

Lyra winced as she pressed the frozen bag of shrimp against her left eye—hard to tell which stung more, the cold or the bruise. A dusty fan hummed behind her, blowing hot air as it oscillated by. Each time it passed her, some of her choppy hair blew in front of her face and clung to the frozen shrimp bag, while others stuck to the beads of sweat dripping down her neck. She leaned forward, but in doing so, caused the floorboards to groan under her cleats and her softball bat to fall.

As the aluminum bat clattered on the floor, Lyra held her breath and shut her eyes tight, afraid to move. A sharp and sweet voice, like a knife dipped in honey, bounced off the crooked walls.

“Child, you betta not be thawing my shrimp.”

“I’m not,” Lyra shouted back.

“And you betta not be lying to Pearline Boudreaux in her own po’boy shop, ya hear?”

Pearline rounded the corner with the calm menace of a cat, leaning against the doorway with her arms crossed. Lyra tilted back in the chair and balanced the frozen shrimp bag across both her shut eyes. Maybe if she closed her eyes, Pearline would leave her alone. The bag flew off her face. Lyra opened her eyes and saw Pearline had snatched it and was already at the freezer. Pearline tossed the frozen shrimp bag she reclaimed inside and exchanged it for a bag full of frozen gumbo blocks instead.

“Here, gon need to thaw this for supper.”

Pearline tossed the gumbo blocks to Lyra, who caught them without a beat. Lyra gently lowered the gumbo on her bruise, but still winced anyway. Pearline leaned against the freezer door after she closed it. She cocked her eyebrow and nodded toward Lyra’s face.

“*That* have something to do with the three girls I had to scare off outside?”

“Was Gertrude’s lip busted?” Lyra asked with a smirk.

“Not busted enough,” Pearline scoffed. “Cher, I thought I taught you to hit harder than that.”

“I was outnumbered,” Lyra groaned. Pearline’s face remained unchanged and unamused.

“I also taught you how to walk away from a fight. Especially when you’re outnumbered, but you just can’t stop swinging, can you?”

Lyra let out a sigh. “Can I just stay here for a bit? I’ll even do the dishes.”

“Oh, baby,” Pearlline said. Her harsh exterior finally seemed to melt. She walked over to Lyra and knelt in front of her, resting her hand on Lyra’s knee. “You can’t hide out here forever.”

“I just don’t want Ba to see me with...” Lyra waved the gumbo bag in a circle around her face. “...all this.”

Pearline rose to her feet and headed to the front of the store. She peeked at some customers to make sure they were fine before sauntering behind the counter. She handed a wrapped po’boy to Lyra.

“And here I thought you were staying to steal some of my gumbo.”

As Lyra put the sandwich in her bag, she could smell the fried catfish inside it. She almost drooled.

“Me? Steal your gumbo? I would never.” Lyra said. She put her bat in her backpack after the po’boy, gathered her things, and plopped herself down at the counter across from Pearlline. “Besides, you know Ba’s probably cooking up a storm at home.”

Pearline rested her chin on her hand and observed Lyra’s bruise.

“Then you best not keep her waitin’, ya hear?” Pearlline said. “Mm mm mm, what I would do for some of your grandma’s dumplings.”

“I can bring you some tomorrow if you’d like.”

“Plan on getting your ass beat again tomorrow?” Pearlline laughed. “I’ll get you a proper ice pack, and you can keep it. Consider it a birthday gift.”

“I’d rather keep the gumbo.”

Lyra hopped up out of her seat, grabbed her backpack, and bolted for the door.

“Child, you betta not—”

“You said it, Pearlline! It’s my birthday!”

“And if you wanna live to see 14 tomorrow, you gimme back that gumbo.”

“Thank you, Pearlline! Love you! Bye!”

Lyra scrambled out the door, swinging it wide open to be embraced by the muggy air and beating sun. The iron molding awnings did little to keep the heat off, and the sound of jazz in the air

was thicker than the humidity. She tossed the bag of gumbo blocks in her backpack, since the Louisiana heat would boil them right through the plastic if she wasn't careful.

She picked up her pace as she heard the two clangs of the St. Charles trolley. She ran across the street, in front of the trolley, to stop it from leaving. She grabbed the handrail and swung herself onto the trolley steps.

