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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?

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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.

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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 Iguala, 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.

ERIN



*"If you have the words, there's always a chance that
you'll find the way."*

Seamus Heaney

MR. ALLEN DROPS RUSS, WES, AND ME off at the emergency room and then goes to park his car. The automatic sliding doors close behind us and I throw up in the waiting-room trash can.

It feels like I'm turning inside out.

When I come up for air, half the room is looking at me. There's maybe twenty or so sick, weary people sitting in chairs, and one homeless man pacing at the far end of the room, yelling, "Whenever I get help, I'm gonna be thankful! Whenever I get help, I'm gonna be thankful!" The other half is watching a show about sharks on the TV that hangs in the corner. I glance up just in time to see the massive jaws of a great white clamp down on a sea lion.

Russ puts his hand on my back and says, "You all right?"

I puke again and just look up at my teammates when I finish.

I don't know how I am.

"Listen," Wes says, "you're going to have to lie and say you're family, or they won't let you in. I know, because when my sister had her baby her friends tried to come in during the birth, and the hospital people said only immediate family could visit. So tell them you're Rod. They're probably not going to let Russ and me in, so you have to get yourself together."

Wes's hand is on my back now too. He says, "You need to be strong for Erin. Be a man. *Okay?*"

I nod because I'm supposed to, but I feel like I'm going to throw up again.

At the main information desk, Wes tells the woman that I'm Erin's brother and, just like he predicted, he and Russ are made to stay in the waiting room, while I'm led to what the check-in person calls the trauma center.

I stand in the doorway for a few seconds before I enter Erin's room.

It's like a nightmare.

Her left leg is in a soft cast and there's a plastic neck brace holding her chin in a very rigid position.

Her right arm's all wrapped up.

There are red bandages on her face that were once white.

The skin around her eyes is purple and black.

Her face is really puffy and shiny; it looks like someone smeared Vaseline under her eyes.

Mrs. Quinn's sitting next to the bed, which has wheels on it, so maybe it's not a bed. I don't know.

They're holding hands.

Erin's moaning and her cheeks are wet with tears.

"I'll leave you alone with your family," the nurse says.

I stand frozen for a long time, just watching, wondering if this can be real.

Erin looks ruined.

Mrs. Quinn's hair is all frizzy and wild and her eyes look small and scared. She's staring at the window even though the blinds have been pulled. Neither Erin nor her mother notices me at first.

I walk around to the far side of the bed and take Erin's other hand in mine. She doesn't squeeze.

When we make eye contact, it doesn't even look like her, because of the swelling, but I recognize the shamrock-green eyes.

She starts talking really quickly. "Finley, my leg's shattered. I'm never gonna play basketball again—*ever*. It's over. That's it. My season's ruined. My basketball career is over. No chance for a college scholarship now. When they hit me, they knew it. They saw my face. I flew up onto the hood of their car. I was thrown onto the street—and they just left me there like I was a dead animal. It seemed like they even sped up when—But that can't be true, right? Who would do something like that? And now I can't play basketball. *What am I going to do about college?* How are we going to get out of Bellmont *now*? I should have made my decision and committed earlier. How could they leave me there? I don't want you to see me like this, Finley. I must look so ugly. Maybe you should leave. No, don't leave. And the paramedics cut through my brand-new sports bra too—I just got it two days ago—and that bra cost a lot of money, and—"

“Shhh,” Mrs. Quinn says. “You’re in shock, honey. You’ll be playing basketball in no time. We’ll get you a new sports bra. It’s going to be okay.”

So many thoughts are running through my head, but I can’t seem to make sense of any of them.

“It hurts, Finley. It hurts so much. I can’t move my leg.”

When Erin starts to sob, she looks like a little kid who’s been tortured to the point of exhaustion. I can see the pain tunneling its way through her face and body.

It hurts for her to even cry.

I want to tell her it’ll be okay—that she’ll be playing ball again soon.

I want to ask her how she got hit—what happened?

Will she ever be able to walk again, let alone play basketball?

I look to Erin’s mom for help.

“She can’t have painkillers until they rule out any possible head injuries. They’re going to scan her brain soon, and then—once they rule out brain damage—they’ll give her drugs,” Mrs. Quinn says. “You just have to hold on a little longer, Erin.”

“What about her leg?” I ask. “What did the doctor say about that?”

When Mrs. Quinn doesn’t answer my question, I study her face. She looks very scared herself. Suddenly, I understand that it’s probably worse than I initially thought.

“Finley,” Erin says.

Her eyes are red, but the green shines even now—even amid all the swelling and bruising—maybe even more so.

“Will you please be my boyfriend again?” she says. “I need you

to be my boyfriend now. I'm scared. I'm really scared. Please be my boyfriend again. I can't go through this alone. Please. Please."

