

"An affecting tale of a girl's
transformation in a climate of fear."
—*Publishers Weekly*



NO PLACE SAFE

a family memoir

KIM REID

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Chapter One

The summer before I started high school, two boys went missing and a few days later, turned up dead. They were found by a mother and son looking for aluminum cans alongside a quiet wooded road. It was already ninety degrees at noon, even with an overcast sky, because it was the end of July in Atlanta, Georgia, which I imagine is similar to the heat in hell, except with humidity. The mother thought she saw an animal at the bottom of a steep embankment that started its descent just a couple of feet from the road. The combination of heat and damp created a smell that frightened her. Something about the odor must have told her it wasn't an animal at all, must have made her call her young child to her lest he discover the source. They left off the search for discarded cans and walked to a gas station where the mother called her husband, and he called the police.

The boys were friends; one was about to celebrate his fifteenth birthday, the other had just turned thirteen, the same age as I at the time. One went missing four days after the first, but they were both found on the same day, not two hundred feet apart in a ravine just off Niskey Lake Road. The two detectives first on the scene, responding to a signal 48 (person dead), noted in their report that either side of the road was bordered by trees, like most streets were in Atlanta at the time. Loblolly pine, white oaks, and the occasional stray dogwood that played unwitting hosts for the creeping kudzu vines that threatened to take them over completely. The officers also noted that the woods and ravines lining both sides of the road were "used as a dumping ground for trash." This was where they found the first body. A vine growing from a nearby tree had already wrapped itself around the boy's neck, unaware that his last breath had been stolen from him days ago.

While making notes of how the child's body lay among other thrown-away items littering the road's shoulder, the detectives caught an odor on a small, hot breeze coming from the north. They knew the smell immediately, and it led them to the second boy's body. At the time, no one knew the boys were friends because the police didn't know who they were. By the time school started, only one boy had been positively identified. More than a year would pass before a name could be given to his friend.

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It wasn't much more than a blip in the news—two black boys being killed in Atlanta in 1979 didn't get much coverage. The only reason I knew what I did was because my mother, an investigator with the Fulton County District Attorney's Office at the time, told me to be a little more careful. She said it was probably just a coincidence, but just as likely not, that the boys were close in age, black and found in the same wooded area.

Warning me to be a little more careful because those boys were killed was a waste of words. By my thirteenth summer, I'd learned to be nothing but careful, whether I wanted to or not. I couldn't help but think like a cop. Even though they were my favorite, I rarely drank frozen Cokes because I avoided going into the convenience stores where they were sold (an off-duty cop still in uniform is a sitting duck if she walks in during a robbery). At restaurants, I never sat with my back to the door (you need to be aware of everyone who comes in and out, and know your entry and exit points). I always tried to carry myself like I wasn't scared of shit (even if you are, don't let them know or they have you). My friends called me Narc.

Ma told me about the boys while we got ready for work, sharing her bathroom mirror. I combed my hair while I studied her use of blush—the sucking in of cheeks to find the bones, the blowing of the brush to prevent over-application. This girly part of her never seemed to go with the other part, the other woman—the one who, as a uniformed officer, carried a .38-caliber service revolver in her thick leather holster, along with other things difficult to associate with a woman, especially a mother: handcuffs, nightstick, and the now illegal blackjack, solid metal covered in leather for handling an uncooperative perpetrator, or *bad guy* as I called them. *Perpetrator* filled my mouth in an uncomfortable way.

My use of cosmetics was limited to tinted lip gloss and a brush to tame my thick and unruly eyebrows. But I watched her anyway, filing away the technique for the time she'd let me use real makeup to turn my face into something that resembled hers.

"I'll call a friend at the department to see what other information I can get on those two boys," Ma said while she softened the tip of her eyeliner pencil over a match's flame.

"Why?" I asked. "People are all the time turning up dead in Atlanta."

“Something’s not right about it—they dying a few days apart, both being teenage boys and black, turning up in the same location. I’ll look into it, and in the meantime, you be watchful, and look out for your sister.”

Ma didn’t need to add the last part. When wasn’t I watchful? And I didn’t know any other way than to look out for my sister. Bridgette was only nine. I was the oldest, which meant looking out for her was my job.

I just told Ma, Okay, I’ll be careful. She was thinking there might be a pattern. She was always looking for a pattern in *everything*. The fact that the two boys were found so close together but in different stages of decomposition, a clue that they hadn’t been left there on the same day, made Ma think their killer was the same person and was using the wooded spot just off the road as a dumping area. I imagined a car slowing just long enough to open a door and toss out some mother’s child, like an emptied beer bottle or a tread-bare tire.

Beyond that bit of theory, Ma couldn’t come up with more. Even if she was right about a connection between the victims, I didn’t see what I had in common with the dead boys other than being black and our ages being close. For one thing, they were boys, and everybody knew boys liked risk. Boys looked for trouble, and if none could be found, they’d make some up.