"Miss Lyra Lu, howdy do," sang the voice of Reggie with a timbre between leather and velvet.

"How's the drive, Mr. Reggie Clyde?" Lyra responded with the same rhythm.

He let out a chuckle.

"That's a new one. I like it."

"Just came up with it today."

Lyra pulled out a crumpled dollar bill from her pocket and dropped it in the fare box.

"No way you're short-changing me today,"

"It's all I got, Reggie, and I really gotta get home."

"Everybody's gotta pay the fare."

Lyra sighed and dropped her backpack on the trolley floor. The sound of half-melted gumbo blocks sloshed within. She ripped open her bag and pulled out the po'boy Pearline had given her. She extended it to Reggie.

"Shrimp?"

"Catfish."

"Hmph," he grunted. "I don't like the catfish one."

"I'll be sure to let Pearline know you said that."

Fear flashed in his eyes as he snatched the po'boy out of her hands and put it on the dashboard.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't. Go on. Take your seat then."

Lyra flashed a smile and strolled down the trolley aisle. As she weaved past a sea of tourists, she bumped into shoulders overlathered with sunscreen and cartoonishly large cameras. A squeal erupted from the back of the trolley from a muster of girls in pink rhinestone sashes and plastic tiaras labeled "bride-to-be".

Perfect.

She slipped between the like she belonged. No one looked at her twice. Not with her dark hair, crescent eyes, sun-kissed skin. She could be from anywhere, just like how everyone in this trolley was someone from somewhere else. Here, she wasn't a target. Just another outsider, blending in with the rest.

She rode until the tourists dwindled down, the trolley emptying as she reached the end of the line. She bid Reggie a curt farewell before hopping off to catch the next bus. Each ride home blurred into a slow unraveling of the city with fewer houses, more swampland. Civilization peeled back like old wallpaper.

At the last stop, she hopped off, her cleats scrunching onto shell-crushed gravel.

Her next step didn't meet the gravel. It met an outstretched foot.

Lyra hit the ground hard.

"Thought you could get away, did ya?"

Face-first in dirt, Lyra didn't need to look up. Gertrude's voice dripped smug and sour.

"Get up, Lie-Ra."

The butchering of her name scraped worse than the gravel on her palms. Lyra's fists twitched in welling rage. She pushed herself up, slowly, her breath felt like fire leaving her nostrils.

"How's your lip?" Lyra asked through gritted teeth, a smirk itching up the side of her cheek.

Gertrude's shadows flanked her, swinging wide. Lyra dodged one, but another fist caught her ribs. She stumbled, her backpack slipping from her shoulders. The handle of her softball bat stuck out like a loaded trap.

She reached for it.

*You just can't stop swinging, can you?*

Pearline's voice snapped in her memory. Lyra froze. Her fingers curled, then let go.

"I don't want to fight, Gertrude."

"You're acting like you had a choice."

Gertrude and her friends stepped closer. Lyra braced, eyes squeezed shut, awaiting the beating.

Silence.

When Lyra opened her eyes, the girls weren't looking at her anymore.

Their eyes, pinned wide open, stared behind her.

To Lyra's right, jaws hung open, wide and prehistoric. An alligator, still as death, its eyes twin stones sunk in shadow. Crooked teeth jutted like shattered columns.

"Don't move," Lyra said, to the girls or herself—she didn't know.

Gertrude screamed and bolted. The other two followed, stumbling over each other in their panic.

Lyra didn't wait. She dove aside just as the jaws snapped shut where she'd been standing. Her bag, still half open, lay nearby. She scrambled for it, pulled out a warped plastic baggie, and ripped a marshmallow from within it.

"Here, you big brute."

She tossed the marshmallow. The alligator caught it midair, jaws cracking shut. As it threw back the marshmallow with each clamp of his jaw, Lyra narrowed her eyes.

"Toothpick, you damn near took my head off," she scolded.

The creature's gaze didn't change. It remained flat, black, and ancient.

Lyra tossed him her last marshmallow. Toothpick swallowed without thanks and slid back into the water.

"Thanks anyway," Lyra muttered, slinging her bag over her shoulder before continuing home.