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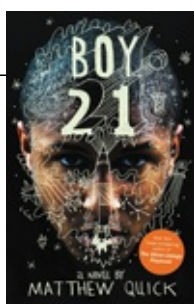
a NOVEL BY
MATTHEW QUICK



BY MATTHEW QUICK



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for all my brothers
from different mothers



PREFACE

SOMETIMES I PRETEND THAT shooting hoops in my backyard is my earliest memory.

I'm just a kid, so Dad gives me one of those smaller basketballs and lowers the adjustable rim. He tells me to shoot until I can make one hundred baskets in a row, which seems impossible. Then he goes back inside the house to deal with my pop, who has recently returned legless from the hospital, clutching my dead grandmother's rosary beads. Our house has been silent for a long time and I understand that my mother is not coming back, but I don't want to think about what happened, so I do as my father instructed.

At first, I can't even reach the rim when I shoot, even though the hoop has been lowered. I keep shooting for hours and hours, until my neck is stiff from looking up and I'm sweaty. When the sun goes down, Dad puts on the floodlight and I continue to take shots, because it's better than being inside listening to my pop cry and moan—and, also, it's what Dad told me to do.

In my memory, I shoot through the night and don't stop for days and weeks and months. I don't even break to eat or sleep or use the bathroom. I just keep shooting hoops, zoning out, pretending that I will never have to go into my house again—that I will never have to remember what happened before I began shooting hoops.

You can lose yourself in repetition—quiet your thoughts; I learned the value of this at a very young age.

I remember the leaves falling and crunching under my feet, the snowflakes burning my skin, the yellow long-stem flowers blooming by the fence, and then being scorched by the powerful July sun—through it all I kept shooting.

I must have done other things—like go to school, obviously—but shooting hoops in my backyard is the only thing I remember from childhood.

After a few years, Dad began speaking more and shooting with me, which was nice.

Sometimes, Pop would park his wheelchair at the end of the driveway and sip a beer as he watched me perfect my jump shot.

The rim was raised every so often, as I grew.

And then one day a girl appeared in my backyard. She had blond hair and a smile that seemed to last forever.

"I live down the street," she said. "I'm in your class."

I kept shooting and hoped that she'd go away. Her name was Erin and she seemed really nice, but I didn't want to make friends with anyone. I only wanted to shoot hoops alone for the rest of my life.

"Are you ignoring me?" she asked.

I tried to pretend she wasn't there, because back then I was pretending the whole world wasn't there.

"You're really weird," she said. "But I don't mind."

My shot clanked off the rim and headed straight for her face, but the girl's reflexes were good and she caught the ball just before it smashed into her nose.

"Do you mind if I take a shot?" she asked.

When I didn't answer, she fired and the ball went in.

"I play a little with my older brother," she explained.

Whenever I shot around with my dad, the shooter got the ball back after a made basket, so I passed the ball to her and she shot again, and then again, and again.

In my memory, she hits dozens of shots before I get the ball back, but she doesn't ever leave my backyard—the two of us keep shooting for years and years.

PRE-SEASON



*“A question that sometimes drives me hazy:
Am I or are the others crazy?”*
Albert Einstein

ONE WEEK BEFORE OUR SENIOR YEAR of high school begins, Erin's wearing her basketball practice jersey and I can see her black sports bra through the armhole, which is sort of sexy, at least to me.

I try not to look—especially since we're eating breakfast with my family—but whenever Erin leans forward and raises her fork to her mouth, her right armhole opens up, and I can see the shape of her small breast perfectly.

Stop looking! I tell myself, but it's impossible.

I don't hear one word that's said over our eggs and sausage.

No one notices my staring.

Erin's so charismatic and beautiful that my dad and pop never pay any attention to me when my girlfriend's around.

Like mine, their eyes are always on Erin.

When we get up to leave, my legless pop yells from his wheelchair, "Make the few remaining Irish people in this town proud!"

My father says, "Just do your best. Remember—it's a long race and you can always outwork talent in the end."

That's Dad's personal life motto, even though he ended up alone and working the night shift, collecting tolls at the bridge, where he needs neither talent nor a good work ethic.

Mostly because of Pop, my father's life has been pretty dreary. But his eyes always seem hopeful when he says that I can outwork talent over the long haul, and so for him—and for me too—I try my best to do just that.

The nights Dad watches me play basketball, I truly believe that those are the best in his entire life. That's one reason I love b-ball so much: for the opportunity to make Dad happy.

If I've had a good game, Dad's eyes water when he says he's proud of me, which makes my eyes water too.

When Pop sees us like that he calls us pansies.

"You ready?" Erin says to me.

