

# TRUE TRUE

**DON P. HOOPER**

 Nancy Paulsen Books

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Dedication TK



TRUE  
TRUE



# PART I

## Laying Plans

*War is a matter of vital importance . . .*

*The province of life or death; the road to  
survival or ruin.*

SUN TZU: *THE ART OF WAR*





I'm leaving Brooklyn.

I'm not moving or anything. Just going away. *Stop. Don't think about that.* This is my last night out with my friends. Summer is over. And there's one last party every Caribbean in Brooklyn is at. J'ouvert.

Well, maybe *every* Caribbean is an exaggeration. But everyone wanting to party from nighttime straight through sunrise.

The night sky is a mix of powdery smoke and mist. The freshly paved asphalt reflects the light rain like a field of diamonds. Silhouettes move to the rhythm of steel drums. Shoulders bounce and hips sway in harmony with the beat, while paint and powder fly. I can't make out faces. All I see are horned crowns, braids, flowing locks, and every Caribbean flag waving in unity. The Fourth of July has nothing on this. This is a celebration. Right now, here, we are truly free.

A few people wear heavy steel chains, some of which drag on the street. Two shirtless men, who must've done a million pull-ups, are covered in molasses from head to toe. Others push carts with barrels full of paint up the street, splashing the crowd, a reminder of the freed slaves in the Caribbean who mocked the slave owners after emancipation. This is the Jab Jab.

I dodge the spatter but then a hand reaches out and grabs my shoulder, holding me in place while someone else pours paint over my head from a repurposed water bottle.

“Gotcha!”

I don't have to open my eyes to know the culprits. Rej grabbed. Stretch poured.

Rej has always been the initiator in our trio, friends since meeting each other in third grade at the Always Persevere Dojo. He's the shortest of us, has dreads still trying to reach his neck, and an undercut fade. The Haitian flag is draped around his shoulders and a painting of Dessalines is on his chest like a Superman S. But anybody spotting Rej sees the way he carries himself before anything else. He walks with an air of regality. When my dad was home, every time Rej came by Dad would jokingly ask, “Prince Akeem, weh di rose bearers at?” Dad loves his movie references; *Coming to America* was a top-ten Friday-night fav.

“Woy mezanmi,” Rej says, throwing his hands up like I'm being a fool for wanting to stay clean. He was born in Haiti and knows Creole even though he moved to Brooklyn before he could speak. His dad was taken by ICE last year, then lumped into a mass deportation in March, while America still classifies Rej as a Dreamer. Home of the free? Yeah, right. They're

undocumented immigrants like my dad, except Rej didn't have a choice at his age. "Dis man was really tryin to stay clean at J'ouvert." It's good to see him laughing, even if my clothes paid the price.

"Rockin the polo too," Stretch says. He's got the evil smirk on, dripping disdain. The streetlamp catches his tilted head, bronze skin, slightly darker from spending the last two weeks with his folks in Trinidad. His high fade highlights the textured curls with the bleached tips rising inches above his head. "Gotta. Loosen. Up." Loose is Stretch all day. Some people have zero chill, Stretch is chill twenty-four seven.

I look down. My crisp white polo shirt is covered in blue paint. Dammit. "My granma got me this shirt," I say with the straightest face I can hold.

She didn't.

I needed to upgrade my wardrobe before senior year, so I got a summer job at the supermarket. But I want my friends to feel bad, so I drop the guilt-trip lie 'cause nothing commands respect like Granma's name. All my friends grew up eating her cooking: oxtail, curry goat, stew peas. Somebody caught a whiff of food when Granma was throwing down, there'd be a line up the block and past the corner store for a plate.

"Aww, did we mess up Granma's shirt?" Stretch mocks, flashing a fraction of teeth, surrounded by a pencil-thin goatee that's barely connected.

I should've known. Give Stretch two Heinekens and a Shandy Carib and he transforms into the most patronizing clown on the block.

"My fault, man," Rej tags in without cracking a hint of a

smile, locked in this wrestling match of sarcasm. “I shoulda told Granma not to let you come out dressin up in your Sundays for Carnival. That’s my fault.” He slams his hand on his chest twice to emphasize it, dragging out his words. “Myyy fault.”

Before I can come up with a clever reply, a girl jumps in front of me, pushes her back up against my chest, wraps her hand around my thigh, and starts to wine to the music. It’s Nakia. She’s wearing a bikini top designed like a Bajan flag and khaki shorts that are covered in molasses and paint. I feel her round hips pressed against me, urging me forward. *I love Carnival*. She’s blowing her whistle as we dance. In less than a minute she hops off my body, waving her flag, whirling with one leg in the air.

“You gonna miss me when you go away, city boy?” Nakia asks, her eyes locked on me.

When I worked at the Associated on Church Ave, she would pop in every Thursday and spark conversation. We’d hang outside during my break. She liked the Flamin Hot cheese puffs. I did too. We both dug getting to the bottom of the bag and scooping out the last bit of seasoning with our fingers. It turned to mild flirting. She’d run her hand against the nape of my neck; I’d gently touch her twists. Then she got a job at Associated too.

Nothing ever came of it. Too much on my mind with Granma’s health and dad’s status. This year hasn’t been easy.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, failing at speaking up, like every time I didn’t ask her out during the summer. If this were Rej, he’d just go for it, perpetually in boss mode. He wanted to produce music so he made it happen. Stretch vibes like he’s floating on a hoverboard across a beach, drink in hand, wherever he goes. Can’t tell him nothing.

Nakia leans in. “Oh no, you fancy now,” she says, her hand on my cheek, sending a warm shiver through every point in my body. The muscles in my face twist and distort, wanting to bury the Kool-Aid smile trying to bust out. “Leaving Brooklyn cause you big-time.”

“Yup.” Stretch slams his arm over my shoulder, his tall wiry frame casting a shadow like one of the streetlamps. “Our boy super fancy. You seen this fresh white polo his granma got him?” He flicks my collar. “And the shorts. Ooh He’s gonna be upset you got paint all over—”

I elbow Stretch in his gut. He has terrible timing. “Ima still be in Brooklyn. We can hang.”

Before Nakia can respond, a young girl about seven years my junior with two neck-length French braids and the skin tone of a Caribbean beach cuts between us.

“Big bro!” she says, extending her hand with a glittering smile. It’s Kenya from our dojo. I still remember when she first signed up—small, stocky, and unsure of herself. Her parents hoped that martial arts would give her confidence. Now she’s like lil sis and I’m big bro. We exchange the Always Persevere’s trademark handshake, ending with a salute, before she gives me in the warmest hug. Then she greets Rej and Stretch.

“What’re you doing out here?” I ask.

“I’m with my sister,” Kenya says, pointing. I look over and see Nakia off to the side, chatting it up with her friends, giggling. And it dawns on me. The girl I been failing at flirting with is Kenya’s actual big sister.

Nakia walks over and wraps her arms around Kenya. “Gimme a call,” Nakia says to me.

"I don't have your number," I reply.

"Next time ask. Don't wait till you moving to the city."

"Wait, you're moving?" Kenya asks, confused. "You're gonna be at my belt test on Wednesday, right?" Her expression could break me down with guilt if I didn't.

"Course I am," I say, but Nakia is already dragging her off. "And I'm not moving," I mutter, defeated, as they disappear.

"Dammnn, you don't have the number." Stretch lets out a gusty sigh. "That's an *L*."

Rej shakes his head. "What I tell you, yo?" he says. Rej's got a deep voice with a lingering rasp that's twenty years and a few cigarette cartons older than his age, even though he's never smoked a cigarette before. Weed, yes. Cigarettes, a big no.

"I dunno." I roll my eyes, humoring him, knowing what he'll say. "What'd you tell me?"

"My guy! I told you she was into you."

"You think everybody into me or you or somebody?"

"I mean, that's reality." Rej presses his hands together like he's praying and conducts class, street professor extraordinaire. Here it goes.

"Somebody is gonna be into you or me or somebody," he says. "This particular gem was into you. I mean who goes to the supermarket to wait on line to buy one soda? You go to the corner store for that. Supermarket is for groceries. You're leaving with bags, a cart, you know, mad stuff. The corner store, bodega, dem's for single-item purchases. One soda, bag a chips, maybe two sticky buns or a sandwich. Not one a dem gentrified sandwiches either. A real one."

