

## Prologue

When the bullets hit him, first his arm, then his stomach, it doesn't feel like he'd always imagined it would. Because of course, as a Black boy growing in this neighbourhood, he'd imagined it. He'd thought it would feel hot and sharp, like the slice of a knife; instead, his entire body goes cold, like someone has filled his insides with ice.

The blood is a surprise too, not how much—he'd pictured it pooling around him—but how little, a warm, sticky trickle flowing from under his jacket where he fell to the ground.

He hears heavy footsteps and voices coming closer, two of them. One is calling for an ambulance. They're talking loud and fast, not to him but to each other.

"Check his ID."

"No, don't touch him."

"Fuck!"

And then: "Where's the gun? Get the gun!"

One of them says this over and over.

There's no gun. He wants to explain, but no words come out of his mouth.

He was wearing his headphones—Meek Mill blasting in his ears—when he thought he heard shouting, felt footsteps pounding in the alley. He turned and instinctively reached for his phone in his pocket to turn off the music. That was stupid. He knew better. No sudden movements. Don't be a threat. Do what they say. His mom had drilled this into him since he was old enough to walk. He didn't even have a chance though; his mind moved so much slower than the bullets.

An image comes to him—his face on the news. He knows exactly which photo his mom will choose: his school picture from last year, eighth grade. She was happy he'd finally smiled in it; he usually tried to keep his mouth closed to hide the gap in his teeth, even though just last week he'd overheard Maya in line behind him in the cafeteria call it "cute." He pictures Riley Wilson, the pretty one on Channel Five, with her bright red lips, her voice smooth as melted chocolate: "Fourteen-year-old Justin Dwyer was shot tonight by Philadelphia police officers. . . ."

He looks at his phone on the ground next to him, screen shattered into a spiderweb of cracks. For a split second, he's seized with panic—his mom had made it clear when he lost his last phone that she wouldn't buy him another one. Then it hits him just as suddenly: it doesn't mat-ter. In the backpack lying beside his phone there's a brand-new polo—one he bought with his allowance, ten bucks a week for good grades and doing the food shopping and making dinner the nights his mom works double shifts. He's scared he's never going to get to wear that shirt. He vibrates with nervous jitters like when time is running out on a test. There are so many things he still may never get to do now—drive a car, see the ocean, have sex. As he hears the sirens growing louder, he starts to shake uncontrollably.

He tries to stop himself from thinking about his mother. He knows what her cries will sound like, because he heard them when his dad died four years ago. He won't be able to comfort her as he did then, rubbing her back, telling her, "It's okay, it's okay," even though it wasn't, even though he was terrified that he now had to be the man of the house.

It's okay. It's okay. He whispers the words to himself because there's no one else to do it. The officers are close, their scuffed boots eye level; their voices float far away, jumbled with the shrill sirens and the chatter from their radios. One of them kneels near him. "Hang on, kid. You're gonna be all right. Please just hang on." He wants to tell them his name.

If they know his name he'll be less alone. Worse than the pain or even the fear is that he's never felt so alone in his life.

A single star is visible in the hazy sky above, like the light in the fish tank in his room. It's something to focus on, something to hold on to until whatever comes next.

## Chapter One

RILEY

*You can't trust white people.* My grandmother's voice is in my head out

of nowhere, her Alabama lilt still honey-thick despite almost a lifetime of living in Philadelphia. I swear I can even feel her hot breath in my ear. It's been happening more and more lately, ever since Gigi passed out two weeks ago on her faded corduroy La-Z-Boy, where she faith-fully watched *Judge Mathis* every afternoon. She may be over at Mercy Hospital on round-the-clock dialysis, with a prognosis the doctors call "grim," but she's also in my ear with her no-nonsense advice and favorite sayings on random rotation. *Always keep some "runnin' " money in your pocketbook. Don't kiss a man with dainty fingers. Never drink more than two glasses of brown liquor.* Sometimes she's a little more direct, like this morning when I stopped by the hospital and she clucked, *Baby girl, that skirt's a little short, ain't it?*

I glance down at my skirt, which probably is a little short for work. I tug at my hem, then force it all out of my mind and bust through the station's double doors, as giddy as a kid playing hooky. Back upstairs, everyone is still in the middle of the 6 p.m. broadcast. For the first time in weeks, I was able to arrange it so I don't have a package running or a live shot so I could leave at a decent hour and finally meet up with Jen. I'm still running twenty minutes late though. I pull out my phone to text her that I'm on my way and see she's beaten me to the punch.

*You're even pushing CP time. Get over here already!*

Funny, Jen . . . real funny. I roll my eyes, amused. Why did I let her in on the concept of "coloured people" time?

