

Backseats and Bleachers: A High School Love Story

Prologue

The sweaty bangs sticking to my forehead should have been my first clue to get my lazy butt off the front porch and out of the stifling Texas heat. My dad and stepmom Trudy's home cooling system - two floor fans sitting on top the coffee table provided little relief, but at least I would have been safe there. I sat on the steps 'til the sun charred my cocoa-brown legs. Salt from the dripping sweat ran down the center of my forehead burning the corners of my eyes. With one hand I wiped my brow while the other rubbed the circulation back into my booty.

As I stood to go back in the house, young brothas shot out from every direction running through the yard, one by one, every man for himself. Petrified by the chaos, I heard the faint sounds of police sirens grow louder, yet I couldn't move. My feet were stapled to the bottom step where I'd sat for two hours looking at nothing.

One by one they kept running past me. A threesome zipped by. Suddenly one of them stopped cold. We stood still, staring at each other. His eyes narrowed then doubled in size as he studied my face. As long as he stands still, everything's cool, I thought. But when his upper body leaned in signaling he was about to make moves, I leaped out my favorite pair of black sandals, racing towards the front door.

He charged after me. BAM! I tripped on the top step. He grabbed my wrist, swinging me around to face him. I wrestled to free myself from his monster grip. "Let go of me!" I screamed and slapped him with my free hand.

"Trek," he whispers.

I look up and instantly stop fighting him. He slides his grip from my wrist down to my hand. Our eyes lock. I study the teardrops tattooed below his right eye. My gaze wanders down his face to his black, crusty lips. I remembered when they were soft and brown.

Then he smiles.

"Freeze, Ferris!" With guns drawn, the "jump out boys," or Houston police officers known for combing the Wards and jumping out of squad cars, move in. "Put your hands behind your head," they order. Ferris doesn't move. "Put your goddamn hands behind your head, Ferris!" He stood still as finger-waves.

I can't believe he's risking his life just to keep holding my hand and staring into my eyes. Ka-clack-clack. The guns cock. I break our gaze in time to see guns pointing at me. I yanked my hand back and ducked out of range.

"Hands behind your head, Ferris. Do it now!" the officer closest to us screamed.

Slowly Ferris lifted his hands and clasped them behind his neck. The officer ran behind him. With one hand he held the gun steady to the back of Ferris' head. With the free hand, he handcuffed him. "Get downÉcome onÉon your knees. You know the drill," the officer commanded. Ferris didn't move. The officer yelled directly into his ear, and again, no movement. The officer lifted his gun and with one quick blow to the back of Ferris' neck sent him crashing to his knees. Paralyzed for a second, his handcuffed hands rubbed his injury. Suddenly he lunged towards the officer, prompting the others to jump him from behind. Just that quick the scene went from a Wrestle Mania pile-up to a Radio Raheim chokehold, as one of the officers lifted Ferris off the ground with a billy club pressed to his throat. "SettleÉsettle," I could hear the officer whisper. Ferris' legs dangled and wiggled as his toes searched for ground.

I stood there covering my mouth and looking around panicked. Should I call somebody? This can't be right. I surveyed the area and found others close enough for a firsthand look-see, but far enough away to keep out of it.

As the officer shoved Ferris' head down to put him in the back of the squad car, Ferris bumps his head. Not sure who's at fault. Whether it's the officer trying to be slick with his abuse or Ferris too busy watching me to pay attention to what he was doing, I

can't said.

All I know is I've been feeling him since I was in middle school, but he said I was too young. Any other man would've jumped on it, but not Ferris. "I got a little sister your age, Trek. If I ever caught a fool my age tryin' ta holla' at her, I'd break his neck," he'd said once. "But as soon as you turn 17, you belong to me," he promised. I hadn't seen him since then until now.

Standing on the porch with my right hand tucked in my back pocket, I'm feeling every bit of the woman I'll be in six months. Can he see it? What does it matter? He's leaving me.