"I ain't hear nothin but facts," Stretch cosigns. "Plus she went

and got a job there too. So yeah, you dropped the bag on that.” Then he starts laughing before snapping again. “And if y’all get married, Kenya will be your literal little sister.”

I got nothing. That’s my boy, but I hate when he’s right.

“Hol up, man,” Rej says as we pass by a corner store on Nosstrand. It’s just before dawn so the door is locked. But you can still buy things through the walk-up window made of bullet-proof glass. “Lemme grab some waters.” A sly smile coats his face as he pulls out his phone. “But first, one time for the people. Need to capture my boy before he goes off to college.”

“You a fool, yo.” I say. “We both seniors.” And it’s the worst time to transfer into a new school, like pressing reset after finishing 75 percent of a test you didn’t wanna take. And this school, Augustin Prep, it’s a reset fareal. Not only have I always gone to school with Rej and Stretch. The students, the teachers, they’ve always primarily been Black and Latinx.

This new school. It’s anything but that.

“Except you goin private on us,” Rej says.

*I didn’t want to.* Not initially at least. But I spent three years fighting with my school’s administration, and my middle school before that. Arguing for more resources for the science department. Freaking working lights and enough seats in all classes. Emailing the district, writing letters to the DOE, going with Dad to school council meetings. Everyone knows New York got money. Where the resources going? *Not to us.* Occasionally, a nonprofit would kick in to do some after-school program. Then they’d disappear. Education should be free. *It’s not.*

Augustin’s pitch is that it molds the future business leaders, lawyers, and politicians of America. And now, with their expanded

robotics program—the future engineers too. So no more arguing with the public school admins trying to get resources.

That's why I transferred.

But the photo of Augustin. Phew. They're as white as they get. Like horror-movie. Small-town. White. Finding a Black or Brown person in their brochures or on their website is a straight-up game of Where's Waldo. But I gotta do this. My family needs a win. *I need to win.*

Rej hands the phone off to Stretch who's got the longest arms. It makes Stretch annoying to spar with, but the best at taking group selfies. Rej reviews the pics as if he's a teacher red-lining a paper. "Nah, nah." He shakes his head. "They good, but I need something for the story."

Producing music isn't just a hobby for Rej. It's his life. Converted his closet into a booth to start working with artists. As an independent producer he's looking for that one shot. Going to Augustin will set me up to make connections that'll help his dream too.

He presses record and goes into action. "Yo, this is your boy Rej, aka TheR1, King a Flatbush. Out here at J'ouvert with my man Stretch and Gil." He grabs me into frame, hugging my neck close enough to choke, embarrassment creeps through my dark brown skin. "He got a little paint on his white shirt, but that's how it be. Learned a lesson." He lets me go. "You come to J'ouvert you come to party. The sun ain't rise yet and we not goin home. N'AP BOULE." A few quick taps on his phone and the story's out to his ten thousand plus followers. He tucks his phone away and knocks on the walk-up window.



“You betta introduce me to some of them international women, son,” Stretch says.

My eyes roll. “Look around you. We Caribbean. We are international, fool.”

“You know what I mean,” he says, sucking his teeth.

Augustin Prep is on the Upper West Side. It’s an hour away by train, but a world away from BK and my crew. But I keep telling myself no more fighting for resources. I toured their lab. Everything is right there. Enough for multiple schools. So after taking their special test and interviews, off I go.

“Jokes aside, it’s dope what you doin,” Stretch says. “Robotics competitions. Phew. That’s some next level.”

“Different borough though,” Rej adds solemnly. He scrunches his face as if he’s swallowed his own bile. “City ain’t Brooklyn, man. Won’t know anybody.” His eyebrows hang like this is a funeral fareal. “Who gonna have ya back if shit go sideways?” The laughter has faded, leaving only concern. Rej has always had my back. That’s what we do. He and Stretch are more than friends, they’re brothers. Another reminder. This transfer isn’t just about me.

“Y’all actin like I’m leavin the country,” I snap. This whole idea of me leaving like I’m moving off planet got me aggy as hell. “It’s a new school. That’s it.” At least it’s what I keep telling myself. Trying not to envision myself becoming a Waldo buried in the prep crowd. “And yo, what Stretch said is the truth. Gonna be nice to actually have a STEM department.”

A group of police walk by, two white cops, one Black. One of the white cops has his baton out, looking ready to make use

of it. Whenever cops are on patrol, you know the deal. Slavery never really ended. The one with the baton says, "Let's keep it moving, fellas."

"Just buying water, sir," Rej replies.

"What'd you say, boy?" the cop asks. "Turn around and address me."

My lungs stutter. The word *boy* used by a cop is as historically loaded as his sidearm. We all do martial arts, but none of that means a damn thing against a cop with a gun. Mom is always worried about me going out for J'ouvert because of the cops. Always gives me a list of things I shouldn't do or shouldn't wear, comparing life here to Jamaica, because *here* police kill unarmed Black people systemically. You need a manual just to stay alive.

When the cops see us, they don't see humans. They don't see people who have lived in and built this community. When I walk down Flatbush by the roti shops, the boutique fashion dealers, and the Caribbean grocers, I know the parents, the kids, the aunts, the uncles. I know the butcher who cuts up our oxtail by his first name: Michael. The streets may have changed with all the gentrification. But this is my home. Nobody's ever gonna make me feel like an outsider.

Rej turns around giving the smile that says *I know you're messing with me and I'll play this game if I have to*. He moves deliberately so nobody can say he was holding a weapon he doesn't have. "Just getting water, officer," Rej reiterates. "It's hot. Don't want my friends passing out from dehydration." I can't tell if he's trying to be patronizing or polite. That's Rej's style. I prepare myself. Anything can happen. "Y'all should get water too, y'all

lookin real thirsty.” That answers that. Black cop looks down and away, getting Rej’s not-too-subtle knock.

“Okay,” the officer replies, “no loitering.” He points his baton at each of us. “You don’t want to get into trouble—or pass out.”

I know a threat when one is waved with a baton. We nod, mouths shut, waiting for them to leave. They do. My chest finally releases the clamped air that was ready to burst out.

“Freakin cops,” Stretch says. “You see how they try to instigate, right?”

I nod. “They really getting paid overtime to be assholes.”

“Fareal, man,” Rej cosigns. “Anything we do or say they gonna switch up like we were resisting arrest or pullin a weapon.”

“That’s how they got Byrd.”

His real name was Marvin, but to the streets he was always Byrd. He was fourteen. If you heard a clarinet that could bring sunshine to a storm, that was Byrd. Night or day, he could be walking up Foster Ave by the projects, playing some beautiful melody, bringing joy to everyone he touched. The cops killed Byrd right over on Foster Ave. by Vanderveer. They call it Flatbush Gardens now. Never got picked up by the news. But if you from the neighborhood, you know the deal. He was never armed with anything more than his love for music. My dad brought me along to the protest. It was my first one.

“True,” I say. “Took him out for loving music.”

Our nerves relax like we dodged a speeding truck. Another cop, another day, another time, and that small encounter could’ve gone much different.

Rej turns back to the store and passes money through the

revolving window. Three waters and a pack of rolling papers come back. Rej hands out the bottles and we post up in front of the corner store taking in the sounds of J'ouvert. Floats with steel drums and massive sound systems explode through the streets ready for sunrise.

Rej shows us his phone. "Already over a hun'ed views. People are UP. I love J'ouvert."

"Hell yeah," I say, happy for the change of subject. "Let's get back into the Jab Jab."

Rej laughs. "C'mon."

We fill up our empty water bottles with paint from a nearby cart. I'm already soaked. Might as well go all the way.

We spend the next hour parading through the streets. Throwing paint, dancing, having fun. The air horns grow all around us. Soca and reggae vibes everywhere, fetes converging onto Empire Boulevard to mash up the parkway and play mas.

The sun is rising over Brooklyn. This isn't a going-away party—this is a *who-I-am* party. I may be switching schools. But this is my home, my world. I ain't *leaving*.