Even though I don't want to, when I look at her face and into her beautiful shamrock-green eyes, I think about kissing her later tonight, and I begin to stiffen, so I quickly wipe the thought out of my mind.

It's not time for romance—it's time to get strong, and basketball season's only two months away.

SOMETHING YOU MAYBE NEED TO KNOW: People call me White Rabbit.

Whenever they serve cooked carrots in the lunchroom, Terrell Patterson sneaks up behind me and yells “Feed White Rabbit!” as he dumps his carrots on my plate as a joke, and then everyone follows his example, until there’s a huge mound of orange.

This started last spring.

The first time it happened, I got really mad because people kept walking by and scraping what they didn’t want onto my tray, which wasn’t very sanitary, especially since I hadn’t finished eating my lunch.

Erin—who sits next to me in the cafeteria when it’s not basketball season—just started eating the carrots off my plate enthusiastically and thanking people until they got confused.

She kept saying, “Delicious! May I please have some more!” all crazily, until people were laughing at *her* instead of at what everyone was doing to me.

I actually like carrots, so I ate some too, because I saw that Erin’s plan was working and I don’t really care that people laugh when I eat those orange vegetables. *I’ll have better eyesight than everyone*, I thought, and then just left it at that.

The only problem is that the carrot dumping became a weekly event, and it’s really not funny anymore. I hope people forgot about it over the summer, but I doubt it.

I’m one of the few dozen white kids at my high school. I’m quiet like a rabbit. Eminem’s character in the movie *8 Mile* is nicknamed B-Rabbit; Eminem is the most famous white rapper in the world; and I actually sort of look like him.

But the main reason people call me White Rabbit is because we had to read this very sad book by John Updike. It was about a long-ago white basketball star named Rabbit who grows up and lives a miserable life. I’m not a star, but I *am* the only white kid on our varsity basketball team.

Wes, who plays center and is the only other basketball player in the Accelerated English track, told all my teammates about the Updike book—well, just the part about there being a white basketball player with an embarrassing name. My teammates all started calling me White Rabbit.

The nickname stuck and now everyone in the neighborhood calls me that too.

ERIN AND I GRAB OUR BASKETBALLS out of the garage, and on my backyard hoop, we each shoot one hundred free throws. It's our last high school basketball season—last shot—so we train hard.

Simulating game situations, we take two shots at a time and box each other out for rebounds. Erin goes eighty-eight for one hundred and I go ninety for one hundred.

Next we jog our five miles, dribbling our basketballs the whole time.

We do a mile of right-hand dribbling down O'Shea Street past a line of row homes that are as broken and gray as Pop's teeth, which gets us to the school, where we continue running the next four miles on the old crappy track that actually has weeds growing up through the lanes. Every lap we dribble a different way—left-handed, crossover, behind the back. We pretty much practice every way you can legally dribble a basketball.

All the other basketball players in our school are also on the football or cheerleading teams, which practice on the fields next to the track, but they aren't practicing yet this early in the morning. Erin wouldn't be caught dead in a cheerleading uniform and I'm not talented enough to play more than one sport successfully. Besides, I want to give my all to basketball.

When we finish, we're soaked in sweat. Little strands of blond hair stick to Erin's face, and her cute little ears have turned red. I really like it when she takes off her practice jersey so that she's only wearing the sports bra. Her bellybutton is a beautiful mystery.

We take a short break as we wait for the school to open up, because the custodians are late again. My muscles are warm and my body feels loose.

We don't talk much.

Erin's one of the few people I know who is okay with silence and, since I don't like talking, it makes us a perfect match. I don't stutter or anything like that. I just *choose* not to speak so much.

We sit in the grass silently for a time.

"You think girls'll win states again this year?" Erin asks me, because she feels pressured to repeat

What she's really asking is if I think she's good enough to carry her team all the way to another state championship, because our other star girls' player—Keisha Powell—graduated last year and now plays for the Tennessee Lady Vols. None of the other remaining girls' basketball players are even half as good as Erin.

Concern wrinkles her forehead, so I nod and smile enthusiastically.

Erin's probably the best girls' player in the state—no exaggeration.

When they're being crude, which is always, my teammates sometimes say that if Erin had a penis (they use a different word), I'd be riding the bench, which isn't the nicest thing to say, but when I watch her dominate a game I sometimes do wonder if my girlfriend actually could beat me out for my position, which is saying a lot.

I know I'm probably not going to play college ball anywhere, not even at the division-three level. I'm a role player on my team, not a star. I'm okay with that. But Erin has a real chance to make a good college team and earn a scholarship, which is another reason I love training and playing off-season basketball so much: It's a chance to help Erin.