Ma said herself that most homicide victims were left not too far from where they lived or where they were killed. Niskey Lake Road was in southwest Atlanta, a good fourteen or fifteen miles from our house. Though they didn’t know it for sure, the cops were already speculating the boys were poor and messing around with drugs. There was nothing new in this theory—according to the police and the media, all black boys in inner-city Atlanta were poor and dealing. I didn’t know much about drugs other than the joint I’d sampled when I was twelve, during a summer vacation in Cleveland with my grandparents that freed me from Ma’s surveillance.

We did okay financially, considering we lived on a cop’s salary and there were no child support payments waiting in the mailbox, no sugar daddy to take up the slack. Neither of those income sources was my mother’s style. Maybe those boys were from the projects or nearby, and I lived in a house with a pool in the backyard. True, I lived within a couple of miles of two housing projects, but that was on the other side of Jonesboro Road—the side that led down Browns Mill Road to Cleveland Avenue and its pawn shops, check-cashing stores, and fast-food joints that filled our passing car with the smell of old grease. To me, it seemed a world away.

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In between filling the dog's water bowl and making sure Bridgette didn't add more sugar to her Frosted Flakes, I began the morning countdown, telling Ma the time every three minutes to keep her on track because she was never on time for anything. You'd have thought she was an actress instead of a cop, as much time as she took in the morning. It probably would have made her cop life easier, but she didn't pretend to be a man. She wore her hair long, although as a street cop, she'd had to wear it up. Long hair could get you into trouble when you're trying to take down a bad guy. This is probably what made her popular with some of the more open-minded male cops, those who didn't see anything wrong with a female cop as long as she was something to look at.

We rode together in the mornings because we both worked downtown, and I pestered her about the clock until the moment we were in the car. I hated being late for anything, much less a place where I was responsible for things. The source of my obsession with being on time is a mystery because Ma didn't give me much of an example. Or maybe it's because she didn't. There were too many times when I was the last kid picked up from daycare, or school, or basketball games that she couldn't get to early enough to watch me play. Put-out babysitters, teachers, and coaches would give me the evil eye in between checking the window for any sign of her, though when she finally arrived, they'd say, "Not a problem at all, I understand."

Normally, I'd catch MARTA, the city bus system, to avoid having to depend on her. She let me start taking public transportation when I was eleven. After that, my tardiness could be blamed only on the bus driver, and even that rarely happened because I always tried to take a bus earlier than I needed to just to make sure I wasn't late. But it was summertime and I was already getting up earlier than should be legal during summer break. Riding with Ma gave me an extra thirty minutes of sleep. When I'd finally get her out the door, I always thought we'd make it on time as long as we didn't get stuck at the train tracks. More often than not, we did.

I left Ma in the parking lot in front of her building, the Fulton County Courthouse on Pryor Street, and walked the last half mile to work. Past the old entrance to Underground Atlanta, once a tiny city beneath the city (and now is again). Down Martin Luther King to Courtland and into the Georgia State University campus. And finally, over to Butler Street, where all kinds of things could be seen and heard: fights between spouses, patrol cars coming

and going, people grieving, the homeless, people going about their every day, and ambulances screaming to be heard over all the rest.

My job wasn't a paying one, but it should have been. I was a candy striper at Grady Hospital, which was like being a candy striper in a war zone. It seemed like a good idea when Ma said I needed something to keep me busy during the summer. I figured I'd get to wear a cute nurse's outfit, and Ma always said I'd wanted to be a doctor since I was six, when she bought me a microscope for Christmas, complete with specimens pressed between small rectangles of glass. The job would give me a chance to find out whether this life of medicine was Ma's dream or mine. True, I lied to the volunteer agency about my age, saying I was fourteen, but the job shouldn't have been given to anyone under twenty-one, and even then, I'd have warned them to think twice.

The uniform was the first disappointment because there was nothing cute about it. Instead of being white and form-fitting as I'd imagined, it was a smock of blue-and-white-striped seersucker worn over a white blouse. The top half of the smock was apronlike, square-necked, sleeveless, and a size too small, pressing down my breasts like binding. The bottom half flared out, giving the impression my hips were far wider than they were. The candy striper uniform did nothing to help me broadcast my recently acquired curves. And the job wasn't like what I remembered from the movies—handing out magazines, filling cups with ice chips.

Back then, Grady was the largest hospital in the Southeast. It was where people were sent when no other hospital wanted them—because they were on Medicaid, because they were shot while trying to kill the person who shot them, because they had no place else to go. It was where the ambulance took Ma after a car chase that ended badly. She said when you're on the wrong side of the white light, Grady was the place to go if you weren't ready to check out just yet. Once they saved you, though, it was another story. You had better get moved to another hospital quick.

Grady served its purpose, but that didn't keep it from being a scary place. Everything about it was functional and institutional—brightly lit rooms, echoing hallways, and no thought given to softening the waiting areas with silk plants and paintings to distract visitors from whatever bad thing had brought them there. When I started the job, they gave us a tour and told us how many miles of corridors there were. I don't remember the number, but after spending my first few days there, I do recall thinking that it meant a lot of corridors filled with sick people,

forgotten people, hopeless and hopeful people, overburdened nurses, and pushed-to-the-edge doctors.