A scream startles me out of a restless sleep. The wailing cry through the thin postwar apartment wall louder than any alarm.

“No! No! No!”

I jump out of bed, toppling over my sheets to stand. I pull at the door, which fights back. I’m still barely awake. But I know that voice. In agony.

Granma.

The doorknob finally does me the kindness of opening. Granma’s room is right next to mine. I don’t knock. I nearly bust down the door to get in. Adrenaline threatens to blast my heart right from its chamber. And then I see her. Sitting up in her bed, watching the morning news, ready to throw the remote control at the TV.

“Cyaan believe dis idiot,” she says. She turns to me, loose strands of untwisted gray hair wave as if a wind caught it. Seeing her

narrow eyelids widen like that—it's like looking into Dad's eyes. "Yuh all right, GC?" she asks me as if I was the one in agony.

"I heard you . . . I was just checking that you were . . . Morning, Granma," I say, finally settling on a response, putting on a makeshift smile. Ever since she was first diagnosed with dementia, when me and my parents were still trying to make sense of it all, Granma told us to never make her feel like she was any less than the person we love. She's in a between stage, the doctor said. Got control of her thoughts for the most part. But certain things are complicated. Numbers. Dates. Memories. Locations.

"Dis fool right here." Granma sucks her teeth, slamming the bed. "Killian really out fi mash up di schools. Him wann cut all a di budget. Talkin bout infrastructure. And now dem sayin him ahead in di polls. Tankful dis a yuh last year a high school, cause if him take office . . . Lawd Jesus save us."

Every day it feels like I'm losing a little more of her. Sometimes I listen at the wall to her morning prayers. Gives me a sense of how she's doing—if she's coherent. It sucks. When I close my eyes, I picture Granma moving, dancing, living life to the fullest. But that vision is fading.

"Breakfast, bighead!"

My cousin Renee stomps in, fit from a lifetime of martial arts. She's wearing a BLACK GIRL MAGIC tee her girlfriend designed and lounge shorts. The tiny curls on her head dyed red complement her beige skin. She's in her second year at NYU, didn't have classes today so she stayed the night. Renee's been around more since Granma got diagnosed, always dropping off some-

thing new for me to read: Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, some philosophy books. If she reads it in college, it's ending up here next. I think she wants to keep me busy so I don't get too caught up in my head thinking about Granma or Dad.

"C'mon, cuz, Auntie got a feast for you." She claps me to attention like a military bugle. Wednesday mornings shouldn't feel this urgent.

"Oh word," I say. My head's pounding from springing out of bed. I tend to get migraines from lack of sleep or just stressin. Gonna have to drink some tea so my first day at Augustin doesn't start with a headache. "I'll be out in a minute."

I head into my room, take a sip of water from the cup next to my bed. Then wipe the sleep from my eyes. Nobody in the history of the world has ever looked forward to the first day of classes. Me included. And today is starting over an hour earlier cause I gotta go into the city. *Relax. It's a new beginning.*

Staring at me is a futuristic view of the Brooklyn Bridge with my favorite martial artists, Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly, on one side and B.I.G. and Audre Lorde on the other. Next to them is a Jamaican flag. I'm second generation, but I rep hard. They all remind me of the perseverance needed to succeed in martial arts and in life. Renee's girlfriend painted it for me almost two years ago, a gift on my sixteenth birthday. Life was simpler, not filled with so many fading memories.

Doctors can't help Granma's condition. But the disease can't take away her defiance. She told the doctors she wouldn't give in to the disease. She doesn't take nothing from nobody. I got art of heroes on my wall. I got a real-life hero on the other side

of it. So I'm doubling down on STEM as if this commitment is a contract that helps her live long enough for me to help find a cure. 'Cause the scientists today ain't cutting it.

It's crazy. But I need hope.

Directly below the painting is a yellowing flyer for a robotics competition. Next to that is the first robot I ever built. It assembled like LEGOs, and looks like a Transformer with tank wheels. Maybe it's bootleg compared to Augustin's robotics lab, but I still love it. A gift from Granma on my eighth birthday. Me and Dad put it together. I was so little then. His broad shoulders would hug me close to his belly that rolled with every laugh, before dropping some random movie reference from *The Matrix* or *Black Belt Jones*.

Today should be a milestone like this robot, but all I feel is the distance between us.

Dad chose to go back to Jamaica to get his immigration papers shortly after Rej's dad was deported. ICE been going hard at Black and Brown families. He could've waited till after I went to college, been here with me today. But no. He had to get it sorted ASAP 'cause if he gets deported, then there's no way he can come back into the country for five to ten years. So I get it. *I don't*.

I walk down the hallway, past my parents' room, then the living room. Scents of ackee and salt fish, sweet plantain, mannish water, and escovitch fish guide me to the kitchen.

"Morning, Gil," Mom greets me. Her full face and pearl eyes are tucked behind stylish glasses. She has an expectant smile, her cheeks a deeper brown than Dad's and mine. There was a time when I always gave her a hug and kiss in the morning. I



don't know when it stopped. Maybe it was after last summer's growth spurt. I tower over her now like Stretch looms above Rej. Instead of giving her a kiss, I adjust the purple bonnet rising halfway off the back of her head as if it were trying to escape in the night. I could hear her fitful sleep through the walls. Rest hasn't been easy in this house.

Mom lights a paper towel from the fire under the plantain and draws it over to the other range so that it catches, then immediately puts it out, the remnants of sulfuric ash dwindling in the air. The stove is just one of the things we were supposed to get replaced when the bills started piling up. Can't rely on the landlord to do it. Not in this building.

"Morning," I say to a room that feels empty without Dad's boisterous laugh and corny jokes. He'd probably be singing some song right now about the plantain, and we'd have to wonder if it was real or if he made it up on the spot.

I look at my phone. My last one was a relic, the free cell that came on the family plan. Renee may give me a hard time, but cuz is deshi at the dojo and big sis outside, always looking out. She gifted me her old phone since she got an upgrade. Now it's like I've stepped forward in time. The pic of me, Rej and Stretch at J'ouvert with our flag colors is set as the background, beaming like a Caribbean Justice League. Superpowered friends that I'm leaving behind for engineering opportunities at this private school. *This white school.*

No missed calls. *Figures.* Only a reminder I got testing at the dojo at 5:00 p.m.

"Did anyone call?" Mom and Renee look at each other, shaking their heads in unison.

“Eh, cuz, cheer up,” Renee sings, trying to invigorate the morning. “You become a prep student today,” she says mockingly.

I roll my eyes. She’s getting some sadistic pleasure out of seeing me attend a prep school like she did. “Don’t you got somewhere to be?” I ask. “You know, like your dorm, your folks’ place, anywhere but here—”

An elbow buries itself deep in my stomach reminding me who’s big cuz and who actually enjoys doing burpees. “Aww, Auntie, I think Gil is choking up with excitement to be an Augustin Tiger,” she says, fakin like she all nice. Meanwhile, I’m massaging my stomach from her strike when I hear the toilet flush. “Oh, before I forget,” she says, sarcasm dancing on each syllable, “you got a visitor.” I know it couldn’t be Dad, but for a moment there’s a glimmer in my heart, that feeling of expectation before opening a gift, the culmination of weeks of hints leading up to the holiday.

“Hey, Gil!” The squeaky voice crushes hope. Coming out of the bathroom is Mr. Neckles, the only person I know who can still look dusty in a suit, despite perfect posture. Maybe that’s his whole wardrobe—a row of navy and gray suits with pastel button-downs. He’s got a wide guffaw grin that could make a chipmunk jealous. It’s befitting his acorn-complexioned face, speckled with tiny pockets that never quite recovered from pimple-popping puberty. He fixes his pants, which he should’ve done in the bathroom. Acting like he live here.

I suck my teeth. Only Renee notices.

I hate when Mr. Neckles shows up. He’s Dad’s friend. They met when they were teenagers and have been friends since. I don’t see how. Dad is unapologetic about his Jamaican heritage. Mr.

Neckles makes nothing but apologies for his heritage. Starting with his first name, which is really Shareef. But he goes by Allen.

