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THANKSGIVING DAY has us wearing gloves, scarves, and hats.

Erin, Boy21, and I sip hot chocolate as we watch our football team lose their final game of the season on their home field.

People around here like football, but the atmosphere is underwhelming compared to the basketball games. It's Thanksgiving, so it's a little more lively than usual, but not much. Bellmont just isn't a football town.

Our marching band's halftime show's pretty awesome, though. They do a Michael Jackson tribute that ends with an amazing rendition of "Thriller," complete with zombie dance moves.

Boy21 sits with us in the smaller, mostly white section of the stadium, which makes him stick out a little, but no one says anything.

It's not like our stadium is segregated intentionally, but Bellmont citizens generally sit with the people they look most like, and that's the way it's always been.

The three of us cheer when our team does something good, but we don't say much else. The whole time I want to ask Boy21 if he'll be trying out for the basketball team tomorrow, but I also don't want to ask.

When Terrell throws a fourth-quarter interception, the Bellmont football team ends up finishing 2–6 for the season, so they don't make the playoffs. None of my basketball teammates were injured, so I consider football season to be a complete success and I know that Coach agrees.

As we exit the stands, we run into Mrs. Patterson, Bellmont's number one basketball fan and Terrell's mother, who is wearing a leopard-print hat and a leather jacket that sort of looks like a bathrobe. She's very stylish. When she sees me, she yells, "White Rabbit! Come on over here, boy."

I walk over to Mrs. Patterson and she gives me a big hug and then kisses both my cheeks. To her friends—who are all wearing Bellmont football jerseys over their coats and are the moms of non-basketball players—Mrs. Patterson says, "Did you know this here Pat McManus's boy? Time for the real season now. *Basketball!* This young man's gon' feed my son the rock all winter long and I'm gon' cheer White Rabbit and my Terrell on to the state championship. Ain't that right, White Rabbit?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Look how he quiet and respectful, just like his father was in high school," a large woman with dark purple hair extensions says. All of the other women laugh and smile and say, "Mmm-hmm!"

"Okay, White Rabbit," Terrell's mom says, nodding a respect-

ful but curt hello at Erin, who is standing with Boy21 ten feet away. “You run off with your girlfriend and your tall silent shadow. Go on now.”

We find Coach hanging out with the other Bellmont faculty members in the parking lot drinking beer from paper cups and pretending that we students don’t know what’s in the cups. He tells me that he’ll see me in the morning—which is when basketball season officially begins—wishes Erin luck, and then says he’ll drive Boy21 home, because that’s where he’s having his Thanksgiving dinner, with the Allens.

Finally alone, Erin and I walk back to our neighborhood holding hands.

The few trees left around here have shed their leaves, but because no one in our neighborhood bothers to rake, we crunch our way down the sidewalks.

“You know,” Erin says, “maybe we could stay together this basketball season. Maybe we don’t have to break up?”

I don’t say anything.

Erin and I have this conversation every year.

She argues that our schedules will keep us so busy that it won’t even matter if we are together or not, but I believe that during basketball season, a romantic relationship is a distraction, and there’s no way I can simply be friends with Erin. If I see her at lunch or before school or at my locker every day, I’ll get horny, and I won’t be able to focus one hundred percent on the season. I love Erin as much as I love basketball, which is a conflict of interest. And if we kiss on my roof or hold hands—these things will most definitely take my mind off my goals. With schoolwork and

Pop to take care of already, I can't mentally afford to have a girlfriend during basketball season.

I love making out with Erin, and holding her hand, and the peachy smell of her hair after she showers—almost as much as I love the sweaty leather smell of a gym in winter, being part of a team, and working out with the guys. And while having a girlfriend and being on a team aren't mutually exclusive, both fill a need—maybe the same need. Basketball and Erin make the rest of the world go away—focus me, make me forget, and get the endorphins flowing. It's best to be addicted to one or the other. This will be the fourth season Erin and I have taken a break, and we've always gotten back together in the past, so why do I have this strange dreadful feeling tonight?

When it's clear that I'm not going to argue with her, Erin says, "Don't you worry that I'll start dating someone else?"

I laugh because I know she's kidding.

Basketball will be her boyfriend for the winter, just like it'll be my girlfriend.

"So?" she says.

"You need to focus on *your* season too."

She knows this is true because, deep down, Erin also wants to concentrate solely on basketball. She just gets a little needy the night before the season begins.

"Can't we at least walk to school together and talk? Sit together at lunch? Aren't you being a little extreme?" Erin's smile is playful. She's messing with me. I know she gets why we break for basketball.

"I have to stay focused," I say. I think about the possibility of Boy21 actually playing, and then add, "Especially this year."

“Why?”

I shrug, because I’m not allowed to tell her the truth.

She gently elbows me in the ribs. “Tell me why you said *this year!*”

I don’t know what else to say.

“Why do you have to be so weird?” Erin says, but she squeezes my hand when she says it, so I know she isn’t mad at me.

I decide to kiss her on the lips, and, because it’s not officially basketball season yet, I do just that.

20

ERIN AND I EAT OUR THANKSGIVING MEAL at the Quinns'. The dining room is very narrow and it's hard to pull the folding chairs out so that you can sit down. None of the chairs match and the table is an old wood job with lots of scratches on it. The silverware is mismatched and crappy. Erin's parents are wearing depressing old sweat suits. Her mom's in a pink Minnie Mouse number and her dad's is plain navy blue.

Rod is there and I have to admit that he intimidates me, especially knowing what he allegedly did to Don Little.

During the meal, Rod says, "Anyone in the neighborhood bothering you?"

"Nah," I say. Rod's now got a tattoo on his neck. Something written in Irish, I think. I don't know Irish.

"What about you, Erin?" he asks.

"No," she says. "Do you ever play ball anymore, Rod?"

"Nope," he says, which makes me sad because he played ball

with us all the time when we were younger, and he was a great point guard. Dad used to take me to see him play back when Rod was at Bellmont High, playing for Coach. Rod was pretty awesome. I once saw him get a triple double against Pennsville—sixteen assists, eighteen points, ten rebounds.

“Your team going to be any good this year?” he asks me.

“I think so,” I say. “Erin’s team will be too.”

“Coach is pretty much the only good black man I’ve ever met,” Rod says, ignoring my comment about his sister. “And that’s really sayin’ something.”

Erin opens her mouth, no doubt to call Rod on his racist statement, but then she thinks better of it. She doesn’t want the family to fight on Thanksgiving, especially since Rod hardly visits anymore, which bothers Erin. She misses Rod—the *old* Rod who used to play ball with us when we were kids. He never used to say racist stuff.

I think about saying something too, like *I know a lot of good black men*, but I also know my place in the neighborhood. Truth is, I’m afraid of the new tattooed Irish mob Rod, just like everyone else.

We eat in silence for a few minutes.

Erin’s parents are older than my father and a little strange too. Her dad’s quiet like me and avoids eye contact during the meal. Her mother’s a nervous woman who makes so many trips to and from the kitchen that she never really sits down long enough to eat, let alone have a conversation.

Erin’s parents look a little like wrinkly deflated zombies. Sounds funny to say, but it’s true. There’s not a lot of life in either of them.

In some ways, their row home is a little nicer than mine. They even have a flat-screen TV, a computer, and Internet access, but I wonder how much of that Rod covers, especially since Mr. Quinn has been out of work for a long time and Mrs. Quinn works down at the town hall as a secretary, so she can't make all that much cash. There are some questions you simply don't ask in Bellmont, because no one wants to know the answers.

"I'll get you some more meat" is the most Mrs. Quinn says to me during the meal.

Erin tries to get everyone talking by asking what each of us is thankful for.

"Turkey," her father says.

"Family," her mom says.

"Guinness and Jameson," Rod says.

"Basketball," I say.

"Finley," Erin says.

"And Erin," I say.

"And basketball," Erin says.

Erin and I look each other in the eyes.

Rod snorts and shakes his head.

We finish eating in silence.

Just as soon as he swallows his last bite of pumpkin pie, Rod leaves.

Mr. and Mrs. Quinn both fall asleep on the couch.

After Erin and I wash and dry the dishes, we go to my house, where we find Pop passed-out drunk in his wheelchair again, clutching Grandmom's green rosary beads, just like every other holiday, because special occasions make him miss his wife even more.

We present my dad with the plate of food that Erin wrapped up and sit with him while he eats.

"What are you thankful for?" Erin asks Dad.

"That my son has such a good friend," Dad says. "And for this plate of delicious food too."

Erin smiles.

"You two ready for basketball season?" Dad asks.

"You know it," Erin says.

"Man, I wish I was still playing high-school basketball," he says. Dad gets this sad faraway look in his eyes, probably because he was dating Mom back then.

No one says anything and Dad finishes eating.

Once his slice of pie is gone, Erin and I go up to my bedroom and climb out onto the roof. We bring my comforter with us, wrap ourselves up into a giant cocoon, and breathe in the crisp fall air, which makes me think of opened refrigerators again.

I had planned to make out with Erin for a half hour straight, because this is the last time we'll kiss for at least three months. If either of our teams goes deep into the playoffs, it could be four months before I taste Erin's lips again, so as I run my hands between her shirt and her smooth, strong back, I try to focus on being with my girlfriend tonight and put basketball out of my mind, but I can't.

"What's wrong?" Erin finally says. "You're not into this at all."

"I'm nervous about tomorrow," I say.

The wind blows hard and I shiver, even though Erin is on top of me now and her body is very warm.

"Why?" she asks. "You've been the starting point guard for

two seasons now. Coach loves you. You're in the best shape of your life, and you've worked so hard in this off-season. You've done everything you possibly could to prepare. It's going to be a great year for you. Hard work yields big-time rewards, right? Remember our summer motto."

When I don't say anything, Erin says, "What's going on with you? You've been weird for a couple of weeks now. You better tell me now before we break up at midnight or this is going to eat you up for months."

"Can you keep a secret?" I ask her, because she's right: I need to talk about this. I know I'm betraying Coach by telling Erin, and I feel guilty about that, but I just can't keep it in any longer.

"You know I can."

I stare into her shamrock-green eyes and then, before I can stop myself, I say, "Russ's parents were murdered."

"What?"

"He's here because his parents were murdered and then he went crazy and had to live in a home for kids with post-traumatic stress. Whenever we're alone, Russ calls himself Boy21. He says he's from outer space and that his parents are going to come and pick him up in a spaceship."

