

The Long Walk
Act 1
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Harlem, 5:12 p.m.

On days like this one, you wouldn't catch me dead outside. I'd be huddled in my room, next to the air conditioner, streaming movies, with an iced tea and a turkey on wheat. So when the train doors open, blowing sticky air in my face on this hot ass platform, I have second thoughts about the new job.

Out of the station, I'm surprised to see so many people on the street, the Apollo Theater sign gleaming in the brutal sun. If this was my film set, we'd be wrapped, or I'd switch to night shoots. It's a heatstroke kind of day. One where bad stuff happens. Tensions matching the temperature make people do stupid things in a city full of millions.

The concrete melts the bottom of my sneakers as I run down 125th Street, train delays setting me back a whole ten minutes. The MTA doesn't give a damn about being on time, even during a heatwave. Now I'm going to be late. Well, I'll be on time but that's the same as being late! Dad always says, If you're early, you're on time; if you're on time, you're late. That's why I never chilled in the halls between classes, was always first in my seat minutes before the second bell would ring. Think that's why all the teachers liked me. It showed I respected them. Even Mr. Bishop, and no one hated gym more than me.

My dress is soaked by the time I take the elevator up to the fourth floor. I don't think I've ever sweat this much in my entire life. But they said I needed to drop off my paperwork before Monday's training.

Yes, HR orientation training. For a legit job. Your girl is the new office assistant at The Apollo corporate headquarters. My advisor hipped me to the opening. Working for the most famous Black theater in New York, known for the start of such music superstars like Michael Jackson, Mariah Carey, and Stevie Wonder, will have me kiki-ing with elite celebrities. Good practice for when I become a big-time director.

The pay: \$3500 for six weeks.

Sure, it's all the way in Harlem, no less than an hour and change by train from Brooklyn. But it puts plenty of distance between Bed Stuy and me all summer long.

I don't want to be around there anymore. Not since ... it happened. Not since "we" became a him and her, then a me.

The acceptance email said to arrive at five-fifteen, and since this was going to be the first time my co-workers would see me, I put on my new yellow and blue baby doll dress bought from Fashion Nova, thanks to some graduation funds. You know what? I'm going to buy a whole new wardrobe before school, all to match my new life as I leave my old one behind. Might even start introducing myself as Tam instead of Tammi. *Who would know the truth?* It's not like anyone's coming down to Clark Atlanta with me. I'll be there... alone.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, I think as I approach the reception desk. "We" had different plans. Promises made. But there's no longer a "we," and it's time I learn how to live my life without him.

“Hey, hon.” The elderly Black woman beams, sweat dripping off her brows. “Can I help you?”

I pull back my shoulders and shake the thoughts away. “Hi, my name is Tam Wright. I’m the new intern, here to drop off my paperwork.”

“All right, then. Let me see if Maureen is here to sign off. Whew, hot enough for you?”

The windowless office area is steamy. I peep men and women at their desks in damp clothes. “Um, yeah.”

She turns to grab a folder off the desk. “Well, heard it hit 101 around noon and hasn’t come down since.”

I wrap my braids up in a high bun, fanning my face. Last thing I need are brown makeup streaks on this dress.

“Is it always this hot in here?” I’m trying not to panic but I’m already thinking about the few dresses and shirts I own that’ll keep me cool in here all summer. I need everything to be perfect.

She throws me a sympathetic smile. “Sorry, love, system has been acting up all day. I think a—”

“Whewwww! Shit. Sorry I’m late!” The voice behind me makes me jolt and stiffen, my skin going cold, even inside that oven. I close my eyes and start to pray.

Please don’t let it be him. Please, God. Please. Anyone but him.

“Hey, hon. Can I help you?” the woman asks.

His hard steps sound like the killer approaching. He always wore sneakers that were either too big for him or that he refused to lace, soles slapping the floor giving a high-five with each stride.

“Hey! How you doing, I’m Kareem…” his voice trails off until he yells, “Tammi?”

Damn.

I finally open my eyes and pivot to face him. That brown skin. Those beautiful eyes. It’s not like I haven’t seen him. We’re neighbors and went to the same school. But this is the closest I’ve stood near him in the last four months, close enough to smell, and I wish he didn’t smell so damn good.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. It comes out real aggressive but with good reason.

