

LIGHT
IT UP

KEKLA MAGOON

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THE INCIDENT

At the end of the day, a girl is dead. Maybe it's winter. Maybe she had a black ski hat on. Maybe she was running and didn't stop when he ordered her to. Maybe because she had headphones in, so she didn't hear him shouting. Maybe she was late for something. Or maybe she was running simply because it was cold and dark and she was nervous to be alone on the street. It was dusky already at four-thirty p.m. When the lights flashed behind her, maybe it didn't seem unusual. Maybe she never imagined it was about her. She was tall for her age, bundled in her warmest coat. She looked bigger than she was. Thicker. More like a man, an adult. But still thirteen years old.

DAY ONE: THE INCIDENT

PEACH STREET

No one saw anything.

In the aftermath, the curb is dewy with blood. The man crouches by the girl's body. They are both now smaller than they were.

"No, no, no, no, no." He is on his knees. On his lips, a litany of sorrows.

He shoves away the iPod lying on the sidewalk. It jerks back, tied to the body by headphones. The sound of low talking blossoms into the silence.

He is supposed to press the walkie-talkie button, call again for backup.

Instead, he reaches around her puffy coat collar, presses fingers to her neck. "No, no, no, no, no."

What he sees—it's impossible. He prides himself on being a good shot. Prides himself on his instincts.

WITNESS

You don't expect it. Ever. Walking home, like usual, the last thing you expect is to witness a murder. Shootings happen around this neighborhood, of course they do, but somehow you still never expect it. You worry about it, in a ghost way. A sliver of thought in a dusty back corner of the brain. A curl of gray matter that gets woken up once in a blue moon, given an electric shock to remind it never to fade.

You expect to cross the street, avoid the hoopla, like always. There's no call to get involved. No one wants to be a witness. To put yourself out there like that, against some gangbanger you maybe went to high school with? Hells no. Not this cat.

The squad car, lights flashing, is at the other end of the block. A traffic stop, maybe. Or a domestic thing, checking up on some hipster's noise complaint about the sound of fighting next door.

It's a whole block away. You figure you have time to get around whatever's going on. There's no crime scene tape. But then suddenly you're upon them. The cop and the child. You can tell it's a child, somehow. Maybe you know the world all too well.

When you're first on the scene, here's what you find:

The body looks unreal. Some punk-ass King, or whatever, rendered inert. Black coat, like a marshmallow. Strange kicks, for a gangbanger. Is pink the new red?

The sirens are blaring. Response time was slow. One cop in the area, got to the scene first.

"What happened?"

"He's dead. He's dead," the officer says. "He had a gun."

The world inverts. This is a whole different thing. You can't help it, you blurt out, "You shot him?"

The officer lunges to his feet. His weapon rises up. "Step back."

You freeze, then slowly spread your hands wide. "Whoa, man. I ain't do nothing. I ain't see nothing."

Heart pounding, skin pounding, the pulse pumps firmly in your chest, your knees, your eyes. You pray. *Keep pumping. I ain't gotta die today.*

That corner of your brain, that worried corner, is much bigger than you thought and it's wide awake now. It scolds. *See flashing lights, go down another block. No lookie-loos.* It aches. *Not my time. Not today. I ain't going down like this.* It speaks to your feet. It's your brain—it can do that. *Run. Run.*

You fight it. With another part of your brain, the common sense part. You hold fast there, knowing you might be shot down where you stand.

The sirens grow louder.

"Be cool, man," you say. "Be cool."

He's breathing hard. And you are.

More cops roll up. More guns. All on you. Just like that, a walk home becomes a mouthful of sidewalk. Becomes handcuffs. Becomes the back of a cop car and a call to some legal aid lawyer. On the phone you tell her, "I ain't done nothing. I ain't seen nothing. I was just walking home."

ZEKE

In my nightmares I see flashing lights. I see them in the glint of sun off the other cars' hoods in the rearview. I see them in the glare off the road signs and in bouncing headlights. I see a white car with a ski rack and I ease off the gas on instinct. Just in case.

I wanna fly, you know? I wanna put the pedal to the metal, knowing I can afford the cost of a ticket. It's gonna be what, fifty bucks? A hundred? I don't know. Never been pulled over. Never wanna be.

Watch the needle like a hawk instead.

Every time.

Tonight, the lights behind me are real.

My pulse pounds under every part of my skin. Blinker on. Glide to the shoulder. Lower the window, then freeze, with my hands at ten and two. I already can't breathe.

Not one, but two police cars. I expect them to flank me. They don't even slow.

My car rocks in their wake. They are flying.

A prayer slides out of me, unbidden.

Relief, for myself.

Hope and despair, for the poor souls at the other end of their call.

Find a gap, ease back into traffic. Other cars rocket by me. I'm that annoying driver everybody can't wait to pass. Their slipstream is my security blanket. They'll get pulled over before me, for sure.

I'm only a few minutes' drive from the Underhill Community Center. I'll make it there before full dark.

My old car chugs its way down the exit ramp, weaves through the neighborhood. It's hard, coming down from expressway speed. Feels like I'm crawling.

Peach Street is all lit up like Christmas. Some kind of big mess.
I crawl. Watch the needle like a hawk. Use my signals.
Fifty bucks. A hundred. That's good money and all, but what's the
cost of freedom?
All I know is what it's not worth: my life.

KIMBERLY

The clock on the office wall reads 5:27. It's two minutes behind my cell phone. My shift technically ended at five.

Zeke's late.

I've been pretend packing up my purse for almost half an hour. Put the lip gloss in, take the lip gloss out. Gloss. Put the lip gloss back in. Stand up. Loop the purse straps over my arm and take a last look at the desk. I'm like a background character in a cartoon. Can you get a repetitive stress injury from being ridiculous?