“Seeing as some of my co-workers are Augustin alum and have kids there,” Allen says, “figured I’d pick you up a gift for your first day.” He reaches into his Tumi bag and hands me a box. I already know what’s in it by the rectangular shape. The gift every kid hates, right up there with socks. I open it and see a striped gray tie. “Clothes make the man.” There’s an eager sparkle in his eye that’s probably never seen a down moment.

*Stop tryin to make me into you.* “Thanks,” I say, barely masking a groan.

“Oh, it looks lovely,” Mom says. “My son, the biochemist.”

I went to one career day, mentioned biochemistry, and I’ve already got my PhD in Mom’s mind. But if that’s what I need to make a difference, I’ll get it.

“Well, I better be taking off,” Mr. Neckles says. He picks up a cup of mannish water he’d been working on and finishes it with a loud gulp. “I always like to get in a solid hour before my managers. Once they arrive all the conversations change to the stock market, elections, and how elections will affect the market.” His head bobs side to side as if these are conversations we relate to. They’re not. You got to have money you’re willing to lose to invest. That’s not us. And as for elections, my mom votes for whichever candidate wants us dead the least.

“Do you think that independent will win?” Mom asks. “The fintech or whatever CEO?”

“Killian? He’s really conservative,” Mr. Neckles says. “He just calls himself independent because the city is blue and a conservative candidate can’t win.”

Mr. Neckles leaves and I go to snatch a piece of fried plantain off a plate on the counter.

“Ow.” A spoon knocks my hand.

Granma. She’s like a wizard who pops up when you least expect it. I didn’t even hear her come out of the bedroom. “Ya haffi wait fi everyone else to eat, Ahmad.”

“Ahmad?” I ask, puzzled.

“Sorry. Sorry, GC,” she says, shaking away the fog. My parents call me Gil. Granma calls me GC. “Haven’t had mi morning tea yet. Yuh juss remind me so much of your uncle.”

She’s referring to Dad’s older brother and her eldest son, Uncle Ahmad. I’ve seen pictures and sort of see the resemblance. He was a tall, dark-complexioned, lean figure with dreads. He passed before I was born.

“Oh you did get one message,” Mom says brightly, strategically changing the subject. “Vicki texted, wishing you good luck today.”

“Vicki?” I ask.

“Oh, sorry, Ms. Rowe,” Mom says. They texting now? “I ran into her when I was out with your aunt,” Mom says, referring to Renee’s mom. “We had a drink and hit it off.”

Wow. Leave it to Mom to befriend my teacher. Ms. Rowe tried to support me and Rej’s interest in robotics as best she could at Union, which meant getting us out of Union. Said it also would be a good way to boost our college applications. She talked to Mom, then some connect on Augustin Prep’s board of trustees.

During the interviews, the Augustin reps talked about the robotics competition with schools from around the world. Competitions that would never be on Union’s radar.

Honestly, I thought that would be the end of it. Private school tuition is up there with college, which is why Rej skipped it all together. Even with a partial ride from Augustin, Mom had to take out some hefty loans. As if Granma's medical bills weren't enough, here I come adding more debt. But I'm gonna make it count. Ms. Rowe showed me all the grant money that's out there for people in tech. I'll make my family proud so this transfer pays dividends.

"So what kind of robot are you going to build?" Mom asks.

"Won't know till next week," I say, setting the table for breakfast, forcing a smile because my mom wants it to be a celebration. "That's when the robotics team has its first meeting."

"Just stay away from that artificial intelligence stuff," Mom says. "Your dad playing *The Matrix* once a year is enough for me."

I laugh. It's real. "Probably won't be on *Matrix* level yet," I say. I know I should be more hyped, but me and Dad were always a team. But I guess even in *Fellowship of the Ring*, another Dad favorite, the fellowship gets broken. "I just hope everyone else isn't too far ahead of me." Me and Rej did a lot of self-learning, picking up coding, getting kits whichever way we could. Playing catch-up to schools like Augustin is the worst. "I dunno. Testing in math is one thing—"

"Yuh needed a challenge," Granma says. It was rough enough downloading pirated software onto Union's computers so me and Rej could get a taste of CAD. Another reason Ms. Rowe thought it was time we took our *ambition* elsewhere. Granma rests her hand on my shoulder using me for balance as she eases toward the table. "And one ting I know is dat my grandson is a fighta." She stops to pound her foot on the floor a couple times,

circling her ankle as if it fell asleep. “Him can run anyting him put his mind to. He nuh back down from nothing. School, martial arts, anyting. So yuh gonna waltz right inna dat school and crush any test dem trow at yuh. All a Jamaica gon big yuh up!”

Leave it to Granma to lift my spirits.

“Lord,” Granma starts a prayer over the food, “thank you for the food that we are about to receive. Bless the hands that prepared it. And please bless GC as he begins this new journey.”

That’s what this is. A new journey. A chance to grow, persevere. I wanna leave my mark. Be remembered. And robotics, Augustin, is the way.

I'm looking over my back every two seconds, wondering if I'm being followed, on my way to change the world.

The green Augustin blazer I got on is a giant target that says *Jack me*. And these khakis Mom picked up from a back-to-school sale are so stiff they got me looking like I'm constantly pulling out a wedgie. She was glowing as I stepped out the door. Chasing me down the stairs. Taking pictures with her phone as if I were dressed for prom.

Augustin sent home a letter about dress code last week. In bold letters it read, *All clothes must be ironed, and no sagging pants*. Straight-up coded message. At Union, I knew who I was. We were every shade of Black and Brown but still different. I could wear a shirt celebrating Jamaica, Black culture, Black joy. I've already sacrificed a piece of myself.

The streets are littered with boarded-up construction sites.

Residential homes bulldozed to make room for *upscale* apartment buildings. Lining the walls are campaign signs interspersed with ads for parties and building permits. Dollar-van drivers, that charge more than a dollar, honk horns, yelling “Flatbush! Flatbush!”

“Walk of shame.” It’s Rej, popping up behind me like a stalker at the Newkirk Avenue–Little Haiti station.

“Damn shame.” Joined by none other than Stretch, in his torn jeans and TRINI 2 DE BONE shirt. “You gotta hold ya head up high, son,” he says coolly. “Walkin around so serious.” Easy for him to say. Both his parents are home and their pockets way deeper than me and Rej’s. But that’s him. Always relaxed, sure of himself, gliding through life. Never worried about what’s next, he just lets whatever happens happen.

That’s my brother. But that’s not my life.

“You know we had to see you off, man,” Rej says. We dap each other up.

“Big tings.” Stretch nods in agreement, giving me the one-hand clap to hug. I have to shuffle my bags to not tip over. I gotta get used to carrying both. When I was at Union, I had time to go home after school, drop my books off, and grab my gi and equipment before heading to the dojo. With the commute, I gotta haul everything with me to school. “You gonna be like that Maya Angelou poem. ‘The dream of the slave’ or something.” He starts snapping his fingers, looking to Rej for an answer. “You know what I’m talking ’bout. What was the name?”

“Still I Rise,” Rej says, grabbing a palm full of dreads to shake his head.

“That’s the one,” Stretch says. “The hope and dream of Brooklyn right here.”



“Sup with this material.” Rej pulls at the cardboard tube I’m wearing called pants. Meanwhile, he’s comfortable in black cut jeans with a custom TheR1 patch, and a Basquiat-like design on his long-sleeve shirt. He could be going to the club or a music video shoot, but it’s just a regular Wednesday being Rej off to Union. “Mezanmi! Can you even do a sidekick in those?” The look of disgust in his face mirrors how I feel. “Definitely can’t run.”

“Leave that man alone,” Stretch says, always the peacemaker. His pinched brow cringes speaking his truth. “Not many people get these opportunities.” *Man. This fool. Why’d Stretch have to say that?* ‘Cause “not many people” include Rej. It’s hard to be happy when I know I’m getting to do something he can’t. I love Stretch but he don’t be thinking sometimes. “Couple months, Gil gonna be all the news. Scientist extraordinaire. Robotics champ. Nah. Like the Notorious B.I.G. of robotics to BK.” His exuberance pumps me up. Forget the fashion. I’m gonna give Mom, Granma, a reason to smile. Know they didn’t throw money away on me.

