown and Dartmouth were my reach schools. Prestigious but not snooty. Or at least that's what the internet said.

Whenever I was reviewing my application materials, my mother would knock on my door in half an hour increments, and too-casually ask how I was doing. The college process was frazzling her nerves. She gained temporary relief from pestering me. My mother did not, however, present the major challenge to my privacy. She was watchful, but her years of motherhood to an established playboy (Oz) leant her wisdom in approaching secrets. Oz, on the other hand, had minimal appreciation for my privacy. We were not to keep anything from one another – or, to be more precise, I was not to keep anything from him. Though annoying, our unspoken arrangement was pragmatic and carried out in good faith. I was fully aware of the dozen fights Oz fought for me in elementary and middle school when, insulted by my use of a three or four-syllable word, a bully would attempt to knock my teeth through my skull. It was Oz, after all, who read me the Anansi and Brer Rabbit storybooks my mother bought for me. When I wanted to sharpen my math and writing skills in the summer after eighth grade, Oz found a tutor and the money to pay him. My life was, in routine and meaningful ways, Oz's business; his was always his own.

I was fortunate that Oz had not taken note of my nightly absences until my mother unwittingly clued him in with her question: *When did you get in last night?* I didn't have

an immediate answer, as I was absorbed in a novel, and was saved only by Oz who quickly interjected, boldly stating that he had heard me come in at around ten. For his act of mercy, I knew he would demand the truth. After introducing myself to the new girl, Nora Roy, and making several desperate attempts at diversion, I was cornered into an interrogation. My mother had gone in for a nap, leaving only Nora Roy, Oz, and me.

Instead of directly refusing to tell him, a strategy sure to instigate an argument, I dodged Oz's questions with a tale about cocaine and prostitutes. Humor, I thought, would disarm him, and that thought proved incorrect. He remained insistent and the strain in his voice, an indicator of temper, tightened. At the moment I thought he would turn toward anger, Nora Roy joined the conversation, affirming my tale with deadpan confirmation and additions to my story. Nora Roy, it seemed, saw me snort coke; she, in fact, was the one who dealt me the cocaine; she knew the prostitutes with whom I debauched the night away. She, most importantly, playfully defused what could have been more than just a tense moment. When Oz's anger finally collapsed and he leveled with me, asking if I really intended to keep the secret from him, I gave him the only reply that seemed fair: I inquired as to his doings, secrets all. This was indeed a risky move, but with his peak displeasure now passed, he only blew a rush of air from his nostrils and said *Get the fuck outta here, go to your room, big man got secrets now*. I quickly took the escape, scurrying off to my room, grateful for Nora Roy's assistance and whatever divine intervention got Oz momentarily off my back.

My laptop, a three-year old monstrosity that wheezed when I turned it on and sighed in exhaustion when I turned it off, sat contentedly on my desk. There are few advantages to attending North End Community Middle School, but one blessing it did provide was a city-sponsored computer program for sixth graders. In a rush of educational zeal, the mayor, along with some philanthropic donors, cobbled together enough money for brand new computers and tech teachers for the city's lowest achieving middle schools. That push, for the little long term good it did Sugarland schools, nurtured, in me, a love for computers to pair with my bookworm tendencies. I downloaded novels (and games), read across news and sports and, like a child filling his mouth with candy, entertainment sites. The internet was, like a good story, a wormhole in which I could get lost in seemingly endless information.

The problem with much of that information was that, even to a middle schooler, it was crap. In ninth grade, my discontent with the internet brewing, I noticed the magazine my English teacher consistently read. *The New Yorker* appeared flimsy and ill-designed, thin paper glued together on weak binding that would not withstand anything but the most delicate touch. Curious about my teacher's devotion to such a thing, I went in search of its online version only to discover that *The New Yorker* required a subscription.

Annoyed, I sought out *The New Yorker's* reputation. It was, supposedly, one of the premier, if not the premier, literary and long-form journals in the country. My interest peaked. Quickly, and without much trouble, I found a list of usernames and passwords for some of the *The New Yorker's* accounts online. None of them worked, all having expired. I set out to download another list using a torrent service. Finally, after having

unsuccessfully tried a dozen or so combinations, I found a username and password that granted me access. This was my first, rather elementary, introduction to hacking.

The rush it brought me was, perhaps, greater than any joy I derived from actually reading the magazine. Gaining illicit entry was not, I don't think, comparable to the adrenaline rush of playing in a championship basketball game or winning an election or having a first and wanted child. It was a private rush, the injection of a small dose of potential akin to finding that one can, in a small way, change the settings in a dream and redraw the bounds of its possibilities. There were no policepersons on the corner or watchful eyes gazing out of apartment windows. Instead, the illusion of anonymity guarded that simple hack and an accompanying power simmered beneath it. I could read what I wanted. I could see what I wanted, I could find what I wanted.

When Nora Roy knocked and opened my door, with Oz at her side, I was impatiently waiting for my computer to boot and connect me to the layered worlds it offered.

Malik, she said, I was wondering if I could ask you about something?

Alright, I told her. What's up?