I watched the squad car pull off. As it turned the corner, he looked over to me one last time. I kissed my hand and blew a parting gift towards the backseat of the blue and white Impala. Then, my stepmom walked out eclipsing my view with a stomach twice the size of her butt, looking like a large square with a jelly bubble in the middle. "You young womens is so stupid. Can't pick a good man for nothin'." Trudy shook her head. Looking down at her watch, she said, "Lord, I betta' get dinner ready. Yo' daddy will be home soon from fishin'."

She turned around to head back in the house right as my dad drove up. He stepped out the car and walked behind it to the trunk. He pulled out his fishing gear.

"Did you catch anything, baby?" Trudy asked.

"Nah," he said. "Damn fish weren't biting today." Walking up the stoop, he leaned down to kiss my cheek. I braced myself for the combined stench of saltwater and fish, but was confused when I smelled Chanel No. 5 perfume instead. Let him tell it the fish weren't biting. But judging from all the red marks on his neck, somebody was. He set his equipment down on the porch and hooked Trudy between his arms, lifting her off the ground. His knees wobbled under the pressure of trying to toss a whale with the ease and grace of a flounder.

She giggled and squealed like a school girl. "Stop being silly," she said, frowning deep to force the smile off her face. "Put me down now," she ordered. After one last kiss to the neck and Popsicle-style lick to her face, he put her down and followed her into their happy home.

They left me outside, alone with nothing but my thoughts. Why was my heart beating so fast? Ferris.

Why were my lips stretched wide across my face in a goofy grin? Ferris.

Where is Ferris? On his way to jail.

CHAPTER 1

He had been MIA from around my dad's neighborhood for a couple of years.

When my dad finally settled down, Ned and I spent every other weekend at his house. We didn't use the court or the legal system or nothing like that. We didn't need to; my mama spoke and her words became the law. "That's the least you could do, Sylvester. It's not like you're doing anything else for them, you rat mouth bastard," she told him. Any time mama mentioned money to my dad it was usually to point out he didn't have any, which she always followed up with a mumbled insult about him or his mama.

Everybody rolled with mama's plan. My stepmom Trudy was the only one who had a problem with it. She knew better than to say so though.

The best part of those weekends was kickin' it with my dad. He didn't want trouble. We cranked the radio and stayed out late. He always played it cool, probably because he was so raggedy. But I loved him.

I also made friends with some of the other kids in their neighborhood. The only good advice Trudy ever gave was, "Gal, you betta' watch the people you keep company with 'cause whatever they do is what you'll end up doing, too." So, I made friends with other kids outside of her daughter Reesha, who at 14 had her first baby and at 16 is

pregnant with her second. She's living with her second baby's daddy and his family in a two-bedroom apartment.

"We tryin' to save our money to pay for our weddin' and buy our own house," Reesha said one time. She looked like a thousand reasons why not to have sex, sitting in a gapped-leg, pregnant woman's position wearing a gelled-ponytail Ð the broke-woman's hairstyle.

"Why you keep having all these babies before you have a wedding?" I asked, bouncing her son lil' Trevor on my knees.

"Trick, who you tryin' to judge?" Reesha asked.

I stood up placing the baby on the floor and assumed the warrior stance. Calling me a trick to my face was like the boxing referee shouting, "Round 1!"

Reesha snatched Trevor up into her arms, mumbling to herself as she waddled out the ring.

Every other Friday evening like clockwork, my friend Pumpkin would stand on the corner waiting for my dad to drive up with me and Ned in tow. If my stepmom wasn't such a skank, my friend could have waited for me inside the house. She was so evil she wouldn't even let him sit on her porch to wait for me. He was dismissed to the street corner like a stop sign. When he'd see my dad's Grenada pull into the driveway, he'd come running.

"Trek! Ned!" Pumpkin would yell.

Ned stepped out the car first, stretching his tall, lanky body. Pumpkin reached out to hug Ned around the waist. "Whoa! Slow that down, bruh. Slow it way down." Ned stuck both hands out in front of him, one to keep Pumpkin from getting any closer, the other for a handshake.

"Ned, you so silly, boy." To hide his embarrassment, Pumpkin used his left hand to cover his face and his right one to shake Ned's.

"Man, put some muscle behind your grip," my dad said. "You ain't shaking hands with the queen of England."