“I better hop this train,” I say.

“Let me get your phone first,” Rej says. “Want to make sure you got this new mix I put online.” I hand him the phone and he downloads the playlist. He grabs my shoulder, leans into my ear, talking low so that only I can hear. Between us, there are no secrets. “Me and you, we understand each other’s situation in a way others won’t.” He’s talking about our dads. Rej was on vacation with his family in Florida when they were pulled over during a traffic stop. The cops ended up taking his dad into custody and later sharing that information with ICE. From there he was taken to a detention facility for being an undocumented

immigrant. Every week, me and Dad were helping them, making calls, trying to get legal counsel to speak to Rej's father. But less than a year later, he was still lumped into a mass deportation. "Now you got something to vibe to . . . remind you where you from. And that you can always come back."

It's Rej's going-away gift. He got jokes, but he shows up. "Thanks, yo," I say. Now I got something to nod to on the way into the city—my fam is with me. "And, yo, anything I do in robotics, I'm recording." He produces music, but it's always been a dream of ours to form our own robotics company, something that to help build better housing in the hood. Probably came from being around Dad and all his ideas to use science to make socioeconomic changes.

"Aight, man"—Rej laughs, giving me a pound—"we'll see you at the dojo. I know lil sis'll be looking for you too." *Wouldn't miss it.* I'm looking forward to seeing Kenya spar through the gauntlet. Root for her the way my seniors at the time, Joshu Smith and Joshu Wong, did. I probably would've quit if they weren't there championing me on. Now I'm a black belt too.

"You got this," Stretch says brightly, encouraging as ever.

"True, true," I reply. Rolling my shoulders, adjusting my bags, the weight of Brooklyn on my back.

THE 2 TRAIN screeches underground stinging my ears. The MTA has tried to spruce up the subway stations as deep into BK as Newkirk. Redo the wall tiles. Add mosaic art. The platforms may be power washed at night, but the concrete clings to a stain of yellow grime laden with chewed-up, spit-out, and fossilized gum. On the tracks, a parade of rats scramble through discarded

sports drink bottles, fighting for tossed food scraps—a constant reminder of New York’s true self. Try as you might, it’s the one thing this city can’t bury. *Truth.*

Since it’s still early, there’s enough room to get a seat. By the time the train hits Franklin Avenue, not only are the seats gone, but the train is also packed. At each stop the business suits, New York’s *professionals*, who work in those skyscraper offices, battle their way inside, cramming into the slightest opening—so much tension it might pop. Pretty sure they’re sucking the air out of the train and every dollar out of our community. This is the future Augustin’s selling. In five years, these will be my classmates doing the same thing to my hood. *Is this who I’ll turn into? Just a suit reporting to an office?* I spot maybe two or three Black people in corporate attire lost among their peers. One makes eye contact, like he’s accusing me of something. *But what?* Trying to be something I’m not. Leaving BK behind. Abandoning my friends. Like Dad abandoned us. *Stop it, Gil. He left temporarily. He’ll be back soon.*

“You okay, honey?” the woman next to me says, clutching my arm. My chest is heaving. Each breath stumbles out. Forehead dripping from sweat. I wipe it with my hand and then onto my blazer. She offers me a tissue and water bottle. I wave it away. She insists. “Uh-uh, baby. Take the water. You need it.”

I take a big gulp. She’s right. It soothes me, my heart rate steadies.

“You look handsome,” she says. But I feel like a fool in these clothes. “What kind of school you going to?”

She reminds me of Granma, except this woman has a tan complexion and no accent. I don’t like sharing personal information

about myself on the street, but people like Granma—like her—have a way of making you share. “Augustin Prep,” I say.

“Oh, that’s a good school,” she says. “You must be smart.”

“Nah,” I reply, my cheeks warm.

“Don’t be bashful, baby. You’re a Black man in America. Don’t hide your intelligence.” She smiles and I’m certain that she must be Granma’s personality doppelgänger. With a few words, she calms me down, changing my whole mood. “Well, this is my stop,” she says, getting up. “Remember, when you go to that prep school, you let people know who you are.” She’s right. Focus on the positives. The robotics club. Augustin’s resources. They’re all springboards. While Rej makes a name for himself in music, I’ll make a name for myself so colleges have no choice but to see me.

Five stops later, I’m on the Upper West Side. Traffic lights flash and yellow cabs whiz down wide avenues. There are rows of restaurants and boutique clothing stores huddled below brick and limestone buildings. Gothic architecture soars above furniture shops that can only be afforded by the city’s wealthy residents. A coffee shop is at every other corner, giving commuters their daily highs, while trees line every street floundering to soak up the carbon dioxide. I’d say this ain’t Brooklyn, but downtown BK looks just like this with all the new construction and overpriced apartment complexes. Escalating rents from Bed-Stuy, East Flatbush, Gowanus, everywhere make it abundantly clear the colonizers have returned.

The 8:00 a.m. sun hits Augustin Prep’s remodeled exterior. Light shimmers over glossy marble and stone like a beacon. The architecture, dating back to the 1800s, may have seen its fair

share of change, but it hasn't hit the student body. White kids swarm from all directions, converging on these massive solid glass double doors with steel handles. It's like the entrance to a Midtown office building and not a high school.

I take the biggest gulp of Manhattan air and brace myself to enter, reflexively checking my phone. There's an alert. A message from Dad:

**DAD**

Gil sorry I couldn't be there for your first day. But know that me and all your family in Jamaica are cheering for you. You're going to do things that I could only dream of at your age. Big tings a gwaan fi yuh, mi son 🍷

**ME**

Thanks dad.

It's not the same as him being here. But I feel myself relax, ready to take on the day.

Students pile through the entrance, bumping each other like it's rush hour in Times Square. A group of boys push into my back as I enter. I'm not sure if they were trying to get past me or what, but I do what any New Yorker would do during a morning commute, I make a slight turn with my arm bent and extended so it looks like an accident when I elbow the closest in the chest. Renee would be proud of that move. The group of matching blond-haired students look like they are on the way to a Future Republicans of America photo shoot.

Blue eyes and burgundy cheeks give me a confused look and

I respond with the *Oh, I didn't see you there* look. Then keep it moving.

Dean Bradley, the dean of students, welcomes everyone as we walk past the school's reception desk. He's got on loafers, gray corduroy pants, a pastel-yellow dress shirt, a green sweater-vest to match the school colors, and a striped tie that may be uglier than mine. I'm not a fashion guru. But if I were to give a name to his style, it'd be: busted.

He says something, pointing to my head. I turn down Rej's mix to hear him repeat it. "Take those earphones off, son." *Did this dude just call me son?* "No earphones or caps on in the building or I'll take them. You're inside. This isn't the ghetto."

*Ghetto? Who says that?* Shoot. Grabbin someone's belongings when you didn't pay for it sounds ghetto to me. He being extra for no reason. I remove the earbuds, then trace my tapered fro, drop fade, with my palms, thankful for the fresh cut. Ain't no way a hat going over this.

"Morning, Mr. Powell," Ms. Willis greets me, adding the subtle nod that says, *I see you*. She looks like she's older than my mom, probably above forty. But Black don't crack so who knows. Her twists are pulled back in a bun, so her squat neck can be seen above the collarless gray pantsuit with the white blouse. She's the only Black teacher I met during my interviews. So I remembered her name. And she made it a point to know mine.

"Morning, Ms. Willis," I say, before joining the pre-class locker rush.

Everyone is fixing their ties, some putting on athletic letter sweaters they can wear instead of the blazer. The first floor is filled with glass trophy cases, highlighting Augustin's varsity ath-

letics program and its accomplishments. Looks like almost every other year the football team's got a championship. The antique wood adds to the stuffy atmosphere that all feels like a mausoleum. I don't spot one Black student in the wave of white faces.

Everywhere I turn, there are pockets of people catching up with each other, chatting about all their shared experiences. I shouldn't care. But it's another reminder it's just me here. In martial arts competitions, we may fight alone, but my team, the dojo is there, cheering me on. At least I'll have robotics next week. A group of people competing together in science. We do good, Mom will prob tell everyone I'm up for a Nobel Prize.