Nora Roy approached my desk, reaching for my notebook and a pen. She jotted down a list of eighteen names, mumbling them to herself as she wrote. *Could you find out about these people?*

I looked at the list of names and recognized none. *Why?*

Nora Roy pressed her thumb to her middle finger. *You know that thing you wanna keep secret from everyone? Me, I'm cool with that. Your brother, too – and he even helped you keep it a secret from your Mom. Sometimes we tell people our shit, sometimes we don't tell people about our shit and ask for their help. We need your help.*

Flattery – as this was the first time my brother, albeit with or through Nora Roy, was asking for my help – did its work on me. For years, I had known Oz was up to something a little more or less than legal. At school, word got back to me about a carjacking here or a stolen flat screen there. Nothing major, just minor thefts. When I tried asking Oz about his extracurricular activities he would snap, saying, “Mind your own business. You got homework, right?” When he was feeling particularly verbose he would pepper his replies with utilitarian philosophy: “I handle my business, you gotta handle yours, that’s how this all works” or “One of us got the short-term, the other got the long-term” or, more to the point, “Stay out of my shit and get into college.”

Throughout middle and high school I followed those commands. I poured a mix of brotherly devotion and ego into my schoolwork, steadfastly believing that I was as smart as any student in any public, charter, or private school across the country. I had faith because Oz had faith in me. I never wondered if I could write an A-essay or ace a math test; the question was how I would do it. A traditional broad thesis with three sub-

arguments or an experimental, lyrical form in which I could explore structure instead of conforming to it? How far could I push high school syllabi before my English teachers bristled and demanded I lessen their workload by sticking to the script?

Other students – students without an older brother to bolster their confidence – gradually recognized that I was pretty handy in the classroom and began asking for my help.

Eventually, I was editing papers for and tutoring Honors students, finding just as much pleasure in their successes as in mine. I watched struggles with words or numbers turn into mastery, hesitation and fear morph into calm assurance. It was only in helping my peers that I appreciated the extent of Oz's investment in me: if I took so much joy in the triumphs of kids I was sort-of friends with, how much joy did Oz take in my, his little brother's, triumphs? If I found a way into college, he would be over the moon. If I didn't, he would consider himself a failure.

With that understanding in mind, I assumed he would never invite me to participate in his scams. It was one thing if he got caught, a tragedy, but also a measure risk with which he was comfortable. But me, somehow derailed by the law? That would be unacceptable.

Yet here was Nora Roy asking me to help with a task that stank of illegality. Though she was placing restrictions on my involvement – her secrets and all speech – I would still be involved. A shift had taken place. While it lacked in quakes or fireworks, it had still occurred: somehow, for reasons beyond my comprehension, I would now be included.

Okay, I said. What do you need?

Chapter 10

MALIK

When taking care of Mom, the keys were to make her hearty foods (stews, rice, beans) and give her a small, warm towel to place over her eyes. During my junior year of high school, dizziness and an accompanying nausea made regular appearances in her week. Because Oz was often away when she returned from work (which, along with age, I thought, was the cause of her frequent bouts of exhaustion and unease), I was left to look after my mother. This was not a task that burdened me. I took pleasure in my usefulness to her and grew to be grateful for those tender moments. In the first months of her less energetic existence, Mom struggled accepting help from her youngest boy. Gradually, I wore down her resistance to my support with quiet persistence: I would warm her towels in the oven without her asking, make her dinner before she got the chance, tidy the living room prior to her arrival home. She would grumble and smack her tongue against the roof of her mouth, insisting I not go overboard for “my poor, decrepit mother.” Soon, the grumbling lessened, replaced by hushed thank-yous and small squeezes to my arm. Eventually, comfortable with my assistance, her usual bold nature asserted itself in our evenings. *Now, son*, she would begin, *What are you going to make me for dinner? Nothing fried, remember, your mother has a figure to maintain.* Every once in a while, when I was washing the dishes or bringing her tea, she would soften her tone and say, *I’ve raised a you well.* Those words brought a mixture of pride and resignation to her gaze, lowered her chin, let slip the barest flutter of a sigh.

Three days after Nora Roy appeared at our home, Mom, feeling unusually energetic, decided to make dinner for me, Oz, and “the new girl.” She hummed as she went about the kitchen, flipping seamlessly from Percy Sledge to Negro spirituals to the Jurassic 5. I had forgotten that prior to the past year, our home was a concert hall, music packed up to the cheap seats. None of us were particularly attached to any single form or genre; we preferred to sample from the past and present as the mood struck. Bach and Erykah Badu made late night appearances, while Ellington and the Dilated Peoples were late afternoon fixtures. Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin played throughout the day, along with a smattering of gospel. Listening to my mother hum “Trouble of the World” remixed with “You Can’t Hide, You Can’t Run,” returned me to those more musical times. I could not but help plugging my laptop into the living room speakers, hoping that my mother, back turned towards me, would notice and sing along.

When Mom heard the first cords ring out, a little jump popped into her shoulders. She stopped stirring the pot of marinara sauce, lifting her left ear upward as if the music was pouring down from the ceiling. Leaning on her right foot, she reached for a spatula and raised it to the air, before spinning around and, clutching that spatula-turned-microphone with two hands, hit the beat perfectly and sang out, *When a ma-an loves a woman*. She worked through the first line on her own, face scrunched in as if she was belting out the final song at a thousand person concert. She shook her head and shimmied her shoulders and leaned back into an imaginary spotlight. She danced to the cutlery drawer and grabbed another spatula, which she tossed, not so delicately, in my direction. I caught it

and stared at it, waving no-no-no and pretending to walk out of the living room. Almost at the door to my bedroom, I spun around, flung out my arms, and, just barely in time, sang out *He give up aa-aall his comforts*. In full performance mode, we two-stepped and sang from toward each other, reaching out to imaginary audience members and gazing in awe at the upper echelons of the concert hall, filled with our adoring fans. We met in the middle of the living room, to the raucous applause of the sell-out crowd, both of us in full swing, reaching for every note and stomping on the downbeats. There, my mother and I held hands, our faces raised dramatically to the sky as we let loose the final bars.