Erin's mouth opens, but she doesn't say anything.

"I'm serious. When he came to live with his grandparents, Coach told me everything and asked me to help Russ. Coach was good friends with Russ's dad. Russ is using a fake last name, because he's a nationally recruited point guard who used to play in California. Coach wanted me to help Russ assimilate to Bellmont so that he could play ball for us. He's going to take my posi-

tion, Erin. I haven't said anything before about this because Coach asked me not to tell anyone."

"Wow," Erin says. "I mean, *wow*! That explains a lot. He really believes he's from outer space?"

"I think it might just be an act, but he talks about it all the time."

"He has an athlete's body. Anyone could see that," Erin says. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"Coach asked me not to," I say.

"You should've told me. I tell you *everything*. We both know secrets keep people stuck here in Bellmont forever. Do you want to get stuck in Bellmont forever? Or do you want to leave with me?"

"You know I want to be with you. I definitely want to leave this neighborhood."

"Well then?"

Erin seems really pissed, so I say, "I'm sorry. Okay?"

I look up at the sky. There're too many clouds to see anything.

She's right about secrets, but Erin knows I do everything Coach tells me to do.

When I feel like the tension's gone, I say, "I don't want Russ to take my position."

"Maybe Coach was just exaggerating? Maybe Russ isn't that good?"

"I don't know. That's the problem. I wish I knew so I could wrap my mind around it."

Erin kisses the end of my nose. "You don't even know if Russ is going to show up tomorrow. Right?"

"It doesn't seem like he really wants to play ball."

"If he does show, he hasn't practiced in a long time. He's not in game shape, so you have the advantage there. Coach would never forget about you — about all the hard work you've done for the team, and what you've done for Russ too. Coach asked you to be Russ's friend, and you did exactly that — for Coach. And let's say, just for the sake of argument, that your worst fear comes true. Even if you lose your starting position — worst-case scenario — Coach will use you as the sixth man, right?"

"I don't want to be the sixth man," I say. "I want to be the starting point guard and team captain."

"Like I said before — play hard tomorrow. Your game's the only thing you can control."

I kiss her cheek and she wiggles her body down so that she can rest her head on my chest.

"Russ's parents were really murdered?" Erin asks me.

"Yes."

"That unfortunately explains why he's so quiet. I mean, my God. *Murdered*." Erin pauses, and then says, "Is that why Coach picked you to help Russ?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I just thought that — well —"

"What?" I ask.

"Forget it," Erin says.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, but Coach —"

"How did it happen?"

"How did *what* happen?"

"How were Russell's parents murdered?"

"I don't know," I say. "He doesn't like to talk about it. I can tell."

"He doesn't like to talk about *anything*," Erin says.

"I can understand why," I say, and that seems to end the conversation.

We lie there breathing together for a bit, and I can see my breath in the moonlight.

I feel my heart beating so close to hers.

Erin says, "You do realize that Russ really enjoys being around you? He follows you around all day like a lost puppy. And the way he looks at you. You don't see it, do you? He likes you. He needs you. You've been a good friend to him this year. You've been helping him. If he comes out for the team, it'll probably just be so that he can continue to shadow you this winter. So that you two can continue to hang out."

"He only follows me because Coach told him to," I say. "That's the only reason."

"No, it's not, Finley. It's because you're a good person. It's because you're easy to be around. It's because you are *you*. You don't put demands on people and you never say anything negative—ever. So many people suck the life out of everyone they're around, but you don't do that. You give people strength just by being you."

I don't think Erin is right, but I don't say anything about that.

We lie on the roof holding each other until midnight.

We kiss once more on her front steps, after I walk her home.

"Good luck this season," I say.

"You'll be great this year," she says.

“Okay.” I take a step back.

“Do we really have to break up?”

“Just for a few months.”

“Will you be my boyfriend again once basketball season is over?” she asks.

I nod, even though it breaks the rules. In past years I’ve argued that we have to break up for real and that taking a leave of absence from our relationship is not the same as breaking up, because we’d just be thinking about the day when we’ll be reunited, which would distract us from basketball. But the truth is we both know this will really only be a temporary separation. We’re definitely going to spend the rest of our lives together.

“I better go. We need to sleep, rest up for day one,” I say.

She nods once and then goes inside.

I’m a single man.

I’m simply a basketball player—a point guard.

And it’s going to be an interesting season, for sure.

THE SEASON



*"Sometimes a player's greatest challenge
is coming to grips with his role on the team."*

Scottie Pippen

21

JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER YEAR, I'm the first one to arrive.

We have the early practice today, so the gym hasn't been opened up yet. I have to wait outside for Coach to show.

It's cold, especially since I'm wearing shorts.

The six-seven Wes Reese walks up with his nose in a book that's covered in brown paper. He tries the door without even seeing me. When he finds it locked he looks up from his book and says, "Hey there, White Rabbit. Didn't see you."

"Yo," I say.

He holds his book up. "Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. Good stuff."

I nod even though I've never read Ralph Ellison, and, truthfully, I don't know who he is.

Sir and Hakim show up next and we all slap hands.

More and more players begin to arrive, but no Coach.

Terrell gets dropped off by his brother Mike, who's driving a

pimped BMW with chromed-out rims and tinted windows. The bass from his stereo hits my chest as he cruises away.

"Where Coach?" Terrell asks.

"Dunno," I say.

He's wearing a gold chain with his number dangling from it — 3. That's new, I think.

Assistant Coach Watts shows up and we know Coach is officially late, because our JV coach is never on time.

Coach is never late.

Never.

What's up?

Suddenly, as I stand there huddling with the other players, I realize why Coach is late.

I break out in a cold sweat.

He's trying to talk Boy21 into coming to practice.

"White Rabbit, why you look so nervous?" Terrell asks me.

I shake my head and shrug.

"You should open your damn mouth more," Hakim says to me.

"The only time I hear you speak is when you calling out plays."

"What you reading?" Terrell says to Wes.

"Ralph Ellison," Wes says without looking up.

"Who Ralph Ellison?" Terrell asks.

"One of the most important African American writers," says Wes, sounding like what some people would call *bougie*. "Part of your heritage. An author you should really read."

Terrell flashes the rest of us a funny expression and then grabs the book out of Wes's hands.

"Give that back to me!" Wes says.

Terrell inspects the book and then yells, "*Harry Potter!* This fool's readin' 'bout a boy wizard!"

Everyone laughs at Wes, even Coach Watts, but I'm not really sure why.

So what if Wes wants to read *Harry Potter*?

Who cares?

I want to say something to Terrell, but my tongue won't work and I feel my face turning red.

"We have to read it for Advanced Placement English," Wes says. "It's assigned reading. It's not my fault!"

"That true, White Rabbit?" Sir asks me.

"Absolutely," I say, just to save Wes from sounding like a liar, and he shoots me a thankful look before he grabs his Harry Potter book back from Terrell.

"Any black people in Harry Potter books?" Terrell asks.

"Why does that even matter?" Wes says.

Before Terrell can answer, Coach pulls up in his truck with Boy21.

"Look who it is, White Rabbit," Terrell says. "It's your shadow. Thought Black Rabbit didn't play basketball?"

"Why's he ridin' with Coach?" Hakim asks.

"Dunno." I peer up into the sky. Gray everywhere.

Coach unlocks the gym door and we all go inside.

I decide to ignore Boy21 and simply focus on my own goals. If I don't even talk to Erin during basketball season, and Erin's been my best friend since elementary school, then I shouldn't feel bad about ignoring Boy21. Time to prioritize. Time to play basketball. My teammates need me.

Right?

The only problem is that Boy21's parents were murdered and I know that I should be helping him, because he's suffering.

As we shoot around, Boy21 hovers near me, but I just keep moving—chasing rebounds. I never really minded having a shadow, but Boy21's presence feels heavy now, like it could slow me down. It's almost like having a girlfriend during the season—an extra worry.

I catch Russ's eye once and he looks really nervous, scared, which makes me angry because, if Coach's assessment is right, Boy21's the best basketball player in the gym, so what does he have to worry about?

When Coach blows the whistle we all sit against the wall. Boy21 plops down next to me, but I don't look at him. Coach says he only has enough uniforms to keep eighteen players, and cuts will be next week. There are twenty-six players sitting against the wall, which means eight players will not make the team.

Coach talks about our goal of winning a state championship. He talks about teamwork and hard work and how we're going to become a unit—a family. He says all the stuff he says every year.

I've heard these words a thousand times before, but even so, Coach's message makes me feel lighter, focused. My muscles are ready. My heart wants to beat hard. My mind wants to shut off. It's like falling into a trance.

The season is the only thing that really makes any sense in my life. There's a clear objective. People come together to accomplish this objective, and the community celebrates that. Basketball's the only thing around here that gets done right, the only thing

that people consistently support. It's the best thing in my life by far, except for maybe Erin.

Soon we're running full-court drills, but I can't even lose track of Boy21 in the shuffle of the lines because he's performing so horrifically that everyone notices him.

The first pass he makes goes into the stands.

The first four shots he takes are air balls or bricks.

He gets beat every time while playing defense.

He looks awful—like he's drunk or something.

His shoulders are slumped forward and his knees are together, which is a terrible basketball stance. He's always looking up at the lights, like he's expecting to be beamed up into outer space or something, or maybe like he's praying. It's clear that he really doesn't want to be here.

But the funny thing is: I'm not happy about this. I actually start to worry about Boy21, because the expression on his face makes it look like he's about to cry. I worry so much about Boy21 that it starts to affect *my* game, and when I throw a bad pass, Coach yells, "What's wrong with you, Finley? You're competing for your starting spot too! No free rides!"

Coach has never yelled at me like that before. It makes me really nervous and confused.

In order for Coach to be happy with my performance, both Boy21 and I need to play well, which seems unfair. I'm connected to Russ in a way that the other players are not.

When Coach goes over the new offensive plays, I'm relieved to find myself still practicing with the first squad.

Boy21 runs with the second team, but he can't seem to

remember the plays, even after watching me run them for a good twenty minutes.

He's awful.

Too awful.

Unbelievably terrible.

It's almost comical.

The other starters exchange angry looks and shake their heads and mumble curse words, because Russ is single-handedly ruining the flow of practice.

