

CHAPTER ONE

Summer 2015

There was nobody else in the world I wanted to kiss—not even famous people or superheroes—only Aisha. I’d been thinking about kissing her since the end of eighth grade, not even three months. Summer meant more reading together, more of her telling me stories about our favorite books, comic books, movies. She saw parts of the characters I missed and explained them in startling, genius ways.

I wanted to put my lips on hers and inhale her words into my brain.

I should’ve asked Aisha out on the anniversary of the day we met. I wish I could’ve kissed her then.

* * *

I met Aisha because I got roped into setting up our block’s annual shindig. Due to my grandmom Milo’s unofficial standing as Queen-Emperor of the block, the party happened in front of our house. My job included carrying a ton of folding chairs from our open garage to the street and setting them in big circles.

Wolverine—“Wolvie” to her friends—my big, silly loveball of a dog walked with me, her leash looped over my belt. That reminded her to stick close, except when she saw other dogs and squirrels. It was early for squirrel season and we didn’t have a lot of dogs on our block, plus the street had already been blocked off for the party.

Behind me, I heard a car pull around the “street closed” signs and stop a few houses down. I didn’t realize the leash had come loose and Wolvie wasn’t beside me until I heard a man yell, “Get your dog away from me!”

Wolvie is seventy pounds of black-and-brown fuzzy love, half German Shepherd, half Lab. Her size can scare people who don’t know her—especially when she body-checks them out of joy.

She’d backed this man against his car, but only because he wasn’t petting her. Square-faced, graying brown hair, peach skin, he looked older than my mom but not as old as my grandpop. He held his hands out, trying to ward off Wolvie, who pushed into his thighs, wriggling.

He glared past me, down the street, yelling, “Dammit, girl, get over here and get this dog off me!”

A girl’s resonant voice called back, “That’s not my dog.”

I turned one-eighty to see who he was yelling at. A brown-skinned girl held a puffy white Bichon Frise in her skinny arms. Even with her curly black hair piled up on her head, she wasn’t taller than me. Couldn’t have been older than thirteen or fourteen. Anger narrowed her eyes and set creases at the edges of her mouth.

She had to be from the new family that’d moved in across the alley weeks ago. Our town was about ninety-five percent white and less than two percent black; a black family moving in was hard to miss. From my treehouse, I’d seen an older boy and his dad in the yard across the alley. I didn’t know they had a girl my age.

“Of course this is your dog!” The man was spitting mad at the girl. “Don’t play dumb with me. You get over here right now.”

I was half the distance away from this guy and standing in plain sight. Why would he think Wolvie belonged to her?

“Wolverine, down!” I yelled.

Wolvie dropped to her belly, tail wagging, watching me. She opened her mouth in a happy, befuddled pant, the edge of her tongue over her black lips.

“Come. Sit.” Wolvie jogged to my side and sat. “This is my dog,” I told the guy, though it was blazingly obvious at that point.

From behind me, the girl said, “I told you.”

“Don’t mouth off to me,” he snarled. “Bitch.” He stormed up his front steps and slammed the door.

The girl’s mouth scrunched up. More anger or trying not to cry? I couldn’t tell. She turned away, still holding the fluffy white dog to her chest. They must’ve been on a walk and she’d picked up her dog when Wolvie got loose. I didn’t want her to be scared of Wolvie.

“Hey, I’m really sorry,” I called to her. “My dog wouldn’t hurt your dog, I promise. She’s real sweet, loves people.”

The girl half turned back, then glanced down the street like she was going to walk off without saying anything. I picked up Wolvie’s leash, tapped my thigh with the command for “heel” and took a few steps closer to her. Wolvie paced with me. She knew how to behave when she had to. Wolvie sat when I stopped, just the way I’d trained her, two houses away from the girl and her dog, in case she was scared of Wolvie too.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I’m Kaz, this is Wolverine, but you can call her Wolvie.”

The girl’s eyes focused on me, face set serious like this was going to be the most important question in the history of the world.

In a way, it was.

“Logan or Laura?” she asked.