As the song quieted to its close, the front door clicked open. Oz and Nora Roy, twenty minutes late, walked in to the sight of me and my mother, spatulas raised to our wide open mouths, holding hands in the living room. Mom turned towards them casually. *You missed the concert*, she said, indignant. *No refunds*. With that she walked back to the kitchen, instructing Oz to wash his hands and come help her take food to the table.

I had not seen Nora Roy since she had asked me for a favor, and I was dreading telling her that I could not complete it. It was too tall a task. The first step – compiling profiles of people on a list she had created – was simple enough. A Google search, some sniffing around. The second step was not so easy.

Nora Roy wanted the sort of dirt only a full-fledged hacker could dig up. She wanted secrets, evidence of bribes and blackmail, information gutsy television detectives uncover

to take down slick-haired political kingpins. Nora Roy and I were not, however, living on CBS.

The people on her list were, for the most part, executives in multinational companies, corporations that hire MIT graduates and former FBI techies to build fences around and patrol their data. I concocted a lame plan that involved fake emails, bogus attachments, and a bug that would track keyboard swipes to get passwords and usernames. It had no real chance of working. If, by some fluke, the email wormed under the fence built by MIT graduates, the former FBI sniffers would squash the bug in less than a minute.

Of course, I did not dare tell Nora Roy and Oz that my plan was doomed. Risk losing inclusion in Oz' little world? Forfeit the tiny bit of trust he had, through Nora Roy, placed in me? Not a chance. I decided to ride out the pseudo-lie as long as I could, hoping some gliche in ultra-powerful networks would let me slide in and steal a password or two.

In the meantime, a dinner of spaghetti, meatballs, and broccoli awaited me. It was a simple affair, though I worried Nora Roy's white t-shirt would not fare well when confronted with marinara sauce. More than slightly embarrassed that the tail end of my singing antics had been seen by an outsider, I decided to remain mostly quiet and tucked in to the meatballs with vigor. I noticed that Nora Roy did the same, and her t-shirt had, so far, remained spotless. My mother, feeling no embarrassment and in a curiously jovial mood, leaned in to the table and twirled spaghetti around her fork.

Nora, my dear, she began. While you may be used to more polite company, my boys are hoodlums and savages. She winked at Oz and me before going on. Oz has told me next to nothing about you even though, it seems, you two have become close friends. I know you and I are civilized or, at least, we can pretend to be. She laughed and reached out to Nora Roy's hand, giving it a warm rub. Please, Nora, tell me a little bit about yourself. Were you born in Sugarland? What do you enjoy doing? What inspires you?

My mother returned fully to the form she had taken for the first sixteen years of my life. She had forgotten both the spaghetti wrapped around her fork and that same fork held at eye level in her hand. Nora Roy returned Mom's gaze and wiped her mouth with a napkin. Yes, she replied. *I was born in Hartford. My mom grew up here, too. We've got family all over the city, but we ain't close to most of them – people grow apart, you know what I mean?* She moved her hand to her cheek, giving more thought to her response. *And about what I enjoy? That's tough, man. I used to do a lot of sh-, I mean a lot of stuff that I enjoyed. Reading, talking with my grandma, watching the Giants with her – the New York Football Giants, not the San Fran ones. She was real hype on them, more than anyone else I know.* Nora Roy forced a smile. *Yeah, I liked that kind of stuff.*

Mom, fork lowered to the table, asked a follow-up: *And now, Nora? What do you enjoy now?*

Nora re-adjusted her posture, her focus shifting to the plate beneath her. She sucked in a breath and dropped her shoulders, her smile loosening and crinkles showing at the edges

of her eyes. *This. Having dinner with people. It's been a second since I've had dinner with a family.*

Come over whenever you like, my mother responded. *Though I can't always promise we'll eat this well.* I feigned indignation before reaching for another portion of meatballs. *And as for my last question, Nora, the most interesting of the three. What inspires you, my dear? What makes you feel alive?*

Mom, that's a really weird question, Oz said.

And there you were, sitting so politely and quietly, Oswald.

But, for real, Mom —

Let her speak, or shall I bring out the baby pictures?

The trump card played, Oz nestled into his seat and turned up his palm, a gesture of defeat. The attention turned, once more, to Nora. Her gaze was fixed on her plate and when she spoke she started slowly, choosing her words with precision.

You ever read much Shakespeare, Elle? It ain't too hard to get through once you get the rhythm right and figure out Shakespeare is a twisted dude. There's this one play he has that ain't nobody really reads. It's called Measure for Measure and in it he says some

things that makes you think for a minute. My favorite one is when he says, "Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt." It's cheesy, yeah, but I think it means you can't let the things haters tell you about yourself and the things you might think about yourself and just the way the city is set up tilted stop you from trying to do what's good and what's right. When people write shit like that, that's what inspires me.

