

MR. GORE'S A TALL, THIN MAN with thick glasses and a Jheri curl hairstyle that the other students relentlessly make fun of. He's my guidance counselor, and I don't really like him, even though he smiles a lot, has a soft voice, and is always talking about looking out for my best interests.

He's pulled me out of English class on the first day of school, which seems unnecessary and makes me feel anxious because I had to leave Boy21 behind, and Coach won't like that.

Mr. Gore's office is covered with bumper stickers—floor to ceiling. Each bumper sticker has the name of a college on it, which is sort of ironic, because not many of the students here will get to go.

"So," Mr. Gore says when I sit down, "you thinking about your future at all?"

"Community college," I say, because it's all I can afford without a scholarship, and my SAT scores are pretty mediocre. Dad

says you can go to community college for two years and then transfer, which saves a lot of money in the end. I'll have to take out less in loans, which seems smart. And then I plan to follow Erin wherever she ends up playing basketball.

"You can do better," Mr. Gore says. "But there will be time to discuss that later." He leans forward in his chair. "So tell me about the new kid, Russ Washington."

"What do you want to know?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe why Coach asked you to shepherd him around school, for starters." Mr. Gore smiles and licks his lips. "Why do you suppose he picked you?"

I shrug.

"I know about Russ's past, Finley. I'm in the inner circle, so to speak."

He's evaluating me, trying to see what I know, or maybe he's trying to trick me into giving out information on Russ. I don't like the look on his face. It's almost like he enjoys messing with my mind.

"Tell me. Do you see any similarities between you and Russ?"

"We both play basketball," I say, and then I wish I hadn't because I don't know if Mr. Gore knew that already.

"True," he says, which makes me feel better, "but I'm thinking about something else. Something that maybe you need to talk about. Something you've kept bottled up for too long now."

I know exactly what he means because he's been trying to get me to talk about this subject ever since I was a freshman, and it's really none of his business. He doesn't understand what he's messing with. Some things are definitely better left unsaid. Mr. Gore doesn't live in this neighborhood, and it shows.

"Can I leave now?" I ask.

"I'm only trying to help you, Finley."

"Coach told me not to leave Russ alone, so I have to get back to class."

"You do everything Coach tells you to do without ever questioning his motives?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He's my coach."

"I'm worried about you, Finley. If you get to feeling like you're in over your head, you can always talk to me. I want you to know that. I'm a good lifeguard."

Lifeguard?

Take a look around, Mr. Gore. We're not exactly at the town pool.

I'm starting to get annoyed, and it must show, because Mr. Gore writes me a pass and holds it up between his fore- and middle fingers.

"You're free to go," he says.

I bolt.

14

AFTER THE LAST BELL OF THE DAY, Boy21 follows me to the gym, where I meet Erin for our after-school workout.

When I change into my workout clothes, I ask Boy21 if he'll be training with us, and he says, "I just want to watch."

I nod, and when I turn my head, I smile, because I don't want to help him earn my starting spot should he decide to come out for the team. I'm happy to let him sit on the sideline while I get stronger and faster. And as soon as I'm on the court sweating, feeling my heart race as my body moves, I stop thinking, sort of like I did when we were looking at sticker constellations, only more intense. Playing basketball makes everything else go away.

Russ sits in the bleachers while Erin and I shoot our patterns, practice free throws, and do our sprints. He sits in the football stadium while we dribble our five miles. And he sits in the corner of the room while we lift weights. The whole time he watches us with this blank expression on his face.

Eventually, he begins doing his homework.

Boy21 waits on the sidewalk when I walk Erin up to her door and give her a kiss good-bye. And then he and I sit silently on my front steps until his grandfather comes to pick him up.

The next day his grandfather drops him off at Erin's house and he becomes my silent shadow once again.

15

OUR PHYSICS TEACHER, Mr. Jefferies, announces that we'll be taking a field trip to watch an IMAX Theatre film. It's about an expedition to fix some telescope in outer space called the Hubble.

"You won't believe how much of what we'll be talking about this year is applicable to space travel," Mr. Jefferies says while passing out the permission forms. "You're going to see images that will absolutely blow your mind!"

