

Wednesday, October 1
5:05 a.m.

I pulled off Western Avenue and into the empty parking lot of Great Redeemer Church of God in Christ.

The Dodge Neon was parked in the alley, near the garbage bins, almost invisible in the fog. The car's windows were white with condensation—it had been sitting there all night.

I parked in a space a few feet away and waited to meet “T.H.”

No one exited the Neon.

Western Avenue . . . This South Los Angeles street was always mentioned in the papers and on the six o'clock news.

Four killed on Western in a gang-related shooting.

Seventy-six-year-old grandmother raped in her home off Western.

And yet here I was.

I didn't rush to leave my car—I barely hit five feet four and have the muscle mass of a Rice Krispies Treat. Besides, my car had a robust heater, seat warmers, satellite radio, and an SOS satellite system in the event of car trouble. Why leave all that, especially with all the fog and all those crime stats—*seventeen rapes and six murders in the last five months.*

Maybe T.H. left to get coffee.

I plucked my iPhone from the cup holder and sent T.H. a text message. *I'm here now. Parked across from you.* I hit Send but the bar above the message stalled.

Ah.

No reception. A dead zone.

At 5:15, I opened my car door.

The rank odor of urine assaulted me. That and the stench of spilled beer and sour-sweet rotting meat.

I threw a few nervous glances up and down the alley. Cold, dead air pushed me from all sides. *Nothing will happen to me. I'm at a church. I'm protected by angels with swords and . . .*

Rustling sounds, and buzzing, lots of buzzing, came from the Dumpsters just ten yards away from me. To my left and a block down, mechanical squeaking, like a shopping cart wheel that needed oil, pierced the air.

Something brushed against my ankle.

I yelped, hopped, and scanned the wet asphalt with wide eyes.

There it is!

A rat the size of a rabbit waddled past me and headed to the garbage bins.

The mechanical squeaking sounded closer than before. A bright white light flashed—I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Wasn't much. Small. Quick.

I peered in that direction but saw nothing.

Just my imagination.

I turned back to the Neon.

No one had left the car.

I waved in its direction to let T.H. know that I was Syeeda McKay, the writer who had answered the text message and had driven in the dark to this neighborhood to meet someone I didn't know.

The Neon's door didn't open.

I muttered "Crap," and waited with my keys held between my knuckles.

Once upon a time, my father had been a bus driver, and his route had been up and down Western, passing car washes, elementary schools, chicken joints, Baptist churches, Laundromats, motels, motor inns, pawn shops, Koreatown, Little Armenia. Over the course of his thirty-year career, he had been jumped and shot at countless times. He had broken up fights, rescued abandoned babies, and prevented late-night rapes, all of which happened on his bus. The violence didn't kill my father. The cigarettes did.

I glanced at the phone's clock—5:25—then mumbled, "This is crazy." I stomped over to the Neon and into a cloud of flies, the source of that crazy-loud buzzing. I tried swatting them away. Too many.

"Hey!" I shouted at the driver's-side window. "You in there?" I swiped the glass with my jacket sleeve.

Empty seat. No T.H.

Are you kidding me? I've been waiting out here since—

I glanced over the top of the car, to the giant Dumpsters filled with trash. My gaze dropped to the wet asphalt.

An ocean of rats swarmed over a pair of brown legs. A woman's legs.

I quickstepped around the Neon, heart in my throat, and darted to the woman on the ground. "Hey! *Hey!*" A wave of nausea washed over me as I kept swatting at those flies. The rats bumped and crawled over my shoes, skittered and scratched against my bare ankles. I screamed in my head, and held my breath to block those rotting alley smells. Tried to avoid the puddle of goopy liquid oozing toward the toes of my sneakers, knowing that it was blood. Her blood.

A trash bag had been dumped on top of the woman.

I pulled it off.

Her face was shattered. One glassy dead eye stared at the dark sky. The second eye . . . Where was the second eye?

God help me.