I jam my gym bag inside my locker, sighing at the gang of textbooks I gotta haul. I notice the clock on the wall. Ten minutes until my first class. *Wait . . . what do I have first period?* Is it AP Physics? Nah, maybe it's AP Lit. Ah man, I can't remember.

I dive through my book bag, folders, locker, then my pants and blazer for my schedule but it's gone. I reach for my phone to try and pull up the doc.

Of course. It's dead. I slam my locker closed, and swing my book bag over my shoulder to head to the dean's office for a new schedule when I crash into a wall. It's the chest of someone twice my size with a neck made of muscle. He's got wavy black hair long enough to tuck behind his ears, dark brown eyes, and a chiseled jaw. His arm, clothed in a varsity sweater, hangs around a slender girl with a styled lob and highlights, holding a luxury handbag that looks too small to carry a notebook or tablet. They cling to each other, not a single pimple between their white faces. It's like they've practiced this pose nonstop and are ready to cover a magazine.

“My fault,” I say reflexively. I actually don’t know who bumped who, but his expression says it doesn’t matter and it’s definitely my fault.

I move around him and he steps into my space. “That’s right, it is your fault,” he says as if it were a matter of scientific fact.

“Hey, Terry, Jill.” A girl slides between us, wafting gentle scents of coconut oil from the curls puffing out from rubber band twists. Her skin is like the moon touching the trees at night. She’s the first Black student I’ve seen all morning, and here she is flying in to save me. “You better hurry or you’ll be late for class,” she says to the dude. “Even football players get detention.” She grabs my hand assertively, sure-footed, pulling me away. “You must be new.”

“Yeah.” The lone word flutters out, my hand warm in hers, as she pulls me down the hall to the staircase. She may be five six, glasses with a blueish tint hover below strong eyebrows. Her back moves like a swimmer as I follow. I pull my hand from hers and it slips easily away from the heat and damp anxiety. “I forgot my schedule,” I say, as if she needed further information on my newness.

“You don’t got a phone?” she asks.

“Forgot to charge it,” I reply.

She smirks. “You look a little old to be making freshman mistakes.”

“Just had a lot on my mind, transferring to a new school and all,” I say.

“Oh,” she says tilting her head in. “You got them transfer-student blues. Gonna write a poem about it?”



“Nah, nothing like that,” I say, channeling Stretch, trying not to laugh and play it cool.

“I’ll show you the dean’s office,” she says with a turn. “Not the place you want to go on your first day. Dean Bradley loves giving out detention more than he likes cigarettes.” She gives me the quick tour, highlighting different places of interest as we go up the stairs. The school’s Legacy Wing. Business offices. But all I see are her curls leading me on, now giving me hints of peaches drifting off each movement. I keep my eyes up, not tracking the skirt as it moves rhythmically with her hips, and the charcoal leggings beneath.

“So, what’s your name?”

“Gil.” My eyes shoot to the ceiling.

“You a sophomore? You look too old to be a freshman.”

“Nah,” I add bass to my voice. “Senior.”

“Don’t lie. Augustin doesn’t admit senior transfers. Against policy.”

“Well, they made an exception.”

“You rich?”

She’s got jokes. “Pssht. Yeah, right. You think I’m one of these white kids bouncing from country to country during the summer?”

“Well, we’re here.” She gestures inside an open door. “I got Calc on the fourth floor, so I better get going. By the way, since you were rude enough not to ask, my name is Tammy.”

Damn. It’s like not getting Nakia’s number all over again. “Sorry. Was about to ask.” I’ve been looking for other Black students since orientation. Finally find one and I don’t ask her name.

“You should come out to the Black Culture Club.”

“Oh, we got a club?” I ask. She nods. “Yeah, maybe I’ll come through.”

“Chill with the maybe and do that,” she says with authority. “Today. After school.” I dip my head to say yes, even though I know I can’t make it. “It’s cool,” she says, spotting my hesitation. “New school. You a little shook. I get it.”

“Whoa. Ain’t nobody shook.” Rej and Stretch would like her. No opening missed.

“Getting defensive,” her voice sings. “Anyway, you owe me for your rude introduction.” Her lip curls to one side and I feel the blood rush to my face.

“Somebody being rude to Tammy?” This Asian cat with a sleek rasp to his voice like he’s always in chill mode limps over on crutches. His hand brushes the black hair with brown highlights from his eyes, then he and Tammy exchange a friendly hug.

“What happened, CJ?” she asks.

“That influencer life.” He chuckles without smiling. “Perils of me being me.” He uses his crutch as an extension of his arm to motion to the door. “Had to pick up the elevator key ’cause, you know. Anyway, got Calc with Abato. I better go.”

“Hey, I’ll go with you.” Tammy turns to me to say, “Don’t forget, after school, fifth floor.” I watch her as she fades down the hall and out of sight.

The dean’s office is broken up into two rooms. The waiting area has a bench, bookshelves, and a desk on the right for the dean’s assistant. To the left is a door leading to the dean’s private office.

The dean enters, the more prominent side of his receding

hairline poking out first. His low-cut brown hair has turned gray at the sides. Up close, he's got a funny smell. He's clean-shaven, so it might be aftershave, but it's like inhaling coffee and air-fried gym socks. I get the feeling this guy rarely smiles.

"Let me guess," he says, eyebrows raised in judgment. "No schedule." I nod apologetically. "I get it. First day. But you're not a freshman. You're a senior." Never had a conversation with this guy before, if I can call it that, and he knows I'm a senior. Guess it makes sense since there aren't that many Black people here. They made a point to know the transfer. "There's no excuse for tardiness. This is the real world you're in now."

Sup with this? He Morpheus? Have I been living in the dream world? "The bell hasn't rung yet." I try not to clench my teeth too hard. *If you give me my schedule, I'd get to class.*

"We don't use bells at AP," he says as if it's a crowning achievement. But checking the office clock, yeah, I'm late. One strike against me in his book. "This is preparation for college. We trust our students to be adult enough to keep track of time. Don't you have a phone?" That's the second time this morning. Literally just got the cell last night, one that can actually use Google Docs without blowing up. Phones weren't even allowed in class at Union. "Now I have to print out a new schedule," he says. "Which wastes paper. And we're eco-friendly here."

*But not Gil-friendly.* Instead of giving me a lecture, he could press the button, print the schedule. Not everything has to be a teachable moment. But no, some part of him is enjoying this. Like he took the job to flex authority over people half his age.

My old school never had a dean, only a principal, and he wasn't much better. He got some twisted pleasure out of telling us that

college wasn't necessary or that we would never achieve the successes of private school kids. We butted heads more than once.

The dean finally prints my schedule and I head through the empty hallways to AP Gov. I can still feel his gaze on me as he shakes his head.

I let it go . . . as much as I can. First days of school are forever trash. Next week, robotics team starts. Things can only get better.

*This ain't the start I needed.* I swear I'm getting glances, and it's not ones that simply say *Transfer student*. Been late to almost every class. Can't keep up with all the names, faces. Even the room numbering is weird, a mix of letters and numbers—not sequential.

Finally. Last period is over. Gotta say a quick hello to Mr. Abato. Then make a run for my locker. Outside of Ms. Willis, Mr. Abato is the only person I remember from my interviews. Not my AP Physics teacher, but he runs the after-school STEM activities, including New York State Science Honors Society and the robotics team. I was hoping to have at least one teacher who was Black or any person of color, but in the classes I had, they all turned up white. Just like Mr. Abato.

“Mr. Powell,” he says, exiting his classroom. He’s proudly rocking a lab coat like he’s been conducting some ill experiment. He’s got a young face, he may be in his thirties. His hair is a premature matte silver, based on the budding lumberjack beard that’s only starting to turn from its original brown. “How are you enjoying your first day at AP?”

AP. That’s what the teachers here call the school. Brooklyn is BK. Augustin Prep is just Augustin Prep. Don’t think an acronym is gonna make the school sound less white.