"Ooh, Mr. Sylvester, how you gon' shame me like that?" he asked my dad. "I thought we was cool." Pumpkin playfully rolled his eyes and neck and walked over to me. "Hey Trek Trek, my princess!"

"Hey Pumpkin, my king/queen!" We laughed and kissed each other's cheeks.

My dad and Ned both rolled their eyes and left us standing on the shell and pebble driveway.

"Girrrl, I got a lot of stuff to catch you up on. Baby, I got so much ta tell youÉ" was how Pumpkin began every visit. We'd walk the neighborhood past the empty library, cut through the traffic jam leading to Yellowstone Park, stop at the liquor store for a cup of ice and head right back to the corner. By the time the weekend ended I was more than ready for a 14-day break from his mouth. His verbal spurts and splatters were kinda like diarrhea Ð just had to come out. But I never left him without a good laugh and some juicy gossip.

One piece of info flipped my world. We were sitting on his porch that afternoon, sipping Kool-aid. He looked back at the door to make sure no one could hear him; then he whispered, "Ferris is getting out next week."

CHAPTER 2

"Hump him or dump him?" asked WG, the only white girl on our all black drill team. The Casper-colored Sheneneh-meets-Key-lolo is pretty enough to attract brothas, but instead keeps hooking up with niggas. Now that she's sifted through all the niggas on the Southwest side, she's found fresh beef on the North.

"Dump himÉand quickly," I said.

"Tre-ek, gimme a break, girlfriend." Leaning her head back against the locker, she's frustrated that once again I refuse to sign off on some cockroach that showered her

with attention over the weekend and got her believing she's in love again. At least this one has a car, but it's a Cadillac, which means it probably belongs to his grandma.

"I got love for you, girlfriend, much love," I said. "Unfortunately, it's tough love.

Dump him!"

"How do I know that he's not the one unless I give him a shot?" she asked.

"Give him a shot at what?" I shake my head and wonder why she, like Wile E.

Coyote, just doesn't get it. If he'd only stop ordering from Acme, he'd stop getting hit on the head and blown up all the time. If WG knew what niggas said about white girls, maybe she'd stop hooking up and finally find love past one week and six condoms. I wish I could tell her without feeling like I'm betraying the cause. After all, she is my friend. She lives around the corner from a brand new school in a ritzy neighborhood in Richmond, Texas, but everyday she treks to the Ridge to absorb the flavor.

WG sways back and forth in a trance, holding her binder and books for second period tightly to her chest. "He say I'm different, Trek."

I slam my locker door shut. She doesn't bother to look up before grinning. "I know, I know," she concedes.

WG accidentally drops her books. The people closest to us got silent. I can tell by their stares they're checking for drama. Her round, hazel eyes follow me as I stoop to pick up her books. Handing them off to her, I walk off and remind her of what she needs to do. "Dump!" I yell, giving her the thumbs down sign.

CHAPTER 3

After drill team practice, I usually hitch a ride with Keci, my best girlfriend and neighbor. She and I joined the Wings drill team made up of the pretty girls who walk with a "C" in their back. Keci and I are cute like the others, but all we really wanted was to get into the games for free. Doesn't hurt that we both love to dance, too. But Keci is way better than me. Her skills landed her an officer's gig.

Feeling too tired to wait on her, I decide to walk home.

"I know we better not be in this meeting all evening. I'm tired myself. We might get out early. Which way you walking?" Keci asked.

"I'll cut through Ridgeway," I said.

Keci disapproves. "2-3-4 brothas take the long way. That's how they get face time," she said of her all-consuming passion with guys who either wear 2-digits on a jersey, pay 3-figures for their gear, or roll on 4-wheels. "But if you insist on the shortcut, I'll drive that way to see if you still walking."

"You'll pick me up?" I asked.

She rolls her eyes. "Nah, skank, I'ma just drive by waving at you."

"Just for that, I hope the meeting lasts all night." I hate when she calls me skank.

But I know it's just her way of saying I'm her homegirl. "Call me when you get home," I said.