My classmates seem happy about the field trip, mostly because it's something different and gets us out of school for half a day, but Boy21 doesn't even crack a smile, which is weird. I thought he'd be really excited to travel through space, even if it's only an IMAX movie.

In between classes, I say, "You excited about the field trip?"

"Sure," Russ says, but that's it.

I figure it's best not to bring up outer space too much, so I just leave it alone. But whenever Mr. Jefferies talks about the trip,

Russ starts opening his mouth really wide and tapping his pen on his desk, which makes everyone stare at him. I wonder if that's his nervous tic.

On the day of the trip, as we're lining up outside the high school, I'm disappointed to see that Mr. Gore is chaperoning along with Mr. Jefferies. But I say hello to Mr. Gore when he greets me.

Our class just fills the short bus that takes us to the Franklin Institute, which is in Center City, Philadelphia, only a half-hour drive away. This is only the second time I've ever been to Center City, and the first time I've been to the Franklin Institute. My dad's taken me to a few Sixers and Phillies games over the years, but those aren't in Center City.

Russ and I sit together on the bus. I look out the window the whole time, because I don't often get a chance to leave Bellmont. Before we get onto the highway, we roll through this one town called Robin Township, where everyone lives in a mansion. There's no trash on the streets, no graffiti on the trees, and shiny brand-new cars are everywhere. Some of the houses look as big as our school and the front lawns are longer and wider than football fields. It's like what you see on TV. I wonder what it's like to live in a town like that and if Boy21 had a big house out in California, but I don't ask him.

We drive through the city and down a street lined with the flags of many different countries before we get out of the bus, climb a set of concrete stairs that lead to huge old-looking columns, and then into the Franklin Institute. While Mr. Jefferies picks up our tickets, we wait next to a gigantic white statue of

Ben Franklin in the biggest chair I have ever seen. There are several high-school physics classes here, and our classmates mingle with kids from other schools, but Boy21 and I just hang silently by Mr. Franklin.

“You boys okay?” Mr. Gore says.

I nod.

“Yep,” Russ says.

I notice that Russ is opening and closing his hands over and over again, like he’s nervous or something.

Mr. Jefferies huddles up our AP physics class, distributes the tickets, and says, “When I was your age, I never dreamed I’d be able to experience what you are about to. Behold the modern wonders of science! Onward, young minds!” He’s a complete dork. He’s totally geeking out over the IMAX experience.

We follow him into the theater and take our seats.

It’s like being inside a globe, because the round screen looks like the inside of an opened sky-blue parachute—making me feel as though I am somehow falling.

There’s a general announcement about what to do if you feel nauseated. You’re supposed to close your eyes or exit toward the back, but as we are in the middle of a long row, I figure it’s pretty much impossible to escape. I hope the people behind me don’t puke on my head. The movie begins shortly after the announcement ends.

It’s an amazing experience, just like Mr. Jefferies promised. Loud and vivid, and almost three-dimensional. It feels like we’re floating through outer space and like we’re really going to be part of the space mission. The speakers are so loud they make my rib

cage vibrate. It looks like I could grab planets and stars as easily as picking leaves off a tree. And they even got Leonardo DiCaprio to narrate.

"This really is pretty amazing," I whisper to Russ, but he doesn't answer—he has his hand over his mouth, like he's trying not to get sick.

When a picture of the space shuttle appears on the screen, Boy21 yells, "I don't want to see this anymore!"

Several people make the *Shhh!* noise, and then Russ is out of his seat, climbing over people's knees, trying to escape the theater.

"Sit down!" someone yells through the darkness, but Russ keeps moving.

I stand and try to follow him, to make sure he's okay, because it's dark, the steps are steep, and Boy21 seems really upset, but Mr. Gore says, "Stay here, Finley!" and then he chases after Russ.

I figure Mr. Gore will take care of the situation, so I return to my seat and try to get lost in the movie, but I can't.

Why did Boy21 get so upset?

The astronauts float around inside the space shuttle's cramped quarters, where there is no gravity. I watch them put on space suits and fix the Hubble Space Telescope. Some pictures of the cosmos are really truly amazing. It messes with my mind a little, seeing how much there is out there, how big everything is. Leonardo DiCaprio says there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars. Hard to imagine. From time to time, I wonder where Russ and Mr. Gore might have gone and what they are talking about, but mostly I just watch the movie.