It's like Boy21 has never touched a basketball in his life.

It's almost like he's intentionally —

That's when I understand what's going on. Why Coach looks so frustrated and angry.

For the next two hours I play as hard as I can, but my mind's elsewhere.

Toward the end of practice the girls' team enters the gym. I glance up at Erin. She's watching my every move, rooting for me with her eyes and fighting an urge to wave. I wish I could tell her what's going on, but we won't be speaking for another three months, and that's just that.

My practice uniform is heavy with sweat. My hair and skin are slick. My muscles are tired and so is my mind, because of Boy21. Basketball has never been so stressful before. I'm thinking too much. It's better when athletes don't think.

As we run our end-of-practice sprints I make sure that I finish first every time, even though Sir, Hakim, Terrell, and probably Boy21 are much faster than I am when they're not tired. I'm tired too, but because I'm not as gifted as the other top players, I have

to outwork talent, like Dad says, so I push myself harder and win every sprint by five to ten feet.

I try to make up for my poor practice and soon my lungs are aflame and my legs are screaming, threatening to quit on me.

Each time, Boy21 finishes dead last.

He looks pathetic.

“Bring it in,” Coach says.

We huddle together and put our hands in the center so that we make a big wheel of bodies with arm spokes.

Coach says, “Second session starts at three. Finley and Russ, I’ll see you in the coaches’ office. On three, team! One, two, three—”

“Team!” everyone yells, and then I follow Coach into his office and Russ follows me. Coach Watts herds everyone else into the locker room and the girls take the court with the noise of a dozen or so basketballs being dribbled and twice as many pairs of sneakers pounding the hardwood floor.

Boy21 and I stand on opposite sides of the office.

Coach shuts the door and says, “Finley, I asked you to help Russ transition to Bellmont, correct?”

I nod.

“Based on what I told you about Russ, do you not think that our team would have a better chance of achieving its goals if he played for us this year?”

Boy21 looks at his shoes.

“He’s known that you were clued in from the start, because I told him about our conversations,” Coach says. “So just answer my question, Finley.”

“Yes.”

Yes, the team would be better with a nationally recruited all-star point guard playing instead of me.

“Then why did you tell Russ not to come out for the team?” Coach asks.

My eyes almost pop out of my head. I never told Boy21 not to come out for the team. *Never!* I open my mouth but no words will come. My tongue just won’t work.

It feels like my heart is a squirrel trying to climb up and out of my throat. My hands are balled up. Sweat beads are jumping from my face to the floor.

“He never exactly *said* that to me,” Boy21 says. “Not with words.”

“What?” Coach says to Boy21. “You told me this morning that Finley said you shouldn’t play for our team.”

“That’s not what I said,” Boy21 says. “I said I could tell he didn’t want me to play. He never told me not to, but he never asked me to play either—he never encouraged me, and I could just tell. Coach, this is Finley’s senior year. I don’t want to come in and ruin it for him.”

“We do what’s best for *the team*,” Coach says. “Remember what we’ve been talking about?”

“Coach, Finley’s been so cool to me. He’s a good person. He loves this game a lot more than I do. He worked so hard in the off-season. Much harder than I worked. I can’t just jump in and take his starting spot. What kind of friend would I be?”

I study Boy21’s face for a long moment.

He doesn’t crack a smile.

He doesn't even blink.

He's completely sincere.

He wasn't going to play basketball this year just so I could start. That's why he was pretending he couldn't play during practice—just for my benefit. I feel something akin to what I feel for my own family, Erin, and Coach as I realize what's going through Boy21's mind. I'm not sure anyone has ever offered to make such a sacrifice for me.

"I can't take his number either. It wouldn't be right," Boy21 says.

I look down at the number 21 on my practice jersey, the number I've been wearing since freshman year. I knew this was coming, but I feel differently than I thought I would. Of course he'd want to wear that number.

"Finley, you never told Russ not to play basketball?" Coach asks.

"No, sir," I say.

"I owe you an apology, then."

I don't really want an apology, but I'm feeling relieved. I just want to play basketball. I just want Coach to be happy with me.

"It's been a strange situation for all of us. Listen. How about this? I'm going to step out of the room for a few minutes and see if you two can work something out," Coach says, and then he does just that.

Boy21 and I stand in silence for what seems like a long time.

I can hear the squeaking of sneakers on the court and the girls' coach yelling about hard work. The office smells of sweat and leather—like an old baseball glove. It's pretty dusty too.

I'm sort of pissed about being put in this position. Isn't it Coach's job to make sure everyone's on the same page? And he just leaves the room?

Eventually Boy21 says, "I don't want to ruin your senior season, Finley. I don't even care about basketball anymore."

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing.

Coach yelling at me during practice messed with my head, and I still feel a little out of sorts, even though I realize Boy21 basically lied to him. But I'm not mad at Boy21 at all. I've never met anyone who would cease doing what they are best at just so I could do it. I don't think I'd stop playing basketball for *anyone*.

"And I can't play unless I'm number twenty-one. I have to be twenty-one. That's just the way it is," he says.

"Why?" I ask.

"My father was number twenty-one in high school, and he's monitoring me from outer space. I promised I'd always wear number twenty-one for him, so long as I played ball. And now that he's on a spaceship so far away, I feel like it's more important than ever—but if I don't play basketball this year, I won't have to worry about numbers at all. Which is good, because you're already number twenty-one, and you're my best Earthling friend. I could just root for you from the stands, which could be a lot of fun. I could sit with your dad and Pop and we could cheer you on until I leave this planet. And I think Mom and Dad will be coming soon to take me into outer space, so what's the point of me playing basketball anyway?"

I look into Russell's eyes. He's fighting back tears. I wonder if he really thinks his parents are on a spaceship or if he's just using

space as some sort of shield—as a layer of words that allows him to express himself honestly almost in camouflage, as strange as that sounds.

Something is going on. It's like Boy21's giving me clues by making up stories about outer space.

Why?

This is the first I've heard Russ talk about outer space since we watched the space shuttle launch on my roof to mark his birthday.

If he's as good as Coach says he is, I know what's best for the team, and I've always put myself second for the team. That's what good basketball players do.

I think I know what's best for Russell.

I think about what good friends do.

I take off my number 21 practice jersey and toss it to Boy21.

He catches it and says, "Finley, if I take this, if I start to play basketball to the best of my abilities—especially if I use my extraterrestrial powers—there's no way that you can beat me out for the position of point guard. You'll have absolutely no shot."

"We'll see about that," I say.

"You have to promise me that you'll be my friend regardless. I need you to be my friend. Please promise me."

"I'm your friend no matter what happens." I mean it.

"I'll hold back for as long as I can, but eventually, I won't be able to control myself," he says. "When I play basketball, something inside of me changes. It's just the way I'm programmed."

"I don't want you to hold back." If he's going to take my spot, he at least owes it to me not to hold back. I want to win or lose it fair and square.

When Boy21 doesn't say anything in response, I say, "Do you really believe that your parents are coming in a spaceship to take you away?"

"Yes. Early in the new year, most likely, but it's hard to tell because Mom and Dad are not using Earthling calendars anymore, since they no longer reside in this solar system. Your calendar is based solely on the Earth's rotation around the sun. Once you pass Pluto, your Earth calendars are meaningless."

"But you're still not going to talk about outer space with our teammates, right?"

"They'll know I'm not human when they see me play basketball," he says. "I won't be able to keep it a secret, because my skills are . . . *otherworldly*."

I nod slowly, waiting for Boy21 to start laughing, for Coach to come running in with the rest of the team, pointing at me and howling at the elaborate practical joke, but that doesn't happen.

These words coming out of any other boy's mouth would sound like hyperbole or plain old trash talk, but Boy21 is dead serious. It's not even like he's proud of his skills. He's willing to hide his ability as if it were something to be ashamed of.

"You believe me, right, Finley? You believe I'm going back up into the cosmos with my parents. You of all people," he says.

I nod. "Do you mind if I talk to Coach alone?"

"Okay."

He leaves and Coach shuts the door behind him.

"I'm sorry I doubted you, Finley," Coach says. "The situation has been hard on me. His father was a good friend of mine, so I feel a certain sense of—"

When Coach doesn't finish his sentence, I swallow once and wait.

Coach says, "You gave Russ your number?"

I nod.

"You're a good kid, Finley. *A real good kid.* I'm making you and Terrell captains. I wasn't going to tell you until later, but considering the circumstances, I—"

"Coach, he really believes his parents are coming for him in a spaceship."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"He needs help."

"He's getting it. Russ sees a psychologist twice a week. You want to know what Russ told his grandparents two weeks ago?"

I don't think Coach should be telling me what Boy21 says to his grandparents in confidence, but he keeps talking.

"Russ said his parents were going to pick him up in October—in their spaceship—but he sent a message using his mind or something like that. He asked his parents if he could stay on Earth for a few more weeks because he'd made a friend named Finley and Finley has a 'calming presence.' He said he was enjoying your company."

I swallow again.

"He's on the edge, Finley. I don't think I have to tell you what that means, because you're a smart kid. When you see him play—really play ball—everything will make sense to you. Trust me on this one."

When I leave the coaches' office the rest of my squad is long gone. The second-string girls' team is going over a zone defense, so

Erin's back is against the wall; she's hugging her legs and resting her chin on her knees. Her eyes are on me, which is when I realize I'm shirtless. I see concern on her face, but I can't think about Erin now so I just turn my head and go change in the locker room.

I find Boy21 outside and he follows me to the town library.

In the young-adult section two copies of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* are available, so I check out both and hand a copy to Boy21.

"Wes was taking heat for reading this. He told Terrell it was required reading for AP English," I explain.

Boy21 nods.

Wes is our teammate, so we get his back.

Boy21 follows me home, where I make sandwiches and we eat with Pop, who is sober enough to mind his manners and ask us questions about practice, all of which I answer vaguely, and then Boy21 and I hang in my room and read *Harry Potter* until it's time to go back to the gym.

The book's about a kid who has an awful life but gets a chance to escape it when he finds out his dead parents were wizards. Reading it makes me wonder if I'll ever escape Belmont, and, if so, what sort of life I might have somewhere else.

We arrive to the second session early so we continue to read in the bleachers while the girls finish practicing.

Wes sits down next to us, notices what we're reading, and then whispers, "You guys don't have to do this."