Warm sunny joy burst open in me. Those were the names of classic Wolverine from the *X-Men* and the new, awesome, All-New Wolverine. I thought I was the only girl for twenty miles who read comics.

“Laura!” I told her, bouncing on my toes from excitement while staying in place so Wolvie wouldn’t get up.

A grin took over her face, dimpling her cheeks, warming her eyes. “I’m Aisha, this is Mr. Pickles.”

“You want to come into my back yard and let Mr. Pickles and Wolvie play? Wolvie’s gentle with small dogs.”

She set Mr. Pickles down and he ran out to the length of his leash but couldn’t reach Wolvie, who was thumping her tail hard but knew better than to break a sit.

Aisha asked, “Are you the house with the treehouse?”

“Sure am. Come on, I’ll show you. Did you move in to that house behind us? You probably met my grandmom, Milo.”

“She brought us brownies.”

Aisha followed me to the side gate and I held it open for her. She wore a white T-shirt with a cute row of buttons at the top, plus blue jeans. Garage dust streaked my blue shirt, making it match my crappy gray jeans and the old tennies with no laces that I used for chores.

I closed the gate. “Wolvie might try to tackle you with love, but she won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid of dogs,” she said, eyes cutting toward the house where the jerk had gone. “But let Pickles go first. You can call him Pickles; he likes you.”

“Sure,” I said. Did her dropping Mr. Pickles’ formal title mean we were on our way to being friends?

As soon as she put Pickles down, he ran up the stairs to the back patio and declared himself king of the hill with his ears up and tail high. I let Pickles sniff a bit before unclipping Wolvie’s leash. She butted against Aisha’s legs, so Aisha bent down to rub her with both hands.

Pickles came back to sniff Wolvie and they did the whole dance of butt-sniffing. Aisha peered up at the treehouse. It was six feet up the big oak in our yard, with a wrap-around staircase so Wolvie could get up there. Four walls, but one opened for good weather.

“You want to see it?” I asked.

"I have to get home soon. Do you want help with those chairs before I go?"

"Yeah, thanks. My brother bailed on me."

"Older or younger?" she asked as we put the dogs back on their leashes.

"Older," I said.

"Same here. Two of them, but one's at college."

We walked around to the front of the garage and I picked up a folding chair from the stack inside the open door.

"We should have a support group for younger siblings," I told her. "What comics are you reading?"

As we carried the chairs into the street, Aisha listed her comics and I listed mine. When I brought up *Ms. Marvel*, her eyes lit up. "That Wolverine crossover in the sewer with the giant alligator? So epic!"

She faced the army of empty chairs. I only saw half of her smile, but it was the best smile, broad and open, but also like she knew a secret, her dimpled cheeks bunching up, crinkling the skin by her eyes. And she smiled like that about comics, about Wolverines and giant alligators. I thought: *I am going to be her friend forever.*

"Do you want to come to the cookout?" I asked.

"Let me take Pickles home and ask my parents if it's okay."

She set the last chair into place in a big oblong that took up the middle of the street. Getting Pickles' leash from where she'd looped it around another chair, she waved and walked off down the block.

I wondered how we'd look together: a white girl walking a mostly black dog and a black girl walking a white dog. Did that look like a commercial for world peace or fabric softener?

* * *

I wanted Aisha to come to the block party cookout so much! If she didn't, how weird would it be to show up at her house with a stack of comic books?

I'd invited my best friend Jon to the cookout, even though he would diss everything about it, so I had to stay. If Aisha didn't return, maybe tomorrow I could walk over to her house. Or I could hang a sign on my treehouse that said, "Come over! Read comics!" Would she see that from her yard?

After carrying out cutlery and napkins and condiments, I went inside to change. If Mom didn't drive around the signs, like that jerk guy had, she'd have to park in the alley, by the big, heated shed that held Milo's woodworking equipment. I didn't see Mom's current favorite purse on the hooks by the garage door, or thrown on the dining room table, which was more likely. I stopped in the kitchen to drink half a glass of water and poured the other half into Wolve's bowl to cool it down.