He rolls his eyes, turning to the receptionist as if I were a ghost. “Sorry about that. I’m here to drop off some paperwork for orientation.”

Orientation? No, no, no...we can’t work at the same place. No way!

“Wait, you’re both here to drop off paperwork?” she asks.

“No,” we say in unison and glare at each other.

“I mean, yes,” we say in unison, again.

Mortified, I take a step to widen the space between us and clear my throat.

“What I mean to say is, *I’m* here with my paperwork. I don’t know what *he’s* doing here.”

He grins. “Guess I’m here for the same reason.”

Her eyes toggle between us, and she quickly opens the folder in her hand, scanning papers. She returns to her computer screen, reading something hard, while I steal a quick glimpse of him. He's wearing his favorite jeans (even in this heat), a black polo shirt, and a fresh pair of Jordans. Probably ones *she* made him get. Kinda miss his beat-up red Converse and collection of Marvel comics t-shirts.

Stop it, Tammi! You don't miss anything about this dummy.

"Uhhh, just a second," the receptionist says, her voice shaky. "You two can have a seat. I'll be right back with Maureen."

Kareem and I exchange a suspicious glare as we slowly head over to the waiting area. Hopefully Maureen won't take too long to come get me...and leave his ass here.

I sit on one side of the entrance door while Kareem sits on the opposite, fidgeting.

Just keep it cute, Tammi.

I do a quick selfie-check, making sure all that heat I trekked through hasn't melted my edge control. I don't want him, but I don't want him seeing me looking a mess either.

"Whoa," Kareem mumbles to himself staring up at something, and I follow his eyes.

"Whoa," I gasp. The walls of the waiting area are a mural of old Apollo concert posters. James Brown, Ray Charles, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday...people my grandparents grew up listening to. I didn't notice any of this before and it hits me--I'm within the very same halls these legends walked through. The warmth of that thought makes me almost forget about the jerk on the other side of the room. Is this what it's going to feel like when I'm in TV studios and film lots?

Kareem is still fidgeting, digging through every pocket he has. Does that when he's flustered or running late, which is almost always. He wouldn't have made it to school at all if I didn't set several alarms on his phone for him. Wonder if he still kept them.

Kareem slaps his forehead, cursing under his breath. He must have forgot something--

Stop it! Stop thinking about him. He's not thinking about you.

What is he even doing here? Mr. Taylor, our guidance counselor, told me about this position but said there would be only one opening, for one student interested in studying media and entertainment. Kareem said he wanted to major in boring business accounting so he could learn how to "count all his stacks." Oh, that's it! The money, he wants that \$3500.

Well, too bad for him, I'm the real deal here. I even sent my film reel with the application (all shot and edited on my iPhone). This job is mine! Plus...I need this. It's one more step on the road to a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Mom and Daddy still aren't totally on board with this plan. Only Kareem was. And now...he probably couldn't care less. So I won't let him take this away from me. He might as well dip and catch that A train back home to Brooklyn.

I rip out my phone, trying to find something to focus on so I don't keep stealing glances at him. He hasn't changed much. Still tall as hell, all legs and gangly arms with those almond eyes and thick lips. He looks a little browner. Maybe he's been to the beach...with her. The thought makes me ill. I can imagine them trekking out to Far Rockaway, her in a skimpy bikini, him bare-chested ...

"Hey, you got a charger?"

It takes a moment for it to register that he was talking to me.

“What?” I cough out.

“A charger,” he says all slow like I can’t speak English. “I forgot to charge up and I’m on, like, five percent.”

I blink in sheer disbelief. “Is...is that all you got to say to me?”

He frowns. “What you mean?”

As usual, he’s freaking clueless.

“You haven’t said more than two words to me in months and the first ones out your mouth is you asking for something.”

At first, he’s just stunned. But then, his eyes narrow, and he’s leaning back in his chair, sucking his teeth.

“Never mind,” he snaps, crossing his arms. “Don’t even know why I bothered. You only care about yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he grumbles.