I should go. Instead, I unloop the straps and sit down again.

There's a file folder open on the desk. Doesn't matter which. It's only there so I can close it with a flourish, stuff it in the drawer, and breezily declare, "I was just on my way out."

I scroll to see what everyone's posting. Another couple of minutes won't hurt anything.

There's a discussion going on between several well-known organizers from around the country. Kelvin X and Viana Brown love to go head-to-head about protest tactics. Kelvin thinks he's clever, and he always sounds good in a thread of one-liners, but most of his ideas are unrealistically militant. I toss hearts onto a couple of Viana's best zingers. *Violence is not the answer; violence is the question.* She is always spot on.

The big viral item of the afternoon appears to be an article featuring Senator Alabaster Sloan.

I scroll past that one. I don't want to think about Senator Sloan. The Reverend. Al. Whatever.

"Hey." Zeke's voice comes out of nowhere.

I leap about a mile. Zeke's right there, on the other side of the desk. Even not reading the article had pulled my attention all the way into my phone, apparently.

“Oh, hey.” My smile feels dramatically extra-glossed. Did I overdo it? Are my lips shining like a mirror right now? God. I fumble for the edge of the file folder. “I was just about to take off.”

“You might want to wait a few minutes,” he says. “There are cops all over Peach Street. Looks like a big raid or something.”

When I leave, I won’t be going toward Peach. The hair salon where I work is down that way, but my apartment is a few blocks in the other direction. I guess Zeke doesn’t know that. Or . . . did he just invite me to stay? Does he want me to?

My tongue darts out over my lip. Comes back coated in gloss. Ugh. Sticky. “Um—” I scrape my teeth against the gunk. “Sure, that’s a good idea.”

Zeke isn’t really paying attention to me.

I plop my purse back on the desk for the dozenth time. If it was animate, it would be pissed at me for jerking it around. “They’ve been out in force lately, haven’t they?”

“Our community actions are making them nervous.” Zeke smiles. He has a great smile. Not too glossy or anything. “Everything we do in the neighborhood to empower people, to create awareness, is frightening them. They want to keep us in check.”

I lean on the edge of my desk. No, that probably makes my hips look too wide. “They’re succeeding, aren’t they?” It’s an honest question.

Zeke looks at the desk. “Yeah.”

There’s not much to say after that. Except something about how we’re going to change things, right from here. Together.

But that would sound too corny.

Our room is in the heart of the community center. It doesn’t have any windows. “I guess I should get home,” I tell him. It’s pizza night with my roommate. “How long until it passes, do you think?”

The phone starts ringing off the hook.

MELODY

Police lights and caution tape? That's straight-up black-person repellent. People avoid that certain block on Peach Street while the cops close in. Ain't nobody want a piece of that mess. At first.

Then word gets out. What's really going down.

A child, dead. A girl.

Then the truth gets floated: *officer-involved shooting*.

Reporters pop up at the corners.

Then her name gets out: *Shae Tatum*.

What? They wrong. They gotta be. I would have kept walking, if I didn't hear someone say it. 'Cause that can't be right. Can't be.

Shae wouldn't be out alone at night. Ever. This couldn't happen.

Hold up, though. . . . It's Thursday. I dropped her off at tutoring at 3:30. Sometimes she walks home alone. It's only five blocks. But she'd have been home hours ago.

Already got my cell in my hand, like always. Dial Shae's momma.

It rings on into nothing.

Gotta get closer. I can't see past the people. Too short. *Think thin*. It's not so hard to slide to the front when you're small. Crane my neck, but there are too many police cars. The block is lit. Uniforms wandering this way and that. Milling.

The body on the sidewalk. Black coat. Pink shoes—

No. No. God, no.

The wail comes out loud. My green gloves tug at the yellow tape.

POLICE LINE—DO NOT CROSS.

I will cross anyway. But strangers put their hands on me.

Shae.

No way to go forward, no way to go back. There's a crowd, thick

behind me, everyone crying and cursing and fussing. Rows and layers of people. More witnesses than anyone would know what to do with. They hopping. They shivering. How many of us got a really good winter coat? Naw, you mostly bundle and scurry. Like Shae was.

I can picture it. I can picture her going and going. Headphones in, like she always had.

Shae.

TINA

Shae wore headphones
for courage.
The sound of voices
in her ear made her feel
less alone in a big scary world.

JENNICA

The bell above the door jangles. *Customer!* It rings out the news way too cheerfully. I'm tired of smiling today.

I'm pouring coffee for the old guy already at the counter. He's a regular. Not a chatty one, just likes to watch the news. We have a rhythm.

When I turn around, my stomach shifts.

Oh. It's only Brick. I'm relieved and stirred all at once.

"Hey, Jen."

He calls me Jen here, because that's what's on my name tag. He's respectful like that.

Brick perches on one of the counter seats. "How you doing?"

"I'm good." I slip him a menu. Sometimes he orders. Either way he always leaves money on the counter. Hard to argue with that.

"Just good? But I'm here now." He smiles and winks.

I don't know what he's playing at. He likes me, but not like that. At least, he's never tried to grab me or nothing. If he's after me for sex, he's going about it different than any King I've known. Sometimes I get a glimmer off him, but it always tucks back away.

I'm mainly glad he comes alone. He's not trying to run game to get me back with Noodle. And Noodle's his main man, so maybe that's why he doesn't try to get fresh with me himself. Respect. Not that Noodle deserves it.

Brick scrolls through his texts. "Gotta iron out some wrinkles between my boys."

"Don't forget to starch them," I joke.

Brick grins. "I heard of that," he says. "Is that a real thing?"