I nod.

Of course I will.

"I need you to say it," she says, and her voice sounds tiny and childlike and so unlike Erin that I really start to worry.

"I'm your boyfriend again now," I say.

"Then talk to me. Tell me something else," she says.

"Like what?"

"Anything to take my mind off the pain."

"I just threw up before I came in here."

"Really? Are you okay?"

"Wes and Russ are in the lobby. Boy21 made us lie on his bedroom floor in the dark and listen to this jazz CD about using music to travel through outer space and then I was confused and suddenly I'm at the hospital and I was so worried about you that I just threw up. I puked twice. I puked yellow bile even."

"Very romantic. You really know how to make a girl feel special, Finley," she says, which makes me feel good because she smiles for a second. "I've missed you. Look what I have to do to get your attention."

She tries to laugh, but the attempt hurts her and she starts crying again.

I'm afraid that Erin might die, because she looks that bad.

"It's going to be okay."

"No, it's *not*. It's really *not* going to be okay, Finley." Erin tries to laugh, but only starts to cry harder.

Her mom strokes her forehead and says, "Shhh. It *is* okay. Everything's fine."

Because I don't know what else to do, I start to pet Erin's hand like it's a cat or something. After a minute or so, she yells, "Just everyone stop touching me — *okay?*"

Mrs. Quinn flinches.

I try to make eye contact with Erin, but she's staring fiercely at the ceiling; I can tell that she doesn't want to look at me all of a sudden and that I should just be quiet.

We wait around silently for a long time, until they take Erin into a room where they will scan her brain.

Mrs. Quinn's allowed to accompany her, but a nurse tells me to stay behind.

Being alone in a hospital freaks me out so I return to the ER waiting room to see if Wes and Russ are still there.

I find them with Mr. Allen, watching a show about snakes. On the hanging TV a snake with a head as big as a football is in the process of swallowing what looks like a dog, although I can only see the hind legs sticking out of the snake's mouth. I wonder why they play these types of shows in the ER waiting room, where people are already feeling depressed about hurt loved ones. Couldn't they find more lighthearted programming?

Mr. Allen, Wes, and Russ stand when they see me. Russ is no longer wearing his cape.

"How's Erin?" Mr. Allen says.

I shake my head and say, "Not good."

"What's wrong with her?" Russ says.

"Her leg's shattered and she has bruises all over her face.

They're scanning her brain for damage now. She was rambling for a time and then she got really angry and started yelling at me like I did something wrong, when all I was doing was holding her hand."

"The girl's in shock," Mr. Allen says. "Won't last. She'll be back to normal soon."

"Sorry to hear that," Wes says. "Damn."

Boy21 says nothing.

I look up and the snake has finished swallowing. Its midsection is now the shape and size of the dog; it almost looks fake.

"I'm gonna stay here," I say. "You guys can leave. Thanks for waiting."

"You sure?" Wes says.

"Yeah. I can catch a ride home with the Quinns if I need to."

"Tell Erin we're pulling for her," Russ says.

"Yeah," Wes says, "please do."

"We'll pray for her tonight," Mr. Allen says.

"Thanks." I go back to the trauma center, but Erin and her mom are still in the brain-scanner room.

Alone in the hospital, I think about how fragile people are, how anyone can disappear in a second and be gone forever—how close I've come to losing Erin—and I start to remember things I don't want to remember, so I bite down on the triangle of skin between my left thumb and forefinger until it hurts enough to stop my brain from dredging up any of the garbage that sits at the bottom of my memory.

When Erin's wheeled back into the room, she has an IV drip in her arm and is semiconscious.

"Her brain's okay," Mrs. Quinn says. "She's on morphine now."

I pull up a chair and hold Erin's hand.

"I'm your boyfriend again," I tell her.

"That's good," she says, and then smiles once before she closes her eyes.

EVENTUALLY COACH SHOWS UP with the girls' coach, Mrs. Battle, a large squat serious lady who always wears a tracksuit. Tonight she has on a navy-blue number with three silver stripes running the length of her arms and legs. Erin's mother and father repeat all the information we know.

Hit-and-run.

Shattered leg.

Major reconstructive surgery.

After the Quinns explain the metal external fixator—a super-skeleton on the outside of Erin's leg that will hold the bones in place—there's silence.

What else is there to say, really?

Erin's season is over.

Coach shakes his head sadly.

Mrs. Battle frowns and says, "Tell Erin the team will visit," as if that will really help.

Everyone nods sort of dumbly and then Coach says, "Finley, I'll drive you home. Let's give the Quinns some time to themselves. Erin's drugged and out for the night. There's nothing for you to do here."