We just want to get the hell out of this town somehow—together—and Erin's basketball career might be our best shot. We talk about leaving Belmont all the time, moving past the history of our

families, breaking free. We've seen too many people make mistakes and get stuck here—like Erin's brother, Rod, and my pop did.

Sitting there on the grass, looking at her beautiful stomach, I start to think about making out with Erin, running my hands up and down her abs. So I have to think about where my pop's legs end just below the thigh—his stumps, because that always wipes the sexy thoughts from my mind—and, just like that, my head's right by the time the custodian opens the gym door and says we can come in.

Inside the gym, we run all sorts of sprints and shooting drills and practice free throws.

And then we go out to the stadium and run up and down the steps for twenty minutes of chest-pounding, muscle-screaming, lung-burning action.

Back in the gym we're shooting more patterns when the football team comes in for a bathroom and water break.

Terrell Patterson—chief carrot dumper, starting quarterback, and star shooting guard—yells out from the pack of football players, “Yo, White Rabbit, why you practicin' your jump shot, boy? You ain't never gonna shoot in a game. You know this! Your job is to get me the ball. Period.”

In between shots, I point to Terrell and smile.

I'm the point guard so it's my job to get the ball to the scorers. Terrell averaged twenty-three points a game last year, and I racked up many assists by feeding him. He probably wouldn't say I'm his friend, but he's my teammate and so I consider him a brother.

I've been the starting point guard for two years now.

Terrell smiles, pounds his fist against his chest two times, and then flashes me the peace sign.

“How you doin', White Rabbit's lil baby?” Terrell yells to Erin, which makes all the football players laugh.

Erin gives Terrell a dirty look and yells, “I'm not anyone's *lil baby*, Terrell!”

“Damn! The girl mad at me! Shoot!” Terrell says, making everyone laugh again, and then they all follow their coaches into the locker room.

Erin's passes are harder and crisper after Terrell leaves, which lets me know she's upset.

When I finish the pattern, she strides out of the gym even though we still have more shooting patterns to do.

I follow her into the shade underneath the stadium and give her a look that says, *What's wrong?*

“You know I don't like to be called lil baby,” she says.

Her face is tomato red and her forehead is all angry wrinkles.

She looks like she might start punching walls.

“You really have no idea why I'm upset, do you?” she says.

I open my mouth, but—like usual—no words will come.

I don't know what to say.

“There are times when you need to open your mouth more, Finley.”

It's true. Erin isn't saying I need to change my personality, but just stick up for her when it is necessary.

I say I'm sorry with my eyes—blinking a lot.

Erin sighs. Then she smiles and there are no more wrinkles in her forehead. Sometimes I'm amazed by how easily she seems to accept me.

“Come on,” she says. “Let's finish the patterns.”

So we finish our routine and hit the weights before the football team enters the weight room and starts grunting and trying to see who can bench-press the most L-B-S-es.

DOWN AT THE PLAYGROUND EVERYONE FOULS and shoots too much and never allows plays to develop, but Erin and I make sure we're always on the same team so we can work on the things that serious players need to work on, like playing help defense and executing set plays on offense too.

Even though most of the playground players are grown-ups who play ball every day instead of working a job, Erin and I usually beat these men easily, which they hate, mostly because I'm a weird minimal speaker and Erin's a girl.

Only seven or so blocks from our homes, drug dealers hang out by the town courts and old men sit around drinking from brown paper bags. There are crack vials and used syringes strewn about the concrete that surrounds the playground. It's not the safest place in the world, but we are under the protection of Erin's brother, Rod.

Rod is in his late twenties, plays drums in a Pogues-type, Irish-trad-punk band, and, if the rumors are true, deals a little himself, only not on the streets. But the important part is that his reputation proclaims him to be the most unpredictable and violent Irishman ever to live in Belmont. Neighborhood people are scared of him, and rightly so.

Once when we were freshmen there was this upperclassman named Don Little who had a thing for Erin. He followed her around school and talked sexy to her. I'm not even going to repeat some of the things he used to say because they are so horrifically base. Whenever I would hear Don Little say something lewd to Erin, my chest would get tight and my hands would ball up into fists, but, of course, my tongue wouldn't work at all.

Don Little was a nineteen-year-old senior who had been in juvie for dealing cocaine and Erin was a fourteen-year-old kid.

One day Erin and I were walking home, and Don Little followed us and when we were far enough away from the high school he grabbed Erin's butt and said some really lewd things.

It was like I wasn't even there—or I didn't matter. I was so mad that I tried to say something, but all that came out was “Heyahhhh!”

Don Little laughed and said, “Why don't you ditch the retard and get with a real man?”

That's when I charged him. But before I could land any punches, he dropped me with one punch to the jaw.

BAAAMMMMM!