"Sure." My mom used to starch my dad's work shirts. It was old school. The memory floats, like a cloud of starch dust. Standing under the

ironing board, around my mom's knees. Puffs of steam, watching the powder float down. Thinking it magical, like snow.

Like snow.

Long before snow ruined them.

Brick grimaces. "Who wants their fabric all stiff, like cardboard? Hard to work it out in my head."

I let myself smile, but it's tight. Can't forget what his boys do. Can't ever forget. "Not stiff, more like . . . crisp. If you dig neatly pressed uniform shirts, or whatever."

Brick wears a black denim shirt with red trim. Red cap on backwards. Variations on a theme. He looks good.

He turns his phone over so he can't see the screen. "Lemme get some pie."

I serve him, and he chats at me about whatever. He likes talking to me, I think. He always did. We get along.

"You wanna come up to my place tonight? I've got people coming over."

He already knows what I'm going to say. "That doesn't make it different from any other night, does it?"

He shrugs. "What can I say? I'm the host with the most. Can't keep the ladies away."

Most of the ladies. It goes unsaid. "Thanks, anyway," I say.

He sighs. "I miss having you come by. We had some good times, didn't we?"

I slide Brick's pie plate away, try to clear my mind. No good comes from thinking in reverse. Instead, I focus on how it's pizza-night Thursday. What will go on my half, what will go on Kimberly's. She's more predictable. I like to shake it up. Because I can. Tonight I have to work later than usual, but the food will still be waiting for me when I get home.

Brick's phone is buzzing off the hook, but he stays right with me.

"Are you gonna check that?" I ask. He's barely glanced at it in ages.

"I should," he says. "Don't want to. Somebody's got beef and they wanna drag me into it."

"Where's the beef?"

Brick offers me half a grin. Hmm. He usually laughs too hard at my bad jokes. He's trying to look out for me.

He glances at his phone. Double takes. Picks it up and scrolls.

"Hey, do me a favor," he says. "Pop on the local news."

"Sure." The remote is right there below the counter, by the silverware bin. A couple of clicks and I'm seeing what he meant.

The six o'clock news leads with it. "Officer-involved shooting . . ."

"They always try to sugarcoat it." The old guy down the counter shakes his head. Time to refresh his coffee.

The clatter of the glass pot, the smell, the steam rushing up—all familiar. Familiar as the sterile-sad voice overhead.

"Police say a full investigation will be conducted. They decline to release the name of the suspect pending notification of the family."

"Suspect," the old guy grunts. "Dollars to donuts it's just a kid."

Brick pays closer attention to his phone. "Maybe one of my guys. My phone is blowing up."

My hand moves, almost of its own accord. Across the counter to cover his free hand.

BRICK

As I stroll out the diner, Noodle's texting me up down and backwards.
Where u at?

Taking care of some business, I answer.

Can't exactly tell him I'm doing what I do most evenings. Eating mediocre diner pie and slow playing his ex.

Srsly, Noodle types. Get down here. It's lit.

It might never happen, me and Jennica. Maybe it shouldn't, either.

Ten cruisers on Peach. Paddy wagon rolling in.

Get clear of it, I instruct him. What is he thinking messing around with this? He's reckless. Dives headfirst into a mess and expects to come up clean.

Can't, he says. We're throwing down.

Sigh. Sometimes I wonder what Jennica ever saw in Noodle in the first place. He has only two settings: pissed off about everything or high enough not to care about anything. She deserves better. He's my boy, but come on. She's too smart for him. She deserves some nuance. Some sweet. I have more to offer her than Noodle ever could.

I'm biding my time. I could close this deal anytime I want, though. I know what to say to make it happen. She moves like a frightened rabbit. She would fall into my arms, like she keeps falling back into Noodle's. I could save her.

If it was any other girl, I might go on and get it done. See how it all shook out. We'd run fast and hot like a struck match, then flame out just as easily. But Jennica's not just any girl.

She's gotta know, she's safe with me. However long that takes. Slow burn. Something Noodle could never comprehend.

I tell him again, *We don't need trouble. Get out.*

Can't, bro. Everyone's here.

Goddammit. All right. Tuck my collar, glide toward the scene. My ride's parked between Peach and the diner anyway. Easy enough to swing past and see what's up. At least long enough to smack Noodle upside the head and bring him home.

Moments like this, I miss Tariq Johnson more than ever. I need a second with a better head on his shoulders. Noodle's loyal, and tough. He takes his marching orders without pushback—usually—and he knows how to keep the rank and file in line. But I need someone to bounce ideas off of. I used to have these conversations with T, before he got shot. And Jennica, too, when she was on the inside. Now I'm on my own. Juggling the big decisions without a sounding board ain't easy. Can't take Noodle's word for what's going down. Gotta see it for myself.

The shouting reaches me two blocks out. What the actual . . .

OFFICER YOUNG

Crowd control is usually a bullshit assignment. Boring as hell. We stand on a street corner during a march for breast cancer awareness, or whatever, and watch the chattering ladies stroll by, carrying their signs and balloons. We stare at pink shirts, hats so long the color loses meaning. We try not to think about breasts, even though they are all around us and the word is everywhere, too.

There is something musical about the shouting and chanting; we are lulled by it. There is energy pouring out of the comparatively small bodies in front of us. There is something powerful about the passion and anger directed at this disease, something moving about the idea of people coming together to make change.

We stand there, vigilance level set to automatic. Our eyes flick here and there occasionally. We admonish people for sneaking through the barricades. Sometimes they cross them anyway. We're part of the fabric backdrop. Everyone moves through us.

We get our toes run over by strollers a couple of times. Sometimes we get an apology. We give directions to the porta-potties. We stand with our thumbs hooked over our belts because we think it looks cooler than letting our arms dangle, plus the department discourages crossed arms because some captain took a course in nonverbal communication and determined that the messaging is unfriendly.

