



**KING
AND
THE
DRAGON
FLIES**

KACEN CALLENDER

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CHAPTER

1

The dragonflies live down by the bayou, but there's no way to know which one's my brother. I've never seen so many dragonflies around this time of the year. There are hundreds, maybe even thousands, just sitting on tree branches and rocks, baking in the sun, flitting over the brown water that seeps up from the dirt, zipping across the sky, showing off their ghostlike wings. Happy in their own dragonfly paradise.

I want to ask Khalid—I want to ask him, “Why did you choose a dragonfly? Why not something cooler, like a lion or a panther or a wolf?” And if he were still in the body that's now buried in the ground over in the Richardson cemetery, he might hit me upside the head with his crooked grin and say, “Let me alone. I can

choose to be whatever I want.” And I wouldn’t be able to argue, because I know he’d be exactly right about that.

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I like to look for my brother in the afternoon by the bayou, on the long and hot and sweaty walk back from school, down the hard dirt road that weaves between the thorny bushes with their big fluffy leaves, and through the trees with their moss and vines, cicadas making their noise and birds whistling their tunes. Those trees always seem to be watching. Like they’ve got a secret to tell me, if only I’d stop for a second and wait and listen. Or it could be the ghosts. Just as my mom says: “Plenty of ghosts here in Louisiana watching your every move, so you best mind yourself.”

I’m doing exactly that—just minding myself, kicking away some stones whenever they’re in my path, thinking on my brother and dragonflies and the world and the universe, because it can be funny sometimes, thinking about how small we are no matter what body we’re in—when there’s a crunching behind me. I turn and look to see a rusting white pickup coming, kicking

up dust behind it, so I step to the side of the road and onto the browning grass, expecting it to zoom by, but the pickup slows down until it stops right beside me. There're a few white boys inside, but my heart drops into my stomach when I see the driver. Mikey Sanders.

He was in my brother's class. He hated my brother. My brother hated him. But most people do, on account of the fact that Mikey Sanders helped kill a man. No one says it because of who his father is—no one will admit in the courtroom that the older Sanders boy helped three other murderers beat a Black man to death and then drag him all around the bayou. But everyone knows it was Mikey Sanders's white pickup truck that did the dragging. Same truck he's driving now, right here in front of me.

He's got a sunburn across his face and tiny blue eyes and pale hair, so pale it might as well be white, too. He's smoking a cigarette even though I know he isn't yet eighteen, and he wears a collared shirt like he's just come back from church.

My brother and Mikey got into fights—and I mean real throw-'em-down fistfights. My brother said Mikey's

a racist, that Mikey called him the N-word and made monkey noises and would leave bananas on his desk. Even tied up a T-shirt like a noose and put it in my brother's gym locker. It's not surprising, I guess, given Mikey Sanders is the grandson of Gareth Sanders, who was a member of the white sheet-wearing KKK. And now Mikey Sanders is here, looking at me like he's thinking of dragging me from the back of his pickup truck, too.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment. Just looks me up and down, his truck's engine still rumbling and shaking, almost as much as I'm trembling on my feet. His friends in the passenger seat and the back seat are as silent as stones.

Mikey flicks his cigarette to the ground and sucks on his teeth. I flinch, and I know how I must look to him. I look scared—like I'm about to wet my pants. I don't care, because that's exactly what I am: as scared as the day I was born and pushed out wailing into this world. I was scared to be alive then, and I'm scared I'm going to die now.

Mikey finally speaks. "Sorry about your brother," he says.

I don't answer him. I don't know if he's serious, if he's joking, or if he's just being plain mean.

He shrugs, like he can hear all my questions and he doesn't know any of the answers himself. "What're you doing out here?" he says, eyes scanning the trees all around me.

I still don't say a single word. Is he trying to figure out if I'm on this road by myself? Trying to see if he can get away with killing me, too?

He looks my way again, still sucking his teeth. Must be a piece of food stuck way in there. "We're headed into town." He rubs his nose. "Want to hop in the back?"

Something possesses me and I'm able to move. I shake my head once, hard and fast.

Mikey shifts in his seat. "You know, your brother—" I'm not sure what he's going to say, and maybe he isn't so sure either, because he stops himself right there. "See you around."

And he peels off, turning back onto the road and racing out of sight, leaving a cloud of dust behind him. I stand right where I am, taking one long shaky breath, and wait until my heart slows down. What would my

dad say if he saw me as scared as this? What would my brother say?

I know what my brother would say. “No way you can live your life as a coward. If you’re always too busy hiding, then you’re not really living, are you?”

I take in another long breath and keep on walking.

*

The dirt road becomes rocky with gravel and then becomes paved, and I’m right where I’m supposed to be, walking by my neighborhood’s collection of silver trailers and one-story paneled houses that have windows with the blinds and curtains closed, rusting cars and trucks shimmering under the sun and collecting all the light in the world and bouncing it right into my eyes. It’s hot. It’s been a particularly hot past few months here in Louisiana, but today it feels like the devil came up out of his grave. I’m sweating from every pore as I walk, my socks squishy and my shirt sticking to my back. My bag is empty, but it feels like a ton of stones weighing down my shoulders.

My mom and dad’s house is at the end of a long road, farther away from everyone else, with walls of

chipping white paint and a front yard of dead yellow grass. I stomp up the steps and grab my key from my backpack. It used to be Khalid's key. It's copper, like a faded penny. Khalid's hands were bigger than mine as they reached into his bag and pulled out the key after our walk home from school under the same sky, same heat, same everything as before, except for the fact that Khalid is now gone. He'd unlock the door, and the two of us would fall into the shade, scrambling over each other to get to the TV remote first. Khalid almost always won our race just to show he could, but then most times he'd let me watch whatever I wanted anyway.

Dim light swirls in through the windows and the gauzy curtains. The living room is all wood—wood-paneled walls, wood-paneled floors—and furniture that's too big for the space, with plastic covering my dad's favorite sitting chair. My mom's been saying we need to redecorate for years, and I think she might've done it, too, but now these days she mostly sits and stares, hand on her chin—until she snaps out of it and looks up with this smile. My mom's smile drives me up the wall

sometimes. I know it's fake. She knows it's fake. So why does she always pretend to smile?

My mom's still at work at the post office, and my dad's still at work at the construction site, so I'm alone now, trying not to remember the way Khalid would be stretched out on the couch, falling asleep with his phone in his hand. The TV is on to some afternoon rerun of an anime show, and I'm just sitting on the couch where Khalid used to sit, staring and blinking and thinking. What was Mikey Sanders going to say about my brother?

Does Mikey know my brother's a dragonfly?

It happened at the funeral. We were in the front row of the overheated church. Someone was crying behind me. Most were swatting their programs to push away the heat. My dad used to tell me all the time that boys don't cry, but sitting there that day, his face was wet, salted water dripping from his eyes, off his nose and chin, and he didn't bother wiping his face, didn't bother trying to hide it. I didn't even know so much water could be inside a person—like he was hiding an entire ocean beneath his skin.