It didn't help ease my initial fear of the place when they put me on the gynecology ward during the middle of a nurse shortage, requiring me to do a lot more than fluffing up pillows. Within the first week, I'd learned a couple of things: the whole idea of being a doctor was shot to hell regardless of whose idea it had been, and I planned to avoid those stirrups for as long as possible. According to the nurses I worked with, a girl didn't have to have the exam until she was eighteen or having sex, whichever came first. I thought that if the girls at school could see what I did, heard the screams I heard outside the examination rooms, they'd become nuns.

Part of my job was to put together admissions packets for the patients. I put the appropriate blank forms into the folders, and stamped each one with the patient's insurance cards using one of those machines they used for credit cards at the department stores. It was always the same card—Medicaid, cornflower blue with patient information embossed in white. When I stamped one card in particular, I was certain the date of birth information was wrong, because it would have made the patient ten years old. When I showed it to the nurse at the desk, she said, "No, it's correct." She had checked the girl in herself.

The girl was back in the ward, in the room where we'd put the people who were either too poor—or not sick enough—to have a semi-private room. We had no private rooms in our department that I can recall, which was too bad for the patients, because nearly everyone was there for something they probably didn't want too many people to know about.

I knew that, in the suburbs, the candy strippers weren't allowed in certain places, weren't allowed to see certain things. At Grady during a nurse shortage, I saw things and went places I'm sure I should've been nowhere near. I was a responsible thirteen-supposed-to-be-fourteen-year-old. People forgot I was a kid after spending a little time with me. And they were so short-staffed, I had to help wherever I could, as long as it didn't require actual medical work. I wheeled patients on gurneys and in wheelchairs to x-ray, and shuttled blood and plasma *stat* between floors (I liked saying *stat*). On my trips to pathology, always colder than the rest of the hospital, I tried hard not to think of the cadavers and body parts in jars that I imagined were stored inside the huge metal refrigerators, especially if I had to run this errand right before my lunch break. This kind of work was why I thought I should have been

paid. Instead, my reward was supposed to have been satisfaction in helping others. At thirteen, it was difficult to see the reward in that.

When I went back to the ward, the girl I saw in the bed didn't look ten years old. I was certain she was at least fifteen when I looked at her face, but when I made out the shape of her body under the sheet, I could tell she was still a little girl.

"They sent me in here to take off your makeup," I said, trying to talk as I would to a small child even though she looked older than I did.

"Who the hell are you? Whoever you are, I don't want you touching me." She looked fifteen, but her mouth sounded thirty. "How old are you? You don't look like a real nurse."

"I'm not a nurse. All I want to do is take off your makeup. The nurse will be in soon to get you ready for your exam."

"All right, but don't touch the lashes. They fake, and it's hard as hell to get them on just right."

"They have to come off, too."

"You try and I'll slap you."

I saw at this point that I was no match for the woman-child, and decided I'd remove everything but the lashes. The nurse could handle that. I tried to make conversation, and besides, I was dying to know what a ten-year-old was doing in the gynecology ward.

"What procedure are you in here for?"

"None of your damn business." She folded her arms over her chest and stared at me while I wiped cotton over her clown-red cheeks.

"You know I can just look at your chart."

"Then why you asking me?"

I realized that was the end of our conversation and removed the rest of the makeup in silence, a little embarrassed that the woman-child scared me. I didn't scare easily—I'd been in more fights than a girl ever should, had a knife pulled on me once by some high school girls, and hid in a closet while a man who had been stalking Ma broke into our house. But this ten-year-old made me nervous.

When I finished removing her makeup, the girl touched her lashes to make sure I hadn't tricked her. She watched as I walked to the end of the bed and picked up the chart hanging there. I avoided her stare but felt it just the same. The doctors in Emergency had her admitted because

she had gonorrhea. I wondered if she'd have to get the D&C procedure that made grown women cry out. I'd seen the makeup on their faces, knew of the diagnoses with women who had the disease so advanced that it had spread throughout their bodies, but would have never connected those women and their self-described profession to this girl. I bet none of the candy stripers in the shiny, new suburban hospitals ever removed the makeup of a ten-year-old prostitute.

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I'd thought about the doll-sized prostitute throughout the rest of my day, wondering if she was afraid of being in the streets since those two boys had died. Did it make it any more dangerous for her, or was her world scary enough that two dead boys she'd never met were the least of her problems?

Ma was reading the paper that night after dinner while Bridgette and I watched TV. Normally, talking to Ma while she had the paper in hand was not a wise thing. She'd shush anyone who disturbed her while she watched the news or read the newspaper—my grandparents, houseguests, it didn't matter. But thoughts of the girl in the hospital wouldn't let go of me.