I can tell he's touched by the way he's looking at me, so I give him a smile. I hold up my fist and he gives me a pound.

"It's a really good book," Wes says, and then pulls out his copy. "Surprisingly good."

When Terrell, Hakim, and Sir see us reading *Harry Potter* they just shake their heads.

During the second session Boy21 picks up his game, but not too much. I actually think he plays just well enough to make the team, but not well enough to challenge me for my position.

My ego wonders if all his and Coach's talk about how good he is might just be inflated hype, but there's something deep down inside me that knows Boy21's still holding back.

He's not going one hundred percent and doesn't get physical with anyone.

He's simply coasting without making any mistakes.

He's *in* the game, but he's not *playing* the game.

After she changes in the locker room, Erin sits alone in the stands for a while watching us, but then halfway through practice I look up and she's gone.

I don't like her watching me practice because it makes me nervous, but I already miss her.

22

WE PRACTICE, WE GO TO SCHOOL, we do our homework, we read *Harry Potter*... and that's really all Boy21 and I do.

When he asks why we don't see Erin anymore, I say, "Basketball is my girlfriend now," which makes him laugh, and I guess it does sound pretty funny.

We finish reading the first Harry Potter book a few days after Wes does.

Before Friday-afternoon practice, while shooting around in the gym, Wes says, "So what did you think of *Sorcerer's Stone*?"

"If one of your friends had magical powers," Boy21 says, "would you want to know about it?"

"Like Harry does?" Wes says, moving his shoulders back six inches and scrunching up his face. "*Real* magical powers?"

"Powers that not everyone else has," Boy21 says.

"Hell yes, I'd want to know," Wes says.

"What if it meant you'd never see them again? Not everyone

gets to go to Hogwarts, right?" Boy21 starts rubbing his palms against his sides.

"Why you askin' me this, Russ?"

Boy21 rolls the back of his head across his shoulders.

Wes cocks his head sideways at me, but I only shrug.

"You guys want to come over my house tonight and watch the movie version of the book?" Wes asks. "My mom got it for me on Netflix."

So that night the three of us watch the movie version of the book, which is pretty good. Lots of magic, castlelike buildings, and friendship.

After the movie Wes takes us into his room and plays his favorite rap group, N.E.R.D. The music is very funky, not like the straight-up gangsta rap music I usually hear in the neighborhood, although there *is* a lot of cursing.

(I don't really listen to music much, maybe because I have no iPod. Music is okay, but I don't go crazy for any one type.)

"Do you guys know what N.E.R.D. stands for?" Wes asks.

"What?" I say.

Boy21 says, "No one. Ever. Really. Dies."

"You a fan, Russ?" Wes says.

Boy21 nods and smiles.

"You seen the Seeing Sounds Game on their website?" Wes says. "Retro. *Badass futuristic funky*."

Wes punches up the N.E.R.D. website on his computer and then hits the right link. The Seeing Sounds Game has an outer-space theme.

No wonder Boy21 likes this group.

A giant gorilla chases the group members across a moonlike landscape.

"It's an old-school video game. You play as one of the group members," Wes says, and then he and Boy21 take turns playing.

When they finish messing around on the N.E.R.D. website, Wes suggests we form a Harry Potter book club. He wants to read each book and watch each film in between readings. I always thought that book clubs were for rich women, but it feels good to be included in something other than basketball.

We both agree to join him and pick up copies of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

I like Wes. We've always been friendly, but I'm starting to feel like maybe he could be a real friend to both Boy21 and me—someone we hang out with regularly. Maybe because he's the weird type of kid who forms a Harry Potter book club. Wes is strange like that. Odd like us.

Why didn't I hang out with Wes before?

As we walk back to the Allens' home, I ask Boy21 about N.E.R.D. and the outer-space theme of their website, and he says, "That's just pretend outer space, not real outer space, but it's true that no one ever really dies."

I raise my eyebrows when he glances at me.

"Matter cannot be destroyed nor created," he says. "That's one of the basic principles of the universe, first of all. But then there is your life force, which is contained and trapped here on Earth by your body—your flesh—which is like a prison. When you Earthlings die, your life force is released and then you're free to travel through the galaxies again. That's not death, it's liberation."

“Umm . . . *what?*” I say.

“I only tell you, Finley, because you seem to be enlightened. The rest can’t handle such ideas.”

I feel a little proud knowing that Boy21 thinks I’m special, but I also feel a little sad too, because Boy21 is suffering. Deep inside his brain there is a war going on — a war that he’s losing.

There’s not much I can do to help him.

23

I SEE ERIN IN THE HALLS of our school and in the gym. We pass and she always tries to catch my eye or rub elbows, pretending it's an accident, but I keep walking with my eyes straight ahead, like I don't notice her.

Coach names Terrell and me this year's captains during a team meeting. The team celebrates by eating a dozen or so pizzas.

The day before our first game, Coach announces the starting lineup, and I get the nod at point guard.

All is going as planned, and I sort of forget about Boy21's ability to take away my starting position.

I'm playing organized basketball again.

On the court it's all adrenaline and sweat and movement and leather and cheering and squeaking sneakers and high fives and the feeling that I can and am accomplishing something.

Off the court it's all anticipation, hunger, counting down the minutes until the next practice or game, drawing plays in my notebooks, visualizing myself on the court: seeing myself diving for loose balls and feeling the scabs on my knees burn; defending so closely my mark's knees and elbows leave bruises on my legs, arms, and chest; passing creatively, finding the open hands of my teammates; even making a few layups; Coach telling me I did well; Dad and Pop smiling proudly.

It's all sweaty practice and daydreaming until I'm suddenly playing our first real game against weak Rockport, and I'm actually *doing* all the things I visualized, which feels so amazing, I wonder if it's real—like maybe I'm sitting in science class just daydreaming.

But I'm not daydreaming in science class; I'm playing basketball.

I rack up fifteen assists while Terrell scores thirty-two points.

We're up by forty at the end of the third quarter, and so Coach puts in the second squad.

On the bench I notice my heartbeat slowing, my muscles cooling, and I begin to feel a wonderful sense of having completed a task.

I watch Boy21 play and again I can tell he isn't really playing. He doesn't make any mistakes, but he just looks to get the ball to the other backups so they can try to score. He's running at three-quarter speed; he doesn't shoot when he's open; there's no intensity.

He's playing very unselfishly, which is nice to see, but it also

makes me feel as if he's hiding in broad daylight — like he's afraid to show the world what he can really do.

We win the game 101–69.

Dad is proud.

So is Pop.

24

THE SECOND GAME OF THE YEAR is the annual boy-girl doubleheader against Pennsville, our archrivals in basketball and by far our best competition for the conference championship. The day before the game, in practice, Coach has us all lined up sitting against the wall when he says, “Based on our scouting reports, Pennsville’s going to run what we’ll call a triangle-and-two on Terrell, which means they’re going to double-team him anytime he gets the ball.”

“Damn,” Terrell says. “I hate being double-teamed.”

Coach ignores Terrell and says, “Wes, Hakim, and Sir will experience a matchup zone, which will leave Finley wide open.”

What Coach means is that Pennsville doesn’t think I can make my jump shots—they don’t think I’m a threat to score. I’m not offended, because my being the weakest scoring threat on the team is a fact. I’m a point guard, not a shooter. That’s my role, and other teams have doubled Terrell before, but for some reason

my jump shot seems a little more off this year than in years past. I went zero for two in the first game.

"Finley will have to shoot his way out of the triangle-and-two," Coach says. "Which we all know he can and will do. He just has to hit a few early shots to make them switch to man-to-man coverage. And *then* we'll be able to run our regular man offenses."

Coach teaches the second squad the Pennsville triangle-and-two defense, and then we practice against it. Just about every shot I take bounces off the rim. It feels like I haven't heard the sound of the ball spinning through net twine in years.

"Keep shooting," Coach says. "Get all your misses out today. Save your baskets for tomorrow."

I keep shooting, but I feel a little more anxious with every miss. When I glance at my teammates, I see doubt in their faces—or am I just being paranoid?

Coach subs in Boy21 for me at one point and Russ misses all of his shots too, which doesn't make me feel any better. I'm really starting to think he's missing on purpose. This depresses me and makes me feel guilty, even though I told him not to hold back.

In the locker room after practice, Wes, Sir, and Hakim all punch my arm and pat my back and say things like "You got all your misses out today" and "Tomorrow's baskets are the ones that count, not today's" and "Game day is the real day."

But Terrell says, "You better get that extra man off me early, White Rabbit. You hear? I want to hit a thousand points before the season's over."

Coach is always saying we shouldn't chase personal records, but we all know there will be a huge celebration when Terrell

scores his one-thousandth point. He needs me to do well if he's going to reach a grand this year.

I'm worried about tomorrow enough already, so my stomach flips and pulses when Coach calls me into his office. He shuts the door and says, "I only expect you to shoot the ball when you're open tomorrow. You're a decent shooter, Finley. Hakim and Wes will rebound too. Trust me."

"Yes, sir," I say.

"Maybe talk to Russ about making more shots in practice too," Coach says.

"So you think he's missing on purpose?"

"We haven't seen the real Russ play ball yet," Coach says. "And you don't know what a show you're missing."

He looks into my eyes for a long time—like he's trying to control my mind or something—and I eventually look down at my sneakers.

"See you tomorrow, Finley."

"Yes, sir," I say, and then go change in the locker room.

I thought everyone had left, so I'm startled when I hear, "Finley?"

Boy21 is standing next to me in a towel. He's the only player who uses those nasty showers, which haven't been cleaned for decades. He wears flip-flops to protect his feet.

"What's up?"

"I told my grandfather to pick me up at your house later tonight."

"Why?"

"I was hoping we could sit on your roof."

I sigh. I'm tired, and the thought of talking in code with Boy21—all the cosmos and outer-space jazz—exhausts me. “I have to do my homework.”

“We could do it together maybe.”

Russ is rubbing his chin over and over again, looking at me with these crazy intense eyes. Again, I wonder if he really has been missing his shots intentionally, and for some reason I decide he probably has. Something about the way he's standing—it's almost submissive, like a dog with its tail between its legs. Why would anyone yield to me?

25

DAD HEATS UP FROZEN PIZZA FOR US and Pop peppers us with questions about the Pennsville game plan.