POP!

STARS!

I remember my legs flying up in the air, seeing clouds above, and then blacking out.

When I came around, Erin was stroking my cheek, saying, “Wake up! Come on, Finley, wake up!”

Her nose was bleeding. Warm heavy drops were hitting my neck.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I beat Don Little's ass.”

“What?”

“I punched him in the face after he hit you. I was so pissed!”

“Your nose.”

“Yeah, he got in a good shot before he ran away.”

“Are you okay?”

“Are you?”

“I think so.”

“Well, then, me too.”

She helped me up and walked me home and I asked her not to tell anyone about her defending me from Don Little, which made her laugh.

“You mean you’re not proud of your girlfriend’s ability to kick ass?” she asked.

I puked on the sidewalk in response, and immediately felt less woozy.

Erin’s brother, Rod, visited me later that night.

I hadn’t seen him in a long time, because he no longer lived with the Quinns.

He had been lifting weights and looked like a professional bodybuilder. He was wearing a tight T-shirt with skulls on it and black jeans rolled up so that you could see the white laces of his black Doc Martens boots. His head was shaved and his arms were covered with Celtic tattoos.

“Mr. McManus, you mind if I speak to your boy alone?” Rod asked.

“Why alone?” Dad asked. “We’re family.”

“I think you know why,” Rod said.

Dad and Rod stared at each other for a few seconds until Rod said, “I put in good words for you and your family, but people don’t forget.”

Dad’s face turned white and I started to feel sick when I saw that the gray hair around his temples was slick with sweat.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Dad said.

“Then leave us alone for a few minutes. Your boy’s a good kid. We know that. We’re only trying to help.”

I was surprised that my father actually left and shut the door behind him.

Rod asked me what had transpired, so I told him what I remembered.

He grabbed the back of my head and carefully pulled my forehead closer to his, so that our eyebrows were touching. His eyelashes brushed up against mine whenever he blinked. The liquor on his breath was dank and smelled sharp as a razor blade. “After tonight, brother, no one in this neighborhood will touch you or my sister ever again. I promise you that.”

The next morning they found Don Little unconscious on the town basketball court. His entire body was swollen and bruised.

His braids had been cut and his head shaved.

I heard there was a sign around his neck that read I HIT GIRLS.

The cops investigated, but neither Don Little nor anyone else ever said a word about what everyone assumed to be true.

Most people don’t snitch to the police around here.

Don Little dropped out of school and left town shortly after, and no one in Bellmont has ever laid a finger on Erin or me since.

This is why we can play pickup basketball at the town courts without being harassed by the criminals who hang around there. We know that if Rod were not around, we’d be treated differently, which makes me sort of sad.

IN FRONT OF HER HOUSE—a brick row home under a faded and ripped yellow awning—Erin says that she'll be over just as soon as she's showered, and then she kisses me once on the lips before disappearing behind the front screen door.

I jog the one block home down O'Shea Street.

The neighborhood is gray and dingy and littered with trash, but all the row homes are occupied and therefore not condemned, so our blocks look pretty healthy compared to most around here.

When I cross the street to my block, I notice Coach Wilkins's old Ford pickup truck parked in front of our house.

Coach has come to pay me a visit and he's now alone inside my house with Pop, who sometimes gets drunk during the day and starts dancing with family skeletons—talking freely about stuff I don't want anyone to know, especially Coach.

I sprint into my house and yell, "Coach?"

"Finley, I'm right here. No need to yell." He's wearing a summer suit with no tie and fancy shoes. Why's he dressed up?

He's on the sofa in the living room. My pop's wheelchair is parked next to the couch and thankfully Pop looks relatively sober.

"Coach Wilkins would like to take you out to dinner," Pop says. He's in a wife-beater undershirt and his tan pants are pinned under his stumps. Pop's white hair is tucked behind his ears and falls to his shoulders. He's not trying to look cool with the long hair; he just doesn't care enough to make the trip to the barber. Grandmom's green rosary beads make a V on Pop's chest and Jesus hangs on a black cross right around Pop's outie bellybutton.

"To a friend's house, actually," Coach says. And then, noticing how sweaty I am, he adds, "Looks like you've been working out pretty hard today."

"With Erin Quinn," Pop says. "That's his lady friend."

"She's a fine ball player and a fine young woman," Coach says. "So, Finley."

I like the fact that Coach doesn't call me White Rabbit, especially since my teammates are always trying to get him to use the nickname.

Coach says, "You want to dine with me tonight?"

I nod.

I do whatever Coach asks of me. He's my coach.

"Why don't you shower up and we'll talk about it on the way. And wear something nice," Coach says.

"I'll be needing your assistance before you go," Pop says.