I look at the Quinns and see that the wrinkles around their eyes are pink and raw. It does look like they want to be alone, so I nod and follow Coach out of the hospital.

We say good-bye to Mrs. Battle in the parking lot and then get into Coach's truck.

The Bellmont streets silently pass by the passenger window. I see a man sleeping on the sidewalk. A small abandoned bonfire in an oil drum makes an alley glow. Hookers in wigs, short skirts, and fur coats are pacing under the overpass.

"I have to take care of my pop," I say, just to break the silence. "I have to put him to bed."

"I'm taking you home," Coach says, but that's it; he doesn't say anything else, which makes me feel sort of strange.

It's late, so Dad's already left for work.

Coach tells Pop about the hit-and-run — how Erin was walking home from practice and a car came around the corner just as Erin was crossing the street, hit her, and then sped away.

Pop just shakes his head, grabs onto the crucifix at the end of Grandmom's rosary beads, and says, "I hate this neighborhood."

I get the old man's diaper changed, carry him upstairs, and then put him to bed. When I turn out the lights, Pop says, "What did Erin tell you about the accident — anything that Coach left out?"

"Just what we told you."

"Nothing else? *You sure?*"

I think about it, replaying Erin's words in my mind. "She said they might have sped up before they hit her."

"That's what I thought." The old man shakes his head and blows air through his broken, jagged teeth.

"What?"

"Maybe this wasn't an accident."

"What are you saying, Pop?"

"You're not stupid, Finley. Stop pretending you don't understand what's going on."

I think about what the old man means and immediately dismiss his words as crazy. *Why would anyone want to break Erin's leg?*

Back in the living room, Coach has helped himself to one of Pop's beers and is sitting on the couch.

"Wanted to speak with you," he says.

Before I can think better of it, I say, "Do you think that maybe someone hit Erin intentionally to get back at Rod?"

Coach opens his eyes really wide. He looks at me for a moment, and then he says, "Don't know, and I don't *wanna* know, either. *You* don't wanna know that, Finley. Haven't you lived in this neighborhood for eighteen years? Don't go there. Useless information. Not a damn thing to do with thoughts like that. You hear me?" He takes a sip of Pop's beer and says, "Sit."

I sit.

"I'm real sorry about what happened to Erin. It's a shame. A damn shame." Coach looks down at his hands for a few moments, but when he looks up, he's smiling, which makes me feel very weird. "In other news, the cat's out of the bag. You don't have to keep Russ's secret anymore."

In other news? Did Coach really just make that transition?

"I'm already getting calls from top programs. Coach K phoned just this morning. Coach K himself. Duke basketball. Russ really has a shot to go far, and your helping him get through this tough period is commendable. I want you to know that I appreciate it very much and that you'll be getting your minutes, don't you worry. I know this is a tough night for you, Finley, and that's why I wanted to say I'm proud of you. You did a good thing, helping Russ. But the job's not done yet."

I just stare at Coach. I know that he's trying to make me feel better about losing my starting position, that he's thanking me, but with Erin in the hospital—with my having just seen how bad she was hurt and understanding that her hopes for a college scholarship are now over—this hardly seems like the appropriate time to be discussing Russ.

My hands are balled and I can feel my face getting hot.

"I just wanted to take that off your mind, in light of all you have to think about now, with Erin in the hospital," Coach says. "I'm not displeased with you. Quite the opposite. And the doctors will fix Erin's leg. Don't worry about the rest. You can't control the rest. So just forget about those questions you were asking earlier. Okay?"

I nod, because I don't want to continue this conversation.

Coach sips his beer once more before he places it on the coffee table and says good-bye. Then I'm alone.

I stretch out on the couch and wait for my father to come home so that he can advise me, but I fall asleep somewhere around three.

I sit up when I hear the front door open.

I blink.

"Finley?" Dad says. "Why are you sleeping on the couch?"

My face must look terrible, because Dad sits next to me and says, "What's wrong?"

After a minute or so of waking up and thinking and remembering, I tell him what happened.

Remembering is bad, but it feels even worse to say the words.

My stomach starts to churn.

I feel guilty, but I'm not sure why.

It's confusing.

Finally I say, "Do you think that someone hurt Erin because of who Rod is and what he does? Do you think that it might not have been an accident?"

Dad looks scared. His left eye is sort of twitching. "Someday you and Erin are going to leave this neighborhood and never come back. May that day come soon."

He didn't answer my question directly, but I know he's talking in code, the way people do around here. So he's confirmed my suspicion.

"Go get your pop ready for his day, and I'll put on breakfast."

And so I do.