That's what it's supposed to be. Tonight it's not that.

Tonight, the only splash of pink has great meaning.

Tonight we stand with our arms crossed.

We put on our most menacing stares. If anyone steps on our feet, we can respond with appropriate force. If anyone has to pee, it's their own damn problem to solve.

There is something menacing about the shouting and chanting; we are disturbed by it. There is energy pouring out of the comparatively dark bodies in front of us. There is something unsettling about the passion and anger directed at us, something terrifying about the idea of people coming together to tear our blue line down.

We stand there, vigilance level set to the max. Our eyes flick here and there constantly. We threaten people for leaning over the barricades. Our batons are at the ready, and so are our guns. No one moves through us.

We're each handed a Plexiglas shield to carry in front of us. It makes us feel better and worse at the same time. We have fleeting thoughts about nonverbal messaging, but we do what we're told. We stand in a line, ready to serve and protect.

WILL/EMZEE

The best time to tag is the middle of the night, but after school is when I'm free. I've made my peace with it.

The best time to mural is at dusk. Early enough that you still got some light, late enough that you can hide your face if you need to.

It's not unusual for me to see a big police hoopla. SWAT teams enjoy moving around dusk as well. No rhyme or reason. You'd think they'd prefer full daylight. *All the better to shoot you by, my dear.* I picture them cackling like cartoon villains, dressed in their strange new urban camo.

I guess we should have known they were coming for us when someone went out and made fabric. Urban insurgency.

It is unusual to see such a big gathering of onlookers. That's what really holds me up.

I'm supposed to be heading home. Long before now, actually.

It should be dark, but it doesn't look it, with all the floodlights. It should be cold, but it doesn't feel it.

The crowd is getting heated.

The body, people keep saying. *Move the body.* The ambulance is down the end of the block. Only vehicle on the street with its lights off.

But they don't move the body. They don't move her for hours. The sun goes down. They roll in lights. Walk around her like some set dressing. She is out of sight of the crowd, but the cops circle like vultures.

People gather, watching. Shouting. Cops come stand at the edge of us, with bullhorns. They order us to disperse.

We are not to wonder. We are not to feel. We are not to question the things we see before us.

We surge against the police line tape. It is not a wall. We are held in place because we let ourselves be . . . for how much longer? How much longer?

I slip from the crowd. Pull my spray cans from my satchel. Black.
Gray. Red. White. Pause a second . . . Blue.

Shake. Listen to the telltale ball-bearing rattle.

Speak. My arms arc over my head.

I write the words in big letters on the side of a brick building. This
space, I've been saving. It deserves something huge and beautiful.
Something that would take more than a night to complete.

I don't know why, but I do it. Tell myself I can paint over it later.

Write the words: BLACK POWER.

NATIONAL NEWS NETWORK SPECIAL REPORT

Host: *We're here with special guest Professor Xavier Charles of Columbia University, monitoring the escalating tensions in Underhill tonight. Professor, what's your take on the situation?*

Prof. Charles: *Tragedy all around. The authorities are going to need to proceed with greater caution than they've displayed so far tonight.*

Host: *Are we looking at a possible riot?*

Prof. Charles: *We're looking at a community being actively disenfranchised, and targeted by law enforcement. You want to talk about tensions running high, don't look at the people on the street. They have reasons to be angry.*

Host: *So, in your view, rioting in Underhill is a real possibility tonight?*

Prof. Charles: *The police are not treating the citizens with respect. Bad policing results in unnecessary violence. Case in point, a thirteen-year-old girl was murdered tonight.*

Host: *Allegedly . . . The investigation hasn't returned any results yet.*

Prof. Charles: *An unarmed child was shot to death by a police officer. The police department already publicly confirmed the basic facts of the case. Let's be clear—we're talking about a murder.*

Host: *We're talking about the actions of a police officer on duty. It's irresponsible journalism to throw around criminal accusations—*

Prof. Charles: *I'm not a journalist. I'm a political science and African American history professor.*

Host: *To say murdered suggests—*

Prof. Charles: *I'm aware of what it suggests. The historical legacy of police violence against black citizens bears it up.*

Host: *History isn't at issue here.*

Prof. Charles: *Look at Watts in '65, look at LA after Rodney King, Ferguson after Michael Brown, Baltimore after Freddie Gray.*

Host: *Riots.*

Prof. Charles: *You want to call it "riots" because you want the focus to be on so-called black violence and so-called black criminality. You want to do anything possible to justify the reality of police officers acting with lethal force on a community.*

Host: *That's not—*

Prof. Charles: *You want to say it's okay for a police officer to respond with knee-jerk lethal anger at the mere idea of a threat against his person, and at the same time you want to say it's wrong for a community to rise up in peaceful anger in response to repeated, systematic abuses at the hands of the power structure. That logic doesn't hold.*

Host: *Peaceful anger? A riot?*

Prof. Charles: *Look at the live feed. I see a group of people exercising their First Amendment rights to free speech and to assemble peaceably. You've had the camera focused on the crowd this whole time. Who there is breaking the law? Yet you're already calling it a riot.*

Host: *A potential riot.*

Prof. Charles: *You see a public gathering of the black community as a potential riot—*

Host: *Look at them!*

Prof. Charles: *—and they see every police officer as a potential murderer.*

Host: *That's unfair.*

Prof. Charles: *Yes. But it's a parallel, and a racist double standard that news media and law enforcement perpetually ignore.*

Host: *You're saying there's bias on both sides?*

Prof. Charles: *I'm saying you have the cameras turned the wrong way. The whole time we're talking here, the live feed playing on the split screen is focused on the crowd of angry blacks. The scroll bar says "escalating tensions threaten to spill over." If you want to talk about responsible journalism, you should also show what they're protesting. How many hours later, and that child's body is still in the street?*