I wait at the WALK sign at the corner, in the shadow of a giant billboard featuring the KYX Action News anchor team. As I look up at Candace Dyson's face, the size of a small planet, the gloss of her toothy grin catching the setting sun, the usual thought runs through my head: One day. Candace was the first Black weeknight anchor at KYX. I idolized her growing up and told her as much on my first day of work five months ago. "I loved watching you as a kid. I dressed up like for two straight Halloweens," I gushed.

Instead of her being flattered, I was met with a chill that still hasn't thawed despite my repeated attempts to ingratiate myself. Maybe she could sense how badly I wanted her chair. Maybe she sees me as a threat. Maybe I am.

When the light finally turns, I charge across the street, beads of sweat dripping down the back of my neck, my hair getting frizzier and frizzier by the second in the steamy humidity. It's almost seventy

degrees, which is just plain wrong considering it's a week into December. It feels like I'm back in Birmingham, which makes me shudder despite the heat.

I bound through the entrance and slam into a throng of happy-hour revellers—a sea of Crayola-coloured J.Crew sheath dresses and blue button-downs. I only suggested this place because it was close to the station, but I'm barely through the door before the crowd, the faux-farmhouse decor, the waitstaff in plaid suspenders, all combine to radiate an instantly irritating pretension.

Not long ago this street was all liquor stores and check-cashing places, the kind of block a woman knew better than to walk down after dark. It's like this now all over the city; gentrification creeping into every corner, as relentless as water finding its way through every crack, the grit and grime replaced by sleek lofts and craft breweries. I barely recognise my hometown.

It's the same feeling when I spot Jen sitting at the bar. It takes me several double takes to recognize my oldest friend. She's chopped off her long hair so it ends right at her chin. In the three decades I've known her, she's never once had short hair. She looks like a stranger. Without even quite meaning to, I edit the scene to a more familiar sight—Jen's long dirty-blond hair, streaming down her back, smelling like the lavender Herbal Essences shampoo she's faithfully used since middle school. She and I haven't seen each other as much as we promised we would when I moved home, and it's all my fault, the new job has consumed me, but seeing her now, I'm hit with a rush of love. Jenny.

I stop to watch her for a moment, a habit from when we were little girls. Back then, I thought if I studied her enough, I could train myself to be more like her—breezy, outgoing, fearless. But that never happened—turns out you don't outgrow yourself.

Jen leans into the man sitting next to her, whispers something to him, playfully slaps his thigh, and then laughs so loudly other people look over. He's mesmerized, basking in the attention like a fat lizard on a sun-soaked rock. This is what Jen does, draws you in and makes you believe there's something uniquely interesting about you, even when you're completely ordinary and boring, prying personal information from you that you aren't even sure why you're sharing. She probably already knows whether he gets along with his mother, the last time he cried, and what he'd rather be doing with his life besides going to happy hour at pretentious gastropubs. It's her gift, her aggressive friendliness, and it's why it was always Jen who charged into parties, or the first day of school, or the first track meet, with me trailing behind, counting on her to be our emissary, to make friends for the both of us. It was easy for Jen, who, unlike me, fits in everywhere, with everyone.

And though she's not classically pretty—she once joked that she was “trailer-trash hot . . . a poor man's Gwyneth Paltrow”—men have always been drawn to her. Like this guy who's now leaning a little too close despite Jen's wedding ring I can see even from here. Not to mention his.

I take a few steps in her direction and stop short when Jen turns ever so slightly. There, poking out from her black tunic, her round stomach. Like the hair, this startles me, though it shouldn't. The last time I saw her, for brunch right before Halloween, she wasn't really showing. Seeing her belly now, almost as big as the soccer balls we used to put under our shirts when we were little to pretend we were pregnant, makes it all too real. This pregnancy may not have even happened without my help, but I'm still getting used to the idea that Jen is having a baby. As if sensing me, Jen turns around and shouts, “Leroya Wilson, get your butt over here!”

I'm startled hearing my given name, which I stopped using years ago and for a second I wonder why she's yelling it across a crowded bar. Then I see the look on her face and can tell she's offering it as a

term of endearment, a signal of our connection. I knew you when. It's funny that I can't even remember exactly how I came up with my new name, but I do remember how emphatic I was about changing it. It was after a field trip to the news station in eighth grade. Standing in the control room, watching the energy and action of live news, seeing Candace sitting at the anchor desk with her stiff helmet of curls and her Fashion Fair coral lipstick, gave birth to a dream.

I leaned over and whispered to Jen right then and there. "I'm gonna be her, Jenny. I'm going to be the next Candace Dyson."

For weeks after, I spent every day after school staring in the bath-room mirror, wearing the plaid blazer Momma had bought me for mock trial and a mouthful of metal braces, practicing my sign-off. "This is Leroya Wilson, for Action Five News." But it never felt quite right. It was rare enough to see someone on TV who looked like me, and when they did they definitely didn't have a name like Leroya. And so I became Riley.