Letting the "shit" slide, Mom finally took a bite of her spaghetti and chewed it methodically. *That's a quite a response*, she said.

You gonna let her eat some food and pause with the questions now? Oz, upright in his chair, was newly determined to change the topic.

Yes, my mother replied, *I'll leave her in peace, for the time being. Let us investigate more lurid, secretive topics.* When Oz and I were young, Mom dramatized our dinner conversations with over-the-top commentary and the diction of a romance novelist. She made herself a mother and an entertainer, a duality that, I suppose, somewhat obscured the fact that she was a mother who, most of the time, was without an accompanying father. Because of that history, and her general good mood on that particular day, I did not see the clue in her conversational turn – secretive topics could mean the latest news on the Knicks starting line-up or juicy details from the book she was reading. *Malik, when are you bringing that new girl of yours home to meet me?*

I almost choked on a meatball. Unable, and unwilling, to contain himself, Oz held his stomach and launched into laughter. Nora, too, could not hold in her amusement, but she, at least, had placed a polite hand over her mouth. It was a full minute before I stopped hacking up pieces of half-chewed meatball and Oz managed to control his glee. My mother, all the while, continued to eat as if nothing had happened.

Mom, what are you taking about? I said, praying I could avoid her questions.

I'm talking about the reason that you leave the apartment after I go to bed, Mom said.

And the reason that you're always on your phone, texting away like you're trying to tap your fingers into nubs. And the reason that you walk around here glowing like a candlestick. When do I get to meet her?

Oz, a relentless grin on his face, decided to chime in. *Yeah, Malik, when do we get to meet her?*

Intent on having more fun than she already was, Mom decided to include Nora Roy: *I'm sure Nora Roy would like to meet her, too.*

I'd really, really like to meet her, Nora Roy said.

Cornered. A newly formed gang of three. Protesting would do little good; they were armed with zeal and half a dinner left to grind me down. Their smiles would remain coy

and courting, steadfast and assured, alternately applying blunt force and seduction to wrest a concession from me. Joined by Nora Roy at their interrogation table, my brother and my mother had me, literally, surrounded. There was no returning fire; no holding my position; no retreat.

I'll bring her over sometime, I said. Exclamations of victory erupted from the three bandits.

Chapter 11

NORA ROY

1.

You know what ain't nobody tells you about mothers? Eventually, you become your mother's mother. I think old people know about that because it happened to them. It's not exactly a fun conversation to have with a kid though, telling them about age and how knees break down first and minds not all that long after. For me, though, it would've been good – prepare me for my own mom going downhill. Yeah, I saw my grandma get old and delusional but I never thought, *Oh, one day Ma is going to be like that, too, and that one day may be, like, a decade close.*

When Oz dropped me off at home the afternoon I asked Malik to do a little spying, Ma hadn't moved. I brought her some cereal, Fruity Loops because that's what she used to give me when I wasn't feeling too hot. She let them sit by her bed till they were soggy and the milk looked like a swamp filled with muddy rainbows. I took them back downstairs and brought her a bar of dark chocolate to nibble on.

Ma was silent.

There wasn't nothing more to do and I was tired on account of not really sleeping too much the night before, so I climbed into bed next to her. Her body was freezing and stiff even though it was summertime and the walls were sticky seven layers of heat. I

wrapped my arm around her and heard her snuffle. I might have been dreaming, but I think she moved closer to me when I was falling asleep. She was probably looking for warmth.

When I woke up an hour later, Ma was sitting up in bed and nibbling on that bar of chocolate.

“It’s good,” she said. “Thank you. We got something other than chocolate and Fruity Loops in the house?”

2.

I don’t think stealing from people is wrong. At least not all the time.

Does that make me crazy?

Here is what I’m trying to say: my Ma had a breakdown and so I was trying to make her a nice dinner, a meal with veggies and steak and big potatoes, you know? I wanted to use olive oil and premium grade meat and fresh broccoli, good food that would get her stomach back in the game. The catch is, while I’m out buying that food and then when I’m at home making it, all I’m thinking is that the twenty-two bucks I spent on this meal could’ve lasted us three meals, more if we really wanted to push it.

I'm not even talking about how much dinero the middle man in the supermarket game is taking or what agriculture politics is screwing over the person buying milk and eggs.²⁹ What I'm talking about is straight up human compassion. I was lucky, I didn't have to steal nothing to make the meal that night. But if I get in a tight spot and you ask me to trade the morals of not stealing for making my mom a meal that'll help her fly out of a shit storm?

Like I said, I don't think stealing is always wrong.

3.

Ozzie texted me after dinner. Ma had finished eating and was feeling stronger, so she was in the shower while I cleaned up. He asked about her and I told him that she was getting better, cleaning herself up and starting to talk a little too.

That was nice of him, you know, to check up on me.

I asked him about the first person I asked Malik to look into, Pearl J. Parker. He sent back a winky face and a message that said, "Who's Pearl," thinking he was cute. I responded with, "Stop being annoying, jackass."

I probably should've flirted back.

4.

²⁹ Ms. Hurley taught us about the Farm Bill.

Privacy is a funny thing, right? I'm sorry (though not really) if I'm getting too activist or philosopher for you, I just think about these things sometimes.

We were trying to invade Pearl's privacy. Ain't no doubt about that, ain't no question.