Host: *The police are surely following an investigative protocol. We can get more information—*

Prof. Charles: *They're making choices about what to prioritize.*

Host: *The crowd is growing and they don't have a permit to demonstrate.*

Prof. Charles: *Did they have a permit at the Boston Tea Party?*

Host: *You can't compare—*

Prof. Charles: *No matter what they tell you about the First Amendment, this country will never grant us a permit to tear down the establishment.*

Host: *That sounds dangerously close to treason, Professor.*

Prof. Charles: *On the contrary. It's a deeply American idea. The fundamental right to oppose tyranny is the entire basis for the Declaration of Independence, which we widely regard as a foundational document of the United States. But it wasn't at the time. It was, in fact, a document of resistance against the Crown, after which the newly independent states created their unified government under a new flag. The US Constitution, the actual foundational American document, establishes law for this new nation, in which black Americans, then enslaved, were counted as three-fifths of a person and denied basic human rights and citizenship. You can call it treason, but it is a deeply American idea for the disenfranchised to rise up against the power structure, in an effort to secure actual equality and the benefits of liberty on their own terms.*

Host: *You're calling for a revolution.*

Prof. Charles: *I'm calling for systemic social change. There are myriad ways that change could happen peacefully. We might still be British subjects if the Crown had responded to the colonists' desire for self-government with compassion and forethought. In this nation today, we still have leaders who stubbornly pursue their own self-interest. Instead of investing in social services, we have militarized policing.*

Host: *We need to take a break. Last thoughts, Professor Charles?*

Prof. Charles: *You have the cameras turned the wrong way. Even through this discussion, the feed hasn't shifted. You want to blame*

poor black communities, but violence begets violence. The problem begins with the police and the politicians who deploy them. I'll remind your viewing audience that there are students in the streets of Underhill right now, filming the police from within the crowd and posting the footage online. We should all be looking in all directions. The revolution—

Host: *Thank you, Professor. We'll be—*

Prof. Charles: *—may not be televised, but it will be YouTubed.*

Host: *—right back with an update regarding Underhill Police Department procedures.*

@KelvinX_: Light it up, ya'll. #underhill #riseup

@Viana_Brown: We wait no longer. We stand still no longer.
#standupspkout

@Momof6: Kids today. SMH.

@BrownMamaBear: My thoughts and prayers are with
Underhill!

@WesSteeleStudio: The mainstream media will tell you LIES about
what happened tonight in Underhill. Wes Steele makes the real story
known: [click for video](#). #HeroCop #MakeItKnown

@WhitePowerCord: Self-defense is a human right.
#BlueLivesMatter

@WhitePowerCord: One less criminal on the streets. Hoo-rah.
#HeroCop

@BrownMamaBear: Will there be peace in our time? Praying for all the
little brown babies tonite. #blessings

@Usual_Suspect_911: Why r u up here talkin bout blessings?
Aint no GOD in this mess.

@BrownMamaBear: My prayers are with you, young brother.
#blessings

@Usual_Suspect_911: You trippin. Prayers aint enough.
#WalkingWhileBlack

NIGHT ONE: THE FALLOUT

PEACH STREET

The opposite of calm is a frenzied feeling. It is the scratch of wool mittens, necessary to stay warm. It is the foam that spills out from the hole of a beer can, the pop-rush-damp, a first careful sip, then a chug.

The opposite of calm is concentric circles, the ripple effects of a stone in a pool. One smooth black stone—plop, rush, shimmer, and the stillness is broken.

The opposite of calm is the skitter of pebbles. When the people are distressed, so is the surface of the street. Every crack in the sidewalk echoes their scream.

WITNESS

“Man, nothing.” How many ways can you say it? “I was walking home. Turned the corner, came upon the cop and the dead kid. That’s it.”

“What did you see?” the officer asks again. The room is small and growing smaller by the minute. You wonder if people are watching you through the dark window in the wall. You assume you’re being recorded. “Describe exactly what you saw.”

“Cop and the dead kid.”

“The officer and the suspect. Did you witness the shooting?”

“Naw, man. It was over already. Kid was on the ground, cop was kneeling over her.”

“The suspect was on the ground?”

“Yes. Lying there dead.”

Cop nods. “The suspect was on the ground. Was the suspect lying face-up or face-down?”

“Face-up. He turned her over to check for a pulse.”

Cop’s voice sharpens. “Did you see him do that?”

“Naw, you could tell by the way the body was turned.”

“I’ll ask you not to speculate, then. Was the suspect lying face-up?”

“Yes.”

“So, the suspect was facing the officer at the time of the shooting?”

Steam fills you up. You let it slide out your nose, like a bull. Let it slide out your ears, like a cartoon. “How you gonna call a thirteen-year-old girl a suspect?”

“Answer the question. The suspect was facing the officer at the time of the shooting?”

“I told you, I ain’t see it.”

Cop sighs. “I expect your cooperation in this matter.”

Cooperation? As in, lying to support the cops? Screw that. "Now you want me to speculate?"

"Boy—" Cop looks like he's about to blow a gasket. Whatever that is.

The legal aid lawyer clears her throat. "What do you expect to gain from this line of questioning?"

Cop breathes in and out a couple times. Almost makes you laugh. Someone's been to anger management. You know a little something about that yourself. You're sitting here hoping they don't look up those records and use it against you.

"Ma'am, we're trying to determine an order of events."

"My client has been clear about his experience of the incident. If there's nothing further, and there are no charges to level, then he's free to go."

You stand up, following her lead.

"On TV they can tell that shit." Mistake. Too impulsive. You're baiting a hook, and you're the only fish in the room.