When the film is over, Mr. Jefferies herds us all out of the Franklin Institute and we eat our bagged lunches under the huge columns on the steps, where we watch a fountain shoot into the air between the Philadelphia Free Library and some skyscrapers. When I'm halfway done with my tuna sandwich, I spot Boy21 and Mr. Gore walking toward us. They cross the street and climb the steps. Our classmates are talking and laughing, so I'm really the only person who notices Russ's return.

"You okay now?" Mr. Gore asks. His hand is on Russ's shoulder—like they're old friends.

Russ nods and sits down next to me.

Mr. Gore walks toward Mr. Jefferies, leaving me alone with Boy21, and the silence feels awkward—even to me. So I say, "You missed a good movie. Stars look really different up close than they do from far away. And some of the clusters—it almost looked like some giant stuck his enormous finger into the universe and swirled everything up, or something. Does that sound weird?"

Russ looks at the cars passing by and doesn't answer me.

"Why did you leave?" I ask.

"I don't really want to talk about it, okay?"

"Sure." I understand about wanting to keep quiet—I really do.

16

LATE SEPTEMBER IS THE FIRST TIME the lunch ladies serve carrots. I wait for the dumping to begin, keeping my eyes on Terrell, but this other kid I don't know approaches first. He's looking sort of tiny in an oversize Eagles jersey, but he has this cocky look on his face. When we make eye contact he says, "Time to feed the rabbits." He tries to scrape a mushy orange mound onto my food, and Russ screams, "WE ARE NOT RABBITS!" He's not frantic, like he was at the IMAX Theatre. He's just mad. He's intimidating, with a fierce look in his eyes and a wild edge to his voice. Not to mention his size.

The kid jumps back and drops his plate on the floor.

Everyone in the lunchroom turns and faces us.

Dead silence.

My eyes are wide open, and then I'm smiling. I don't need to worry about my new friend. He can take care of himself—and maybe me too.

No one tries to dump carrots on Boy21's or my food ever again.

Through the fall, Boy21's by my side every second of the day. Even on weekends, he comes to watch Erin and me practice, but he never once touches a basketball and he never really says anything of consequence to either of us.

He's just always there.

We take him to the mall and to the movies a few times. I wonder if something will set him off again and make him get all angry like he did about the carrot dumper, but his facial expressions never seem to change. He doesn't laugh when we laugh. He doesn't smile when we smile. He just sort of hovers around us, and since Erin and I are pretty easygoing people, we don't really mind, but we start to get curious.

Alone on my roof Erin asks me questions about Boy21, but I only shrug. I don't tell her what Coach revealed to me, which isn't much. I promised him I wouldn't and so I don't.

"Does he say anything interesting when I'm not around?" Erin asks.

"Not really," I say. It's the truth, maybe because I never ask him any questions.

"What's wrong with him, do you think?"

"Some people are just quiet. Like me."

She smiles. "Quiet can be sexy."

Suddenly Erin's lips are on mine and my mouth is all hot and slippery. Then she pulls away again and says, "I don't mind quiet, but Russ is always around. We're hardly ever alone anymore."

"Does that bother you?"

“Yeah, a little. But at least he doesn’t invade our roof time.”

We’re kissing again. Hot sweetness.

After ten or so minutes of making out, my thoughts drift and I begin to wonder why Boy21 hasn’t mentioned outer space since the first time we met, but I also figure it’s probably best not to bring the subject up, because he’s surviving his Bellmont experience nicely and I don’t want to jinx that. Just surviving around here can be hard enough. Plus I don’t want to trigger another IMAX Theatre-type experience.

I respect privacy.

Also, I like kissing Erin, so I decide to concentrate on the present moment.

17

ONE NIGHT IN LATE OCTOBER, on my way home from Erin's, Boy21 pops out from behind a tree and says, "Can we sit on your roof?"

It's late, but it's also Friday night, so I nod.

I'm no longer surprised to find Boy21 following me. It's just what he does. And like I said before, he gives Erin and me space when we need it.

We head to my house. He's carrying a white box tied with string, plus his over-the-shoulder bag. He looks a little fidgety and keeps opening his mouth extra-wide, as if he's stretching out his jaw or yawning like a lion, only he doesn't look tired at all.