A quick check out the back window showed no car. Maybe I'd get lucky and Mom would be stuck at work. She did a lot of evening shifts because she assistant-managed a Maurice's, a chain women's clothing store that also sold shoes and accessories, but not any that I'd wear. Mom didn't like me bringing Wolve to neighborhood events, but it wasn't fair to leave Wolve in the house with so many people right out front.

My grandpop, who we all called Pops, stood in the back yard, cleaning the surface of a grille that was already cleaner than any other grille in our town. Like always, he wore khakis and a blue short-sleeved button-down shirt. In winter he switched to long sleeved. Milo bought his shirts a dozen at a time. He wore them buttoned all the way up, an uncannily hip old guy, but I think he was being hip on accident.

Hearing rustling from the basement, I yelled down to Milo, "Need help?"

"Nope," she called back. "Go wash up."

I headed for my room. My brother Brock must've come and gone because our bathroom stank of his acrid body spray. I could smell it from the top of the stairs, even though my bedroom comes before the bathroom. Brock's room is in the basement, but he shares this bathroom with me because Mom, Milo and Pops kicked him out of the other two bathrooms. He left his

socks, underwear and shirts in every corner and they reeked like thousand-year-old cabbage.

Pops and Milo have lived here for way longer than I've been alive, like since the eighties, when my mom was a teenager. She used to have my room, or I had hers, however that worked. Now she slept in the first floor den that Milo converted into a bedroom when we moved in. Milo and Pops slept in the big bedroom on the second floor and I had the little one, which was still plenty big for me.

After a quick shower, I changed into my blue Wolverine T-shirt, the one with Laura on it rather than Logan, and less-torn jeans. I switched the dog treats from the pocket of the other jeans to these. When I got back to the street with Wolvie on her leash, Pops had the grille rolled out of the garage and fired up. The smell of pork fat and spices rested heavy in the warm summer air. I gave Wolvie a treat since she wasn't allowed to eat bratwurst—though she'd steal part of one off the ground later and then have gas that made everything Brock smell like air freshener.

Milo sat in a folding chair with people all around her since she was the official/unofficial royalty of our neighborhood. Adults had taken up most of the chairs, but I saw a blanket on our front lawn with Jon and Brock on it. Jon had biked over from the fancy housing development on the other side of the river. This used to be a small town when Milo and Pops first moved here, but then people noticed it was a pleasant twenty-five minute drive from Saint Paul, so new houses kept getting built for the corporate folks who wanted big yards. And the small, old houses in my neighborhood got built onto or torn down and replaced with big, new ones, like the one across the alley, where Aisha lived.

I'd been taller than Jon when we first met and he'd started to catch up. Plus he'd discovered fashion. I didn't like either of those trends. He had on dark blue skinny jeans and a short-sleeved button-up, black with pink flamingos, ironic and stylish. Jon's jeans looked like they wouldn't be caught dead in the same

store as mine. He'd been growing out his very black hair, now past his ears, and it made him even more handsome-pretty.

Brock wore his usual sleeveless T-shirt and baggy jeans. He'd been allergic to sleeves since last spring when some girl at school talked up his arm muscles. They were bigger than Jon's arms, but Brock had a ways to go to catch up to Pops in muscles, size and height. Brock got the freckles in the family and with the acne and sad attempts at shaving, most days it looked like his brush of red hair had launched a partially successful missile attack on his face.

I dropped onto my butt on the blanket and bent my knees up so I could rest my arms on them. Wolvie sighed because she knew she so wasn't getting at a brat anytime soon and flopped on her side against my hip.

"Kaz, just in time," Jon said. "Pick a hero."

Jon had more interests than having superheroes fight each other, but this was the one that crossed over to Brocks' interests, or at least his old interests. Now that Brock was starting tenth grade and had approximately seven hairs on his face, he was trying to give up that kid stuff.

Jon had another version of this game in which you described the heroes going on dates, but no way Brock would play that.

"I'll be Wolverine," I said. Because it was a very Wolverine day, in the best ways.

"X-23, Laura Kinney?" he asked.

"No, Logan."

