



KING AND THE DRAGON FLIES

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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.

My mom's hands were clenched, hard, around a crumpled-up cut tissue in her lap, and she was staring without blinking, her eyes wide—staring right at where my brother's old body was lying in his casket. I know most folks like to say a dead person looks like they're sleeping, but I didn't think so. I know what my brother looked like when he was asleep. He was always dreaming. Always smirking, or frowning at something I couldn't see, outright laughing before he mumbled and turned over, some nights even speaking to me. We shared the same bed in our cramped little room, and sometimes I'd kick him just so that he'd shut up and let me sleep, too, but other times I'd sit and curl my knees to my chest and listen. He'd mostly say things that made no sense, or speak so low I couldn't hear what he was telling me—but sometimes he'd whisper secrets about the universe. It was almost like he was given a special ticket to see a magic world in his dreams, even if he couldn't remember anything when he woke up.

That boy lying there in that casket wasn't asleep. He wasn't even my brother. He was like a snake's second skin, shed off and forgotten and empty on the ground. I was

mad that day. Why would we sit here crying over some forgotten skin? It's like mourning a moth's cocoon. If Khalid had seen us there crying over that old body of his, what would he have done?

My brother could slip into a whole other universe in his sleep. *We're all made of light.*

That's all I could think about, when just as the choir began to sing, a dragonfly flew in through a window—and I know those wings must've been going a mile a minute, but it was like they slowed down somehow, those crystal patterns shimmering and shining. The dragonfly's little green body and big eyes floated right past me and landed on the edge of the casket.

I'd sit up in our bed all night sometimes, listening to my brother as he told me about the other worlds he could see.

There's a purple sky, King. There are mushrooms as tall as trees. I have dragonfly wings.

*

I must've fallen asleep on the couch, because next thing I know, my dad's heaving a sigh as he bends over me,

his chain dangling against my cheek, and I can smell the salt and sweat of a hard day of work as he shakes my arm.

“What’d I tell you about falling asleep and leaving the TV on, huh?” His voice is soft, so I know he isn’t mad.

“Sorry, sir.” I sit up. The TV’s screen is already black, the living room quiet. This place is as silent and still as a graveyard sometimes.

My dad stands over me for a second, letting his eyes skim my face. I don’t know what he’s thinking, but I could make a couple of guesses: He thinks I’m growing up fast. He’s worried he’s going to lose me, too. He thinks I look like my brother. That’s what I think to myself every time I see my reflection. My face is suddenly shifting, morphing, changing so fast that sometimes I look in the mirror and scare myself because I think there’s a little ghost boy in my room, a ghost of who my brother used to be. Curling black hair and brown eyes and brown skin, the kind that’s “got a pinching of the Creole in it,” as my mom likes to say.

My dad leaves me sitting on the couch without another word, his bedroom door shutting down the hall.

He broke apart the day my brother died—a little of his heart over here, a little of his mind over there, a little of his soul lost somewhere, don't know if that'll ever be found again—and he's been slowly picking up the pieces . . . If he knew the truth—if he knew my brother isn't really gone—I bet he'd feel better about it all.

But I can't tell him. I can't tell him my brother's become a dragonfly, because it's what he told me in my sleep. He came to me like he always does, at least once a night—came to me and said that secrets are best kept hidden, because sometimes people aren't ready to hear the truth. *And that's okay, King, he said, because you don't need other people to know the truth also. Just as long as you got that truth in you.*