My dad's putting on his jacket, getting ready to leave for work, when we go inside. He's wearing that resigned miserable face he dons whenever he thinks I'm not looking, or when he's just too tired to fake it. When he sees us, he says, "Do your grandparents know you're here, Russ?"

"Yes, sir," Boy21 says. "My grandfather's coming to pick me up in an hour."

"What's in the box?" Dad asks.

"Cupcakes," Boy21 says.

"Seriously?"

Boy21 nods.

"Well, I'm off to work."

Pop's passed out in his wheelchair again, dead to the world with a beer can in one hand, Grandmom's rosary beads wrapped around the other, and the TV remote in his lap. On the TV is an infomercial for some cleaning product endorsed by Magic Johnson, who keeps saying, "This is just like me—*magic!*" every time the hostess wipes a stain off a couch or rug with the "magic" wand cleaner.

"Wish I could watch the Lakers' greatest point guard of all time humiliate himself on a cable infomercial station, but somebody has to pay the bills around here, so heigh-ho! Off to work I go!"

Boy21 laughs at Dad's joke, which makes him smile and raise his hand. They exchange a dorky dad-type high five, and then Dad is gone.

"Be gone, old cleaning products!" Magic Johnson says as he shoots old bottles like basketballs into a faraway trash can. "Magic is here. Magic! Watch out, stains! You don't stand a chance! Magic! Magic! Magic!"

Magic Johnson looks old.

"Let's go," I say.

Boy21 follows me up to my bedroom.

I pop open the window and we climb out onto the roof. It's cool, but not too cold up here. Maybe like opening-a-refrigerator-door cool.

Once we're seated he opens the box and, surprisingly, a small package of birthday candles. The two cupcakes are store-bought. Because the light is still on in my room, I can see that someone has drawn space shuttles on the cupcakes with frosting. I start to worry because of Boy21's freak-out at the IMAX Theatre.

He sticks a candle deep into each cupcake so that the wicks stick out where the flames would exit each space shuttle.

He uses a lighter to ignite the wicks and then says, "STS-120. T minus ten seconds. Eight seconds. T minus five. Four. Three. Two. One. And liftoff of *Discovery*—opening harmony to the heavens and opening new gateways for international science."

Boy21 starts singing "Happy Birthday." His eyes look wild, crazy, manic.

"Happy birthday, dear Boy21. Happy birthday to you," he sings, and then blows out the candles.

He hands me one of the cupcakes and says, "I got you a vanilla and me chocolate," and then takes a big bite out of his cupcake.

I wonder if the vanilla and chocolate comment was a joke. He's not laughing, so I say, "Happy birthday. If I had known—"

"One day short of completing my fifteenth trip around the sun, my father doesn't drive me to my high school," Boy21 says in this really serious voice. "In fact, we drive in the opposite direction. When I ask where we're going, he just smiles and laughs. We end up at the airport and when we check in, I realize we're headed to Florida. So I say, 'Dad, are you delivering on your

promise?’ When he winks at me, my heart starts pounding, because I know exactly where we’re going. We land in Florida and hit a hotel. He doesn’t even have to confirm it for me, because I know we are about to fulfill his lifelong dream and mine.”

The wind blows and the few dry, brittle leaves still hanging on to the trees rattle. I shiver a little.

“The next day we drive to the viewing spot and I can see it—space shuttle *Discovery*. It stands huge on the tower, and only a small body of water separates us. We wait for what seems like forever for it to take off, wondering if there will be complications. But it takes off twenty minutes before noon and there is this awesome noise when the rockets are ignited—and then these massive clouds explode from the bottom of the ship and billow out forever and ever along the horizon and then it rises real slow... pushed upward by what looks like a bright cone of orange lava, and a long tower of clouds forms in its wake. It may have been the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. And I remember my father putting his arm around me as we stood and watched. When it was over neither of us said anything for a long time. We just stood there smiling. It was the best birthday I’ve ever had. The best day of my life.”

When Boy21 finishes his story, I don’t know what to say. So this is why he freaked out on the physics field trip.

“Eat your cupcake,” he says.

I eat the whole thing in just a few bites. Vanilla. Rich. Moist. So sweet it makes my teeth ache.