"You can't be Logan," Brock said. "You're a girl. You're Laura."

My brother the traitor. He hadn't cared when we were little if I was guys as often as I was girls. The whole idea of tenth grade had corrupted him.

"It's a game," I insisted, loudly. "I can be whoever I want. I can be a guy."

"You're Laura!" Brock came back louder.

"Why can't Kaz be whoever she wants?" asked a newly familiar voice from behind and above my left shoulder.

I hopped up and pressed my arms to my sides because I already wanted to hug Aisha and that would be so weird when we'd only met today. Jon and Brock also got up, Brock with a more WTF stance: legs wide, arms crossed.

"Aisha moved in across the alley," I told them. "This is Jon and my brother Brock."

Everybody said "hey," with varying levels of enthusiasm. Brock picked up his pop bottle and didn't quite turn back to face her.

To me, Aisha said, "Laura does have more cutting force per claw, so bear that in mind."

"What? How?" Jon asked. He ran a hand through his hair and it sifted down ending up looking as great as when it had started. My hair was only an inch longer than Jon's, light brown instead of black, about as straight, but it never did that—only got frizzy if I touched it, sometimes even when I didn't.

Aisha rocked back and shrugged in a no-big-deal, this-is-obvious way. She'd put a light jacket over her delicate shirt, a patchwork of orange fabrics, different colors and patterns. It fit close to her shoulders and made them look tiny.

She said, "Two claws instead of three means the total force of the strike is split fifty-fifty, rather than into thirds, so even if her striking power is less than Logan's, he'd have to hit significantly harder to match her. Plus a lot of their strikes aren't based in muscle force, they're based in momentum, so she basically owns."

"Cool, okay then I am Laura," I said and sat back down on the blanket because Wolvie had been gazing up at me like: *For real? Are you going to keep standing and make me get up for nothing?*

Aisha sat on the other side of Wolvie and ruffled the thick fur by her ears. Wolvie huffed and rested her head on Aisha's thigh.

Brock sprawled out on a whole third of the blanket, and Jon took the remaining edge. He said, "You're still never going to win because Quentin will just mind control you." These days, he always picked Quentin, who was queer and a super powerful telepath.

“Not with Jean Grey on her team,” Aisha said.

“You’re not Storm?” Jon asked.

“Why would I be Storm?” Aisha pitched the question with full curiosity.

“Cause she’s African American,” Brock told her, sounding both like he was talking to a little kid and like African American was *not* a great thing.

“Oh, you’re going with the obvious reason,” Aisha said. “Yeah, we’re both black, but as someone wise once said, ‘It’s a game. I can be whoever I want.’ I’m Jean Grey. Who are you?”

“Apocalypse,” he declared.

“Shoulda picked Franklin Richards,” Aisha told him with a dramatic sigh and a single shake of her head. “Well, that was a short fight. I’m going to get a burger.”

“Try the brats, they’re better,” I said, unable to stop grinning.

“Who the hell is Franklin Richards?” Jon sputtered.

“No way,” Brock insisted. “If I empower Quentin, you two are fucked.”

Aisha tipped her face down and looked up at Brock out of the tops of her eyes, like she was staring over glasses even though she wasn’t wearing any. She raised her eyebrows and kept them up.

“Let me break this down for you. I shield Kaz’s mind and she goes in as a distraction. Sure you can defeat her in a minute, but it’ll take you a minute. And any damage you do, she can heal from. Meanwhile, I use the Phoenix Force to reach back in time and push around a few minor details in the universe, step on a butterfly, whatever. Now Apocalypse is born as a normal human and Quentin is much less of a jerk. Fight’s over before it even started. Should *not* have messed with the Phoenix.”

“No, what? No!” Jon sputtered.

“Why are you being like this?” Brock asked me.

“I thought the point of the game was to win,” I replied. But I could see the point of the game, today at least, was for them to win. They didn’t think they could lose to me and Aisha. And somehow this was worse than losing to me alone.

“Show me to the brats?” Aisha asked and I pointed to Pops’ grille. She got up and offered me her hand. I let her pull me up because of how her fingers tightened around mine.