That email account was her property and was full of information about her work and some stuff about her life, too.³⁰ How would I feel if someone hacked into my email?

Pretty fucking pissed. Can't get around that basic piece of it – do unto others and all and whatever else the Bible says about treating people like you want to be treated. I didn't pay too much attention in church on account of all the devil talk freaking me out, but I got the basic idea about being a good person and not messing with other people.

I can't really justify invading Pearl's privacy. People shouldn't try to break into other people's lives.

Then again, Pearl probably never went on welfare. That means she never had to hand the government every piece of information about her and her life. And she probably ain't ever been suspected of a crime just because of the way she looked and the place she lived, so she never had the cops sniffing around her spot and asking people questions about her. And she ain't ever been stopped and frisked for no reason, and she ain't ever walked into a café and had people stare at her like she didn't belong, and she ain't ever

³⁰ She was sleeping with a junior exec, a Korean dude whose name she never mentioned. She wrote about him all the time in emails to Janice, her best friend from college. When she wanted to be funny about her and the junior exec hooking up she would say that she was making regular visits to Seoul. That's probably a racially fucked up thing to say.

been questioned by security that couldn't believe that, yeah, she actually bought that dress with her own goddamn money.

So maybe privacy ain't really a right. Maybe it's a luxury.

While I was taking care of my mom, Ozzie and Malik were busy messing with Pearl's luxury.

5.

Ma didn't do much the next couple days. I think her head was pretty busy, but her body had its own agenda. She sat on the couch and watched crappy soap operas. She would shower, which was positive, and then put her pajamas back on, which wasn't so positive. Her shirt was catching stains and crumbs like it was playing shortstop for the Yankees.

I made her lunch and dinner, and she would turn off the TV and we'd eat together on the couch. We didn't talk, but it was still nice.

The best parts of my day were when Oz texted me in the mornings asking if I wanted to come over for dinner. I told him I would when Ma was better.

On the third day, Ma came out of her room with her hair pressed. That's when I knew she was making a comeback. She had on a blue blouse and a pair of jeans, and the first

thing she said to me was, “Nora, we gotta throw these pajamas into the washer. They stink six ways to Sunday plus two shits.”

I usually put up a fight when Ma tells me to do stuff, especially because I’m usually the one doing most of the stuff anyway. I wasn’t about to ruin her good mood though. I grabbed the pajamas, and the clothes in my room, and went down to the basement to throw them in the washer. Ma was making eggs and toast when I got back upstairs. Doesn’t matter that it was already two in the afternoon – after half a week of nothing, she was making eggs and toast. That’s an improvement.

She told me to sit at the kitchen table and when she was through cooking, she put a plate in front of me and leaned over and kissed my forehead and said, “You been good the last few days.” She sat down across from me and spread butter on her toast.

“Keyshia been calling me,” she said.

“I know. She’s been calling me, too. She’s worried.”

“Ain’t no reason to be worried. I’ll be fine.”

“I was worried too.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re my daughter, your responsibility to be worried,” she said, in between real loud chewing.

“You going to let Keyshia know how you’re doing?”

“Already did. I’m gonna go to her place for dinner. You good for food or you wanna come?”

“I’m good.”

It’s not that I was trying to get rid of Ma – that would be mean, right? Especially after she made me breakfast and told me I’d been good to her. Now that I’ve said that, I should also say that right after breakfast I shot Oz a text to see if that dinner invitation was still on the table. It was.

6.

You’d think walking in on your host and her son at the end of a full-out pretend concert would be embarrassing to the host and to you. When Oz and me opened the door, Malik and Elle were in the living room, hollering out the last line to “When a Man Loves a Woman.” The thing about Elle, though, is that she doesn’t give a damn about your opinion, especially when it comes to how she treats her boys. And me? I ain’t ever seen a grown son be that goofy with his mother so, yeah, definitely I kept it in a vault labeled bust-Malik’s-balls. But on the real, I thought it was beautiful. Malik was holding Elle’s

hands and singing right along with her, it was no one-woman show. It takes a certain kind of tough to be that sweet with your mother.

Dinner was meatballs and spaghetti, which was delicious.³¹ Elle started grilling me on my life with questions about what I liked and what I thought was inspiring. It wasn't complex stuff, but people don't usually ask questions the way that she does. Most of the time someone will say, "so, where do you wanna be in ten years" instead of "what inspires you? what makes you feel alive?" Ozzie tried to get Elle to stop asking, but I didn't mind so much – they were good questions and I gave some answer that I really believed, even though it was probably dumb and I probably quoted Shakespeare and I probably looked like a righteous fool.

The most fun part of dinner was when Elle talked Malik into (okay, pressured Malik into) bringing his new girl over to the apartment. Malik was blushing like a virgin on prom night, I ain't ever seen black skin go that purple before. I feel like the kid really thought he was getting away with keeping secrets, thought nobody would know about or get into his business. But like I said, man, privacy ain't a right. Your mom tells you to bring home the girl you're trying to keep on the low, you bring the girl home. I'll be honest: I was just itching to be there when the down-low girl actually showed up.

8.

³¹ Pretty much perfect, except for the fact that I had to watch out for spills on my white tee.

Elle went to bed right after dinner. She gave me a hug and kissed me on both cheeks, before saying she was tired and telling the boys, “You let her wash one dish, and I’ll kick you both to the street.”