I push Pop's wheelchair into the bathroom, where I quickly help him change his soiled diaper.

When we return to the living room my father's up. (Dad sleeps days and works nights.) He and Coach are talking hoops and smiling so I park Pop next to them. Pop says, "Hurry your ass up," as I jog up the steps.

In the shower I wonder where Coach is taking me.

He's never asked me to dinner and he's only visited my home twice before. Once after I was beat up by Don Little, and once after I hurt my ankle sophomore year.

I can't imagine where he would be taking me tonight, but I'm excited to find out.

I PULL ON MY BLACK TROUSERS and my light blue shirt with the collar and three buttons, and then Coach and I are walking out the door as my father's telling me to mind my manners. He's standing in the doorway looking tired but wearing the hopeful we-have-guests face that he puts on whenever anyone other than Pop and me is around.

With her hair still wet, Erin walks up to the house wearing a colorful summer dress. She and Coach say hello.

"You mind if I borrow Finley for a few hours?" Coach asks.

"Not at all," Erin says, but when she catches my eyes I can tell she's a little bummed, and definitely confused, so I shrug to let her know I have no idea what's going on. I want to hang out with Erin, but I see her every night. Plus, she understands that when your coach pays a house visit, it means that something important is happening. Erin says, "Coach, when'll you be returning Finley?"

"I'd say we'll be back by nine or so."

"See you then," Erin says to me, and then she starts walking home.

"You're lucky to have a friend like Erin," Coach says as we get into his truck and buckle up. "People need friends. *Real friends*— like Erin is to you."

The engine rumbles to life and the air-conditioning hits me in the face.

It feels really cool, but Coach doesn't drive.

His face is dark and strong as always, but he keeps swallowing. His Adam's apple is going up and down, so I know something is wrong.

Coach says, "You know how I'm always telling the team that basketball can teach you a lot about life and that those lessons are more important than wins and losses and personal stats, more important than the game itself—that we're learning life lessons on the court and that's the most important part of the experience?"

"Yeah."

Coach is always saying that.

"Well, I think you're going to learn a lot this year, Finley."

Something about the way he says those words makes me feel sort of strange. Like he's trying to be prophetic or something, and this dinner's even more important than I originally thought.

I look at Coach's face and try to read his eyes. I see desperation, frustration, exhaustion—what I see in the eyes of all the men who have lived in this neighborhood for too many years.

"We've got a bit of a situation here, Finley. Because I trust you, I'm gonna tell you a lot tonight and I want you to keep it all confidential. You can tell no one what I'm about to say. Not your dad or grandfather or Erin. Not your teammates. And especially no one at school. Can I trust you to keep this information top secret?"

I can't imagine what Coach is going to tell me.

My heart's beating really hard, and I realize that I'm swallowing now too.

I nod to let Coach know that I'll keep the secret.

"Okay then. Does the name Russell Allen mean anything to you?"

I shake my head.

"Here's the secret: Russell Allen played his first three years of high-school ball out in L.A. He

gained a national reputation last year as a junior. Quite simply, he's one of the top recruits in the country. At seventeen he already has the body of a professional ball player. I've seen game tapes and I'm convinced he could play for any NBA team right now. He's a six-five point guard who can play inside and out. Smart player. Can run an offense. Rebounds. Hustles. The best high-school defender I have ever seen. And to top it off, he scored near perfect on his SATs and was able to maintain a four-point-oh GPA through three years of all-season basketball. He's played in all the best camps. He's been outgoing and trouble-free all through high school. Great work ethic. Every collegiate program in the country wants the kid."

It's clear that Coach loves this player, but I can't figure out why he's telling me all this—especially if Allen plays on the other side of the country—let alone why I need to keep it a secret.

"You know the Allens over on Porter Street, by that dive bar called Drinkers?"

"No." I never go to that part of town. There are no Irish there.

"Those folks are Russell Allen's grandparents and good friends of mine. I used to play ball with Russell's father, Russell senior. He ended up becoming a pretty well-known jazz musician, a saxophonist. He moved to L.A. and started writing music for movies. Made enough money to put Russell into a real good prep school out there, where he did pretty well until—"

Coach is gripping the steering wheel too hard and licking his lips repetitively.

I've never seen Coach get nervous like this before.

"My friend Russell and his wife were murdered last February." The word *murdered* gets stuck in my ear and suddenly it feels like someone is jabbing a finger into my throat. I begin to cough a little, but Coach keeps talking. It takes a few minutes for my mind to process the rest of his words. "The details aren't important right now. But the event has had a dramatic effect on Russell junior. He's spent some time in a group home for kids who suffer from post-traumatic stress. The Allens here in town are his closest relatives and even though they don't feel quite up to taking on a troubled teenage boy, because Russell requested it, they have agreed to care for him until he goes to college next year."