We sit in silence for a long time.

“You want to see that launch?” Boy21 asks.

“How?”

“YouTube,” he says while pulling a laptop out of his bag. “I downloaded it before I came.”

We watch the short video. Boy21 was quoting verbatim whoever was announcing the launch on the YouTube clip—all the talk about harmony for the heavens and gateways. I wonder how many times he’s watched this video.

“Your dad,” I say. “He was interested in outer space?”

“Fascinated by it. He used to read endless books. Was a big *Star Trek* fan. He loved the final frontier. We had several high-powered telescopes too. Still do, in storage out west.”

Boy21 looks into my eyes and I start to feel as though he’s making a decision. It’s weird. This is the most he’s ever said about his past. I feel as though he’s already let down his guard far more than he had intended. But then his facial expression changes and he’s gone again, just like that.

“My father sent me a telepathic birthday card today. He says he has a present for me, but due to an unforeseen meteor shower in a galaxy that you Earthlings don’t even know exists yet, he anticipates being a few Earth days later than he had originally planned, regarding the pickup. So it looks like you and I will be spending some more time together, Earthling known as Finley.”

Part of me wants to call him on the charade and put some direct questions to him, especially after all he’s revealed tonight. He came here uninvited. He freely offered up the story about his father. He obviously wants to talk about all this stuff. But for some reason I don’t ask him anything. Maybe it’s just my nature to remain mute when I am unsure, which is always, but I feel like

I should be asking questions—that conversation would help—and yet, I realize he’s probably talking to me because I *don’t* ask questions and just let him exist as he wishes to exist. I don’t mind him being Boy21, but I sort of like Russell too.

Instead of talking we simply lie on our backs and look up at the sky, even though it’s cloudy and we can’t even see the moon.

When his grandfather pulls up to my house, Boy21 says, “Thanks for eating cupcakes with me, Earthling.”

I walk him through my room, down the steps, and out the door.

Just before he gets into the car, Boy21 turns around and says, “I wish you and I could travel through the cosmos together, Finley. You have that calming presence. Happy birthday to me—and thanks.”

“See ya, man,” I say, and then he’s gone.

18

I'M IN MY ROOM TRYING TO READ *The Merchant of Venice* for English class, which is proving to be pretty hard, when something hits my bedroom window. The splat remains of a snowball are sliding down the glass. I open up the window and cold air rushes into my room just before I get blasted in the face with another snowball.

"Snowball fight!" Erin yells from across the street.

I throw on my jacket and shoes and race downstairs.

"Where's the fire?" Dad says as I pass him in the living room.

Erin drills me in the chest just as soon as I exit through the door.

The flakes are falling huge and fast and the whole neighborhood is coated in white. Something pretty magical happens whenever it snows around here. The neighborhood gets very quiet and all the trash, broken glass, and graffiti are hidden under the white, at least for a little while. It seems too early for snow, which makes this night even more beautiful—like an unexpected present.

While I scoop up some snow and pack it, Erin hits me three times, which is when I realize that she has stockpiled snowballs. Once I have one packed, I charge Erin and take aim. She ducks and I miss, so I decide to tackle her, but not too hard, because there isn't all that much snow on the ground. She doesn't put up much of a fight at first, but then she tries to wrestle me, so I grab her wrists and pin her arms with my elbows, and we kiss.

Our mouths are the warmest things in the world right now.

"Isn't it amazing?" she says as the snow falls past my ears and lands all around her head.

"It is."

"Let's sit on the roof and watch it fall all night."

"Okay."

We see two headlights approaching, which seems weird because most people around here are afraid to drive in the snow.

We stand, and I recognize the Ford truck as Coach's.

"Why is Coach here?" Erin asks.

"Dunno."

Coach pulls up slowly, rolls down his window, and says, "Finley, take a ride around the block with me?"

I look at Erin and shrug.

"I'll go hit Pop with a snowball," Erin says. She actually picks one up from her pile and then jogs to my home. I wonder if she'll really throw it at the old man, which she could get away with, because Pop loves Erin as much as I do.

I get into the truck and the heat streaming from the vents burns my fingers when I try to warm my hands.

Coach doesn't drive around the block. He says, "How's Russ doing?"