By the time I've elbowed my way to the bar, Jenny is standing, waiting to greet me.

"Whoa, mama!"

"I'm huge, right?" Jen arches her back and cups a hand under the bump to exaggerate its size.

"Well, I meant your hair!"

"Oh yeah! Surprise! I did it last week. I wanted something shorter and easier, but not a mom cut." Her hand floats up from her stomach to run through what's left of her hair. "It doesn't look like a mom cut, right?"

"No, not at all," I lie. "It's very chic. Come here." I pull Jen into a hug and flinch a little at the odd sensation of her hard belly pushing against mine. When I press my face into her hair, the familiar smell of lavender is so strong I can taste it. The nostalgia is like a warm blanket. Thank God I didn't cancel. It had crossed my mind more than once today, but standing here in Jen's embrace and a haze of memories, the stress about Gigi, work, my never-ending to-do list, the exhaustion—all of it re-cedes and there is only Jenny, exactly what I needed. I'm already more relaxed knowing that for the next few hours I don't have to try so hard or impress anyone. Sometimes you just need to be around someone who loved you before you were a fully formed person. It's like finding your favourite sweatshirt in the back of the closet, the one you forgot why you stopped wearing and once you find it again you sleep in it every night.

The press of Jen's belly against mine does remind me of one thing I need to do: call Cookie back. I'm supposed to be co-hosting Jen's baby shower with her mother-in-law, a brunch on New Year's Day, and Cookie has left me three messages this week. But every time I pick up the phone to call her back, I find a reason to procrastinate. Mainly because Cookie—a woman who uses "scrapbook" as a verb, constantly references her Pinterest boards, and refers to Chip and Joanna Gaines by their first names—keeps saying things like, "It's the Year of the Baby!" as if "Year of the Baby" is a thing people say. Her last voice mail was an agonized two-minute monologue about what colour balloons we should get, since Jenny "refuses" to find out the sex.

"Isn't it so selfish that she won't find out?" Cookie asked in the re-corded rant.

Well, maybe it's selfish for you to demand to know, Cookie. It's what I want to tell her, but of course I won't. My tongue may well fall out with all the times I'm going to have to bite it with her. I guess that's the price I'll have to pay, because Jenny deserves a fun shower, and if the tables were turned, I

know Jen would be on the phone with my mom every night trying to convince her that rum punch served in baby bottles would be hysterical!

If there's one thing Jen loves it's a party, but she also always goes out of her way to be thoughtful, which makes you feel adored when it doesn't make you feel undeserving.

Case in point: The day I moved back from Birmingham this summer, anxious and bone-tired from driving thirteen hours straight, there was Jen bounding out of the coffee shop next to my new building, where she'd been waiting for me to arrive for who knows how long. Her hands were full with not one but two housewarming gifts—a spiky house-plant and an eight-by-ten framed picture of us from when we were kids.

“You can't kill a succulent,” she insisted, hugging me tightly before thrusting it into my arms.

I did kill the plant in record time, but the picture is still there on my mantel. It's one of my favourites, taken when we were six or seven. We'd spent the afternoon running through the Logan Square fountain with a hundred other sun-drunk kids and the camera caught us lying on the wet cement, side by side in matching pink polka-dot bikinis, clutching each other's hands.

While we waited for the super to get my new keys, we sat on the curb in the sticky heat. Jenny reached out to wipe my face. “You're here,” she said.

I hadn't even realized I was crying. I was just so . . . happy, or maybe

it was more relieved. After everything that had happened over the last year, my fresh start was real. Sitting there together on the warm concrete, it was of those rare times when, for a brief, glorious moment, the pieces in your life fall into place. I was home.

Jenny gestures now toward two stools to her left. “Here, sit.” She removes the denim jacket she'd spread across the top, oblivious that the man next to her is irritated to have been so abruptly robbed of her attention. She's already forgotten him. “I saved three seats. One for you and two for my fat ass.”

“You wish you had a fat ass,” I joke. “You look great; you're glowing,” I tell her.

“You too. But you always look camera-ready, so no surprise there. Your bangs are growing out. That's good.” She reaches over to touch them. Jenny is the only white woman in the world I would let get away with that. Or talk me into cutting bangs.

“You know, I used to think you were such a weirdo for getting annoyed when people want to touch your hair, but now that I've got this”—she places a hand on either side of her stomach—“I get it now. I'm like Aladdin's lamp. No one asks. They just rub.”

It isn't the same thing at all, but I let it go.

I finger my bangs, which look even frizzier next to Jen's smooth bob that's now starting to grow on me. “So why did you talk me into this again? Chopping these two days before a brand-new job?”

“I know. My bad. We thought it would be very Kerry Washington in season two of Scandal.”

“Yeah, but it ended up more like Kim Fields in The Facts of Life. All I need is roller skates.”