“They’re gonna double Terrell, right?” Dad says.

“Yep,” I say.

“Finley should get a lot of shots,” Boy21 says.

“Score some points for the Irish!” Pop says.

“For Bellmont,” Dad says. “You think you’ll get into the game, Russ?”

“Don’t know.”

“You okay, Finley?” Pop says. “You haven’t touched your slice.”

Dad gives me a look.

I just shrug.

Boy21 and I do all our homework up in my room, but we don’t really work together. He does his at my desk and I do mine on my bed for about an hour before we put our jackets on and go out onto the roof.

It's not really that cold out for winter. In the distance a police siren is whining, but it's a pretty peaceful night otherwise, and I always enjoy being on the roof, getting a different perspective. I start to zone out a little—in a good way.

After ten minutes or so of silence, Russ says, "If I get into the game tomorrow, would you mind if I used my extraterrestrial powers?"

I'm not really in the mood for outer-space talk. "The only way you're getting in the game is if I can't hit any shots."

"You'll hit your shots."

"Well, then it's a nonissue, right?"

"Guess so."

I look up and see part of the moon sticking out from behind a cloud.

"I just want to know what I should do *if* I get in the game," Russ says. "Coach says he's going to give me some quality minutes whether I want them or not. You want to win the championship, so I figure it's best for me to use my extraterrestrial powers to help you beat Pennsville if I get the chance. I used telepathy to check with my dad up in outer space and he says it's okay if I expose myself a little bit, because he's coming soon to get me anyway."

I'm tired of Boy21's outer-space fantasies. I'm tired of Coach pressuring me. I'm worried about my inability to hit a jump shot. And so I don't say anything in response. Silence has always been my default mode—my best defense against the rest of the world.

When Boy21's grandfather pulls up, I'm grateful.

"See you tomorrow," Russ says as he climbs back into my bedroom.

I nod, but I don't leave the roof.

I hear Boy21 say good-bye to Pop and Dad, and then I watch him get into Mr. Allen's Cadillac below.

As the taillights get smaller and smaller, I try to visualize myself hitting shot after shot, but I keep missing open jumpers, even in my mind.

26

THE GIRLS' GAME IS BEFORE OURS and the stands are packed. Because the girls are usually away when we are home and vice versa, this is one of the few times I'll get to watch Erin play this year.

I sit with my teammates in the designated spot in the bleachers and when Erin comes out I see that she's changed her jersey number to 18 — my new number.

I get a little emotional as the girls warm up. I start to feel exactly what I try to avoid feeling during basketball season — in love — and I'm equal parts happy and annoyed.

Wes and Boy21 are reading the next Harry Potter book. Wes fiddles with the zipper of his hoodie. Boy21 wrinkles his brow and nods every so often like he agrees with whatever he's reading. The rest of my teammates are listening to iPods or joking around. Coach Watts chaperones us.

There's a small section of Irish who've come to root for Erin.

They're sitting with Pop and our parents and they're all wearing green. One man has painted his face green, white, and orange like Ireland's flag.

But most of the people in the gym tonight are black because Pennsville is pretty much an all-black high school.

Erin opens the game by hitting a deep three pointer, which makes the crowd erupt. She looks gorgeous out there on the court and every time she does something good my teammates punch my arm or rub my head.

Erin hits shot after shot, pulls rebounds, get steals, and carries her team to a twenty-point lead by halftime. Just before she walks into the locker room, she looks up into the stands, finds me, and smiles.

She's so happy being out there on the basketball court doing what she was born to do—and I start to envy her, because I feel as though I might throw up.

I'm thinking about the triangle-and-two.

In the second half Erin blocks three shots, intercepts two passes, drives the lane several times for layups, comes off endless screens, sinks shot after shot, and secures the win easily. I'm happy for her, and I even smile back when she looks for me at the end of the game, but I still feel as though I might puke. Big-game jitters. This one could be for the conference.

As we stretch in the locker room, Boy21 seems calm. I think about how he'd be the perfect secret weapon tonight, and I want to tell him that it's okay to play to the best of his ability if he gets in the game—not to worry about me—but for some reason, I don't. Maybe I think he's not ready, or maybe I think he is and I just don't want to lose my starting position.

"Shoot your way out of the triangle-and-two early," Terrell says to me. "We both know the team's better when I'm the number one option on offense. Right, White Rabbit?"

"Right."

I completely agree.

When they announce our squad, Terrell gets the biggest cheer by far, although I get a hearty roar from the Irish section. I see Pop parked in the handicap zone. He's wearing a green, white, and orange scarf. Dad's sitting next to him and a sweaty Erin is next to Dad even though she should be sitting with her teammates. I know that this is her way of being my girlfriend when I don't allow her to be my girlfriend, which makes me feel good, but I remind myself not to think about Erin tonight.

We're not dating during basketball season, remember?

Basketball is your girlfriend now.

The gym's rocking.

The students are chanting, "*Bell-mont! Bell-mont!*"

In the pregame huddle, Coach says, "I don't think I have to remind you that this is a play-off game. We only play this team twice, and we need to win both times if we want to take the division and set ourselves up nicely for the postseason. Good man defense. Call out switches. Quick transitions, and shoot the ball, Finley. We need you to shoot your way out of the triangle-and-two."

I swallow hard.

"On three, team. One, two, three—"

"TEAM!"

And then I'm on the court.

Wes wins the jump easily, and—just like Coach had

predicted — Pennsville leaves me unmarked, double-teams Terrell, and sets up a triangle zone.

I know I'm supposed to shoot the ball, but I try to force it into Wes, which results in a turnover.

"Shoot the ball, Finley!" Coach yells.

The next time down on offense, when they leave me wide open, Coach yells, "Shoot!"

I take a three pointer; it hits the front of the rim, and Pennsville gets the rebound.

I miss the next three shots.

We're down eight to nothing.

This isn't working.

I can't hit a shot to save my life.

"Keep shooting," Coach says. "Keep shooting, Finley!"

I try to get the ball to Hakim next, but I make another bad pass and suddenly I have two turnovers and four missed shots in a row.

I glance over at Pop and Dad and their eyes look small, their faces sheepish, like they're embarrassed for me.

"Keep shooting!" Erin yells. "Keep shooting!"

The next time down Pennsville leaves me wide open, and I call time-out.

As I jog off the court, Coach says, "Who told you to call time-out, Finley? *Who?*"

I swallow.

Coach looks me in the eyes.

He sees I'm rattled.

He sees I'm scared.

He says, "Russ, report in for Finley."

Russ doesn't make a move. Coach Watts grabs his elbow and sort of gives him a push in the right direction. Boy21 looks at me, but I look away.

As Russ reports in at the scorer's table, I become invisible—everyone is avoiding eye contact because they're embarrassed for me.

Boy21 takes my place on the bench with the starters.

"Same exact game plan," Coach says. "Russ—you're the shooter now."

"Coach," Terrell says, "he can't shoot. We're already down eight."

"You might be surprised," Coach says. "Now execute the game plan."

"Finley," Boy21 says. Everyone looks at me. *Everyone*. "Do you want me to use my extraterrestrial powers to win this game?"

"What did he just say?" Terrell asks.

"Extra-*what*?" Sir says.

"Huh?" Hakim says.

"Russ!" Coach says. "Not now!"

"Finley," Boy21 says a little more slowly. "Do you want me to use my extraterrestrial powers to win this ball game? Your call."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Terrell says. "We got a game to play!"

Boy21's staring at me—communicating with his eyes—and I can tell that he doesn't really want to do what he is about to do.

Part of me wants to see if he's the real deal.

Part of me just wants to beat Pennsville.

Part of me knows that I should've been encouraging my friend to use his talents all along and that I've been selfish.

The buzzer sounds.

The time-out is over.

"Finley," Boy21 says, "I need you to say it's okay."

Finally I say, "It's okay."

Somehow I know this means I won't play again tonight.

"Okay, same game plan," Coach says once more as I sit down on the other end of the bench and the rest of the team takes the court.

I feel ashamed being on the bench. Like I'm naked or something.

Everyone in the gym is watching the game, I know, but it feels like all eyes are on me. I begin to feel hot, anxious. I've never visualized being benched. This is not how things are supposed to be.

Sir inbounds the ball to Boy21 at half-court.

"Coach!" Boy21 shouts as he dribbles all alone, well behind NBA three-point range. "You won't be mad at me if I use my extraterrestrial powers?"

My teammates on the bench are all whispering.

People in the stands are repeating Boy21's words to one another.

Somehow I know—everything is about to change.

Coach yells, "Russell, just play ball like you can. *Please!*"

The Pennsville coach shoots a strange expression over to our bench.

And then it happens.

With no one on him, Boy21 pulls up for what amounts to a half-court jump shot.

As the ball arcs through the air, time slows down in my mind, like in a movie—I can see everything at once: the collective shock of my teammates, the expressions on the fans' faces, the mocking smiles of the opposing team.

Russ pulled up for a half-court shot with no one on him!

People are outraged.

How could a no-name kid coming in off the bench take a half-court jumper?

The audacity!

Who does he think he is?

But then the ball goes in—*swish*—and the crowd goes wild.

Boy21's face changes.

His eyes narrow.

His lips tighten.

His body loosens up.

He slaps the floor with his palms, gets into a low defensive stance, and waits for his man to reach him. When Pennsville's point guard crosses half-court, Boy21 guards him tightly and then steals the ball with ease.

He dribbles four times and then takes off at the foul line, spreads his legs, and soars.

Hanging there in the air, he looks like the famous Michael Jordan silhouette.

The entire gym rises up in anticipation and Boy21 dunks the ball with resounding authority.

If we didn't have breakaway rims, the backboard would have shattered into a million pieces.

My teammates on the bench are out of their seats, hooting, pumping fists in the air, hugging one another, going nuts.

JV Coach Watts has to pull a few of them off the court so we won't get a technical foul, and Coach gives me a glance that says, *Now do you understand what I was talking about?*

Pennsville calls time-out and their coach yells over, "What the hell is this, Tim? Don't think I'm not going to check his records. This is shady. *Shady!*"

"Damn, Russ!" Hakim says.

"You really do have magic powers," Wes says. "I feel like I'm at Hogwarts."

"We're gon' win this game," Sir says.

Terrell gives me a look that says, *You knew, didn't you?*

"All right," Coach says. "Let's concentrate on the game plan."