I glance up at the receptionist, now back at her desk, and she averts her eyes, pretending not to be listening. His phone wouldn’t be dying all the time if he wasn’t using it like a DJ speaker. Even if I did have a charger, I wouldn’t give it to him. Not if he was the last boy on earth. I’ll stay petty AF forever.

He sucks his teeth again, slouching further in his seat. “Man, you acting like I’m asking for a twenty. Cheap ass.”

“Yo, you done? Or are you gonna mumble some more shit under your stank breath?”

Kareem’s eyes narrow, ready to kill.

“Hello there!”

We both jump to our feet at the sing-song voice of a woman who is rounding the reception desk, straight for us.

“Hi! I’m Maureen. You must be Tammi Wright. And you, Kareem Murphy?”

“Yeah,” we say in unison and I hate myself for loving the way we sound together.

Get it out of your head, girl! There is no “we.” We is gone, dead. Forever.

She shakes both our hands then sighs. “Well, hate to say this, but I wish we were meeting on better terms.”

“What do you mean?” we both ask, and I hold in a groan.

“This is pretty embarrassing. There’s been a small clerical error. It appears an offer letter for the internship was sent to both of you. But, unfortunately, we only have the budget to cover one opening.”

My stomach tenses, jaw tightens.

Kareem crosses his arms, brows making a deep V. “So what does that mean?”

She visibly gulps. “It means only one of you got the position.”

Kareem and I share a glance, then CLICK, the room goes black.

Just like that.

One minute I'm staring up into those beautiful brown eyes I've missed, and the next... nothing. Not a smooth FADE TO BLACK, DISSOLVE, or CUT TO. The movie just ends.

Confused, I reel back as voices rise out of the shadows.

"What the hell!"

"What's happening?"

"Everyone stay calm!"

In the rise of panic, there are footsteps and screeching chairs. Maybe someone hit a light switch by accident, but they would've turned it back on by now. Something's wrong. Where's Kareem?

"Hey! What's going on?" I shout, waving my hands in front of me, eyes trying to adjust to the dark. Something bumps into me hard and I shriek.

"Tammi?" His voice sounds far away, mixed in the chaos.

"Kareem," I want to yell back, but the name is stuck in my throat.

Phone flashlights ignite, like a scattering of spotlights. Then there's another click. Lights, but not as bright as before. Emergency lights, one every ten feet or so, leaving most of the office still in darkness. Across the waiting area, Kareem spins around, locking eyes on me, and I'm not entirely sure, but I could've sworn he looked almost relieved. Office doors open; dim daylight seeps in from a few narrow windows facing a brick building.

After five minutes of scrambling, Maureen shouts, "Everyone, we're evacuating!"

"Are you sure?" the receptionist asks.

“Old building. Not sure how long the generator will hold up. Everyone outside! Use your flashlights and take the stairs.”

Kareem and I say nothing as we follow the crowd out the door and down the hall toward a bright red exit sign.

There are more people in the stairwell, the whole building taking the same route. My heart starts to hammer.

Maybe it's some type of fire drill or someone burned their lunch.

Outside, the streets are crowded with people pouring out of every building. They cover the sidewalks, all on their phones in collective confusion. In the mix of heat, humidity, panicky voices, and sinking sunlight, my breath catches. Something's happening.

“What's going on?” I ask a man on the corner near the train station. “Are we...being attacked or something?”

Even asking the question makes me want to vomit.

“Some type of power outage,” the man says, scrolling through his phone. “Affecting the whole city.”

“What? The whole city?” Kareem asks. Didn't even notice him still behind me.

I whip out my phone and call Mom. She answers on the second ring.

“Are you ok?” she asks and I can hear my older brother and sister arguing in the background.

“Yeah. I'm fine. The power is out here.”

“Yeah, here too. Where are you?”

“I’m outside the Apollo ... with Kareem.”

She gasps. “He’s there ... with you?”

“Yeah. I’ll, uh, explain later.”

“Wowwww. Ok. Come home as soon as you can.”

“I will. See you soon.”

“Be safe, Tammi.”

More people pile into the street. My family is safe, but am I? Doesn’t look like anyone has a clue what’s going on or why the power’s out. The city could be under attack and no one would even know it!

“Hey,” Kareem says. I almost forgot he was standing next to me. “Uh, can I see your phone?”