“This'll make it all better, Tootie.” Jenny slides over one of the sweating glasses. She doesn't need to tell me it's a vodka tonic.

“That’s why I love you.” A long sip sends the cool liquid flooding into my stomach, reminding me that, once again, I’ve gone the whole day without finding time to eat.

“I’m jealous.” Jenny raises her glass. “Ginger ale for me.”

“Oh, come on, have a glass of wine with me,” I beg her, because it’s not as much fun to drink alone. Now that I’m here, all I want is to get buzzed with my oldest friend.

Jenny looks down and clutches her belly protectively. I feel like I’m intruding on something private.

“I don’t want to chance it, Rye.”

I shouldn’t have suggested the wine. Not after all those years of trying, then the miscarriages, and all those rounds of IVF. Jen shakes her head. “I just can’t.”

“I understand.” It’s true, I do, but the role reversal is ironic given that it’s been Jen’s mission all these years to loosen me up, to get me to “live a little.”

I make a show of downing another gulp. “Then I’ll have to drink for the both of us.”

“I’m so glad you’re here. God, I’ve missed you so much!” Jen grabs my hands as soon as I set down my drink.

I don’t know why I’m suddenly self-conscious in the face of her effusive affection—and guilty too. “I’m sorry I’ve been so MIA. Work’s been brutal.”

Even with a top-of-the-line “miracle” concealer, I can see the dark circles and deep lines around my eyes in the long bevelled mirror above the bar making me look closer to forty than thirty. So much for Black don’t crack. Clearly, the twelve-hour days, the six to ten packages I’m producing a week, and the almost nightly live shots are taking their toll. It’s the work of three people, but I’m used to that by now. You gotta work twice as hard to get half as far as them, baby girl. It was a mantra most Black kids were all too familiar with, as ubiquitous as reminders to lotion up ashy knees.

“No worries, I get it. And you’re totally killing it. I loved your story last night on how the city needs to invest more money in the West Philly school lunch program. I had no idea how many kids went without lunch every day because they couldn’t afford it.”

“You caught that?” It had taken several weeks to convince my boss, Scotty, the news director, to let me do the piece, and then when all the positive emails started rolling in, he’d conveniently forgotten that he’d said, “Not sure anyone’s going to care, Wilson.”

“Are you kidding me? Of course I did. I always catch your broad-casts, Rye! You’re the only reason I watch the crappy local news. And soon you’re gonna be anchor!” Jen raises her soda and clinks my glass so hard I’m worried she cracked it.

“We’ll see.” I half-heartedly toast, scared that I’m going to jinx it somehow. Don’t go counting your chickens before they hatch. Jen was the first and only person I’d told when I heard Candace might be retiring soon. I always assumed Candace was the type to be carried out of the studio in a coffin, but sure enough, when Scotty took me to lunch last month, he confirmed the rumours that she may “soon be exploring other opportunities,” and that he’d probably be looking for someone “internal” to replace her. It was clear from the way he said it that she, a woman just past sixty, was being pushed out after more than two decades at the station. I should have been outraged by that, but I was too focused on what it could mean for me—a chance at the anchor desk. Given that I’ve only been at the station a few months, it’s a long shot, but ever since Scotty dangled it as a possibility, it’s

a shiny prize that I'm reaching for, greedy as a grubby-handed toddler grabbing for candy. The more Jen acts like it's a done deal though, the more anxious I feel about the fact that it might not happen.

"Trust me, it'll happen," Jen continues. "I know it. Anchor by forty! Right? You always said that was the goal. You're gonna get the job, and your bangs are gonna be a mile high on that billboard. You'll be so famous, and then I can tell everyone that I knew you when you used to practice French kissing on a pillowcase with Taye Diggs's face on it." She looks down and rubs both hands over her belly again. "It's all happening for us, Rye. All the things."

"God, remember how many games of MASH we used to play? I feel like I was somehow always living in a shack with Cole Bryant from algebra."

"OMG, you would have been thrilled to live in a shack with Cole. You loved his dirty drawers!"

It's funny to think of just how many hours—endless—that Jen and I devoted to imagining our future lives: where we would live, what we would do, who we would love, how many kids we would have. All we wanted was for our lives to hurry up and happen already. And now here we are. It was supposed to be the happily-ever-after part; what we didn't understand is that adulthood would be a relentless series of beginnings—new cities, new jobs, new relationships, new babies, new worries. Which is probably why I can't escape the feeling of always being on the cusp of the next thing.

"Here's to us, all grewed up." This time, I clink my glass to Jen's more enthusiastically. My head spins from downing my drink too fast and my stomach growls. "I really need some food."

"Me too, we're starving." It takes me a second to figure out what Jen means by "we."