No one says a word to me in the huddle and I sort of fade into the background.

When the game resumes, Boy21 dominates.

He hits three pointers.

He pulls rebounds.

Runs fast breaks.

Dunks the ball.

Blocks shots.

Accrues steals.

It's like an NBA player decided to show up and play for our high-school team—that's how good Boy21 is. He's Andre Igoudala, playing against children. A man among boys. Players fall

down like they have broken ankles when they try to guard Russ, because he's too quick. Boy21 outruns, outshoots, outjumps, and outdribbles everyone on the court.

Soon we're winning easily—but the second quarter ends with me still on the bench.

While Coach and Mr. Watts argue with the Pennsville coaches, who are demanding that the refs check Boy21's eligibility—as if Coach is expected to pull out a file containing Boy21's birth certificate and papers that document his entire life—the team goes into the locker room and peppers Boy21 with questions.

Why were you pretending that you couldn't play?

How'd you learn to play like that?

What was that you said earlier about having extraterrestrial powers?

Where'd you come from?

What the hell is going on?

Boy21 sits on the locker-room bench listening to all of the questions with a very peaceful expression on his face.

If I didn't know better, I might say he looks smug.

But I know better.

He has two choices: He can tell everyone about his parents being murdered and his spending so much time in a group home for teens diagnosed with post-traumatic stress, or he can tell them about outer space.

I know what he'll choose before he even opens his mouth.

"I am called Boy21," Russ finally says to the team. "I'm a prototype sent to your planet to collect data on what you Earthlings call emotions. I'm not human, as you can clearly see when I play basketball to the best of my ability."

All jaws drop.

Silence.

Wes squints like he's expecting me to put it all into context for him, but what would I say even if I were more of a talker?

"What the *hell* are you talkin' 'bout, Russ? Stop playin', yo!" Hakim says, and then everyone laughs nervously.

"You're not for real?" Sir says, smiling now, as if what Boy21 said was all a joke. "You're just messin' with us, right, Russ?"

Boy21 shakes his head the way a father would at a little boy who doesn't understand something elementary, something simple that all adults understand—like why lakes freeze in the winter, or where babies come from.

"He's not playin'," Terrell says, looking very serious. "He believes it. You can see it in his eyes. This fool's *crazy*."

Boy21 just continues to smile sort of sadly.

Before anyone can say more, Coach strides into the room and launches into an explanation of his game plan for the second half now that Pennsville's out of the triangle-and-two and will be focusing more on Russ.

It's hard for me to listen to Coach talk about basketball.

I think about the newspaper photographers and reporters I saw standing at the end of the court—all the many classmates and neighborhood people who'll now be focusing their attention on the new basketball god in town. It won't be long before the word spreads and college scouts start coming—maybe even NBA scouts.

This might all sound overly dramatic on my part, but everyone in the room is thinking the same thing on some level after seeing what Boy21 can do.

We're going to win the state championship, and that's what matters most—not the fact that Boy21 is claiming to be from outer space.

While Coach talks, the smile on Boy21's face grows more and more strange, but he doesn't really seem to be paying attention to Coach, or to any of us—he's off in his own little world.

When we burst from the locker room and begin our halftime warm-up, I spot Erin staring at me with a very concerned expression on her face. I don't look up at Pop and Dad. I figure Coach will work me back into the game at some point, but I'm starting to feel pretty humiliated and pathetic sitting here on the bench, especially after all the work I did this past season and what I did to help Boy21 after Coach asked me to do just that.

But Coach doesn't work me back into the game.

Pennsville focuses on containing Boy21 in the second half, which allows Sir, Hakim, Wes, and Terrell to score a lot of points.

We maintain a ten-point lead throughout, but Coach doesn't risk subbing in any of the bench—not even when Pennsville calls time-out with only a minute to go.

By the end of the game the finality of my position hits me and my eyes begin to burn. I feel as though I might start crying. As lame as it sounds.

My relegation hurts.

I love basketball more than anything.

I worked harder than anyone on the team.

I spent all that time with Boy21, just like Coach asked me to do.

And yet I rode the bench through one of the most important games of the year.

When we win and it's time to shake hands, the few reporters in the building rush Boy21 and ask him questions about who he is and where he came from.

"Call me Boy21," he tells them, and then he points to the ceiling. "I'm from outer space."

Coach is arguing with the Pennsville coach, who shouts, "The kid couldn't have just dropped from the sky! Why didn't anyone know about this Washington if he's a legit part of your squad? What did you have to hide? I'm protesting this game! This is bullshit!"

The students and parents have rushed onto the floor and my teammates are celebrating like we've already won the state championship.

Boy21 is talking about the cosmos with a handful of very confused reporters.

My teammates are high-fiving everyone, yelling taunts, rapping, and even dancing. Parents and students are on the court. It's like a deliriously happy mob has formed, almost like it's New Year's Day or something. I should be celebrating too, but I can't.

I feel like I might freak out.

I'm not supposed to leave, but I slip out the back door and start running laps on the crappy track.

It's cold out, especially since I'm only wearing my basketball uniform, and suddenly I'm sprinting, although I'm not sure why.

I'm never going to get any significant minutes at point guard now that Boy21 has emerged as the best damn player in the universe—and I worked so hard. I can't imagine facing Pop and Dad later, having to tell them that I tried my best, but I'm no

longer a starter. And I also know that things with Boy21 and me are going to change as well. No more being left alone, and how can I be his friend when all's I want to do is beat him out for the point-guard position? It's not fair.

And so I run harder, trying to stop thinking, turn off my mind, get the endorphins flowing, the heart pounding, and work off what I couldn't while sitting on the bench.

"Finley—wait up!" Erin sprints to catch up with me. "You need to go back inside or Coach will suspend you for leaving before the team talk."

"I can't talk to you," I say. "It's basketball season. We broke up."

"Go back inside before Coach realizes you left."

"Didn't you see how good he is?"

"I did."

"Then why should I go back inside?"

"Because you worked hard. *We* worked hard. *You owe it to me.* Coach benched you because you stopped shooting, not because Boy21 is better than you. If you would've kept shooting in the first quarter when he told you to shoot, he would've worked you back into the game. But you didn't execute the game plan, Finley. He was disciplining you. And now you're acting like a baby, running out here all alone in the dark, freezing-cold night."

Erin says all this while sprinting next to me, and for some reason her words make me pick up the pace until she stops running.

I sprint a lap without her.

She's right.

I *was* being disciplined, and I deserved it.

I *am* acting like a baby.

The sprinting relaxes me.

I want to tell Erin that she was amazing out there on the court tonight, but I'm still upset, so when I reach her I just nod once and pant out warm silver clouds into the cold night.

Erin is shivering and I fight the urge to put an arm around her.

"Get your butt inside!" Erin smiles at me sort of funny. "Hurry!"

I want to touch her. A roof night with Erin would feel fantastic right about now. My toes and fingers start to tingle. I'm glad when she lets me off the hook by raising her hand. I give her a high five and then run back inside, where the team is finally filing into the locker room.

Again, Boy21 sits with what could be mistaken for a very smug look on his face, but no one is asking any questions this time.

When Coach arrives he starts talking about what worked in the game and what we need to improve, just like he always does. He doesn't say a word about Boy21.

Coach talks some more about what we will be focusing on tomorrow in practice, and then he tells us that he's proud of the way we played as a team tonight, which is a little ironic because I only played a minute or so and the other twelve nonstarters in the room who *don't* think they are from outer space didn't get into the game.

When the talk is over we put our hands in the middle and yell "*Team!*"

As we disperse, Coach Watts stands between Boy21 and the rest of the squad, almost like he doesn't want anyone to speak to Russ.

Coach Wilkins asks me to meet him in his office, and when he shuts the door behind him he says, "Russ is the new point guard, so if you want to get into the game, you had better shoot the ball when you're open. *Understand?*"

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't execute the game plan, Finley. I had to bench you. Would've done the same thing to any other player."

I believe that.

"You have anything to say?" Coach asks.

I think about it, and then say, "I think he's pretending."

"Come again?"

"Russ. He's just talking about outer space to keep people at arm's length."

"I know."

"He doesn't want to play basketball."

"If he didn't want to play, I don't think he would have put on such a show tonight," Coach says.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Coach."

"We do the best we can, Finley. We can't change what happened to the boy's parents, but we can give him an opportunity to do what he's best at. He needs to play basketball—just like you do. Trust me."

Coach has to believe he's doing the right thing because he doesn't know what else to do. I once heard someone say that everything looks like a nail to the man with a hammer in his hand. I thought it was just a corny cliché when I first heard that expression, but I think it actually applies to Coach right about now, which makes me sort of sad.

I want to play basketball and win the state championship.

I want to be the starting point guard.

I also feel like I should be helping Boy21, and I'm not sure Coach is right about Russ needing to play b-ball.

But I'm not the coach, and so I say, "I'll shoot the ball when I'm told to shoot the ball from now on."

"Good," he says. "See you tomorrow at practice."

DAD LEFT JUST AS SOON AS the game ended. He had to get to work on time.

Because I want to be alone, I tell Pop that I'm going out for hot wings with the team.

Erin's parents take the old man home and I walk through the gray, dirty, trash-everywhere streets of Bellmont.

Almost all the streetlights have been smashed with rocks, so it's dark.

It's frigid out and I'm still in my shorts, with a winter coat on top. As I walk, I'm surprised that I'm not thinking about the game or losing my starting position.

I'm thinking about Boy21, and how bad he must be hurting.

People just don't go around saying they're from outer space for nothing.

The deep bass of an expensive car-stereo system approaches from behind. I turn my head, but all I see are two bright head-

lights. Somehow I know the car's going to stop, and it does just as it reaches me. The music turns off and I hear, "Yo, White Rabbit, get in."

It's Terrell's voice.

I walk to the passenger-side window. He's riding with his brother Mike. Both of them are wearing gold chains and huge diamond earrings.

"Don't just stand there lookin' at us," Mike yells from the driver's seat. "Get your lily ass in the car before you freeze it off in those ball trunks. Your knees look like snowballs!"

I open the back door and hop in, but Mike doesn't drive.

"You knew about this outer-space shit from the beginning, didn't you?" Terrell asks.

I don't see the point of lying, so I nod.