I suddenly realize that Russell will be eligible to play for our basketball team. And even though Coach is talking about the aftereffects of a murder, I'm ashamed to admit that I immediately begin worrying about my starting position. It's like being told I have cancer and might need a part of me removed—the part called starting point guard.

"So," I say, "he's going to play for us, Coach?"

"Well, I hope he *will* come out for the team, but at this point his mental health is what we need to be focusing on. He hasn't touched a basketball in months. You see, after all that's happened, Russell's not really right in the head. We all think that a boy with his gifts should be using them and, with so many colleges ready to give him a full ride, it would be a shame to watch him sit the season out, but we need to take one thing at a time, which is why he's going to enroll under his mother's maiden name. The Allens don't want college scouts and coaches bothering Russell until he moves past his issues. The basketball world doesn't know he's here. And he's not exactly interested in basketball right now. *Understand?*"

I have no idea why I'm in the truck.

I'm lost.

"I've told them that our high school can be rough and Russell would be better off in a private school, especially since he's inherited a lot of money. But, for some reason, the Allens want the boy to play basketball for me this year. Probably because they know me, and after all that's happened, they don't want to put Russell into the hands of a stranger. So under the name Russ Washington, Russell is going to transition to our school, which couldn't be any more different from the prep school he

attended in California. Administration, his guidance counselor, me, and now you—those are the only people who'll know Russell's true identity. Okay?"

I don't know what to say. I really don't.

Coach says, "I thought that maybe if Russell had a friend who knew what it was like to be *different* the transition might be a little easier."

Suddenly, I think I might understand my role.

"You have a question on your face, Finley. Now's the time to ask it."

Even though I know that the Allens live in an all-black section of town, I say, "So, Coach, are you saying Russell's white?"

"Does the color of his skin matter?" Coach asks.

He's always saying that he doesn't see the color of a man's skin, but I know that's just politically correct talk. Coach absolutely changes his game plan depending on the opposing team's skin color, because black and white teams usually play different styles of basketball, and that's just a fact.

When I don't say anything, Coach says, "Russell's pretty much the same color as I am."

"Then why *me*?" I ask.

"Well, let's just say that I have a hunch you two will get along. That and you're pretty much the only boy on the team I trust to help my dead friend's son."

Those words make me swallow hard.

Part of me just wants to be with Erin, and yet, another part of me's intrigued, kind of flattered, and a little nervous, all at once.

Coach shifts into gear and drives us across town to the Allens' house.

WHEN HE PARKS, Coach says, “There’s one other thing.”

He gets this look on his face like he has to use the bathroom or something. He looks way uncomfortable. He’s strangling the steering wheel.

“Russell isn’t exactly going by the name Russell at this moment in his life.” Coach glances out the windshield with this vacant look on his face. “Russell now likes to be called Boy21.” He nods a few times, as if to say he isn’t joking.

“Why?” I say, noting that twenty-one is my basketball number. Could this night possibly get any weirder?

“The people at his group home and his local therapist have both recommended that we all call him Boy21 out of respect for his wishes. They say he now needs to exert control over his environment in some small way, or something like that. I don’t know anything about therapy, but I think after all that’s happened the boy could sure use a kindhearted friend. That’s what this is about. We’ll call him Boy21 tonight and work on getting him back to Russ before school starts.”

I nod, but I imagine my expression says something different. Am I kindhearted? How can I be a friend to this kid when I don’t really even talk to people, and I don’t have any true friends besides Erin? Will he want my basketball number?

Coach’s eyebrows are pushing the skin on his forehead into folds and he’s swallowing every five seconds now.

He reaches across the truck, puts his hand on my shoulder, and says, “I’m doing this out of respect for my late friend. And, Finley, no matter how this goes, thank you for coming. You’re a good kid. I’m only asking you to give tonight a shot. Nothing more. If it doesn’t go well, we’ll just forget about it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Well. Here we go.”

We get out of Coach’s truck. The Allens’ street is much worse than mine. Broken bottles and fast-food wrappers litter the sidewalks, a few houses are boarded up, and just about every building is tagged with graffiti curse words, but the Allens’ place is actually pretty nice. The lawn’s cut, the bushes are shaped, and the house itself looks well kept and inviting. It’s even been freshly painted, which is a rare sight in Belmont.

Coach rings the doorbell and soon a white-haired couple answers.

“Timothy!” The old woman is wearing a black dress. She wraps her arms around Coach’s neck so that he has to bend over. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Pleasure, Ms. Allen.”