The menu is a long strip of parchment affixed to a piece of leather and printed with the day's date on top like a newspaper. Each dish has a gag-worthy "origin story." Steak tartare from Bucks County, farm-fresh burrata from Haverford described as "barnyardy," and honey procured from hives on the restaurant's roof. It's a long way from the Kool-Aid, Stouffer's pizza, and boxed mac and cheese we grew up on.

"Everything is crazy expensive," Jenny says, staring at the menu as if it's a problem to solve.

It's true, the prices for "the array of small plates" are as absurd as their descriptions. I should have picked a cheaper place, considering how much Jenny and Kevin are struggling. But the subject of money is some-thing I try to avoid with her entirely, so she won't be reminded of the reason it looms between us, the loan I know she'll never be able to pay back. I didn't have a choice though. I had to give her the money. When I was home for the holidays last year, and she stopped by my parents' place as usual on Christmas Eve, she was a desperate wreck. It had been more than six weeks since her final round of IVF, her third try, didn't work.

"What can I do?" I'd asked, as we passed a bottle of warm red wine between us, and then wondered what I would say if Jen wanted me to carry her baby in some sort of Lifetime-movie-of-the-week scenario.

"Nothing." Jen lay down on my childhood bed. I stretched out beside her, wrapped my arms around her bony frame, and buried my face in her hair. It smelled like it hadn't been washed for days, not a trace of lavender.

"You can try again, right?"

"No. We can't." Jen sighed.

“You can. You will,” I insisted. “What *will* it take for you to try again?”

There was a long stretch before she spoke.

“Money. We’re already, like, thirty grand in debt.”

“Thirty grand,” I repeated, taking in the staggering number. It was more than my annual salary in my first job out of college, working as a scrub reporter in Joplin, Missouri. And it was an insane amount of money to spend on something that didn’t seem to be working at all. They still didn’t have a baby. But I made up my mind not to judge. Besides, I’d never seen Jen like this. It was painful to witness someone you love want something so desperately, and to watch as each miscarriage fundamentally altered her—made her more fragile and bitter. Gigi said it was like Jen’s spirit itself was withering like forgotten fruit. There was only one thing to do.

“How much do you need?” I braced myself for the answer.

Jen didn’t respond right away, which made me think she might say no, and maybe that’s what I wanted. Finally, she said, in as small a voice as I’d ever heard her use, “Maybe five thousand? That could help us . . . if it’s not too much.”

Again, I tried not to react to the number and just wrote her a check, instantly wiping out more than half my hard-earned savings. The way she couldn’t stop saying, “Thank you, thank you,” as she hugged me and wouldn’t let go made it all worth it. So did her scream—so loud I had to hold the phone away from my ear—when she’d called to tell me the next round of IVF had worked. Still, sometimes the money feels like a little pebble caught in a shoe; you’re not going to stop walking, but you always know it’s there. We both look down at her belly now and silently come to the same conclusion—any awkwardness between us is a small price to pay.

“Don’t worry. I can expense dinner. We might do a story on this place.” I lie again to make us both feel better. “Order whatever you want. It’s on me . . . on the station.”

Jenny’s visibly relieved as she turns back to the menu. “Well, in that case let’s get it all. We fancy. We’ve come a long way from Chef Boyardee, huh?”

The bartender finally tears himself away from a gaggle of blondes who barely look of drinking age and pays us some attention. I can tell when he does a double take that he recognizes me. It’s embarrassing how much I like this, how it never gets old. I offer him a sheepish smile, but he’s all business, with a brisk “What can I get you?” and even then, he only addresses Jen, as if she’s the one footing the bill. I order \$100 of overpriced small plates to prove a point, though what exactly that point is, I have no idea. The bartender walks away before I can even set down the menu.

“We’re gonna feast! Kevin’s been picking up all the shifts he can until the baby comes and doing overtime working the Eagles games on Sundays, so I’ve been eating a lot of cereal alone on the couch binging Fixer Upper.”

“The glam life of a cop’s wife.”

Jen bites the edge of her bottom lip, a lifelong nervous habit that’s left her with a tiny white scar. “I wish. It’s been hard. The holidays are such a shit time to be a cop. Thanksgiving and Christmas are supposed to be, like, the happiest time of year for most people, but there are way more calls, more domestics, and a lot more suicides. Kevin had to go to one last week—day after Thanksgiving, guy hung himself in the back-yard from his daughter’s swing set. So awful, right? He left a note taped to the swings that said he couldn’t fight the demons. It messed Kevin up for days. He doesn’t say

anything, but I can tell. It's too much for the cops . . . to be the social workers, the therapists. . . . Anyway, enough about that. God, so depressing. How's Gigi?"