"Excuse me?" Tall cop wheels around.

Lawyer puts her hand on your arm.

"Forensics, right? You got some lab techs somewhere who can tell if she was shot from the front or from the back."

Tall cop flinches toward his cuffs, a reflex. "You wanna be charged with impeding an investigation?"

Lawyer sweeps you out the door using the full meat of her arm. "My client has been fully cooperative. If you have further questions, you may direct them to my office."

You are walking, suddenly and briskly through the precinct, the lawyer's small arm around you, propelling you.

"Not another word. To anyone, ever, about this. You hear?" Her strength comes from somewhere invisible. The bull inside you paws against her grip. You're spoiling for a fight. They've tipped you past the breaking point. You'd march straight back in there, tell them how it is. You have a daughter, almost thirteen.

The night air is surprisingly chill. It was hot in there. You walk, walk, walk. Stop next to a parked car. The lights come on and the doors click unlocked.

"Tell me you heard me," the lawyer says.

You stare at her blankly.

"Don't talk to anyone. No reporters. No one. No matter what."

"They wanna silence me?"

She sighs. "It's for your own good. You didn't actually witness the shooting. There's nothing good that can come from speaking out."

You do the sensible thing, nod.

She hands you a card. "I'm dead serious. Not a word."

Dead. The image has been floating there all along, but the word brings it into full focus. Smooth young cheeks, gone slack. Eyes unfluttering. Sleeping but not sleeping.

"Need a lift?" she offers.

"I'll walk."

You need time, and space. To clear your head. You have a daughter, almost thirteen.

TINA

I am the last to know
most things.
Mom crying means there has been
an occurrence
or maybe it is just one of those days.
I don't ask questions
put on my headphones
and wait.

DEVANTE

“My roommate is driving me nuts!” Robb storms into my dorm room. I turn down the music.

“Still?” It’s the third week of January. Freshman year, second semester. You’d think they’d have pulled it together by now.

Robb throws himself down across my bed and starts fiddling with the throw pillow fringe. All the guys make fun of me for that damn fringe, but Ma said we needed to dress up the place a little. Whatever. Between the throw pillows and the homemade quilts and the cookies she sends, my half of the room is cozy as hell and everyone knows it. Where do they all come sit when they’re feeling out of sorts? That’s right.

So, I’m making friends left and right around here. Ma knows what she’s doing. Can’t deny her. Not that she’d let me.

“He never wants to do anything interesting,” Robb gripes. “Studies around the clock.”

“It’s almost like he’s in college or something.”

“I know, right?” Robb sighs.

I half laugh. “You know you’re gonna have to make your peace with it eventually. Half a year to go.”

I don’t want to hear about this from him. His roommate is black and the way Robb complains about him . . . I don’t know, it’s not racial in a serious way, but it feels like it might be underneath. Robb doesn’t quite get that some of his aversions are coded.

“It’s madness,” Robb says. “We have scheduled music hours and quiet hours.”

“Sounds fair.”

It’s hard being the one everyone comes to gripe to. I’ve already decided that I’m applying for RA as soon as possible. Might as well get paid if I’m

doing the work, right? And it does feel like work. It doesn't really seem like my suitemates or any of the guys on the floor really like me that much.

Robb's my one good friend on campus so far. All semester he's been cool to me, when some of the other guys around here come across pretty standoffish. I wasn't expecting that. I thought there'd be more of a community feel, but for some reason that doesn't work when you're one of only two black guys on the whole floor.

It's weird. All my friends from high school were white. I feel perfectly comfortable here. But I also feel like I'm coming from some other place, or they think I am, and there's a distance there. If it wasn't for the damn throw pillow situation, I'd probably have no friends at all, and be stuck in my room all the time, like Robb's roommate.

Sometimes I feel guilty for not making more of an effort with him myself. Black guy to black guy, or something. But I also don't want that kind of obligation.

"Dude," Robb says. "Twitter's blowing up."

"Yeah?"

Robb's thumb flicks over the screen. "Another shooting. Cop versus kid. In the hood."

It's when phrases like "in the hood" slip out of his lily-white ass that I have to give him the side-eye. He doesn't notice. He's too into his phone.

"That sucks," I say.

"They gotta stop this crazy shit, man, seriously."

"Tell it to the history books," I say.

"It's the twenty-first century," Robb answers. "For crying out loud."

I bite my tongue. We've been crying out loud for quite some time now, haven't we?

"Whoa. Check it."

"What?"

"This is the same neighborhood as that other famous one, Tariq Johnson."

That other famous one? Come the fuck on. "Oh yeah?"

Robb scrolls. "Yeah, they're saying it's the same exact street." He doesn't even look up. "How messed up is that?"

"Pretty messed up." It's easier to agree with Robb than try to get into a conversation.

Robb rolls up off the bed. "I'll be back," he says.

No doubt, no doubt.

When he's gone, I pull up the news on my laptop. It's good to stay current. And it's happening not that far from here, really. Less than six hours away.

News of the shooting is popping up all over everything. It stabs me all the way through. My eyes get thick. I pull on a sweater and tuck myself among the cozy pillows.

My mind replays the scene with Robb from moments ago. How . . . excited he sounded. To him, it's all a story, all a theory. It's not everything he sees when he looks in the mirror.

I close my eyes. Things had been feeling okay with Robb, finally feeling okay with some of the other guys, too. My gut says this is going to shake us up.

TYRELL

Differential equations are a slice of heaven as far as I'm concerned. My pencil slides across the page, and I lose myself in the math. Solve for x . Solve for y . The more complicated the better. Mental gymnastics is better than meditation for making the whole world disappear around me.

"Yo, T," Robb says, bursting into our room. All semblance of calm slips away.