As we walked over, Wolvee heeling next to me, I said, “That’s only the third time I’ve won against Jon. You’re amazing.”

“Phoenix is pretty much always the answer,” she said, grinning. “Are you usually Wolverine?”

“In the fights, yeah. But by myself, Beast. He’s super smart but he’s also funny, goofy, especially in the earlier stuff. Are you always Jean?”

“Yep. You know, people underestimate Beast,” Aisha said. “Maybe ’cause he doesn’t look like they think a genius should.”

I introduced Aisha to Pops and we got two brats, lightly charred on one side, perfection. We heaped them with relish, mustard and ketchup. Aisha bit into hers and widened her eyes.

“Oh this is good. It’s like a hotdog that got bitten by a radioactive spice truck.”

“You were going to let me feed you something bad?”

She shrugged and smirked, all cute. I just dug into my brat, radiating inside because she trusted me enough to take my recommendation.

Jon and Brock pounced on us before we even got back to the blanket, coming around either side of the cooler as we got drinks.

“If you didn’t have the Phoenix, we’d totally win,” Jon said to Aisha.

“Yeah, you’re not shit without that,” Brock added. “So we win. We just wait for a time when you don’t have it.”

“You know Jean can call the Phoenix, right?” Aisha said. “I mean, that’s literally how she got it in the first place. She used her powers to draw it to her and save her own life. So, no. You still lose.”

Brock faced me, his cheeks ruddy with anger. “Have fun cleaning up by yourself. Your new pal’s not going to win a lot of friends around here with that attitude.” He stomped off toward the house and Jon headed back to the blanket.

"I'm sorry, my brother's a pretty bad loser," I told Aisha.

"Yeah." From her tone, she didn't buy that. "Or the obvious reason."

She'd turned away from me, as if she could see through my house to hers. In this one day, she'd had to deal with the mean neighbor calling her a bitch, Brock and Jon being hyper-aggressive and me clueless about all that.

It took almost a year for me to see how much of the time when Aisha held her ground with a white person, even with as small and smart and funny as she was, they'd come back at her hard. I didn't understand how in my town, and not only mine, blackness acted as a lightning rod for white people's anger.

Took me a lot longer to figure out what to do about it.

CHAPTER TWO

August 2016

Flash forward one year of as many hours and minutes as possible with Aisha. School mornings, I'd run over to her house so we could walk to the bus together. Summer mornings we walked the dogs. Aisha lit up telling stories. I made up questions so she'd keep talking. Her bright, melodic voice had a depth that made me feel I could wrap myself up in her words.

Now in two weeks, we'd start ninth grade and I'd been worrying that she'd find someone else she wanted to spend her time with. I had massive questions about how people dated, about my body and what to do with it. But I knew one thing: I wanted Aisha to be my girlfriend.

Being from L.A., she'd been out about liking girls since she was eleven. She'd even had a girlfriend for part of seventh grade. She insisted everyone from California wasn't automatically cool and that homophobia was still a huge problem in the black community, but looking at her family, I'd never have known. Aisha had spent a month this summer in California with her lesbian aunts—her mom's sister and her partner—and I'd missed

her so much and envied her. I wished for more queer and trans people in my family. Or, like, any.

I decided that the perfect day to ask Aisha to be my girlfriend would be the anniversary of the day we'd met. That morning, I texted her to see when she wanted to walk the dogs. We walked them in the morning all summer because it was cooler for Wolvie and then they weren't jumpy all day.

She texted back: *Can we walk the dogs to downtown? I need coconut water and candy?*

Coconut water?

Dad.

Her dad had hooked us on coconut water with much more success than his smoothies. More than half the time his smoothies came out like murky swamp water. Aisha kept telling him to stop putting kale in them, but he wouldn't listen.

Aisha didn't wake up as early as I did, especially in the summer when she didn't have to, so by the time she was up, dressed and eating breakfast, it was nine. Wolvie and I went across the alley and hung out in the back yard, texting Aisha to let Pickles out.