"Ma, guess what happened today." Right away, I knew I should have just told her, and the look she gave me over the newspaper confirmed it. It said, *I know you don't want me to play guessing games while I'm reading the paper.* I pretended not to notice. "I had to take makeup off a prostitute's face."

"Mmm."

"She was wearing fake eyelashes and said she'd slap me if I touched them. She just about jumped out of the bed when I tried to take them off." I thought I should liven up the story a bit to get a better response.

"You should've let the nurses take care of it," she said from behind the paper.

"The craziest part of it is that she had gonorrhea *and* is only ten years old."

Ma said nothing, just kept reading the paper like meeting a ten-year-old prostitute with the clap happened every day. I was getting mad, and wished I had the nerve to tear the paper from her hands. My story was every bit as interesting as whatever she was reading.

"Don't you think that's something?" It was more a demand than a question.

Ma just said, “You wouldn’t believe the things I see.” She didn’t look up from the paper when she said it.

Chapter Two

Sometimes, no matter where you live, how nice the neighborhood is, or how friendly the people are, you're bound to hear your neighbors fight. Parents yelling at kids, lovers threatening to kill each other for the hundredth time, so you figure if they really were going to do it, it would have been done by now. Some people get up enough nerve to call the police and hope their neighbors never find out who called. Most folks just try to ignore it rather than get involved. That's how it probably goes in most homes: just pretend the bad thing isn't happening and hope it'll end soon.

Not at my house. On an August night when it wasn't hot enough to justify turning on the air conditioning and running up the electric bill (which in Ma's mind meant no one had fallen over from heat stroke yet), we had the windows open and could hear an argument building next door. Our neighbor was single, mostly kept to himself and rarely had visitors. Being these were often the traits of single men who ended up on the evening news for committing some shocking crime that surprised their neighbors, I'd already decided he was slightly suspect.

But recently he'd gotten himself a girlfriend, and their relationship must have been based on the kind of passion created by antagonism, because they often made us an unintentional audience for their bickering. The houses on our street sat on half an acre each, some more than that, so it wasn't as if we were right on top of each other, but still we could hear them clearly. It started out like a loud discussion, quickly turned into an argument, and soon enough, it sounded like our neighbor might be beating the hell out of his girlfriend.

There was something about a man beating a woman that agitated Ma more than other crimes. It was the thing that made her talk angrily to the TV set when she heard mention of a husband killing his wife during the nightly run-down of all the bad things that happened in Atlanta that day. The other murders, the robberies and corruption, she'd let go by with only a disgusted sigh, but wife-beaters made my mother cuss without apology. Even though she'd told me a million times how a domestic dispute was the worst call for a cop to go on because tempers are high, passions are fired up, and people do things that don't make a damn bit of sense, Ma headed over there anyway. When I asked her if I should call the police, she said, "I *am* the police." She put her gun into her hip holster and clipped it on before she left the house, for which I didn't know whether to be grateful or afraid.

These were the times when it was hard for me not to blur the line between my mother and the other woman. When I tried to make the distinction, I could see only my mother going into a situation that might get her killed. It was difficult to see a cop with six years' experience, one who could kick some ass when she wanted to, according to her police friends. Still, I didn't see why she couldn't just call some uniforms to come over and deal with it.

Bridgette and I ran to her room to watch what would happen from the window. Both our bedrooms were on the side of the house that faced our neighbor's, but our house sat farther back from the road so his front door was out of sight. We had to listen to it instead, which wasn't difficult because the neighbor was loud and Ma was loud right back at him. The conversation went something like this:

Ma: Stop beating on your girlfriend.

Man: This is none of your business. (I remember him being very proper talking, and I think he said something like "This is none of your affair," but probably not.)

Ma: Everyone on the street can hear you, so you're making it everybody's business.

Man: So call the police.

Ma: I am the motherfucking *po-lice*. (Ma liked saying this, and she could curse like nobody's business when provoked, probably something she had to learn to sound tough on the streets.)

I don't remember much else of the conversation, but the police never came and the couple stopped fighting, at least for that day. I don't recall ever hearing them fight again, but I'm certain they didn't stop. They probably just made sure to do it more quietly from then on. After Ma went *Kojak* on them, I went out of my way to avoid the man and his girlfriend, not certain why I was the one embarrassed when it should have been them.

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One Friday, Ma was working while I took care of Bridgette. I didn't have to work at the hospital on Fridays, which meant Bridgette didn't have to go to the babysitter. When I was her age, I didn't much have a babysitter, but Ma said me being the oldest made me more responsible.

Bridgette wasn't at all responsible; she didn't have to be because doctors had diagnosed her when she was six as being hyperactive, a condition that made her a scary combination of aggressive and reckless, and required her to take little pills that Ma or I had to cut in half or else they turned her into a zombie. She was also the baby, so Ma had fewer expectations of her.

We were watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island*.