For as long as Jen has known her, she has called my grandmother by the same nickname my brother, Shaun, and I use, the one I gave Gigi when I was first learning to talk and couldn't say "Grandma." Of course, Gigi loves this, since Jen is basically her granddaughter too. I tease her that she loves Jen more than me and vice versa. Ever since the very first day Jenny came to the day care that Gigi ran out of our house, the one she started when she moved in with us after Grandpa died and she retired from thirty years at Bell Atlantic, she took a special shine to Jenny, calling her "my little firecracker."

I always rib Gigi about this. "But can we trust her, you know, her being white and all?"

To which Gigi responds with the utmost sincerity: "Oh, baby, you know Jenny is different. She isn't like the rest of them." It was too funny since I can bet on the number of times people have said that about me.

"I overheard my mom talking to Pastor Price about needing to think about 'the arrangements' for Gigi and I got so angry. Like Mom was acting like she was already gone."

Jen puts her hand on my arm. "Gigi's a fighter, Rye. She's still got a lot of life in her."

"I don't know. . . . The dialysis isn't cutting it anymore, and there's just not much else the doctors can do." I pause for a moment, worried I'm going to sound crazy, but then I tell her anyway. "Gigi's been haunting me. I hear her voice everywhere, Jenny, and it makes me feel like I'm losing my mind."

"Is she reminding you that nice girls wear pantyhose?" Jen scrunches up her face and cackles, so loudly people look over again. She's clearly thinking about the time Gigi insisted Jenny borrow a pair of her stockings to wear to church one Sunday after she'd slept over, even though the Hanes Her Way were two shades too brown for Jenny's pale legs.

"It's not funny!" I say. "Maybe I'm losing it."

"Shut your mouth. You're not crazy. You're worried about her. You love her. And you got a lot going on." Jen rubs the knot between my shoulder blades. "I should go see her."

"Yeah, she'd love that. She was asking about you, and I told her I was seeing you tonight. She'll want to rub your tummy and tell you the baby's future. Who they're gonna marry, when they'll be elected president . . ."

"You know because of Gigi I grew up thinking all Black people were psychic."

"It's not psychic. It's the tingles."

Gigi always claimed that the women in the Wilson family had a touch of the "tingles," a sense of knowing the future.

I'm about to remind Jen of the time we tried to convince Gigi to let us charge the kids at school for her psychic readings when I see the moment has taken a turn. Jen is staring off into space, brows knitted. "Don't you wish you really could see the future, Rye? I just want to know everything's going to be okay. He, she . . . it's all going to be okay, right?"

Jenny and I were always making wishes together as kids—for our crushes to notice us, for Juicy sweat suits our parents couldn't afford, for boobs. She'd offer a fallen eyelash on the tip of her finger and tell me to blow. She would get annoyed when I wouldn't tell her my wishes, the ones I was too embarrassed about or most wanted to come true; I didn't want to risk ruining my chances.

I grab Jen's hand to reassure us both.

"Is this the hormones? A second ago we were toasting to all our dreams coming true. Of course the baby's fine. Little Bird is healthy and happy and can't wait to make fun of their mama with me."

When Jenny first starting calling the baby "Little Bird" after the Philadelphia Eagles mascot, it sounded like the corniest thing I'd ever heard, but over time I've decided it's sort of cute. I even found these adorable onesies on Etsy with baby birds and bought twenty of them that I'm planning to string up at her baby shower. Also, a shirt for her that reads, "Momma Bird." So I have done something for the shower, even if it was without Cookie's approval, which I suspect isn't going to go over too well.

"I'm just freaked out, you know. The closer I get . . ." Jen stops and looks down at her stomach again. "The scarier it is. There are so many things that can go wrong. You know what I mean?"

I know exactly what she means—the biting fear that everything you've worked for can disappear in a second, that you can bust your butt, do everything right, and it won't matter one bit. I know it all too well.

"It's going to be fine, Jenny. Better than fine. I'm so, so happy for you." Granted, it's a complicated happiness. I want to love this new part of Jenny's life, but there have been times when I've secretly indulged a stupid, petty, and selfish line of thinking: What does all this mean for me? How will this change everything? But in this moment none of that matters. It all gives way to a pure and bone-deep joy that Jen is about to get the thing she's always wanted, her version of the anchor chair.

I wrap my arms around my friend and hug her tightly and hope the physical reassurance will penetrate more than words. When she pulls back to look at me, she's so close I can count the constellation of freckles that dot her nose. I still don't say anything. Instead, I touch my index finger to the middle of my left eyebrow, and this does the trick—the memory chases the worry from Jen's face.

We were twelve when I decided to experiment with plucking my bushy brows for the first time. I wanted to give them a fierce arch like Posh Spice. But I was too excited and overplucked and then over-plucked some more until half my left eyebrow was gone. No one could make me come out of my room, not Gigi, not Momma. I had finally opened the door for Jen, who promptly fell on the floor laughing, which only made me howl even louder. Then, while I stood there blubbing, Jenny marched right into the bathroom, grabbed a pink Bic, and shaved off half of her own left eyebrow. On the rare occasions I get annoyed with her, this is what I think of to calm myself down, the time Jenny shaved off half an eyebrow for me.