Pickles chased Wolvie around their backyard tree. When they'd run each other out a bit, I put them on their leashes and went inside to see if Aisha was done with breakfast.

Aisha's mom sat at the kitchen table reading *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Jackson*, looking like a taller, heavier version of Aisha without the grin. She had a thoughtful face and her hair was in two French braids close to the sides her head, tucked in at the back. That gave her a level of seriousness that couldn't be cracked, even by her faded blue T-shirt saying: "Books, because reality is overrated."

"Are you excited for ninth grade to start?" she asked.

Her question reminded me that I had to ask Aisha out soon, like today, and I got sweaty despite the air conditioning.

"I like that we're the oldest students," I told her. "But you know I'm still going to study, like, two-thirds of how much Aisha does."

She chuckled. “Who knows, this year it might be three-quarters.”

Aisha ran down the stairs and stopped at the bottom to put on the blue sneakers that went with most of her sundresses. She took Pickles’ leash and went out the front door, me and Wolvie following.

The whole walk there, I tried to figure out the best way to ask. I got her talking about whether sorcery or telepathy was stronger in the Marvel comic book universe, hoping that would give me cover to figure it out. “Do you want to go out?” seemed too blunt. “We’re really good friends, maybe we should date,” sounded more tentative than I felt. I’d about settled on, “Do you want to be my girlfriend?” when I got pulled in to her argument. As with most of our comic book debates, it ended at, “It depends on whether large-scale telepathy can disrupt sorcerous artifacts; we need more research!”

We reached the CVS before I was ready. Anyway, it would be better if we had drinks and chocolate—better yet if we went to the ice cream place after CVS and I could ask her there. I stayed outside with the dogs while Aisha went in to get our candy and coconut water. I watched people go in: a guy older than Pops, bent forward in the shoulders; a girl about my age but way taller; Mrs. Branch from the local library who sometimes ordered graphic novels for us. I said hi to her.

And I watched people come out: two kids, maybe ten, jostling each other and admiring their handfuls of candy bars; a woman with dirty blond hair, wearing cool cargo pants who walked off down the street.

A police car pulled up. Last year I’d have smiled or waved at them. Now I got a thick dread in the center of my chest.

Six weeks ago, in early July, a Saint Paul cop had fatally shot a black man driving home with his girlfriend. Aisha had sent me the link to the news story the day after it happened. I’d scanned the headline fast, registering the words “black man” and “police shooting” and then—a dizzy, sick vortex inside me—“Falcon Heights.” I’d been there. That was near the Minnesota State

Fairgrounds. It was less than thirty miles from where we lived, where Aisha lived.

I'd scanned down the article fast. Philando Castile was driving home with his girlfriend and her kid. The police had pulled him over for a broken taillight. He was doing what they said. He had a gun that he was registered to carry and he told them that. When he reached for his license, the cop started shooting. His girlfriend took video of it as she was praying that he wasn't dying, but he was. He died at the hospital.

I'd searched for the video, but Facebook had already taken it down, so I found a transcript. When I got to his girlfriend saying, "Please don't tell me my boyfriend just went like that," tears dripped down my face.

I'd thought stuff like that only happened on the coasts, maybe in the South, for sure not in Minnesota. We had to be careful, sure, but Aisha was supposed to be safe here.

I'd stared at a photo of Philando for a long time. He had a sweet smile and big nerd glasses. His skin wasn't any darker than Aisha's.

She wasn't safe here.

Everyone who'd gone into or come out of the drugstore was white. The cops were white. One got out of the car and took three steps toward the drugstore, then paused, waiting for his partner.

I got my phone out and texted Aisha: *Where are you!!*

Checking out now, she wrote back.

The air was nearly eighty, Wolvie's tongue lolling out from the walk over, but I went freezing cold. I tied Wolvie and Pickle's leashes to the bike rack in front of the store, but to be safe, I put Wolvie in a down-stay. Then I sprinted into the drugstore ahead of the cops. What could I do? All I knew was to put my body between Aisha and them.