“It’s nice,” I say, like complimenting a haircut when the barber jacked up your hairline. “The mix of new and vintage design. The architecture definitely stands out from the city.” It’s like I’m in the middle of another interview, manufacturing a voice and smile that isn’t me. But this guy holds the keys to the kingdom if you’re STEM focused. So I do what I got to.

I got my guard up—a little cautious after the two encounters with the dean, plus muscle-neck dude. But the day wasn’t all bad. I can still see those blue frames and curls. Almost taste the scents that dripped off her like an island breeze. My day-one hero. Tammy.

“We’re celebrating a big anniversary this year,” Mr. Abato says. He adjusts his lab coat, which fits a size too big for his lanky frame. “Our sesquicentennial. One hundred fifty years. Lots of history here.” He rattles on, sometimes too fast for me to keep up. The time is ticking, but his energy and love for science have me hyped like when I first met him. “Distinguished alum.”

“Anybody I’d know?” I ask.

He starts name-dropping people who don’t ring any bells.

CEOs. Athletes. TV personalities. Conservative politicians that I always see getting dragged on Twitter. Nobody that really hits. Another reminder that everybody he's into—probably ain't Black. "Alum at Boston Dynamics. Then there's Dr. Gunther, whose latest patent on robot-assisted neurosurgery has been utilized by Intuitive. Haru Nakamura, who just left a position at FANUC, doing some amazing things with automation in manufacturing."

"Wait, go back to the person working in robotics," I say, the last bit of information grabbing me. "You said somebody working in brain surgery?"

"Oh, Dr. Gunther," Mr. Abato says. "Truly a brilliant scientist. One of the donors who helped fund our new STEM Lab and Fabrication Center."

"Is there a chance to meet them or something?" I ask. I think about the possibility of helping people with dementia using robots and nanotechnology. This is what Augustin's about.

"Well, she's pretty busy," he says. "But who knows, I'll talk to the alumni office, maybe we can set up some kind of virtual meet with the team."

"That'd be cool," I say, noting it on today's brighter-side list right under Tammy.

"There's going to be a lot of opportunities for internships and to meet industry professionals, as we expand our corporate sponsorship," Mr. Abato says. He taps his head, an idea popping up. "Since you're already here, I'd love you to meet the RoboAugs founding members," he says. I reach for my phone to check the time, thankful Ms. Willis let me charge it in her class during lunch. She didn't give me any judgment like the dean, just said no problem. Mr. Abato sees my hesitation, adding, "They got the

school interested in making Augustin competitive in robotics, which is a big reason you're here. It will only take a few minutes."

"Sure thing," I say, swallowing a sigh as he walks me inside.

"This is Heath and Lydia," he says. I do a double take at the matching hair that looks like a phoenix touched their scalps. They must be related. Freckles dot their noses and across their cheeks.

"Yes, we're twins," Heath says, curtly answering a question I didn't ask, but that must come up regularly. He's the shorter of the two, stocky with a hint of arrogance in his crossed arms, judging me out of the corner of his eye, wondering if I belong. His hair is pressed down as flat as possible to his scalp.

I ignore him 'cause his sister obviously took all the civility in their genetic split. She extends her hand with a welcoming smile, her cheeks flushing as red as her eyebrows.

"You're going to love it here," Lydia says, spiraling atomic energy as if she's on the verge of exploding. They may be twins, but they couldn't be more opposite. And the only thing wilder than her enthusiasm is her hair, which is as jumpy as she is. "When the season starts, it gets kind of bonkers, but brainstorming together is the absolute best. The STEM Lab down the hall and the Fabrication Center downstairs are like toy rooms for us." Her eyes widen, closing in on my personal space, expecting me to respond. I've never seen someone my age so hyped for science. Me and Rej are geeks for it, but not like this. She's got no reservations. "Seriously, anything you need, Augustin has it."

"That sounds great," I say sneaking back, reclaiming my breathing room. "I can't wait to get my hands into it." There's



no matching this excitement, it's almost too overwhelming. But I force a smile with every muscle I can muster because robotics is what I love and I can't get freaked out by every new person I meet.

"You build before?" Heath asks like a gunslinger throwing down a challenge.

"Here and there," I say cautiously. He nods, maybe my answer pleased him. "Nothing on the tournament level."

"Well, don't worry," Lydia says. "We're just happy to expand the team. The more brains in the mix the better."

"That includes me." That Asian dude Tammy knows glides in on his crutches.

"CJ, you made it, perfect timing," Mr. Abato says. "CJ will be working on CAD this year."

"Always looking for more content for the following," CJ says, effortlessly joining the group. There's barely a smile on his face but the confidence is undeniable. He could probably battle Stretch for the "most chill" award.

"We're all learning together," Mr. Abato adds. "And, some other news." Mr. Abato grins. "The Freedom Academy will be hosting an off-season competition in late October. That means we'll have a chance to fix our robot from last year and really show the other schools what we can do." He takes out his phone and motions for us to stand together. "Let's take a picture," he says. "Headmaster DeSantis wants to add it to the alumni newsletter."

This moment feels right. They talk about the goals for the year, fixing the drivetrain from last year's robot, a new fabrication

machine, recruitment. It's all pretty cool, especially some of the programming applications. Then I look at my phone.

It's 3:39.

A few minutes turned into thirty plus.

Flying through the double doors at the entrance, I stuff my blazer in my bag and rip off my tie without breaking stride. My cousin once told me that the school crest on your chest is the perfect place to hit you. I take the comment seriously. When I get to the corner, I find a bench and swap out my shoes for the sneakers I have in my gym bag.

The Jordan IV retros with the black cement. I'm not a full sneakerhead. My money's just not right. And with things the way they been at home, I can't really spend like that. But this is something I gifted myself over the summer. Despite the khaki pants and my shoulders lugging two bags, I'm feeling comfortable, more like myself as I swipe into the subway.

I lean on the train doors and put my earbuds in to listen to Rej's mix, bumping my head. He's got so much talent. Not like local DJ talent, but someone the world needs to know. My family's not the only one that could use a win. Sucks that his time is split now. Trying to meet with nonprofit lawyers, get his dad back in the country.

The 2 train is running smoothly—fingers crossed. I should still make martial arts by 4:45. I'll miss the kids' class but I'll catch Kenya and the other kōhai test for belt promotion. Always Persevere is a second family. If they're struggling, Ima be there to push them, cheer them on. Big bro got you. And I'll prove to Rej and Stretch that this school isn't gonna affect who I am.

Three heads get on the train at Hoyt Street. They're at the far end of the car, but for some reason my senses tell me to pay attention. Martial arts taught me mindfulness, trained me to constantly be aware of my surroundings. One of them makes a gesture and I'm 90 percent sure that motion was toward me. Normally, I wouldn't think anything of it. They ain't dressed any different from my people at Union. But something doesn't feel right. They're quiet, not talking, only looking over in my direction. When the train passes Atlantic and more people get off, they move to the middle of the train and my chest tightens.

These damn khakis. Rej was right. I can't kick in these. The blazer may be in my bag, but the rest of the dress code is screaming *Jack me*. The closest dude cases me like a bank vault. I act like I don't notice, nonchalantly making a move to the next car. It's a little more crowded. I should be okay.

When I first took the bus by myself, Dad told me there's one thing heads like this love to do—jack you as a group. He said it's fear.

I keep my pace steady, but quick. I don't want them to think I'm scared, and I need to keep a good distance between us. I'm missing Dad even more right now. That silent nod he'd give me with the encouraging smile before a martial arts competition always hyped me up like I could take on the world. My gut tells me I could take one, maybe two, but not three and if they have a weapon, I'm done. Too many heads wanna be shooters. And a black belt doesn't protect you from getting jumped.

They follow me.

I can almost feel them at my back as the train leaves Bergen.

I'm in the last car. Nowhere to run. They come closer and I can't help but shrink into the steel doors.

"Yo, wussup, kid," the tall one says, barely opening his mouth. He's wearing a black vest over a charcoal hoodie and it's over seventy degrees out. His facial hair with connected sides makes me think he's got a couple years on me. "Where you goin, like a job intaview or suttin? We tryna talk to you and you runnin."