Terrell has turned his body so that he's facing me, but Mike's looking at me through dark sunglasses in the rearview mirror. It's after ten and he's wearing sunglasses. I smell some sort of sweet smoke in the air and then see that Mike is puffing on a joint. I want to get out of the car, but I know I can't.

"How crazy is he?" Terrell says.

"I don't know."

"Crazy like he might come to school with a gun and start shooting people, or crazy like he just says amusing things about outer space?" Terrell says.

"The latter, I think," I say.

"What you mean *the ladder*?" Mike says. "You gon' climb a damn tree or somethin'?"

"So he's just all talk?" Terrell says.

"I don't really know."

"Coach ask you to help him, right?" Mike says.

"Yep."

"So you go and be his friend even though he gon' end up takin' your position?" Mike says.

"Right."

"That's White Rabbit for you," Terrell says.

"*You good people*," Mike says, and then he takes a drag off his joint. "I like you, White Rabbit. You got what the old people call *character*."

"Russ is crazy as a mofo, but he makes us a better team," Terrell says.

"I'm'a drive you home," Mike says. "You all right."

I don't want to let Mike drive me home because he's high, but there's nothing I can do about it, so I just sit quietly in the backseat. When one of the most feared drug dealers in the neighborhood wants to drive you home, you let him drive you home. I know he's strapped. There are probably several guns in the car, and who knows what's in the trunk.

We pull up to my house, and just before I get out, Mike says, "You need any paper, White Rabbit?"

"Money," Terrell says when I don't answer.

I shake my head no.

"Let us know if your family ever needs paper," Mike says. "You can always work for us. We like to employ people with character."

I nod once, even though I never want to be a drug runner, and then get out as fast as I can.

When Mike and Terrell drive away I go inside and find my grandfather drinking a beer.

My dad's already at work, so it'll be just Pop and me tonight.

"You feel like shit, don't you?" Pop says.

"Yeah."

"Well, you shouldn't. Your father's always telling you that you can outwork talent, but I got a news flash for you, Finley. You could work as hard as you humanly can for the rest of your life and you'll never be as good as what we saw tonight." He takes a swill from his bottle and says, "I fancy a bath. You game?"

I nod and push Pop into the bathroom, where I strip the old man and lift him into the tub.

As I hold the detachable showerhead for Pop, he washes his hair, and I watch the suds run down his neck and over Grandmom's green rosary beads. Pop won't even take them off to bathe. When he finishes, he tells me to turn off the water and when I do he says, "Coach will work you into the games. Don't worry. It'll work out."

I'm wondering what Boy21 is thinking right now. Did he enjoy playing tonight? Did it make him feel better? Does basketball help him the way it helps me? And, if so, does he need the starting position more than I do?

"I love watching you play ball, Finley. Best part of my days lately — makes me feel like I still have legs, even — but life's more than games. This Russ, he's special. Anyone can see that. And it's hard to be special, Finley. *You understand what I'm saying?*"

I don't understand what Pop is saying, but I nod anyway.

"You're special too, Finley. You don't always get to pick the

role you're going to play in life, but it's good to play whatever role you got the best way you can," Pop says. "And I know I'm a damn hypocrite for saying that tonight, but that don't make what I said a lie. We've both had hard lives so far. No favors done for either of us."

I can't think of anything to say, especially since I'm not special at all, so I just get Pop out of the tub and into bed.

I lie awake all night thinking about what has happened and what it all means.

THE NEXT DAY, JUST AS SOON AS his grandfather drives out of sight, Boy21 reaches into his over-the-shoulder bag and pulls out a brown robe made from bath towels safety-pinned together. He slips his head and arms through the holes.

On his chest he has spelled the word SPACE with red fabric that looks like it was once a T-shirt.

He then ties a sparkly gold cape around his neck. The cape looks store-bought and expensive, as it has a silver clasp and the material is much heavier than what might be used to make a cheap Halloween costume.

I just stare at Boy21 when he puts on a motorcycle helmet that he has spray-painted silver. He's glued a golden eagle to the top of the helmet—the kind of eagle you might see at the end of a flag post in a classroom.

I wonder why he hid the robe and cape when his grandfather must have seen the helmet, but I don't ask, of course.

"No more Russ Washington," he says. "It's Boy21 everywhere I go now. The time to leave Earth is soon. No point in lying about everything now. They've all seen my extraterrestrial powers anyway."

I give him a look that says, *You sure about this?*

Boy21 ignores my look and says, "And after practice I'd like you to listen to a special CD that will explain everything. I'm going to ask Wes to join us as well. Will you listen to the recruiting CD with me?"

I nod.

What type of CD could explain everything?

I want to know. But I also realize that Boy21 is losing it — *or is he?*

Students mob us as we approach the high school. They want to know why Boy21's wearing what he's wearing, where exactly in outer space he came from, and how many points he'll score in the next game.

The best-looking girls blink a lot, say, "*Hey, Boy21,*" blow him kisses, and even reach up to touch his silver helmet in a sexy way.

It's almost unbelievable, especially if you don't know how popular basketball is in Bellmont.

More and more people crowd around us, but Boy21 just keeps moving forward with this very eerie smile on his face.

Who knew that acting like a total freak would make you popular?

Or is it just because he's an extraordinary basketball player?

As everyone continues to press in around us and yell questions, I start to feel invisible because no one says a word to me,

even though they obviously know Boy21 and I are tight. No one ever said much to me before, but now that Boy21 has appeared, it makes me realize that maybe he has something I don't. Not only athletic ability, but also star power, no pun intended.

When we finally arrive at the high-school steps, he stops and says, "I will score many, many points in the next game—definitely more than forty, guaranteed. And I come from a place that you don't even know exists. I will be returning to that outer-space place shortly, and anything else you might learn about me will come through my Belmont Earthling tour guide, Finley, who will also serve as my Earthly documentarian."

Most of the students surrounding us laugh as if Boy21 is joking, but I can see Erin twenty people deep in the crowd, and she's biting down on her lip.

"Finley," Boy21 says, "please tell the masses all they need to know about Boy21."

Everyone turns and looks at me, but, of course, I don't speak—because I'm a minimal speaker, yes, but what would I say, even if I were a blabbermouth?

"No fair!"

"White Rabbit never says *anything*!"

"How do you run basketball like that?"

"We wanna know what you playin' at!"

"What's up with that spaceman *outfit*? You in the Black Eyed Peas now?"

"Who *are* you?"

"I'm Boy21 from the cosmos!" Russ says, and then he turns so quickly that his sparkly gold cape flies up into the air.

I march after him into the building.

The questions continue all day.

Boy21 just smiles and smiles and repeats the same standard lines about coming from the cosmos to learn about emotions.

The less he says to our classmates, the more popular he seems to become. Everyone wants to know his secret, and that's his power—just having one.

The local papers don't run any information about Boy21 except the number of points he scored in the game, and his assists and rebounds. The editors were probably too scared to report what Russ actually told them, but I wonder how long it'll be before his real story comes out and he'll have to face the truth about his past.

Our teachers don't ask Russ about his costume, which leads me to believe that they were instructed not to, because he looks absolutely ridiculous—like an insane person dressed up for Halloween or the Mummers Parade or something even crazier.

I worry about lunch, when we'll see the rest of the team without the close supervision of teachers, but we're called down to guidance and separated just before it's time to eat.

Boy21's instructed to head into Mrs. Joyce's office, and I'm directed to Mr. Gore's.

Mr. Gore's Jheri curl is extra shiny today.

"I had a lunch sent up," he says when I sit down in front of his desk. "Go ahead and eat."

I look at the hot turkey sandwich.

White bread.

Tan-yellow gravy.

It looks good.

I'm hungry, so I eat.

"Have you figured out yet why Coach picked you to help Russ?" Mr. Gore says.

I shake my head no.

Mr. Gore smiles broadly—too broadly, as if every single one of his teeth is calling me a liar.

He touches his fingertips together and keeps tapping the tops of his palms so it looks like a spider is doing push-ups on a mirror.

"Tell me something, Finley." Mr. Gore looks deeply into my eyes, until I look down at my food. "How did your grandfather lose his legs?"

I hate it when Mr. Gore asks me irrelevant questions—especially this one in particular.

I feel my face burn like it always does whenever I'm in his office. I hate this feeling I get when I'm forced to listen to his pointless, stupid questions.

"Don't you think it kind of odd—your not knowing the answer to that one? Have you never thought to ask him how he lost his legs? All these years, it's never crossed your mind to ask?"

My hands are balled into tight fists. He's trying to make me upset so I'll talk, and I don't like it.

"What happened to your mother?" Mr. Gore asks.

I'm starting to get really annoyed with this line of questioning, especially since guidance has a student who says he's from outer space in the next room.

What is the point of these questions?

I'm sweating now.

Don't lose it, I tell myself. Do something productive to take your mind off of what's happening.

I work on consuming my hot turkey sandwich. I take huge bites and enjoy the feeling of swallowing. My stomach begins to feel full. I savor the taste of meat and gravy and doughy bread.

"Finley?" Mr. Gore says. "Are you listening to me?"

I nod without making eye contact.

"So what do you think we should do about Russ?" he asks.

"I don't know."

How should I know?

"How're *you* doing?" he asks.

"Fine."

"Are you upset about losing your starting position?"

I shrug.

"It's okay to be upset."

I quickly eat the mashed potatoes and drink the milk.

I want out of here.

"Do you want to know how Mr. and Mrs. Allen were murdered?" Mr. Gore asks, which surprises me.

"No."

I don't want to know that.

Why the hell would I want to know that?

"Can I leave?" I ask.

"It's okay to feel upset, Finley. This is a lot for you to process. It's more than most young people could deal with. I just want you to know that I'm here to listen, should you ever feel like talking about Russell—or yourself. I'm a resource for you. A safe ear."

"Thanks," I say, but I'm already walking toward the door.

When I exit, Mr. Gore all but yells, "It might help Russell if you told him about your mother."

I don't want to think about what he's implying, so I just leave Mr. Gore's office and take a seat in the hallway outside the guidance department offices.

I clench my fists and then stretch out my fingers as wide as they will go.

I repeat that process over and over again until I calm down a little.

Boy21 comes out a few minutes later, but he doesn't say anything to me.

He looks unfazed.

He's still wearing his brown robe, gold cape, and silver helmet.