She stood at the counter with a small mountain of candy and four bottles of coconut water, because we had to get two for her dad. Her headband matched the purple in her purple and white sundress and the laces of her blue sneakers. She was basically the cutest human on the planet; my paranoia couldn't be real.

Her gaze flicked to me, forehead wrinkling with confusion, and then seeing past me, her eyes went wide. I watched her body freeze like a deer on the highway in front of a semi's headlights.

One cop was the size of Pops, not quite six feet, bulky in his uniform. The other was taller and thinner, and he looked so big with that massive belt and his gun.

"We got a call about a woman shoplifting," the tall cop said.

"My manager asked me to call," the cashier told him. "Should I get her?"

I couldn't remember ever being this scared, not this shock of immediate terror. I knew about being scared of the kids at elementary school, being scared of my mom the years after dad left, but those were slow fears over days. This was being hit in the gut by ten pounds of ice.

I'd never felt like this around cops. Our great-grandfather had been a police officer and the whole family had a deep respect bordering on awe.

But I hadn't been around cops since I'd met Aisha.

I forced words out of my mouth. "I saw someone suspicious," I said. "I was outside with my dogs. Dishwater blond with a fake tan. Gray cargo pants with big pockets." I looked at the cashier, "Right?"

"Uh, I don't know, another employee heard someone putting things into a bag or, I guess, maybe, pockets."

"Miss," the shorter cop said to Aisha. "Can we check your bag?"

She nodded slowly. Her voice quavering, she said, "I'm going to put it on the counter and take a step back from it, okay?"

"That'd be fine."

She moved like underwater, slow motion horror movie, pulling the strap over her head. The buckle caught her headband and pulled it loose. It fell to the floor and she didn't reach for it. She put her bag on the counter and stepped back.

I fumbled my phone out of my pocket and opened the camera app. I moved to where I could have Aisha and both cops in the frame and started recording even though I was shaking so hard the video wasn't going to come out well.

“Put that away,” the shorter cop told me and I felt like I was going to pee myself, but I shook my head at him. He sighed and rolled his eyes at me.

The tall one shrugged and opened Aisha’s bag. It wasn’t big, just enough for her wallet, phone, keys and a few necessities. He pawed through it, flinching when he came across a tampon and dropping that on the counter like it was a mouse.

Mrs. Branch had come to the end of an aisle and stood there, staring at all of us, staring at the cop dropping that tampon like it had bit him. I heard the sharp rustle of someone putting a hand on a chip bag and pulling it back fast. I knew the tall girl was behind me, watching. Probably the other employee had come up too and the manager. Everybody in the store except Aisha was white.

The old guy stood behind Aisha in line and he’d started clicking his tongue, like “shame, shame, shame.”

The tall cop opened Aisha’s wallet and pulled out her school ID, looked from it to her and back.

“We’re fourteen,” I said. “We’re both fourteen.”

The guy’s tongue clicking got louder, a metronome of recrimination. Like being kids made it worse, like here we were, criminals already, when we hadn’t done anything. But not “we,” just Aisha.

“Mrs. Branch knows us.” I jerked my chin in her direction. “She sees us at the library all the time. We didn’t take anything. We wouldn’t.”

I looked to Mrs. Branch for help and she took a step back. She stepped away from us, even though she’d seen us at least twice a week all summer. Even though she ordered books for us and talked about what we’d read. Now she turned her face away and down, lips pressed together. Disapproving, not of these cops, not of their pristine authority, but of us.

The tall cop looked Aisha up and down in the sundress. There wasn’t any place she could’ve hidden more than a pack of gum.

“You can go,” that cop said, pushing her bag toward her.

Aisha took it by reflex. Hands shaking, she got her phone and keys back inside it. She stared at the candy on the counter like it was a puzzle.

"Hey," I said softly. "The dogs are outside alone. Please, check on them?"

"Yeah."

She went out through the door. I put my phone in my pocket, stepped to the counter, and picked up the errant tampon and the twenty she'd gotten out to pay for the candy. I didn't touch the candy. I shoved the cash and tampon into my pocket, bent down and got Aisha's hairband. We'd buy our snacks somewhere else from now on.