"You're sitting too close to the TV," I told Bridgette. I liked to act as if I were her boss, mostly because Ma said I was completely in charge when she was at work. Sometimes I pushed it too far, like the time I tried to spank Bridgette with a wooden spoon like Ma used to do me before parents started getting into trouble for that. Bridgette nearly kicked my ass, and would have if I didn't outweigh her, so I never tried that again.

"Move back from the TV." I had to repeat myself because she was ignoring me. "You don't move back and I won't put any cheese on your SpaghettiOs."

She moved back, but only by an inch or two. I didn't ask for anymore. I wasn't even worried about her eyes; I just wanted to make sure she knew who was running things. I kept all kinds of threats and bribes ready for those times she wanted to give me trouble, like when I had to comb her hair after lunch. To make sure she held still, I'd tell her she couldn't go down the street with me to play basketball later. Of course, I'd never leave her alone in the house – Ma would've killed me – but Bridgette hadn't figured that out yet.

"Remember when Ma would be home most of the time, and not always be at work?"

She turned down the volume, maybe so I could focus on the question, but I didn't remember such a time because Ma was always at some job. I figured Bridgette was old enough to have only four years of fully reliable memory, and Ma had been a cop for longer than that, so whatever days she was recalling, she'd made them up. But she must have taken my silence as agreement.

"We used to watch the *Carol Burnett Show* in her room and crack pecans with that raggedy pair of pliers because you lost the nut cracker, and the next day she'd fuss about the shells in her bed."

The pliers and pecans were familiar. "I remember us watching that show. Is it still on?"

"No, and I don't know the last time we went to the farmers' market for pecans. Nothing is like when I was little."

That was funny to me because she was still little in my book, but I didn't laugh because she looked so serious about it. In that moment I wanted to call her Little Bit, which was my nickname for her until she was five and told me she hated that name. I'd always assumed it was better than Monkey, which everyone else called her because she could climb anything and went a long stretch where the only food she'd eat willingly was bananas. She told me she hated that name, too.

"Next week I'll buy some pecans from the market downtown."

Bridgette looked just about done with me. "Pecans aren't in season until fall."

After I warmed the SpaghettiOs, I told her to go wash her hands before she came to the table.

"You're not Ma, stop trying to act like it," she said, but she did it anyway.

When Ma would get home from work, she'd make us tell her what we did all day, but only after she went around the house inspecting furniture and opening closets, making sure we did our chores, which included vacuuming, dusting, and laundry. She liked a neat house, but getting chores done was also Ma's way of making sure we weren't getting into any trouble while she was gone. If everything was done on the list—and it was always a long list—she figured we didn't have time to do much else. She was usually right, but sometimes suspected us anyway.

"You played basketball down the street?" she asked me.

"Yes."

"Did you have any company over here?"

Ma always asked this, trying to find out if my boyfriend had come over. Kevin had been my boyfriend since the summer before, when he kissed me on a warm night while a bunch of us kids played a game of hide-and-go-seek, the night lit only by lightning bugs and the glow from some family's porch light. He'd caught me hiding between a house and a thick forsythia bush growing against it. He was fourteen and experienced, given his reputation around the neighborhood. I was twelve and it was my first real kiss. It had come earlier than I'd expected which meant I hadn't prepared for it, and my teeth were more involved than they should've been, but it was still exciting.

Kevin was handsome, even as a boy, with the strength of a man's face barely masked behind the softness of a boy's. His eyes were brown like just about every black person I knew, but hinted at the possibility of something gold warming the brown. Or perhaps that was just my

imagination. He opened up a world of conversation for me at school, allowing me to add descriptions of my first kiss to the popular girls in eighth grade, who allowed me close enough to listen, but never expected me to contribute. And when they doubted my veracity, the wallet-sized school picture Kevin had given me was produced as proof. An unattractive boy would have gotten an immediate laugh, then dismissal. When they gathered around to silently scrutinize his picture, I knew they were impressed. When they questioned where I'd gotten the picture, suggesting maybe it was a cousin instead of a boyfriend, I knew they were jealous. I wouldn't respond, only returned the picture to my wallet, and let my silent smugness tell them exactly what I thought about their skepticism.

Ma was always saying, "I'm not raising any babies that I didn't bring into this world. Don't have any babies while you're in my house." When I was six years old, she made sure I understood how that might happen, and later, lectured me on the availability of birth control many times, warning me that it was best to keep my legs shut until I no longer lived in her house. I understood that these warnings were well intended, and had much to do with the fact that she gotten pregnant with me when she was eighteen.

Ma couldn't stand the idea that I was only thirteen and had the same boyfriend for a year. Kevin lived one block over, and his father was a cop, too. Ma knew him from the Department. I think that's why she never made me break up with him—she figured between her and his father, they'd catch us if we were doing anything. She preferred having that kind of surveillance over me, something she wouldn't have if I was going with a boy whose father wasn't a cop. She didn't realize that Kevin and I were scared shitless of both of them, and wouldn't get into any trouble—at least not with each other. (It wasn't until later that I learned my first love's reputation had been honestly earned.)