"I'll holla." She does an about-face and pranced her petite self back into the drill team practice room, swinging her ponytail from side to side.

The world is your playground, Keci. She is an officer on the Wings Drill Team, a debutante with The Links, a member of the National Honor Society and an active member of the Ann & Andy Teen Society. She tried recruiting me into Ann & Andy. I started the application, but stopped when they asked questions about my dad's occupation, snickering at the thought of them with their professional daddies reading, "Trek Baden's dad is a penniless pimp." Why was he important anyway? It's supposed to be a "teen society." I skimmed through the rest of the app and permanently laid my pen down after reading about the \$50.00 application fee and the \$1200 in yearly dues. If dad had an occupation, we might be able to talk about it. But the only person with pennies in my camp is mama.

Not even two minutes into my walk home I wish I'd waited on Keci. I kept on

my blue spandex unitard, but slipped a pair of sweat pants over it. My backpack is loaded with my regular books, plus an 800-page SAT practice book my guidance counselor lent me. I stop on the sidewalk, bending over to pull out two books and lighten the load on my right shoulder. Suddenly I hear, beep beep.

I look up and smile as Stilts pulls his Ford Mustang alongside me. "Why you got yo' ass all up in the air?" Stilts is my friend from middle school whose parents bought him a car for his 16th birthday, increasing his stock with the ladies. But he's always been the man to me. Mega cool.

"I'm trying to use what my mama gave me to hitch a ride," I teased.

"Oh really? Turn around so I get a good look at the merchandise."

I turn my backside to him and seductively bend over to touch the ground. While my butt faces the street, another car slows to watch the show. I quickly stand up straight and asked, "So? Can I get a ride?"

He frowns and shakes his head. "Nah. What else you got?"

"Stilts, don't make me cuss you!" I said.

"Hah hah. Come on get in, girl."

I walk around to the passenger's side. The door opens. At first I thought Stilts opened it from the inside, until a pair of red, high-heeled, open-toed sandals peek underneath the door. Next thing to appear is an Amazonian creature with long wavy hair peeling herself off Stilts' leather seats.

"Oh, uh, hi. I'm Trek." I reach my hand to shake hers, but she leaves me hanging. Trying to figure out a slick way to let her know that Stilts is like a brother to me, I asked him, "Man, why didn't you tell me you had somebody in the car with you? Got me out here making a fool of myself in front of your girlfriend." I pull the lever up to hop in the back.

"Unh-unh, Trek, get in the front. And you," pointing to the girl, "climb yo' ass back there."

"What?" She bends down to stick her head in the car. I grab my book bag and move out of reach of her fists.

Stilts jumps out the car. His lanky, slow-drawled talking, country butt couldn't buy a piece of a woman before his mama and daddy bought him "a pony." Now he's in this girl's face like he got it like that. As he walks towards her, I step back even further. I could have walk home for all this. The closer Stilts got to her, the less hard she appeared. By the time he's in her face, her hands are clasped behind her back like a little girl. She looks off to the right avoiding eye contact with him.

"What's that you was talking a second ago, huh? What? Wait, I can't hear you."

Stilts tugs at his right ear lobe. "Speak into my ear. You gotta speak directly, baby, 'cause I can't hear you."

She keeps looking off.

"You ain't got nothin' to say? Well, I got somethin' to say. You ready? Here it is. I get your stank in the ass in the back seat."

I'm so mad at Stilts I'm shaking; I never knew he could be so mean. As pissed as I am at Stilts though, I'm even angrier with the nameless girl for putting up with his BS.

"Why you still standin' there like a dummy? You wanna walk?" he asked her.

That's it! If she decides to walk, I'm walking with her. I'll carry her shoes and let her cry on my shoulder. In fact, I'll take my shoes off, too, so she won't have to walk barefoot alone. We'll walk to my house and wait for Keci to get home. Better still, we can walk back to Willowridge and wait on Keci. It's only two minutes away. We sisters should stick together.

I watch her make her decision. She takes off her shoes. She walks to the car.