Malik scampered back to his room after cleaning. The sun was sinking and the apartment felt too quiet without the cleaning and the eating and the conversation.

“Let’s go to my place,” I said. “I don’t want to wake up your Mom if we talk too loud.”

9.

There weren’t too many pictures in my room. There was one on my dresser of me and Ma at an amusement park when I was eight. We had just ridden a rollercoaster and were slamming down jellybeans, so we were smiling through nausea and multi-colored teeth. There was one other picture on the dresser, me and Ma again, but this time with grandma on her seventy-fifth birthday. We went to an Italian place that offered unlimited breadsticks before Olive Garden ever did. Besides the two photos, my room was mostly bare. No posters, no paintings. I didn’t have a bookshelf, so I stacked my novels next to the bed and they doubled as a nightstand.

I brought Ozzie to my room because I wanted to show him that picture of me and Ma. The rest of the house had old school photos of my grandparents and their friends. Makes sense considering the house was grandma’s and she decorated it long before I was around. But would it really have killed Ma to put a picture of me up in the living room?

Something that would tell people, yes, that girl who lives in the small room on the second floor actually belongs here.

People get strange ideas about other people when they see them at their worst. Just hearing about Ma when she's going through depression, Ozzie might've thought that's how she always was or that's who she always was. I wanted to let him know that she laughed a lot, too, and she took care of me back in the day and that there was a lot of love between us. The picture of us at the amusement park was the best to show that. I used it as a reminder to myself every day.

"Your mom was pretty," Ozzie said. "Looked a lot like you. Same smile. How's she doing now?"

"Better. She's at Keyshia's, the neighbor. Thanks, by the way. For helping out."

"You're helping me out too. It's fair." Ozzie put the picture down on the dresser, making sure it was lined up straight, and sat on the corner of the bed. "You know Malik ain't going to find nothing, right? I mean, he's good with computers, but you asked for some hacker shit."

"It's worth a try. And you let me ask."

“I didn’t know what you were going to ask. It’s all good though – I didn’t mean to say you shouldn’t have. I think it’s a good thing. If he thinks he’s doing something for me, at least he’s not fucking around with niggas who deal or got guns.”

“You have guns now.”

“Malik doesn’t know that and he ain’t invited to anything where we use them.” Ozzie’s voice dipped low like he was telling me a secret. “I don’t even want to use them. It’s too risky. Even if no one gets shot, you get blown up jail time if the cops catch you with a gun. But there’s a roof on the jobs you can do without one. Still, man, would you trust motherfucking Kermit with a glock? Big Sean, maybe. You, definitely. At least you’ve actually shot one for real, like at somebody. I probably couldn’t pull the trigger. I’d have my mom’s voice in my ear, talking about humanity and what it means to be a man and all her high morals lecturing. I ain’t that dude who can just shoot. You ever think about stuff like that? You had to, after you shot that guy.”

“He wasn’t just a guy. He was my uncle.”

“I thought that was just a rumor.”

“No.”

“You ever tell anyone about it?”

I shook my head. And then I told him.

Chapter 12

MALIK

At the insistence of my mother, and my brother, and Nora Roy, I prepared myself to ask Kinley over for dinner. There was, in my opinion, no rush. My family would pester me when the mood struck them, but, I believed, the pressure would not truly mount for some time. Contentedly hidden, Kinley and I passed our nights at her home, ordering takeout on her credit card, sliding into novels, and slipping out of our clothing.

I rather studiously refrained from mentioning the project with which I helped Oz and Nora; Kinley, for her own reasons, alluded to but never truly talked about her family. Though my participation in Oz's scheme included planning and advice, it stopped there as my older brother, true to form, would not allow me any closer to danger than needed. I, in turn, protected Kinley by supplying her with total ignorance. It was fear of endangering her that led to my silence; one might think trust, or lack thereof, would have been the force that sealed my lips, but, somehow, I already had faith in her.

Instinctively, I felt that she had faith in me as well. The petty jealousies of high school life were nowhere to be found in our cocoon. We assumed reliability, she knowing that I would arrive at whatever time we agreed on and I knowing that the door would be open, her schedule would be cleared. Our touches grew more frequent and familiar, shedding the intimacy of urgent need for that of an earned closeness. I drew my hand across her

back; she scratched my knee. We explored her house together, rediscovered its abandoned couches and stale, spotless studies. We watched shows on an expensive flatscreen that collected dust in the living room. We filled the kitchen with cartons of Chinese and Indian and Thai delivery food, curries of any flavor my preference, Pad Thai and spring rolls her favorites. Only a few weeks after our coffee date, we had created and found joy in a routine; nightly we would wrestle time and, valiantly losing, find ourselves sleep deprived, mentally muddled, and happy come sunrise.

It was on one such night, only a week removed from my exploits with Oz and Nora Roy, that I met Kinley's father. We had spoken little of our dads, giving only general outlines and key distasteful features. Kinley had told me that her father, a little over forty, still had a penchant for partying and all that went with it – women, drugs, late-nights, and ruin covered up by greased palms and well-placed connections. She refrained from telling stories and, hoping for the same courtesy from her, I refrained from asking. However, when I told her of my father's bouts of jailtime and his current stint, she did ask a question: *When does he get out?* Only logical, the query was still unnerving to me, as the truth was that he would be released in a matter of weeks and I had not prepared myself to see him, nor did I want to. My family still had not spoken of his return, and had no intention to. He would, one day, show up like a figment come alive, and expect our home to be his home. He was, in most ways, a stranger to me, and I would not, could not, imagine treating him with the same familiarity, the same love, with which I treated my mother and brother. An insistent voice climbed from up my spine and planted thoughts I should not have had in my mind. I wished that he would not return, wished

that I would not have to face the reality of his presence, and wished, fervently, that he, as a topic, would take up no more of my time with Kinley. *I don't know*, I mumbled in response to her, with enough of an edge that she immediately dropped the subject.