"Kim didn't have any friends over, did she?" Ma treated Bridgette and me like her suspects, waiting for one to turn over on the other, but we rarely did, even if there was something to hide. She'd catch us at the front door, immediately send one into another room, and question us separately on where we'd been, what we'd done, and who with. She caught us lying only a couple of times before we learned to get our stories straight before we reached the front door.

I prayed Bridgette wouldn't bust me, because on that very day my boyfriend *had* come by, though I didn't let him in the house, which was Ma's specific question. Instead, I led him around to the windowless side of the house, safe from Bridgette's watch. There, we kissed until

the prospect of being caught by the neighbors and the thrill of the kiss itself made it difficult for me to keep his hands from wandering.

Bridgette said, “No boys came in,” and I knew I’d owe her something later.

When Ma was satisfied that no boys had been in her house, she relaxed and stopped being a cop. I helped her make dinner, chopping vegetables for the salad and mixing up the corn bread, which were my regular dinner tasks anytime Ma was home early enough to cook. When she wasn’t, I cooked the whole dinner.

“They’ve identified one of the Niskey Lake boys, the older one,” Ma said after sending Bridgette off to watch TV. When she sent Bridgette away so we could talk about her work, it always made me feel like I was a grown-up. And it was a chance to have Ma to myself. When she was home, it seemed to me most of her time went to Bridgette, because that’s how it works when you’re the youngest. Or maybe I was just jealous.

“How do you know he was older if you don’t know who the other boy is yet?”

“The medical examiner can approximate their ages.” Ma sounded too business-like about something so dark, until I considered figuring out the ages of unidentified dead was part of her business. “His name was Edward Hope Smith, and he was just a month shy of his fifteenth birthday. Last time anyone saw him was at that skating rink you go to. *Used* to go to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I knew what it meant, but asked anyway.

“Until they catch whoever did it, I want you to stay away from there.”

Greenbriar skating rink on Campbellton Road had been a favorite hangout since I was eight or nine, when we still lived in Southwest. My girlfriends and I would loop yarn around two cardboard doughnuts, snip the yarn along the edges, and tie string between the doughnuts to create pompoms, which we tied onto our skates. I had pompoms to match every outfit. Ma or a friend’s mother would drop us off and leave for wherever they went to get a few hours’ relief from being mothers. I’d skate until I grew sweaty and tired, timing my strides to the beat of Chic’s “Good Times,” made dizzy by the squares of light reflected from the disco ball as they moved round and round across the floor, walls, and skaters. I wouldn’t leave the floor for an hour straight, except during Slow Skate when the DJ would play something meant for couples, and fake smoke would blow from the ceiling, which made me cough.

And here Ma was trying to keep me from one of the few places a thirteen-year-old could go to have some fun. Since I didn't have any skating plans in the near future, I let it go and decided to cross that bridge when I got to it. By then, they'd have caught the killer.

"What's taking so long to identify the other boy?"

"They're working on it."

"But it's been two weeks. No one's called in about him?"

"There's a missing report on a boy named Alfred Evans who hasn't been seen since he got on a bus heading downtown to watch a movie at the Coronet, but the police want to be as sure as they can before asking the family to identify the boy's body. As it is, there wasn't much left of him to identify when he was found."

That was a sad thing to me because it meant there was no one to cry over him, and somewhere in Atlanta there was a family wondering where their child was, hoping he wasn't the boy lying in the morgue.

"They still aren't tying the two boys together yet," Ma said, absentmindedly poking a spatula at ground beef that was long since cooked through. "But they're wrong on that."

Sometimes, I was sure she missed the Department. She wouldn't get involved in the investigation until the case was brought to the district attorney. By the time she got her hands on it, much of the early discovery was already done. Ma never wanted to see anyone hurt, especially not kids, but she did like to solve cases. I could tell she wished she could work on this one.

"Do they have any suspects yet?" I asked. I always asked Ma about this stuff, although most folks would probably say this wasn't the kind of thing to discuss with a thirteen-year-old. But who else was going to ask her? She had to let go of her work at the end of the day just like a professor did with her husband, or a businessman with his wife. Besides, I'd never been thirteen a day in my life.

"Nothing so far. I guess they won't be bringing it to us any time soon. You know these things take a while." She handed me the plates to put on the table.

"What about the boy from the skating rink. What else do you know about him?"

Ma didn't answer, and I knew she was in her own head, thinking about patterns.

"Maybe you can help out with the investigation," I said, trying to bring her back to me.

“That’s the city’s business for now. I think those boys are tied together, and so do some of the detectives working the case. The city doesn’t want to raise that question, though. People will freak out if they think somebody’s out there killing kids.”

I thought about the boys, wondered what the one from the skating rink did that night, the one named Hope. Maybe he skated with his girlfriend during the Slow Skate, maybe he had a quarter get stuck in the pinball machine that was always taking kids’ money. He probably left there wondering what lie he was going to tell his mother for getting home late, and it turned out it didn’t matter.