"Ain't nobody was running," I reply, showing them I'm not intimidated. *Maybe they'll move on.* They get closer. Dude with the vest gives me the smirk of someone not afraid of lockup. He measures me, sees a prep school kid that stepped into the wrong borough, an easy target for a beatdown. I raise my voice a few decibels hoping someone will hear me and step in. "What, you need something?" People willfully look away as if I don't exist. I might as well be on an empty train, but I'm not. Everybody just wants to continue on with their day, avoiding drama even when they could help. Maybe they think I was asking for this.

He puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "Yo, I need a dolla. Tryna git one adem mail room jobs like you. So wussup?" He pats my chest.

I push his hand off and say, "Nah, man. I'm broke."

"Fancy kid sayin he broke," he says, turning to look at his minions, pointing at my sneakers, my pants. He taps my pockets with the back of his hand, feeling the cell phone, wallet. My skin crawls. Nobody's ever rolled on me like this before. But things are different now.

*It's these damn clothes.*

One day and people already looking at me like I ain't from my own hood.

He presses his forearm into my neck as the train enters Grand Army Plaza. I'm trapped between the train door and his arm.

"Run the pockets, and doze sneakers."

I can feel the steam coming out of his nostrils. My chin tucks into my neck. My heart races. My back, pressed against steel and plexiglass, wants to burrow its way out.

*Can you even do a sidekick in those pants?*

The train door opens. I pull my knee up to my chest launching a stomp kick with the sole of my foot into the center of his vest with every fiber in my body. He tumbles into his friends, the momentum sending me down to the stained concrete, littered with a day's worth of garbage and spit. I don't waste time. I scramble up and run. I don't know if they're behind me. I need to get outta here. Escape this train. Escape this day.

I charge up the stairs. Through the turnstile. Out the subway exit. And I keep running. I look from side to side not sure where to go, barely registering where I am. It's rush hour. Cars and people swirl around. Truck drivers hurl curses. Pedestrians scream back. They all combine into a whirlwind attacking my senses. Then I see it, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch standing like a stone mountain above the roundabout. I turn toward it and keep running. A car screeches by. I leap back, toppling under the weight of my bags.

"Hey, get out the road," a driver yells at me.

I wait at the intersection for the light to change, catching my breath, looking over my shoulder. I think I lost them, but I'm not

sure. One intersection between me and safety. The light changes to a saving green. I rush across the street to the Central Library. I fly up the concrete stairs, taking them two, three at a time.

Fifty-foot pillars that touch the sky and windows adorned with gold etchings ripped from literature mark the entrance like a roadway to the Roman Colosseum. I've always come here when I want to just enjoy quiet time alone. Now, here it is, a real sanctuary. I press through the revolving door, flatten my back against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

I look outside. Nothing. I know I can't leave yet, they could still be lurking out there. *What time is it?* If Mr. Abato hadn't stopped me, I would've got to the dojo on time. If it wasn't for this uniform, I wouldn't have been marked on the train.

If I didn't choose this school, I wouldn't be in this situation.

I WAIT A good fifteen minutes before heading to the B41 stop, constantly checking behind me. The bus is a longer ride but I don't want to risk getting back on the 2. Of course, it doesn't come for twenty minutes and rush-hour traffic isn't forgiving either. I cross the street just in time to see Kenya exiting the dojo.

Her cheeks and eyes droop sadly. "Hey, Joshu Powell," she says with attitude that I can't fault. "You promised you'd be here."

I instantly feel like crap. "I'm sorry, lil sis," I say. This is on me. I messed up. I gotta do better. "How'd it go?"

"I passed," she says, even though it sounds more like defeat. She flashes her new belt tip.

"That's dope!" I say. "You deserve it. All that work you've put in."

"It was rough," she says. "I had to spar against sooo many

people. I felt like I was gonna pass out.” *And I wasn’t there to cheer you on, pick you up.* The worst big brother. “You’ll be here Saturday for demo practice, right?” she asks hopefully.

“You know it,” I say. At least I don’t gotta worry about the subway or school on weekends. “And you been showing a lot of improvement. I think we can add on an extra movement to your nunchuck routine.”

“Really?” she says, with a spark. I can still make this up to her.

“You have your chucks on you?” She nods anxiously, pulling them out of her bag. It’s one of the best parts about getting onto our demo team, learning new techniques before other students of your same age and rank. “Check it,” I say. “You’ve done your figure eights and shoulder passes. Now I’m going to work with you on rip rolls and throws.” I take the nunchucks from her hand. There are two people passing by on the sidewalk, who have stopped to watch what I’m about to do. Once they step back, and give me room, I start to demonstrate basic figure eights. Then I transition into a wrist roll, spinning the chucks, the chain connecting the sticks sliding smoothly through my thumbs, across the back of my hands in endless cartwheels. Finally, I end with a shoulder-to-shoulder throw, my gaze locked forward, not once blinking.

“Whoa,” she says, her jaw open. “I get to do that?”

“You’re a quick learner,” I say. “We don’t have any demos until next year, but with steady practice, you’ll be able to do a few wrist rolls and maybe some throws by then.” The smile on her face fills me. Maybe I’m even forgiven. “Which means I gotta step up my routine too. ’Cause me and Stretch come out right after you.”

Nakia crosses the street. She's never come to the dojo before. She's like five three. Never really noticed what a mean walk she got. Like she's commanding the earth with each step, fully comfortable in her body and who she is. "We gotta run," she says to Kenya.

"What're you doing here?" I blurt out the words, which sounds like attitude, forgetting any sense of the good manners my mom would expect of me or the swag Rej and Stretch would mock me for not having.

"Um, rude," she says assertively, a one-eighty from the vibe she was giving at J'ouvert.

"Nah, I'm sorry," I say, trying to clean it up, tripping over each syllable. This whole day is messing with my head. "Usually your mom comes, I was surprised that's all."

"Mm-hmm," she says. "Well, we gotta go." It's like something's on her mind but I got too much going on right now to do a deep dive. "Give me your phone." When she returns it, I've got a new contact. She looks at me with such certainty. It's different from the summer hangs at the job. Not that *I wanna get to know you* look, but the look of knowing who I am and where I'm from, nudging us to go further. Her hand wraps around the back of my neck, gently rising along my fade. My face heats up. "No excuses now."

Kenya giggles. Then turns with her sister to walk away. For a moment, lil sis looks back at me with hesitation but then merely waves. "Bye big bro," she says, taking off with Nakia.

Stretch throws up his hand, flashing a wussup grin as he walks out of the dojo. "Where you been, son?" He sees Nakia walk off. And turns to me with the devilish smirk. "Hope you got that



number.” I nod my head, showing him my phone. “Okaaay.” Stretch beams. He taps me with the back of his hand on my chest. “Let me find out private school life got you stepping up.”

“What’s up with that rip in your crotch, man?” Rej asks, studying me.

I look down and realize that the stomp kick ripped open a hole in my pants.

My cheeks gets hot. Oh no. Did Nakia notice?

I tighten my lips, the part of me that wants to tell my friends what happened on the subway. But I can’t. First day of being out of BK and I get jumped. What’s that say about me? That I can’t be out on my own? Like I’m a little kid. The whole hood will be laughing at me. Trying to break me. So I lie.

“Cheap material. I slipped.”

“Pfft. Any pants you can’t kick in—” Stretch shakes his head. His mood light, accepting my answer.

Rej though . . . After things went down with his dad, me and him got closer, promised we’d always tell each other the truth. Neither of us knew that our dads were undocumented. Not formally at least. They did the grind. Things was always harder and we just thought that was another part of life. Our parents didn’t want to burden us with the concern.

He has one hand crossed at his waist, the other up by his chin, massaging his fingers on his palm, deciding whether he wants to believe me. But I don’t think he does. He only says, “We did warn you.”

As we walk to the bus stop, they tell me about the test. How grateful the kōhai were to have them there. All of the younger students passed, putting their hearts into earning their promotion.

That's Rej and Stretch's memory. One that I'm not a part of. Whenever they or the kōhai recall this day, I won't be able to share in the conversation. My memory will be of Augustin Prep, the 2 train, and letting lil sis down.

And this is only day one.