"You said you saw someone leaving?" the tall cop asked me.

"Yeah I did, but you went through my friend's bag anyway, why?"

"Procedure. Can you describe the person you saw?"

I spun on my heel and confirmed that the lanky white girl was hiding behind the end of the chip aisle. "Why didn't you check *her* bag?"

"Um, could you move?" the cashier asked, pointing at the old guy now behind me.

He'd stopped clicking his tongue now that Aisha was outside, and had moved on to sighs of increasing volume. I leaned back against the counter and crossed my arms.

"Who did you see?" the cop asked.

"A *white* woman. Five-seven, closer to my mom's age, blond-brown hair, skinny, wearing tan cargo pants. The pockets looked really full. She had her head down but looking around fast, arms close to her body, defensive."

"You noticed all that?" the cop asked, doubtful, like I was making up stuff to protect Aisha.

I raised my chin, pulled my shoulders back. "I train dogs. I see what people's bodies are saying." Like I'd seen the eight adults here stand around Aisha in a circle of blame, seen how their eyes and hands and shoulders said how easy it would be for them to hurt her or turn away while someone else did.

“Did you recognize this woman?” the cop asked.

“No. Haven’t seen her around here before. Is that all?”

He nodded and I fled through the double doors into the hot air. My shirt was soaked with sweat despite the air conditioning of the store.

Aisha stood near the corner, holding Wolve and Pickle’s leashes, staring into the distance. Wolve had backed into her legs, facing the police car, a ridge of fur standing up on her back. She had one ear flat to her head, one to the side, listening for danger because she could feel how upset Aisha was.

Aisha held the leashes out to me and, as soon as I took them, walked across the street, away from the drugstore. I ran to catch up and offered my hand. She took it and didn’t let go.

We walked along the downtown storefronts. Past the fancy salon where mom always wanted me to get my hair done—Aisha’s mom drove herself and Aisha into Saint Paul to get theirs done—past the Perkins and the German place and the Chinese place, past the butcher shop where Pops got his brats. We crossed a street and walked by the building for sale that used to be a local bank, its parking lot currently the site for Thursdays’ farmer’s markets, and then the big, new vape store.

I’d keep going as long as Aisha wanted, but she stopped in front of the ice cream store across from the Great Clips where I got my hair cut.

“Chocolate chip and pistachio,” she said, her voice catching but making it through the words.

“Okay, you stay with the dogs and I’ll get us pints?”

She nodded.

I got in and out with ice cream in under a minute. On the walk home, she took my hand again.

I said, “I’m sorry. I was so scared, you...?”

She nodded, took in a long breath and let it out. “We’re okay.”

“Yeah. We’re better than okay.”

But she didn’t let go of my hand.

At her house, her mom was still reading at the kitchen table. It felt like we’d been gone for days, but the clock told me we’d left fifty-two minutes ago.

"It's too early for—" Her mom stopped mid-sentence and focused on Aisha's face. "What happened?"

"We're okay," she said. "Cops checked my bag because someone reported a shoplifter. I didn't move. I kept my hands where they could see. I did what you said. And we're okay."

Her mom surged up and opened her arms. Aisha folded herself against her mom's body. I put the ice cream in the freezer, then stood with my hand on the refrigerator handle because we hadn't gotten the coconut water and I wanted to cry. When I turned around, Aisha's mom held a hand out to me and drew me into the hug.

She said, "I'm so proud of both of you."

Nobody had been arrested or shot, but that wasn't the only way to do harm to a person. How long would it be before Aisha went back to the library? Would she ever? From now on, every time she saw Mrs. Branch she'd remember cops with their gun belts and all those accusing eyes on her. She'd hear that awful man behind her clicking his tongue, shaming her.

Every time I saw Mrs. Branch, I'd remember that too.

I knew what to do for cops: get badge numbers, take video, call an adult. But they weren't the whole problem, not even most of it. What could I do about everyone else? How could I fight something that vast and invisible and embedded in the brains of people around me? People I'd grown up with and liked and needed on my and Aisha's side?