“I hope he at least had fun,” I said, and Ma looked at me as if to say, *Who?*

Chapter Three

My friend Cleo from middle school worked in the Municipal Market where her parents owned a stall. The market was in the middle of Sweet Auburn, the cradle of civil rights in Atlanta—home to Dr. King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church and the *Atlanta Daily World*, the city’s first black-owned newspaper. Before desegregation, black people couldn’t shop inside where the best selection could be found, and had to make purchases from curbside vendors. By 1979, it seemed only black folks ever shopped there, and only on the inside.

It was like a farmers’ market but better, because it had all the flavor of Atlanta wrapped inside of it in the form of food prepared from the soul, or soon to be, at home in someone’s kitchen. While the vendors sold you tender collards, fat garlicky pickles, or let you sample just a little taste of pulled pork, they’d talk to you as if they’d known you forever, even if you’d never been inside the place. And the regulars they *had* known forever, they’d remember to ask how a child was doing in school, or whether an elderly father was recovering all right from his stroke. People who didn’t go there that often complained about the smell, but that’s because they couldn’t sniff past the fish on ice to get to the good stuff—fresh melons and berries, home-style fried chicken, or fresh baked sweet potato pie.

Since it was only two blocks from the hospital, I’d walk down there after my shift and try to pull Cleo away from her job running the cash register so we could hang out somewhere downtown. Sometimes we’d window-shop the latest styles, visit Walter’s Clothing on Decatur Street for a new pair of Converse high-tops, or maybe check out the record store for new 45s. Almost always her father would let her go, but not before handing us whatever fruit was at peak season—a handful of strawberries when summer was just getting started, or blueberries about the time it seemed the days couldn’t get any hotter. (Bridgette was right—it was much too early for pecans.) Since it was on the waning side of August, he handed us a peach, sweeter than any you’d ever find in a grocery store. We walked toward Central City Park, talking about the things important only to thirteen-year-old girlfriends, trying to keep peach juice from running down our arms and staining our shirts.

“I can’t stay away too long,” Cleo said. “It’s our busy day and Daddy’ll need me back soon. You hanging out until your mother gets off work?”

“Nah, I catch the bus back home. Never sure what time she’ll get off work. I just figured we won’t see each other much after summer vacation ends.”

“Why do you want to go to that school way out in the middle of nowhere, anyway? Not like it’s the only Catholic high school in town. It isn’t even in town, for that matter.”

“It’s a good school,” I said, wishing immediately that I hadn’t.

“The school I’m going to is a good school, too.”

“I know. That’s not what I meant.” I pointed out a bench in the park, saying that the large shade tree it sat beneath would give us some relief from the sun, in hopes of changing the subject. She sat beside me but didn’t change the subject.

“You’re going to that white school like you think they want you there. They just want to make their quota.”

“There isn’t any quota.” I knew she wasn’t saying it to be hurtful, that she was still angry that I’d reneged on our deal to attend the same high school. Neither of us had been part of the popular crowd at school, though they tolerated us, like the football team put up with the mascot and the band, part of the team but not really. So Cleo and I mostly stuck together. After three years of being each other’s confidantes, having each other’s back in an afterschool fight, sharing the angst of our secret and unrequited crushes, it was hard to imagine not seeing each other every day. But I told myself there would be weekends and summers.

Cleo folded her arms under her breasts, as though she was cradling them, an absentminded habit she’d developed to hide the psoriasis that had plagued her elbows and forearms for as long as I’d known her. A hundred or so pigeons gathered around our feet in anticipation of being fed, but moved away quickly when they discovered our hands were empty. I watched white and black people walk through the park—business people, fast-food workers, homeless men, government employees—and wondered if there was any truth to what Cleo said.

“You’ll change, going to school way out there. Next thing I know, you’ll be talking white.”

“No I won’t.”

“And acting white, too.”

“*No I won’t.*” I knew how weak and childish it sounded. But what else could I have said? I hadn’t prepared for an argument defending who I was to the person who knew me better than anyone.

“I won’t hardly recognize you anymore.”

I wasn’t sure which feeling took me more by surprise—the anger, or the hurt caused by her words. More confusing was how far apart we already were, even before school had begun. I hadn’t set foot on the new school’s property, and already I was being called a sellout. There was little worse than being told by my own that I’d forget who I was, as though any neighborhood, any dialect, any race of people surrounding me could pull the brown skin from my flesh, my soul right from my heart.

“I’d better start walking toward Five Points if I want to make the next bus,” I said, hoping the heat growing behind my eyelids wouldn’t show how she’d wounded me before I could walk away. I don’t recall how many times we talked after that, but I know it wasn’t many more.

