



# 1

## RODNEY

“Abdi Warsame, Abdi Ali,” Marquese says in a monotone. “Abdi Omar, Abdi Aynte, Abdi—”

“You’re losing it. Whatcha doing?” Rodney asks as he, Marquese, and Bryant enter the cafeteria.

“I’m countin’ Somalis,” Marquese says, then points across the crowded room at Minneapolis’s Northeast High. Bryant, a former football teammate of Rodney’s, snorts like a pig with laughter. Rodney puts in his

earbuds to drown out Marquese's nonstop blathering and the roar of a room housing twice its hundred-student capacity. After the silence of too many nights in a CIU cell, the packed cafeteria seems louder than the school's football games. No matter, Rodney has eyes for only two: his ex, Aaliyah, and her new boy, Antonio. She dumped Rodney by letter when he was doing time at County Home School.

"Bro, that's racist," Rodney snaps at Marquese. "I mean, given some of the—"

"Listen Rod, it ain't like it was before you went inside." Marquese speaks to Rodney but never takes his eyes off of the assembly of tall, thin, and neatly dressed Somali teen boys. Like most Minneapolis schools, Northeast's diversity isn't about black and white but about kids of many different colors. The only colors lacking at Northeast are green and gold—the colors of money.

"The Somalis are taking over our turf," Marquese continues.

Rodney says nothing. Like Marquese, Rodney spent many an hour standing on a

street corner, sometimes making more in a week than his mom did in a month. But that was before his six month placement at the CHS (County Home School) spent STAMPing (Short Term Adolescent Male Program) and doing CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), which at the start seemed like real BS. A lot of letters, but it turned out OK.

"Somebody's gotta take 'em down before we lose all our business. Get me, Rodney?" Marquese asks.

"It ain't gonna be me," Rodney answers as they get in line for food. Rodney's never been into hating for the sake of hating. He cares about his mom and his friends, but mostly about getting Aaliyah back. Hating wastes his time. "I got other stuff to do."

"Not playing football," Bryant says, before stuffing his mouth with fries covered with bacon and cheese. Bryant wears a Northeast High letter jacket like the one Rodney used to wear.

"I've got to study." Rodney slams his heavy book bag off Bryant's shoulder.

“You ain’t wearing the purple and white of the team and—” Bryant starts.

Marquese cuts him off. “Or ATK colors. Rodney, you ain’t even black, you acting white.”

Rodney feels his face flush with the toxic combination of humiliation and irritation. Beneath his dark black skin, his cheeks grow red. “I thought you guys were my friends. I thought you—”

Then it happens. In the center of the cafeteria, the two rival groups smash together like atoms in the supercollider Rodney hopes to study in college. It starts with Devonte and his crew jawing loudly with Farhan and his crew: the descendants of slaves versus the offspring of Somali war refugees.

Rodney freezes as a roar drowns the room like a tidal wave. He won’t fight. He watches first the talking, then the yelling, and then the shoving. Next comes food flying, and then comes fists being thrown. A normal loud lunch hour turns to a manic war zone in minutes.

*Trouble*, Rodney thinks, *follows me like a rumor*.

Somali boys rage against black boys. Kids

from the other groups—Latinos and whites and some of the girls who aren’t in the fight—watch from the sidelines. Some laugh, some take cover behind tables, some run for the exit.

Teachers run for help, for safety, for their lives. The security guards near the door are yelling into their walkie-talkies and motioning to each other.

Food and punches fly, and cafeteria knives are wielded like weapons.

Marquese picks up Bryant’s tray filled with bacon-covered fries and hurls them in the direction of a group of charging Somali young men. “Eat pork!” Marquese yells.

In response, one of the Somali students, a thin but hard-looking boy, hurls a saltshaker at Marquese.

Marquese ducks, and the saltshaker sails past. Rodney hits the floor. Behind him, he hears a clank and then a yelp, like someone who’s been kicked. He turns and sees a Somali girl in a long grayish dress but with one of those white head scarves. She’s lying on the filthy floor. Another Somali girl crawls to the

girl's aid. From the corner of his eye, Rodney sees the fight coming toward the Somali girls. Teachers drop back; gang girls surge forward.

A group of four black girls starts toward the two Somali girls, who seek shelter under a table on the dirty cafeteria floor. Rodney hears their muffled crying. Turning his back to the mob, Rodney bends down. "Are you okay?" he asks the wounded girl. That girl says nothing, while the other, wearing broken glasses and a hearing aid, stares lightning bolts at him. "Is she okay?" Rodney asks the girl with glasses.

"Let's kick their—" a girl starts to yell, but she's cut off by a roar of crowd voices. Rodney looks at the girl on the floor and then up at the charging crowd. He can see that one of girls in the crowd, well under five feet tall, displays a knife.

"Back off!" Rodney yells as he positions himself between the crowd and the girl. Her white scarf is soiled with drops of blood.

"Don't mess with them or me. Hear me?"

The girls turn away, not so much afraid as irritated, Rodney thinks. They start toward

another group of Somali girls. Chairs, books, and anything else not nailed down sail across the room like a zero-gravity space chamber. Rodney sees Farhan and Devonte in a UFC-style brawl on the top of a table. One of the teachers trips an alarm, which only adds to the panic in the room.

"The police have been called!" a voice booms over a loudspeaker, but everybody seems unmoved by words, only motivated by actions. It's hard to tell which kids started the fight, because the entire cafeteria seems in motion. Everyday cafeteria items fly through the air or are brandished as assault weapons.

"Are you okay?" Rodney yells to the Somali girl on the floor holding her head. "Let me see." She takes off the scarf, and Rodney sees the big cut on her forehead from where the saltshaker smashed into her flawless face.

The girl nods and blinks her soft brown eyes, the corners of her mouth forming a hurt smile.

"You need to move! Run to the door!" Rodney tells her. "Can you move?"

The girl tries to say something but then clutches her forehead and passes out, face first on the floor. With debris flying over him, Rodney turns the girl to face him. Amid the chaos of the cafeteria and beneath the ruckus of the riot, Rodney grows light-headed and feels his heart race.

He's felt this twice before: once in ninth grade when he got shot, and again in tenth grade when he fell in love with Aaliyah. Rodney pulls the girl's head closer to him and the feeling grows deeper. Stronger.

The lights of the cafeteria turn off and on, but Rodney can see glowing spots like a thousand fireflies from cell phones videoing the melee. Rodney covers his face; his PO won't like this.

"You're safe with me," Rodney tells the unconscious girl. In the cafeteria, the October armageddon continues, but holding the wounded young Somali girl in his arms, Rodney has never felt safer. Stronger. Better.

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