Mr. Allen—who’s wearing a gray suit—shakes Coach’s hand very formally and says, “Thank you again for what you said at the funeral. You’re a poet, a good friend, and a kind soul.”

“I only spoke the truth,” Coach says. Everyone’s eyes are suddenly glistening. “This here’s Finley McManus. One of the finest young men on my ball squad. Good people here. I promise you that.”

I’m a little embarrassed by Coach’s introduction, but I’m also a little proud.

Mr. Allen looks at me and says, “Thanks for coming.”

I know Mr. Allen is probably surprised that I’m white, but that doesn’t bother me. I’d probably be

surprised if I were him too. Actually, I'm surprised that Coach picked me for this job. I'm not a therapist, nor do I have much in common with the Allen family at all. They're probably thinking I won't be able to relate to their grandson, that I might even be a liability for him in the new neighborhood, and I completely agree. Black kids with white best friends are not common in Belmont. Maybe that's blunt, but I've found that being blunt sometimes makes life easier for everyone.

"Come in," Mrs. Allen says.

IT'S AIR-CONDITIONED INSIDE.

Pictures of Jesus hang all around the house. Jesus cuddling lambs. Jesus in a garden. Jesus wearing a purple robe. The furniture is very old, but the rooms are the cleanest I've ever been in. Everything wooden is polished, the rugs are fluffy and freshly vacuumed, and you couldn't find a single speck of dust even if you moved around the picture frames. It's like being in a museum, compared to our mess-man-house.

I'm sitting next to Coach on the couch when Mrs. Allen hands me a glass of lemonade.

"So where's Russ?" Coach says.

"Up in his room," Mr. Allen says. "I'm afraid I couldn't get him to come down. I told him you were coming, but, well, you see"—he lowers his voice here—"the social worker told us that we shouldn't push the boy just yet, but let him acclimate to the new setting, so—"

"Would you go up and talk with him?" Mrs. Allen asks me.

She's a tiny thin lady, but her eyes are forceful, piercing, so I simply nod because I always do what my elders ask of me. That's how Pop and Dad raised me.

"Might as well let the boys meet," Mr. Allen says a little too hopefully, as if he's trying to hide his true expectations, but maybe I'm just being paranoid.

"You okay with that, Finley?" Coach says, resting his hand on my shoulder again.

I nod.

A good ball player always listens to his coach, especially when his coach is as smart as mine.

"Upstairs, second door on your left," Mrs. Allen says.

I place my glass on a coaster and stand.

"Did you tell him about the outer-space fixation?" Mr. Allen says to Coach.

When I give Coach a questioning glance, he says, "Go on upstairs, Finley. Say hello. Okay?"

I wonder what any of this has to do with outer space, but Coach's eyes beg me not to ask him anything in front of the Allens, so I don't.

As I walk across the room and make my way to the stairs, I can feel my elders watching me, but once I'm out of sight I go slowly and study the pictures on the wall that leads up to the second floor, trying to figure out just what kind of a mess I'm in.

There are black-and-white pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Allen taken when they were young, and I recognize different corners of Belmont even though the cars and clothing styles are outdated and the town looks much cleaner and safer.

There's an old wedding picture and Coach is the best man; he's rocking a huge Afro, wearing a powder-blue tuxedo, and looking more like my classmates than an adult, which makes me smile.

The photos of Boy21 begin when he was a baby and go all the way to the present day.

It's obvious his family had money. His clothing looks expensive in all the school photos, and there are pictures of him and his parents taken in foreign places: in front of the Eiffel Tower and also that leaning tower in Italy—even one by those pyramids in Egypt.

I start to feel a little jealous of this kid, because I've never been anywhere but Belmont and he's been all over the world, which doesn't really seem fair. Why is it that some people are born into fantastic situations and others wait their whole lives for a break?

Russell's smiling nicely in all of the shots. He looks like a good kid, which makes it hard for me to hate him.

And then I see his high-school basketball team photo: He's the only black kid. His squad's wearing cool brand-new Nike uniforms, like a college team. They even have matching sneakers.

Maybe Coach knew that Boy21 was the only black kid on his team like I'm the only white kid on my team, and that's why Coach picked me for this job.

But I also see Russ is wearing number 21—my number—and I can't help but feel threatened.

At the top of the steps there are no more pictures. I walk down the hall, where an entire room's contents are in boxes. I have to turn sideways as I pass a big chest of drawers and a desk. A mattress and bed frame are leaning against the wall.

Behind the only closed door in the hallway, someone is talking.

I put my ear up to the door and hear a man's voice say, "Perseus! Perseus the hero! Slayer of Medusa! There you are, my friend! A road map to a new existence. Space is the place! Space is the place!"

Whoever is behind the door sounds absolutely insane.