"Fine."

"Have you talked to him about playing basketball?"

"Yep," I lie. Ever since his birthday he's been extra quiet, and I get the sense that he doesn't really want to talk about basketball or anything else, so I let him be. But Coach doesn't want to hear that.

"What does he say?"

"Nothing really."

"Nothing?"

"No."

"What does he say about basketball?"

"I don't think he wants to play basketball."

"Russ said that, or you *think* it?"

"He's not really stable."

"Are you a psychiatrist now, Finley?"

Coach has never talked to me like this before. There's sarcasm in his voice and I can tell he's annoyed with me, which makes me angry, because I have walked to school with Boy21 every day, eaten every school lunch with him, and allowed him to be my shadow for more than two months now. And tonight I was having a nice private moment with Erin before Coach interrupted us.

"No, sir," I say.

"I expect you to make sure Russ gets his physical tomorrow after school in the nurse's office and that he shows up to the team meeting on Friday. Understood?"

"Yeah."

"When you see the boy play, you'll understand why this is so important. Trust me."

"Okay."

Coach reaches through the darkness and squeezes my shoulder. "Thank you, Finley. This is about more than basketball. More than the team. Russ likes you. You're helping him."

I don't know what to say to that, because it sure doesn't seem like I'm helping Russ, and he really isn't getting better, as far as I can tell.

"Tell your family I said hello," Coach says.

I nod and then run through the falling snow toward the house.

Erin's watching the Sixers game with Dad, and Pop's shirt is all wet, which lets me know that she really threw a snowball at the old man.

"This is one feisty broad," Pop says to me.

Dad laughs. "She ran in here and blasted Pop in the chest!"

"If I had legs..."

"Sure," Erin says, "the old no-legs excuse."

There aren't many people who could get away with talking this way to Pop, but Erin's special to us. She's put her time in. She's family.

"Come on, Finley," Erin says.

And then we're on the roof again, watching Bellmont turn white—one snowflake at a time.

"What did Coach want?" Erin asks.

"He thinks I should encourage Russ to play basketball," I say.

"Cool," Erin says as she climbs on top of me.

By morning almost all the snow has melted, so no snow day.

As we walk to school Erin says, "Russ, you interested in playing basketball?"

"Don't know," Russ says.

I glance at his face and he's sucking his lips in between his teeth. He catches my eye and it's almost like he's asking for permission. I know I'm supposed to encourage him to play, but for some reason I don't.

"Physicals are after school today in the nurse's office," Erin says. "Best get one just in case. You can go with Finley."

Russ nods.

I don't say anything.

We both pass our physicals later that afternoon, but we don't talk about basketball.

On the day of the preseason meeting, Mr. Allen calls to let us know that Russ will be out sick. This is the first day of school he has missed, and I wonder if it has anything to do with the meeting.

After school our team meets in the lunchroom and Coach quickly hands out permission forms and a practice schedule that begins the day after Thanksgiving. Just tucking the papers into my backpack gives me a rush, because this moment is the first official basketball experience of the year.

After the meeting, as my teammates hustle off to football practice, Coach says, "Finley, can we talk?"

I stay behind and, once we're alone, Coach says, "What's Russ been saying to you about basketball?"

This again? Why won't Coach lay off it?

"We got our physicals," I say.

"That's good. But the boy refused to come to school today — the day of the basketball meeting. His grandparents told me he's talking about outer space again, saying his parents are coming to get him in a spaceship."

I watch the janitor empty the trash cans on the other side of the cafeteria.

"Did you tell him that he should play ball? Have you been encouraging him, Finley?"

"He doesn't want to talk about basketball," I say. "We don't talk about much at all."

Coach sighs and gets this disgusted look on his face. "Listen. Just make sure he's at the first practice. Let's just see how he reacts to being part of the team, running drills, getting back to normal for him. He needs the routine. Even if he never plays in a game. Just being part of something can help. You, of all people, should know that."

I have to admit, I'm getting a little pissed at Coach. Why isn't he hassling Terrell or Wes or any of the other starters, asking *them* to help Boy21? Why is this my mission alone? I just want to play basketball.

"I know you won't let me down," Coach says, and then lightly slaps my right cheek twice.

19

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.