"You're right, you're right. I'm sure everything is gonna be fine. And guess what? I have some news." Jen brightens, her dark mood passing as quickly as it arrived. "I officially gave notice on Monday!"

"Oh, really?" I'm so caught off guard, it's hard to keep my voice neutral. It's not like Jen loves being a receptionist for a dentist on the Main Line, but given their money situation, I didn't think quitting was an option.

"What?" Jenny asks, clearly expecting a happier reaction.

“Nothing. I’m just surprised. I guess I didn’t see you as the stay-at-home-mom type.”

“It’s not forever. Kevin’s schedule is nuts. It changes all the time. He’s four days on, then four nights, and that’s when he doesn’t pick up the overtime. One of us needs the flexibility. It’s best for me to stay home. He’s on track to make sergeant soon, and that’ll mean more money coming in. And I’m going to throw myself into raising this little one and making French toast every morning, and packing healthy lunches every day just like Lou.”

There’s a beat before we crack up at how far this is from the truth. The only thing Jen’s mom, Louise, has ever been good for are dirty jokes, dirty martinis, and dirty looks. Her idea of a home-cooked meal is a Lean Cuisine.

As if on cue, our food arrives, and we turn our attention to appetisers that live up to their description of small plates. The farm-raised-beef sliders are no bigger than a half-dollar. Jenny pops two into her mouth back-to-back like popcorn, errant globs of mustard dribbling down onto her belly. I dip the corner of my napkin into my water glass and reach over to dab at the stain. There’s a reason I stopped sharing clothes with her.

“God. I was starving,” Jenny says, scooping up a bacon-wrapped date. “So listen. More big news. Kevin has a man for you.”

Jen likes to give the impression that Kevin is much more invested in my life than he actually is—I suspect she’s always had this romantic idea that we would be the Three Musketeers or something. But I can’t say Kevin and I instantly clicked when we first met all those years ago, despite Jen’s assurances that I was going to love him. My first impression when I saw him though was, This guy? It was hard to pick him out from all the other identical-looking white guys in plaid at the Irish pub on Walnut Street we’d met up at on one of my rare visits home. Kevin wasn’t what I was expecting based on everyone who had come before him—the tattoo artist, the professional poker player, the guy who lived on a rickety houseboat and grew hydroponic weed. The evening was pleasant enough, and I could see how much Kevin adored Jenny, but he clearly didn’t feel he had to work particularly hard to earn my approval even though I was the best friend. Later I’d overheard him talking to Jenny. “Yeah, she’s cool, you guys are just so . . . different.” Which was fair, and I felt the same about him. Kevin—simple, basic, vanilla, chinos-wearing Kevin—was just not who I’d always imagined for my friend.

He’s not enough for you. It was my first thought when Jen announced they were engaged a year later. And then: Please don’t settle. But I swallowed those doubts with a gleeful scream and a promise to throw myself into maid-of-honour duties immediately. I have no idea what Kevin thinks about me beyond how “different” I am, but I don’t believe for a second that he’s the driving force in any setup. It’s Jen who, like every married woman with an unattached best friend the world over, has a single-minded mission to find me someone.

“Oh yeah?” I can guess the reason Kevin thinks this guy and I would make such a great match.

Jen takes a big bite of a crab cake and talks as she chews. “He moved here from Atlanta. His name is Kayvon Freeman.”

And there you go: a fine upstanding brother.

“He just came onboard as detective at the Twenty-Second District with Kevin. Moved here from Delaware . . . I guess he wanted to work in a bigger city or something.”

A cop? No way in hell would I ever date a cop. But I obviously can’t tell Jen that.

“And he’s hot. And tall, we know that’s a must! Kevin says you two would hit it off. We should double! I mean Kevin/Kayvon. It’s too perfect.”

“I have zero time to date right now, Jen.” It’s my stock response—offered reflexively as a defense and an excuse. “I’m so busy. I need to—”

Jenny stops me with a raised palm. “Riley. It’s time. How long has it been since you’ve had sex? Your vagina probably has cobwebs by now.” She playfully makes as if to lift my skirt, but her tone is laced with concern.

“I’m focused on other things. And I’ve got time.” Though some days it doesn’t feel like that at all. Some nights I’m wrenched awake at 3 a.m. with the unsettling sensation that time is speeding past me and I’m so behind I’ll never catch up. I know what Jen’s going to say before she opens her mouth. Because it’s a lecture I give myself at least once a week.

“C’mon Rye. You can’t be single forever. It’s time to move on. To get back out there. You need to—”

I put my hand up to stop her before she gets to the part about how all the “good ones” are going to be taken.