But for Coach, I do as I was instructed to do.

Good basketball players execute the game plan.

Always.

I raise my fist and knock.

THE VOICE STOPS TALKING and after a long few seconds the door opens inward and I'm looking up at a shirtless man-child.

His body is incredible.

The perfect basketball body.

Tall, lean, strong—it looks exactly like Kobe Bryant's.

He has four-inch braids that are unlike what my teammates wear—those neat Manny Ramirez braids. Boy21's braids are so nappy, they almost look like Bob Marley's dreads.

"You are an Earthling?" Boy21 says to me.

I swallow and nod.

"I am programmed to treat all Earthlings with kindness. Greetings. I am Boy21 from the cosmos. I am stranded here on Earth, but I will be leaving soon. Enter into my domestic living pod."

He turns his back on me and resumes what he was doing.

I step into the empty room and see that the ceiling and walls have recently been painted black.

Books are open all over the floor. They're all about outer space. Hundreds of constellations and galaxies and universes are spread out at my feet.

When I look up, Boy21 has a book in his hand and is arranging constellations on the wall using those glow-in-the-dark plastic stars—what little kids stick on their bedroom ceilings.

He's already filled an entire wall with constellations.

"I just finished Perseus. That there is Algol—the demon star. This here is pretend outer space—our fantasy outer space—so we're not really interested in arranging the constellations the way they usually appear." His expression is blank—completely alien. "We're just putting up our favorites so we'll feel more at home in our domestic pod here on Earth. What's *your* favorite constellation? And do you have a name, Earthling?"

This isn't a game or a joke. He's crazy.

"Earthling, is your audio intake system damaged? Can you hear me, Earthling?"

"Um..." is all I can manage. What am I supposed to say to this insane kid who thinks he's from space?

"Is your audio output system damaged? What you English-speaking Earthlings call *the tongue*—is yours working?"

"Yeah."

"So you are just *parsimonious* with your words?"

"Parsimonious. Yeah. I guess." I note the proper use of the SAT word. Is this some sort of game? Coach playing a practical joke?

"I respect your parsimonious nature," he says, and then continues arranging constellations his own way as he mumbles facts about outer space.

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

After five minutes or so, Boy21 turns and says, "Is it okay if I call you by your Earthling name—Finley?"

His grandparents probably told him my name, but his using it without my telling him what it is so of surprises me.

“May I?” he says.

“Sure.” What the hell is with this kid?

“My name is Boy21. I’m a prototype. A test model. I was sent to your planet temporarily to gather scientific information on what you Earthlings know as emotions. But I will only be with you for a few more months. Soon my makers will come for me and take me back into the cosmos, where I will be studied and disassembled and ultimately freed. I realize that these are strange ideas and are therefore probably hard for your brain to process, because you are merely an Earthling. So perhaps we should nourish your system with sustenance at this juncture?”

I just look at him blankly.

“Would you like to consume atoms?” he says. “What you refer to as *eating dinner*.”

Realizing that this will get me back into the company of sane people, I nod. “I’m starving.”

“Very well,” he says, and then slips into a white undershirt on which he has written with Magic Markers.

The rainbow lettering on his shirt reads:

N.A.S.A.

(Nubians Are Superior Astronauts)

“Do you like my shirt, Earthling known as Finley?” he asks when he sees me looking at it. “Black man and the cosmos. Two great things that go great together.”

I’m speechless.

He says, “Am I not using your Earthling language effectively?”

Holy crap. What on earth is going on here?

Boy21 smiles knowingly and says something with his eyes that I don’t quite understand.

When he descends the stairs I follow and somehow I find myself eating a delicious meal with Coach, Boy21, and the Allens.

Roast beef.

String beans.

Garlic mashed potatoes.

None of the adults say anything about Boy21’s shirt, and he remains silent through the entire meal.

“How’re you liking Belmont so far?” Coach asks.

“Russell,” Mr. Allen says. “Coach is talking to you.”

“It’s okay,” Coach says. “You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. There will be time for talking.”

All the adults exchange glances, and I’m glad that they don’t glance at me.

“You like the food?” Mrs. Allen says.

“Yes. Thank you,” I say, and then it’s just the sounds of knives and forks scraping against the plates, chewing, swallowing, glasses of water being sipped and set down on wood.

Boy21 keeps his eyes on his food until it’s gone, which is when he says, “May I take Finley back up to my room?”

“Are you finished eating?” Mrs. Allen asks me.

I nod, even though I’m not, and say, “Thanks.”

“You boys go have your fun,” Coach says, and then I’m back in Boy21’s room watching him arrange glow-in-the-dark sticker constellations.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Boy21 asks, looking over his shoulder.

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