BOY²¹ EMERGES FROM HIS grandfather's Cadillac looking very much like an Earthling. He's wearing dark jeans, a Polo rugby shirt with the huge oversize polo-player-on-a-horse symbol, and a cool leather jacket—no robe, cape, or helmet. Judging by the look on his face I don't think I'm going to hear anything about outer space today.

"Hey, Finley," he says. "You okay?"

I nod.

"You hear anything more about Erin?"

I shake my head.

"My grandparents are praying for her."

"Thanks," I say, even though I'm not sure I believe in praying, mostly because Dad, Pop, and I stopped going to church when I was a kid.

"I'm sorry that Erin's hurt so bad and won't be playing basketball."

"Me too."

"Do you want me to sit tonight's game out?"

I look at Russ and say, "Why would I want you to do that?"

"I don't know."

"I heard Coach K called about you."

"I've met Coach K a half-dozen times," Russ says, as if Coach K were just any old person and not the head of perhaps the best collegiate basketball program in the country. "At camps."

This means that Russ has been to summer invitation camps for the best high-school players in the nation. They get to go for free and meet all sorts of basketball celebrities.

"Why are you here?" I ask. "I mean, you could be anywhere. Any prep school in the country would take you. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to be near my grandparents," Russ says. "Besides... maybe I *need* to be in Bellmont."

"This hellhole? Why?"

"To be your friend," he says.

I don't understand why he would say that, so I just let it go.

I'm tired, and we've reached the high school. As we go through the metal detectors, people start asking me questions about Erin. I return to silent mode.

All day long I think about Erin and how strangers are operating on her leg, cutting it open, inserting pins or whatever to mend the bones. I worry that the surgeons won't get it right and Erin will have to walk with a limp, or even worse. I can't pay attention in any of my classes. And when I receive a slip that says to report to guidance during my lunch period, I don't even mind the fact

that I'll have to speak to Mr. Gore, because it means I won't be around Russ. He keeps asking me if I'm okay and it's getting really annoying.

When I sit down across from Mr. Gore I notice the Duke bumper sticker above his filing cabinet and start to get mad, although I'm not really sure why.

"You okay?" Mr. Gore says.

I shake my head.

"You want to talk about anything?" His Jheri curl is looking a little flat on the left side—like maybe he slept on it and didn't have time to do his hair this morning.

"I'm tired of Bellmont," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm tired of seeing graffiti every day. I'm tired of drug dealers. I'm tired of people pretending that they don't see what's going on in the neighborhood. I'm tired of good people getting hurt. I'm tired of basketball. I'm tired of doing nice things for people and being punished for it. I just want to get out of here. I just want to escape."

The words simply popped out, which surprises me. Mr. Gore seems surprised too, especially since I never talk to him about anything important. He's trying not to smile, but I can tell he thinks he's making progress with me. Maybe he is.

"Are you tired of Erin?" His eyes are all excited now.

"No."

"And yet you broke up with her for basketball."

"What does that have to do with her being in the hospital?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Why did you call me down here?"

"Because I care about you."

Mr. Gore's leaning forward. His forehead is damp, like he's nervous—or maybe like he really does care. When I look into his eyes, I see something that makes me feel as though maybe I was wrong about him all along. It's hard to explain. It's been a strange twenty-four hours, and I didn't sleep much last night.

"You know, I played high-school basketball," he says.

"Really?" I find it hard to believe, because Mr. Gore is very thin and fragile-looking, but he *is* tall.

"Played in college too, until I hurt my knee. I used to be able to dunk."

I try to picture Mr. Gore dunking and the little movie I create in my mind makes me laugh.

"As a young man I dedicated my entire life to basketball, and you know what basketball does for me now?" he says.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I think about what I'll be doing when I'm Mr. Gore's age and I can't see myself playing ball. Even if I went pro, I'd be done playing. For some stupid reason, I see myself with Erin—maybe we're married. We're all old and silly-looking—somewhere far from Bellmont, somewhere decent—but we're still together. I wonder if we really will be.

"You don't owe anything to Coach," Mr. Gore says.

I just look at him for a second. He seems different to me, like he's on my side. Maybe I've had him all wrong. And his saying that about Coach makes me feel better, for some reason.

"You look tired, Finley."

"I didn't sleep much last night."

"You want to catch a few z's in my office?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'm in meetings this afternoon. If you want to take a nap, you can do so here. I'll let your teachers know that you're with me. Just don't go telling anyone my office is a hotel." Mr. Gore shoots me a corny wink, and then adds, "We good?"

I don't know if I'll be able to sleep in his office, but I would like some time alone, so I say, "Thanks."

"No problem. I'll be in the conference room next door if you need me."

He pats my shoulder twice before he exits, and then I'm alone.

I stare out the window for two hours and think about Erin.

Halfway through the last period, I slip out of the building before Russ or anyone else can find me.