“Why?” I snap.

“Mine’s almost dead and I need to call my moms.”

I slap the phone in his hand. “Go ahead.”

He shakes his head and dials a number. He really didn’t have to. His mom is still saved in my contacts.

“Nah, Ma. It’s me,” he says. “Yeah. Yeah long story. Anyway, power out there? It is? Damn, here too. Ok, I’m on my way. Yeah, I know, I’mma try. Aight? See you soon.”

He clicks off and hands the phone back. “Thanks for sparing your free minutes.”

I want to knock the sarcasm out his mouth until I spot Maureen.

“Oh, hey! Ms. Maureen!” We push through the crowd in her direction as she stands by the curb.

“Guys, sorry, now’s not a good time; I’m taking headcount,” she says without looking at us. “You two should head home. We don’t know how long this is going to last. Come back on Monday, okay?”

“But,” I start, “you never told us who got the position. Which one of us should come back?”

“This really isn’t a good time,” she says, flustered. “I’m sorry, but right now, I have to make sure everyone is accounted for. It’s protocol. Once the power is back up, I’ll let you two know, okay? Get home safe!”

She walks off quick before I have time to stop her.

“I can’t believe this,” I say, throwing my hands up. “We have to wait the entire weekend?”

“Think we got bigger things to worry about,” Kareem says, holding out his hand. “Lemme see your phone again.”

“For what now?”

“Yo, we in middle of an emergency and you being *this* difficult?”

“Ugh! Fine! Just don’t use up all the power.”

He checks his phone to look up a number before dialing. “Aye yo Twig, what’s good, fam? Nah, calling on my…friend’s phone. My phone straight up dead, T.”

Twig is one of our neighbors from the block. Tall and gangly like that character from those superhero movies I’d never want to direct. Why was he calling him? What was so important he’d waste battery life for?

“Yeah, the power is out all over the damn city. It’s crazy,” he says. “But what’s good for tonight? Yeah? You for real? Aight, bet. See you soon.”

He hands back my phone and digs out his wallet. “How much money you got?”

“Why?”

He huffs, waving at the station. “Cause if there’s no power, it means there’s no trains either. We need to get a cab.”

Damn, he’s right. The trains will be down, and I definitely don’t want to be caught in them tunnels in the dark.

He counts the cash in his wallet. “I got twenty. You?”

I only have five dollars.

“That ain’t gonna be enough to get us back home,” he says. “With the stop lights out, we’d be lucky if this gets us ten blocks.”

“Um, there’s a bank across the street,” I offer. “I can use my debit card.”

“Power out means ATMs are out too.”

“Shit,” I mumble. “What do we do?”

I don't know why I asked him. Probably because there's no one else around and I'm trying to keep calm despite the growing panic in my chest.

He looks up at the street sign and takes a deep breath. "Aight. Let's do this."

He starts walking away and I follow.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. Where else?"

"But how?"

He shrugs. "Walk."

"Walk! From here?"

"You got any better ideas?"

"That's, like, mad far! It'll take you days."

He scowls. "Quit playing. Ain't like we in the Bronx."

I look up at the street sign. He wants to walk from 125th Street back to Brooklyn? We might as well be in the Bronx.

"Welp," I say with a wave. "Later, then."

"What you mean? You coming with me?"

"Pssh! The hell I am!"

"Look, we don't know how long this thing is going to last, but I'm not waiting to find out. It's after five-thirty. I ain't trying to get caught out here after dark. You ain't got no money

and I ain't got no phone. So we gonna have to stick together 'till we make it home. Then you can go back to hating me or whatever."

Hey, I never said I hated him! Well, out loud.

Glancing around, I weigh my options. Maybe the power won't be out for that long. Maybe it'll just be a few more minutes, two hours tops. But what if he's right? What if it takes all night to fix and we're stuck here?

"We'll take Frederick Douglass down to Central Park West," he says.

MTA workers tape off the station entrance. Wonder how many people are stuck down there in the dark ... with the rats? Just the thought makes my hands tremble. But there are worse things...one particularly that I'm desperate to avoid.

"You coming or nah?" Kareem snaps.

I sigh at the setting sun and take the first step in his direction.