"Tyrell," I correct him for the thousandth time.

He barrels in like he didn't even hear me. "Yo, you hear the latest?"

"I've been studying."

"You gotta check your Twitter at least sometimes, dog."

"I do." I'm just not on it 24/7, *brah*.

"Check this. Some kind of shooting happened." Robb flips his phone toward me so fast that only the key words jump out at me: *Police shooting. Child. Underhill.*

"That's tragic," I mumble. My skin tingles, in little ripples, like goose bumps.

"Cops shot a girl. Only thirteen, and retarded or something."

"Don't say 'retarded.'" I correct him automatically.

"Yeah, whatever you call it." He waves his hand.

Breathe. Robb gets under my skin without even trying, and at the moment, it seems like he's trying. *Ignore him.* Focus on the next problem set in the textbook in front of me.

"That's all you got to say?" Robb looks annoyed. "That's your hometown, dog."

I'm well aware of where I come from, thanks.

He pushes the phone closer, like it's going to make me see something I didn't already.

I turn away. "So?" The cold feeling starts to rush in.

I don't want to think about home. Definitely don't want to think about people dying there.

My head is full and pounding, out of nowhere. My fingers curl around the lip of the desk.

Shootings are way too common. Anytime one happens anywhere, it reminds me of Tariq. Not that I forget about him the rest of the time. T's always with me. I carry him, like a satchel, everywhere I go. I don't mind. He's still my best friend. I carry him, and he helps me carry everything else. Sometimes it's like I can even hear his voice.

This is different. It's not in my mind—it's physical. A head-throbbing, throat-clogging, stomach-aching feeling sets in when the news hits too close to home.

Breathe in and out. Hold the edge of the desk. It'll pass. It'll pass.

"So, did you know her?" Robb says.

It'll pass. "You think I know every black person in Underhill?"

Robb rolls his eyes. "I'm not racist like that, yo. It's just, if there were riots where I come from, I'd be all over it."

"Lots of dissatisfaction down there at the country club?"

Robb laughs. "I know, right?" He doesn't even feel the dig.

"News at eleven," I say. He thinks we're buddy-buddy. A couple of guys, just joking around. It will never make sense to me. I've stopped trying to understand.

Robb scrolls through his phone. "Peach Street," he says.

A shiver goes through me. "What?"

"Dunno. They're making a big deal about where it happened."

The story writes itself in my head. I can see the street, the convenience store. The block I'd avoid like the plague, except I can't because I have to walk down it to get just about everywhere.

"Dunno," Robb says again. Scrolling. "Oh, wait, it's the same block where—"

He's going to say it, and I don't want him to. He doesn't know.

"I don't want to talk about it!" I push the words at him. I'm rarely this direct with Robb, but he can't take a hint. I need to sit with it all in my own mind. Calculate the odds of a second shooting happening in the same exact place. Like a vortex. A Bermuda Triangle, right down the street from my so-called home.

He smirks at me. "I don't get you."

That's right. You don't. You don't get me. And you don't get to get me just because you want to. You can't have me.

"Leave me alone." I reach for my headphones. I need better ones, the kind that really block out all the noise.

Robb huffs over to his bunk. I breathe in and out slowly until I can see straight again. Until my fingers uncurl from the edge of the desk and it becomes bearable again. The truth, that my best friend was shot for no reason, by a man who will never be prosecuted.

"This is wack," Robb mutters, still fixated on his phone.

When you've lost someone, the way I lost Tariq, nothing makes sense anymore. "Mmmhmm," I mumble. Robb doesn't know from wack.

BRICK

Noodle was right. The block is lit. Quite literally. Floodlights and flashing lights, and Noodle in the middle of it talking about trying to move some product.

“Unwise,” I tell him. “Just let it shake out. Come on.”

I don’t like the look of things here. The crowd is on edge and it feels like things could all boil over. We gotta bounce. ‘Fore it’s our faces on the news.

“Come on.” I grab his arm. Nothing’s moving tonight. And even if it was, Noodle’s not going to be the one to do it. We got kids for the nickel-and-dime shit.

We start pushing back, back, away from the center of this mess. We’re almost out when the scream comes.

“Shae!”

The deep cry pierces, like something being torn to shreds. A sound both full and empty at the same time. And close. “Shae?” Bill Tatum tears through the crowd, a wild man. “Shae! Shae!”

The murmurs begin. *Oh, God. That’s the father. Her father.*

Cops move toward the place where he will emerge.

The next five minutes play out in my mind in sped-up slo-mo fashion: *He’ll run at them. Try to bring them down with his own hands. Then he’ll be laid out beside her and they will feel justified.*

No time to think. I’m moving.

I use my size, my power to part the crowd. People jostle around me. No complaints. The urgency wins.

We meet at the edge of the caution tape barricade. My hands go up, blocking his path. “Tatum.”

He bursts forth into my arms. He’s tall and wiry, but I am a wall.

"Let me through! Shae!"

I am a wall. A shield. A punching bag.

"Shae!" he screams. "Answer me, baby!"

He pummels me. I've taken worse, but just barely.

"Back it down, bro," Noodle shouts. He's trying to get an arm in.

Tatum pushes hard, slips past me. A man possessed.

I catch him again, this time from behind. My arms X across his narrow chest, locking him to me.

Holy fuck.

We're facing a crescent of cops, guns drawn. "Hands in the air! Freeze!"

Tatum strains against my grip. "That's my baby. Let me go! That's my baby!"

"Back it down," Noodle shouts, as if reasoning with a madman is possible.

Keeping hold takes all my willpower. "I got this," I tell Noodle. "Get us a doctor."

"Doctor?" Noodle echoes.

"You killed my Shae! Get up baby, Daddy's here."