She reaches in and pulls out her purse from the front seat. She lets the seat up, tosses her purse and shoes on the car floor, and slides, behind first, into the back. Since her legs are too long to sit straight, she stretches them across the seat. Stilts pushes the seat back into place giving me more leg room than I need and continues holding the door open for me.

By now I'm mad enough to strangle him.

Leaving the car door open, he walks towards me and lifts my backpack from my shoulder. He lays it on the floor in the front seat. I stand outside the car with my arms folded, shaking my head. He pulls me into his arms, whispering, "Don't be mad at me, Trek. I ain't trippin' none of these hos."

Standing there with his arms draped around me like a security blanket, I understand for a twinge of a second why ol' girl tolerates him. He feels goood! But I won't give him the satisfaction. "You owe her an apology."

He smirks. "Anything for you, Trek."

"Be careful how you treat women, Stilts. One day, like Sleeping Beauty, these hos will wake up and know they're queens." He kisses my cheek. I wipe it off as I get in the car. I pull the lever for the seat to come up, trying to give his girlfriend more room in the back. Because I pulled too hard, the seat shot forward, cramming my knees into the glove compartment. Stilts laughs and closes the door. He bends down to study his door-handle, afterwards using his shirt tail to wipe off fingerprints.

We ride in silence on the short trip to my house. On our way, Stilts is flagged down by one of his boys riding in a dropped red Cadillac with the white top, traveling in the opposite direction. They both stop in the middle of the street, not caring that they are blocking traffic.

"Coochie Crook!" his friend yelled out to him.

"What's up, fool?" Stilts said. "What'chu doing in my hood?"

"Scopin', rollin' and ho-strollin'," his friend answered.

"All day long." Stilts chuckled.

He looks into Stilts' car. "Damn, CC, how many hos get to ride the pony at one time?"

I punch the passenger's door. Stilts reaches over to pat my knee. "Man, you got me mixed up. My stallion is chauffeuring queens."

His friend laughs. "Whateva'. Check it, this weekend we throwin' a barbecue for my man here who just got out the County." He points to his thugged-out friend chillin' in the white-leather backseat. "Come on swing through. The party'll be going on all day and all night, you heard me?"

"Shiiitt, you know your boy. If it starts with a 'P' and ends with a 'Y' I'm all up in it."

Before his friend can say anything else, he adds, "I gotta get my homegirl Trek to the house so that me and girlie can roll out. I'll holla'." Beep beep. He pulls off. Listening to Stilts and his friend call women hos to their face leads me to know one thing - I better find myself an older man.

When Stilts turns down my street, I notice his friend still following us. Stilts pulls in front of my house while his friend turns into my driveway, then backs out.

"Thanks, Stilts." Turning to the back, "Nice meeting youÉGirlie," I said. Stilts burst out laughing. I frown. "That's her name, right?" He keeps laughing and she keeps looking at me like I am the enemy and not a sister with leg cramps who ten minutes earlier was prepared to walk barefoot with her.

When I step out the car, so does Stilts' friend. When I bend down, so does he. I pull out my book bag and glance in his direction to see what he will pull out. For his sake I hope he's not trying to be funny by imitating my every move. I am mad and his chalk-board flat booty looks more and more like a target for my foot. I walk to the mailbox and pull out our stash. I casually flip through, trying to ignore both ol' boy and his games, and keep a calm look as I sort the white-faced bills from the pink-faced ones. Every month like clock-work, Southwestern Bell or Reliant Energy or Bank One threatened to take away our phone, our lights or our car. But they never did.

I walk to the center of my driveway and turn around for one last look. "Oh my God," I said and drop the mail. I freeze solid at the sight of the artistically carved body cloaked in a wife-beater and jeans that don't cling. The gold "F" dangling from his chain

is a beautiful centerpiece on his chest. My fingers crave Blue Magic grease and yearn to run free back and forth between his freshly done cornrows. His face looks hard, like he killed off his innocence a long time ago. I pray his spirit is still in check. He looks like nothing I'd give a second thought to if I saw him on the street. Then he smiled, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he becomes my world.