Even though she may have a point. At Jen’s urging I went on two dates since moving back to Philly, with people she’d swiped for me on Tinder. One guy talked about himself the whole time and then when I called him out about it said, “I’m just trying to help you get to know me.” And the other one told me I must think I’m “big time” when I told him about my job and then just eyed the check when it arrived waiting for me to pick it up. I had little faith third time would be the charm.

“I can’t take the idea of getting back out there, Jenny. . . . starting from scratch with someone new, letting someone see me naked for the first time. . . .”

“So you’re just going to be celibate forever? No way. Here, give me my bag so I can get my phone. Let me show you his picture. You’ll want me to make this date happen tomorrow.” Jen goes to grab her purse and then winces sharply.

“Son of a bitch.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine, fine, this happens all the time,” she says, waving off my concern.

“You sure?”

“Just a kick. Right in my ribs. You want to feel?” Without waiting for an answer, she grabs my hand and places it to the left of her belly button. There’s a series of little jabs, quick and insistent. I fight against pulling my hand away from the little alien boxing in my friend’s belly.

Jen finally finds her phone and pulls it out triumphantly.

“Ugh. Kevin’s texted a bunch.” Her stubby fingers swipe the texts away and scroll through her photo album. “Here, I found him. Kayvon. Hot, right?” Jenny holds up the screen.

Kayvon is attractive, with his buffed bald head and sprinkle of stub-ble. In the photo he’s dressed in his buttoned-up blues and wearing a sly kind of smirk, like he could be up to trouble. I see him giving me that smile across the table in a dimly lit restaurant and then I see him slap-ping handcuffs on teenagers and wrestling them to the ground. I chase both images away with a swig of my drink.

“Okay, true story. He is good-looking. So maybe . . . we’ll see.” I’m hoping Jen just drops this, even though I know better.

“No, no maybes. This is happening. It’s been like a year since Corey.” Actually, it was fifty-six weeks to be exact. Hearing his name out loud, my stomach turns over on itself. I should be over this by now. It makes me crazy that I can still have this reaction to just hearing his name. Or finding one of his socks tucked in the back of a drawer, like I did last week, which threatened to wreck my whole afternoon, until I marched out on the balcony, threw it into the air, and watched it flutter onto the hood of a delivery truck.

I hold my breath and wait for Jen to ask me again about what happened between us. She’s never been satisfied with my vague answers. But she seems to register the pained look on my face and switches gears. Corey is a bear we do not poke.

“We need dessert,” Jen says, and we let the subject dissipate like smoke after fireworks.

“Okay, you have to get the bartender’s attention though; he’s not giving me the time of day. Look pregnant and hungry and sad.”

“I can do that.” As Jenny juts out her lower lip and bats her eyelashes at the bartender, her phone buzzes and “Hubby” lights up on the screen.

“Seriously? It’s like I go out one night and he can’t stop texting me.” She rolls her eyes, but I know she loves this about Kevin, that he needs her so much.

“Oh, text him back. You’re pregnant. He’s probably worried about you.” She swipes to open the message. “Or he’s bored. He always texts when he’s on patrol and he’s bored. I told him to start playing one of those games where you kill birds—”

In almost thirty years I’ve seen about every expression Jenny can make. I know her face like I know my own. But the look she has right now, as she reads Kevin’s message, is one I’ve never seen. I grab her arm. “What’s wrong? Is Kevin okay?”

She doesn’t respond, too focused on opening the Uber app. “I have to go.”

“What? What happened?”

“I have to go.” She’s in motion, gathering her bag, her coat, knocking over her purse, picking it up by one strap. A tube of ChapStick falls and rolls across the floor.

“Wait. Jen. You have to tell me what’s going on.”

“Something happened . . . to Kevin.”

It is these four words that will haunt me, how she phrased it: *Something happened. To Kevin.*

“My Uber’s pulling up,” she says. “Look, I’m sorry, I just need to find out what’s going on. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?” She’s already stand-ing, buttoning her coat. She moves in for a quick hug.

I’m worried, but also a little pissed at being inexplicably shut out like this “Okay, then.” I probably sound bitchy but she’s not listening any-way. She’s halfway out the door.

When the bartender appears, I order a second drink, which is noticeably stronger than the last one, practically a shot. Maybe he saw Jenny rush out. Maybe he thinks I was dumped by my pretty, white, pregnant girlfriend, which makes me laugh a little. The liquid sings the back of my throat as I drain

the glass and then search for my phone, calculating that it's been at least an hour since I've checked it, a record these days.

Adrenaline pricks at my skin when I see I've missed three texts from Scotty.

*We need you tonight. Where are you? Get here, now.*

He also sent two emails. As I open them, my whole body buzzes, the tingles. A Black teenager shot by a Philadelphia police officer, in critical condition. I make the sickening connection. I know exactly why Jenny had to rush home.