"One of them ambulance guys." I can hold Tatum for now but he ain't gonna stop. We are two big black men under the gun, and still, I can feel it. He ain't gonna stop.

The cops call out in a cacophony.

"Hands in the air!"

"Stop right there!"

"Freeze, asshole!"

"Put your hands up!"

"Show your hands!"

"You can fucking well see our hands!" I answer. "It's her father. You get that?"

Noodle edges away, one step. But he can't, really. He's in the crescent with us. We are three big black men under the gun.

Noodle looks to me, uncertain. If I order him to go anyway, he will go. My bones hum with the power of it. Even as my muscles ache with powerlessness. Under the gun.

"Stay cool," I order.

"We need a doctor!" Noodle shouts.

A Mexican-looking dude in an ambulance suit runs toward us. He pauses, becomes a part of the crescent.

"It's her father," I tell him. "You got something to knock him out?"

He glances sideways at the cops, takes one step forward. Pauses.

Tatum bucks and screams. We'd be on the ground already but for the crowd behind us, and the television cameras.

"He ain't deserve to get shot," I scream. "Fucking sedate him!"

The paramedic takes another step. "You got him?"

"I got him."

"Going in," he announces to the police. They shout at him, but he comes toward us with a syringe. He has a ring on his finger. Probably some little rug rats at home. He meets my eye, brown man to black man. All I gotta do is hold on.

"Give him more," I tell him. "It wasn't enough."

"That's the standard dose," the paramedic answers. "It'll just take a moment to kick in all the way."

"You sure?" Even as I'm asking, Tatum begins to slacken in my arms.

The paramedic's dark eyes are clouded with worry. "You good to get him home?"

"I got this." But over his shoulder, the crescent is firm. "They gonna let us walk away?"

He looks at me, looks at Noodle, looks at the crowd. "Walk him straight backward. Right now. No hesitation."

Our eyes are locked. Brown man to black man. He pulls in all his breath filling his chest and broadening his shoulders. He takes one step back, takes my place as the wall.

I move, on faith. Straight back into the crowd, dragging Tatum with me. The cops are shouting, but the crowd enfolds us.

The stone-cold ache of the crescent is with us, all the way to my car. Out of sight, out of mind, my ass. We shuffle Tatum into the backseat. His listlessness is no comfort. "Shae, baby. Daddy's here. You're okay, baby."

Noodle starts to hop in the front seat.

"No, sit with him."

"Man," he complains. "He's all spread out. What you want me to do back there?"

"Fuckin' Christ," I shout. "Just sit with him."

"Shae, baby," Tatum moans.

The paramedic didn't give him enough. Black pain is deeper than Western medicine.

In the car on the way home, even through the sedative, he keeps repeating, "My baby. My baby."

EVA

Daddy comes home late, and he's not alone. When the garage door starts creaking, I run to hug him like usual. Our routine is for me to hang up his coat while he takes off his uniform shoes.

I wait by the door. Mommy said Daddy had a problem at work today, and I am to be well behaved and not cause any trouble.

"We've already had dinner," I tell him. "We covered your plate."

The other men with Daddy are also in uniform, and looking Very Serious. The cold air comes in on their clothes.

"Come in," Mommy says. "I'll take your coats."

I get a bad feeling in my tummy. Everything is wrong.

Daddy kneels in front of me, which is not from our routine. His cheeks are bright red with cold. I lay my hands on his stubble. "What's wrong, Daddy?"

His whole face folds up. "Eva, baby."

Daddy never cries.

OFFICER YOUNG

We holster our weapons. Crisis averted. Still, nothing is calm. The dark sea of worried, angry faces still looms behind the barricade. They shout. They hiss. They hold up their phones, filming us.

“You blocked our shot, idiot,” snaps the officer to my left. O’Donnell.

Chip Mendez caps his syringe. “Gonna shoot a grieving father on national TV? Really?”

O’Donnell sniffs.

“If that was the plan, then I saved your ass, O’Donnell.”

“Shut up, Mendez.” O’Donnell sneers. “Get back in your rig.”

My eyes comb the crowd. That’s the job, after all. The father is gone. We’ve just come face-to-face with the leader of the 8-5 Kings. And his lieutenant. They’re easy to recognize. We got their faces up on a wall in our precinct.

O’Donnell might’ve been set to shoot, but I doubt it was at the father.

Every glint of silver is a double take. Weapon? Phone. Weapon? Phone. No one wants to screw up tonight. But here we stand, in the open. A thousand eyes on us. A thousand unseen hands out there. All angry.

“No respect for authority.” O’Donnell curses. “We need to shut this down.”

He’s right. The gathered faces didn’t flinch when we drew our weapons. Not a good sign.

O’Donnell’s radio hums with static. “Sit rep, O’Donnell. Stable?”

O’Donnell squeezes the button at his shoulder. “That’s a negative,” he reports. “This side is hostile.”

“Status?”

“We’ve had to draw weapons.”

Brief silence. Then, “How many are you looking at?”

O'Donnell looks at me. I shrug. Glance at crowd. I'm no expert. I shrug back, hold up two fingers. Best guess.

"Can't tell for sure. A couple hundred, easy," O'Donnell says.

"All hostile?"

O'Donnell speaks into his radio. "They refuse to disperse," he reports. "They're behind the line but only for now."

"Pull back," comes the order over the radio. "Tactical unit coming in."

We don't turn our backs to the crowd. We amble, toe to heel, in reverse.

"We need masks," O'Donnell says. "Asap."

"Masks?" I echo.

The canisters whistle overhead, each trailing an arc of smoke. The white-gray cloud that billows up sets people choking.

The line we held firm for hours is shattered. So long, tenuous peace. The string of yellow tape bursts and drifts to the ground as people run and scream.