CHAPTER 4

"You look so different," I said as we hug. His eyes crinkle to the side when he smiles. He looks much older, and as handsome as a roughneck could be, I guess. Yet it isn't his looks that draw me to him on first glance. In the short run it's that perfectly chiseled body and the thought of what tenderness can come from his calloused hands. I don't want to look at his face, nor do I want him to look at mine. My nose is greasy, and I try to be slick by biting the chapped skin from my lips. He, on the other hand, smells incredible wearing that new cologne that makes you think of deep oceans. Basking in his sweet smells, I suddenly remember my funk. We had a hard dance practice under the blazing sun preparing for Willowridge's first game of the season.

I pull away. Stilts and Cadillac-man stand outside their cars talking while Girlie sits quiet in the back.

"It's a small world. I was just telling my man I had an old girlfriend who lived out this way," Ferris said.

"Old girlfriend?" I asked.

He blushes. "I mean, you know, my friend who's a girl."

"I was talking about the 'old' part." We laugh.

"Well, you are old, especially compared to when I met you back in the day."

Back in the day. Before he had a criminal record. Before he branded his face. Before he reduced his vocabulary to one-syllable words. Before he covered that million-dollar smile in hundred-dollar gold.

Mama pulls up to the foot of the driveway. I look down and quickly pick up the mail before moving onto the grass.

"Hey, mama." I hand her the mail. She kisses my cheek and immediately begins segregating the whites from the pinks. Keci drives by honking her horn. Cadillac-man trots over to Keci. Stilts leans inside the driver's window of his car to kiss "Girlie" sitting in the back.

When mama gets to the door, she looks over her shoulder. "Tre, you finished your homework?"

"No, ma'am. I just got home."

"You can't have company when I'm not here. You know the rules," she said before walking into the house.

I pick up my book bag. "Ferris, I gotta go."

"Say," Ferris asked softly. "You gon' come stay at your dad's house this week?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because I wanna see you. My pot'nah over there throwing me a party.

Everybody in the neighborhood suppose to be there. Won't be much of a homecoming if I can't share it wit'chu."

He's not touching one part of my body, yet I can feel him in the pit. "IÉI don't know. I'll have to see."

"Please, Trek." He bows down on one knee and clasps praying hands.

I overhear his friend say, "Damn, I need to get this fool outta' here."

"Find yo' way out my bidness, son," Ferris yelled to him.

"Find yo' ass walkin' back to South Union, nephew," Cadillac-man answered back.

Ferris kisses my hand as I help him up. He walks backwards to the car. I blow

him a kiss. He lifts his right hand and snatches it from the air, placing it to his lips. His homeboy lifts the backseat to let Ferris in the car. Stilts lifts his backseat to let girlie out the car. She walks barefoot to the front seat. They all drive off.

My younger brother Ned is in the living room watching TV when I walk in. "Any messages for me?" I asked.

"Do you see any on the message pad in the kitchen?" he asked.

"I'm not in the kitchen, Ned."

"That sounds like the problem right there," he said, his eyes glued to the TV.

"Punk," I mumble. I walk through the kitchen and check the message pad next to the phone. I lean over the pad. "Ned, whose number is this?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me their name. Just a number."

"Was it a girl or guy?"

He chuckled. "I don't know. They didn't tell me that either."

"Who you trying to clown? Nobody would call and leave a number but not a name."

"Could you please call the number and asked if anybody at that house called you?"

"I hate you! You get on my nerves," I said.

"Hey!" mama yells. "That's enough. I don't want to hear that talk coming from your mouth."

"You get on my nerves, too," I mutter.

She pops out her bedroom partially undressed. "What was that?"

"Nothing," I said, feeling like a punk.

Ned chuckles. "She forgot about your bionic ears, mama."

She walks back to her bedroom. I roll my eyes and pick up the receiver to dial the nameless number. I dial the first four numbers and stop. I bring the pad closer to my face. "I can't read your writing, Ned."

"Trek, stop calling my name. Dial the numbers you can read and substitute for the ones you can't."

I slam the phone down. "I can't wait to move out of here," I said as I storm back to my bedroom.

"T.Y.A. Đ tear yo' ass," Ned said. Mama missed his comment