It was, then, in a peaceful father-less bliss that Kinley and I ate the remains of a broccoli beef and stir-fried rice dish we had ordered from a Chinese restaurant one town away. Well past midnight, our appetites had returned with a vengeance and, dressed only in pajamas, we had little issue with unceremoniously downing mouthfuls of cold Chinese food. Kinley's feet were flung on mine as we sat at the kitchen table, absentmindedly returning to previous conversations, though with less introspection and far less gravitas.

You really think college is for suckers? I asked.

I said losers. But same thing, I guess.. Kinley started speaking with a hearty bite of beef broccoli swirling around her mouth. She coughed to avoid choking and chuckled to herself before continuing. *I was too eager, see what happens when you ask me questions past midnight? Yes, college is for suckers. And people who want to work for suckers.*

And what's the biggest problem with it all?

I slid my eyes from left to right. *Is that rhetorical?*

The biggest problem with it all, Kinley continued, implicitly answering my question, *is that none of them know they are suckers. They think that they're expanding their minds*

and that they're setting themselves up for jobs that are so fascinating and living lives they think are important.

It's better than not having a job in the North End, I said lightly, mixing the salty sauce layered on broccoli beef with fried rice.

Kinley pursed her lips. *Okay, fine, yes, it's better than that. But I'm not talking about you. You'll go to college and you'll study something you love and be excited about it. Then, you'll find a job or create a job that makes you happy and still lets you earn enough money to live however you want.*

What do you think I should study when I get there? I asked.

English. You're going to have to, you're always reading. There isn't enough time in college to read a ton for pleasure and read a ton for class, you gotta combine the two.

How do you know so much about college?

They counselors at school talk to us about it all the time.

They talk to you about the suckers at college, too?

No, Kinley said. That one I figured out on my own. Right from the beginning of high school, all of the kids I go to school with work and work and work and work and why? So that they can have big empty houses that they never actually live in.

Kinley had begun stabbing the air with her fork. When we heard a key turning the front door lock, she dropped the fork and snapped her neck towards the sound. His red tie loosened and his gait ambling, Kinley's father appeared from the hallway like a piece of fiction brought to flesh.

Dad? Kinley rubbed her eyes and took a second look. We sat frozen, her feet still flung on mine. Fearful of her father's response to my presence, I stayed very still, hoping I could pass for a late-night illusion or an over-priced statue of a black teenage male.

Ah-ha, he said, *Kinley, you're still up, very good!* He stood no more than six feet tall. A mop of auburn hair met his receding hairline an inch or two past its ideal whereabouts. His arms were gangly, but it seemed that the years had packed a paunch on his stomach and flab around his neck. He wore small, oval glasses with thin frames. Beneath them, a pair of blue, flashing eyes took in the room. They were, on that night, curiously glassy, moving lazily from one object to another.

He took off his jacket and attempted to fling it on the kitchen island. It landed on the edge and slid down to the floor, accompanied by mumbling: *Dammit, I forgot my briefcase in the car. Nevermind, nevermind.* Standing with his hands on hips, he closed

his eyes and swung his torso side-to-side. *What I wanted to talk to you about, Kinley, was vacation. Yes, vacation.* His voice rose, inflected with delight. *I was thinking of Italy. A week – the coast, the food, and we’ll bring friends, of course. I can talk to your principal, shouldn’t be a problem getting you out of school. Who would you like to bring, huh? I’ll bring a friend, you’ll bring a friend.* Thoroughly pleased with his idea and the negotiation he had, by himself, carried out, Kinley’s father wore a wide, sloppy grin. He opened his eyes and, finally, noticed my presence.

With startling rapidity, he lifted his arm and pointed at me. Aiming his index finger at me like a gun, he held his pose for a moment that stretched into two, into three, into four, into an interminable swath of time. My ribs squeezed my lungs and my respiratory track forgot to respire. He rubbed his tongue on his lower lip and squinted. Slowly, he brought his pointing hand to his glasses and took them off, cleaning them on his tie and placing them back over his eyes. I alerted my legs that, in a matter of seconds, they might be called to jump into a standing position and brace for a bull-rush.

This guy, he said. You wanna bring this friend to Italy? That’s fine, that’s fine with me. Like I said, I bring a friend, you bring a friend, no problems. My chest heaved upward in relief and my legs melted from iron to jelly.

Dad, Kinley said. Can I get you some water? She had not yet removed her feet from my lap and her face held a placid, unnervingly blank expression.

Please, please, yes. I could do with a gallon. He placed his palms on the kitchen island and leaned on it with all his weight as Kinley poured him a glass of water. She found Advil in a closet near the sink and shook out several tablets. She brought him the water and the medication, along with the very last bits of broccoli beef. *Here*, she said.

I only need the water, none of the rest of this, thank you, Kin, he responded.

Take all of it.