*

It was my fading friendship with Cleo that made me start one with Cassandra, the girl next door. She had lived there a couple of years by then, but we were never tight because I had Cleo, and the sometimes friendship of the popular girls at school. Also there was something about Cassandra I always thought strange and put me off from her—the way she was like an old lady and a little kid at the same time. She had the forgiving and innocent ways of a four-year-old, but none of the adventure of one. Cassandra never wanted to do anything, content to sit on her porch and watch everyone else even though she was only thirteen. She even had the physical presence of an old person, standing back on her legs so they bowed backwards, hands on her hips, looking tired but willing to call up enough energy to give a sermon on the dangers of whatever the rest of us kids were doing.

On that day, Cassandra and I, along with two girls from the neighborhood we sometimes hung out with, all decided it was too hot for doing anything but sitting around, so we went down to the girl’s house with the card table on her patio, protected by the shade of a big magnolia tree. Cassandra was reluctant to leave her porch, where she sat fanning herself with a folded newspaper and remarking on how fast people were driving down our street, but she followed us anyway.

Like most Atlanta streets outside of downtown, there were no sidewalks, so we had to walk in the street. This caused Cassandra no small amount of stress when cars flew around the

curves going forty-five miles an hour instead of the thirty posted on the sign the city had planted in my yard. The speeders didn't live on our end of the street, where people had what Ma called *pride of ownership*. They lived on the other end, in apartments and Section 8 housing that either a landlord or the government owned. Today when I pass through (because my mother still owns that house and we have family living there), I see drug deals made openly at the stop sign where I once caught my bus, and I only make a rolling stop, fearful of being caught in the middle of a deal gone bad.

Twenty years earlier, my street had been part of a solidly middle class neighborhood. In the summer of 1979, it was slipping toward the lower end but I didn't know that. I saw mostly well-kept houses, large yards full of white oaks and peach trees, and at least one car in each driveway, even if they were older models with neglected dents aged with rust or patched with Bondo. I was just glad I didn't live in an apartment building as we had the four years before Ma bought the house. No more listening to the man above us pee in the morning, or the rhythmic banging of a headboard against the wall of the bedroom my sister and I shared, accompanied by sounds that made Bridgette ask whether the couple next door was fighting. My street was full of trees, houses were far enough apart that no one knew your business unless you wanted them to, and we had a pool in the backyard that made other kids on the street envious.

"Sitting under all those trees, we'll be eaten alive by mosquitoes," Cassandra said in a low voice so the others couldn't hear while we walked to the girl's house. I ignored her. "Plus, they have that small creek running behind the house. Mosquitoes love hanging around water."

"Then go back home."

"That's okay. I put on some Skin So Soft this morning. That should keep some of them away."

Our game was Spades, playing in pairs. There were five girls, and Cassandra was more than willing to be the odd girl out. She sat in a chair on the periphery of the card table, barely moving except to swat away mosquitoes. We almost forgot she was there.

After we bid our books, me certain that my partner was overconfident in the number of books she could win, we started into another game. From three houses down, I could hear the woodpecker going at one of the apple trees in my backyard. Every summer he returned, as if circling the branches and trunk with shallow holes was a pilgrimage. Our world was quiet except for the bird, and the occasional tiny thud of shiny red magnolia seeds falling from

grenade-looking pods. It was at least a month too early in the season for the seeds to be falling, and I briefly wondered what omen my grandmother might read into it. We focused on our card game and didn't talk about how the humidity pressed down on us like a shroud, because that would have only made it feel more miserable.

One girl cleared her throat. Silence can make teenage girls uncomfortable if it goes on for more than a minute or two, so the rest of us were grateful.

"I can't wait until school starts," the girl said, causing us to look up at her with worry she'd taken ill with the heat stroke. "High school, I mean. It'll be fun to be in high school."

"There's nothing special about it," Marie said. She was the oldest, on her way to tenth grade, and she belonged to the Beautiful Family, as I called them. There were four kids—two boys and two girls—all of them pretty. They came in all shades, from red-bone to cocoa, but all had flawless skin that seemed gilded, the same full lips, the same round eyes and lush eyelashes that made me think of babies. The girls I wanted to look like, the boys I wanted to go with, but neither thing ever happened.

The rest of us listened to Marie because not only was she the oldest and beautiful, she was also worldly. Her mother was a teacher, and she, like her sister and brothers, spoke in the most beautiful way—every syllable enunciated, no lingual short-cuts taken, and sometimes with words I'd have to pretend to know and then look up in my *World Book* dictionary later.

"It's just more of the same. College is what I'm looking forward to."

"What about the football games and pep rallies?" I asked.

"Oh, and the pep squad," my Spades partner said. "I'm going out for the pep squad."

"And all the cute boys," from Marie's partner.

"All what cute boys? The boys are the same ones you knew in eighth grade. Everyone's the same, just in a new building. Status quo." Marie laid down a card with a slapping sound, as if to say, *And that's that*, and won the book.

"Not for Kim," Cassandra said from behind me, startling everyone because we'd come to believe there were only four of us. "The boys will be different 'cause she went to private school, and now she'll be going to George High with us."

"I'm not going to George. I'm staying in Catholic school." I was waiting for the fall-out, the questions about whether I thought I was too good for public school.

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