I follow him down the hallway to our lockers. The hall monitor hassles us, but Boy21 remembered to get a pass, so we're okay.

We trade in our morning books for our afternoon books and then Boy21 says, "They don't want me to wear my outer-space clothes. They say it disrupts the school day. Do you agree?"

"No," I say, which surprises me and makes Boy21 smile.

I didn't like my conversation with Mr. Gore, and that makes me apt to disagree with anything guidance has to say.

"Maybe I can get my parents to beam down another outer-space cape for you, Finley," Boy21 says. "Would you like that?"

"Very much so," I say and then smile.

We finish our day, and then we attend practice.

Boy21 takes off his space clothes and puts on a practice uniform so that he looks simply terrestrial instead of extraterrestrial.

When no one on the team brings up outer space or anything Russ said last night, I figure Coach must've talked to all the other team members and instructed them to stay mum.

Boy21 invites Wes to listen to the CD with us after practice, saying it's a little like N.E.R.D., because it's related to outer space, and Wes agrees, although he quickly changes the subject by saying, "I need to work on my free throws."

So we shoot some free throws until Coach shows up and runs us through a regular practice.

I run with the second team, and that relegation stings a little, although I try to rise to the challenge of playing against our best players and I'm able to lose myself in sweat, aching muscles, and the repetition of the drills.

"Looking good today, Finley," Coach says more than once, which makes me feel a little better.

After we grab our gear in the locker room, Boy21, Wes, and I hop into Mr. Allen's Cadillac.

"You want me to drop you boys off at home?" Mr. Allen says.

"They're coming over to listen to an important CD," Boy21 says.

"They are?" Mr. Allen looks at us in the rearview mirror. Brown eyes. Gray eyebrows. "What CD?"

"It's something for school," Boy21 lies. "Mostly about science."

"Okay, then," Mr. Allen says.

When we arrive at the Allens' home, Mrs. Allen insists that we each shower up, put on our school clothes, and sit down to dinner. "I didn't know you were coming, but we'll make do," she says, which is nice, so we all grab quick showers and then eat a chicken salad dinner.

Wes is very polite and carries the conversation as the Allens ask us about basketball and school.

"We're reading *Le Petit Prince* in French class," Wes says. "You might like that one, Russ, come to think of it, because it's about a boy from another planet."

Russ says, "I'd like to read that."

Mrs. Allen gives Wes a hard look—I guess she doesn't want us to encourage the space fixation—and Mr. Allen says, "Basketball is going well?"

"Fine," Wes says. "We have a good team this year. Coach thinks we can go deep into the postseason."

"That so?" Mr. Allen says. "Any new defenses? A press perhaps?"

Wes tells Mr. Allen all about our playbook—both what we have used already in games and what we haven't. They talk hoops for a long time while the rest of us listen.

With Wes around, I feel like I can be myself and remain quiet. The Allens never ask me a direct question, and Wes is very talkative by nature, so it's an easy dinner.

A few times I catch Mr. and Mrs. Allen staring at Russ's space robe and cape. There's a sadness in their eyes. Boy21 doesn't wear the helmet to dinner.

"We will go to my room now," Boy21 says when we finish dinner, "and listen to that CD for school."

"Okay," Mrs. Allen says. "Study hard."

"Excellent meal, ma'am," Wes says.

I nod in agreement.

And then we follow Boy21 up into his room, where the walls

and ceiling are now entirely covered with glow-in-the-dark stars, which seem to pulse energy. It's a little bit eerie and disorienting but also kind of beautiful, in an odd way.

"Sit on the bed," Boy21 says when he closes his bedroom door.

We sit and then Russ begins to pace.

"So," Wes says, "let's hear this CD."

"Can you guys keep a secret?" Boy21 asks.

"Sure," Wes says.

"You know it," I say.

"I used to do this thing with my dad," Boy21 says—he's still pacing. "And I've never told anyone about it before."

"What thing?" Wes says, and then he glances at me nervously, which makes me wonder if Wes somehow found out that Russ's parents were murdered.

"Back home in California, he used to drive me out to where there are no houses or lights, so that we could see lots of stars. We used to drive to this place on the coast. A little cliff that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. We'd park and walk along the edge until we couldn't see the road anymore—so that car lights wouldn't break the mood."

Boy21's pacing slows a little.

"We'd throw down a blanket to lie on and put the CD player between our heads, and while we stargazed Dad would play this music."

He holds up the CD.

The cover features a black man wearing a crazy pharaoh-looking outer-space outfit and a long cape. Behind him are stars

and what looks like Saturn, maybe—a planet with a ring around it.

“It’s called *Space Is the Place* and it’s the sound track to a movie that my father says is pretty bad, although I’ve never seen it. It’s by the jazz musician Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Solar Arkestra. Sun Ra claimed that his music could transport people to outer space. I was hoping that maybe we could pretend we were looking up at the stars and listen to the CD together. See what happens. Just like Dad and I used to do.”

Wes looks at me sort of funny, and I shrug to let him know that I’m game.

Why not?

Especially since it might help explain why Russ needs to be Boy21.

Plus I’m really curious to find out what such music might sound like.

“Okay,” Wes says, but he sounds hesitant.

Boy21 smiles and stops pacing. “You’re going to love this. *Space Is the Place!* Okay, lie down on the floor. Get comfortable. Look up at the stars. And don’t talk until the entire CD has finished playing. That’s the one rule. You’ll know when the experience is over because I’ll turn on the light.”

Wes gives me another doubtful glance, but I’m already lying on the floor, so he follows my example.

Boy21 pulls the blinds and turns off the lights so that his stars glow a weird green, and then he presses Play on his CD player and lies down between us.

The CD opens with strange outer-space noises and a woman chanting, "*It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?*"

Then there are very strange pulsing noises and squealing echoes that sound like a trumpet being tortured to death.

But as I look up at the green constellations, I get the feeling that I'm really in outer space, which is weird, because how would I even know what that feels like?

The rest of the CD features long African drumming sessions.

What sounds like a piano crashing down flights of stairs.

Sun Ra preaching about the "alter destiny" and "the living myth" and powering his spaceship with music—all over strange noises that sound more like a computer malfunctioning than jazz.

A woman sings nicely for a time, about "a great tomorrow," and is encouraging us to "sign up with Outer Space Ways Incorporated" if we "find Earth boring."

Then there is a song about Pharaoh being on the throne when the black man ruled the land, and I wonder what that has to do with outer space, but I sort of realize that the whole record is about black culture and how it might thrive more easily in the cosmos.

The music sounds nothing like N.E.R.D. at all, but it's very interesting, and as I lie there listening, gazing up at Boy21's fantasy outer space, I feel as though I'm in a trance or something, and I actually do imagine myself traveling through distant galaxies, which is pretty cool.

I've never taken drugs, but I wonder if taking acid might feel something like listening to *Space Is the Place* in the dark while staring up at glow-in-the-dark sticker constellations.

The last song is the title track and it's upbeat and makes me feel like I really want to go to outer space, where "there's no limit to the things that you can do."

After listening to this CD, it's easy to see where Boy21 is coming up with his weird philosophies and costumes.

Wes and I don't make a sound through the entire experience, and when it's over, Boy21 turns on the lights.

Wes and I sit up and blink.

"Now that was different," Wes says while making a lemon face, as if he's really saying, *What the hell was that?*

Boy21 says, "So what do you think?"

"About what?" Wes says.

"Outer space. Do you want to come with me?"

Wes raises his eyebrows. "Where exactly do you think you're going?"

"Saturn and then beyond," Boy21 says. "Black man and the cosmos! That's where my parents are now."

"Finley too? Or is space only for black people?" Wes says.

I note the sarcasm in Wes's voice.

"Finley has a calming presence," Boy21 says. "We'll make an exception. He'll be our token white space traveler."

I smile. All of this is insane. Russ could be kidding, pretending, messing with us. But Wes is uncomfortable.

"Okay," Wes says. "We'll go to outer space with you. When are we leaving?"

"Sooner than you think," Boy21 says.

"Right," Wes says. "Got it. Now Finley and I have to go. Homework and all. We'll see you tomorrow morning?"

"Very well," Boy21 says. "I'm so glad that you'll be making the journey with me. We can listen to Sun Ra some more to get used to being in outer space. We'll practice being in the cosmos again soon."

I want to talk to Russ about the music and why he and his father used to listen to it on the cliff, under the stars, but Wes has already exited the room and he's my ride home, so I'll just ask Russ tomorrow, when we're alone. It's easier to talk when it's just Russ and me anyway.

Downstairs we say good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Allen.

"Do you want a ride home?" Mr. Allen asks.

"I live just around the corner," Wes says. "My pop'll drive Finley home."

A block away from the Allens' home, Wes says, "I think this is serious. That music was nuts. I can't believe I lay there for all that time listening. He's either psycho or messing with us."

I'm surprised Wes didn't think it was an interesting experience.

"Or he's just doing what he has to do to get through the day," I say.

"What do you mean?"

I don't get to answer because I hear someone screaming my name. I turn around and see that Boy21 is sprinting toward us, his cape trailing.

"Finley! Finley! Wait up!"

Wes and I look at each other; he's just as concerned as I am. When Boy21 reaches us he puts his arm on my shoulder and pants for a few seconds.

"What's going on?" Wes says.

"My grandfather's coming to pick us up."

I see the headlights of Mr. Allen's Cadillac coming toward us now.

"I told you," Wes says, "we don't need a ride."

"Coach just called," says Russ, still panting. "There's been an accident."

"What happened?" Wes says. "Just say it."

Russ ignores Wes, puts his other hand on my shoulder, and looks into my eyes. I see the Russ I saw on his birthday, when he was talking about his father on my roof—the real Russ. Not Boy21.

"It's Erin," Russ says. "She's in the hospital. She was hit by a car."

"What?" Wes says. "How?"

"Don't know," Russ says.

Someone's jabbing a finger in my throat again; I can't breathe.

Mr. Allen pulls up, rolls down the window, and says, "Come on. Get in."

I'm sliding through the worst streets of Bellmont now, seeing my blank reflection in the window—my face superimposed on our shitty neighborhood.

Breathe.

Try to breathe, I tell myself.

But it's getting harder and harder.

"What happened?" I finally get the words out. "Is she okay?"

But no one answers, not even Mr. Allen, which seems bad.

Really bad.