No, really, I'm fine, just a bit tired.

You're high, Dad. At that, the sloppy grin returned to his face and he let out a giggle.

You got me, he said. *Lock me up, I partied a little. I'll take your meds and food, Ms. Police-Lady.* He popped the pills in his mouth and swallowed them before draining the glass of water and taking a bite of food. He chewed ravenously, purpose returning to him. *Now that I've done that for you, how about you do this vacation thing with me, yes? It'll be fun. Think about it and then tell me yes. You can bring him, I promise.*

I think you should go to bed now, Kinley said. Her face was still absent of any emotion, joy or frustration, concern or anger.

I get it, I get it, Kinley's father said. Little specks of food darted out of his mouth when he spoke. *Get the old man out of the way so you can hang alone with your friend, here.*

What's your name?

Malik. I said my name quietly, unsure of the degree to which I would like to get involved in the conversation.

Malik, I'm Brad Raleigh. How would you like to come to Italy with us?

I'm going to take you to bed now, Dad, Kinley interjected. She held the crook of his elbow and turned him to the hallway. He offered no resistance, allowing her to drag him out of the kitchen amidst mutterings of vacation and promises of good times. Brad's feet did not so much leave the ground as sweep across it in effortful lunges. His shoes scraped the floorboards for a full minute before, I presumed, Kinley laid him in bed. She came back to the kitchen, her face red with embarrassment. I lifted myself from my seat and quickly held her in a close hug. A soft sob vibrated against my shoulder. Her arms loosely circled my hips, and they too shook slightly to the rhythm of her quiet crying.

Chapter 13

NORA ROY

1.

I don't know about the rest of the world, but there are certain facts that are just facts in the North End. I'm not saying they won't or can't change, I'm just saying this is how it is for now.

Fact: if you're a woman – and it doesn't matter all that much how you dress or how you walk or if you're wearing lipstick or not – you're going to get some attention that you don't want to get. Maybe it's flattering in real specific settings, and maybe there are moments when you can use it to your advantage. A lot of the time, though, it's just flat out annoying or rude or even disturbing when you're minding your own damn business and some hormonal wreck is eyeballing you like a rabid dog. The whistling and the hooting and the hollering? I could do without all of that.

Fact: sometimes it doesn't stop at the eyeballing.

Fact: not all family is good family.

2.

I told Ozzie how one night, when I was seventeen, Ma got real sloshy after a family barbeque, which wasn't out of the norm, except that the more she drank the more scared she got. Her body would freeze up in a curled position on the couch for five minutes at a time. Then she'd reach into her heart and pump out some brave to get her going again, get her frantic enough to clean or yell at the TV. She was drinking in giant gulps, no dainty sips or standard swigs, and she was using everything in the house – vodka, rum, beer. Ma was fine with mixing liquors though, she had a stomach like a premium ship, nothing would tip it over. It took three or four hours but eventually the fuel she was burning simmered into a low-grade heat and all she wanted to do was sit on the edge of the couch and spill out fury.

3.

Uncle Sal wrapped callused hand around her thigh before she hit double digits. Sal did favors for friends of friends. The 'I-know-a-guy' guy, he had a network and a list of IOUs. A union job. Always working, always paid. He was legit, steady, the go-to when money was tight and kids needed a new pair of shoes.

Maybe no one noticed when he would have regular one-on-one time with particular kids, started lavishing them with gifts. Maybe the rest of the family thought that he was just doing what a good male role model should do – spending time, buying presents. Maybe it would have been too hard to see it. Family is family. Some family helps you get by.

4.

If justice was an emotion it would be outrage. That's what runs through me when I'm treated like trash or I hear about someone getting screwed over. That's what I felt when Ma told me about Sal. I gripped the sides of my thighs and let my insides turn to lava and then to stone. I was nuclear angry, angry enough to wonder how the world was still spinning when nothing had been done to punish the perp. It's not that I think the justice system works, because coming from my neighborhood you know it's a mess whether pols are taking about punishment or rehabilitation or "cleaning up the streets." I just didn't think Justice with a capital J, that thing that is solid and essential, Plato's Cave Justice, would let karma act so out of whack for so long. How was Sal still alive and kicking and doing pretty fucking well? Other people, that's who justice abandons, but not me and Ma. Our shit would go sour, but it wouldn't rot, and eventually there would be some sweet, some silver lining or saving grace.

What I figured that night while I was listening to Ma talk is that Justice ain't just a concept that lives in an imagined place and floats by us once in a while and magically solves one or two things that are real important to us. Justice is more like a virus that infects people, gets under their skins and gives them a rash, an itch. I won't lie about it: when you scratch an itch, it's not only about necessity, it's about sensuous relief, too. And that's a fucking tragedy, what he did to Ma, and then the fact that what he did made me someone who could find pleasure in ending another human's life.

After I was done telling Ozzie everything, we sat in silence for a good, long moment. Telling the whole truth made me calm, except for my hand, which was quivering a bit. Ozzie looked at me like he was trying to read a book in another language. Then he did the strangest thing. He took my hand in his, and he told me that he could never understand what Ma had been through, and he would probably never fully get what I had done either, but that he was good at keeping things safe, guarding secrets and pain and spots that haven't scabbed over and healed yet, and I knew he was telling the truth by the gentle way he held my hand and pressed it and let its trembling quiet to a still.